

REVOLUTION AT THE GATES

A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917

V. I. Lenin



Edited and with an Introduction and Afterword by

Slavoj Žižek



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- 1 "Letters from Afar", vol. 23, pp. 295-342. Written March 7-26 1917. Translated from the Russian by M. S. Levin, Joe Fineberg and others. Edited by M. S. Levin.
- 2 "The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution (April Theses)", vol. 24, pp. 21-9. First published in *Pravda* no. 26, 7 April 1917. Translated from the Russian and edited by Bernard Isaacs.
- 3 "On Slogans", vol. 25, pp. 185-92. Written in mid-July 1917. First published in pamphlet form in 1917. Translated from the Russian and edited by Stephan Apresyan and Jim Riordan.
- 4 "The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It", vol. 25, pp. 323-69. First published at the end of October 1917 in pamphlet form. Translated from the Russian and edited by Stephan Apresyan and Jim Riordan.
- 5 "One of the Fundamental Questions of the Revolution", vol. 25, pp. 370-77. First published on 27 September 1917. Translated from the Russian and edited by Stephan Apresyan and Jim Riordan.
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- 10 "Advice of an Onlooker", vol. 26, pp. 179-81. Written 21 October 1917, first published in *Pravda* on 7 November 1920, signed An Onlooker. Translated from the Russian by Yuri Sodobnikov and George Hanna. Edited by George Hanna.
- 11 "Letter to Comrades", vol. 26, pp. 195-215. First published in *Rabochy Put* nos 40, 41, and 42, 1, 2 and 3 November 1917. Translated from the Russian by Yuri Sodobnikov and George Hanna. Edited by George Hanna.
- 12 "Meeting of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies", vol. 26, pp. 239-41. First published in *Izvestia* no. 207, 26 October 1917. Translated from the Russian by Yuri Sodobnikov and George Hanna. Edited by George Hanna.

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Introduction

Introduction: Between the Two Revolutions

Slavoj Žižek

The first public reaction to the idea of reactualizing Lenin is, of course, an outburst of sarcastic laughter. Marx is OK – today, even on Wall Street, there are people who still love him: Marx the poet of commodities, who provided perfect descriptions of the capitalist dynamic; Marx of Cultural Studies, who portrayed the alienation and reification of our daily lives. But Lenin – no, you can't be serious! Doesn't Lenin stand precisely for the *failure* to put Marxism into practice, for the big catastrophe which left its mark on the whole of twentieth-century world politics, for the Real Socialist experiment which culminated in an economically inefficient dictatorship? So, if there is a consensus among (whatever remains of) today's radical Left, it is that, in order to resuscitate the radical political project, we should leave the Leninist legacy behind: the ruthless focusing on the class struggle, the Party as the privileged form of organization, the violent revolutionary seizure of power, the ensuing "dictatorship of the proletariat" . . . are all these not "zombie-concepts" to be abandoned if the Left is to have any chance in the conditions of "post-industrial" late capitalism?

The problem with this apparently convincing argument is that it endorses all too easily the inherited image of Lenin the wise revolutionary Leader who, after formulating the basic co-ordinates of his thought and practice in *What Is to Be Done?*, simply ruthlessly pursued them thereafter. What if there is another story to be told about Lenin? It is true that today's Left is undergoing the shattering experience of the end of an entire epoch for the progressive movement, an experience which compels it to reinvent the very basic co-ordinates of its project – however, it was an exactly homologous experience that gave birth to Leninism. Recall Lenin's shock when, in autumn 1914, all European Social Democratic parties (with the honourable exception of the Russian Bolsheviks and the Serb Social Democrats) adopted the "patriotic line" – Lenin even thought that the issue of *Vorwärts*, the daily newspaper of the German Social Democrats, which reported how

Social Democrats in the Reichstag voted for military credits, was a forgery by the Russian secret police destined to deceive the Russian workers. In that era of the military conflict that cut the European continent in half, how difficult it was to reject the notion that one should take sides in this conflict, and to fight against the "patriotic fervour" in one's own country! How many great minds (including Freud) succumbed to the nationalist temptation, even if only for a couple of weeks!

This shock of 1914 was – to put it in Alain Badiou's terms – a *désastre*, a catastrophe in which an entire world disappeared: not only the idyllic bourgeois faith in progress, but also the socialist movement which accompanied it. Lenin himself (the Lenin of *What Is to Be Done?*) lost the ground under his feet – in his desperate reaction there is no satisfaction, no "I told you so!". This moment of *Verzweiflung*, this catastrophe, cleared the ground for the Leninist event, for breaking the evolutionary historicism of the Second International – and Lenin was the only one who realized this, the only one who articulated the Truth of the catastrophe. Through this moment of despair, the Lenin who, via a close reading of Hegel's *Logic*, was able to discern the unique chance for revolution, was born.¹

It is crucial to emphasize this relevance of "high theory" for the most concrete political struggle *today*, when even such an engaged intellectual as Noam Chomsky likes to underscore how unimportant theoretical knowledge is for progressive political struggle: of what help is studying great philosophical and social-theoretical texts in today's struggle against the neoliberal model of globalization? Is it not that we are dealing either with obvious facts (which simply have to be made public, as Chomsky is doing in his numerous political texts), or with such an incomprehensible complexity that we cannot understand anything? If we wish to argue against this anti-theoretical temptation, it is not enough to draw attention to numerous theoretical presuppositions about freedom, power and society, which also abound in Chomsky's political texts; what is arguably more important is how, today, perhaps for the first time in the history of humankind, our daily experience (of biogenetics, ecology, cyberspace and Virtual Reality) compels *all* of us to confront basic philosophical issues of the nature of freedom and human identity, and so on.

Back to Lenin: his *State and Revolution* is strictly relevant to that shattering experience of 1914 – Lenin's full subjective engagement in it is clear from this famous letter to Kamenev written in July 1917:

¹ This passage draws on conversations with Sebastian Budgen and Eustache Kouvélakis.

Entre nous: If they kill me, I ask you to publish my notebook "Marxism & the State" (stuck in Stockholm). It is bound in a blue cover. It is a collection of all the quotations from Marx & Engels, likewise from Kautsky against Pannekoek. There is a series of remarks & notes, formulations. I think with a week's work it could be published. I consider it imp. for not only Plekhanov but also Kautsky got it wrong. Condition: all this is *entre nous*.²

The existential engagement is extreme here, and the kernel of the Leninist "utopia" arises from the ashes of the catastrophe of 1914, in his settling of the accounts with the Second International orthodoxy: the radical imperative to smash the bourgeois state, which means the state *as such*, and to invent a new communal social form without a standing army, police or bureaucracy, in which all could take part in the administration of social matters. For Lenin, this was not a theoretical project for some distant future – in October 1917 he claimed: "We can at once set in motion a state apparatus constituting of ten if not twenty million people."³ *This urge of the moment is the true utopia*. What we should stick to is the *madness* (in the strict Kierkegaardian sense) of this Leninist utopia – and, if anything, Stalinism stands for a return to the realistic "common sense". It is impossible to overestimate the explosive potential of *The State and Revolution* – in this book, "the vocabulary and grammar of the Western tradition of politics was abruptly dispensed with".⁴

What then followed can be called – borrowing the title of Althusser's text on Machiavelli – *la solitude de Lénine*: the time when he basically stood alone, struggling against the current in his own party. When, in his "April Theses" (1917), Lenin discerned the *Augenblick*, the unique chance for a revolution, his proposals were first met with stupor or contempt by a large majority of his party colleagues. No prominent leader within the Bolshevik Party supported his call to revolution, and *Pravda* took the extraordinary step of dissociating the Party, and the editorial board as a whole, from Lenin's "April Theses" – Lenin was far from being an opportunist flattering and exploiting the prevailing mood of the populace; his views were highly idiosyncratic. Bogdanov characterized the "April Theses" as "the delirium of a madman",⁵ and Nadezhda Krupskaya herself concluded: "I am afraid it looks as if Lenin has gone crazy."⁶

² V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers 1965, vol. 42, p. 67.

³ Quoted from Neil Harding, *Leninism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1996, p. 309.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁶ *Ibid.*

This is the Lenin from whom we still have something to learn. The greatness of Lenin was that in this catastrophic situation, *he wasn't afraid to succeed* – in contrast to the negative pathos discernible in Rosa Luxemburg and Adorno, for whom the ultimate authentic act is the admission of the failure which brings the truth of the situation to light. In 1917, instead of waiting until the time was ripe, Lenin organized a pre-emptive strike; in 1920, as the leader of the party of the working class with no working class (most of it being decimated in the civil war), he went on organizing a state, fully accepting the paradox of the party which has to organize – even re-create – its own base, its working class.

Nowhere is this greatness more evident than in Lenin's writings which cover the time span from February 1917, when the first revolution abolished tsarism and installed a democratic regime, to the second revolution in October. The opening text of the present volume ("Letters from Afar") reveals Lenin's initial grasp of the unique revolutionary chance, while the last text (the minutes of the "Meeting of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies") declares the Bolshevik seizure of power. Everything is here, from "Lenin the ingenious revolutionary strategist" to "Lenin of the enacted utopia" (of the immediate abolishing of the state apparatuses). To refer again to Kierkegaard: what we are allowed to perceive in these writings is *Lenin-in-becoming*: not yet "Lenin the Soviet institution", but Lenin thrown into an open situation. Are we, within our late capitalist closure of the "end of history", still able to experience the shattering impact of such an authentic historical opening?

In February 1917 Lenin was an almost anonymous political emigrant, stranded in Zurich, with no reliable contacts to Russia, mostly learning about the events from the Swiss press; in October 1917 he led the first successful socialist revolution – so what happened in between? In February, Lenin immediately perceived the revolutionary chance, the result of unique contingent circumstances – if the moment was not seized, the chance for the revolution would be forfeited, perhaps for decades. In his stubborn insistence that one should take the risk and go on to the next stage – that is, repeat the revolution – he was alone, ridiculed by the majority of the Central Committee members of his own party; this selection of his texts endeavours to provide a glimpse into the obstinate, patient – and often frustrating – revolutionary work through which Lenin imposed his vision. Indispensable as Lenin's personal intervention was, however, we should not change the story of the October Revolution into the story of the lone genius confronted with the disorientated masses and gradually imposing his vision. Lenin succeeded because his appeal, while bypassing the Party *nomenkla-*

tura, found an echo in what I am tempted to call revolutionary micropolitics: the incredible explosion of grass-roots democracy, of local committees sprouting up all around Russia's big cities and, ignoring the authority of the "legitimate" government, taking matters into their own hands. This is the untold story of the October Revolution, the obverse of the myth of the tiny group of ruthless dedicated revolutionaries which accomplished a *coup d'état*.

The first thing that strikes today's reader is how directly *readable* Lenin's texts from 1917 are: there is no need for long explanatory notes – even if the strange-sounding names are unknown to us, we immediately get what was at stake. From today's distance, the texts display an almost classical clarity in tracing the contours of the struggle in which they participate. Lenin is fully aware of the paradox of the situation: in spring 1917, after the February Revolution which toppled the tsarist regime, Russia was the most democratic country in the whole of Europe, with an unprecedented degree of mass mobilization, freedom of organization and freedom of the press – yet this freedom made the situation non-transparent, thoroughly ambiguous. If there is a common thread running through all Lenin's texts written between the two revolutions (the February one and the October one), it is his insistence on the gap which separates the "explicit" formal contours of the political struggle between the multitude of parties and other political subjects from its actual social stakes (immediate peace, the distribution of land, and, of course, "all the power to the soviets", that is, the dismantling of the existing state apparatus and its replacement with the new commune-like forms of social management). This gap is the gap between revolution *qua* the imaginary explosion of freedom in sublime enthusiasm, the magic moment of universal solidarity when "everything seems possible", and the hard *work* of social reconstruction which is to be performed if this enthusiastic explosion is to leave its traces in the inertia of the social edifice itself.

This gap – a repetition of the gap between 1789 and 1793 in the French Revolution – is the very space of Lenin's unique intervention: the fundamental lesson of revolutionary *materialism* is that revolution must strike twice, and for essential reasons. The gap is not simply the gap between form and content: what the "first revolution" misses is not the content, but *the form itself* – it remains stuck in the old form, thinking that freedom and justice can be accomplished if we simply put the existing state apparatus and its democratic mechanisms to use. What if the "good" party wins the free elections and "legally" implements socialist transformation? (The clearest expression of this illusion, bordering on the ridiculous, is Karl Kautsky's

thesis, formulated in the 1920s, that the logical political form of the first stage of socialism, of the passage from capitalism to socialism, is the parliamentary coalition of bourgeois and proletarian parties.) Here there is a perfect parallel with the era of early modernity, in which opposition to the Church ideological hegemony first articulated itself in the very form of another religious ideology, as a *heresy*: along the same lines, the partisans of the “first revolution” want to subvert capitalist domination in the very political form of capitalist democracy. This is the Hegelian “negation of negation”: first the old order is negated within its own ideologico-political form; then this form itself has to be negated. Those who oscillate, those who are afraid to take the second step of overcoming this form itself, are those who (to repeat Robespierre) want a “revolution without revolution” – and Lenin displays all the strength of his “hermeneutics of suspicion” in discerning the different forms of this retreat.

In his 1917 writings, Lenin saves his most acerbic irony for those who engage in the endless search for some kind of “guarantee” for the revolution; this guarantee assumes two main forms: either the reified notion of social Necessity (one should not risk the revolution too early; one has to wait for the right moment, when the time is “ripe” with regard to the laws of historical development: “It is too early for the Socialist revolution, the working class is not yet mature”) or normative (“democratic”) legitimacy (“The majority of the population are not on our side, so the revolution would not really be democratic”) – as Lenin repeatedly puts it: as if, before the revolutionary agent risks the seizure of state power, it should get permission from some figure of the big Other (organize a referendum which will ascertain that the majority support the revolution). With Lenin, as with Lacan, the point is that the revolution *ne s'autorise que d'elle-même*: we should venture the revolutionary *act* not covered by the big Other – the fear of taking power “prematurely”, the search for the guarantee, is the fear of the abyss of the act. That is the ultimate dimension of what Lenin incessantly denounces as “opportunism”, and his premiss is that “opportunism” is a position which is in itself, inherently, false, masking a fear of accomplishing the act with the protective screen of “objective” facts, laws or norms, which is why the first step in combating it is to *announce* it clearly: “What, then, is to be done? We must *aussprechen was ist*, ‘state the facts’, admit the truth that there is a tendency, or an opinion, in our Central Committee . . .”⁷

Lenin’s answer is not the reference to a different set of “objective facts”,

⁷ V. I. Lenin, “The Crisis Has Matured”, see the present volume, p. 139.

but the repetition of the argument made a decade ago by Rosa Luxemburg against Kautsky: those who wait for the objective conditions of the revolution to arrive will wait for ever – such a position of the objective observer (and not of an engaged agent) is itself the main obstacle to the revolution. Lenin's counterargument against the formal-democratic critics of the second step is that this "pure democratic" option is itself utopian: in the concrete Russian circumstances, the bourgeois-democratic state has no chance of survival – the only "realistic" way to protect the true gains of the February Revolution (freedom of organization and the press, etc.) is to move on to the Socialist revolution, otherwise the tsarist reactionaries will win.

The basic lesson of the psychoanalytic notion of temporality is that there are things one has to do in order to learn that they are superfluous: in the course of the treatment, one loses months on false moves before "it clicks" and one finds the right formula – although they retroactively appear superfluous, these detours were necessary. And does the same not go also for the revolution? What, then, happened when, in his last years, Lenin became fully aware of the limitations of Bolshevik power? It is here that we should oppose Lenin and Stalin: from Lenin's very last writings, long after he renounced the utopia of his *State and Revolution*, we can discern the contours of a modest "realistic" project of what Bolshevik power should do. Because of the economic underdevelopment and cultural backwardness of the Russian masses, there is no way for Russia to "pass directly to Socialism"; all that Soviet power can do is to combine the moderate politics of "state capitalism" with the intense cultural education of the inert peasant masses – not "Communist propaganda" brainwashing, simply a patient, gradual imposition of developed civilized standards. Facts and figures reveal "what a vast amount of urgent spadework we still have to do to reach the standard of an ordinary West European civilized country. . . . We must bear in mind the semi-Asiatic ignorance from which we have not yet extricated ourselves."⁸ So Lenin warns repeatedly against any kind of direct "implantation of Communism":

Under no circumstances must this be understood [in the sense] that we should immediately propagate purely in strictly communist ideas in the countryside. As long as our countryside lacks the material basis for communism, it will be, I should say, harmful, in fact, I should say, fatal, for communism to do so.⁹

⁸ V. I. Lenin, "Pages from a Diary", in *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers 1966, vol. 33, p. 463.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 465.

His recurrent theme is: "The most harmful thing here would be haste."¹⁰ Against this stance of "cultural revolution", Stalin opted for the thoroughly anti-Leninist notion of "building Socialism in one state".

Does this mean, then, that Lenin silently adopted the standard Menshevik criticism of Bolshevik utopianism, their idea that revolution must follow the preordained necessary stages (it can occur only once its material conditions are in place)? It is here that we can observe Lenin's refined dialectical sense at work: he is fully aware that, now, in the early 1920s, the main task of Bolshevik power is to execute the tasks of the progressive bourgeois regime (general education, etc.); however, the very fact that it is a proletarian revolutionary power which is doing this changes the situation fundamentally – there is a unique chance that these "civilizing" measures will be implemented in such a way that they will be deprived of their limited bourgeois ideological framework (general education will be really general education serving the people, not an ideological mask for propagating narrow bourgeois class interest, etc.). The properly dialectical paradox is thus that it is the very *hopelessness* of the Russian situation (the backwardness that compels the proletarian power to fulfil the bourgeois civilizing mission) which can be turned into a unique advantage:

What if the complete hopelessness of the situation, by stimulating the efforts of the workers and peasants tenfold, offered us the opportunity to create the fundamental requisites of civilization in a different way from that of the West European countries?¹¹

Here we have two models, two incompatible logics, of the revolution: those who wait for the ripe teleological moment of the final crisis when revolution will explode "at its own proper time" according to the necessity of the historical evolution; and those who are aware that revolution has no "proper time", those who perceive the revolutionary chance as something that emerges and has to be seized in the very detours of "normal" historical development. Lenin is not a voluntarist "subjectivist" – what he insists on is that the exception (the extraordinary set of circumstances, like those in Russia in 1917) offers a way to undermine the norm itself.

Is this line of argumentation, this fundamental stance, not more apposite than ever today? Do not we, also, live in an era when the state and its apparatuses, including its political agents, are simply less and less able to articulate the key issues – as none other than John le Carré put it recently:

¹⁰ V. I. Lenin, "Better Fewer, but Better", in *Collected Works*, vol. 33, p. 488.

¹¹ V. I. Lenin, "Our Revolution", in *Collected Works*, vol. 33, p. 479.

"Politicians are ignoring the real problems of the world" (by which he meant ecology, deteriorating healthcare, poverty, the role of multinationals, etc.). Le Carré was not simply making a point about the shortsightedness of some politicians – if we take what he said seriously, the only logical conclusion is that we urgently need a new *form of politicization* which will directly "socialize" these crucial issues. The illusion of 1917 that the pressing problems which faced Russia (peace, land distribution, etc.) could be solved through "legal" parliamentary means is the same as today's illusion that the ecological threat, for instance, could be avoided by expanding the market logic to ecology (making polluters pay for the damage they cause).

"Lenin" is not the nostalgic name for old dogmatic certainty; quite the contrary, *the* Lenin who is to be retrieved is the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which the old co-ordinates proved useless, and who was thus compelled to reinvent Marxism – take his acerbic remark apropos of some new problem: "About this, Marx and Engels said not a word." The idea is not to return to Lenin, but to *repeat* him in the Kierkegaardian sense: to retrieve the same impulse in today's constellation. The return to Lenin aims neither at nostalgically *re-enacting* the "good old revolutionary times", nor at an opportunistic-pragmatic *adjustment* of the old programme to "new conditions", but at *repeating*, in the present worldwide conditions, the Leninist gesture of reinventing the revolutionary project in the conditions of imperialism and colonialism – more precisely: after the politico-ideological collapse of the long era of progressivism in the catastrophe of 1914. Eric Hobsbawm has defined the concept of the twentieth century as the time between 1914, the end of the long peaceful expansion of capitalism, and 1990, the emergence of the new form of global capitalism after the collapse of Really Existing Socialism.¹² What Lenin did for 1914, we should do for 1990. "Lenin" stands for the compelling freedom to suspend the stale existing (post-)ideological co-ordinates, the debilitating *Denkverbot* (prohibition on thinking) in which we live – it simply means that we are allowed to think again.

So what role should Lenin's *personality* play in our assessment of his contribution? Are we not, in fact, reducing him to a pure symbol of a certain revolutionary stance? In a letter to Engels written on 30 July 1862, Marx designated Ferdinand Lassalle – co-founder of German Social Democracy, and his competitor for influence in it – not only as "a greasy Jew

¹² See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, New York: Vintage 1996.

disguised under brilliantine and cheap jewels", but, even more brutally, as "the Jewish Nigger": "It is now perfectly clear to me that, as the shape of his head and the growth of his hair indicate, he is descended from the Negroes who joined in Moses' flight from Egypt (unless his mother or grandmother on the father's side was crossed with a nigger)."¹³ Instead of reading such statements as proof of the Eurocentric bias of Marx's theory, we should simply dismiss them as fundamentally *irrelevant*; their only positive significance is that they prevent us from indulging in any kind of hagiography of Marx, since they clearly reveal the irreducible gap between Marx as a person and his theory which, precisely, provides the tools for an analysis and a criticism of such racist outbursts. And, of course, the same goes for Lenin: his alleged "ruthlessness" has exactly the same status as his love of cats and little children in the Stalinist hagiography.

After the Hungarian rebellion of 1956 was crushed by the Russian tanks, Georg Lukács (who participated in the Imre Nagy government) was taken prisoner; when a KGB officer asked him if he had a weapon, Lukács calmly reached into his pocket and handed over his pen.¹⁴ Does not the implication of this gesture hold even more for Lenin's texts collected here? If ever a pen was a weapon, it was the pen which wrote Lenin's 1917 texts.

¹³ *Marx-Engels-Werke*, Berlin (GDR): Dietz Verlag 1968, vol. XXX, p. 259.

¹⁴ Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács*, Oxford: Blackwell 1991, p. 434.

Revolution at the Gates

Afterword: Lenin's Choice

Slavoj Žižek

In academic politics today, the idea of dealing with Lenin immediately gives rise to two qualifications: yes, why not, we live in a liberal democracy, there is freedom of thought . . . provided that we treat Lenin in an "objective, critical and scientific way", not in an attitude of nostalgic idolatry, and, furthermore, from a perspective firmly rooted in the democratic political order, within the horizon of human rights – that is the lesson learned painfully through the experience of twentieth-century totalitarianism.

What are we to say to this? The problem lies in the further implicit qualifications which can easily be discerned by a "concrete analysis of the concrete situation", as Lenin himself would have put it.¹ "Fidelity to the democratic consensus" means acceptance of the present liberal-parliamentary consensus, which precludes any serious questioning of the way this liberal-democratic order is complicit in the phenomena it officially condemns, and, of course, any serious attempt to imagine a *different* sociopolitical order. In short, it means: say and write whatever you like – on condition that you do not actually question or disturb the prevailing political consensus. Everything is allowed, solicited even, as a critical topic: the prospect of a global ecological catastrophe; violations of human rights; sexism, homophobia, anti-feminism; growing violence not only in faraway countries, but also in our own megalopolises; the gap between the First and the Third World, between rich and poor; the shattering impact of the digitalization of our daily lives . . . today, there is nothing easier than to get international, state or corporate funds for a multidisciplinary research project on how to fight new forms of ethnic, religious or sexist violence. The problem is that all this occurs against the background of a fundamental *Denkverbot*: a prohibition on thinking.

Today's liberal-democratic hegemony is sustained by a kind of unwritten *Denkverbot* similar to the infamous *Berufsverbot* (prohibition on employing individuals with radical Left leanings in the state organs) in Germany in the

late 1960s – the moment we show a minimal sign of engaging in political projects which aim seriously to challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately: “Benevolent as it is, this will inevitably end in a new Gulag!” The ideological function of constant references to the Holocaust, the Gulag, and more recent Third World catastrophes is thus to serve as the support of this *Denkverbot* by constantly reminding us how *things could have been much worse*: “Just look around and see for yourself what will happen if we follow your radical notions!” What we encounter here is the ultimate example of what Anna Dinerstein and Mike Neary have called the project of *disutopia*: “not just the temporary absence of Utopia, but the political celebration of the end of social dreams”.² And the demand for “scientific objectivity” amounts to just another version of the same *Denkverbot*: the moment we seriously question the existing liberal consensus, we are accused of abandoning scientific objectivity for outdated ideological positions. This is the “Leninist” point on which one cannot and should not concede: *today, actual freedom of thought means freedom to question the prevailing liberal-democratic “post-ideological” consensus – or it means nothing.*

The Right to Truth

The perspective of the critique of ideology compels us to invert Wittgenstein’s “What one cannot speak about, thereof one should be silent” into “What one should not speak about, thereof one cannot remain silent”. If you want to speak about a social system, you cannot remain silent about its repressed excess. The point is not to tell the whole Truth but, precisely, to append to the (official) Whole the uneasy supplement which denounces its falsity. As Max Horkheimer put it back in the 1930s: “If you don’t want to talk about capitalism, then you should keep silent about Fascism.” Fascism is the inherent “symptom” (the return of the repressed) of capitalism, the key to its “truth”, not just an external contingent deviation of its “normal” logic. And the same goes for today’s situation: those who do not want to subject liberal democracy and the flaws of its multiculturalist tolerance to critical analysis, should keep quiet about the new Rightist violence and intolerance.

If we are to leave the opposition between liberal-democratic universalism and ethnic/religious fundamentalism behind, the first step is to acknowledge the existence of *liberal fundamentalism*: the perverse game of making a big fuss when the rights of a serial killer or a suspected war criminal are violated, while ignoring massive violations of “ordinary” people’s rights.

More precisely, the politically correct stance betrays its perverse economy through its oscillation between the two extremes: either fascination with the victimized other (helpless children, raped women . . .), or a focus on the problematic other who, although criminal, and so on, also deserves protection of his human rights, because "today it's him, tomorrow it'll be us" (an excellent example is Noam Chomsky's defence of a French book advocating the revisionist stance on the Holocaust). On a different level, a similar instance of the perversity of Political Correctness occurs in Denmark, where people speak ironically of the "white woman's burden", her ethico-political duty to have sex with immigrant workers from Third World countries – this being the final necessary step in ending their exclusion.

Today, in the era of what Habermas designated as *die neue Unübersichtlichkeit* (the new opacity),³ our everyday experience is more mystifying than ever: modernization generates new obscurantisms; the reduction of freedom is presented to us as the dawn of new freedoms. The perception that we live in a society of free choices, in which we have to choose even our most "natural" features (ethnic or sexual identity), is the form of appearance of its very opposite: of the *absence* of true choices.⁴ The recent trend for "alternate reality" films, which present existing reality as one of a multitude of possible outcomes, is symptomatic of a society in which choices no longer really matter, are trivialized. The lesson of the time-warp narratives is even bleaker, since it points towards a total closure: the very attempt to avoid the predestined course of things not only leads us back to it, but actually constitutes it – from Oedipus onwards, we want to avoid A, and it is through our very detour that A realizes itself.

In these circumstances, we should be especially careful *not to confuse the ruling ideology with ideology which seems to dominate*. More than ever, we should bear in mind Walter Benjamin's reminder that it is not enough to ask how a certain theory (or art) positions itself with regard to social struggles – we should also ask how it actually functions in these very struggles. In sex, the true hegemonic attitude is not patriarchal repression, but free promiscuity; in art, provocations in the style of the notorious "Sensation" exhibitions *are* the norm, the example of art fully integrated into the establishment. Ayn Rand brought this logic to its conclusion, supplementing it with a kind of Hegelian twist, that is, reasserting the official ideology itself as its own greatest transgression, as in the title of one of her late non-fiction books: "Capitalism, This Unknown Ideal", or in "top managers, America's last endangered species".

Indeed, since the "normal" functioning of capitalism involves some kind of disavowal of the basic principle of its functioning (today's model capital-

ist is someone who, after ruthlessly generating profit, then generously shares parts of it, giving large donations to churches, victims of ethnic or sexual abuse, etc., posing as a humanitarian), the ultimate act of transgression is to assert this principle directly, depriving it of its humanitarian mask. I am therefore tempted to reverse Marx's Thesis 11: the first task today is precisely *not* to succumb to the temptation to act, to intervene directly and change things (which then inevitably ends in a cul-de-sac of debilitating impossibility: "What can we do against global capital?"), but to question the hegemonic ideological co-ordinates. In short, our historical moment is still that of Adorno:

To the question "What should we do?" I can most often truly answer only with "I don't know." I can only try to analyse rigorously what there is. Here people reproach me: When you practise criticism, you are also obliged to say how one should make it better. To my mind, this is incontrovertibly a bourgeois prejudice. Many times in history it so happened that the very works which pursued purely theoretical goals transformed consciousness, and thereby also social reality.⁵

If, today, we follow a direct call to act, this act will not be performed in an empty space – it will be an act within the hegemonic ideological co-ordinates: those who "really want to do something to help people" get involved in (undoubtedly honourable) exploits like *Médecins sans frontières*, Greenpeace, feminist and anti-racist campaigns, which are all not only tolerated but even supported by the media, even if they seemingly encroach on economic territory (for example, denouncing and boycotting companies which do not respect ecological conditions, or use child labour) – they are tolerated and supported as long as they do not get too close to a certain limit.⁶

This kind of activity provides the perfect example of interpassivity:⁷ of doing things not in order to achieve something, but to prevent something from really happening, really changing. All this frenetic humanitarian, Politically Correct, etc., activity fits the formula of "Let's go on changing something all the time so that, globally, things will remain the same!". If standard Cultural Studies criticize capitalism, they do so in the coded way that exemplifies Hollywood liberal paranoia: the enemy is "the system", the hidden "organization", the anti-democratic "conspiracy", not simply capitalism and state apparatuses. The problem with this critical stance is not only that it replaces concrete social analysis with a struggle against abstract paranoid fantasies, but that – in a typical paranoid gesture – it unnecessarily *redoubles* social reality, as if there were a secret Organization *behind*

the "visible" capitalist and state organs. What we should accept is that there is no need for a secret "organization-within-an-organization": the "conspiracy" is already in the "visible" organization as such, in the capitalist system, in the way the political space and state apparatuses work.⁸

Let us take one of the hottest topics in today's "radical" American academia: postcolonial studies. The problem of postcolonialism is undoubtedly crucial; however, postcolonial studies tend to translate it into the multiculturalist problematic of the colonized minorities' "right to narrate" their victimizing experience, of the power mechanisms which repress "otherness", so that, at the end of the day, we learn that the root of postcolonial exploitation is our intolerance towards the Other, and, furthermore, that this intolerance itself is rooted in our intolerance towards the "Stranger in Ourselves", in our inability to confront what we have repressed in and of ourselves – the politico-economic struggle is thus imperceptibly transformed into a pseudo-psychoanalytic drama of the subject unable to confront its inner traumas. . . . (Why pseudo-psychoanalytic? Because the true lesson of psychoanalysis is not that the external events which fascinate and/or disturb us are just projections of our inner repressed impulses. The unbearable fact of life is that there really are disturbing events out there: there *are* other human beings who experience intense sexual enjoyment while we are half-impotent; there *are* people submitted to terrifying torture. . . . Again, the ultimate truth of psychoanalysis is not that of discovering our true Self, but that of the traumatic encounter with an unbearable Real.) The true corruption of American academia is not primarily financial, it is not only that universities are able to buy many European critical intellectuals (myself included – up to a point), but conceptual: notions of "European" critical theory are imperceptibly translated into the benign universe of Cultural Studies chic. At a certain point, this chic becomes indistinguishable from the famous Citibank commercial in which scenes of East Asian, European, Black and American children playing is accompanied by the voice-over: "People who were once divided by a continent . . . are now united by an economy" – at this concluding highpoint, of course, the children are replaced by the Citibank logo.⁹

The great majority of today's "radical" academics silently count on the long-term stability of the American capitalist model, with a secure tenured position as their ultimate professional goal (a surprising number of them even play the stock market). If there is one thing they are genuinely afraid of, it is a radical shattering of the (relatively) safe life-environment of the "symbolic classes" in developed Western societies. Their excessive Politically Correct zeal when they are dealing with sexism, racism, Third World

sweatshops, and so on, is thus ultimately a defence against their own innermost identification, a kind of compulsive ritual whose hidden logic is: "Let's talk as much as possible about the necessity of a radical change, to make sure that nothing will really change!" The journal *October* is typical of this: when you ask one of the editors what the title refers to, they half-confidentially indicate that it is, of course, *that* October – in this way, you can indulge in jargonistic analyses of modern art, with the secret assurance that you are somehow retaining a link with the radical revolutionary past. . . . With regard to this radical chic, our first gesture towards Third Way ideologists and practitioners should be one of praise: at least they play their game straight, and are honest in their acceptance of the global capitalist co-ordinates – unlike pseudo-radical academic Leftists who adopt an attitude of utter disdain towards the Third Way, while their own radicalism ultimately amounts to an empty gesture which obliges no one to do anything definite.

There is, of course, a strict distinction to be made here between authentic social engagement on behalf of exploited minorities (for example, organizing illegally employed chicano field workers in California) and the multiculturalist/postcolonial "plantations of no-risk, no-fault, knock-off rebellion"¹⁰ which prosper in "radical" American academia. If, however, in contrast to "corporate multiculturalism", we define "critical multiculturalism" as a strategy of pointing out that "there are common forces of oppression, common strategies of exclusion, stereotyping, and stigmatizing of oppressed groups, and thus common enemies and targets of attack,"¹¹ I do not see the appropriateness of the continuing use of the term "multiculturalism", since the accent shifts here to the *common* struggle. In its normal accepted meaning, multiculturalism perfectly fits the logic of the global market.

Recently, the Hindus in India organized widespread demonstrations against McDonald's, after it became known that, before freezing its potato chips, McDonald's fried them in oil of animal (beef) fat origin; once the company had conceded the point, guaranteeing that all potato chips sold in India would be fried only in vegetable oil, the satisfied Hindus happily returned to munching the chips. Far from undermining globalization, this protest against McDonald's, and the company's quick answer, embody the Hindus' perfect integration into the diversified global order. The point is not only that the global market thrives on the diversification of demand, but that, on a purely formal level, the Hindus' defence of their tradition is already inscribed in the logic of modernity, that it is already a "reflected" gesture: the Hindus have *chosen* (to remain faithful to) their tradition, thereby transforming this tradition into one of the many options available to them.

A closer analysis should take into account the gap between the literal and the metaphorical dimension of the Hindu protest against McDonald's chips: it is clear that this protest functioned as a metaphorical stand-in for global discontent with Western cultural imperialism. We can thus imagine two further versions (not taking into account the third one: what if McDonald's were to lie, continuing to use beef fat, and the Hindus were to believe the company? Is it not true that in this case, everybody would have been satisfied?):

- What if, having obtained assurances that McDonald's had truly stopped using beef fat, the Hindus somehow felt frustrated? By complying with their literal demand, McDonald's prevented them from articulating their more fundamental protest against Western cultural imperialism?
- What if, after McDonald's had truly stopped using beef fat, the Hindu press had continued to spread the lie that this fat was still being used, and this lie had triggered a popular revolt against cultural imperialism with some really emancipatory results? Is it not true that in this case, a blatant lie would have served as the means of articulating a more global truth? (Consider also the analogous case of the trial of an African-American murderer: even if he really did commit the crime, the sentence is somehow "wrong", since it serves to sustain racist attitudes towards African-Americans.)

McDonald's "respect" for the Hindus is thus unremittingly *patronizing*, like our normal attitude towards small children: although we do not take them seriously, we "respect" their innocuous habits in order not to shatter their illusory world. When a visitor reaches a local village, with its local customs, is there anything more racist than his clumsy attempts to demonstrate how he "understands" these customs, and is able to follow them? Does not such behaviour reveal the same patronizing attitude as the one displayed by adults who adapt themselves to their small children by imitating their gestures and their way of speaking? Are not local inhabitants legitimately offended when the foreign intruder mimics their speech? The patronizing falsity of the visitor does not reside merely in the fact that he is only pretending to be "one of us" – the point is, rather, that we establish a real contact with the locals only when they disclose to us the distance they themselves maintain towards the letter of their own customs.¹² There is a well-known anecdote about Prince Peter Petrovič Njegoš, an early-nineteenth-century Montenegrin ruler famous both for his battles against the Turks and for his epic poetry: when an English visitor to his court, profoundly touched by a local ritual, expressed his willingness to partake in

it, Njegos cruelly rebuffed him: "Why should you make a fool of yourself too? Isn't it bad enough for us to play these silly games?" . . .

Furthermore, what about practices like burning wives after their husband's death, which is part of the same Hindu tradition as sacred cows? Should we (tolerant Western multiculturalists) also respect these practices? Here, the tolerant multiculturalist is compelled to resort to a thoroughly *Eurocentrist* distinction, a distinction that is totally foreign to Hinduism: the Other is tolerated with regard to customs which hurt no one – the moment we come up against some (for us) traumatic dimension, the tolerance is over. In short, tolerance is tolerance of the Other in so far as this Other is not an "intolerant fundamentalist" – which simply means: in so far as it is not the real Other. Tolerance is "zero tolerance" for the real Other, the Other in the substantial weight of its *jouissance*. We can see how this liberal tolerance reproduces the elementary "postmodern" operation of having access to the object deprived of its substance: we can enjoy coffee without caffeine, beer without alcohol, sex without direct bodily contact, right up to Virtual Reality, that is, reality itself deprived of its inert material substance – along the same lines, we even get the ethnic Other deprived of the substance of its Otherness. . . .

In other words, the problem with the liberal multiculturalist is that he or she is unable to maintain a true indifference towards the Other's *jouissance* – this *jouissance* bothers them, which is why their entire strategy is to keep it at a proper distance. This indifference towards the Other's *jouissance*, the thorough absence of envy, is the key component of what Lacan calls the subjective position of a "saint". Like the authentic "fundamentalists" (say, the Amish) who are indifferent, not bothered by the secret enjoyment of Others, true believers in a (universal) Cause, like Saint Paul, are pointedly indifferent to local customs and mores which simply *do not matter*. In contrast, the multiculturalist liberal is a Rortyan "ironist", always keeping his or her distance, always displacing belief on to Others – Others believe for them, in their place. And although they may appear ("for themselves") to reproach the believing Other for the particular content of his or her belief, what actually ("in itself") bothers them is *the form of belief as such*. Intolerance is intolerance towards the Real of a belief. These people in fact behave like the proverbial husband who concedes in principle that his wife may have a lover, only not *that* guy – that is to say, every particular lover is unacceptable: the tolerant liberal concedes the right to believe in principle, while rejecting every determinate belief as "fundamentalist".¹³ The ultimate joke of multiculturalist tolerance is, of course, the way class distinction is inscribed into it: adding (ideological) insult to (politico-economic) injury,

upper-class Politically Correct individuals use it to berate the lower classes for their redneck "fundamentalism".

One of the most refined forms of racist (or sexist) oppression is to deny the other the right to define their identity – we do it for them; we tell them who and what they really are. This practice is expanded with Politically Correct multiculturalism: when members of an old ethnic group, for example, make clear their desire to taste the pleasures of the "consumerist society", patronizing multiculturalists try to convince them that they are victims of Western capitalist ideology, and that they should resist it. This patronizing attitude can go right up to direct interference in naming itself: at a TV round-table discussion in Minnesota a couple of years ago, the enlightened white liberals tried to convince their partners to refer to themselves as "Native Americans", although they insisted that they unequivocally preferred the old term "Indians".

This brings us to the more radical question: is respect for the other's belief (say, belief in the sacredness of cows) really the ultimate ethical horizon? Is this not the ultimate horizon of postmodern ethics, in which, since reference to any form of universal truth is disqualified as a form of cultural violence, all that ultimately matters is respect for the other's fantasy? Or, to put it in an even more pointed way: OK, you can claim that lying to the Hindus about the beef fat is ethically problematic – does this mean, however, that you are not allowed to argue publicly that their belief (in the sacredness of cows) is already in itself a lie, a false belief? The fact that "ethical committees" are sprouting up everywhere today points in the same direction: how did ethics, all of a sudden, became an affair of bureaucratic (administrative), state-nominated committees invested with the authority to determine what course of action can still count as ethically acceptable? The "risk society" theorists' answer (we need committees because we are confronting new situations in which it is no longer possible to apply old norms, that is, ethical committees are the sign of "reflected" ethics) is clearly inadequate: these committees are the symptom of a deeper malaise (and, at the same time, an inadequate answer to it).

The ultimate problem with the "right to narrate" is that it uses a unique particular experience as a political argument: "Only a gay black woman can experience and tell what it means to be a gay black woman", and so on. Such recourse to a particular experience which cannot be universalized is always, and by definition, a conservative political gesture: ultimately, everyone can evoke his or her unique experience in order to justify their reprehensible acts.¹⁴ Is it not possible for a Nazi executioner to claim that his victims did not really understand the inner vision which motivated him?

Along these same lines, Veit Harlan, the Nazi film director, spoke despairingly in the 1950s about the fact that Jews in the USA did not show any comprehension of his defence for making *The Jew Süss*, claiming that no American Jew could really understand his situation in Nazi Germany – far from exonerating him, this obscene (factual) truth is the ultimate lie. Furthermore, the fact that the greatest plea for tolerance in the history of cinema was made in a defence against “intolerant” attacks on an advocate for the Ku Klux Klan tells a lot about the extent to which – to use today’s terms – the signifier “tolerance” is very much a “floating” one. For D. W. Griffith, *Intolerance* was not a way to exculpate himself for the aggressive racist message of *The Birth of a Nation*: quite the contrary, he was smarting at what he considered “intolerance” on the part of groups which attempted to have *The Birth of a Nation* banned because of its anti-Black thrust. In short, when Griffith complains about “intolerance”, he is much closer to today’s fundamentalists decrying the “Politically Correct” defence of the universal rights of women as “intolerant” towards their specific way of life than to today’s multiculturalist assertion of differences.

Consequently, Lenin’s legacy, to be reinvented today, is the politics of truth. Both liberal-political democracy and “totalitarianism” foreclose a politics of truth. Democracy, of course, is the reign of sophists: there are only opinions; any reference by a political agent to some ultimate truth is denounced as “totalitarian”. What “totalitarianism” regimes impose, however, is also a mere semblance of truth: an arbitrary Teaching whose function is simply to legitimize the pragmatic decisions of the Rulers.¹⁵ We live in the “postmodern” era, in which truth-claims as such are dismissed as an expression of hidden power mechanisms – as reborn pseudo-Nietzscheans like to emphasize, truth is a lie which is most efficient in asserting our will to power. The very question “Is it true?”, apropos of some statement, is supplanted by the question “Under what power conditions can this statement be uttered?”.

What we get instead of the universal truth is the multitude of perspectives, or – as it is fashionable to put it today – of “narratives”; as a result, the two philosophers of today’s global capitalism are the two great Left-liberal “progressives”, Richard Rorty and Peter Singer – both are honest in their radical stance. Rorty defines the basic co-ordinates: the fundamental dimension of a human being is the ability to suffer, to experience pain and humiliation – therefore, since humans are symbolic animals, the fundamental right is the right to narrate one’s experience of suffering and humiliation.¹⁶ Singer then provides the Darwinian background: “speciesism” (privileging the human species) is no different from racism: our perception

of a difference between humans and (other) animals is no less illogical and unethical than our former perception of an ethical difference between, say, men and women, or Blacks and Whites.¹⁷

The problem with Singer is not only the rather obvious fact that while we, ecologically conscious humans, are protecting endangered animal species, our ultimate goal with regard to oppressed and exploited human groups is not just to "protect" them but, above all, to empower them to take care of themselves and lead a free and autonomous life. What gets lost in this Darwinist narrativism is simply the dimension of truth, *not* "objective truth" as the notion of reality from a point of view which somehow floats above the multitude of particular narratives. Without a reference to this universal dimension of truth, we ultimately all remain the "apes of a cold God" (as Marx put it in his 1841 poem¹⁸), even in Singer's progressive version of social Darwinism. Lenin's premiss – which today, in our era of postmodern relativism, is more pertinent than ever – is that universal truth and partisanship, the gesture of taking sides, are not only not mutually exclusive, but condition each other: the *universal* truth of a concrete situation can be articulated only from a thoroughly *partisan* position; truth is, by definition, one-sided.

This, of course, goes against the prevailing doxa of compromise, of finding a middle path among the multitude of conflicting interests. If we do not specify the criteria of the different, alternative, narrativization, then this endeavour runs the risk of endorsing, in the Politically Correct mood, ridiculous "narratives" like the ones about the supremacy of some aboriginal holistic wisdom, of dismissing science as just another narrative on a par with premodern superstitions. The Leninist answer to the postmodern multiculturalist "right to narrate" should thus be an unashamed assertion of the *right to truth*. When, in the débâcle of 1914, almost all the European Social-Democratic parties succumbed to war fervour and voted for military credits, Lenin's complete rejection of the "patriotic line", in its very isolation from the prevailing mood, stood for the singular emergence of the truth of the entire situation. Against the cliché according to which politics tears people apart, introducing disunity into the social body, we should claim that *the only real universality is the political one*: the universal link binding together all those who experience a fundamental solidarity, all those who became aware that their struggles are part of the very struggle which cuts across the entire social edifice.¹⁹ To put it in Badiou's terms: universality (of the truth-procedure) can assert itself only in the guise of such a cut, of a radical division, at the very heart of the social body. How did De Gaulle emerge as the symbol of unified France? Through his "crazy" insistence in

1940, after the French defeat, that the war was not over, that the fight must go on – an insistence whose effects were deeply divisive.

In a closer analysis, we should show how the cultural relativism of the “right-to-narrate” orientation contains its own apparent opposite, a fixation on the Real of some trauma which resists its narrativization – this properly dialectical tension sustains today’s academic “Holocaust industry”. The postmodern logic of “everything is a discursive construction, there are no direct firm facts” was never used to deflate the Holocaust: Holocaust revisionists prefer to argue in the terms of empirical analysis. Their claims range from the “fact” that there is no written document in which Hitler ordered the Holocaust to the weird mathematics of: “Taking into account the number of gas ovens in Auschwitz, it was not possible to burn so many corpses . . .”. In contrast to the revisionists, it is precisely the postmodern discursive constructionists (like Lyotard) who tend to elevate the Holocaust into the supreme ineffable metaphysical Evil – for them the Holocaust is the untouchable-sacred Real, the negative of contingent language games.²⁰ The problem with those who perceive every comparison between the Holocaust and other concentration camps and mass political crimes as an inadmissible relativization of the Holocaust is that they miss the point and reveal their own doubts: yes, the Holocaust *was* unique, but the only way to establish this uniqueness is to compare it with other similar phenomena, and thus demonstrate the limit of this comparison. If, instead of risking this comparison, you prohibit it, you get caught in the Wittgensteinian paradox of prohibiting speech about that about which we cannot speak: if we stick to the prohibition of the comparison, the gnawing suspicion emerges that if we were to be allowed to compare the Holocaust with other similar crimes, it would be deprived of its uniqueness. . . .

Materialism Revisited

Lenin’s truth is ultimately that of *materialism*, and in fact, in the present climate of New Age obscurantism, it may appear attractive to reassert the lesson of Lenin’s *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*: in today’s popular reading of quantum physics, as in Lenin’s time, the *doxa* is that science itself finally overcame materialism – matter is supposed to “disappear”, to dissolve in the immaterial waves of energy fields.²¹ It is also true (as Lucio Colletti emphasized) that Lenin’s distinction between the philosophical and the scientific notion of matter eliminates the very notion of “dialectics in/of nature”: the philosophical notion of matter as reality existing independently

of mind precludes any intervention by philosophy into science. However . . . the "however" concerns the fact that, in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, there is no place for dialectics, for Hegel. What are Lenin's basic thesis? A refusal to reduce knowledge to phenomenalist or pragmatic instrumentalism (i.e. the assertion that, through scientific knowledge, we come to know the way things exist independently of our minds – the infamous "theory of reflection"), coupled with an insistence on the precarious nature of our knowledge (which is always limited, relative, and "reflects" external reality only in the infinite process of approximation). Does this not sound familiar? Is it not, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of analytical philosophy, the basic position of Karl Popper, the archetypal anti-Hegelian? In his short article "Lenin and Popper",²² Colletti recalls how, in a private letter written in 1970, first published in *Die Zeit*, Popper wrote: "Lenin's book on empiriocriticism is, in my opinion, truly excellent."²³

This hard materialist core of *Empiriocriticism* persists in the *Philosophical Note-Books* (1915), despite Lenin's rediscovery of Hegel – why? In his *Note-Books*, Lenin is struggling with the same problem as Adorno in his "negative dialectics": how to combine Hegel's legacy of the critique of every immediacy, of the subjective mediation of all given objectivity, with the minimum of materialism that Adorno calls the "predominance of the objective"; this is why Lenin still clings to the "theory of reflection" according to which human thought mirrors objective reality):

Here there are *actually*, objectively, *three* members: (1) nature; (2) human cognition = the human *brain* (as the highest product of this same nature); and (3) the form of reflection of nature in human cognition, and this form consists precisely of concepts, laws, categories, etc. Man cannot comprehend = reflect = mirror nature *as a whole*, in its completeness, its "immediate totality", he can only *eternally* come closer to this, creating abstractions, concepts, laws, a scientific picture of the world, etc., etc.²⁴

Both Adorno and Lenin, however, take the wrong path here: the way to assert materialism is not by clinging to the minimum of objective reality *outside* the thought's subjective mediation, but by insisting on the absolute *inherence* of the external obstacle which prevents thought from attaining full identity with itself. The moment we concede this point, and externalize the obstacle, we regress to the pseudo-problematic of the thought asymptotically approaching the ever-elusive "objective reality", never able to grasp it in its infinite complexity.²⁵

The problem with Lenin's "theory of reflection" lies in its implicit

idealism: its very compulsive insistence on the independent existence of material reality outside consciousness is to be read as a symptomatic displacement, destined to conceal the key fact that *consciousness itself* is implicitly posited as external to the reality it "reflects". The very metaphor of reflection infinitely approaching the way things really are, the objective truth, betrays this idealism: what this metaphor leaves out of consideration is the fact that the partiality (distortion) of "subjective reflection" occurs precisely because the subject is included in the process it reflects – only a consciousness observing the universe from the outside would see the whole of reality "the way it really is", that is, a totally adequate "neutral" knowledge of reality would imply our ex-sistence, our external status with regard to it, just as a mirror can reflect an object perfectly only if it is external to it (so much for Lenin's theory of cognition as "mirroring" objective reality).²⁶ The point is not that there is independent reality out there, outside myself; the point is that I myself am "out there", part of that reality.²⁷ So the question is not whether there is a reality outside and independent of consciousness, but whether consciousness itself is outside and independent of reality: so, instead of Lenin's (implicitly idealist) notion of objective reality as existing "out there", separated from consciousness by layers of illusions and distortions, and cognitively approachable only through infinite approximation, we should assert that "objective" knowledge of reality is impossible precisely because we (consciousness) are always-already part of it, in the midst of it – the thing that separates us from objective knowledge of reality is our very ontological inclusion in it.

This, of course, in no way entails that the tracing of the difference between idealism and materialism is not more crucial than ever today; but we should be careful to proceed in a truly Leninist way, discerning – through the "concrete analysis of concrete circumstances" – where this line of separation runs.²⁸ The line of separation between idealism and materialism runs even within the field of religion, where the singular point of the emergence of materialism is signalled by Christ's words on the cross: "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?" – in this moment of total abandonment, the subject experiences and fully assumes the *nonexistence of the big Other*. More generally, the line of division is the one between the "idealist" Socratic-Gnostic tradition which claims that the truth is within us, just waiting to be (re)discovered through an inner journey, and the Judaeo-Christian "materialist" notion that truth can emerge only from an *external* traumatic encounter which shatters the subject's balance. "Truth" requires a struggle in which we have to fight our "spontaneous" tendency.

To put the same argument in a different way: the correct materialist

position (which draws the radical Hegelian ontological consequence from Kant's antinomies) is that *there is no universe as a Whole*: as a Whole, the universe (the world) is Nothing – everything that exists is *within* this Nothing:

The universe did not arise out of nothing; the universe arose inside nothing. Everything is nothing, seen from the inside. *The world without is really nothing seen from within.* We are inside nothing.

Seen from without, there is zilch, nothing. Seen from within, there is everything we know. The whole universe.²⁹

The line that separates materialism from idealism is very delicate here. On the one hand, there is the temptation to read this in the subjectivist mode (the universe "out there" emerges only through being perceived by the Mind); on the other, there is the obverse radical conclusion that consciousness is thoroughly included in the observed objects. This is where we again encounter the limitation of Lenin's "theory of reflection": only a consciousness observing the universe from the outside would see the whole of reality the way it really is. The very notion of the "whole universe" thus presupposes the position of an external observer, which is impossible to occupy. To put it in Gilles Deleuze's terms, what this means is *absolute* perspectivism: the distorting partial perspective is inscribed into the very material existence of things.

This is what "there is no world" means: there is no "true objective reality", since reality as such emerges from a distorted perspective, from a disturbance of the equilibrium of the primordial Void-Nothingness. This is the homology between Hegel and Nagarjuna's Buddhist thought: Nagarjuna also asserts that the Void as the ultimate reality does not assert the overall denial of beings, but just the fact that every positive entity is thoroughly relational, that it emerges in the void of the absent others which condition it – we arrive at the Void if we try to conceive of the world as a Whole.³⁰ You could also put it in the terms of Heideggerian epochality: "absolute perspectivism" means that our "world" is always disclosed to us within some finite horizon which arises against the background of an impenetrable self-concealment of Being. Every ontological disclosure is by definition partial, distorted, an "errance" of Being, and this limitation is its positive condition of possibility.

If there is a fundamental lesson common to Hegel and Lacan, it is the exact opposite of the common wisdom that one should discard non-essential appearances and go to the essentials: appearances matter; appearances are essential. We cannot simply oppose the way the thing is "in itself" and the

way it appears from our constrained, partial perspective: this appearance has more weight than the thing in itself, because it designates the way the thing in question is inscribed into the network of its relations with others. In Marxism, "commodity fetishism" provides the co-ordinates of the way commodities appear to subjects, *and this appearance determines their objective social status*; in psychoanalysis, "fantasy" provides the frame within which objects appear to the desiring subject, *and this frame constitutes the co-ordinates of what the subject experiences as "reality"*.

In the properly Hegelian relationship between the Finite and the Infinite, we should not begin with the Finite and then proceed to ask how we can go on to the Infinite – the moment we do this, the moment we start with (and thus acknowledge) the Finite, we already miss the true Infinite, which is not something beyond the Finite, but nothing but the lack-of-being of the Finite itself, its negative self-cancellation. That's the crucial point, in which Alain Badiou goes wrong when he insists on a strict frontier between the Political and the Social (the domain of State, of history) – he concedes too much: namely, that *society exists*. Against this concession, we should endorse the thesis, articulated by Laclau and Mouffe,³¹ that "society doesn't exist" – that society is not a positive field, since the gap of the Political is inscribed into its very foundations (Marx's name for the political which traverses the entire social body is "class struggle"). Badiou concedes too much when he accepts that there is the order of Being, and then goes on to how an Event is possible. Just as society doesn't exist, we should formulate the basic materialist thesis that "the world doesn't exist" (or, in Badiou's terms, that there is no order of Being). The same goes for the relationship between Necessity and Freedom: we should not first assert the causal network of Necessity, and then ask how a break in it is possible, how Freedom can emerge. Here we can also clearly locate Kant's ambiguity, his oscillation between materialism and idealism – not in the normal sense (transcendental constitution is idealist subjectivism; things-in-themselves are a remainder of materialism), but in the guise of the oscillation between asserting, in a purely immanent way, the nonexistence of the World as a Whole, and between the idea of another noumenal domain of freedom behind phenomena.

From Aristotle and Aquinas, idealism asserts the existence of ontic objects within the world, then posits God as its external Limit/Exception which guarantees its ontological consistency. As a result, the formula of materialism is not to deny the Beyond, to claim that there is only the world of actual finite "real" objects, but to claim that this very "real" object does not have full ontological consistency – that from Outside, conceived of as a Whole, it is nothing. Again, the formula of true atheism is not "God doesn't exist",

but "The world doesn't exist". The existence of the world implies its founding exception, which is God. Here, we should insist on the strict Hegelian determination of existence as the appearance of a hidden Essence: the World doesn't exist means that no hidden Ground-Essence appears in/through it. (In the same way, for Freud in his *Moses and Monotheism*, the true formula of anti-anti-Semitism is "The Jew (Moses) doesn't exist . . .".) Here, the Lenin of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, with his insistence on the existence of objects there outside Consciousness, is secretly idealist: this fully constituted world can emerge only through immaterial Consciousness as its Exception.

What, however, if we were to connect the idea of truth as emerging from an external encounter with Lenin's (in)famous notion, from *What Is to Be Done?*, of how the working class cannot achieve its adequate class-consciousness "spontaneously", through its own "organic" development – of how this truth has to be introduced into it from outside (by Party intellectuals)? In quoting Kautsky at this point, Lenin makes a significant change in his paraphrase: while Kautsky speaks of how non-working-class intellectuals, who are outside the class struggle, should introduce science (providing objective knowledge of history) to the working class, Lenin speaks of consciousness which should be introduced by intellectuals who are outside the economic struggle, not outside the class struggle! Here is the passage from Kautsky which Lenin quotes approvingly –

socialism and class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other; each arises under different conditions. . . . The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the *bourgeois intelligentsia*. . . . Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without and not something that arose within it spontaneously.³²

– and here is Lenin's paraphrase of it:

all worship of the spontaneity of the working-class movement, all belittling of the role of "the conscious element", of the role of Social-Democracy, *means, quite independently of whether he who belittles that role desires it or not, a strengthening of the influence of bourgeois ideology upon workers*. . . . the *only* choice is – either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course . . . the *spontaneous* development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology . . . for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade-unionism.³³

It may sound the same, but it is not: for Kautsky, there is no room for politics proper, just the combination of the social (the working class and its

struggle, from which intellectuals are implicitly excluded) and the pure neutral, classless, asubjective knowledge of these intellectuals. For Lenin, on the contrary, "intellectuals" themselves are caught in the conflict of ideologies (i.e. the ideological class struggle), which is inevitable. (It was Marx who made this point – from his youth, when he dreamt of the unity of German Idealist philosophy and the French revolutionary masses, to his insistence, in later years, that the leadership of the International should under no circumstances be left to the English workers: although they were the most numerous and best organized, they – in contrast to German workers – lacked theoretical stringency.) So when Lenin mentions the knowledge that intellectuals should deliver to the proletariat, it all depends on the exact status of this knowledge.

Lacan distinguishes four main modalities of knowledge: the servant's "know-how", practical knowledge of the artisan, farmer, and so on; the "disinterested" *theoria* (Plato in *Menon*: the philosopher confronting a slave) as the Master's reappropriation/transformation of knowledge which, however, is not yet modern scientific knowledge, since it still relies on the initiatory relationship between Master and his apprentice/pupil – as Plato emphasizes, this knowledge presupposes the transferential relationship of love; modern scientific knowledge, which is impersonal, not grounded in the figure of a Master, but existing in impersonal manuals and technical equipment, in principle accessible to all (here the subject is foreclosed, as Lacan put it); and bureaucratic knowledge, which is the process of registration, of "writing down", filing, cataloguing all that (should) exist(s).

Two interrelated paradoxes should be emphasized here, that of scientific knowledge and that of bureaucratic knowledge. When scientists tried to reconstruct the "software" for such a common activity as walking, they were amazed to learn how many complicated equations our brain has to solve effortlessly – as an engineer put it: "The upright two-footed locomotion of the human being seems almost a recipe for disaster in itself, and demands a remarkable control to make it practicable."³⁴ A leg has to change its point of support all at once, and the weight has to be unloaded to do so. The motors controlling a leg have to alternate between keeping the foot on the ground while it bears and propels the load, and taking the load off to make the leg free to move. All the while they have to keep the body's centre of gravity within the polygon defined by the feet, so that the body doesn't topple over. When we walk, we repeatedly tip over, and break our fall in the nick of time.³⁵ This complexity of instant spontaneous calculations, the knowledge the body has to possess in order to be able to walk, is what Lacan called "knowledge in the real" – and, of course, what we should not

forget here is the basic hermeneutic point: it is only when we are already within the computational scientific horizon, when we observe a walking body from the engineering standpoint, trying to explicate the equations which allow this body to walk, that we are compelled to posit this kind of "knowledge in the real"; within a more "naive" approach, we simply refer to some innate or learned "dispositions". In short, this "knowledge in the real" emerges once we adopt the attitude of the external data-processing observer, and endeavour to translate the engaged living bodily agent's pre-reflexive know-how into the activity regulated by following explicit rules.

As for bureaucratic knowledge, its pervasiveness gives birth to a certain gap best exemplified by the French "certificat d'existence" or by strange stories, reported from time to time, on how (usually in Italy) some unfortunate individual, when he asks a certain favour from a state apparatus, is informed that, according to the registers, he is officially dead or nonexistent, and that, in order to be able to claim, he must first produce official documents which confirm his existence – is this not the bureaucratic version of "in-between the two deaths"?³⁶ A French businesswoman was recently summoned to the Préfecture because – as the official letter of invitation claimed – she had lost her *carte vitale* (the French health smart card). In fact, she had not lost it; so when, after waiting for over two hours, she got to the front of the queue and produced her card as proof that she had not lost it, the bureaucrat who was dealing with her said: "But the computer says you've lost it, so the one you have now is no longer valid – you'll have to hand it in to be destroyed, and then ask for a new one!" If there was ever such a thing as an ethics of bureaucracy, this is an example of it.

The interrelationship between these two modes of knowledge lies in the fact that they are the obverse of each other: "knowledge in the real" stands for the immediacy of a knowledge directly inscribed into the Real of the body itself, bypassing symbolic mediation; while bureaucratic knowledge brings home the absurd discord between the Symbolic and the Real.

To these four forms of knowledge we should, of course, add the paradoxical status of (supposed) knowledge in psychoanalysis: the analyst is supposed to know the secret of the analysand's desire. And undoubtedly, the infamous "knowledge" to be introduced to the working class from the outside by the Leninist Party is of the same nature as the (supposed) knowledge in psychoanalysis. The key question thus concerns the exact status of this externality: is it simply the externality of an impartial "objective" scientist who, after studying history and establishing that, in the long run, the working class has a great future ahead, decides to join the

winning side? So when Lenin says: "The Marxian theory is omnipotent because it is true,"¹⁷ everything depends on how we understand "truth" here: is it neutral "objective knowledge", or the truth of an engaged subject?³⁸ (One of the consequences of this notion of universal partisan truth concerns the stance we should adopt towards the populist New Right: we should quite "dogmatically" exclude them, rejecting any dialogue, not accepting their "normalization", their transformation into a "normal" political subject-partner. In short, we should fully accept the paradox: yes, it is we, the Leftists, who should reject any dialogue, and it is the Rightists who (in the present hegemony of liberal democracy, at least) simply want to be accepted as "normal partners in a dialogue" . . .).

The key to the status of this supposed knowledge in psychoanalysis is the paradoxical knowledge about the Other's knowledge. Take the final reversal in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, in which the husband, who for years harboured an illicit passionate love for Countess Olenska, learns that his young wife *knew* about his secret passion all the time. Perhaps this could also offer a way of redeeming the unfortunate film *Bridges of Madison County*: if, at the end, the dying Francesca were to learn that her allegedly naive, down-to-earth husband knew all the time about her brief passionate affair with the *National Geographic* photographer, and how much this meant to her, but kept silent about it in order not to hurt her. That is the enigma of knowledge: how is it possible that the whole psychic economy of a situation radically changes not when the hero directly learns something (some long-repressed secret), but when he *find out that the other* (whom he mistakenly regarded as ignorant) *also knew it all the time*, and simply pretended not to know, to keep up appearances. Is there anything more humiliating than the situation of a husband who, after a long secret love affair, learns all of a sudden that his wife knew about it all the time, but kept silent about it out of politeness or, even worse, out of love for him?

Apropos of *Hamlet*, Lacan claims that the presupposition that the Other doesn't know maintains the bar that separates the Unconscious from the Conscious³⁹ – how? In *The Age of Innocence*, the hero lives under the illusion that his big desire is to be with the object of his passion: what he does not know (what he represses in his unconscious), and what he is forced to face when he learns that the Other (his wife) also knows, is the fact that he does *not* really want to abandon his family and live with his beloved – the true object of his desire was this entire situation, in which he was able to enjoy his passion only in secret. It is not the object of passion that is unconscious, it is the way I actually relate to it, the conditions under which I was attached to this object. So it is precisely when I think that, deep inside

myself, I know (about my passion, about which the Other doesn't know), that I am duped about the lineaments of this passion. When a married man has a secret affair, and is convinced that he no longer loves his wife, how often it happens that when, for some reason (divorce; the wife's death), he is finally in a position to realize his desire, he breaks down. Or, even more simply, when he learns that his wife knows about the affair, and she offers to let him go, he is unable to do it. . . .

The outstanding documentary *The Thin Blue Line* quotes a memorable statement by an anonymous public prosecutor: "An average prosecutor can get a guilty person convicted; it takes a really good prosecutor to get an innocent person convicted." The logic of this paradox is the same as that of the motto of the Nazi henchmen formulated by Himmler: "It is easy to do a noble thing for your country, even to give your life for it; true heroism, however, consists in doing the necessary dirty job for it: to kill and torture for your country, to take the burden of evil on you!" That is the secret seductive lure of cynicism: living in truth and goodness is boring; the only authentic challenge is that of Evil, that is, the only space for extraordinary achievements is to be found in transgressive idiosyncrasies. In short, as Fernando Pessoa put it: "If you possess a truth, keep it to yourself!"

Why should we not, then, in contrast to this stance, take the risk of shamelessly and courageously endorsing the boring classic criticism according to which Marxism is a "secularized religion", with Lenin as the Messiah, and so on? Yes, taking the proletarian standpoint is exactly like making a leap of faith and becoming fully engaged its Cause; yes, the "truth" of Marxism is perceptible only to those who accomplish this leap, not to neutral observers. What the externality means here is that this truth is none the less universal, not just the "point of view" of a particular historical subject: "external" intellectuals are needed because the working class cannot immediately perceive its own place within the social totality, which enables it to accomplish its "mission" - this insight has to be mediated through an external element.

And why not link these two externalities (that of the traumatic experience of the Divine Real, and that of the Party) to the third one, that of the analyst in the psychoanalytic cure? In all three cases, we are dealing with the same impossibility which bears witness to a materialist obstacle: it is not possible for the believer to "discover God in himself", through self-immersion, by spontaneously realizing his or her own Self - God must intervene from outside, disturbing our balance; it is not possible for the working class to actualize its historical mission spontaneously - the Party must intervene from the outside, shaking it out of its self-indulgent spontaneity; it is

not possible for the patient/analyst to analyse himself – in contrast to Gnostic self-immersion, in psychoanalysis there is no self-analysis proper; analysis is possible only if a foreign kernel gives body to the object-cause of the subject's desire. Why, then, this impossibility? Precisely because not one of the three subjects (believer, proletarian, analyst) is a self-centred agent of self-mediation – all are decentred agents struggling with a foreign kernel.

In what is for some the most problematic song in *The Measure Taken*, a celebration of the Party, Brecht proposes something that is much more unique and precise than it may appear. That is to say, it seems that Brecht is simply elevating the Party into the incarnation of Absolute Knowledge, a historical agent which has complete and perfect insight into the historical situation – a subject supposed to know if ever there was one: "You have two eyes, but the Party has thousand eyes!" A close reading of this poem, however, makes it clear that something very different is going on: in reprimanding the young Communist, the Chorus says that the Party does *not* know all, that the young Communist may be right in his disagreement with the predominant Party line:

Show us the way which we should take, and we
shall follow it like you, but
do not take the right way without us.
Without us, this way is
the falsest one.
Do not separate yourself from us.⁴⁰

This means that the authority of the Party is not that of determinate positive knowledge, but that of the form of knowledge, of a new type of knowledge linked to a collective political subject. The only crucial point on which the Chorus insists is that if the young comrade thinks that he is right, he should fight for his position *within* the collective form of the Party, not outside it – to put it in a somewhat pathetic way: if the young comrade is right, then the Party needs him even more than its other members. What the Party demands is that we agree to ground our "I" in the "we" of the Party's collective identity: fight with us, fight for us, fight for your truth against the Party line – *just don't do it alone*, outside the Party. Exactly as in Lacan's formula of the discourse of the analyst, what is important about the Party's knowledge is not its content, but the fact that it occupies the place of Truth.

God, Analyst, Party – the three forms of the "subject supposed to know", of the transferential object; this is why, in all three cases, we hear the claim "God/the Analyst/the Party is always right"; and, as it was clear to

Kierkegaard, the truth of this statement is always its negative — *man* is always wrong. This external element does not stand for objective knowledge, that is, its externality is strictly internal: the need for the Party stems from the fact that the working class is never “fully itself”. So the ultimate meaning of Lenin’s insistence on this externality is that “adequate” class-consciousness does not emerge “spontaneously”, that it does not correspond to a “spontaneous tendency” of the working class; on the contrary, what is “spontaneous” is the *misperception* of one’s social position, so that “adequate” class-consciousness has to be fought out through hard work. Here, again, the situation is homologous to the one in psychoanalysis: as Lacan emphasizes again and again, there is no primordial *Wissenstrieb* (drive-to-knowledge): the spontaneous human attitude is that of *je n’en veux rien savoir* — I don’t want to know anything about it; and, far from realizing our innermost tendency, the psychoanalytic treatment has to proceed “against the grain”.⁴¹

We can make the same point in terms of the opposition between *interpretation* and *formalization*:⁴² the external agent (Party, God, Analyst) is not the one who “understands us better than we do ourselves”, who can provide the true interpretation of what our acts and statements mean; rather, it stands for the *form* of our activity. What, then, is this Form? Let us take Ernst Nolte’s “revisionist” argument concerning the relationship between Nazism and (Soviet) Communism: reprehensible as it was, Nazism not only appeared after Communism; it was also, with regard to its content, an excessive *reaction* to the Communist threat. Furthermore, all the horrors committed by Nazism merely copy the horrors already committed by Soviet Communism: secret police, concentration camps, genocidal terror. . . . Is this the Form we are talking about? Is the idea that Communism and Nazism share the same totalitarian Form, and that the difference between them concerns only the empirical agents which fill in the same structural places (“Jews” instead of “class enemy”, etc.)? The usual liberal reaction to Nolte is a moralistic outcry: Nolte relativizes Nazism, reducing it to a secondary echo of the Communist Evil — how, however, can you even compare Communism, that thwarted attempt at liberation, with the radical Evil of Nazism?

In contrast to this dismissal, we should fully concede Nolte’s central point: yes, Nazism was in fact a reaction to the Communist threat; it merely replaced the class struggle with the struggle between Aryans and Jews — the problem lies, however, in this “merely”, which is by no means as innocent as it appears. We are dealing here with displacement [*Verschiebung*] in the Freudian sense of the term: Nazism displaces class struggle on to racial struggle, and thereby obfuscates its true site. What changes in the passage

from Communism to Nazism is the Form, and it is in this change of Form that the Nazi ideological mystification resides: the political struggle is naturalized into the racial conflict, the (class) antagonism inherent to the social edifice is reduced to the invasion of a foreign (Jewish) body which disturbs the harmony of the Aryan community. So while we should fully admit that Nazism can be understood only as a reaction to the threat of (Soviet) Communism, as a displaced repetition of the Communist ideological universe, we should locate the Form which determines the concrete functioning of Nazism not in the abstract notion of "totalitarianism" which encompasses both Communism and Nazism as its two particular cases, but in the very displacement to which Nazism submits the Communist co-ordinates. This notion of Form is a properly dialectical one: Form is not the neutral frame of particular contents, but the very principle of concretion, that is, the "strange attractor" which distorts, biases, confers a specific colour on every element of the totality.

In other words, formalization is strictly correlative to focusing on the Real of an antagonism. In the Marxist perspective, "class struggle" is not the last horizon of meaning, the last signified of all social phenomena, but the formal generative matrix of the different ideological horizons of understanding. That is to say: we should not confuse this properly dialectical notion of Form with the liberal-multiculturalist notion of Form as the neutral framework of the multitude of "narratives" – not only literature, but also politics, religion, science, are all different narratives, stories we are telling ourselves about ourselves, and the ultimate goal of ethics is to guarantee the neutral space in which this multitude of narratives can coexist peacefully – in which everyone, from ethnic to sexual minorities, will have the right and opportunity to tell their story. Or, as Fernando Pessoa formulated it succinctly: "the Whole, the true and the genuine one, is an illness of our thoughts". The properly dialectical notion of Form signals precisely the *impossibility* of this liberal notion of Form: Form has nothing to do with "formalism", with the idea of a neutral Form, independent of its contingent particular content; it stands, rather, for the traumatic kernel of the Real, for the antagonism which "colours" the entire field in question. In this precise sense, class struggle is the Form of the Social: every social phenomenon is overdetermined by it, so that it is not possible to remain neutral towards it.

In this precise sense, both Marx and Freud were the two great formalizers. In his analysis of commodity fetishism, Marx asserts that the mystery of the commodity-form resides in this form itself, not in the content hidden beneath it, thereby echoing Freud's remark (in his masterpiece with the misleading title *The Interpretation of Dreams*) that the specificity of the

dream resides in its form as such, not in the content encoded in this form.⁴³ For this precise reason, Marx's deployment of the commodity-form in Chapter 1 of *Capital* is not a "narrative", a *Vorstellung*, but a *Darstellung*, the deployment of the inner structure of the universe of merchandise – the narrative, on the contrary, is the story of "primitive accumulation", the myth capitalism proposes about its own origins. Along the same lines, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* – contrary to Richard Rorty's reading – does not suggest a grand narrative of the birth and deployment of subjectivity, but the *form* of subjectivity; as Hegel himself emphasizes in the Foreword, it focuses on the "formal aspect [*das Formelle*]". This is how we should also approach the absence of grand all-encompassing narratives today – this is Fredric Jameson's subtle description of the deadlock of the dialogue between the Western New Left and the Eastern European dissidents, of the absence of any common language between them:

To put it briefly, the East wishes to talk in terms of power and oppression; the West in terms of culture and commodification. There are really no common denominators in this initial struggle for discursive rules, and what we end up with is the inevitable comedy of each side muttering irrelevant replies in its own favorite language.⁴⁴

At the same time, Jameson insists that Marxism still provides the universal meta-language that enables us to situate and relate all other partial narrativizations/interpretations – is he simply inconsistent? Are there two Jamesons: one postmodern, the theorist of the irreducible multiplicity of narratives; the other the more traditional partisan of Marxist universal hermeneutics? The only way to save Jameson from this predicament is to insist that here Marxism is not the all-encompassing interpretative horizon, but the matrix which enables us to account for (to generate) the multiplicity of narratives and/or interpretations. It is also here that we should introduce the key dialectical distinction between the founding figure of a movement and the later figure who formalized this movement: Lenin did not just adequately translate Marxist theory into political practice – rather, he "formalized" Marx by defining the Party as the political form of its historical intervention – just as Saint Paul "formalized" Christ, and Lacan "formalized" Freud.⁴⁵

The Inner Greatness of Stalinism

When, after Lenin's death, Marxism split into official Soviet Marxism and so-called Western Marxism, they both misread this externality of the Party

as designating the position of neutral objective knowledge – in the steps of Kautsky, Soviet Marxism simply adopted this position, while Western Marxists rejected it as the theoretical legitimization of “totalitarian” Party rule. Those few libertarian Marxists who wanted to redeem Lenin – partially, at least – tended to oppose the “bad” Jacobin–elitist Lenin of *What Is to Be Done?*, relying on the Party as the professional intellectual elite which enlightens the working class from outside, to the “good” Lenin of *State and Revolution*, who envisioned the prospect of abolishing the State, of the broad masses directly taking the administration of public affairs into their own hands. This opposition, however, has its limits: the key premiss of *State and Revolution* is that you cannot fully “democratize” the State; that the State “as such”, in its very notion, is a dictatorship of one class over another; the logical conclusion from this premiss is that, *in so far as we still dwell within the domain of the State*, we are legitimately entitled to exercise full violent terror, since, within this domain, every democracy is a fake. So, since the State is an instrument of oppression, it is not worth trying to improve its apparatuses, the protection of the legal order, elections, laws guaranteeing personal freedom . . . – all this becomes irrelevant.⁴⁶ The element of truth in this criticism is that you cannot separate the unique constellation which enabled the revolutionary takeover in October 1917 from its later “Stalinist” turn: the very constellation that made the revolution possible (peasants’ dissatisfaction, a well-organized revolutionary elite, etc.) led to the “Stalinist” turn in its aftermath – that is the real Leninist tragedy. Rosa Luxemburg’s famous alternative “socialism or barbarism” ended up as the ultimate infinite judgement, asserting the speculative identity of the two opposed terms: “Really Existing Socialism” *was* barbarism.⁴⁷

In the diaries of Georgi Dimitroff, recently published in German,⁴⁸ we get a unique glimpse into how Stalin was fully aware of what brought him to power, giving an unexpected twist to his well-known slogan “People (cadres) are our greatest wealth”. When, at a dinner in November 1937, Dimitroff praises the “great luck” of the international workers – that they had such a genius as their leader, Stalin – Stalin answers: “*I do not agree with him*. He even expressed himself in a non-Marxist way. . . . *Decisive are the middle cadres*” (7 November 1937). He puts it even more clearly a paragraph earlier:

Why did we win over Trotsky and others? It is well known that, after Lenin, Trotsky was the most popular in our land. . . . But we had the support of the middle cadres, and they explained our grasp of the situation to the masses . . . Trotsky did not pay any attention to these cadres.

Here, Stalin spells out the secret of his rise to power: as a rather anonymous General Secretary, he nominated tens of thousands of cadres who owed their rise to him. . . . This is why Stalin did not yet want Lenin dead in the early 1922, rejecting his demand to be given poison to end his life after his debilitating stroke: if Lenin were to die in early 1922, the question of succession would not yet be resolved in Stalin's favour, since Stalin, as General Secretary, had not yet penetrated the Party apparatus sufficiently with his own appointees – he needed another year or two, so that when Lenin actually died, he would be able to count on the support of thousands of mid-level cadres, nominated by him, to win over the great old figures of the Bolshevik "aristocracy".

We should therefore stop the ridiculous game of opposing the Stalinist terror to the "authentic" Leninist legacy betrayed by Stalinism: "Leninism" is a thoroughly *Stalinist* notion. The gesture of back-projecting the emancipatory-utopian potential of Stalinism, into a preceding time, thus indicates our minds' inability to endure the "absolute contradiction", the unbearable tension, intrinsic to the Stalinist project itself.⁴⁹ It is therefore crucial to distinguish "Leninism" (as the authentic core of Stalinism) from the actual political practice and ideology of Lenin's period: the actual greatness of Lenin is not the same as the Stalinist authentic myth of Leninism. So what about the obvious counterargument that exactly the same goes for every ideology – including Nazism, which also, perceived from within, displays an "inner greatness" which seduced even such an outstanding philosopher as Heidegger? The answer should be simply a resounding *no*: the point is precisely that Nazism does *not* contain any authentic "inner greatness".

If we want to see Stalinist art at its purest, one name is sufficient: Brecht. Badiou was right to claim that "Brecht was a Stalinist, if, as one should, one understands Stalinism as the fusion of the politics and the philosophy of dialectical materialism under the jurisdiction of the latter. Or, let us say, Brecht practised a Stalinized Platonism."⁵⁰ This is what Brecht's "non-Aristotelian" theatre ultimately amounts to: a *Platonist* theatre in which the aesthetic charm is strictly controlled, in order to transmit the philosophico-political Truth which is *external* to it. Brechtian extraneation means that "aesthetic semblance has to distantiate itself from itself, so that, in this gap, the external objectivity of the True is *displayed*".⁵¹ So when Badiou says that "extraneation is a protocol of philosophical surveillance",⁵² we should shamelessly confer on this term all its secret-police connotations. So let us stop our ridiculous games of opposing some kind of "dissident" Brecht to Stalinist Communism: Brecht is the ultimate "Stalinist" artist; he was great not in spite of his Stalinism, but because of it. Do we really need proof?

Towards the end of the 1930s, Brecht shocked the guests at a New York party by claiming, about the accused in the Moscow show trials: "The more innocent they are, the more they deserve to be shot."⁵³ This statement is to be taken quite seriously, not just as perverse cockiness: its underlying premiss is that in a concrete historical struggle, the attitude of "innocence" ("I don't want to dirty my hands by getting involved in the struggle, I just want to lead a modest and honest life") embodies the ultimate guilt. In our world, *doing nothing is not empty, it already has a meaning* – it means saying "yes" to existing relations of domination. This is why, apropos of the Moscow trials, Brecht – while admitting that the methods of the prosecution were not very gentle – asked himself: is it possible to imagine how an honest and sincere Communist who entertained doubts about Stalin's policy of rapid industrialization ended up seeking help from foreign secret services and engaging in terrorist plots against the Stalinist leadership? His answer was "yes", and he proposed a detailed reconstruction of their reasoning.

No wonder, then, that when, on his way from his home to his theatre in July 1953, Brecht passed a column of Soviet tanks rolling towards the *Stalinallee* to crush the workers' rebellion, he waved at them, and wrote in his diary later that day that at that moment, he (never a Party member) was tempted for the first time in his life to join the Communist Party⁵⁴ – is this not an outstanding case of what Alain Badiou has called *la passion du réel* which defines the twentieth century? It was not that Brecht tolerated the cruelty of the struggle in the hope that it would bring a prosperous future: the harshness of the violence as such was perceived and endorsed as a sign of authenticity. For Brecht, the Soviet military intervention against the East Berlin workers was aimed not at the workers, but at "organized Fascist elements" which exploited the workers' dissatisfaction; for this reason, he claimed that the Soviet intervention actually prevented a new world war.⁵⁵

Even on a personal level, Brecht "had a real liking for Stalin",⁵⁶ and he developed a line of argumentation justifying the revolutionary necessity of the dictatorship of a single individual;⁵⁷ his reaction to the "de-Stalinization" at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956 was: "Without a knowledge of dialectics, passages like the one from Stalin as the motor [of progress] to Stalin as its brake cannot be understood."⁵⁸ In short, instead of renouncing Stalin, Brecht played the pseudo-dialectical game of "what was progressive before, in the 1930s and 1940s, has now (in the 1950s) turned into an obstacle". . . . I am almost tempted to read the moment of Brecht's death (autumn 1956, just after the Twentieth Congress and before the Hungarian uprising) as timely: the merciful release

of death freed him from having to confront the full pain of "de-Stalinization".

If we want to see Brecht at his best, we should focus on the great German Stalinist musical triad: Brecht (words), Hanns Eisler (music), Ernst Busch (performance).⁵⁹ If we need to convince ourselves of the authentic greatness of the Stalinist project, it is enough to listen to one of the supreme recordings of the twentieth century: Hanns Eisler's *Historic Recordings*, with (most of the) words by Brecht and (most of the) songs performed by Busch. In what is arguably their supreme achievement, the song "To Sing in the Prison [Im Gefängnis zu singen]" from *Die Mutter* (*The Mother*), the gap between the symbolic breakdown of the opponent and its actual defeat is directly alluded to, when the imprisoned worker Pawel addresses those in power:

You have law-books and rulings
 You have prisons and fortresses . . .
 You have prison-guards and judges
 Who are well paid and ready to do anything.
 What for? . . .
 Just before you disappear – and that will happen soon –
 You will notice that all this was of no use to you.

You have newspapers and printing-houses
 In order to fight against us and keep us quiet . . .
 You have priests and professors
 Who are well paid and ready to do anything.
 What for?
 Do you really have to be so afraid of truth?

You have tanks and guns
 Tommy guns and hand-grenades . . .
 You have policemen and soldiers
 Who are well paid and ready to do anything.
 What for?
 Do you really have such mighty enemies? . . .
 Someday – and that will come soon –
 You will see that all this is of no use to you.⁶⁰

The actual defeat of the enemy is thus preceded by symbolic breakdown, a sudden insight into how the struggle is meaningless, and all the arms and tools at its disposal *serve no purpose*. That is the ultimate premiss of the democratic struggle: for a priori structural reasons, and not only owing to some contingent miscalculation, the enemy misperceives the co-ordinates of the global situation, and assembles the wrong kind of forces in the wrong

place. Two recent examples: what did the Shah's repressive apparatus amount to in 1979, when it was confronted by Khomeini's popular movement? It just collapsed. And of what use was the overblown network of *Stasi* agents and informers to the East German Communist *nomenklatura* in 1989, when it was confronted by the growing mass protests? Big oppressive regimes are never defeated in a head-on confrontation – at a certain point, when the “old mole” accomplishes its underground work of inner ideological disintegration, they just collapse.

Apart from the sublime masterpiece “In Praise of Communism” (“the Simplest, which is the most difficult to accomplish”), the third key song in *The Mother* is “The Song of the Patch and the Gown”, which begins with an ironic depiction of humanitarians aware of the urgent need to help the poor:

When our gown is tattered
 you always come running and say: this can no longer go on.
 Things must be remedied, and with all means!
 And, full of zeal, you run to the masters
 While we wait, freezing.
 And you come back, and triumphantly
 Show us what you gained for us:
 A small patch.
 OK, this is the patch.
 But where is
 The whole gown?⁶¹

This acerbic rhetorical question is repeated apropos of bread (“OK, this is a piece of bread, but where is the [whole] loaf?”⁶²), and the song ends in a sweeping explosion of demands (“... we need the whole factory, and the coal and the ore and the power in the state”) – the properly revolutionary moment at which the *quid pro quo* of exchanges with those in power breaks down, and the revolutionaries brutally assert that they want *everything*, not just some “fair” part of it.

Here Brecht is at the very opposite end of the spectrum from Georg Lukács: precisely in so far as Lukács, the “soft” European humanist, played the role of “closet dissident”, waging “guerrilla warfare” against Stalinism, and even joining the Imre Nagy government in 1956, thus endangering his very physical existence, he was the *ultimate Stalinist*. In contrast to Lukács, Brecht was unbearable to the Stalinist cultural establishment because of his very “over-orthodoxy” – there is no place for *The Measure Taken* in the Stalinist cultural universe.⁶³ If the young Lukács of *History and Class*

Consciousness was the philosopher of Lenin's historical moment, after the 1930s he turned into the ideal Stalinist philosopher who, for that very reason, in contrast to Brecht, missed the true greatness of Stalinism.

Lenin as a Listener of Schubert

Anti-Communist critics who insist on the continuity between Lenin and Stalinism like to dwell on Lenin's alleged insensitivity to the universal human dimension: not only did he perceive all social events through the narrow lens of the class struggle, of "us against them"; he was also, as a person, insensitive to the human suffering of real individuals. In order to answer this criticism, let us recall some details of the daily life of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1917 and the following years, which, in their very triviality, reveal their distance from the Stalinist *nomenklatura*.

When, on the evening of 24 October 1917, Lenin left his flat for the Smolny Institute to co-ordinate the revolutionary takeover, he took a tram and asked the conductress if there was any fighting going on in the town centre that day. In the years after the October Revolution, Lenin mostly drove around in a car with only his faithful driver and bodyguard, Gil; a couple of times they were shot at, stopped by the police and arrested (the policemen did not recognize Lenin); once, after visiting a school in the suburbs, they were even robbed of the car and their guns by bandits posing as police, then compelled to walk to the nearest police station. When Lenin was shot on 30 August 1918, this occurred while he was talking to a couple of women complaining in front of a factory he had just visited; the bleeding Lenin was driven by Gil to the Kremlin, in which no doctors were present; so his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, suggested that someone should run out to the nearest grocer's shop for a lemon. . . . The standard meal in the Kremlin *kantina* in 1918 was buckwheat porridge and thin vegetable soup. So much for the privileges of the *nomenklatura*!

Lenin's slanderers like to evoke his famous paranoiac reaction at listening to Beethoven's *appassionata* (he first started to cry, then claimed that a revolutionary cannot afford to let himself give way to such sentiments, because they make him too weak, wanting to pat his enemies on the head instead of fighting them mercilessly) as proof of his cold self-control and cruelty. Even on its own terms, however, is this really an argument *against* Lenin? Does it not, rather, bear witness to an extreme sensitivity to music that needs to be kept in check if he is to continue the political struggle? Who among today's cynical politicians still displays even a trace of such

sensitivity? Is not Lenin in this case the very opposite of the high-ranking Nazis who, without any difficulty, combined such sensitivity with extreme cruelty in taking political decisions (it is reasonable to recall Heydrich, the Holocaust architect, who, after a hard day's work, always found time to listen to Beethoven's string quartets with his comrades) – is it not proof of Lenin's humanity that in contrast to this supreme barbarism, which lies in the very unproblematic unity of high culture and political barbarism, he was still extremely sensitive to the irreducible *antagonism* between art and power struggle?

Furthermore, I am tempted to develop a Leninist theory of this high-cultural barbarism. Hans Hotter's outstanding 1942 recording of Schubert's *Winterreise* seems to call for an intentionally anachronistic reading: it is easy to imagine German officers and soldiers listening to this recording in the Stalingrad trenches in the cold winter of 1942–43. Does not the topic of *Winterreise* evoke a unique consonance with the historical moment? Was not the whole Stalingrad campaign a gigantic *Winterreise*, where every German soldier could say of himself the very first lines of the cycle: "I came here a stranger, / As a stranger I depart"? Do the next lines not express their basic experience: "Now the world is so gloomy, / The road shrouded in snow. / I cannot choose the time / To begin my journey, / Must find my own way / In this darkness."

Here we have the endless meaningless march: "It burns under both my feet, / Even though I walk on ice and snow; / I don't want to catch my breath / Until I can no longer see the spires." The dream of returning home in the spring: "I dreamed of many-coloured flowers, / The way they bloom in May; / I dreamed of green meadows, / Of merry bird calls." The nervous waiting for the post: "From the high road a posthorn sounds. / Why do you leap so high, my heart?" The shock of the morning artillery attack: "The cloud rattles flutter / Around in weary strife. / And fiery red flames / Dart around among them." Utterly exhausted, the soldiers are refused even the solace of death: "I'm tired enough to drop, have taken mortal hurt. / Oh, merciless inn, you turn me away? / Well, onward then, still further, my loyal walking staff!"

What can one do in such a desperate situation but go on with heroic persistence, closing one's ears to the complaint of the heart, assuming the heavy burden of fate in a world deserted by God?

If the snow flies in my face,
I shake it off again.
When my heart speaks in my breast,

I sing loudly and gaily,
 I don't hear what it says to me,
 I have no ears to listen;
 I don't feel when it laments,
 Complaining is for fools.
 Happy through the world along
 Facing wind and weather!
 If there's no God upon the earth,
 Then we ourselves are Gods!

The obvious counterargument is that all this is merely a superficial parallel: even if there is an echo of the atmosphere and emotions, they are in each case embedded in an entirely different context: in Schubert, the narrator wanders around in winter because his beloved has abandoned him; while the German soldiers were on the way to Stalingrad because of Hitler's military plans. It is precisely in this displacement, however, that the elementary ideological operation consists: the way for a German soldier to be able to endure his situation was to avoid the reference to concrete social circumstances which would become visible through reflection (what the hell were they doing in Russia? what destruction did they bring to this country? what about killing the Jews?), and, instead, to indulge in a Romantic bemoaning of his miserable fate, as if the wider historical catastrophe simply materializes the trauma of a rejected lover. Is this not the supreme proof of emotional abstraction, of Hegel's idea that emotions are abstract, an escape from the concrete sociopolitical network accessible only to thinking?

And here I am tempted to take a further Leninist step: in our reading of the *Winterreise*, we did not just link Schubert to a contingent later historical catastrophe, we did not just try to imagine how this song cycle resonated with the embattled German soldiers in Stalingrad. What if the link to this catastrophe enables us to read what was wrong with the Schubertian Romantic position itself? What if the position of the Romantic tragic hero, narcissistically focused on his own suffering and despair, elevating them to a source of perverted pleasure, is already in itself a fake one, an ideological screen masking the true trauma of the wider historical reality? We should thus accomplish the properly Hegelian gesture of *projecting the split between the authentic original and its later reading coloured by contingent circumstances back into the authentic original itself*: what looks at first like a secondary distortion, a reading twisted by contingent external circumstances, tells us something about what the authentic original itself not only represses, leaves out, but *had the function of repressing*.

That is the Leninist answer to the famous passage from the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* manuscript, in which Marx points out how "the difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model."⁶⁴ This universal appeal is rooted in its very ideological function of enabling us to abstract from our concrete ideologico-political constellation by taking refuge in the "universal" (emotional) content. So, far from signalling some kind of trans-ideological human heritage, the universal attraction of Homer relies on the universalizing gesture of ideology.

Does this mean that every pathetic universal reference to humanity is, by definition, ideological? What about Lenin's appeals against patriotic fervour during World War I? Were they not an exemplary case of practising what Badiou⁶⁵ calls the universal function of "humanity", which has nothing whatsoever to do with so-called "humanism"? This "humanity" is neither a notional abstraction nor the pathetic imaginary assertion of all-encompassing brotherhood, but a universal function which actualizes itself in unique ecstatic experiences, like those of the soldiers from opposing trenches starting to fraternize.

In Jaroslav Hašek's legendary comic novel *The Good Soldier Schweik*, the adventures of an ordinary Czech soldier who undermines those in command by simply following orders too literally, Schweik finds himself at the front-line trenches in Galicia, where the Austrian army is confronting the Russians. When the Austrian soldiers start to shoot, the desperate Schweik runs into the no-man's-land in front of their trenches, waving desperately and shouting: "Don't shoot! There are men on the other side!" This is what Lenin was aiming at in his call to the tired peasants and other working masses in summer 1917 to stop fighting, dismissed as part of a ruthless strategy to win popular support, and thus gain power, even if it meant the military defeat of his own country (remember the standard argument that when, in spring 1917, Lenin was allowed by the German state to travel on a sealed train through Germany on his way from Switzerland to Sweden, Finland and then Russia, he was *de facto* functioning as a German agent). The barrier which broke down here is best exemplified by the eerie event which took place on the evening of 7 November 1942, when, in his special train rolling through Thuringia, Hitler was discussing the day's major news with several aides in the dining car; since Allied air raids had damaged the tracks, the train frequently slowed down:

While dinner was served on exquisite china, the train stopped once more at a siding. A few feet away, a hospital train marked time, and from their tiered cots, wounded soldiers peered into the blazing light of the dining room where Hitler was immersed in conversation. Suddenly he looked up at the awed faces staring in at him. In great anger he ordered the curtains drawn, plunging his wounded warriors back into the darkness of their own bleak world.⁶⁶

The miracle of this scene is redoubled: the people on each side experienced what they saw through the window as a fantasmatic apparition: for Hitler, it was a nightmarish view of the results of his military adventure; for the soldiers, it was an unexpected encounter with the Leader himself. The true miracle here would have been if a hand had stretched through the window – say, Hitler reaching out to a wounded soldier. But of course it was precisely such an encounter, such an intrusion into his reality, that Hitler dreaded; so instead of stretching out his hand, he – in panic – ordered the curtains drawn. . . . How, then, can we penetrate this barrier, and reach out to the Real Other?

There is a long literary tradition of elevating the face-to-face encounter with an enemy soldier as *the* authentic war experience (see the writings of Ernst Jünger, who celebrated such encounters in his memoirs of the trench attacks in World War I): soldiers often fantasize about killing the enemy soldier in a face-to-face confrontation, looking him in the eyes before stabbing him. Far from preventing further fight, this kind of mystical communion of blood serves precisely as its fake “spiritual” legitimization. One step further from such obscurantist ideology is accomplished by sublime moments of solidarity like the one which took place in the battle for Stalingrad: on 31 December 1942, New Year’s Eve, Russian actors and musicians visited the besieged city to entertain the troops. The violinist Mikhail Goldstein went to the trenches to perform a one-man concert for the soldiers:

The melodies he created drifted out through loudspeakers to the German trenches and the shooting suddenly ceased. In the eerie quiet, the music flowed from Goldstein’s dipping bow.

When he finished, a hushed silence hung over the Russian soldiers. From another loudspeaker, in German territory, a voice broke the spell. In halting Russian it pleaded: “Play some more Bach. We won’t shoot.”

Goldstein picked up his violin and started a lively Bach *gavotte*.⁶⁷

The problem with this violin performance is, of course, that it in fact functioned as just one brief sublime moment of suspension: immediately afterwards, the shooting went on. Thus this performance not only did not prevent the shooting, it even sustained it, providing the shared background

of the two engaged parties. I am tempted to risk the hypothesis that it did not prevent the shooting precisely because it was all too noble and "deep": something much more superficial is needed to do the job. A much more effective experience of universal humanity – that is, of the meaninglessness of the conflict we are engaged in – can take the form of a simple exchange of gazes which says everything.

During an anti-apartheid demonstration in the old South Africa, while a troop of white policemen were dispersing and pursuing black demonstrators, a policeman was running after a black lady, a rubber truncheon in his hand. Unexpectedly, the lady lost one of her shoes; automatically obeying his "good manners", the policeman picked up the shoe and gave it to her; at this moment they exchanged glances, and both became aware of the inanity of their situation – after such a gesture of politeness, after handing her the lost shoe and waiting for her to put it back on, it was simply impossible for the policeman to continue to run after the lady, and to hit her with the truncheon; so, after politely nodding to her, he turned round and walked away. . . . The moral of this story is *not* that the policeman suddenly discovered his innate goodness – we are *not* dealing here with a case of natural goodness prevailing over racist ideological training; on the contrary, in all probability the policeman's psychological stance was that of any other racist. What triumphed here was simply his "superficial" training in politeness.

When the policeman stretched out his hand in order to pass the lady her shoe, his gesture was more than a moment of physical contact. The white policeman and the black lady literally lived in two different socio-symbolic universes with no possibility of direct communication: for each of them, the barrier which separated the two universes was suspended for a brief moment, and it was as if a hand from another, spectral, universe reached into their ordinary reality. In order to transform this magic moment of the suspension of symbolic barriers into a more substantial achievement, however, something more is needed – like, for example, the sharing of obscene jokes.

In ex-Yugoslavia, jokes circulated about each ethnic group, which was stigmatized through a certain feature – the Montenegrins were supposed to be extremely lazy; the Bosnians were stupid; the Macedonians were thieves; the Slovenes were mean. . . . Significantly, these jokes waned with the rise of ethnic tensions in the late 1980s: none of them was heard in 1990, when the hostilities erupted. Far from being simply racist, these jokes, especially those in which members of different nationalities meet – the "A Slovene, a Serb and an Albanian went shopping, and . . ." type – were one of the key forms of the actual existence of the official "brotherhood and unity" of

Tito's Yugoslavia. In this case, the shared obscene jokes functioned not as a means of excluding the others who were not "in", but as the means of their *inclusion*, of establishing a minimal symbolic pact. Indians (Native Americans) smoke the proverbial pipe of peace, while we, from the more primitive Balkans, have to exchange obscenities. To establish actual solidarity, the shared experience of high culture is not enough – we have to exchange with the Other the embarrassing idiosyncrasy of obscene enjoyment.

During my military service, I became very friendly with an Albanian soldier. It is a well-known fact that Albanians are very sensitive to sexual insults which refer to their closest family members (mother, sister); I was in fact accepted by my Albanian friend when we left the superficial game of politeness and respect behind, and greeted each other with formalized insults. The first move was made by the Albanian: one morning, instead of the usual "Hello!", he greeted me with "I'll screw your mother!"; I knew that this was an offer to which I had to respond appropriately, so I snapped back: "Go ahead, you're welcome – after I've finished with your sister!" This exchange soon lost its openly obscene or ironic character, and became formalized: after only a couple of weeks, the two of us no longer bothered with the whole sentence; in the morning, when we saw each other, he just nodded and said "Mother!", to which I simply responded "Sister!"

This example reveals the dangers of such a strategy: the obscene solidarity all too often emerges at the expense of a third party – in this case, it involves male-bonding solidarity at the expense of women. (Can we imagine the reverse version: a young woman greeting her friend with "I'll screw your husband!", to which the friend responds: "Go ahead – after I've finished with your father!?) Perhaps this is why the relationship between Jacqueline and Hilary du Pré strikes us as so "scandalous": the fact that, with her sister's approval, Jacqueline had an affair with her brother-in-law is so unbearable because it involves the reversal of the classic Lévi-Straussian logic of women as objects of exchange between men – in this case, it was the *man* who served as the object of exchange between women.

There is another problem here, that of power and authority: the example of my obscene ritual with the Albanian soldier works only because there was a presupposed equality between me and the Albanian – we were both common soldiers. Had I been an officer, it would have been much too risky – practically unthinkable – for the Albanian to make his first move. If, however, the Albanian had also been an officer, the situation would have been even more obscene: his gesture would have been an offer of false obscene solidarity masking the underlying power relations – a paradigmatic case of the "postmodern" exercise of power. The traditional figure of

authority (boss, father) insists on being treated with proper respect, following the formal rules of authority; the exchange of obscenities and mocking remarks has to take place behind his back. Today's boss or father, on the contrary, insists that we should treat him as a friend; he addresses us with intrusive familiarity, bombarding us with sexual innuendos, inviting us to share a drink or a vulgar joke – all this is intended to establish the link of male bonding, while the relationship of authority (our subordination to him) not only remains intact, but is even treated as a kind of secret which should be respected and not talked about. For the subordinated, such a constellation is much more claustrophobic than traditional authority: today, we are deprived even of the private space of irony and mockery, since the master is on both levels: an authority as well as a friend.

This conundrum, however, is not as intractable as it may appear: in every concrete situation, we “spontaneously” always know which applies – that is, if the exchange of obscenities is “authentic” or a fake intimacy masking a relationship of subordination. The true problem is a more radical one: is a direct contact in the Real, without the underlying symbolic frame, feasible at all? The contact with the Real Other is inherently fragile – every such contact is extremely precarious and fragile; the authentic reaching out to the Other can revert at any moment to a violent intrusion into the Other's intimate space. . . . The way out of this predicament seems to be provided by the logic of social interaction best expressed in Henry James's masterpieces: in this universe, where *tact* reigns supreme, where an open explosion of one's emotions is considered the utmost vulgarity, everything is said, the most painful decisions are made, the most delicate messages are transmitted – however, it all takes place in the guise of a formal conversation. Even when I blackmail my partner, I do it with a polite smile, offering him or her tea and cakes. . . . Is it, then, that while a brutal direct approach misses the Other's kernel, a tactful dance can reach it? In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno pointed out the utter ambiguity of tact clearly discernible in James's work: respectful consideration for the other's sensitiveness, care not to violate his or her intimacy, can easily become brutal insensitivity to the other's pain.⁶⁸

There is an old anecdote about two competing shopkeepers on the same street. When the first puts up a sign saying “My grocery is the best on this street!”, the other answers by putting up a sign saying “My grocery is the best in the entire neighbourhood!” – and then it goes on and on: “Mine is the best in the whole town . . . in the whole country . . . on earth . . . in the whole universe . . .”, until finally, the winner is the one who simply returns to the original sign: “My grocery is the best on this street!” And does not the same go for the gradual replacement of (sexually, racially . . .) aggressive

idioms with more "correct" ones, like the chain of substitutions *Nigger* – *negro* – *black* – *African-American*; or *crippled* – *disabled* – *bodily challenged*? This replacement potentially proliferates and enhances the very (racist) effect it tries to banish, adding insult to injury. As long as "crippled" contains an indelible mark of aggressivity, this mark will not only be more or less automatically transferred on to any of its "correct" metaphorical substitutes; this substitution will even open up further possibilities of spicing up the basic aggressivity with supplementary irony or patronizing politeness (recall all the ironic uses of "challenged" generated by the PC use of this term). We should therefore claim that the only way effectively to abolish the hatred effect is, paradoxically, to create the circumstances in which we can *return to the first link in the chain*, and use it in a non-aggressive way. The strategy of returning to the first link, of course, is risky; however, the moment it is fully accepted by the group targeted by it, it can definitely work. When radical feminists call each other "bitch", it is wrong to dismiss this strategy as a mere ironic identification with the male aggressor; rather, the point is that it functions as an autonomous act of neutralizing the aggressive sting.⁶⁹

Did Lenin Love His Neighbour?

Atom Egoyan's film *Exotica* tackles the fragile status of the frontier that separates public from private space. When we share a common space with outsiders – say, when a delivery man or a repair man enters our apartment – we politely ignore each other, refraining from probing into the other's privacy (what do they desire, what are their secret dreams?); *Exotica*, however, constantly violates this frontier, suddenly establishing a more intimate contact between two people brought together by some official duty. The Lacanian big Other is, among other things, one of the names for this Wall which enables us to maintain the proper distance, guaranteeing that the other's proximity will not overwhelm us – when we talk with a clerk, we "do not get personal". (The paradox is that this very Wall is not just negative: at the same time, it generates fantasies about what lurks behind it, about what the other really desires.⁷⁰) Our late capitalist daily life involves an unprecedented disavowal of the other's experience:

In order to pass a homeless person crouched in a doorway and *keep walking*, in order to *enjoy* dinner when children are hungry, in order to *rest* at night when suffering is incessant – atomized daily function demands that we

systematically foreclose our affections for and connections with others (in the words of dominant culture, our economy is comprised of individuals who respect each other's individuality). Behind the caricature of the bleeding-heart liberal is the truth of politics: how you feel is how you act.⁷¹

Here we are dealing not with individual psychology, but with capitalist subjectivity as a form of abstraction inscribed in and determined by the very nexus of "objective" social relations:

Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form. Such a state of affairs is at its most developed in the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society, in the United States. Here, then, for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category "labour", "labour as such", labour pure and simple, becomes true in practice.⁷²

So, just as Marx described how, within the market economy, abstraction is inscribed into individual experience itself (a worker directly experiences his particular profession as a contingent actualization of his abstract capacity to work, not as an organic component of his personality; an "alienated" lover experiences his sexual partner as a contingent fill-in that satisfied his need for sexual and/or emotional gratification; etc.), abstraction is also inscribed into the way we relate to others at the most immediate level: we *ignore* them in the fundamental sense of the word, reducing them to bearers of abstract social functions. And the point here, of course, is that "systems of power necessitate specific emotional configurations":⁷³ the fundamental "coldness" of the late capitalist subject is supplanted/concealed by the phantom of a rich private emotional life which serves as a fantasy-screen protecting us from the shattering experience of the Real of other people's suffering. Today, the old joke about a rich man telling his servant "Throw out this destitute beggar – I'm so sensitive that I can't stand seeing people suffer!" is more appropriate than ever. The necessary price of this abstraction is that the very sphere of privacy gets "reified", turned into a domain of calculated satisfactions: is there anything more depressingly anti-erotic than the proverbial appeal of a yuppie to his partner: "Let's spend some quality time together!"? No wonder, then, that the obverse of this distance are brutal and humiliating intrusions into the other's intimate space: from

confessionary talk-shows to cam-websites where we can observe other people defecating from the bottom of the toilet bowl.

It is a well-known fact that people find it much easier to confide their innermost dreams and fears to total strangers than to those who are close to them: phenomena like cyberspace chat-rooms and psychoanalytic treatment obviously rely on this paradox. The fact that we are telling it to a stranger totally outside our circle of acquaintances guarantees that our confession will not further stir up the *imbroglio* of passions in which we are enmeshed – not being one of our neighbouring others, the stranger is, in a way, the *big Other itself*, the neutral receptacle for our secrets. Today's "shared solipsism", however, moves on a different level: it is not only that we use strangers to confide the secrets of the loves and hatreds which structure our relationships with people whom we know and are close to; it is as if we are able to engage in these relationships themselves only against the background of a guaranteed distance. Things which, until now, had the status of an exception (like the proverbial passionate night of sex with a total stranger, in the knowledge that the next morning each of us will go his or her own way, never to meet again) are gradually imposing themselves as the new norm. (Among recent films, it is Patrice Chéreau's *Intimacy* which explores this issue most convincingly: on the morning after a wild night of sex with a stranger, when we find ourselves face to face with him or her, sharing an embarrassed proximity, is it possible to establish intimate personal contact?)

This disappearance of the frontier between public and private means that precise details of intimate life are becoming part of the public persona, accessible to everyone in books or on websites, not the obscene secret about which we whisper in private – to put it in a slightly nostalgic conservative way, the scandal lies in the very fact that there is no scandal any more. It began with models and movie stars: the (fake) video clip of Claudia Schiffer in passionate fellatio on two penises simultaneously is publicized everywhere; if we look on the Internet for data about Mimi MacPherson (the younger sister of the better-known Australian model Elle MacPherson), we find sites about her outstanding ecological activity (running a whale-observation company), interviews with her as a businesswoman, sites of "decent" photos of her, *plus* the stolen video of her masturbating and then copulating with her lover. And what about Catherine Millet's latest book,⁷⁴ in which this world-renowned art critic describes in a cold dispassionate style, without shame or guilt – and, as a result, also without any enthusiastic feeling of transgression – the details of her exuberant sexual life, up to her regular participation in big orgies, in which she was penetrated by or played with dozens of anonymous penises in a single session?

There are no a priori boundaries here – we can well imagine that, in the near future, some politician will (discreetly, at first) allow a hard-core video of his or her sexual shenanigans to circulate in public, to convince the voters of his or her force of attraction or potency. Almost a hundred years ago, Virginia Woolf wrote that, around 1912, human nature changed; perhaps this is a much more appropriate way of describing the radical shift in the status of subjectivity signalled by today's disappearance of the divide between public and private, discernible in phenomena like "Big Brother" reality soaps.⁷⁵

So, in the conditions of late capitalism, our affective life is irrevocably split: on the one hand there is the sphere of "privacy", of intimate islands of emotional sincerity and intense engagements which, precisely, serve as obstacles which blind us to wider forms of suffering; on the other there is the (metaphorical and literal) screen through which we perceive this wider suffering, bombarded daily with TV reports on ethnic cleansing, rapes, tortures, natural catastrophes, with which we deeply sympathize and which sometimes move us to engage in humanitarian activities. Even when this engagement is quasi-"personalized" (like the photo and letter from a child in Africa whom we support through regular financial contributions), ultimately, the payment here retains its fundamental subjective function isolated by psychoanalysis: we give money in order to keep the suffering others at a proper distance which allows us to indulge in emotional sympathy without endangering our safe isolation from their reality. This split of the victims is the truth of the discourse of victimization: me (the harassed one) versus others (in the Third World or the homeless in our cities) with whom I sympathize at a distance. In contrast to this ideologico-emotional baggage, the authentic work of Love does not lie in helping the other by, as it were, throwing him scraps of our wealth across a safe barrier: it is, rather, the work of dismantling this barrier, of directly reaching out to the foreclosed suffering Other.

Such authentic work of Love should be opposed to feel-good anti-racism in the style of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*, in which the black fiancé of the white upper-middle-class girl is educated, rich, and so on – his only fault is the colour of his skin: it is easy for the girl's parents to overcome the barrier and love such a "neighbor"; what, however, about the proverbial African-American from Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, who annoys the Whites when he walks around with the boombox turned up loud? It is *this* excessive and intrusive *jouissance* that we should learn to tolerate – is he not the ideal subject of "cultural harassment"?⁷⁶ And is not the obsession with "sexual harassment" also a form of intolerance – or "zero tolerance",

to use the popular Orwellian term of the law enforcers – for the other's enjoyment? This enjoyment is by definition excessive – every attempt to define its "proper measure" fails, since sexual seduction and proposal are in themselves intrusive, disturbing. Is the ultimate theme of the struggle against "harassment" not, therefore, the idea of each individual's right to be *left alone by his or her neighbours*, protected from their intrusive *jouissance*?

Why does Hamburg have three long-distance railway stations: the main station *Hamburg-Hauptbahnhof*, *Hamburg Dammtor*, and *Hamburg-Altona*, all on the same line? The distinction between the first two, the apparently "irrational" fact that, a short walk from the main station, there is another one, *Dammtor* station, is easy to explain: the ruling class wanted a station where its members could board the train unperturbed by the lower-class crowd. More enigmatic is the third station, *Altona*. It is not clear where this term comes from: while according to some sources it refers to the fact that this Danish settlement was perceived as standing "*all too nah*" ("all too near") to Hamburg itself, the more probable explanation is "*all ten au*", "by the brook". The fact, however, is that since the early sixteenth century, the citizens of Hamburg have been complaining continually about this small, originally Danish, settlement northwest of the city centre. As for the "all too near" theory, we should repeat the old Italian proverb: *se non è vero, è ben' trovato* – even if it's not true [on the factual level], it rings true! This is how a symptom is organized for Freud: as a hysterical accusation which, on the factual level, is clearly not true, but none the less "rings true" in so far as an unconscious desire resonates in it. And, in the same way, the symbolic function of the third station, *Altona* – to keep the intruders who are always "all too near" at a proper distance – also serves to displace/mystify the basic social antagonism (class struggle) into the fake antagonism between "us" (our nation, in which all classes are united in the same social body) and "them" (the foreign intruders).

The connection between these two oppositions provides the minimal coordinates of what Ernesto Laclau has conceptualized as the struggle for *hegemony*. The key feature of the concept of hegemony is the contingent connection between intrasocial differences (elements within the social space) and the limit that separates Society itself from non-Society (chaos, utter decadence, dissolution of all social links) – the limit between the Social and its exteriority, the non-Social, can articulate itself only in the guise of a difference (by mapping itself on to a difference) between elements of social space. The struggle within the social body (between *Hauptbahnhof* and *Dammtor*, the oppressed and the ruling class) is always, by a structural necessity, mirrored in the struggle between the social body "as such" ("all

of us, workers and rulers") and those who are outside ("them", the foreigners who are "all too near", in *Altona*).⁷⁷ That is to say: class struggle is ultimately the struggle for the meaning of society "as such", the struggle for which of the two classes will impose itself as the stand-in for society "as such", thereby degrading its other into the stand-in for the non-Social (the destruction of, the threat to, society).

To simplify: Does the masses' struggle for emancipation pose a threat to civilization as such, since civilization can thrive only in a hierarchical social order? Or is it that the ruling class is a parasite threatening to drag society into self-destruction, so that the only alternative to socialism is barbarism? This, of course, in no way implies that the way we relate to "them" is secondary, and that we should simply shift the focus back to the antagonism which splits "our" society from within: the way we relate to "them", to the third element, is the key indicator of where we actually stand with regard to the inherent antagonism. Is not the basic operation of today's neo-Fascist populism precisely to combine working-class interpellation with racist interpellation ("cosmopolitan multinational companies as the true enemy of our honest workers")? This is why – to take the extreme example – for Jews in today's Israel, "Love thy neighbour!" means "Love the Palestinians!" or *it means nothing at all*.⁷⁸

The courts in most Western societies know the measure of imposing an "order of restraint": when someone sues another person for harassing him or her (stalking, making unwarranted sexual advances, etc.), the harasser can be legally prohibited from knowingly approaching the victim within more than a hundred yards. Necessary as this measure is in view of the obvious reality of harassment, there is none the less something of the defence against the Real of the Other's desire in it: is it not obvious that there is something dreadfully *violent* about openly displaying one's passion for another human being to this being him- or herself? Passion, by definition, *hurts* its object; and even if its addressee gladly agrees to occupy this place, he or she can never do so without a moment of awe and surprise. Or – another variation on Hegel's dictum "Evil resides in the very gaze which perceives Evil all around" – intolerance towards the Other resides in the very gaze which perceives intolerant intruding Others all around.

We should be especially suspicious about an obsession with the sexual harassment of women when it is voiced by men: after barely scratching the "pro-feminist" PC surface, we soon encounter the good old male-chauvinist myth about how women are helpless creatures who should be protected not only from intruding men, but ultimately also from *themselves*. The problem is not that they will be unable to protect themselves, but that they might

start to enjoy being sexually harassed – that the male intrusion will set free in them a self-destructive explosion of excessive sexual enjoyment. . . . In short, what we should focus on is *what kind of notion of subjectivity is implied in the obsession with different modes of harassment?* Is it not the “narcissistic” subjectivity for which everything others do (talk to me, look at me . . .) is potentially a threat, so that – as Sartre put it long ago – *l'enfer, c'est les autres?*

With regard to woman as an object of disturbance, the more she is covered, the more our (male) attention focuses on her, on what lies beneath the veil. The Taliban not only forced women to appear in public completely veiled, they also prohibited them from wearing shoes with too solid (metal or wooden) heels, and ordered them to walk in such a way that they would not make too loud a clicking noise, which might attract men's attention and thus distract them, disturbing their inner peace and dedication. This is the paradox of surplus-enjoyment at its purest: the more the object is veiled, the more intensely disturbing is the minimal trace of its remainder.

And is not this the case even with the growing prohibition on smoking? First, all offices were declared “smoke-free”, then flights, then restaurants, then airports, then bars, then private clubs; then, on some university campuses, fifty yards around the entrances to the buildings; then – in a unique case of pedagogical censorship, reminding us of the famous Stalinist practice of retouching the photos of the *nomenklatura* – the US postal service removed the cigarette from stamps with photo-portraits of blues guitarist Robert Johnson, and of Jackson Pollock; now we have the recent attempts to impose a ban on lighting up on the pavement or in a park. Christopher Hitchens was right to point out not only that medical evidence for the threat of “passive smoking” is at best extremely shaky, but that these prohibitions themselves, intended “for our own good”, are “fundamentally illogical, presaging a supervised world in which we'll live painlessly, safely – and tediously”.⁷⁹

Is not the target of such prohibitions again the Other's excessive, risky *jouissance*, embodied in the act of “irresponsibly” lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply, with unabashed pleasure – in contrast to Clintonite yuppies who do it without inhaling (or have sex without actual penetration, or food without fat, or . . .)? On top of all this, the notion of the danger of “passive smoking” is clearly part of the post-AIDS fear not only of direct physical contact with others, but also of more ethereal forms of contact (the “invisible” exchange of fluids, bacteria, viruses . . .). What makes smoking such an ideal scapegoat is the fact that the proverbial “smoking gun” is easy to target here, providing a Politically Correct agent of conspiracy, the

large tobacco companies, and thus disguising envy of the Other's enjoyment in the acceptable anti-corporate clout. The ultimate irony is not only that the tobacco companies' profits have not yet been affected by anti-smoking campaigns and legislation, but that even most of the billions of dollars the tobacco companies have agreed to pay will go to the medico-pharmaceutical industrial complex, which is the single strongest industrial complex in the USA, twice as strong as the infamous military-industrial complex.

What makes Fred Walton's film *When a Stranger Calls* so interesting is the unexpected twist after the first twenty minutes, which tell the standard story of the anonymous murderer harassing the babysitter alone in the house with two children with repeated phone calls: after he is apprehended (and we learn that he was in the house all the time, calling from another phone line, and that he has already killed the two children), we are thrown into *his* subjective perspective. This reversal of narrative perspective displays a clear class connotation: the first and last parts of the film take place in upper-middle-class surroundings (the crimes occur during babysitting, when the mother and father are out partying; the murderer's question "Did you check on the children?" is in fact addressed at the parents). Not only does the pathological harasser/murderer belong to the lower classes; he is also portrayed as the ultimate disturbing neighbour, whose offers of friendship and desperate pleas for communication are all brutally rejected (he is beaten up in a desolate low-class bar, ignored by people who walk past him on the street). This rejection also gives a clue to the motivation of his attacks: at the end of the film's second part (in which his narrative perspective predominates), we see him, hidden among dustbins, repeating his mantra: "Nobody sees me! Nobody hears me! I don't exist!" It is from this position of *subjective nonexistence* that he performs the act, and commits his horrible crimes.

There is an extraordinary scene towards the beginning of Kieslowski's *Decalogue 8*: in the middle of a university ethics class, an anonymous haggard-looking young man (a homeless drunkard?) enters the large classroom and looks around perplexed. All the participants are embarrassed and annoyed, not knowing what to do; finally, a formally dressed black man (a student from an African country?) says in English: "Get out!", and the intruder leaves the room.⁸⁰ The irony of this scene is double: first, the participants, who are intensely discussing love of one's neighbour, blatantly not only ignore, but even throw out, the actual neighbour in distress; second, the person who breaks the impasse by ordering the distressed neighbour to leave is a black student – the exemplary object of racial intolerance in Real Socialist countries, in which African students were

despised by local students, who perceived them as financially and politically privileged but intellectually inept foreigners who posed a sexual threat by seducing white girls.

In the magnificent Chapter IIC ("You Shall Love Your Neighbor") of *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard develops the claim that the ideal neighbour whom we should love is a dead one – the only good neighbour is a dead neighbour. His line of reasoning is surprisingly simple and consistent: in contrast to poets and lovers, whose object of love is distinguished by its preference, by its particular outstanding qualities, "to love your neighbor means equality": "Forsake all distinctions so that you can love your neighbor."⁸¹ It is only in death, however, that all distinctions disappear: "Death erases all distinctions, but preference is always related to distinctions."⁸² A further consequence of this reasoning is the crucial distinction between two perfections: the perfection of the object of love, and the perfection of love itself. The lover's, poet's or friend's love contains a perfection that belongs to its object and is, for this very reason, imperfect as love; in contrast to this love:

precisely because one's neighbor has none of the excellences which the beloved, a friend, a cultured person, an admired one, and a rare and extraordinary one have in high degree – for that very reason love to one's neighbor has all the perfections. . . . Erotic love is determined by the object; friendship is determined by the object; only love to one's neighbor is determined by love. Since one's neighbor is every man, unconditionally every man, all distinctions are indeed removed from the object. Therefore genuine love is recognizable by this, that its object is without any of the more definite qualifications of difference, which means that this love is recognizable only by love. Is not this the highest perfection?⁸³

To put it in Kant's terms: here Kierkegaard is trying to articulate the contours of a non-pathological love, a love which would be independent of its (contingent) object, a love which (to paraphrase again Kant's definition of moral duty) is motivated not by its determinate object, but by the mere *form* of love – I love for the sake of love itself, not for the sake of what distinguishes its object. The implication of this stance is bizarre, if not outright morbid: perfect love is *thoroughly indifferent to the beloved object*.

No wonder Kierkegaard was so obsessed with the figure of Don Juan: do not Kierkegaard's Christian love for the neighbour and Don Juan's serial seductions share this crucial indifference to the object? For Don Juan, too, the quality of the seduced object did not matter: the ultimate point of Leporello's long list of conquests, which categorizes them according to their

characteristics (age, nationality, physical features), is that these characteristics are irrelevant – the only thing that matters is the pure numerical fact of adding a new name to the list. In this precise sense, is not Don Juan a properly *Christian* seducer, since his conquests were “pure”, non-pathological in the Kantian sense, done for the sake of it, not because of any particular and contingent properties of their objects? The poet’s preferred love object is also a dead person (paradigmatically the beloved woman): he needs her to be dead in order to articulate his mourning in his poetry (or, as in courtly love poetry, a living woman is elevated to the status of a monstrous Thing). In contrast to the poet’s fixation on the singular dead love object, the Christian, however, treats the still living neighbour as already dead, erasing his or her distinctive qualities. The dead neighbour means the neighbour deprived of the annoying excess of *jouissance* which makes him or her unbearable. So it is clear where Kierkegaard cheats: in trying to sell us, as the authentic difficult act of love, what is in fact an escape from the effort of authentic love. Love for the dead neighbour is an easy feast: it basks in its own perfection, indifferent to its object – what about not only “tolerating” but loving the other *because of his or her very imperfection*?

Is this love for the dead neighbour really just Kierkegaard’s theological idiosyncrasy? On a recent visit to San Francisco, while listening to a blues CD in a friend’s apartment, I uttered the unfortunate remark: “Judging by the colour of her voice, the singer is definitely black. Strange, then, that she has such a German-sounding name – Nina.” Of course, I was immediately admonished for Political Incorrectness: one should not associate someone’s ethnic identity with a physical feature or a name, because all this just bolsters racial clichés and prejudices. To my ensuing query about how, then, one should identify ethnic belonging, I got a clear and radical answer: in no way, by means of no particular feature, because every such identification is potentially oppressive in constraining a person to his or her particular identity. . . . Is this not a perfect contemporary example of what Kierkegaard had in mind? One should love one’s neighbours (African-Americans, in this case) only in so far as they are implicitly deprived of all their particular characteristics – in short, in so far as they are treated as already dead. What about loving them *for* the unique sharp-melancholic quality of their voices, *for* the amazing libidinal combinations of their names (the leader of the anti-racist movement in France two decades ago was named *Harlem Désir*!) – that is to say, *for* the idiosyncrasy of their modes of *jouissance*?

Lacan’s name for this “imperfection”, for the obstacle which makes me love someone, is *objet petit a*, the “pathological” tic which makes him or

her unique. In authentic love, I love the other not simply for being alive, but because of the very troubling excess of life in him or her. Even the common wisdom is somehow aware of this: as they say, there is something cold in perfect beauty; we admire it, but we fall in love with an *imperfect* beauty, because of this very imperfection. For Americans, at least, there is something all too cold in Claudia Schiffer's perfection: it is somehow easier to fall in love with Cindy Crawford because of her very small imperfection (the famous tiny mole near her lip – her *objet petit a*).⁸⁴ And I am tempted to add to the couple of Schiffer and Crawford the couple of the Federal Republic of Germany and the defunct German Democratic Republic: there still are people who love the GDR *inclusive of and for its very imperfections* – they love the memory of the bitter sulphur taste of the air due to the heavy industry pollution – but there is hardly anyone who loves the Federal Republic of Germany.⁸⁵

This failure of Kierkegaard also explains the problems which emerge when we apply the Kierkegaardian triad of the Aesthetic, the Ethical and the Religious to the domain of sexual relations: which is the religious mode of the erotic, if its aesthetic mode is seduction and its ethical mode marriage? Is it at all meaningful to talk about a religious mode of erotics in the precise Kierkegaardian sense of the term? The point of Lacan is that this, precisely, is the role of *courtly love*: the Lady in courtly love suspends the ethical level of universal symbolic obligations, and bombards us with totally arbitrary ordeals in a way which is homologous to the religious suspension of the Ethical; these ordeals are on a par with God ordering Abraham to slaughter his son Isaac. And, contrary to the surface appearance, here that sacrifice reaches its apogee: it is only here that we finally confront the Other *qua* Thing that gives body to the excess of enjoyment over mere pleasure.

Just like Kierkegaard's love for the dead neighbour, this tragic vision of courtly love is not only false, but ultimately even unchristian. In Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, the low-class Judy – who, under the pressure exerted from and out of her love for Scottie, endeavours to look and act like the high-class fatal and ethereal Madeleine – turns out to *be* Madeleine: they are the same person, since the "true" Madeleine Scottie encountered was already a fake. This identity of Judy and Judy-Madeleine, however, reveals all the more clearly the absolute otherness of Madeleine with regard to Judy – a Madeleine who is nowhere, who is present only in the guise of the ethereal "aura" that envelops Judy-Madeleine.

In a strictly homologous gesture, Christianity asserts that there is nothing beyond appearance – nothing but the imperceptible X that changes Christ, an ordinary man, into God. In the *absolute* identity of man and God, the

Divine is the pure *Schein* of another dimension that shines through Christ, this miserable creature. It is only here that the iconoclasm is truly brought to its conclusion: what is in fact "beyond the image" is that X which makes the man Christ God. In this precise sense, Christianity reverses Jewish sublimation into a radical desublimation: not desublimation in the sense of a simple reduction of God to man, but desublimation in the sense of the descent of the sublime Beyond to the everyday level. Christ is a "ready-made God" (as Boris Groys put it); he is fully human, inherently indistinguishable from other humans in exactly the same way as Judy is indistinguishable from Madeleine in *Vertigo* – it is only an imperceptible "something", a pure appearance which can never be grounded in a substantial property, that makes him divine.

This is why Scottie's obsessive love for Madeleine is a fake: if his love were true, he should have accepted the full identity of (the common, vulgar) Judy and (the sublime) Madeleine.⁸⁶ It is in this identity of incongruous opposites, of the sublime and the ridiculous, that we find the comedy of love – or, as Fernando Pessoa puts it: "All love letters are / comical. / They would not be about love, if they were not / comical."

There is, nevertheless, an indifference which pertains to true love: not an indifference to its object, but an indifference to the positive qualities of the beloved object. This indifference of love is closely linked to that of the Lacanian "empty signifier": of course, this signifier is never really "empty" – a king, for example, is always identified with a series of personal idiosyncratic features which characterize him; however, we, his subjects, are aware at all times that these features are thoroughly indifferent and replaceable, that it is not these features which make him a king. The difference between the "empty" signifier and the "full" signifier lies not in the absence or presence of positive features of the object designated by it, but in the different *symbolic status* of these features: in the first case these features are a positive magnitude (the subject's qualities), while in the second they function as a negative magnitude, that is, their very "full presence" is a stand-in for – holds the place of – the "emptiness" of the signifier (of the symbolic mandate) "King". So "fullness" and "emptiness" are not directly opposed: the very "emptiness" of the empty signifier is sustained by a specific "negative" fullness. And the same goes for love: to say "I love you because . . . [you have a nice nose, attractive legs]" is a priori false. With love, it is the same as with religious belief: I do not love you because I find your positive features attractive but, on the contrary, I find your positive features attractive because I love you, and therefore observe you with a loving gaze. Consequently, all the "fullness" of the positive features which I

adore in the beloved are a stand-in for the "emptiness" which I really love – even if they were obliterated, I would still love you.

How does all this relate to sex? The true miracle occurs when sex is "transubstantiated" into an act of love. There are four ways to disavow this impossible/real conjunction of love and sexual enjoyment:

1. the celebration of asexual "pure" love, as if sexual desire for the beloved demonstrates the love's inauthenticity;⁸⁷
2. the opposite assertion of intense sex as "the only real thing", which reduces love to a mere imaginary lure;
3. the division of these two aspects, their allocation to two different people: one loves one's gentle wife (or the idealized inaccessible Lady), while one has sex with a "vulgar" mistress;
4. their false immediate merger, in which intense sex is supposed to demonstrate that one "truly loves" one's partner, as if, in order to prove that our love is a true one, every sexual act has to be the proverbial "fuck of the century".

All these four stances are wrong, an escape from assuming the impossible/real conjunction of love and sex; a true love is enough in itself, it makes sex irrelevant – but precisely because "fundamentally, it doesn't matter", we can fully enjoy it without any superego pressure. . . . And, paradoxically, this brings us back to Lenin: when, in 1916, Lenin's (at that point ex-)mistress Inessa Armand wrote to him that even a fleeting passion was more poetic and cleaner than kisses without love between man and woman, he replied:

Kisses without love between vulgar spouses are *filthy*. I agree. These need to be contrasted . . . with what? . . . It would seem: kisses *with* love. But you contrast "a fleeting (why a fleeting) passion (why not love?)" – and it comes out logically as if kisses without love (fleeting) are contrasted to marital kisses without love. . . . This is odd.⁸⁸

Lenin's reply is usually dismissed as proof of his petty-bourgeois sexual restraint, sustained by his bitter memory of the past affair; however, there is more to it: the insight that marital "kisses without love" and the extramarital "fleeting affair" are the two sides of the same coin – they both shrink from combining the Real of an unconditional passionate attachment with the form of symbolic proclamation. Lenin is profoundly right here, but not in the classic prudish sense of preferring "normal" marriage for love to illicit promiscuity. The underlying insight is that, against all appearances, love and sex are not only distinct, but ultimately *incompatible* – that they operate on completely different levels, like *agape* and *eros*: love is *charitable*,

self-effacing, ashamed of itself; while sex is intense, self-assertive, possessive, inherently *violent* (or the opposite: possessive love versus generous indulging in sexual pleasures).⁸⁹ The true miracle, however, occurs when (exceptionally, not "as a rule"), these two series momentarily *coincide* – an achievement which is real/impossible in the precise Lacanian sense and, as such, marked by an inherent *rarity*.

Today, it is as if the nexus of three levels which characterized traditional sexuality (reproduction, sexual pleasure, love) is gradually dissolving: reproduction is left to biogenetic procedures which are making sexual intercourse redundant; sex itself is turned into recreational fun; while love is reduced to the domain of "emotional fulfilment".⁹⁰ In such a situation, it is all the more precious to be reminded of those rare miraculous moments in which two of these three dimensions can still overlap. I am almost tempted to paraphrase Brecht's "What is a bank robbery compared to the founding of a bank?" here: what is an extramarital affair compared to an affair which declares itself publicly in the form of marriage?

In a recent book against the "excesses" of May 1968 and, more generally, against the "sexual liberation" of the 1960s, *The Independent* reminded us what the radicals of '68 thought about child sex. A quarter of a century ago, Daniel Cohn-Bendit wrote about his experience in a kindergarten:

My constant flirt with all the children soon took on erotic characteristics. I could really feel how from the age of five the small girls had already learned to make passes at me. . . . Several times a few children opened the flies of my trousers and started to stroke me. . . . When they insisted, I then stroked them.

Shulamith Firestone went even further, expressing her hopes that, in a world "without the incest taboo . . . relations with children would include as much genital sex as they were capable of – probably considerably more than we now believe".⁹¹ Confronted with these statements, Cohn-Bendit played them down, claiming: "This did not really happen, I only wanted to provoke people. When one reads it today, it is unacceptable."⁹² The question, however, still remains: how, at that time, was it possible to provoke people, presenting sexual games with pre-school children to them as something appealing, while today, the same "provocation" would immediately give rise to an outburst of moral disgust? After all, child sexual harassment is one of *the* notions of Evil today. Without directly taking sides in this debate, we should read it as a sign of the change in our mores from the utopian energies of the 1960s and early 1970s to stale contemporary Political Correctness, in which every authentic encounter with another human being is denounced as a victimizing experience. This, of course, does not imply

that we should simply take the side of "sexual liberation": the problem is, rather, that "sexual liberation" in the style of Cohn-Bendit and hedonistic Politically Correct asceticism are intrinsically linked – the second attitude is the "truth", the consequent realization, of the first one: that is to say, unconstrained hedonism *has* to end up in some form of renewed asceticism.

In *Gasparone*, a silly German musical from 1937, the young Marika Roekk, reproached by her father for treating her rich and powerful fiancé unkindly, promptly answers: "I love him, so I have the right to treat him in any way I want!" There is some truth in this statement: far from obliging me to be "respectful" and "considerate" – all signals of cold distance – love, in a way, allows me to dispense with these formalities. Does this mean that love gives me a kind of *carte blanche*, justifying every brutality? No, and that is the miracle of love: *love sets its own standards*, so that, within a love-relationship, it is immediately clear when we are dealing with love and when we are not (as with Politically Incorrect terms, which can also be used as proof that I am a real friend of the person concerned).

From *passage à l'acte* to the Act Itself

This is also why authentic love for one's neighbour has nothing to do with compassion: one of the key lessons of psychoanalysis concerns the hypocrisy of compassion, that is, the secret pleasure [*Schadenfreude*] one gets from sympathizing with the other's difficult predicament. Nowhere is this clearer than in Lars von Trier's films. In his remarkable intervention at the Krzysztof Kieslowski conference at UCLA in April 2001, Fredric Jameson violently protested against the unexpected death by drowning of a young boy, the traumatic event around which Kieslowski's *Decalogue 1* turns: he emphatically claimed that Kieslowski should never be forgiven for killing the boy, that he should be held accountable for his death – just as, according to some late medieval legislation, if an author kills a popular fictional character in his narrative, we should be allowed to prosecute him for murder. . . . Brilliant as this idea is, it is probably misplaced: the author who should in fact *never* be forgiven for the way he treats his heroines in *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* is Lars von Trier.

Dancer in the Dark is one of those painful films in which it is clear from the very beginning where the story will end: in total catastrophe. While we are watching, we secretly hope – believe, even – that something will happen which will prevent this unbearable ending, so that, paradoxically, the final

shock is that there is no surprise: the horrible ending towards which the film has pointed all the time *does* materialize.

The story takes place in the USA in the 1960s: Selma (Björk), a Czech émigrée who works in a textile factory, is going blind because of an inherited disease; she works overtime to save money for the operation which would save her son from the same predicament. Her friendly neighbour, in whom she confides, steals the money from her; she kills him, is condemned to death and executed. . . . How can Selma live through such an ordeal? Her big passions are singing and musicals: after working hours, she participates in an amateur group practising for a performance of *The Sound of Music*, and the drab reality of her life is continuously suspended by the songs she imagines singing to herself. These songs, which grow organically out of the rhythmic sounds of her working environment (reminding us of the good old Marxist theories of the birth of music out of the collective work rhythm), become leaner and leaner, with diminishing orchestral accompaniment, until when she is on her way to her execution, we hear just her hesitant voice trying to linger with the melody. The ambiguity here is radical: does *Dancer* celebrate the magic power of music (and musicals) which allows us to survive horrifying reality, or does it condemn music as an escapist fantasy which makes us passively endure social reality?

So how is Selma able to sustain such a radical subjective stance? By adopting the fetishist position. What is a fetish? Patricia Highsmith's short story 'The Button' tells the story of a middle-aged New Yorker who lives a miserable life with his wife and their Down's Syndrome child; late one night, unable to stand his son's meaningless gibber any longer, he goes for a walk through the empty streets, where he bumps into a homeless drunken beggar. Although the beggar is in no way intrusive, the hero spills out all his anger and frustrations on him; after beating him senselessly to death, he tears a button off his dirty coat and runs home. From this evening on, he keeps the button in his pocket all the time, clinging to it as to a kind of superstitious prop – whatever misery befalls him, there will always be this button to remind him how – once, at least – he was really able to hit back. So he regains the ability to confront life with new hope, even to smile kindly at his handicapped son. . . . This is a fetish at its purest: the in-between element which enables the subject to endure miserable reality. And perhaps the true secret of *Dancer* is that it narrates a case of feminine fetishism, turning around the classic psychoanalytic doxa which opposes feminine hysteria and male (fetishist) perversion. Is it not that Selma is able to endure everything, even the most painful situations, because she has her fetish – singing – to which she clings all the time? Underlying all this is a question:

what is singing? Why do we sing? At the very beginning of *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin presents a scene of women singing as they pick strawberries in a field – with the acerbic explanation that they are ordered to sing by their mistress, so that they cannot eat the strawberries as they pick them.

What, then, is the *social* dimension of such a fetishist stance? Let us take another film which deals with music and the working class, Mark Herman's *Brassed Off*, whose topic is the relationship between a "real" political struggle (the miners' struggle against the threatened pit closure legitimized in terms of technological progress) and the idealized symbolic expression of the miners' community, their playing in a brass band. At first, the two aspects seem to be opposed: to the miners caught in their struggle for economic survival, the "Only music matters!" attitude of their old band leader dying of lung cancer looks like the vain fetishized insistence of the empty symbolic form deprived of its social substance. Once the miners lose their political struggle, however, the "music matters" attitude, their insistence on going on playing and participating in a national competition, turns into a defiant symbolic gesture, a proper act of asserting fidelity to their political struggle – as one of them puts it, when there's no hope, there are only principles to follow. . . . In short, the symbolic act occurs when we arrive at this intersection or, rather, short circuit of the two levels, so that insistence on the empty form itself (we'll continue to play in our brass band, whatever happens . . .) becomes the sign of fidelity to the content (to the struggle against the closure, for the continuation of the miners' way of life).

This role of music achieved its highest expression in the legendary event at the Vorkuta Gulag camp Mine 29 in 1953. A few months after Stalin's death, strikes broke out in labour camps all across Siberia; the strikers' demands were modest and "reasonable": the release of the very old and the too young, a ban on random shooting by watch-tower guards, and so on. One by one, the camps succumbed to threats or false promises from Moscow, and only Mine 29 at Vorkuta held out, surrounded by two divisions of NKVD troops, with tanks. When the troops finally entered the main gate, they saw the prisoners standing behind it in a solid phalanx, their arms linked, singing. After a brief moment of hesitation, the heavy machine-guns opened up – the miners remained massed and erect, defiantly continuing to sing, the dead held up by the living. After about a minute, reality prevailed, and corpses started to litter the ground. However, this brief minute in which the strikers' defiance seemed to suspend the very laws of nature, transubstantiating their exhausted bodies into the appearance of an immortal singing collective Body, was an occurrence of the Sublime at its purest, the prolonged moment in which, in a way, time stood still.

What, then, if we risk putting *Dancer in the Dark* into this series, viewing Selma's singing not as an escapist gesture but as a gesture of heroic defiance? Furthermore, what if – before immersing ourselves in speculation about the relationship between voice and reality – we take note of the fact that in a society with universal healthcare, Selma's predicament (having to toil for her son's eye surgery while she is going blind herself) could not have emerged in the first place?

Furthermore, the film's supreme achievement is the avoidance of melodramatic effects where the events seem to call for them. The key scene is the exchange between Selma and the neighbour who stole her money out of despair that were his wife to discover that he was broke, she would leave him. So when Selma (in a calm and dignified way, without any pathetic reproaches) confronts him with his crime, the friendly neighbour answers her in a calm, rational way, admitting everything, and presenting her with a choice: if he were to lose the money, he would not be able to endure the fact that his wife has left him, so the only alternative for him would be suicide. So Selma has to make a choice: either she lets him keep her painfully earned money, or she kills him (he even gives her his gun), which she does. This scene is unique in its radical tension: the cruelty of what is going on (the victim confronting the criminal who has ruined her life) is expressed in the form of a sincerely open and compassionate exchange between two true friends, both victims of circumstance, so that when Selma kills the thief, the act is accomplished not with uncontrolled rage, but as a tender act of helping a friend, reminding us of the final scene of Brecht's *Die Massnahme*, when the three revolutionaries throw their young companion who has failed in his work to his death – political liquidation as an act of *pietà*.

All this brilliance, however, does not alter the fundamental fact that there is something terribly wrong with the film. *Dancer* is the final part of Von Trier's trilogy, which also includes *Breaking the Waves* and *The Idiots*. All three films focus on the same figure of feminine subjectivity: the fairytale figure of the girl walking alone in a forest, who endeavours to escape the sense of being exposed to the menacing darkness all around her by offering bits of what she has to the surrounding shadows. While they profess compassion with the excessively good heroine, the way these films depict her progressive suffering and inexorable self-destruction cannot but put us in the position of the sadistic observer secretly enjoying what he officially condemns: this sadistic pleasure is the obverse, the hidden truth, of compassion. And for this, Von Trier should never be forgiven. The only antidote to this murderous compassion is its apparent opposite: loving aggressivity.

In June 2001, Andrea Yates from Houston, Texas, drowned all five of

her children (from Mary, aged six months, to Noah, aged seven) in a bathtub. At nine in the morning, after her husband had left for work, she filled the bathtub and began killing her children. When she picked Mary up and put her in the tub, Noah caught her in her act and tried to run away; she chased him and wrestled him into the tub. She did her job methodically, killing them one by one, holding them underwater (with, as we can imagine, their eyes staring back at her), then laying them out on the bed wrapped in sheets. Then she calmly called the police and her husband, informing them of her act, for which she assumed full responsibility – when a policeman asked her: “Do you realize what you have done?”, she answered: “Yes, I do. I killed my children.”

Her case revealed the misery of all the talk about “PPD” (postpartum depression). This obfuscates not only the subjective impasse this violent *passage à l’acte* was destined to resolve, but also the ideological co-ordinates of this Medeaesque act which, as the very names of the children (Mary, Luke, Paul, John, Noah – ironically, the last to be drowned . . .) reveal, took place in a devout Christian household. (In the case of Susan Smith, who drowned her two boys in a South Carolina lake in 1994, her religious faith played a crucial role: she thought that by killing the children she was sending them to heaven, and thus sparing them the misery of terrestrial life.)

The Yateses were an ideal Christian family: after their marriage, Rusty and Andrea decided that Andrea should give up her job (as a nurse in a cancer clinic), stay at home, and dedicate herself fully to the children. And she did so with utter dedication: in addition to feeding, bathing and disciplining the children, and teaching them readings and maths, she took care of her father, who suffered from Alzheimer’s. So, far from being psychotic, her mindset was that of feminine obsessional neurosis: the object of her desire was the other’s demand. She dedicated her life to serving others – she cared too much, she tried to be too good a mother, always thinking of other people, never of herself. Caught in this subservience to the other’s demand, she was by definition unable to fulfil it: in accordance with the inexorable logic of the superego, the more she tried to comply with the demand to serve her neighbours, the more she felt inadequate, with attacks of depression and emotional detachment as the consequences of her predicament. After drowning her children, she told the police that she was a bad mother, and that her children were hopelessly damaged. This left her only two ways out: either to kill herself or to kill the children. First, in June 1999, after her father’s death, unable to sustain the situation without him to care for, she tried to kill herself by overdosing; finally, she chose the other path.

At a press conference, her husband described his attitude towards Andrea:

My wife, I'm supportive of her. But . . . I know that the woman here is not the woman who killed my children. . . . One side of me blames her because . . . she did it. But the other side of me says, "Well, she didn't, because that wasn't her; she wasn't in her right frame of mind."⁹³

This, precisely, is an all-too-easy way out: we should assert here what Hegel would have called the speculative identity of these two sides. How, then, are we to read the bond between these two aspects of Andrea's psyche (loving and self-effacing care; the outburst of murderous violence)? If anything, there are too many explanations – a whole proliferation of them. Feminists could claim that Andrea's act was a desperate wild rebellion against the traditional mother-role; "risk society" theorists could interpret it as the result of the inability of traditional family values to enable individuals to cope with the dynamics of modern social life; conservatives could focus on the unbearable stress modern life is putting on the family.

There is, in fact, something "premodern" in Andrea's refusal to follow the path of today's narcissistic injunction: "Realize yourself" – she found satisfaction in the old-fashioned self-obliterating attitude of serving others. What made her burden unbearable was the fact that in contrast to premodern times, when the childcare was more collectivized (grandparents, brothers and sisters and other relatives shared in it), the modern nuclear family tends to confer this task on the mother alone. Abandoning her professional career and dedicating herself to her offspring, she is subjected to the ideological injunction to experience this predicament as supreme happiness: the pure bliss of privacy and intimacy, as opposed to "alienated" professional work. What about the obvious fact that between the ages of two and five, children really *are* monsters, the closest a human being can come to "radical Evil": creatures of insatiable demand, inflexible and stubborn, by definition never satisfied? No wonder that in 1646, the General Court of Massachusetts Bay enacted the "stubborn-child law" which allowed rebellious sons to be tried and put to death. Kant knew that small children display a kind of "wild freedom" that has no counterpart in the animal kingdom – a freedom in which, perhaps, the noumenal dimension of the Real appears.

While all these readings are feasible, we should focus on the more fundamental dimension underlying them: that of the violent *passage à l'acte* as the only way to break out of an ideological deadlock. Here we are dealing not with the simple tension between the impossible ideological injunction and subjective resistance to it, but with the double-bind inherent to this injunction itself: the injunction's "explicit" message is redoubled (supplemented, sustained) by an implicit obscene message which says the

exact opposite. The "complete" message of the injunction is thus, in the case of the mother: be happy and find fulfilment in the very hell of your home, where your children bombard you with impossible demands, where all your hopes are thwarted! And is not a similar double-bind at work in the multicultural liberal injunction to be tolerant? Here again, the true message is: learn to love the disgusting Other whose display of excessive *jouissance* makes you sick! This injunction also contains an additional twist which explains why a liberal subject is ready to follow it: "Zero tolerance for any kind of harassment!", which means that you should tolerate the Other *in so far as he himself is tolerant*. Tolerance towards the Other thus passes imperceptibly into a destructive hatred of all ("fundamentalist") Others who do not fit our idea of tolerance – in short, against all *actual* Others. Or – to apply the same logic to the family haven: infinite dedication to one's children can turn into a destructive rage against real children who do not appreciate their mother's sacrifice.

It is against this double-bind that the (self-)destructive *passage à l'acte* explodes; and it is all too simple to oppose this *passage à l'acte* directly to the authentic political act. The first reaction to an ideological double-bind has to be a "blind" violent *passage à l'acte*, which can only later, in a subsequent move, be properly politicized. We simply *have to accept the risk* that a blind violent outburst will be followed by its proper politicization – there is no short cut here, and no guarantee of a successful outcome either. Horrible as it may sound, we should therefore *not* simply condemn acts like the one committed by Andrea: we should discern in them a hidden liberating potential. What is a *passage à l'acte* – this moment of "Speak, hands, for me!", as Casca puts it in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*?

Perhaps its ultimate cinematic expression is found in Paul Schrader's and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, in Travis's (Robert de Niro) final outburst against the pimps who control the young girl he wants to save (Jodie Foster). The implicit suicidal dimension of this *passage à l'acte* is crucial: when Travis is preparing for his attack, he practises drawing the gun in front of the mirror; in what became the best-known scene in the film, he addresses his own image in the mirror with an aggressive-condescending "You talkin' to me?". In a textbook illustration of Lacan's notion of the "mirror stage", the aggressivity here is clearly aimed at oneself, at one's own mirror-image. This suicidal dimension re-emerges at the end of the slaughter scene when Travis, heavily wounded and leaning against the wall, mimics with the forefinger of his right hand a gun aimed at his bloodstained forehead and mockingly triggers it, as if to say: "The true aim of my outburst was myself." The paradox of Travis is that he perceives *himself* as part of the degenerate dirt

of the city life he wants to eradicate, so that – as Brecht put it apropos of revolutionary violence in *The Measure Taken* – he wants to be the last piece of dirt after whose removal the room will be clean.⁹⁴

In a real-life case of such a deadlock, in 1999 Private Barry Winchell from Fort Campbell US Army base beat to death a fellow soldier who harassed him all the time about his homosexuality. This event is usually quoted as proof of the failure of Bill Clinton's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy on gays in the army; what is perhaps more crucial is to perceive how this failure is linked to the tension between explicit symbolic rules and their supplement, the obscene unwritten rules that actually sustain a community. In his unit, Winchell was continually submitted to anti-gay gibes and taunts – not only by his fellow soldiers, but also by his immediate superior, Sergeant Kleifgen. Typically, when Kleifgen was asked why he did not intervene and order the platoon members to stop harassing Winchell, he replied: "Everybody was having fun" – in short, harassing Winchell functioned as the secret obscene male-bonding ritual that cemented the community. (In military jargon, "having fun" refers as a rule to cruel and humiliating ritualized procedures – take my own experience in the Yugoslav People's Army, where the supreme example of "having fun" was to pick out a soldier asleep in his bed, tie his testicles with a rope to one of his toes when his legs were not fully stretched, then put a piece of paper between his toes, and set it on fire; when the fire awakened the unfortunate soldier, his automatic reaction was, of course, to stretch out his leg repeatedly, trying to get rid of the burning piece of paper that was causing him pain – in military jargon, this was called "making him ride a bicycle", and the result could be heard hundreds of yards away. . . .)

Again, the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy put Winchell in an unbearable double-bind: he was afraid that if he complained to his superior officers about the harassment, he would break the second part of the policy rule ("don't tell") – that is to say, his complaint would involve the act of publicly declaring his gay sexual orientation, which would then eventually lead to his expulsion. In order to break up this double-bind deadlock, he resorted to a physical attack on his most persistent harasser, killing him with a baseball bat. So what should Winchell have done? In abstract terms, instead of acting out and beating the tormenting other to death, he should first have *beaten himself up*, that is, got rid of *his own* libidinal investment in the rituals of his humiliation, *his own* secret participation in them. More concretely, he should have devised a strategy for turning the system against itself by manipulating the split between its explicit rules and their obscene supplement – perhaps, say, he should have summoned up the courage to break the false spirit of group solidarity ("Whatever problems we have, we deal with them

among ourselves – a real man doesn't go outside and complain to others") and simply *denounced his tormentors to the higher authorities for sexually harassing him*; if his superiors had asked: "But *are you gay?*", he should have accused *them* of breaking the "Don't ask, don't tell" rule.

A couple of years ago, a lesbian feminist claimed that today gays are the privileged victims, so that the analysis of how gays are underprivileged provides the key to understanding all other exclusions, repressions, violence, and so on (religious, ethnic, class . . .). The problem with this theory is precisely its implicit (or, in this case, even explicit) universal claim: it is making exemplary victims of those who are *not* – of those who, much more easily than religious or ethnic Others (not to mention the socially – "class" – excluded), can be fully integrated into the public space, enjoying full rights. Here, we should explore the ambiguity of the connection between gay and class struggle. There is a long tradition of Leftist gay-bashing, whose traces are discernible up to Adorno – I will mention only Maxim Gorky's infamous remark from his essay "Proletarian Humanism" (*sic!* – 1934): "Exterminate [*sic!*] homosexuals, and Fascism will disappear."⁹⁵

All this cannot be reduced to opportunistically flirting with the traditional patriarchal sexual morality of the working classes, or with the Stalinist reaction against the liberating aspects of the first years after the October Revolution; we should remember that Gorky's provocative statement, as well as Adorno's reservations about homosexuality ("Totality and homosexuality belong together" is one of the aphorisms in *Minima Moralia*⁹⁶), are all based on the same historical experience: that of the SA, the "revolutionary" paramilitary Nazi organization of street-fighting thugs, in which homosexuality abounded right up to the top (Röhm). The first thing to note here is that it was Hitler himself who purged the SA in order to make the Nazi regime publicly acceptable by cleansing it of its obscene-violent excess, and that he justified the slaughter of the SA leadership precisely by citing their "sexual depravity".

In order to function as the support of a "totalitarian" community, homosexuality has to remain a publicly disavowed "dirty secret", shared by those who are "in". Does this mean that when gays are persecuted, they deserve only qualified support, a kind of "Yes, we know we should support you, but none the less . . . (you are partly responsible for Nazi violence)"? All we should insist on is that the political overdetermination of homosexuality is by no means simple, that the homosexual libidinal economy can be co-opted by different political orientations, and that it is *here* that we should avoid the "essentialist" mistake of dismissing Rightist "militaristic" homosexuality as a secondary distortion of "authentic" subversive homosexuality.⁹⁷

The greatness of Pasolini's *Salò* or *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) is that it does not shirk this thoroughly ambivalent status of homosexuality. The only heroic anti-Fascist act of resistance in the film is committed by Ezio, one of the victims, who is denounced by his peers for breaking the prohibition imposed on them by their masters—libertines: every night, he makes love to the black maid at the villa. When the libertines and their guards burst into the room where the two are making love, pointing their guns, the naked Ezio springs to his feet and raises his fist in the Communist salute; this unexpected heroic act has a paralysing effect on the libertines—stunned, they take some time to shoot him down. Should we not read this pathetic scene against the background of the strange absence of actual sexual penetration in the film—a feature which indicates “a prohibition, or the libertines’ exacting distaste for, sexual intercourse of any kind”?⁹⁸ This only apparently surprising fact is intrinsic to the very fundamental structure of perversion: in the perverse universe, in which “everything is permitted”, this very universal permissiveness is based on the underlying fundamental prohibition of what is already in itself impossible—in short, the plethora of perversions supplants the impossibility of the sexual relationship.⁹⁹

So when—in the long tradition which runs from medieval courtly love to the latest Hollywood film—love is elevated into an “impossibility”, celebrated as something which cannot be fully actualized in real social life, we are dealing with a “decoy impossibility”¹⁰⁰ which masks the true impossibility, that of the *sexual relationship*: while, for Lacan, love as such emerges in order to supplement this second impossibility, it is as if today, in our sexually permissive society, the relation is turned around, with the impossibility displaced on to love—it is the proliferation of sexual relationships which covers up the impossibility of authentic love. Of course, against the spiritual temptation of taking this reversal at face value, we should insist that “love” here still refers to the impossibility of sexual relationship masked by the proliferating diversity of sexual relations.¹⁰¹

Do not these two features, read together, deliver the standard sexually conservative Leftist rejection of perversions—in short, a kind of elaborate illustration of Gorky’s outrageous statement? Furthermore, what are the consequences of this implicit conclusion which seems to impose itself on Pasolini himself, who provocatively displayed his homosexuality in public? Is *Salò* to be read as a kind of masochistic self-indictment, a statement of disgust at oneself? The answer to this reading—according to which *Salò* makes public the obscene, sexually perverse underground of Fascism—is to cite the film’s thorough ambiguity, which emerges the moment we include its position of enunciation: in order to formulate such a disgust—that is, to

make a film like *Salò* – you have to be gay. In other words, it is only from a gay position that one can reveal the thorough ambiguity of the possible political connotations of homosexuality.

Welcome to the Desert of the Real!

The ultimate American paranoiac fantasy is that of an individual living in a small idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he lives in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he lives in a real world, while all the people around him are in fact actors and extras in a gigantic show. The most recent example of this is Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), with Jim Carrey playing a small-town clerk who gradually discovers that he is the hero of a permanent twenty-four-hour TV show: his home town is constructed on a gigantic studio set, with cameras following him everywhere. Among its predecessors, it is worth mentioning Phillip K. Dick's *Time out of Joint* (1959), in which the hero, leading a modest daily life in a small idyllic Californian city in the late 1950s, gradually discovers that the whole town is a fake staged to keep him satisfied. . . . The underlying experience of *Time out of Joint* and *The Truman Show* is that the late capitalist consumerist Californian paradise is, in its very hyperreality, in a way *unreal*, without substance, deprived of material *gravitas*.

The same "de-realization" of the horror went on after the World Trade Centre attack: while the number of victims, 6,000, is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see – no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people . . . in clear contrast to the reporting of Third World catastrophes, where the whole point was to produce a scoop of some gruesome detail: Somalis dying of hunger, raped Bosnian women, men with their throats cut. These shots were always accompanied by the advance warning that "some of the images you will see are extremely graphic, and may hurt children" – a warning which we *never* heard in the reports on the WTC collapse. Is this not yet another proof of how, even in this tragic moment, the distance which separates Us from Them, from their reality, is maintained: the real horror happens *there*, not *here*?¹⁰²

So it is not only that Hollywood stages a semblance of real life deprived of the weight and substance of materiality – in late capitalist consumerist society, "*real social life*" itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbours behaving in "real" life like stage actors and

extras. . . . The ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian de-spiritualized universe is the de-materialization of "real life" itself, its reversal into a spectral show. Christopher Isherwood, among others, gave expression to this unreal quality of American daily life, exemplified in the motel room: "American motels are unreal! . . . they are deliberately designed to be unreal. . . . The Europeans hate us because we've retired to live inside our advertisements, like hermits going into caves to contemplate." Peter Sloterdijk's notion of the "sphere" is literally realized here, as the gigantic metal sphere that envelopes and isolates the entire city.

Years ago, a series of science-fiction films like *Zardoz* or *Logan's Run* forecast today's postmodern predicament by extending this fantasy to the community itself: the isolated group living an aseptic life in a secluded area longs for the experience of the real world of material decay. Is not the endlessly repeated shot of the plane approaching and hitting the second WTC tower the real-life version of the famous scene from Hitchcock's *The Birds*, superbly analysed by Raymond Bellour, in which Melanie approaches the Bodega Bay pier after crossing the bay in a small boat? When, as she approaches the wharf, she waves to her (future) lover, a single bird (first perceived as a barely distinguishable dark blot) unexpectedly enters the frame from above right, and hits her on the head.¹⁰³ Was not the plane which hit the WTC tower literally the ultimate Hitchcockian blot, the anamorphic stain which de-naturalized the famous idyllic New York skyline?

The Wachowski brothers' hit *Matrix* (1999) brought this logic to its climax: the material reality we all experience and see around us is a virtual one, generated and co-ordinated by a gigantic mega-computer to which we are all connected; when the hero (played by Keanu Reeves) awakens into "real reality", he sees a desolate landscape littered with burnt ruins – what remains of Chicago after a global war. The resistance leader Morpheus utters the ironic greeting: "Welcome to the desert of the real." Did not something of a similar order take place in New York on 11 September? Its citizens were introduced to the "desert of the real" – to us, corrupted by Hollywood, the skyline and the shots we saw of the collapsing towers could not fail to remind us of the most breathtaking scenes in the big catastrophe productions. For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of the spectacular shots in the catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since, as Jeremy Bentham knew, reality is the best appearance of itself?

When we hear how the attacks were a totally unexpected shock, how the unimaginable Impossible happened, we should remember the other defining catastrophe from the beginning of the twentieth century, that of the *Titanic*: this, also, was a shock, but the space for it had already been prepared in ideological fantasizing, since the *Titanic* was the symbol of the might of nineteenth-century industrial civilization. Does not the same hold for these attacks? Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with talk about the terrorist threat; this threat was also obviously libidinally invested – just recall the series of movies from *Escape from New York* to *Independence Day*. That is the rationale behind the often-mentioned association of the attacks with Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, *America got what it had fantasized about* – and that was the greatest surprise. The ultimate twist in this link between Hollywood and the “war against terror” occurred when the Pentagon decided to solicit help from Hollywood: at the beginning of October, the press reported that a group of Hollywood scenarists and directors, specialists in catastrophe movies, was established at the instigation of the Pentagon, with the aim of imagining possible scenarios of terrorist attacks and how to fight them.

We should therefore invert the standard reading according to which the WTC explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory Sphere: quite to the contrary, it was prior to the WTC collapse that we lived in our own world, perceiving Third World horrors as something which were not actually part of our social reality, as things which existed (for us) as spectral apparitions on the (TV) screen – and what happened on 11 September was that *this fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality*. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (that is, the symbolic co-ordinates which determine what we experience as reality). The fact that, after 11 September, the opening of many “blockbuster” movies with scenes which bear a resemblance to the WTC collapse (high buildings on fire or under attack, terrorist action . . .) was postponed (or the films were even shelved), should therefore be read as *the “repression” of the fantasmatic background* responsible for the impact of the WTC collapse. Of course, the point is not to play a pseudo-postmodern game of reducing the WTC collapse to just another media spectacle, reading it as a catastrophe version of snuff porno movies; the question we should have asked ourselves when we stared at our TV screens on 11 September is simply: *Where have we already seen the same thing over and over again?*

This means that the dialectic of semblance and Real cannot be reduced to the rather elementary fact that the virtualization of our daily lives, the

experience that we are living more and more in an artificially constructed universe, gives rise to the irresistible urge to return to the Real, to regain firm ground in some kind of real reality. *The real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance*: precisely because it is real – that is, because of its traumatic/excessive nature – we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition. This is what the compelling image of the collapse of the WTC was: an image, a semblance, an effect, which, at the same time, delivered the thing itself. This effect of the Real is not the same as what, way back in the 1960s, Roland Barthes called *l'effet du réel*; it is, rather, its exact opposite, *l'effet de l'irréel*. That is to say: in contrast to the Barthesian *effet du réel*, in which the text makes us accept its fictional product as real, here, the Real itself, in order to be sustained, has to be perceived as a nightmarish unreal spectre. Usually we say that we should not mistake fiction for reality – consider the postmodern doxa according to which reality is a discursive product, a symbolic fiction which we misperceive as a substantial autonomous entity. The lesson of psychoanalysis here is the opposite one: we should not mistake reality for fiction; we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it. In short, we should discern which part of reality is “transfunctionalized” through fantasy, so that although it is part of reality, it is perceived in a fictional mode. Much more difficult than denouncing-unmasking (what looks like) reality as fiction is recognizing the part of fiction in “real” reality.

It is precisely now, when we are dealing with the raw Real of a catastrophe, that we should bear in mind the ideological and fantasmatic co-ordinates which determine its perception. If there is any symbolism in the collapse of the WTC towers, it is not so much the old-fashioned notion of the “centre of financial capitalism” but, rather, the notion that the two WTC towers stood for the centre of *virtual* capitalism, of financial speculation disconnected from the sphere of material production. The shattering impact of the attacks can be accounted for only against the background of the borderline which, today, separates the digitalized First World from the Third World “desert of the Real”. It is the awareness that we live in an insulated artificial universe which generates the notion that some ominous agent is threatening us all the time with total destruction. In this paranoid perspective, the terrorists are turned into an irrational abstract agency – abstract in the Hegelian sense of subtracted from the concrete socio-ideological network which gave birth to it. Every explanation which evokes social circumstances is dismissed as a covert justification of terror, and every

particular entity is evoked only in a negative way: the terrorists are betraying the true spirit of Islam; they do not express the interests and hopes of the poor Arab masses.

Whenever we encounter such a purely evil Outside, we should summon up the courage to endorse the Hegelian lesson: in this pure Outside, we should recognize the distilled version of our own essence. For the last five centuries, the (relative) prosperity and peace of the "civilized" West has been bought at the price of ruthless violence and destruction of the "barbarian" Outside: a long story, from the conquest of America to the slaughter in the Congo. Cruel and indifferent as it may sound, we should also, now more than ever, bear in mind that the actual effect of these attacks is much more symbolic than real: in Africa, more people die of AIDS *every single day* than all the victims of the WTC collapse, and their deaths could easily have been avoided at relatively small financial cost. The USA simply got a taste of what goes on around the world on a daily basis – from Sarajevo to Grozny, from Rwanda and the Congo to Sierra Leone. If we add to the situation in New York rapist gangs and a dozen or so snipers blindly targeting people as they walk along the streets, we get an idea of what Sarajevo was like a decade ago.

When, in the days after 11 September 2001, our gaze was transfixed by the images of the plane hitting one of the WTC towers, we were all forced to experience the "compulsion to repeat" and *jouissance* beyond the pleasure principle: we wanted to see it again and again; the same shots were repeated *ad nauseam*; and the uncanny satisfaction we got from it was *jouissance* at its purest. It was when we watched the two WTC towers collapsing on the TV screen that it became possible for us to experience the falsity of "reality TV shows": even if these shows are "for real", people still *act* in them – they simply *play themselves*. The standard disclaimer in a novel ("Characters in this text are a fiction; any resemblance to real characters is purely accidental") holds also for the participants in reality soaps: what we see there are fictional characters, even if they play themselves for real.

Of course, the "return to the Real" in the WTC attacks can be given different twists: we have already heard some conservatives claiming that what made us so vulnerable was our very openness – with the inevitable conclusion lurking in the background that if we are to protect our "way of life", we will have to sacrifice some of our freedoms which were "misused" by the enemies of freedom. This logic should be rejected out of hand: is it not a fact that our "open" First World countries are the most controlled countries in the entire history of humanity? In the United Kingdom, all

public spaces, from buses to shopping malls, are constantly videotaped, not to mention the almost total control of all forms of digital communication.

Along the same lines, Rightist commentators like George Will also immediately proclaimed the end of the American "holiday from history" – the impact of reality shattering the isolated tower of the liberal tolerant attitude and the Cultural Studies focus on textuality. Now, we are forced to strike back, to deal with real enemies in the real world. . . . Whom, however, do we strike at? Whatever the response, it will never hit the *right* target, bringing us full satisfaction. The ridicule of America attacking Afghanistan cannot fail to strike us: if the greatest power in the world destroys one of the world's poorest countries, in which peasants barely survive on barren hills, will this not be the ultimate case of impotent acting out? In many ways Afghanistan is an ideal target: a country that is already reduced to rubble, with no infrastructure, repeatedly destroyed by war for the last two decades . . . we cannot avoid the surmise that the choice of Afghanistan will also be determined by economic considerations: is it not best procedure to act out one's anger at a country for which no one cares, and where there is nothing to destroy? Unfortunately, the choice of Afghanistan recalls the anecdote about the madman who searches for a lost key beneath a streetlamp; asked why there, when he lost the key in a dark corner somewhere, he answers: "But it's easier to search under strong light!" Is it not the ultimate irony that the whole of Kabul already looks like downtown Manhattan?

To succumb to the urge to act and retaliate means precisely to *avoid* confronting the true dimensions of what occurred on 11 September – it means an act whose true aim is to lull us into the secure conviction that nothing has really changed. The true long-term threats are further acts of mass terror in comparison with which the memory of the WTC collapse will pale – acts that are less spectacular, but much more horrifying. What about bacteriological warfare, what about the use of lethal gas, what about the prospect of DNA terrorism (developing poisons which will affect only people who share a determinate genome)? In this new warfare, the agents claim their acts less and less publicly: not only are "terrorists" themselves no longer eager to claim responsibility for their acts (even the notorious Al Qaida did not explicitly appropriate the 11 September attacks, not to mention the mystery about the origins of the anthrax letters); "anti-terrorist" state measures themselves are draped in a shroud of secrecy; all this constitutes an ideal breeding ground for conspiracy theories and generalized social paranoia. And is not the obverse of this paranoid omnipresence of the invisible war its desubstantialization? So, again, just as we drink beer without alcohol or coffee without caffeine, we are now

getting war deprived of its substance – a virtual war fought behind computer screens, a war experienced by its participants as a video game, a war with no casualties (on our side, at least).

With the spread of the anthrax panic in October 2001, the West got the first taste of this new “invisible” warfare in which – an aspect we should always bear in mind – we, ordinary citizens, are, with regard to information about what is going on, totally at the mercy of the authorities: we see and hear nothing; all we know comes from the official media. A superpower bombing a desolate desert country and, at the same time, hostage to invisible bacteria – *this*, not the WTC explosions, is the first image of twenty-first-century warfare. Instead of a quick acting-out, we should confront these difficult questions: what will “war” mean in the twenty-first century? Who will “they” be, if they are, clearly, neither states nor criminal gangs? Here I cannot resist the temptation to recall the Freudian opposition of the public Law and its obscene superego double; along the same lines, are not “international terrorist organizations” the obscene double of the big multinational corporations – the ultimate rhizomatic machine, omnipresent, yet with no clear territorial base? Are they not the form in which nationalist and/or religious “fundamentalism” accommodated itself to global capitalism? Do they not embody the ultimate contradiction, with their particular/exclusive content and their global dynamic functioning?

For this reason, the fashionable notion of the “clash of civilizations” must be thoroughly rejected: what we are witnessing today, rather, are clashes *within* each civilization. A brief look at the comparative history of Islam and Christianity tells us that the “human rights record” of Islam (to use an anachronistic term) is much better than that of Christianity: in past centuries, Islam was significantly more tolerant towards other religions than Christianity. It is also time to remember that it was through the Arabs that, in the Middle Ages, we in Western Europe regained access to our Ancient Greek legacy. While I do not in any way excuse today’s horrific acts, these facts none the less clearly demonstrate that we are dealing not with a feature inscribed into Islam “as such”, but with the outcome of modern sociopolitical conditions.

If we look more closely, what is this “clash of civilizations” really about? Are not all real-life “clashes” clearly related to global capitalism? The Muslim “fundamentalist” target is not only global capitalism’s corrosive impact on social life, but *also* the corrupt “traditionalist” regimes in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and so on. The most horrifying slaughters (those in Rwanda, Congo, and Sierra Leone) not only took place – and are taking place – within the same “civilization”, but are also clearly related to the interplay of global economic interests. Even in the few cases which would vaguely fit the

definition of the "clash of civilisations" (Bosnia and Kosovo, southern Sudan, etc.), the shadow of other interests is easily discernible. A suitable dose of "economic reductionism" would therefore be appropriate here: instead of the endless analyses of how Islamic "fundamentalism" is intolerant towards our liberal societies, and other "clash-of-civilization" topics, we should refocus our attention on the economic background of the conflict – the clash of economic interests, and of the geopolitical interests of the United States itself (how to retain privileged links both with Israel and with conservative Arab regimes like those of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait).

Beneath the opposition of "liberal" and "fundamentalist" societies, "McWorld versus jihad", there is the embarrassing third term: countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, deeply conservative monarchies but economically American allies, fully integrated into Western capitalism. Here, the USA has a very precise and simple interest: in order for it to be able to count on these countries for their oil reserves, *they have to remain non-democratic* (the underlying notion is, of course, that a democratic awakening could give expression to anti-American attitudes). This is an old story whose infamous first chapter after World War II was the CIA-orchestrated *coup d'état* against the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mossadeq, in Iran in 1953 – there was no "fundamentalism" there, not even a "Soviet threat", just a plain democratic awakening, with the idea that the country should take control of its oil resources and break up the monopoly of the Western oil companies.

The lengths to which the USA is ready to go in order to maintain this pact were made clear in the Gulf War in 1991, when the Jewish American soldiers stationed in Saudi Arabia had to be transported by helicopter to the aircraft carriers in the Gulf so that they could pray, since non-Muslim rituals are prohibited on Saudi soil – a fact which should undoubtedly be taken together with another fact, very rarely mentioned in the Western press: Tariq Aziz, the Iraqi Foreign Minister and one of the key figures of the Saddam regime, is not a Muslim but a Christian. This "perverted" position of truly "fundamentalist" conservative Arab regimes is the key to the (often comical) conundrums of American politics in the Middle East: they stand for the point at which the USA is forced explicitly to acknowledge the primacy of economy over democracy – that is, the secondary and manipulative character of legitimizing international interventions by talking about the protection of democracy and human rights.

On the subject of this "clash of civilizations", let us recall the letter from a seven-year-old American girl whose father is a pilot fighting over Afghanistan: she wrote that although she loves her father deeply, she is ready to let him die, to sacrifice him for her country. When President Bush quoted these lines, they

were perceived as a "normal" outburst of American patriotism; let us conduct a simple mental experiment, and imagine an Arab Muslim girl pathetically reciting into the camera the same words about her father fighting for the Taliban – we do not have to give much thought to what our reaction would have been: morbid Muslim fundamentalism which does not stop even at cruel manipulation and exploitation of children.

Every feature attributed to the Other is already present in the very heart of the USA. Murderous fanaticism? Today in the USA there are more than two million populist Rightist "fundamentalists" who also practise a terror of their own, legitimized by (their understanding of) Christianity. Since America is, in a way, "harbouring" them, should the US Army have punished the USA itself after the Oklahoma bombing? And what about the way Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson reacted to the events of 11 September, perceiving them as a sign that God removed His protection from the USA because of the sinful lives of the Americans, putting the blame on hedonist materialism, liberalism and rampant sexuality, and claiming that America got what it deserved? The fact that this very condemnation of "liberal" America, which matched the condemnation from the Muslim Other, came from the very heart of *l'Amérique profonde* should give us food for thought. On 19 October, George W. Bush himself had to concede that the most probable perpetrators of the anthrax attacks are not Muslim terrorists but America's own extreme Right Christian fundamentalists – again, does not the fact that the acts first attributed to an external enemy may turn out to be acts begotten in the very heart of *l'Amérique profonde* provide an unexpected confirmation of the thesis that this clash is a clash within each civilization?

In the aftermath of 11 September, Americans *en masse*, including liberals, rediscovered the innocence of their American pride, displaying flags and singing together in public – as if, after decades of ethico-political doubts about the American role in the world, the vicious destruction of the WTC towers deculpabilized them, giving them the right to assert their identity in all its innocence. . . . Against this reclaimed innocence, we should emphasize more than ever that there is nothing "innocent" in this rediscovery of American innocence, in getting rid of the sense of historical guilt or irony which prevented many Americans from fully claiming their nationality. What this gesture amounted to was "objectively" assuming the burden of all that being "American" stood for in the past – an exemplary case of ideological interpellation, of fully assuming one's symbolic mandate, which enters the stage after the perplexity caused by some historical trauma.

In the traumatic aftermath of 11 September, when the old security seemed momentarily to be shattered, what could be more "natural" than to take

refuge in the innocence of a firm ideological identification?¹⁰⁴ However, it is precisely such moments of transparent innocence, of "back to basics", when the gesture of identification seems "natural", that are, from the standpoint of the critique of ideology, the most obscure – even, in a certain way, *obscurity itself*; to quote Fernando Pessoa's superb formulation: "When I speak frankly, I don't know with what frankness I speak." Let us recall another such innocently transparent moment, the endlessly reproduced video-shot, from Beijing's Avenue of Eternal Peace at the height of the "troubles" in 1989, of a tiny young man with a can who stands alone in front of an approaching gigantic tank, and courageously tries to prevent its advance, so that when the tank tries to circumvent him by turning right or left, the man also moves aside, again standing in its path:

The representation is so powerful that it demolishes all other understandings. This streetscene, this time and this event, have come to constitute the compass point for virtually all Western journeys into the interior of the contemporary political and cultural life of China.¹⁰⁵

And, again, this very moment of transparent clarity (things are presented in their starkest form: a single man against the brute force of the State) is, to our Western gaze, sustained by a cobweb of ideological implications, embodying a series of oppositions: individual versus state, peaceful resistance versus state violence, man versus machine, the inner force of a tiny individual versus the impotence of the powerful machine. . . . These implications, against the background of which the shot exerts its full direct impact, these "mediations" which sustain that impact, are not present for a Chinese observer, since the above-mentioned series of oppositions is part of the European ideological legacy. The same ideological background also overdetermines, say, our perception of the horrifying images of tiny individuals jumping from the burning WTC towers to certain death.

Among the ideological reappropriations of 11 September, there are already calls for rethinking some of the basic ingredients of the modern notion of human dignity and freedom. Take Jonathan Alter's article in *Newsweek* of 5 November 2001, "Time to Think about Torture", with the ominous subtitle "It's a new world, and survival may well require old techniques that seemed out of the question". After flirting with the Israeli idea of legitimizing physical and psychological torture in cases of extreme urgency (so-called ticking-clock cases, when we know that a terrorist prisoner possesses information which may save hundreds of lives), and neutral statements like "Some torture clearly works", Alter concludes:

We can't legalize torture; it's contrary to American values. But even as we continue to speak out against human-rights abuses around the world, we need to keep an open mind about certain measures to fight terrorism, like court-sanctioned psychological interrogation. And we'll have to think about transferring some suspects to our less squeamish allies, even if that's hypocritical. Nobody said this was going to be pretty.

The obscenity of such statements is blatant. First, why use the WTC attack as justification? Are there not much more terrible atrocities going on all the time around the world? Second, what is *new* about this idea? Has not the CIA been teaching Latin American and Third World American military allies the practice of torture for decades? Hypocrisy has prevailed for years. Even Alan Dershowitz's liberal argument, cited by Alter, is suspicious: "I'm not in favour of torture, but if you're going to have it, it should damn well have court approval." The underlying logic – since we are doing it in any case, better legalize it, and thus present excesses! – is extremely dangerous: it gives legitimacy to torture, and thus opens up the space for *more* illicit torture. When, along the same lines, Dershowitz argues that torturing in the ticking-clock situation is not against the prisoner's rights as an accused person (the information obtained will not be used in trial against him, and the torture is done not as punishment, but only to prevent the mass killing to come), the underlying premiss is even more disturbing: so one should be allowed to torture people not as part of a deserved punishment, but simply because they know something? Why, then, not also legalize the torture of prisoners of war who may possess information which may save hundreds of our soldiers' lives?

In short, such debates, such calls to keep an open mind, are nothing less than the ultimate sign that the terrorists are winning the ideological war. Essays like Alter's, which do not advocate torture outright, but just introduce it as a legitimate topic of debate, are even more dangerous than an explicit endorsement of torture: while – at this moment, at least – an explicit endorsement would be too shocking, and therefore rejected, the mere introduction of torture as a legitimate topic allows us to entertain the idea while retaining a pure conscience (of course I'm against torture, but whom does it hurt if we merely discuss it?). Such legitimization of torture as a topic of debate changes the background of ideological presuppositions and options much more radically than its outright advocacy: it changes the entire field, while, without this change, outright advocacy remains an idiosyncratic view. The problem here is that of the fundamental ethical presuppositions: of course we can legitimize torture for the sake of short-

term profit (saving hundreds of lives), but what about the long-term consequences for our symbolic universe? Where do we stop? Why not torture persistent criminals, a parent who has kidnapped his child from a divorced spouse? The idea that once we let the genie out of the bottle, torture can be kept at a reasonable level, is the worst legalistic illusion. Any consistent ethical stance *must* completely reject such pragmatic-utilitarian reasoning. Moreover, I am again tempted to conduct a simple mental experiment: let us imagine an *Arab* newspaper making a case for the torture of American prisoners, and the explosion of comments about fundamentalist barbarism and disrespect for human rights that would provoke.

So what about the phrase which reverberates everywhere: "Nothing will be the same after 11 September"? Significantly, this phrase is never further elaborated – it is just an empty gesture of saying something "deep" without really knowing what we want to say. So our first reaction to it should be: Really? Is it not, rather, that the only thing that actually changed was that America was forced to realize the kind of world it was part of? On the other hand, such changes in perception are never without consequences, since the way we perceive our situation determines the way we act in it. Remember the collapse of a political regime – for example, the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1990: at a certain moment, people became aware all of a sudden that the game was over, that the Communists had lost. The break was purely symbolic, nothing changed "in reality" – none the less, from this moment on, the final collapse of the regime was simply a matter of time.

What if something of the same order *did* occur on 11 September? We should bear in mind that Hollywood is the nerve centre of the American ideology which exerts a worldwide hegemonic role: what draws millions of Third World people to the USA – even those whose "official" ideology is opposed to everything America stands for – is not merely the prospect of material wealth, but also the "American Dream", the chance to participate in it. Hollywood is literally a "dream factory": its main function is to fabricate hegemonic ideological dreams, to provide individuals with coordinates for their private fantasies. So when the Hollywood machinery is perturbed, as in the post-11 September era, when the executives are desperately trying to guess and/or establish the new rules (no catastrophe movies; will single-hero movies like the James Bond series survive? Will there be a turn towards family melodramas or a turn towards direct patriotism?), this fact does bear witness to the deep ideological impact of the events of 11 September.

Perhaps the ultimate victim of the WTC attacks will be a certain figure of

the big Other, the American Sphere. During Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Party, denouncing Stalin's crimes, a dozen or so delegates had a nervous breakdown, and had to be carried out and given medical treatment; one of them, Boleslaw Bierut, the hardline General Secretary of the Polish Communist Party, even died of a heart attack some days later. (The model Stalinist writer Alexander Fadeyev shot himself a few days later.) The point is not that they were "honest Communists" – most of them were brutal manipulators without any subjective illusions about the nature of the Soviet regime. What broke down was their "objective" illusion, the figure of the "big Other" against the background of which they could exert their ruthless drive for power: the Other on to which they transposed their belief, the Other which, as it were, believed on their behalf, their subject-supposed-to-believe, disintegrated. And did not something homologous happen in the aftermath of 11 September? Was not 11 September 2001 the "Twentieth Congress" of the American Dream?

That day is already being appropriated for ideological causes: from the claims in all the main media that anti-globalization is now finished, to the notion that the shock of the WTC attacks revealed the substanceless character of postmodern Cultural Studies, their lack of contact with "real life". While the second notion is (partially) right for the wrong reasons, the first one is downright wrong. What is true is that the relatively trifling character of standard Cultural Studies critical topics was thereby revealed: what is the use of a Politically Incorrect expression with possible racist undertones, compared with the tortured death of thousands? The dilemma of Cultural Studies is this: will they stick to the same topics, directly admitting that their fight against oppression is a fight *within* First World capitalism's universe – which means that, in the Western First World's wider conflict with the external threat to it, one should reassert one's fidelity to the basic American liberal-democratic framework; or will they risk a step towards radicalizing their critical stance: will they problematize this framework itself? As for the end of anti-globalization, the dark hints from the first days after 11 September that the attacks could also have been the work of anti-globalization terrorists is, of course, nothing but a crude manipulation: the only way to conceive of what happened on 11 September is to locate it in the context of the antagonisms of global capitalism. We should always bear in mind apropos of Afghanistan that until the 1970s – that is, until the country became directly involved in the superpower struggle – it was one of the most tolerant Muslim societies, with a long secular tradition: Kabul was known as a city with a vibrant cultural and political life. The

paradox, therefore, is that far from expressing some deep traditionalist tendency, the rise of the Taleban, an apparent regression into ultra-fundamentalism, was the result of the country being caught up in the whirlpool of international politics – it was not only a defensive reaction to this, it emerged directly through the support of foreign powers (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the USA itself).

Another victim of 11 September among some liberals seems to be the notion of the purity of moral intention: it is as if any claim to purity is suspected of breeding some kind of terrorism. We should remember Hegel's thesis on how the actual outcome of our act discloses our true intention: I am not allowed to defend myself by claiming: "But that wasn't what I wanted!", because I do not really know what I wanted. It is in the actual consequences of my act that the truth of my intention becomes visible: however unpleasant the outcome of my act, this is what I really wanted. . . . Attractive as this combination of Hegel and psychoanalysis may sound, we should bear in mind when confronted with it that Hegel's thesis is meaningful only within the idealist identity of the Actual and the Rational, of the Subject and Substance: we can trust that reality will reveal to us the true meaning of our acts only if we presuppose the pre-established harmony between our psychic structure and that of objective social reality – there is "Reason in History", as Hegel put it. And is not Freud's fundamental insight, repeatedly reasserted by Lacan, that we, human subjects, are not "at home in this world", that the reality in which we live is fundamentally foreign, hostile to our innermost intentions and drives?

This Hegelian position goes hand in hand with the mistrust of any form of moral purity, with its dismissal as the false position of the "Beautiful Soul" – and, in fact, it seems that today's ethico-religious "fundamentalisms" provide the most forceful argument against moral fanaticism. The worst thing to do when we are confronted with the onslaught of dedicated "fundamentalists", however, is to suspect ethical purity as such – to reactivate the old conservative wisdom according to which we should mistrust *les purs et les durs*: low-level minor corruption; a tolerance for human weaknesses enables the smooth functioning of the social machine, while rigid moral fanaticism necessarily reverts to utter corruption in which everything, every human consideration, is sacrificed for the Cause.

What is wrong with this suspicion is that it conflates two different forms of purity: "authentic" ethical purity and the false superego purity of turning oneself into the instrument of the Other's enjoyment. "Wise" tolerance for minor everyday corruption and fanaticist superego rigour are opposites within the same horizon, they are two sides of the same coin – or, to put it

in Hegelese, there is an underlying identity of these opposites. That is to say, within this domain, corruption is the ultimate horizon, and the only choice is the one between tolerance of minor corruption and a direct intolerant onslaught against corruption, which coincides with the highest corruption. What Lacan, on the contrary, called the "act" is precisely an intervention which breaks out of this vicious cycle of minor corruption and rigour as the supreme corruption. So there is an infinite gap between religious fanaticist "fundamentalism" and authentic revolutionary intervention, although they both seem to share an "uncompromising" radical character; this gap does not concern only the sociopolitical dimension, but also the immanent structure of the act: the "fundamentalist" act is done for the big Other; in it, the subject instrumentalizes himself for the Other; while an authentic act authorizes itself only in itself – that is to say, it is not "covered" by the big Other; on the contrary, it intervenes at the very point of inconsistency of the big Other. This difference is the difference between Kant and Sade: Sade is not simply the truth of Kant; the Sadeian perverse position emerges, rather, when the radical Kantian ethical stance is compromised.

The supreme example here is, yet again, that of Antigone. From the standpoint of the Hegelian position mentioned above, Antigone is to be unambiguously condemned: the actual consequences of her act were catastrophic; she was an ethical rigourist if ever there was one, in contrast to her sister Ismene's tolerance and compromising attitude – is this what we want? The opposite of the rationality of the Real, or its closed circuit of Fate which gives us back our true message, is the act itself which intervenes in the very rational order of the Real, changing-restructuring its co-ordinates – an act is not irrational; rather, it creates its own (new) rationality. This is what Antigone accomplishes; this is the true consequence of her act. And this cannot be planned in advance – we have to take a risk, a step into the open, with no big Other to return our true message to us.

We do not yet know all the consequences this event will have for the economy, ideology, politics, warfare, but one thing is certain: the USA – which, hitherto, perceived itself as an island exempt from this kind of violence, witnessing this kind of thing only from the safe distance of the TV screen – is now directly involved. So the alternative is: will the Americans decide to fortify their "sphere" further, or will they risk stepping out of it? Either America will persist in – even strengthen – the deeply *immoral* attitude of "Why should this happen to us? Things like this just don't happen *here!*", leading to more aggressivity towards the threatening Outside – in short: to a paranoid acting-out. Or America will finally risk stepping

through the fantasmatic screen separating it from the Outside World, accepting its arrival in the Real world, making the long-overdue move from "A thing like this shouldn't happen *here!*" to "A thing like this shouldn't happen *anywhere!*". That is the true lesson of the attacks: the only way to ensure that it will not happen *here* again is to prevent it happening *anywhere else*. In short, America should learn humbly to accept its own vulnerability as part of this world, enacting the punishment of those responsible as a sad duty, not as an exhilarating retaliation.

The WTC attacks again confronted us with the necessity of resisting the temptation of a double blackmail. If one simply, only and unconditionally condemns it, one cannot but appear to endorse the blatantly ideological position of American innocence under attack by Third World Evil; if one draws attention to the deeper sociopolitical causes of Arab extremism, one cannot but appear to blame the victim, which ultimately got what it deserved. . . . The only appropriate solution here is to reject this very opposition, and to adopt both positions simultaneously; this can be done only if one resorts to the dialectical category of *totality*: there is no choice between these two positions; both are biased and false. Far from offering a case apropos of which one can adopt a clear ethical stance, we encounter here *the limit of moral reasoning*: from the moral standpoint, the victims are innocent, the act was an abominable crime; however, *this very innocence is not innocent* – to adopt such an "innocent" position in today's global capitalist universe is in itself a false abstraction.

The same goes for the more ideological clash of interpretations: one could claim that the attack on the WTC was an attack on what is worth fighting for in democratic freedoms – the decadent Western way of life condemned by Muslim and other fundamentalists is the universe of women's rights and multiculturalist tolerance;¹⁰⁶ one could also claim, however, that it was an attack on the very centre and symbol of global financial capitalism. This, of course, in no way entails the compromise notion of shared guilt (the terrorists are to blame, but the Americans are also partly to blame . . .) – the point is, rather, that the two sides are not really opposed, that they belong to the same field. The fact that global capitalism is a totality means that it is the dialectical unity of itself and of its other – of the forces which resist it on "fundamentalist" ideological grounds.

As a result, of the two main stories which emerged after 11 September, *both were worse*, as Stalin would have put it. The American patriotic narrative – the innocence under siege, the surge of patriotic pride – is, of course, simplistic; however, is the Leftist narrative (with its *Schadenfreude*: the USA got what it deserved, what it had been doing to others for decades)

really any better? The prevailing reaction of European – but also American – Leftists was nothing less than scandalous: every imaginable stupidity was said and written, up to the “feminist” point that the WTC towers were two phallic symbols waiting to be destroyed (“castrated”). Was there not something petty and miserable in the mathematics reminding us of Holocaust revisionism (what are 6,000 dead against millions in Rwanda, Congo, etc.)? And what about the fact that the CIA (co-)created the Taleban and Bin Laden, financing and helping them to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan? Why was this fact quoted as an argument *against* attacking them? Would it not be much more logical to claim that it is precisely their duty to rid us of the monster they created?

The moment we think in the terms of “Yes, the WTC collapse was a tragedy, but we should not be in full solidarity with the victims, since this would mean supporting US imperialism”, the ethical catastrophe has already arrived: the only appropriate stance is an unconditional solidarity with *all* victims. The ethical stance proper is replaced here with the moralizing mathematics of guilt and horror, which misses the key point: the terrifying death of each individual is absolute and incomparable. In short, let us conduct a simple mental experiment: if you detect in yourself any reluctance to empathize fully with the victims of the WTC collapse, if you feel the urge to qualify your empathy with “Yes, but what about the millions who suffer in Africa . . .”, you are not demonstrating your Third World sympathies, merely the *mauvaise foi* which bears witness to your implicit patronizing racist attitude towards Third World victims. (More precisely, the problem with such comparative statements is that they are both necessary and inadmissible: one *has* to make them, one *has* to make the point that much worse horrors take place all over the world on a daily basis – but one has to do so without getting involved in the obscene mathematics of guilt.)

No wonder this anti-Americanism was most discernible in “big” European nations, especially France and Germany: it is part of their resistance to globalization. We often hear the complaint that the recent trend towards globalization threatens the sovereignty of nation-states; here, however, we should qualify this statement: which states are most exposed to this threat? It is not the small states, but the second-rank (ex-)world powers, countries like the United Kingdom, Germany and France: what they fear is that once they are fully immersed in the newly emerging global empire, they will be reduced to the same level as, say, Austria, Belgium, or even Luxembourg. The refusal of “Americanization” in France, shared by many Leftists and Rightist nationalists, is thus ultimately the refusal to accept the fact that

France itself is losing its hegemonic role in Europe. The results of this refusal are often comical – at a recent philosophical colloquium, a French Leftist philosopher complained how, apart from him, there are now practically no French philosophers in France: Derrida is sold to American deconstructionism; academia is overwhelmed by Anglo-Saxon cognitivism.

Another simple mental experiment is called for here: let us imagine someone from Serbia claiming that he is the only remaining truly Serb philosopher – he would immediately be denounced and ridiculed as a nationalist. The levelling of weight between larger and smaller nation-states should therefore be counted among the beneficial effects of globalization: beneath the contemptuous deriding of the new Eastern European post-Communist states, it is easy to discern the contours of the wounded narcissism of the European “great nations”. Here, a good dose of Lenin’s sensitivity towards small nations (consider his insistence that, in the relationship between large and small nations, we should always allow for a greater degree of “small” nationalism) would be helpful.

Interestingly, the same matrix was reproduced within ex-Yugoslavia – not only by the Serbs themselves, but even by the majority of the Western powers, Serbia was self-evidently perceived as the only ethnic group with enough substance to form its own state. Throughout the 1990s, even radical democratic critics of Milošević who rejected Serb nationalism acted on the presupposition that, among the ex-Yugoslav republics, only Serbia had democratic potential: once it had overthrown Milošević, Serbia alone could turn into a thriving democratic state, while other ex-Yugoslav nations were too “provincial” to sustain their own democratic State. Is this not the echo of Friedrich Engels’s famous scathing remarks about how the small Balkan nations are politically reactionary, since their very existence is a reaction, a survival of the past?

America’s “holiday from history” was a fake: America’s peace was bought at the price of catastrophes elsewhere. These days, the prevailing point of view is that of an innocent gaze confronting unspeakable Evil which struck from the Outside – and again, apropos of this gaze, we should summon up our strength and apply to it Hegel’s well-known dictum that Evil resides (also) in the innocent gaze itself which perceives Evil all around. So there is an element of truth even in the most constricted Moral Majority vision of a depraved America dedicated to mindless pleasures, in the conservative horror at this netherworld of sexploitation and pathological violence: what they do not perceive is merely the Hegelian speculative identity between this netherworld and their own position of fake purity – the fact that so many fundamentalist preachers turn out to be sexual

perverts in private is more than a contingent empirical fact. The infamous Jimmy Swaggart's claim that the fact that he visited prostitutes only gave additional strength to his preaching (he knew from intimate struggle what he was preaching against), although undoubtedly hypocritical on the immediate subjective level, is none the less *objectively true*.

And does not the same go for the statement by the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar who, on 25 September 2001, appealed to Americans to use their own judgement in responding to the devastating attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon rather than blindly following their government's policy to attack his country? "You accept everything your government says, whether it is true or false. . . . Don't you have your own thinking? . . . So it will be better for you to use your sense and understanding." Are not these statements, taken in an abstract decontextualized sense, absolutely appropriate? To this first great irony of the situation (irony in the precise Mozartian sense of the term: although you may be subjectively hypocritical, your statements are more true than you think), we should add a second: the fact that the first codename for the US operation against terrorists was "Infinite Justice" (later changed in response to a protest by Islamic clerics that only God can exercise infinite justice).

Taken seriously, this name is profoundly ambiguous: either it means that the Americans have the right ruthlessly to destroy not only all terrorists but also all those who gave them material, moral, ideological, etc., support (and this process will be, by definition, endless in the precise sense of Hegelian "bad infinity" – such work will never be really accomplished; some other terrorist threat will always be there . . .); or it means that the justice exercised must be truly infinite in the strict Hegelian sense – that, in relating to others, it has to relate to itself: in short, that it has to pose the question of how we who are exercising justice are involved in what we are fighting against. When, on 22 September 2001, Jacques Derrida received the Theodor Adorno award, he referred in his speech to the WTC attacks: "My unconditional compassion for the victims of 11 September does not prevent me from saying it aloud: with regard to this crime, I do not believe that anyone is politically guiltless." This self-relating, this inclusion of oneself in the picture, is the only true "infinite justice".

The worst thing to do apropos of the events of 11 September is to elevate them to a point of Absolute Evil, a vacuum which cannot be explained and/or dialecticized. To posit them in a series with the Shoah is a blasphemy: the Shoah was carried out methodically by a vast network of state apparatuses and their executors who, in contrast to the destroyers of the WTC towers, lacked the suicidal acceptance of their own death – as Hannah

Arendt has shown, they were anonymous bureaucrats doing their job, and an enormous gap separated what they did from their individual self-experience. This "banality of Evil" is missing in the case of the terrorist attacks: the terrorists fully assumed the horror of their acts; this horror was part of the fatal attraction which drew them towards committing them. Or, to put it in a slightly different way: the Nazis did their job of "solving the Jewish question" as an obscene secret hidden from the public gaze, while the terrorists blatantly displayed the spectacle of their act. The second difference is that the Shoah was a part of *European* history, it was an event which did not directly concern the relationship between Muslims and Jews: remember Sarajevo, which had by far the largest Jewish community in ex-Yugoslavia and, moreover, was the most cosmopolitan Yugoslav city, a thriving centre of cinema and rock music – why? Precisely because it was the Muslim-dominated city, where the Jewish and Christian presence was tolerated, in contrast to the Christian-dominated large cities from which Jews and Muslims were purged long ago.

Why should the New York catastrophe be in any way privileged over, say, the mass slaughter of Hutus by Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994? Or the mass bombing and gas-poisoning of Kurds in the north of Iraq in the early 1990s? Or the Indonesian forces' mass killings in East Timor? Or . . . the list of countries where mass suffering was and is incomparably greater than the suffering in New York, but which do not have the good fortune to be in the limelight in order to be elevated by the media into the sublime victim of Absolute Evil, is long, and that is the point: if we insist on the use of this term, these are all "Absolute Evils". So should we extend the prohibition or explaining, and claim that none of these evils could and should be "dialect-icized"? And are we not obliged to go even a step further: what about "individual" horrible crimes, from those of the sadist mass murderer Jeffrey Dahmer to those of Andrea Yates, who drowned her five children in cold blood? Is there not something real/impossible/inexplicable about every one of these acts? Is it not that – as Schelling put it more than two hundred years ago – in each of them we confront the ultimate abyss of free will, the imponderable fact of "I did it because I did it!" which resists any explanation in psychological, social, ideological, etc., terms?

We should therefore reject Lacan's famous reading of the Holocaust (the Nazi extermination of the Jews) as, precisely, a holocaust in the old Jewish meaning of the term: a sacrifice to the obscure gods, intended to satisfy their terrible demand for *jouissance*; the annihilated Jews, rather, belong to the series of what the ancient Romans called *Homo sacer* – those who, although human, were excluded from the human community, which is why one could

kill them with impunity; for that very reason, one could not sacrifice them (because they were not a worthy sacrificial offering). Have the events of 11 September something to do with the obscure God who demands human sacrifices? Yes, the spectacular explosion of the WTC towers was not simply a symbolic act (in the sense of an act whose aim is to "deliver a message"): it was primarily an explosion of lethal *jouissance*, a perverse act of making oneself an instrument of the big Other's *jouissance*. Yes, the culture of the attackers is a morbid culture of death, the attitude which finds the climactic fulfilment of one's own life in violent death. Yes, the ultimate aim of the attacks was not some hidden or obvious ideological agenda, but – precisely in the Hegelian sense of the term – to (re)introduce the dimension of absolute negativity into our daily lives: to shatter the insulated daily course of the lives of us, true Nietzschean Last Men. Sacrilegious as it may appear, the WTC attacks do share something with Antigone's act: they both undermine the "servicing of the goods", the reign of the pleasure–reality principle. The "dialectical" thing to do here, however, is not to include these acts in some grander narrative of the Progress of Reason or Humanity, which somehow, even if it does not redeem them, at least makes them part of an all-encompassing larger consistent narrative, "sublates" them in a "higher" stage of development (the naive notion of Hegelianism), but to make us question our own innocence, to discuss and assess our own (fantasmatic libidinal) investment and engagement in them.

So, rather than remain stuck in debilitating awe in the face of Absolute Evil, an awe which prohibits us from thinking about what is going on, we should remember that there are two fundamental ways of reacting to such traumatic events, which cause unbearable anxiety: the way of the superego and the way of the act. The way of the superego is precisely that of the sacrifice to the obscure gods of which Lacan speaks: the reassertion of the barbaric violence of the savage obscene law in order to fill in the gap of the failing symbolic law. And the act? One of the heroes of the Shoah for me is a famous Jewish ballerina who, as a gesture of special humiliation, was asked by the camp officers to perform a dance for them. Instead of refusing, she did it, and while she held their attention, she quickly grabbed the machine-gun from one of the distracted guards and, before being shot down herself, succeeded in killing more than a dozen officers . . . was not her act comparable to that of the passengers on the flight which crashed down in Pennsylvania who, knowing that they would die, forced their way into the cockpit and crashed the plane, saving hundreds of other lives?

Redemptive Violence

The thing to do, therefore, is not aggressively to protect the safety of our Sphere, but to shake ourselves out of the fantasy of the Sphere – how? David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), an extraordinary achievement for Hollywood, tackles this deadlock head-on. The film's insomniac hero (superbly played by Edward Norton) follows his doctor's advice and, in order to discover what true suffering is, joins a support group for victims of testicular cancer.¹⁰⁷ He soon discovers, however, how such practice of love for one's neighbour relies on a false subjective position (of voyeurist compassion), and soon gets involved in a much more radical exercise. On a flight, he meets Tyler (Brad Pitt), a charismatic young man who shows him the futility of a life filled with failure and empty consumer culture, and offers him a solution: why don't they fight, beating each other to pulp? Gradually, a whole movement develops out of this idea: secret after-hours boxing matches are held in the basements of bars all over the country. The movement quickly gets politicized, organizing terrorist attacks against big corporations . . . In the middle of the film there is an almost unbearably painful scene, reminiscent of the most bizarre David Lynch moments, which serves as a kind of clue to the surprising final twist: in order to blackmail his boss into paying him for not working, the narrator throws himself around the man's office, beating himself bloody before security staff arrive; in front of his embarrassed boss, the narrator thus enacts on himself the boss's aggressivity towards him. Afterwards, the narrator muses in a voice-over: "For some reason, I thought of my first fight – with Tyler." This first fight between the narrator and Tyler, which takes place in a parking lot outside a bar, is watched by five young men who laugh and exchange glances in wondrous amusement:

Because the fight is being watched by people who do not know the participants, we are led to believe that what we are seeing is what they are seeing: that is, a fight between two men. It isn't until the end that we are shown that they were watching the narrator throw himself around the parking lot, beating himself up.¹⁰⁸

Towards the end of the film, we thus learn that the narrator did not know that he had been leading a second life until the evidence became so overwhelming that he could no longer deny the fact: Tyler has no existence outside the narrator's mind; when other characters interact with him, they are really interacting with the narrator, who has taken on the Tyler persona. However, it is obviously not sufficient to read the scene of Norton beating

himself in front of his boss as an indication of Tyler's nonexistence — the unbearably painful and embarrassing effect of the scene bears witness to the fact that it discloses (stages) a certain disavowed fantasmatic truth. In the novel on which *Fight Club* is based, this scene is written as an exchange between what is really going on (Norton is beating himself up in front of his boss) and Norton's fantasy (the boss is beating up Tyler):

At the projectionist union office, Tyler had laughed after the union president punched him. The one punch knocked Tyler out of his chair, and Tyler sat against the wall, laughing.

"Go ahead, you can't kill me," Tyler was laughing. "You stupid fuck. Beat the crap out of me, but you can't kill me."

...
"I am trash," Tyler said. "I am trash and shit and crazy to you and this whole fucking world."

...
His honor shot the wingtip into Tyler's kidneys after Tyler curled into a ball, but Tyler was still laughing.

"Get it out," Tyler said. "Trust me. You'll feel a lot better. You'll feel great."

...
I am standing at the head of the manager's desk when I say, what?
You don't like the idea of *this*?

And without flinching, still looking at the manager, I roundhouse the fist at the centrifugal force end of my arm and slam fresh blood out of the cracked scabs in my nose.

...
Blood gets on the carpet and I reach up and grip monster handprints of blood on the edge of the hotel manager's desk and say, please, help me, but I start to giggle.

...
You have so much, and I have nothing. And I start to climb my blood up the pinstriped legs of the manager of the Pressman Hotel who is leaning back, hard, with his hands on the windowsill behind him and even his thin lips retreating from his teeth.

...
There's a struggle as the manager screams and tries to get his hands away from me and my blood and my crushed nose, the filth sticking to the blood on both of us, and right then at our most excellent moment, the security guards decide to walk in.¹⁰⁹

What does this self-beating stand for? On a first approach, it is clear that its fundamental function is to reach out and re-establish the connection with

the real Other – to suspend the fundamental abstraction and coldness of capitalist subjectivity, best exemplified by the figure of the lone monadic individual who, alone in front of the PC screen, communicates with the entire world. In contrast to the humanitarian compassion which enables us to retain our distance towards the other, the very violence of the fight signals the abolition of this distance. Although this strategy is risky and ambiguous (it can easily regress into a proto-Fascist macho logic of violent male bonding), this risk has to be taken – there is no other direct way out of the closure of capitalist subjectivity.

The first lesson of *Fight Club* is thus that we cannot go *directly* from capitalist to revolutionary subjectivity: the abstraction, the foreclosure of others, the blindness to the other's suffering and pain, has first to be broken in a gesture of taking the risk and reaching directly out to the suffering other – a gesture which, since it shatters the very kernel of our identity, cannot fail to appear extremely violent. However, there is another dimension at work in *self-beating*: the subject's scatological (excremental) identification, which is equivalent to adopting the position of the proletarian who has nothing to lose. The pure subject emerges only through this experience of radical self-degradation, when I allow/provoke the other to beat the crap out of me, emptying me of all substantial content, of all symbolic support which could confer a modicum of dignity on me. So when Norton beats himself up in front of his boss, his message to the boss is: "I know you want to beat me, but you see, your desire to beat me is also my desire, so if you were to beat me, you would be fulfilling the role of the servant of my perverse masochistic desire. But you're too much of a coward to act out your desire, so I'll do it for you – here it is, you've got what you really wanted. Why are you so embarrassed? Aren't you ready to accept it?"¹¹⁰ The gap between fantasy and reality is crucial here: the boss, of course, would never actually have beaten Norton up, he was merely fantasizing about doing it, and the painful effect of Norton's self-beating hinges on the very fact that he stages the content of the secret fantasy his boss would never be able to actualize.

Paradoxically, such a staging is the first act of liberation: by means of it, the servant's masochistic libidinal attachment to his master is brought to light, and the servant thus acquires a minimal *distance* towards it. Even on a purely formal level, the fact of beating oneself up reveals the simple fact that *the master is superfluous*: "Who needs you to terrorize me? I can do it myself!" So it is only through first beating up (hitting) *oneself* that one becomes free: the true goal of this beating is to beat out that in me which attaches me to the master. When, towards the end, Norton shoots at himself

(surviving the shot, in fact killing only "Tyler in himself", his double), he thereby also liberates himself from the dual mirror-relationship of beating: in this culmination of self-aggression, its logic cancels itself; Norton will no longer have to beat himself – now he will be able to beat the true enemy (the system).¹¹¹ And, incidentally, the same strategy is occasionally used in political demonstrations: when a crowd is stopped by the police, who are ready to beat them, the way to bring about a shocking reversal of the situation is for the individuals in the crowd to start beating each other.

In his essay on Sacher-Masoch,¹¹² Gilles Deleuze elaborated this aspect in detail: far from bringing any satisfaction to the sadist witness, the masochist's self-torture frustrates him, depriving him of his power over the masochist. Sadism involves a relationship of domination, while masochism is the necessary first step towards liberation. When we are subjected to a power mechanism, this subjection is always and by definition sustained by some libidinal investment: the subjection itself generates a surplus-enjoyment of its own. This subjection is embodied in a network of "material" bodily practices, and for this reason we cannot get rid of our subjection through a merely intellectual reflection – our liberation has to be *staged* in some kind of bodily performance; furthermore, this performance *has* to be of an apparently "masochistic" nature, it *has* to stage the painful process of hitting back at oneself.¹¹³ And did not Sylvia Plath adopt the same strategy in her famous poem "Daddy"?

What she does in the poem is, with a weird detachment, to turn the violence against herself so as to show that she can equal her oppressors with her self-inflicted oppression. And this is the strategy of the concentration camps. When suffering is there whatever you do, by inflicting it upon yourself you achieve your identity, you set yourself free.¹¹⁴

This also resolves the problem of Plath's reference to the Holocaust: some of her critics say that her implicit equation of her oppression by her father to what the Nazis did to the Jews is an inadmissible exaggeration: what matters is not the (obviously incomparable) magnitude of the crime, but the fact that Plath felt compelled to adopt the concentration camp strategy of turning violence against herself as her only means of psychic liberation. For this reason, it is also far too simplistic to dismiss her thoroughly ambivalent hysterical attitude towards her father (her horror at his oppressive presence and, simultaneously, her obvious libidinal fascination with him – "Every woman adores a Fascist, the boot in the face . . ."): this hysterical knot¹¹⁵ of libidinal investment in one's own victimization can never be undone.¹¹⁶ That is to say, you cannot oppose the "redemptive" awareness of being

oppressed to the "pathological" enjoyment the hysterical subject derives from this very oppression, interpreting their conjunction as the result of the "liberation from patriarchal domination as an unfinished project" (to paraphrase Habermas), that is, as the index of a split between the "good" feminist awareness of subjection and the persistent patriarchal libidinal economy which chains the hysteric to patriarchy, making her subordination into a *servitude volontaire*. If this were the case, then the solution would be simple: we should enact what, apropos of Proudhon, Marx characterized as the exemplary petty-bourgeois procedure – that of distinguishing in every phenomenon a "good" and a "bad" aspect, and then affirming the good and getting rid of the bad: in our case, struggling to keep the "good" aspect (awareness of oppression) and discard the "bad" one (finding pleasure in oppression). This "untying of the knot" does not work because *the only true awareness of our subjection is the awareness of the obscene excessive pleasure (surplus-enjoyment) we derive from it*; this is why the first gesture of liberation is not to get rid of this excessive pleasure, but actively to assume it – exactly what the hero of *Fight Club* does. In his *Autobiography*, Bertrand Russell reports how he tried to help T.S. Eliot and his wife Vivien in their marital troubles, "until I discovered that their troubles were what they enjoyed"¹¹⁷ – in short, until he discovered that they enjoyed their symptom.

What, then, is a symptom? In his new book *The Shadow of the Sun*,¹¹⁸ Ryszard Kapuscinski reports on the consequences of an enormous hole which had opened in the main street of Onitsha in Nigeria, holding up traffic for miles: the hole had become an institution. An entire new focus of urban life started to blossom around it: one crowd of boys unloading the next truck in line, another dragging the vehicle into the flooded pit and then heaving it out; rows of women around the edge, selling hot food, others hawking homemade lemonade and beer; boys selling cigarettes and chewing gum. "There arose, suddenly and spontaneously, thanks solely to that unfortunate hole, a dynamic, humming, bustling neighborhood."¹¹⁹ Fresh-painted "Hotel" signs showed where local shops had been converted into refuges for drivers forced to spend nights waiting for their turn to get through; people with nothing to do stood around, turning the hole into a place for meetings and conversations – in short, a ridiculous contingent and meaningless obstacle triggered a swarm of social activity; people started to *enjoy their symptom*. The superficial solution, of course, would have been: why not simply *fill in the hole*, enabling the traffic to run through smoothly again? The mechanism here is in fact that of a hysterical symptom: when a hysterical subject encounters a similar contingent obstacle, he or she turns

it into a focus of activity, rather than simply abolishing or bypassing it. And is it not the same in our societies with, say, ferries bringing passengers and cargo across a bay or a river? The embarkation points are, as a rule, places with a thriving social life which disappears once a bridge is constructed.

The same point could also be made in the terms of Heidegger's opposition between "substitutive-dominating solicitude" and "anticipatory-liberating solicitude": while it is fully concerned with what the other needs, substitutive solicitude ignores the "care" which the other should take upon himself in this activity of procuring something; anticipatory solicitude, in contrast, helps the other clearly to understand his "care", so that he can go freely towards it.¹²⁰ Does not this distinction apply perfectly to liberal humanitarians? Is not their solicitude "substitutive", in the sense that they want to help others (the poor, deprived, victims), instead of enabling them to help themselves (perhaps, even, in order to *prevent* them from helping themselves)? And is not this also what is wrong with the Politically Correct discourse of victimization – it continues to address the establishment with the voice of the victim who demands compensation, help from the Other? This is what is ultimately at stake in revolutionary violence: the transformation of the oppressed victim into an active agent, captured by Marx's famous statement that the emancipation of the proletariat can only be the act of the proletariat itself.

In an outstanding reading of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History",¹²¹ Eric Santner elaborates Benjamin's notion that a present revolutionary intervention repeats/redeems past failed attempts: the "symptoms" – past traces which are retroactively redeemed through the "miracle" of the revolutionary intervention – are "not so much forgotten deeds, but rather forgotten *failures* to act, failures to *suspend* the force of social bond inhibiting acts of solidarity with society's 'others'":

symptoms register not only past failed revolutionary attempts but, more modestly, past *failures to respond* to calls for action or even for empathy on behalf of those whose suffering in some sense belongs to the form of life of which one is a part. They hold the place of something that is *there*, that *insists* in our life, though it has never achieved full ontological consistency. Symptoms are thus in some sense the virtual archives of *voids* – or, perhaps, better, defenses against voids – that persist in historical experience.

Santner specifies how these symptoms can also take the form of perturbations of "normal" social life, like participation in the obscene rituals of the reigning ideology. Was not the infamous *Kristallnacht* in 1938 – that half-organized half-spontaneous outburst of violent attacks on Jewish homes,

synagogues, businesses, and people themselves – a Bakhtinian “carnival” if ever there was one? We should read *Kristallnacht* precisely as a “symptom”: the furious rage of such an outburst of violence makes it a symptom – the defence-formation covering the void of the failure to intervene effectively in the social crisis.

In other words, the very rage of the anti-Semitic pogroms is proof, *a contrario*, of the possibility of the authentic proletarian revolution: its excessive energy can be read only as a reaction to the (“unconscious”) awareness of the missed revolutionary opportunity.¹²² And is not the ultimate cause of *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for the Communist past) among many intellectuals (and even “ordinary people”) in the defunct German Democratic Republic also a longing not so much for the Communist past, for what really went on under Communism, but, rather, for what *might have happened* there, for the missed opportunity of another Germany? Are not the post-Communist outbursts of neo-Nazi violence also a negative proof of the presence of these emancipatory chances, a symptomatic outburst of rage displaying an awareness of missed opportunities? We should not be afraid to draw a parallel with individual psychic life: just as an awareness of a missed “private” opportunity (say, the opportunity of engaging in a fulfilling love-relationship) often leaves its traces in the form of “irrational” anxieties, headaches, and fits of rage, the void of the missed revolutionary chance can explode in “irrational” fits of destructive rage.

According to Alain Badiou, the state of a situation whose function is to represent the multitude (for example, the State with regard to society) always involves an excess with regard to the situation it represents: the State apparatus is never a transparent representation of society; it relies on its own logic, which retroactively intervenes in and exerts violent pressure on what it represents.¹²³ At this point, we should add to his argument: not only is there an excess of State with regard to the multitude it represents; *the State is, at the same time, excessive with regard to itself* – that is to say, it generates its own excess which, although necessary for its functioning, has to remain unrecognized.

Apocalypse Now Redux (2000; Francis Ford Coppola’s newly edited longer version of *Apocalypse Now*) stages, in the clearest possible way, the co-ordinates of this structural excess of State power. Is it not significant that in the figure of Kurtz, the Freudian “primordial father” – the obscene father-enjoyment beyond the reach of symbolic Law, the total Master who dares to confront the Real of terrifying enjoyment face to face – is presented not as a residue of some barbaric past, but as the necessary outcome of modern Western power itself? Kurtz was the perfect soldier – as such,

through his overidentification with the military power system, he turned into the excess which the system has to eliminate.¹²⁴

Badiou is right, however, in his emphasis on how the vicious cycle of superego violence has to be broken – this, precisely, is what does *not* happen in the film. The ultimate horizon of *Apocalypse Now* is the insight into how Power generates its own excess, which it must annihilate in an operation which has to imitate what it fights (Willard's mission to kill Kurtz does not appear in the official record – “It never happened”, as the general who briefs Willard points out). We thereby enter the domain of secret operations, of what the Power does without ever admitting it. And does not the same go for today's figures presented by the official media as the embodiments of radical Evil? Is this not the truth behind the fact that Bin Laden and the Taleban emerged as part of the CIA-supported anti-Soviet guerrilla war in Afghanistan, and the fact that Noriega in Panama was an ex-CIA agent?¹²⁵ In all these cases, is not the USA fighting its own excess? And was not the same true of Fascism? The liberal West had to join forces with Communism to destroy its own excessive outgrowth. (Along the same lines, I am tempted to suggest what a truly subversive version of *Apocalypse Now* would have been like: to repeat the formula of the anti-Fascist coalition, and have Willard propose to the Vietcong a pact to destroy Kurtz.) What remains outside the horizon of *Apocalypse Now* is the perspective of a collective political act breaking out of this vicious cycle of the System which generates its superego excess, and is then compelled to annihilate it: a revolutionary violence which no longer relies on the superego obscenity. This “impossible” act is what takes place in every authentic revolutionary process.

So, back to *Fight Club*: is not the very idea of the “fight club”, the evening encounters between men who play the game of beating each other up, the very model of such a false transgression/excitation, of the impotent *passage à l'acte* which bears witness to the failure actually to intervene in the social body? Does not *Fight Club* stage an exemplary case of the *inherent transgression*: far from effectively undermining the capitalist system, it enacts the obscene underside of the “normal” capitalist subject? And does not the same go for the politicized violence – the attack on bank headquarters – which concludes the film? Is not *Fight Club* the film about the emergence of American terrorism? Is not the final scene – the modern glass buildings exploding as a result of terrorist attacks – strangely reminiscent of the WTC collapse? This aspect was developed in detail by Diken and Laustsen, in their outstanding “Enjoy your fight!”, the most pertinent analysis of *Fight Club*:¹²⁶

The normalized and law abiding subject is haunted by a spectral double, by a subject that materializes the will to transgress the law in perverse enjoyment. . . . Thus *Fight Club* is hardly an "anti-institutional" response to contemporary capitalism, just as creativity, perversion or transgression are not necessarily emancipatory today. . . . Rather than a political act, *Fight Club* thus seems to be a trancelike subjective experience, a kind of pseudo-Bakhtinian carnivalesque activity in which the rhythm of everyday life is only temporarily suspended. . . . The problem with *Fight Club* is that it falls into the trap of presenting its problematique, violence, from a cynical distance. *Fight Club* is of course extremely reflexive and ironic. It can even be said that it is an irony on fascism.

The ultimate ground of this irony is that, in accordance with late capitalist global commodification, *Fight Club* offers as an "experiential commodity" the very attempt to explode the universe of commodities: instead of concrete political practice, we get an aestheticist explosion of violence. Furthermore, following Deleuze, Diken and Laustsen discern in *Fight Club* two dangers which invalidate its subversive thrust: first, there is the tendency to go to the extreme of the spectacle of ecstatic (self-)destruction – revolutionary politics is obliterated in a depoliticized aestheticist orgy of annihilation; second, the revolutionary explosion "deterritorializes, massifies, but only in order to stop deterritorialization, to invent new territorializations": "in spite of a deterritorializing start, *Fight Club* ends up transforming into a fascist organization with a new name: Project Mayhem. Violence is now turned outwards, which culminates in a plan for 'organized' terror to undermine the foundations of the consumerist society." These two dangers are complementary, since "the regression to the undifferentiated or complete disorganization is as dangerous as transcendence and organization".

Is the solution really the "just measure" between the two extremes: neither the new Organization nor the regression to undifferentiated violence? What we should problematize here is, rather, the very opposition between de- and re-territorialization – that is to say, Deleuze's idea of the irreducible tension between the "good" schizophrenic-molecular collectivity and the "bad" paranoiac-molar one: molar/rigid versus molecular/supple; rhizomatic flows, with their molecular segmentarity (based on mutations, de-territorialization, connections, and accelerations), versus classes or solids, with their rigid segmentarity (binary organization, resonance, overcoding).¹²⁷ This opposition (a variation on Sartre's old thesis, from his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, about the reversal of the praxis of authentic group dialectics into the "practico-inert" logic of the alienated institution – Deleuze himself often directly refers to Sartre) is a false ("abstract")

universalization, in so far as it offers no space to articulate the key distinction between the two different logics of the very connection between micro- and macro-, local and global: the "paranoiac" State which "re-territorializes" the schizophrenic explosion of the molecular multitude is not the only imaginable frame of the global collective social organization; the Leninist *revolutionary party* gives body to (or, rather, announces) a totally different logic of collectivity. (Beneath this opposition is, of course, Deleuze's profoundly anti-Leninist distrust of any form of firm global Organization. What is interesting here, however, is that Alain Badiou himself, who draws attention to this anti-Leninist thrust of Deleuze, seems to rely on the same opposition in his "anti-Statist" assertion of the utopian goal of pure *presence* of the multitude, without any state of *re-presentation* which totalizes this multitude, and thus generates a remainder for which there is no place within the totality – significantly, Badiou also refers here to Sartre.¹²⁸) What disappears in this perspective is simply the fundamental Marxist insight that the molar State has to "totalize" the molecular multitude *because a radical "antagonism" is already at work within this multitude.*

As Deleuze saw very clearly, we cannot provide in advance an unambiguous criterion which will allow us to distinguish "false" violent outburst from the "miracle" of the authentic revolutionary breakthrough. The ambiguity is irreducible here, since the "miracle" can occur only through the repetition of previous failures. And this is also why violence is a necessary ingredient of a revolutionary political act. That is to say: what is the criterion of a political act proper? Success as such clearly does not count, even if we define it in the dialectical terms of Merleau-Ponty: as the wager that the future will retroactively redeem our present horrible acts (this is how Merleau-Ponty, in *Humanism and Terror*, provided one of the more intelligent justifications of the Stalinist terror: retroactively, it will become justified if its final outcome is true freedom);¹²⁹ neither does reference to some abstract-universal ethical norm. The only criterion is the absolutely inherent one: that of the enacted utopia.

In a genuine revolutionary breakthrough, the utopian future is neither simply fully realized, present, nor simply evoked as a distant promise which justifies present violence – it is rather as if, in a unique suspension of temporality, in the short circuit between the present and the future, we are – as if by Grace – briefly allowed to act *as if* the utopian future is (not yet fully here, but) already at hand, there to be seized. Revolution is experienced not as a present hardship we have to endure for the sake of the happiness and freedom of future generations, but as the present hardship over which

this future happiness and freedom already cast their shadow – in it, we are already free even as we fight for freedom; we are already happy even as we fight for happiness, no matter how difficult the circumstances. Revolution is not a Merleau-Pontyan wager, an act suspended in the *futur antérieur*, to be legitimized or de-legitimized by the long-term outcome of present acts; it is, as it were, *its own ontological proof*, an immediate index of its own truth.

Let us recall the staged performance of “Storming the Winter Palace” in Petrograd on the third anniversary of the October Revolution, 7 November 1920. Tens of thousands of workers, soldiers, students and artists worked round the clock, living on kasha (tasteless wheat porridge), tea and frozen apples, and preparing the performance in the very place where the event “really happened” three years earlier; their work was co-ordinated by army officers, as well as by avant-garde artists, musicians and directors, from Malevich to Meyerhold. Although this was acting, not “reality”, the soldiers and sailors were playing themselves – many of them had not only actually participated in the events of 1917, but were also simultaneously involved in the real battles of the Civil War that were raging in the vicinity of Petrograd, a city under siege and suffering from severe food shortages. A contemporary commented on the performance: “The future historian will record how, throughout one of the bloodiest and most brutal revolutions, all of Russia was acting”;¹³⁰ and the formalist theoretician Viktor Shklovski noted that “some kind of elemental process is taking place where the living fabric of life is being transformed into the theatrical”.¹³¹ We can all remember the infamous self-celebratory First of May parades that were one of the supreme signs of recognition of Stalinist regimes – if we need proof of how Leninism functioned in an entirely different way, are not such performances the supreme proof that the October Revolution was definitely *not* a simple *coup d'état* by a small group of Bolsheviks, but an event which unleashed a tremendous emancipatory potential?

The archetypal Eisensteinian cinematic scene that depicts the exuberant orgy of revolutionary destructive violence (what Eisenstein himself called “a veritable bacchanalia of destruction”) belongs to the same series: when, in *October*, the victorious revolutionaries penetrate the wine cellars of the Winter Palace, they indulge in an ecstatic orgy of smashing thousands of bottles of expensive wine; in *Behzin Meadow*, after the village Pioneers discover the body of the young Pavlik, brutally murdered by his own father, they force their way into the local church and desecrate it, robbing it of its relics, squabbling over an icon, sacrilegiously trying on vestments, laughing heretically at the statuary...¹³² In this suspension of goal-orientated

instrumental activity, we in fact get a kind of Bataillean "unrestrained expenditure" – the pious desire to deprive the revolution of this excess is simply the desire to have a revolution without revolution. It is against this background that we should approach the delicate issue of revolutionary violence which is an authentic act of liberation, not just a blind *passage à l'acte*.¹³³

And did we not get exactly the same scene in the Great Cultural Revolution in China, with thousands of Red Guardists ecstatically destroying old historical monuments, smashing old vases, defacing old paintings, chipping at old walls?¹³⁴ In spite of (or, rather, *because of*) all its horrors, the Great Cultural Revolution undoubtedly contained elements of such an enacted utopia. At the very end, before such activity was blocked by Mao himself (since he had already achieved his goal of re-establishing his full power and getting rid of the top *nomenklatura* competition), there was the "Shanghai Commune": one million workers who simply took the official slogans seriously, demanding the abolition of the State and even of the Party itself, and the direct communal organization of society. It is significant that it was at this very point that Mao ordered the restoration of order. The (often noted) parallel between Mao and Lacan is fully justified here: the dissolution of the École Freudienne de Paris in 1979 was Lacan's "Great Cultural Revolution", mobilizing his young followers (who, incidentally, were mostly ex-Maoists from 1968!) in order to get rid of the inner circle of his "mandarins". In both cases, the paradox is that of a leader who triggers an uncontrolled upheaval, while trying to exert full personal power – the paradoxical overlapping of extreme dictatorship and extreme emancipation of the masses.

It is with regard to political terror that we can locate the gap which separates Lenin's era from Stalinism:¹³⁵ in Lenin's time, terror was openly admitted (Trotsky sometimes even boasted, in an almost cocky way, about the non-democratic nature of the Bolshevik regime and the terror it used), while in Stalin's time the symbolic status of the terror changed completely: terror turned into the publicly non-acknowledged obscene shadowy supplement of the public official discourse. It is significant that the climax of terror (1936–37) came after 1935, when the new constitution was accepted – this constitution was supposed to end the state of emergency, and proclaim that things had gone back to normal: the suspension of the civil rights of whole strata of the population (kulaks, ex-capitalists) was revoked, the franchise was now universal, and so on. The key idea of this constitution was that now, after the stabilization of the Socialist order and the annihilation of the enemy classes, the Soviet Union was no longer a class society:

the subject of the State was no longer the working class (workers and peasants), but the people. This does not mean, however, that the Stalinist constitution was a mere hypocrisy concealing the social reality – the possibility of terror is inscribed into its very core: since the class war is now officially over, and the Soviet Union is conceived of as the classless country of the People, those who (are still presumed to) oppose the regime are no longer mere class enemies in a conflict that tears the social body apart, but enemies of the People, vermin, worthless scum which must be excluded from humanity itself.

This repression of the regime's own excess was strictly correlative to the invention of the psychological individual which took place in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Russian avant-garde art of the early 1920s (Futurism, Constructivism) not only zealously endorsed industrialization, it even endeavoured to reinvent a new industrial man – no longer the old man of sentimental passions and roots in tradition, but the new man who gladly accepts his role as a bolt or screw in the gigantic co-ordinated industrial Machine. As such, it was subversive in its very “ultra-orthodoxy”, in its overidentification with the core of the official ideology: the image of man or woman that we get in Eisenstein, Meyerhold, Constructivist paintings, and so on, emphasizes the beauty of his or her mechanical movements, his or her thorough de-psychologization. What was perceived in the West as the ultimate nightmare of liberal individualism, as the ideological counterpoint to “Taylorization”, to the Fordist assembly line, was hailed in Russia as the *utopian* prospect of liberation: consider how Meyerhold violently advocated the “behaviourist” approach to acting – no longer emphatic familiarization with the person the actor is playing, but ruthless bodily training to achieve cold physical discipline, the actor's ability to perform a series of mechanized movements.¹³⁶ What the Russian avant-garde artists were doing here was simply drawing the consequences of Lenin's own celebration of “Taylorization” as the new scientific way to organize production.

Does this vision (and practice) of mechanized production really harbour an emancipatory potential? The first thing to do here is to ask an elementary question: What is a factory? Leslie Kaplan's essay-poem *L'excès-usine*,¹³⁷ with its description of the “hell” of factory life, reveals the dimension overlooked in standard Marxist depictions of the workers' “alienation”. Kaplan opposes the self-enclosed universe of the factory to the open environment of the previous work process: the factory space is a timeless space in which fiction and reality ultimately coincide – that is to say, the very reality of this space functions as a fantasmatic space cut off from its

environs. What is lacking in this space is the full "background noise" which provides a life-world context for human individuals: in a factory, as Kaplan puts it, instead of the rich tapestry of the background environment, there is only whiteness – in short, it is as if, when we go into a factory, we enter an artificial universe deprived of the substantial wealth of the texture of real life. In this space, (historical-narrative) memory itself is threatened: workers are cut off from their ancestral roots, and this also affects their own utopian potential: reduced to robots endlessly repeating the same mechanical gestures, they lose the very capacity to dream, to devise projects of alternative reality. What they experience is no longer nostalgia for a determinate past (say, of their previous more "organic" farmers' lives), but, as Kaplan puts it perspicaciously, an "absolute nostalgia" for an empty Otherness whose sole positive content is, again, factory life itself – say, the empty corridors of a factory.

However, is this loss of historical memory, of the capacity to dream, really just a negative experience? What if this disintegration of our embeddedness in the concrete life-world is (a necessary step towards) the emergence of free subjectivity? What if, in order to emerge as a subject, I have first to lose all the wealth of my objective being, so that, at this level of objective being, I am nothing but a corporeal machine? *This* is what was unbearable to and in the official Stalinist ideology, so that Stalinist "socialist realism" *was* actually an attempt to reassert "Socialism with a human face", to reinscribe the process of industrialization into the constraints of the traditional psychological individual: in Socialist Realist texts, paintings and films, individuals are no longer depicted as parts of the global Machine, but as warm passionate people.

Against Pure Politics

This reference to liberating violence also allows us to distinguish Lenin's notion of universal humanity from the recent tendency to introduce moralistic-legalistic reasoning into political struggles. When "apolitical" human rights are evoked as the rationale for a political – even a military – intervention, our first, naive reaction cannot fail to be that of spontaneous rejoicing: isn't it comforting to see NATO forces intervene not for any specific economic or strategic reasons, but simply because a country is cruelly violating the basic human rights of an ethnic group? Is this not the only hope in our globalized era – to see some internationally acknowledged force as a guarantee that all countries will respect a certain minimum of

ethical (and, ideally, also health, social, ecological) standards? What can we have against a respected international tribunal in The Hague prosecuting criminal politicians?

Of course, the no less spontaneous reaction of a Leftist radical is that of contemptuous distrust: first, the neutrality of the reference to human rights is obviously a fiction – in the present constellation, this reference to human rights serves the global New Order dominated by the USA. The question to be asked apropos of every particular intervention on behalf of human rights is thus always: On what criteria did this selection rely? Why Albanians in Serbia and not also Palestinians in Israel, Kurds in Turkey, and so on? Why is Cuba boycotted, while a much harsher North Korean regime gets free help to develop “safe” atomic energy capacities? Here, of course, we enter the shady world of international capital and its strategic interests. Furthermore, this purely humanitarian-ethical legitimization of an intervention thoroughly de-politicizes it, changing it into an intervention into humanitarian catastrophe, grounded in purely moral reasons, not an intervention into a well-defined political struggle. In this way, the reality of a political struggle is transformed into a moral struggle between Good and Evil – in short, the moralization of politics runs the risk of imperceptibly turning into the politicization of morals, in which the political opponent is transformed into the personification of moral Evil.

But is this standard Leftist answer good enough? What it amounts to is a rehashing of the old Marxist denunciation of a false ideological universality: “Universal human rights in fact privilege individuals in highly developed First World countries. . . .” The problem with this rehashing is that it misses the unique chance of turning human rights themselves into a terrain of hegemonic struggle, rather than surrendering them to the enemy. Let us recall the fate of the reference to human rights in the late eighteenth century: of course, at the beginning, they were “in fact” the rights of white male property-owners, silently excluding the lower classes, women, other races, and so forth. Their very universal form, however, set in motion an unstoppable process of expansion: first women said “Why not us too?”, then Blacks (in Haiti) said the same, then the workers. . . .

And it is well worth following the same strategy today. There will always be a bitter taste to the tragicomedy of Milošević’s arrest at the end of March 2001, and to his extradition to The Hague in June: in both cases, the act was executed in order to comply with the deadline set by the USA if it was to grant Yugoslavia generous financial aid. This bitter taste does not result only from a suspicion that the world powers singled out Milošević and elevated him into a personification of Evil; it also attests to the new

Yugoslav government's reluctance to admit Yugoslav responsibility for the war in the 1990s, its intention to cling to the myth of Yugoslavs as victims of Western aggression. Much more important – and the first step in the right direction – was the unexpected arrest of Augusto Pinochet two years earlier. Whatever its ultimate outcome, the immediate ideological repercussions were immense: when Pinochet arrived in London, he was perceived in Chile as an all-powerful untouchable *éminence grise*; after his arrest, the psychological barrier was broken, he was just a frail old criminal inventing humiliating excuses to avoid arrest. The limitation of the Pinochet case, however, is that he comes from a small marginal country.

What, then, comes after Pinochet and Milošević? The true achievement would have been to go for the jugular – to pursue this logic to the very end: to arrest someone who “really matters”. And here Henry Kissinger is arguably the ideal candidate:¹³⁸ the accusation that he is a war criminal is an old and well-substantiated one (remember the famous BBC talk at which the moderator asked him directly: “How does it feel to be a war criminal?” – Kissinger, of course, immediately stormed out of the studio). Furthermore, he is no longer politically active, so the USA cannot claim that his arrest would in any way impede the functioning of its state apparatuses. This, then, would have been an authentic political *act*: if, when Kissinger was on a world tour promoting a new book, some (preferably West European) country arrested him just as they arrested Pinochet. This gesture would put the international human rights machinery to the test, forcing its functionaries to clarify their stance and make a choice: either the US Empire would force his release, thus exposing the big fake of human rights, or. . .

Sometimes, the most cunning politics is that of utter naivety – or, to paraphrase Gandhi's ingenious quip apropos of British civilization: “Universal Human Rights? A good idea – maybe we should test it out!” Is not the May 2001 decision of the US Senate (orchestrated by Jesse Helms) to reject any jurisdiction of The Hague and other international tribunals over American citizens – a decision which took European Community governments by surprise – already a clear sign of the open and brutal exclusivism of US human rights policies? The only way to give some actual content to the “anti-terrorist alliance” which is emerging after the 11 September attacks is to confer the ultimate competence on some kind of international court – which means that this court will also have to have the right to prosecute US citizens. No wonder that after I finished reading Christopher Hitchens's *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, I had a kind of inverted Martin Luther King egalitarian dream: I saw, in the row of prisoners sitting on the benches of the Hague tribunal, Milošević alongside Kissinger; I imagined

these two hardened unscrupulous cynics sitting together at a table during breaks in the trial, sipping whisky and sharing their cheap wisdom. This, then, should be the message to those in power who referred to human rights in their arrest of Noriega, in their bombing of Iraq, in their economic blockade of Cuba, in the pursuing of the Yugoslav war criminals by the Hague tribunal: *arrest Kissinger or shut up!*

I am tempted to go even further here – what about the catastrophic short-sighted madness of President Bush's decision, at the end of March 2001, to renege on his electoral promise to implement the Kyoto treaty on global warming, which sets limits for carbon dioxide emissions? Some of his critics were fully justified in claiming that this action amounted to the Americans' betrayal of their responsibility as global citizens: what right has the USA now to condemn Brazil for destroying the rainforest, or China for building a dam on the Yellow River? The total cynicism of this decision lies in its justification: presumably, only in this way can we prevent a hike in electricity and oil prices, which would hit poor people hardest. This stance of "first economy, then ecology" forgets that it was the very "de-regulation" of the electricity supply in California which caused the power crisis.

It is here that liberal-capitalist globalization should be counteracted with a truly democratic globalization: why not start a big global campaign for a kind of international ecological court, aiming (in the long term, at least) to achieve some kind of legal status with executive authority, setting clear criteria for what constitutes an ecological crime, and with the power to impose at least some kind of measures against the people and institutions responsible? Why not mobilize the full force of the legalistic-moralistic discourse, treating (in this case) Bush not merely as a political adversary, but as a criminal who should be publicly treated as such, and boycotted?¹³⁹

Perhaps, on a more general level, I should take the risk of applying to the logic of political subversion Lacan's opposition of masculine (universality and its constitutive exception) and feminine (no exception to the set, which renders the set non-all) formulas of sexuation.¹⁴⁰ The normal oppositional logic remains on the masculine side: it either assumes the position of a simple exception/externality with regard to the system (clinging to some element – pure love, some version of non-alienated human essence, the correct class position, scientific insight – which is supposed to guarantee that one is outside the system, able to attack it without being contaminated by it), or asserts the absolute closure of the system (late capitalism contains, in an unprecedented way, its own excess, so that all attempts to break out, to transgress its domain, are inherent transgressions taken into account by the system in advance).

The way to break out of this impasse is to reformulate the problem in terms of the feminine side of the formulas of sexuation: there is nothing which is simply external to the system, which is not part of it; at the same time, the system is non-all, it is never able to totalize itself, fully to contain the excesses it generates. This means that the system's excesses are thoroughly and irredeemably ambivalent (or "undecidable", to use a more fashionable term): the very element which was engendered by the system in order to guarantee its closure can turn into a threat – even the most trivial Hollywood melodramas can be "transfunctionalized" into the bearers of explosive utopian potential. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of religion: it can function as the "opium of the people", as the imaginary supplement which makes us endure unbearable reality, or it can turn against the very conditions which gave birth to it, as was the case with different sects and heresies.¹⁴¹

The two formulas of sexuation could be condensed into the triad Universal/Particular/Singular, by introducing a split into universality itself – in Hegelese: between "abstract" and "concrete" universality, or, in Lacanese: between (not only "All S are P", but) "S as such is P", and "there is no S which is not P". First, we have the opposition between universality and its exception – for example: "Man (as such) is a rational being", supplemented by "Some men are not fully rational" (and – the racist implication – therefore not fully human). Or, the more directly politicized version: "A citizen of the USA is, by definition, free", supplemented by "Some of them do not deserve (are not ready and fit for) full freedom." The crucial insight here is the one into the structural necessity of this exception: as Hegel put it, the *differentia specifica* is at the same time the difference between genus and its species. "Man as such is free" means that "Some people are not free." Or, with regard to the logic of explicit symbolic norms and their obscene supplement: "the Law is neutral and equal for all" means that there is a set of obscene unwritten rules which privilege some and exclude others, and these obscene rules are the condition for the law to function effectively and regulate social relations. In Kantian terms, the obscene unwritten rules which posit exceptions to the norm (i.e. the way we are not only permitted, but even obliged, to violate the norm) are a kind of transcendental schema which mediates between the symbolic norm and "real life".

The "feminine" counterpoint to this logic of universality and its constitutive exception is: "There is no man who is not a rational being (or, more precisely, there is nothing in/of man which is outside rationality)" and, for that very reason, "Not-all of man is rational." The logic here is not that of the exception to the universality, but of some object, some singularity,

which directly gives body to the falsity of "its" universality. This is the logic of the singular symptomal element, like the proletariat for Marx: it does not function only as an exception to its universality; rather, it directly belies, undermines, this universality – the very existence of the proletariat means that the whole of the capitalist system is "irrational". (Perhaps this is also how we should read Hegel's "Everything rational is actual and everything actual is rational" from his Foreword to the *Philosophy of Right*: "There is nothing actual which is not rational.") This is how proper dialectical "concrete universality" works: "there is nothing which is not political" (or, in traditional terms, "there is nothing which is not affected by class struggle"), which, precisely, does not mean that "politics is everything", but, rather, that the political class struggle is that "pathological" diagonal feature which affects every element of the social edifice, submitting it to a kind of anamorphic distortion.

In Iceland, some thirty miles northeast of Reykjavik, you can see *das Ding* in one of its historical configurations, under the name of "Althing", the site of the annual caucus of (almost) all inhabitants during which they debated common issues and established new laws. So what do you actually see there? A high cliff (from which the "law-speaker" proclaimed new laws by shouting) separated by a rift valley from the plain to the east (where the crowd gathered). This, then, is the first surprise: the Icelanders chose as their gathering place the site of a geological rupture (the divide between the North American and the Eurasian continental plates, which are physically tearing apart – this is why there are so many earthquakes in Iceland), as if they intended to indicate how politics is, in its very notion, the field of intractable antagonistic struggle. Interestingly enough, the Althing functioned from 930 until 1798, roughly the period of the French Revolution, when the last assembly was held – again, as if to indicate how modern parliamentary democracy is incompatible with the active engagement of all citizens, and thus belying the assertion that the Althing was the first democratic parliament in the history of humanity. This Thing is not simply the mute presence of the Real – it *speaks*, imposing its decrees and judgements. When the assembled population had reached a conclusion, the speakers on top of the cliff informed them by shouting what the Thing had concluded.

That is the difference between the Althing and the modern democratic parliament or national assembly: in the Althing, the Thing coincides with the big Other (the symbolic order); while in modern democracy, the Thing (enjoyment) is evacuated from the Other, the Other is the neutral order of laws, blind to the particularity of enjoyment. If, none the less, we concede

that the Althing was an exemplary site of political antagonism, then, perhaps, a guide to Iceland culture provides the reason in a quite open and brutal way: "The essence of Icelandic conversation is insult." Is not insulting the adversary (attempting to undermine his symbolic status) inscribed into the very heart of the political process? Is this insulting not the fundamental *modus operandi* of political debate?

From this point, we should return to the thesis that one of the basic features of democracy is the transformation of (political) enemy into adversary, of unconditional antagonism into agonistic competition: an adversary is not a mortal threat to power, since the place of it is originally empty, a place for whose (temporal) occupation different agents can legitimately compete.¹⁴² Whenever we hear that we need to suspend the logic of exclusion or excommunication in the field of politics, however, we should always bear in mind that such an agonistic thriving multitude of adversaries, not enemies, has by definition to rely on some (explicit or implicit) symbolic *pact* which defines the rules of this agonistic competition. For this simple reason, wide as this field of agonistic competition can be, the translation of antagonism into agonism, of enemy into adversary, can never be complete – there will always be some "indivisible remainder" of those who do not recognize this pact. And are not the terms in which we have to define this exclusion necessarily ethico-legalistic?

This means that the key political struggle is not so much the agonistic competition, within the field of the admissible, of political subjects who acknowledge each other as legitimate adversaries, but, rather, the struggle for the delimitation of this field, for the definition of the line which will separate the legitimate adversary from the illegitimate enemy.

Classic liberal democracy, for example, involves the excommunication of the extreme (Fascist) Right and (terrorist or Communist) Left: there is no pact with them; coalitions are out of the question. Why should the Leftist strategy not be to impose an even more radical exclusion: does not the struggle between Right and Left often revolve around the inclusion of the far Right, with the Right accepting its inclusion and the Left insisting on its exclusion (Haider in Austria, the neo-Fascist *Alleanza nazionale* in Italy, etc.)? Why not, instead of condemning out of hand the introduction of moralistic and legalistic categories into the political struggle proper, *extend* their application, censuring the extreme Right as ethically Evil, as morally unacceptable, as a pariah to be shunned? In short, why not openly *endorse* the politicization of ethics, in the sense of abolishing the distance between the two, of changing the legal and moral terrain into another battlefield of political hegemony, of resorting to direct ethico/legal arguments and meas-

ures to discredit the enemy?¹⁴³ The goal of radical Leftist politics should therefore be the very opposite of unprincipled tolerant pluralism: to create the public space in which some (racist, etc.) statements and practices are inadmissible, that is, simply *not possible* – those who utter or practise them exclude themselves from the communal space. This is why, every time a radical Rightist stance (from Holocaust revisionism to anti-feminism) becomes “acceptable” in public debates, the Left suffers a defeat.

Do we thereby in fact court some kind of dangerous “extremism”, which is also one of the standard criticisms of Lenin? Lenin’s critique of “Leftism as the Infantile Disorder of Communism” has been more than pertinent over recent decades, when the Left has often succumbed to the terrorist temptation. Political “extremism” or “excessive radicalism” should always be read as a phenomenon of ideologico-political *displacement*: as an index of its opposite, of a limitation, of a refusal actually to “go right to the end”.

What was the Jacobins’ recourse to radical “terror” if not a kind of hysterical acting-out bearing witness to their inability to disturb the very fundamentals of economic order (private property, etc.)? And does not the same go even for the so-called “excesses” of Political Correctness? Don’t they, also, reveal a retreat from disturbing the real (economic, etc.) causes of racism and sexism? Perhaps, then, the time has come to raise as a problem the classic topos, shared by practically all “postmodern” Leftists, according to which political “totalitarianism” somehow results from the predominance of material production and technology over the intersubjective communication and/or symbolic practice, as if the root of political terror resides in the fact that the “principle” of instrumental reason, of the technological exploitation of nature, is extended also to society, so that people are treated as raw material to be transformed into New Men. What if the exact *opposite* were the case? What if political “terror” indicates precisely that the sphere of (material) production is *denied* in its autonomy and *subordinated* to political logic? Is it not that all political “terror”, from the Jacobins to the Maoist Cultural Revolution, presupposes the foreclosure of production proper, its reduction to the terrain of political conflict?

Take Badiou’s exalted defence of Terror in the French Revolution, in which he quotes the justification of the guillotine for Lavoisier: “*La république n’a pas besoin de savants*. [The Republic has no need for scientists.]” Badiou’s thesis is that the truth of this statement emerges if we cut it short, depriving it of its caveat: “*La république n’a pas de besoins*. [The Republic has no needs.]” The Republic gives body to the purely political logic of equality and freedom, which should follow its path with no consideration for the “servicing of goods” destined to satisfy the needs of individuals.¹⁴⁴

In the revolutionary process proper, freedom becomes an end in itself, caught in its own paroxysm – this suspension of the importance of the sphere of the economy, of (material) production, brings Badiou close to Hannah Arendt, for whom, as for Badiou, freedom is opposed to the domain of the provision of goods and services, the maintenance of households and the exercise of administration, which do not belong to politics proper: the only place for freedom is the communal political space.

In this precise sense, Badiou's (and Sylvain Lazarus's¹⁴⁵) plea for the reappraisal of Lenin is more ambiguous than it may appear: what it actually amounts to is nothing less than an abandonment of Marx's key insight into how the political struggle is a spectacle which, in order to be deciphered, has to be referred to the sphere of economics ("if Marxism had any analytical value for *political* theory, was it not in the insistence that the problem of freedom was contained in the social relations implicitly declared 'unpolitical' – that is, naturalized – in liberal discourse"¹⁴⁶). No wonder the Lenin Badiou and Lazarus prefer is the Lenin of *What Is to Be Done?*, the Lenin who (in his thesis that socialist-revolutionary consciousness has to be brought to the working class from outside) breaks with Marx's alleged "economism" and asserts the autonomy of the Political, not the Lenin of *The State and Revolution*, fascinated by modern centralized industry, imagining (depoliticized) ways of reorganizing the economy and the state apparatus.

This "pure politics" of Badiou, Rancière and Balibar, more Jacobin than Marxist, shares with its great opponent, Anglo-Saxon Cultural Studies and their focus on struggles for recognition, the degradation of the sphere of the economy. That is to say: what all the new French (or French-orientated) theories of the Political, from Balibar through Rancière and Badiou to Laclau and Mouffe, aim at is – to put it in traditional philosophical terms – the reduction of the sphere of the economy (of material production) to an "ontic" sphere deprived of "ontological" dignity. Within this horizon, there is simply no room for the Marxian "critique of political economy": the structure of the universe of commodities and capital in Marx's *Capital* is not just that of a limited empirical sphere, but a kind of socio-transcendental a priori, the matrix which generates the totality of social and political relations.

The relationship between economy and politics is ultimately that of the well-known visual paradox of "two faces or a vase": you see either two faces or a vase, never both – you have to make a choice.¹⁴⁷ In the same way, you either focus on the political, and the domain of the economy is reduced to the empirical "servicing of goods", or you focus on the economy, and

politics is reduced to a theatre of appearances, to a passing phenomenon which will disappear with the arrival of the developed Communist (or technocratic) society in which, as Engels put it, the "administration of people" will vanish in the "administration of things".¹⁴⁸

The "political" critique of Marxism (the claim that if you reduce politics to a "formal" expression of some underlying "objective" socioeconomic process, you lose the openness and contingency constitutive of the political field proper) should therefore be supplemented by its obverse: the field of economy is, *in its very form*, irreducible to politics – this level of the form of the economy (of the economy as the determining form of the social) is what French "political post-Marxists" miss when they reduce the economy to one of several positive social spheres. In Badiou, the root of this notion of pure "politics", radically autonomous with regard to history, society, economy, State, even Party, is his opposition between Being and Event – this is where Badiou remains "idealist". From the materialist standpoint, an Event emerges "out of nowhere" within a specific constellation of Being – the space of an Event is the minimal "empty" distance between two beings, the "other" dimension which shines through this gap.¹⁴⁹

So, Lenin the ultimate political strategist should in no way be separated from Lenin the "technocrat" dreaming about the scientific reorganization of production. The greatness of Lenin is that although he lacked the proper conceptual apparatus to think these two levels together, he was aware of the *urgency* of doing so – an impossible yet necessary task.¹⁵⁰ What we are dealing with here is another version of the Lacanian "il n'y a pas de rapport . . .": if, for Lacan, there is no sexual relationship, then, for Marxism proper, there is *no relationship between economy and politics*, no "meta-language" that enables us to grasp the two levels from the same neutral standpoint, although – or, rather, because – these two levels are inextricably intertwined. The "political" class struggle takes place in the midst of the economy (recall that the very last paragraph of *Capital* Volume III, where the text stops abruptly, tackles the class struggle), while, at the same time, the domain of the economy serves as the key that enables us to decode political struggles. No wonder the structure of this impossible relationship is that of a Möbius strip: first, we have to progress from the political spectacle to its economic infrastructure; then, in a second step, we have to confront the irreducible dimension of the political struggle at the very heart of the economy.

Here, Lenin's stance against economism as well as against pure politics is crucial today, apropos of the split attitude towards the economy in (what remains of) radical circles: on the one hand, the above-mentioned pure

"politicists" who abandon the economy as the site of struggle and intervention; on the other, the economists, fascinated by the functioning of today's global economy, who preclude any possibility of a political intervention proper. Today, more than ever, we should go back to Lenin: yes, the economy is the key domain; the battle will be decided there, we have to break the spell of global capitalism – but the intervention should be truly political, not economic. Today, when everyone is "anti-capitalist", right up to the Hollywood "socio-critical" conspiracy movies (from *Enemy of the State* to *The Insider*) in which the villains are the big corporations, with their ruthless pursuit of profit, the signifier "anti-capitalism" has lost its subversive sting. What we should be discussing, rather, is the self-evident opposite of this "anti-capitalism": the trust that the democratic substance of honest Americans can break up the conspiracy. *This* is the hard kernel of today's global capitalist universe, its true Master-Signifier: democracy.

The limit of democracy is the State: in the democratic electoral process, the social body is symbolically dissolved, reduced to a pure numerical multitude. The electoral body is precisely not a body, a structured whole, but a formless abstract multitude, a multitude without a State (in both Badiouian senses of this term: the State as the re-presented unity of the multitude, and the State with its apparatuses). The point is thus not that democracy is intrinsic to the State, sustained by its apparatuses, but that it structurally *ignores* this dependency. When Badiou says that the State is always in excess with regard to the multitude it represents, this means that it is precisely this excess which is structurally overlooked by democracy: the democratic illusion is that the democratic process can control this excess of the State.

That is why the anti-globalization movement is not enough: at some point, we will have to tackle the problem of the self-evident reference to "freedom and democracy". That is the ultimate Leninist lesson for today: paradoxically, it is only in this way, by problematizing democracy – by making it clear that liberal democracy a priori, in its very notion (as Hegel would have put it), cannot survive without capitalist private property – that we can become truly anti-capitalist. Did not the disintegration of Communism in 1990 provide the ultimate confirmation of the most "vulgar" Marxist thesis that the actual economic base of political democracy is the private ownership of the means of production, that is, capitalism, with its class distinctions? The big urge after the introduction of political democracy was "privatization", the frantic effort to find – at any price, in whatever way – new owners, who can be descendants of former owners whose property was nationalized when the Communists took power, ex-

Communists, apparatchiks, Mafiosi . . . anybody, as long as we get a "base" of democracy.¹⁵¹ The ultimate tragic irony is that all this is taking place *too late* – at exactly the moment when, in First World "post-industrial" societies, private ownership has started to lose its central regulative role.

The battle to be fought is therefore twofold: first, yes, anti-capitalism. However, anti-capitalism without tackling the problem of capitalism's *political* form (liberal parliamentary democracy) is not sufficient, no matter how "radical" it is. Perhaps *the* lure today is the belief that we can undermine capitalism without actually problematizing the liberal-democratic legacy which – as some Leftists claim – although engendered by capitalism, acquired autonomy and can serve to criticize capitalism. This lure is strictly correlative to its apparent opposite: to the pseudo-Deleuzian love-hate fascinating/fascinated poetic depiction of Capital as a rhizomatic monster/vampire which de-territorializes and swallows up everything – indomitable, dynamic, always rising from the dead, each crisis making it stronger, Dionysos-Phoenix reborn. . . . It is in this poetic (anti-)capitalist reference to Marx that Marx is *really* dead: appropriated and deprived of his political sting.

Marx was fascinated by the revolutionary "de-territorializing" impact of capitalism which, in its inexorable dynamic, undermines all stable traditional forms of human interaction – everything solid melts into air, up to the corpses of the Jews who disappeared into the smoke of the Auschwitz gas ovens. . . . He criticized capitalism because its "de-territorialization" was not thorough enough, because it generated new "re-territorializations" – the ultimate obstacle to capitalism is capitalism itself, that is to say, capitalism unleashes a dynamic it is no longer able to contain. Far from being outdated, this claim seems to gain relevance with today's growing deadlocks of globalization, in which the inherently antagonistic nature of capitalism belies its worldwide triumph. The problem, however, is: is it still possible to imagine Communism (or another form of post-capitalist society) as a formation which liberates the de-territorializing dynamic of capitalism, freeing it of its intrinsic constraints?

Marx's fundamental vision was that a new, higher social order (Communism) is possible – an order that would not only maintain but even raise to a higher degree, and fully release in reality, the potential of the self-increasing spiral of productivity which, in capitalism, on account of its inherent obstacle/contradiction, is thwarted again and again by socially destructive economic crises. What Marx overlooked is that – to put it in classic Derridean terms – this inherent obstacle/antagonism as the "condition of impossibility" of the full deployment of productive forces is

simultaneously its "condition of possibility": if we abolish the obstacle, the intrinsic contradiction of capitalism, we do not get the fully unbridled drive to productivity finally delivered of its impediment, we lose precisely this productivity that seemed to be generated and simultaneously thwarted by capitalism – if we take away the obstacle, the very potential thwarted by this obstacle dissipates . . . that would be a possible Lacanian critique of Marx, focusing on the ambiguous overlap between surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment.¹⁵²

While this constant self-propelling revolutionizing still holds for high Stalinism, with its total productive mobilization, "stagnant" late Real Socialism legitimized itself (between the lines, at least) as a society in which we can live peacefully, avoiding capitalist competitive stress. This was the last line of defence when, from the late 1960s onwards, after the fall of Khrushchev (the last enthusiast who prophesied during a visit to the USA, that "your grandchildren will be Communists"), it became clear that Real Socialism was losing its competitive edge in the war with capitalism. So stagnant late Real Socialism *was* already, in a way, "socialism with a human face": silently abandoning great historical tasks, it provided the security of everyday life going on in benevolent boredom. Today's *Ostalgie* for defunct Socialism mostly consists in such a conservative nostalgia for that self-satisfied, restricted way of life; even nostalgic anti-capitalist artists from Peter Handke to Joseph Beuys celebrate this aspect of Socialism: the absence of stressful mobilization and frantic commodification. Erich Mielke himself, the chief of the GDR secret police, admitted in simple terms the Communist regime's inability to cope with the capitalist logic of self-propelling excess: "Socialism is so good; so people demand more and more. That's the way things are."¹⁵³ Of course, this unexpected shift tells us something about the deficiency of the original Marxist project itself: it reveals the limitation of its goal of unbridled productive mobilization.

How was it that Wim Wenders's *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), a rediscovery and celebration of pre-revolutionary Cuban music, of the tradition obliterated for many years by the fascinating image of the Revolution, was none the less perceived as a gesture of opening towards today's – "Castro's" – Cuba? Would it not be much more logical to see in this film the nostalgic-reactionary gesture *par excellence*, that of discovering and resuscitating traces of a long-forgotten pre-revolutionary past (musicians in their seventies and eighties, the old dilapidated streets of Havana, as if time has stood still for decades)? It is precisely at this level, however, that we should locate the paradoxical achievement of the film: it depicts the very nostalgia for the pre-revolutionary nightclub musical past as part of the

post-revolutionary Cuban present (this is clear in the very first scene, where the old musician comments on old photos of Fidel and Che). This is what made this "apolitical" film a model *political* intervention: by demonstrating how the "pre-revolutionary" musical past was incorporated into post-revolutionary Cuba, it undermines the standard perception of Cuban reality. The price for this, of course, is that the image of Cuba we get is an image of a country where time is at a standstill: nothing happens, no industrial activity; there are old cars, empty railway tracks; people just walk around – and, occasionally, they sing and play music. Wenders's Cuba is therefore the Latin American version of the nostalgic image of Eastern Europe: a space outside history, outside the dynamic of today's second modernization. The paradox (and, perhaps, the final message of the film) is that this was the ultimate function of the Revolution: not to accelerate social development but, on the contrary, to carve out a space in which time stands still.

For They Know Not What They Believe

Capitalism is not just one historical epoch among others – in a way, the once fashionable (and today forgotten) Francis Fukuyama was right: global capitalism is "the end of history". Christopher Nolan's outstanding neo-noir thriller *Memento* (2000) is, among other things, a perfect metaphor for where we stand today with regard to historical memory. As always, *memento* ultimately refers to *mori* – the film is the story (told in flashback, from the final killing of the alleged murderer to the original crime) of a young man whose wife was raped and killed in his presence, and who, as a consequence of this trauma, suffers from an uncanny mental disorder: while he can remember past events prior to the murder, he can keep in his mind what has happened since the trauma only for a couple of minutes, so the only way for him to organize his recent experience is through external material inscriptions (all the time he takes Polaroid photos, writes notes on scraps of paper, or even has the crucial data tattooed on to his body). With the help of these meagre resources, he desperately tries to trace the murderer and avenge his wife's death; the ending is ambiguous: either there was a crime, but he himself was the murderer; or there was no crime at all, and he simply needs this traumatic point of reference to justify and co-ordinate his recent activities.

Is this not, in a way, the predicament of every one of us today? Are we all not split between the remembrance of the old historical past and the post-historical present which we are unable to insert into the same grand

narrative with the past, so that the present is experienced as a confused succession of fragments which rapidly evaporate from our memory? In short, the problem of our post-historical era is not that we cannot remember the past, our history proper (there are more than enough narratives of that), but that we cannot remember the present itself – that we cannot historicize-narrate it properly, that is, acquire a proper cognitive mapping with regard to it: either we refer to some elusive trauma (like the Holocaust) whose unbearable truth is that we ourselves are (co-)responsible for it, or we construct such traumas in order to make sense of our present.

In what precise sense, then, is capitalism “post-historical”? A certain excess which was, as it were, kept in check in previous history, perceived as a local perversion, a limited deviation, is elevated in capitalism to the very principle of social life, in the speculative movement of money begetting more money, of a system which can survive only by constantly revolutionizing its own conditions – that is to say, in which *the thing can survive only as its own excess*, constantly exceeding its own “normal” constraints.

Let us take the case of consumption: before modernity, we were dealing with a direct opposition between moderate consumption and its excess (gluttony, etc.); with capitalism, the excess (the consumption of “useless things”) becomes the rule, that is, the elementary form of buying is the act of buying things we “don’t really need”. There is an ecological limit to growth, of course: it is clear, for example, that the prospect of rapid development in China, with millions of new cars, would – in the present world constellation – provoke a global ecological catastrophe. However, we should not underestimate capitalism’s ability to colonize domains which seem to resist it – to turn catastrophes caused by its own development into incentives to further development. If it is one of capitalism’s highest achievements to turn every human catastrophe (from illness to war) into a source of lucrative investment, why should it not also do this with ecology? The notion that a serious ecological catastrophe will awaken us from capitalism and turn us into devoted no-growth, no-profit producers fatefully underestimates capitalism’s capacity to turn catastrophes into blessings in disguise.¹⁵⁴ This is why we should remain faithful to Marx’s fundamental insight: unbridled capitalist expansion encounters its limit not in an external factor – the available ecological resources, for example – but in itself: the limit of capitalism is absolutely intrinsic to it – or, as Marx himself put it, the limit of capitalism is capital itself.¹⁵⁵

And perhaps it is only today, under the global capitalism in its “post-industrial” digitalized form, that – to put it in Hegelian terms – really existing capitalism is reaching the level of its notion: perhaps we should

reiterate Marx's old anti-evolutionist dictum (incidentally, taken verbatim from Hegel) that the anatomy of man provides the key to the anatomy of a monkey – that in order to deploy the inherent notional structure of a social formation, you must start with its most developed form. Marx located the elementary capitalist antagonism in the opposition between use- and exchange-value: in capitalism, the potentials of this opposition are fully realized, the domain of exchange-value acquires autonomy, is transformed into the spectre of self-propelling speculative capital which uses the productive capacities and needs of actual people only as its dispensable temporal embodiment. Marx derived the very notion of economic crisis from this gap: a crisis occurs when reality catches up with the illusory self-generating mirage of money begetting more money – this speculative madness cannot go on indefinitely; it has to explode in ever stronger crises. The ultimate root of the crisis, for Marx, is the gap between use-value and exchange-value: the logic of exchange-value follows its own path, its own mad dance, irrespective of the real needs of real people.

It may appear that this analysis is more relevant than ever today, when the tension between the virtual universe and the real is reaching almost tangibly unbearable proportions: on the one hand, we have crazy solipsistic speculations about futures, mergers, and so on, following their own inherent logic; on the other, reality is catching up in the form of ecological catastrophes, poverty, the collapse of social life in the Third World, mad cow disease. This is why cyber-capitalists can appear to be the paradigmatic capitalists today; this is why Bill Gates can dream of cyberspace as providing the frame for what he calls "frictionless capitalism".

What we have here is an ideological short circuit between the two versions of the gap between reality and virtuality: the gap between real production and the virtual/spectral domain of Capital, and the gap between experiential reality and the Virtual Reality of cyberspace. The true horror of the slogan "frictionless capitalism" is that although actual "frictions" continue, they become invisible, repressed into the netherworld outside our "postmodern" post-industrial universe; this is why the "frictionless" universe of digitalized communication, technological gadgets, and so on, is always haunted by the notion that there is a global catastrophe just around the corner, threatening to explode at any moment.

It actually seems that the cyberspace gap between my fascinating screen persona and the miserable flesh which is "me" offscreen translates into immediate experience the gap between the Real of the speculative circulation of capital and the drab reality of the impoverished masses. On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant

property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol. . . . Virtual Reality simply *generalizes* this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides *reality itself* deprived of its substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real – just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like the real coffee without being real coffee, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so.¹⁵⁶ In the case of Virtual Reality, the difference does not concern only quantity: coffee without caffeine is still part of reality, whereas Virtual Reality suspends the very notion of reality. . . .¹⁵⁷ Is a recourse to “reality” which will sooner or later catch up with the virtual game, however, really the only way to conduct a genuine critique of capitalism? What if the problem of capitalism is not this solipsistic mad dance, but precisely the opposite: that it continues to disavow its distance from “reality”, that it presents itself as serving the real needs of real people? The originality of Marx is that he played both cards simultaneously: the origin of capitalist crises is the gap between use- and exchange-value, *and* capitalism constrains the free deployment of productivity.

The problem with the deconstructionist or Deleuzian poetry of capital is that it totally suspends Marx's intention to provide an actual economic analysis of existing capitalism, not a critical philosophy of commodity fetishism and reification. Let us take Derrida's *Specters of Marx*:¹⁵⁸ does it not contain a tension between Derrida's “official” anti-capitalist claim (his call for a “New International” against global capitalism) and his analysis of the irreducible spectrality which has to supplement the gap of every positive ontological edifice, as the proto-transcendental *a priori* which opens up the space for the spectrality of capital? Does this not compel Derrida to conclude that, ultimately, Marx's critique of capitalism and his revolutionary project of a Communist society constituted an attempt to reduce (or, rather, contain) the dimension of spectrality and *différance* within the positive ontological frame of unalienated humanity in which the collective “general intellect”¹⁵⁹ regulates its reproduction as a totally (self-)transparent process? In short, is not Derrida's conclusion that *capital is différance*: a movement which never reaches completion (the full circle of its circulation); which always *postpones* the final settling of accounts?

Capitalism expands by repeatedly “borrowing from the future”, by referring to some indefinite future moment of “full reimbursement” which is forever deferred, like the constant rescheduling of the debts of Second and Third World countries by the IMF, with the fictional notion (which is operative, although no one believes in it) that, at some future moment, these debts will be repaid. It was John Maynard Keynes who, in his criticism of

the idea that, in the long term, reality has to catch up with capital's speculative movement, added acerbically that in the long term we are all dead: actual economic life, however, is precisely the endless postponement of this full settling of accounts. So, when Kojin Karatani, in his otherwise admirable Derridean reading of Marx's *Capital*, claims that capitalism is already its own deconstruction, that it is no longer a stable self-centred system disrupted by excesses and interferences, but a system which, precisely, maintains itself through incessant self-revolutionizing; a system whose instability is its very strength; one which is, in a way, in excess with regard to itself (this, incidentally, is ultimately just a deconstructionist rephrasing of Marx's formulations from the *Communist Manifesto*), he ultimately arrives at a purely formal definition of capitalism as a self-referential system sustained by its very structural imbalance:

The self-referential formal system is dynamic because of incessant internal slippage (self-differentiation). It cannot maintain a definitive meta-level or center that systematizes a system. Rather, like the "multiplicity of subjects" that Nietzsche once proposed, it is multicentered. . . . In short, the self-referential formal system is always disequilibrated and excessive.¹⁶⁰

How, then, is radical anti-capitalism possible within these co-ordinates? Is the notion of the anti-capitalist struggle as the struggle between two spectralities, the "bad" spectrality of capital and the "good" spectrality of the messianic promise of justice and democracy-to-come, strong enough? Are we not – in so far as we remain within this frame – compelled to apply the deconstructive logic of supplement to this opposition itself, and to claim that the "good" spectrality of the messianic promise is always-already contaminated by the "bad" spectrality of capital? The standard deconstructionist notion of how capitalism is an order which generates/contains its own excess, so that it is already its own *différance*, lacking any fixed centre to be subverted, thus confuses what Marx so convincingly – and, I am tempted to add, seductively – describes as the intrinsic "theological whimsies" of capital with his theory of the class struggle, and of how capitalism has inexorably to produce an excess it will no longer be able to contain.

Let us take a closer look at Marx's classic description of the passage from money to capital, with its explicit allusions to the Hegelian and Christian background. First, there is the simple act of market exchange, in which I sell in order to buy – I sell the product I own or made in order to buy another one which is of some use to me: "The simple circulation of commodities – selling in order to buy – is a means of carrying out a purpose unconnected with circulation, namely, the appropriation of use-values, the

satisfaction of wants."¹⁶¹ What happens with the emergence of capital is not just the simple reversal of C-M-C (Commodity-Money-Commodity) into M-C-M – that is, investing money into some commodity in order to sell it again, and thus get back (more) money; the key effect of this reversal is the *externalization* of circulation: "The circulation of money as capital is, on the contrary, an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital has therefore no limits."¹⁶² Crucial here is the difference between the capitalist and the traditional miser, hoarding his treasure in a secret hideout, and the capitalist who augments his treasure by throwing it into circulation:

The restless never-ending process of profit-making alone is what he aims at. This boundless greed after riches, this passionate chase after exchange-value, is common to the capitalist and the miser; but while the miser is merely a capitalist gone mad, the capitalist is a rational miser. The never-ending augmentation of exchange-value, which the miser strives after, by seeking to save his money from circulation, is attained by the more acute capitalist, by constantly throwing it afresh into circulation.¹⁶³

None the less, this madness of the miser is not something which simply disappears with the rise of "normal" capitalism, or its pathological deviation. It is, rather, *inherent* to it: the miser has his moment of triumph in the economic *crisis*. In a crisis, it is not – as you would expect – money which loses its value, and we have to resort to the "real" value of commodities; commodities themselves (the embodiment of "real [use-]value") become useless, because there is no one to buy them. In a crisis:

money suddenly and immediately changes from its merely nominal shape, money of account, into hard cash. Profane commodities can no longer replace it. The use-value of commodities becomes value-less, and their value vanishes in the face of their own form of value. The bourgeois, drunk with prosperity and arrogantly certain of himself, has just declared that money is a purely imaginary creation. "Commodities alone are money," he said. But now the opposite cry resounds over the markets of the world: only money is a commodity. . . . In a crisis, the antithesis between commodities and their value-form, money, is raised to the level of an absolute contradiction.¹⁶⁴

It is crucial how, in this elevation of money to the status of the only true commodity ("The capitalist knows that all commodities, however scurvy they may look, or however badly they may smell, are in faith and in truth money, inwardly circumcised Jews"¹⁶⁵), Marx resorts to the precise Pauline definition of Christians as "inwardly circumcised Jews"; Christians do not need real external circumcision (that is, the abandonment of ordinary

commodities with use-values, dealing only with money), since they know that each of these ordinary commodities is already "inwardly circumcised", that its true substance is money. It is even more crucial that Marx describes the passage from money to capital in the precise Hegelian terms of the passage from substance to subject:

In truth, however, value is here [in capital] the active factor in a process, in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it at the same time changes in magnitude, differentiates itself by throwing off surplus-value from itself; the original value, in other words, expands spontaneously. For the movement, in the course of which it adds surplus-value, is its own movement, its expansion, therefore, is automatic expansion. Because it is value, it has acquired the occult quality of being able to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or, at the least, lays golden eggs. . . .

In simple circulation, C-M-C, the value of commodities attained at the most a form independent of their use-values, i.e., the form of money; but the same value now in the circulation M-C-M, or the circulation of capital, suddenly presents itself as an independent substance, endowed with a motion of its own, passing through a life-process of its own, in which money and commodities are mere forms which it assumes and casts off in turn. Nay, more: instead of simply representing the relations of commodities, it enters now, so to say, into private relations with itself. It differentiates itself as original value from itself as surplus-value; as the father differentiates himself from himself *qua* the son, yet both are one and of one age: for only by the surplus-value of 10 pounds does the 100 pounds originally advanced become capital, and so on as this takes place, so soon as the son, and by the son, the father is begotten, so soon does their difference vanish, and they again become one, 110 pounds.¹⁶⁶

In short, capital is money which is no longer a mere substance of wealth, its universal embodiment, but value which, through its circulation, generates more value, value which mediates-posites itself, retroactively positing its own presuppositions. First, money appears as a mere means of the exchange of commodities: instead of endless bartering, we first exchange our product for the universal equivalent of all commodities, which can then be exchanged for any commodity we may need. Then, once the circulation of capital is set in motion, the relationship is inverted, the means turns into an end in itself – the very passage through the "material" domain of use-values (the production of commodities which satisfy individuals' particular needs) is posited as a moment of what is substantially the self-movement of capital itself – from this moment on, the true aim is no longer the satisfaction of individuals' needs, but simply more money, the endless repeating of the

circulation as such. . . . This arcane circular movement of self-positing is then equated with the central Christian tenet of the identity of God the Father and His son, of the immaculate conception by means of which the single Father directly (without a female spouse) begets his only son, and thus forms what is arguably the ultimate single-parent family.

Is capital, then, the true Subject/Substance? Yes and no: for Marx, this self-engendering circular movement is – to put it in Freudian terms – precisely the capitalist “unconscious fantasy” which parasitizes upon the proletariat as “pure substanceless subjectivity”; for this reason, capital’s speculative self-generating dance has a limit, and it brings about the conditions of its own collapse. This insight allows us to solve the key interpretative problem of the quote above: how are we to read its first three words: “*In truth, however?*”

First, of course, they imply that this truth has to be asserted against some false appearance or experience: the everyday experience that the ultimate goal of capital’s circulation is still the satisfaction of human needs, that capital is simply a means of bringing about this satisfaction in a more efficient way. This “truth”, however, is *not* the reality of capitalism: in reality, capital does not engender itself, but exploits the worker’s surplus-value. So there is a necessary third level to be added to the simple opposition of subjective experience (of capital as a simple means of efficiently satisfying people’s needs) and objective social reality (of exploitation): the “objective deception”, the disavowed “unconscious” fantasy (of the mysterious self-generating circular movement of capital), which is the truth (albeit not the reality) of the capitalist process. To quote Lacan again, truth has the structure of a fiction: the only way to formulate the truth of capital is to describe this fiction of its “immaculate” self-generating movement. And this insight also allows us to locate the weakness of the above-mentioned “deconstructionist” appropriation of Marx’s analysis of capitalism: although it emphasizes the endless process of deferral which characterizes this movement, as well as its fundamental inconclusiveness, its self-blockage, the “deconstructionist” retelling still describes the *fantasy* of capital – it describes what individuals believe, although they don’t know it.¹⁶⁷

All this means that the urgent task of economic analysis today is, again, to repeat Marx’s “critique of political economy”, without succumbing to the temptation of the multitude of ideologies in “post-industrial” societies. The key change concerns the status of private property: the ultimate element of power and control is no longer the last link in the chain of investments, the firm or individual who “really owns” the means of production. The ideal capitalist today functions in a wholly different way: investing bor-

rowed money, "really owning" nothing, even in debt, but none the less controlling things. A corporation is owned by another corporation, which is again borrowing money from banks, which may ultimately manipulate money owned by ordinary people like ourselves. With Bill Gates, the "private property of the means of production" becomes meaningless, at least in the normal meaning of the term.¹⁶⁸

The paradox of this virtualization of capitalism is ultimately the same as that of the electron in elementary particle physics. The mass of each element in our reality is composed of its mass at rest plus the surplus provided by the acceleration of its movement; an electron's mass at rest, however, is zero; its mass consists only of the surplus generated by the acceleration of its movement, as if we are dealing with a nothing which acquires some deceptive substance only by magically spinning itself into an excess of itself. Does not today's virtual capitalist function in a similar way – his "net value" is zero, he directly operates just with the surplus, borrowing from the future?¹⁶⁹

"Cultural Capitalism"

This virtual capitalism, brought to its logical conclusion, confronts us with the Master-Signifier at its purest. Just imagine a totally "outsourced" company – let us imagine, say, that Nike "outsources" not only its material production (to Indonesian or Central American contractors), the distribution of its products, and its marketing strategy and advertising campaigns, but also the design itself, to some selected top designer agency, and, moreover, borrows money from a bank. Nike would therefore be "nothing in itself" – nothing but the pure brand name "Nike", the "empty" Master-Signifier which connotes the cultural experience pertaining to a certain "lifestyle". This is where the polemics against the fetishized role of the logo in our daily lives goes wrong: it overlooks how the efficiency of different logos is parasitical upon a certain gap (between the Master-Signifier and the chain of "normal" signifiers) which pertains to language as such – there is no such thing as a language whose terms directly designate reality, bypassing "lifestyle" connotations.

Two new labels have recently established themselves in the fruit juice (and also ice-cream) market: "forest fruit" and "multivitamin". Both are associated with a clearly identified flavour, but the point is that the connection between the label and what it designates is ultimately contingent: the label cannot be directly grounded in its designated content. A different

combination of forest fruits would produce a different flavour, and it would be possible to generate the same flavour artificially (the same, of course, goes for "multivitamin" juice), so that we can easily imagine a child who, on being given authentic home-made forest fruit juice, complains to his mother: "That's not what I want! I want the *real* forest fruit juice!" It is all too easy to dismiss this as an example of the way fixed designations function within commodity fetishism: what such examples reveal is a gap which pertains to language "as such": there is always a gap between what a word actually means (in this case, the flavour recognized as "multivitamin") and what its meaning would be were it to function literally (any juice enriched with a multitude of vitamins). The autonomous "symbolic efficiency" is so strong that it can sometimes generate effects which are almost uncannily mysterious; I clearly remember how I reacted when, for the first time, I tasted "*zuppa inglese* [sherry trifle – literally 'English soup']" Italian ice cream: although I had no idea whatsoever what this "English soup" tastes (or should taste) like, the effect of recognition was instant and spontaneous – I immediately "knew" that what I was licking tasted like *zuppa inglese*. . . .

Jeremy Rifkin has called this new stage of commodification "cultural capitalism".¹⁷⁰ In "cultural capitalism", the relationship between an object and its symbol-image is turned around: the image does not represent the product; rather, the product represents the image.¹⁷¹ We buy a product – an organic apple, for example – because it represents the image of a healthy lifestyle. This reversal is brought to its extreme when a secondary association becomes the ultimate point of reference, as in the case of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20: since the 1960s, when the second movement was used for the soundtrack of the popular Swedish sentimental love story *Elvira Madigan*, even "serious" recordings of it usually add the film's title: Mozart, Piano Concerto No. 20 ("Elvira Madigan"), so that when we buy and listen to the CD, the experience we buy is that of an insipid Romantic melodrama. . . . Along the same lines, the main reason why so many people still continue to go to "real" shops is not so much that you can "see and feel" the product itself, but that you can "enjoy browsing itself as a recreational activity".¹⁷²

As the example of buying an organic apple indicates, the very ecological protest against the ruthless capitalist exploitation of natural resources is already caught in the commodification of experiences: although ecology perceives itself as a protest against the digitalization/virtualization of our daily lives, and advocates a return to the direct experience of sensual material reality, in all its unpredictable fragility and substance, ecology itself is branded as a new lifestyle – what we are really buying when we buy "organic

food", and so on, is already a certain cultural experience, the experience of a "healthy ecological lifestyle". The same goes for every return to "reality": a recent TV advertisement shown on all the main US channels features a group of ordinary people at a barbecue with country music and dancing, with the accompanying message: "Beef. Real food for real people." The irony is that the beef offered here as the symbol of a certain lifestyle (that of "real" grass-roots working-class Americans) is much more chemically and genetically manipulated than the "organic" food consumed by "artificial" yuppies.

Ultimately, Nation itself is turning into an experiential commodity: we buy things which enable us to experience ourselves as participating in a Nationhood. . . . And I am tempted to risk even a step further, following Benedict Anderson's thesis on nations as "imagined communities":¹⁷³ what if nations were "artificial" formations from the very outset? Is not the rise of modern nations (as opposed to premodern "organic" communities) co-dependent with the rise of capitalism, that is, of commodity production? Is not "nation" the undead spectre of a Community which starts to haunt us after the market economy has killed the "living" organic communities? Nation is an "imagined community" not only in the sense that its material base is the mass media, not the direct mutual acquaintance of its members; it is "imagined" also in a more radical sense of an "imaginary supplement" to the social reality of disintegration and irresolvable antagonisms. Nation thus functioned from the very beginning as a fetish: the point is not to believe in the National Cause, but to use this belief as a prop which enables us to engage in our egotistic pursuits ("we are really doing it for our nation").

The ultimate example of not only commodity fetishism, but, in a much more literal way, fetishism itself commodified, is today's Japan, where you can buy from vending machines, alongside cans of Coke and prepacked food, panties guaranteed to have been worn by young girls. What we are witnessing today, the defining feature of "postmodern" capitalism, is the direct commodification of our experience itself: what we are buying on the market are less and less products (material objects) which we want to own, and more and more life-experiences – experiences of sex, eating, communicating, cultural consumption, participating in a lifestyle. Material objects are increasingly there simply to serve as props for this experience, which is increasingly offered for free to seduce us into buying the true "experiential commodity",¹⁷⁴ like the free cellular phones we get if we sign a one-year contract:

As cultural production comes to dominate the economy, goods increasingly take on the qualities of props. They become mere platforms or settings around

which elaborate cultural meanings are acted out. They lose their material importance and take on symbolic importance. They become less objects and more tools to help facilitate the performance of lived experiences.¹⁷⁵

This is the trend – from “Buy this DVD player, and get five DVDs for free!” to “Commit yourself to buying DVDs from us regularly (or, even better, buy access to a cable which allows you free access to digitalized movies), and we’ll give you a DVD player for free!” – or, to quote Mark Slouka’s succinct observation: “As more of the hours of our days are spent in synthetic environments . . . life itself is turned into a commodity. Someone makes it for us; we buy it from them. We become the consumers of our own lives.”¹⁷⁶ Here the logic of market exchange is brought to a kind of Hegelian self-relating identity: we no longer buy objects, we ultimately buy (the time of) our own life. Michel Foucault’s notion of turning one’s Self itself into a work of art thus finds unexpected confirmation: I buy my bodily fitness by visiting fitness clubs; I buy my spiritual enlightenment by enrolling in transcendental meditation courses; I buy my public persona by going to restaurants frequented by people with whom I want to be associated.

Although this shift may appear to be a break with the capitalist market economy, we could argue that it brings its logic to its consequent climax. The industrial market economy involves the temporal gap between the purchasing of a commodity and its consumption: from the seller’s point of view, the affair is over the moment he sells his commodity – what happens afterwards (what the purchaser does with it, the direct consumption of the commodity) does not concern him; in the commodification of experience, this gap is closed, *the consumption itself is the commodity bought*. The possibility of closing this gap, however, is inscribed into the very nominalistic logic of the modern society and its community. That is to say: since the purchaser buys a commodity for its use-value, and since this use-value can be broken down into its various components (when I buy a Land Rover, I do so in order to drive myself and other people around, *and* to signal my participation in a certain lifestyle associated with the Land Rover), there is a logical next step towards commodifying and selling these components directly (hiring a car instead of buying it, etc.). At the end of all this, therefore, is the solipsistic fact of subjective experience: since the subjective experience of individual consumption is the ultimate goal of the entire production process, it is logical to bypass the object, and to commodify and sell this experience directly. And perhaps, instead of interpreting this commodification of experiences as the result of a shift in the prevailing mode of subjectivity (from the classical bourgeois subject focused on

possessing objects, to the "postmodern" Protean subject focused on the wealth of his experiences), we should, rather, conceive of this Protean subject itself as the effect of the commodification of experiences.¹⁷⁷

This, of course, compels us to reformulate completely the classic Marxist topic of "reification" and "commodity fetishism", in so far as this topic still relies on the notion of the fetish as a concrete object whose stable presence obfuscates its social mediation. Paradoxically, fetishism reaches its acme precisely when the fetish itself is "de-materialized", turned into a fluid "immaterial" virtual entity; money fetishism will culminate with the passage to its electronic form, when the last traces of its materiality will disappear – electronic money is the third form, after "real" money which directly embodies its value (gold, silver) and paper money which, although it is a "mere sign" with no intrinsic value, still clings to its material existence. And it is only at this stage, when money becomes a purely virtual point of reference, that it finally assumes the form of an indestructible spectral presence: I owe you a thousand dollars, and no matter how many material notes I burn, I will still owe you a thousand dollars – the debt is inscribed somewhere in virtual digital space. . . . Does not the same go for warfare? Far from heralding twenty-first-century warfare, the WTC twin towers explosion and collapse in September 2001 were, rather, the last spectacular cry of twentieth-century warfare. What awaits us is something much more uncanny: the spectre of an "immaterial" war where the attack is invisible – viruses, poisons which can be anywhere and nowhere. On the level of visible material reality, nothing happens, no big explosion, yet the known universe starts to collapse; life disintegrates. . . . We are entering a new era of paranoiac warfare, in which our biggest task will be to identify the enemy and his weapons. It is only with this thorough "de-materialization", when Marx's famous thesis from *The Communist Manifesto* according to which, in capitalism, "all that is solid melts into air"¹⁷⁸ acquires a much more literal meaning than the one Marx had in mind, when not only is our material social reality dominated by the spectral/speculative movement of Capital, but this reality itself is progressively "spectralized" (the "Protean Self" instead of the old self-identical Subject, the elusive fluidity of its experiences instead of the stability of the owned objects); in short: when the usual relationship between solid material objects and fluid ideas is turned around (objects are progressively dissolved in fluid experiences, while the only stable things are virtual symbolic obligations) – it is only at this point that what Derrida called the spectral aspect of capitalism¹⁷⁹ is fully actualized.

Convincing as it may sound, however, Rifkin's vision has its limitations:

he passes all too rapidly from an "industrial" to a "post-industrial" order, in which (so we are repeatedly told) market and ownership no longer play the key role. What about the obvious all-pervasive fact that *the market is still here*? First, "cultural capitalism"'s focus on marketing experiences, not objects, has to rely on a complex material infrastructure (food, machinery, etc.); second, experiences themselves still have to be sold, and thus marketed – there are people who *own* them (in the guise of copyrights on brand names, etc.). So, instead of claiming that market and ownership no longer play the key role, we should, rather, argue that the character of ownership is changing: what matters is less and less the ownership of material objects, and more and more the ownership of "immaterial" formulas of experiences (copyrights, logos . . .).

The key insight is that *"cultural capitalism" is not a totality* – if we are to grasp it in its totality, we have to include both poles: the production of cultural experiences as well as "real" material production. What characterizes "late capitalism" is the split between the production of cultural experiences as such and its (partially invisible) material base, between the Spectacle (of theatrical experience) and its secret staging mechanisms; far from disappearing, material production is still here, transfunctionalized into the supporting mechanism for the stage production. In today's ideological perception, work itself (manual labour as opposed to the "symbolic" activity of cultural production), not sex, appears as the site of obscene indecency to be concealed from the public eye. The tradition which goes back to Wagner's *Rheingold* and Lang's *Metropolis*, the tradition in which the work goes on underground, in dark caves, culminates today in the "invisibility" of the millions of anonymous workers sweating in Third World factories, from Chinese Gulags to Indonesian or Brazilian assembly lines – the West can afford to babble about the "disappearing working class", even as its traces are easily discernible all around us: all we need to do is to look at the little label "Made in . . ." (China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Guatemala)" on mass products, from jeans to Walkmans.

What is crucial in this tradition is the equation of labour with *crime* – the idea that labour, hard work, is an indecent criminal activity to be hidden from the public eye. The only place in Hollywood cinema where we see the production process in all its intensity is when the hero of an action film penetrates the master-criminal's secret domain and finds a site of intense labour (distilling and packaging drugs, constructing a rocket that will destroy New York . . .). When, in a James Bond movie, the master-criminal, after capturing Bond, usually takes him on a tour of his illegal factory, is this not the closest Hollywood comes to the proud socialist-realist

presentation of factory production? And the function of Bond's intervention, of course, is to explode this site of production in a fireball, allowing us to return to the daily semblance of our existence in a world where the working class is "disappearing".¹⁸⁰

Today, the two superpowers, the USA and China, relate more and more as Capital and Labour. The USA is turning into a country of managerial planning, banking, services, and so on, while its "disappearing working class" (except for migrant Chicanos and others who work predominantly in the service economy) is reappearing in China, where the majority of US products, from toys to electronic hardware, are manufactured in ideal conditions for capitalist exploitation: no strikes, limited freedom of movement for the workforce, low wages. . . . Far from being simply antagonistic, the relationship between China and the USA is, at the same time, deeply symbiotic. The irony of history is that China fully deserves the title "workers' state": it is the state of the working class for American capital. Although Rifkin is aware that the cyber-commodification of experience of "cultural capitalism" affects only 20 per cent of humankind, he does not develop this *structural co-dependency* between this 20 per cent and the remaining 80 per cent.

How, then, are we to situate not only Third World manual labour sweatshops but *digital* sweatshops like the one in Bangalore, where tens of thousands of Indians programme software for Western corporations? Is it adequate to designate these Indians as the "intellectual proletariat"? Will they be the final revenge of the Third World? What are the consequences of the (for the conservative Germans, at least) unsettling fact that, after decades of importing hundreds of thousands of physical immigrant workers, Germany has now discovered that it needs at least tens of thousands of intellectual immigrant workers, mostly computer programmers? The disabling alternative of today's Marxism is what to do about the growing importance of "immaterial production" today (cyber-workers)? Do we insist that only those involved in "real" material production are the working class, or do we take the fateful step of accepting that these "symbolic workers" are the (true) proletarians of today? We should resist this step, because it obfuscates the division between immaterial and material production, the split in the working class between (as a rule, geographically separated) cyber-workers and material workers (programmers in the USA or India; sweatshops in China or Indonesia).

Perhaps it is the figure of the unemployed (jobless) person who stands for the pure proletarian today: the substantial determination of an unemployed person remains that of a worker, but he or she is prevented from either

actualizing or renouncing it, so that he or she remains suspended in the potentiality of a worker who cannot work. Perhaps today we are, in a sense, "all jobless": jobs tend to be based more and more on short-term contracts, so that the jobless state is the rule, the zero-level, and the temporary job the exception. This, then, should also be the answer to advocates of "post-industrial society" whose message to workers is that their time is over, that their very existence is obsolete, and that all they can count on is purely humanitarian compassion: there is less and less room for workers in the universe of today's capital, and we should draw the only logical conclusion from this fact. If today's "post-industrial" society needs fewer and fewer workers to reproduce itself (20 per cent of the workforce, on some accounts), then *it is not workers who are in excess, but Capital itself.*

This limitation of Rifkin's vision also accounts for the weakness of his proposed solution to our crisis – you can almost touch the discrepancy between the outstanding first part of his book and the "regression" into postmodern New Age jargon in the second part. Rifkin's premiss is culture as the communal soil of human existence, which precedes the economy: if we are able to produce and exchange objects, we have to share a common space of cultural understanding, and every material production is ultimately parasitic upon this space. As a result, when the market threatens to colonize and swallow up culture, it unknowingly drains off its own resources; we should therefore find a new balance between market and culture by revitalizing civil society and community life, affirming their autonomy against market forces – we need not only access to commodities, but even more access to our shared cultural substance. . . . This pseudo-solution cannot fail to remind us of the pseudo-Oriental New Age talk about the need to establish the balance of opposite principles – in this case, of the market economy and its cultural foundation.

Rifkin is not alone – many other analysts have also pointed out how the current expansion of global causes a progressive disintegration of societal links: the old "organic" forms of civil society and political organization are increasingly replaced with forms of interaction organized on the market model; the ultimate consequence of this stance is the idea, proposed by some neoliberal ideologues, that the political logic of decision-making as such should be replaced with the economic one – the true voting in our societies goes on every day, when, by buying a product or service, we "vote" for it against its competitors; along the same lines, we should strive to treat the state apparatus as just another "service organization" a society chooses to buy among a choice of competitors. (Is not the logical conse-

quence of this stance that the state flag itself, the symbol of national community, is turned into just another company logo?) It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that the market cannot play the role of pre-market forms of social life: a shopping mall cannot replace a political meeting proper; an opinion poll cannot serve as a substitute for genuine electoral engagement; paid courses on "spiritual growth" cannot replace real educational interaction.

Furthermore, does not the rise of so-called "gated communities" – residential quarters isolated from their environs, the upper-class equivalent of ghettos – show how the First World and the Third World can no longer be simply opposed as distinct political unities: they are developing more and more within each political unity (state, city)? So when, a decade ago, Francis Fukuyama launched his pseudo-Hegelian thesis on the "end of history", he was right, although not in the way he thought: in so far as the proper opposite of history is nature, the "end of history" means that the social process itself is more and more "naturalized", experienced as a new form of "fate", as a blind uncontrollable force. There are multiple reactions to and symptoms of this threat: desperate attempts to revive old forms of "organic" communal life, from conservative grass-roots organizations to more liberal attempts at the revival of civil society; calls for stronger state control and recourse to violent measures to maintain "law and order"; and so on. These reactions are doomed to failure precisely in so far as they are mere reactions: instead of challenging the market logic itself, they resign themselves to mere damage limitation.

A Cyberspace Lenin?

So where is Lenin in all this? According to the prevailing doxa, in the years after the October Revolution Lenin's loss of faith in the creative capacities of the masses led him to emphasize the role of science and the scientists, to rely on the authority of the expert: he hailed "the beginning of that very happy time when politics will recede into the background, . . . and engineers and agronomists will do most of the talking".¹⁸¹ Technocratic post-politics? Lenin's ideas about how the road to socialism runs through the terrain of monopoly capitalism may sound dangerously naive today:

Capitalism has created an accounting *apparatus* in the shape of the banks, syndicates, postal service, consumers' societies, and office employees' unions. *Without big banks socialism would be impossible.* . . . Our task is here merely to *lop off* what *capitalistically mutilates* this excellent apparatus, to make it

even bigger, even more democratic, even more comprehensive. . . . This will be country-wide *book-keeping*, country-wide *accounting* of the production and distribution of goods, this will be, so to speak, something in the nature of the *skeleton* of socialist society.¹⁸²

Is this not the most radical expression of Marx's notion of the *general intellect* regulating all social life in a transparent way, of a post-political world in which the "administration of people" is supplanted by the "administration of things"? It is easy, of course, to play against this quote the tune of the "critique of instrumental reason" and "administered world [*verwaltete Welt*]:" the "totalitarian" potential is inscribed in this very form of total social control. It is easy to observe sarcastically that in the Stalinist epoch, the apparatus of social administration did actually become "*even bigger*". Furthermore, is not this post-political vision the very opposite of the Maoist notion of the eternity of the class struggle ("everything is political")?

However, are things really so unambiguous? What if we replaced the (obviously dated) example of the central bank with the World Wide Web, today's perfect candidate for the General Intellect? Dorothy Sayers claimed that Aristotle's *Poetics* is in fact the theory of the detective novel *avant la lettre* – since poor Aristotle didn't yet know about the detective novel, he had to refer to the only examples at his disposal, the tragedies. . . .¹⁸³ Along the same lines, Lenin was in fact developing the theory of the role of the World Wide Web, but since the World Wide Web was unknown to him, he had to refer to the unfortunate central banks. Consequently, can we also say that "*without the World Wide Web socialism would be impossible*. . . . Our task is here merely to *lop off* what *capitalistically mutilates* this excellent apparatus, to make it *even bigger*, even more democratic, even more comprehensive"? In this context, I am tempted to revive the old, opprobrious and half-forgotten Marxian dialectics of the productive forces and the relations of production: it is already a cliché to claim that, ironically, it was this very dialectics which buried Really Existing Socialism: Socialism was unable to sustain the passage from industrial to post-industrial economy.

One of the tragicomic victims of the disintegration of Socialism in ex-Yugoslavia was an old Communist apparatchik interviewed by Ljubljana student radio in 1988. The Communists knew they were losing power, so they desperately tried to please everyone. When this old cadre was asked provocative questions about his sex life by the student reporters, he desperately tried to prove that he was in touch with the younger generation; since, however, the only language he had at his disposal was wooden bureaucrat-

ese, the result was an uncanny obscene mixture – statements like “Sexuality is an important component of my daily activity. Touching my wife between her thighs gives me great new incentives for my work of building socialism.” And when we read East German official documents from the 1970s and early 1980s, formulating their project of turning the GDR into a kind of Silicon Valley of the Eastern European Socialist bloc, we cannot avoid the same impression of a tragicomic gap between form and content: while they were fully aware that digitalization was the way of the future, they approached it in terms of the old Socialist logic of industrial planning – their very words betrayed the fact that they did not understand what was really going on, the social consequences of digitalization.

However, does capitalism really provide the “natural” frame of relations of production for the digital universe? Is there not also, in the World Wide Web, an explosive potential for capitalism itself? Is not the lesson of the Microsoft monopoly precisely the Leninist one: instead of fighting this monopoly through the state apparatus (remember the court-ordered splitting-up of the Microsoft Corporation), would it not be more “logical” simply to *nationalize* it, making it freely accessible?¹⁸⁴ So today, I am thus tempted to paraphrase Lenin’s well-known slogan “Socialism = electrification + the power of the soviets”: “Socialism = free access to the Internet + *the power of the soviets*.” (The second element is crucial, since it specifies the only social organization within which the Internet can realize its liberating potential; without it, we would have a new version of crude technological determinism.)

The key antagonism of the so-called new (digital) industries is thus how we can maintain the form of (private) property, the only form within which the logic of profit can prevail (consider the Napster problem: Napster was an organization offering software for the free circulation of copyright recordings of pop music). And do not the legal complications in biogenetics point in the same direction? The crucial element of the new international trade agreements is the “protection of intellectual property”: in a merger, whenever a big First World company takes over a Third World company, the first thing they do is close down the research department. Phenomena emerge here which subject the notion of property to extraordinary dialectical paradoxes: in India, local communities suddenly discover that medical practices and materials they have been using for centuries are now owned by American companies, so they have to be bought from them; now that the biogenetic companies are patenting genes, we are all discovering that parts of ourselves, our genetic components, are already under copyright, owned by others.

The outcome of this crisis of private property and the means of production, however, is by no means guaranteed – this is where we should take into account the ultimate paradox of Stalinist society: against capitalism – which is a class society, albeit in principle egalitarian, without direct hierarchical divisions – “mature” Stalinism is a classless society articulated in precisely defined hierarchical groups (top *nomenklatura*, technical intelligence, the army . . .). This means that even for Stalinism, the classic Marxist notion of the class struggle is no longer adequate to describe its hierarchy and domination: in the Soviet Union from the late 1920s onwards, the key social division was defined not by property, but by direct access to power mechanisms and to the privileged material and cultural conditions of life (food, accommodation, healthcare, freedom of travel, education). And perhaps the ultimate irony of history will be that, just as Lenin's vision of “central bank Socialism” can be properly read only retrospectively, from today's World Wide Web, the Soviet Union provided the first model of a developed “post-property” society, of the true “late capitalism” in which the ruling class will be defined by direct access to the (informational, administrative) means of social power and control, and to other material and social privileges: the point will no longer be to own companies, but directly to run them, to have the right to use a private jet, to have access to the best healthcare, and so on – privileges which will be acquired not by owning property, but by other (educational, managerial, etc.) mechanisms.

This, then, is the approaching crisis which will hold out the perspective of a new emancipatory struggle, of the complete reinvention of the political: not the old Marxist choice between private property and its nationalization, but the choice between a hierarchical and an egalitarian post-property society. Here, the old Marxist thesis on how bourgeois freedom and equality are based on private property and market conditions takes an unexpected twist: what market relations enable are (at least) “formal” freedom and “legal” equality: since social hierarchy can be sustained through property, there is no need for its direct political assertion.

If, then, the role of property is diminishing, the danger is that its gradual disappearance will create the need for some new (racist or expert-rule) form of hierarchy, directly founded in individual qualities, and thus cancelling even the “formal” bourgeois equality and freedom. In short, in so far as the determining factor of social power will be inclusion in/exclusion from the privileged set (of access to knowledge, control, etc.), we can expect an increase in various modes of exclusion, up to downright racism. The first clear sign of this is the new alliance between politics (government) and natural sciences: in the newly emerging biopolitics, the government is

instigating an "embryo industry", a control over our genetic legacy that is outside democratic control, justified by an offer no one can refuse: "Don't you want to be cured of cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's . . . ?" While politicians are making such "scientific" promises, however, scientists themselves remain deeply sceptical, often emphasizing the need for decisions to be reached through a wider social consensus.

The ultimate problem of genetic engineering lies not in its unpredictable consequences (what if we create monsters – for example, humans with no sense of moral responsibility?) but in the way biogenetic engineering fundamentally affects our notion of education: instead of educating a child to be a good musician, will it be possible to manipulate his or her genes so that he or she will be "spontaneously" inclined towards music? Instead of instilling in a child a sense of discipline, will it be possible to manipulate his or her genes so that he or she will "spontaneously" tend to obey orders?

One of the most nightmarish prospects opened up by the identification of the genome is that of a DNA warfare which will give new meaning to the notion of "ethnic cleansing": it is well known (although not widely reported) that secret army agencies all over the world are already using the latest biogenetic results to experiment with lethal chemical substances which, when disseminated, will affect only members of a certain ethnic group. The situation here is radically open – if two classes of people gradually emerge, the "naturally born" ones and the genetically manipulated ones, it is not even clear in advance which class will occupy the higher level in the social hierarchy: will the "naturals" consider the manipulated ones as mere tools, not truly free beings, or will the much more perfect manipulated ones consider "naturals" as belonging to a lower rung of evolution?

So the struggle ahead has no guaranteed outcome – it will confront us with an unprecedented need to act, since it will concern not only a new mode of production, but a radical rupture in what it means to be a human being.¹⁸⁵ Today, we can already discern the signs of a kind of general unease – recall the series of protests usually listed under the name "Seattle". The ten-year honeymoon of triumphant global capitalism is over; the long-overdue "seven-year itch" is here – witness the panicky reactions of the mass media, which, from *Time* magazine to CNN, started all of a sudden to warn us about the Marxists manipulating the crowd of "honest" protesters. The problem now is the strictly Leninist one: how do we actualize the media's accusations? How do we invent the organizational structure which will confer on this unrest the form of the universal political demand? Otherwise, the momentum will be lost, and all that will remain

will be marginal disturbances, perhaps organized like a new Greenpeace, with a certain efficiency, but also strictly limited goals, marketing strategy, and so on. In short, without the form of the Party, the movement remains caught in the vicious cycle of "resistance", one of the big catchwords of "postmodern" politics, which likes to oppose "good" resistance to power to a "bad" revolutionary takeover of power – the last thing we want is the domestication of anti-globalization into just another "site of resistance" against capitalism.

As a result, the key "Leninist" lesson today is: politics without the organizational form of the Party is politics without politics, so the answer to those who want just the (quite adequately named) "New Social Movements" is the same as the Jacobins' answer to the Girondin compromisers: "You want revolution without a revolution!" Today's dilemma is that there are two ways open for sociopolitical engagement: either play the game of the system, engage in the "long march through the institutions", or become active in new social movements, from feminism through ecology to anti-racism. And, again, the limit of these movements is that they are not political in the sense of the Universal Singular: they are "single-issue movements" which lack the dimension of universality – that is to say, they do not relate to the social totality.

Against Post-politics

In "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", Marx deploys something like the logic of hegemony: at the climax of revolutionary enthusiasm, a "universal class" emerges, that is, some particular class imposes itself as universal, and thereby engenders global enthusiasm, since it stands for society as such against the *ancien régime*, antisocial crime as such (like the bourgeoisie in the French Revolution). What then follows is the disillusion so sarcastically described by Marx: the day after, the gap between the Universal and the Particular becomes visible again; capitalist vulgar profit emerges as the actuality of universal freedom, and so on.¹⁸⁶

For Marx, of course, the only universal class whose singularity (exclusion from the society of property) guarantees its actual universality is the proletariat. This is what Ernesto Laclau rejects in his version of the logic of hegemony: for Laclau, the short circuit between the Universal and the Particular is *always* illusory, temporary, a kind of "transcendental paralogism".¹⁸⁷ However, is Marx's proletariat really the negative of positive full essential humanity, or "only" the gap of universality as such, irrecoverable

in any positivity.²³⁸⁸ In Alain Badiou's terms, the proletariat is not another particular class, but a singularity of the social structure and, as such, the universal class, the non-class among the classes.

What is crucial here is the properly temporal-dialectical tension between the Universal and the Particular. When Marx says that in Germany, because of the compromised pettiness of the bourgeoisie, it is too late for partial bourgeois emancipation, and that for this reason, in Germany, the condition of every particular emancipation is *universal* emancipation, one way to read this is to see in it the assertion of the universal "normal" paradigm and its exception: in the "normal" case, partial (false) bourgeois emancipation will be followed by universal emancipation through the proletarian revolution; while in Germany, the "normal" order gets mixed up. There is, however, another, much more radical way to read it: the very German exception, the German bourgeoisie's inability to achieve partial emancipation, opens up the space for a possible *universal* emancipation.

The dimension of universality thus emerges (only) where the "normal" order that links the succession of particulars is disrupted. For this reason, there is no "normal" revolution; each revolutionary explosion is grounded in an exception, in a short circuit of "too late" and "too early". The French Revolution occurred because France was not able to follow the "normal" English path of capitalist development; the very "normal" English path resulted in the "unnatural" division of labour between the capitalists, who held socioeconomic power, and the aristocracy, which was left with political power. And, according to Marx, this was how Germany produced the ultimate revolution in thought (German Idealism as the philosophical counterpart of the French Revolution): precisely because it lacked a political revolution.

The structural necessity of this non-contemporaneity, of this discrepancy, is what gets lost in Habermas: the basic point of his notion of "modernity as an unfinished project" is that the project of modernity contained two facets: the development of "instrumental reason" (scientific-technological manipulation and domination of nature) and the emergence of intersubjective communication free of constraints; hitherto, only the first facet has been fully deployed, and our task is to bring the project of modernity to completion by actualizing the potential of the second facet. What, however, if this discrepancy is structural? What if we cannot simply supplement instrumental Reason with communicational Reason, since the primacy of instrumental Reason is constitutive of modern Reason as such? Habermas is fully consistent in applying the same logic to today's globalization – his thesis is that of "globalization as an unfinished project":

The discrepancy between progressive economic integration and the political integration which lags behind can be overcome only through a politics which aims at constructing a higher-level capacity of political acting which would be able to keep pace with deregulated markets.¹⁸⁹

In short, there is no need to fight capitalist globalization directly – we need only to supplement it with an adequate political globalization (a stronger central political body in Strasbourg; the imposition of pan-European social legislation, etc.). However, what if, again, modern capitalism, which generates economic globalization, cannot simply be supplemented by political globalization? What if such an extension of globalization to the political project forced us radically to redefine the contours of economic globalization itself?¹⁹⁰

In short, Habermas's basic attitude is nothing less than a *disavowal of the twentieth-century* – he acts as if the twentieth century, in its specific dimension, *did not take place*: as if what happened in it were basically just contingent detours, so that the underlying conceptual narrative – that of enlightened democratic liberalism, with its indefinite progress – can be told without them.¹⁹¹ Along the same lines, in order to characterize the demise of the Socialist regimes in 1990, Habermas coined the term “catch-up revolution”:¹⁹² the West (Western liberal democracy) has nothing to learn from the Eastern European Communist experience, since in 1990, these countries simply caught up with the social development of the Western liberal-democratic regimes. Habermas thereby writes off this experience as simply accidental, denying any fundamental structural relationship between Western democracy and the rise of “totalitarianism” – any notion that “totalitarianism” is a symptom of the inner tensions of the democratic project itself.

The same goes for Habermas's treatment of Fascism: against Adorno's and Horkheimer's notion of Fascist “barbarism” as the ineluctable outcome of the “dialectic of Enlightenment”, the Fascist regimes are for him a contingent detour (delay, regression) which does not affect the basic logic of modernization and Enlightenment. The task is thus simply to abolish this detour, not to rethink the Enlightenment project itself. This victory over “totalitarianism”, however, is a Pyrrhic one: what Habermas needs here is a Hitchcockian lesson (remember Hitchcock's claim that a film is only as interesting as its main evil character). Dismissing the “totalitarian” deadlock as a mere contingent detour leaves us with a comfortable, but ultimately *impotent*, position of someone who, unperturbed by the catastrophes around him, clings to the basic rationality of the universe.

The promise of the "Seattle" movement lies in the fact that it is the very opposite of its usual media designation (the "anti-globalization protest"): it is the first kernel of a new *global* movement, global with regard to its content (it aims at a global confrontation with today's capitalism) as well as its form (it is a global movement, a mobile international network ready to intervene anywhere from Seattle to Prague). It is more global than "global capitalism", since it brings into the game its victims – that is, those who are excluded from capitalist globalization, as well as those who are included in a way which reduces them to proletarian misery.¹⁹³ Perhaps I should take the risk here of applying Hegel's old distinction between "abstract" and "concrete" universality: capitalist globalization is "abstract", focused on the speculative movement of Capital; whereas the "Seattle" movement stands for "concrete universality", both for the totality of global capitalism *and* for its excluded dark side. The *reality* of capitalist globalization is best exemplified by the victory in June 2001 of the Russian nuclear lobby, which forced the parliament's decision that Russia would import nuclear waste from developed Western countries.

Here, Lenin's reproach to liberals is crucial: they merely exploit the working classes' discontent to strengthen their position *vis-à-vis* the conservatives, instead of identifying with it to the end.¹⁹⁴ Is this not also true of today's Left liberals? They like to evoke racism, ecology, workers' grievances, and so on, to score points over the conservatives – *without endangering the system*. Remember how, in Seattle, Bill Clinton himself deftly referred to the protesters on the streets outside, reminding the assembled leaders inside the guarded palaces that they should listen to the demonstrators' message (the message which, of course, Clinton interpreted, depriving it of its subversive sting, which he attributed to the dangerous extremists introducing chaos and violence into the majority of peaceful protesters). This Clintonesque stance later developed into an elaborate "carrot-and-stick" strategy of containment: on the one hand, paranoia (the notion that there is a dark Marxist plot lurking behind it); on the other hand, in Genoa, none other than Berlusconi provided food and shelter for the anti-globalization demonstrators – on condition that they "behaved properly", and did not disturb the official event. It is the same with all New Social Movements, up to the Zapatistas in Chiapas: establishment is always ready to "listen to their demands", depriving them of their proper political sting. The system is by definition ecumenical, open, tolerant, ready to "listen" to all – even if you insist on your demands, they are deprived of their universal political sting by the very form of negotiation. The true Third Way we have to look

for is *this* third way between institutionalized parliamentary politics and the New Social Movements.

As a sign of this emerging uneasiness and need for a true Third Way, it is interesting to see how, in a recent interview, even a conservative liberal like John le Carré had to admit that, as a consequence of the "love affair between Thatcher and Reagan" in most of the developed Western countries, and especially in the United Kingdom, "the social infrastructure has practically stopped working"; this then leads him to make a direct plea for, at least, "re-nationalizing the railways and water".¹²⁵ We are in fact approaching a state in which (selective) private affluence is accompanied by a global (ecological, infrastructural) degradation which will soon start to affect us all: the quality of water is not a problem confined to the UK – a recent survey showed that the entire reservoir from which the Los Angeles area gets its water is already so polluted by man-made toxic chemicals that it will soon be impossible to make it drinkable even through the use of the most advanced filters. Le Carré expressed his fury at Blair for accepting the basic Thatcherite co-ordinates in very precise terms: "I thought last time, in 1997, that he was lying when he denied he was a socialist. The worst thing I can say about him is that he was telling the truth."¹²⁶ More precisely, even if, in 1997, Blair was "subjectively" lying, even if his secret agenda was to save whatever can be salvaged of the socialist agenda, he was "objectively" telling the truth: his (eventual) subjective socialist conviction was a self-deception, an illusion which enabled him to fulfil his "objective" role, that of completing the Thatcherite "revolution".

How, then, are we to respond to the eternal dilemma of the radical Left: should we strategically support centre-Left figures like Bill Clinton against the conservatives, or should we adopt the stance of "It doesn't matter, we shouldn't get involved in these fights – in a way, it's even better if the Right is directly in power, since, in this way, it will be easier for the people to see the truth of the situation"? The answer is a variation on Stalin's answer to the question: "Which deviation is worse, the Rightist or the Leftist one?": *they are both worse*. What we should do is adopt the stance of the proper dialectical paradox: in principle, of course, one should be indifferent to the struggle between the liberal and conservative poles of today's official politics – however, *one can only afford to be indifferent if the liberal option is in power*. Otherwise, the price may appear much too high – consider the catastrophic consequences of the German Communist Party's decision in the early 1930s not to focus on the struggle against the Nazis, with the justification that the Nazi dictatorship was the last desperate stage of

capitalist domination, which would open the eyes of the working class, shattering their belief in "bourgeois" democratic institutions.

Along these lines, even Claude Lefort, whom no one can accuse of Communist sympathies, recently made a crucial point in his answer to François Furet: today's liberal consensus is the result of a hundred and fifty years of Leftist workers' struggle and pressure upon the State; it incorporated demands which were dismissed by liberals with horror a hundred years ago – even less.¹⁹⁷ If we need proof, we should simply look at the list of the demands at the end of the *Communist Manifesto*: apart from two or three of them (which, of course, are the crucial ones), all the others are today part of the consensus (at least the disintegrating Welfare State consensus): universal franchise; free education; universal healthcare and care for the elderly; a limitation on child labour. . . . In short, today's "bourgeois democracy" is the result not of liberalism's intrinsic development, but of the proletarian class struggle.

It is true that, today, it is the radical populist Right which usually breaks the (still) prevailing liberal-democratic consensus, gradually making acceptable hitherto excluded ideas (the partial justification of Fascism, the need to constrain abstract citizenship on grounds of ethnic identity, etc.). However, the hegemonic liberal democracy is using this fact to blackmail the Left radicals: "We shouldn't play with fire; against the new Rightist onslaught, we should insist more than ever on the democratic consensus – any criticism of it, wittingly or unwittingly, helps the New Right!" This is the key line of separation: we should reject this blackmail, taking the risk of disturbing the liberal consensus, even up to questioning the very notion of democracy.

The ultimate answer to the criticism that radical Left proposals are utopian should thus be that, today, the true utopia is the belief that the present liberal-democratic capitalist consensus can go on indefinitely, without radical change. We are therefore back with the old '68 slogan "*Soyons réalistes, demandons l'impossible!*": in order to be a true "realist", we must consider breaking out of the constraints of what appears "possible" (or, as we usually put it, "feasible").

If there is a lesson to be learned from Silvio Berlusconi's electoral victory in May 2001, it is that the true utopians are the Third Way Leftists – why? The main temptation to be avoided apropos of Berlusconi's victory in Italy is to use it as a pretext for yet another exercise in the tradition of the conservative-Leftist *Kulturkritik* (from Adorno to Virilio), which bemoans the stupidity of the manipulated masses, and the eclipse of the autonomous individual capable of critical reflection. This, however, does not mean that the consequences of this victory are to be underestimated. Hegel said that

all historical events have to happen twice: Napoleon had to lose twice, and so on. And it seems that Berlusconi also had to win the election twice for us to become aware of the full consequences of this event: the first time can be written off as a mere accidental curiosity, while the second demonstrates that we are dealing with a deeper necessity.

So what did Berlusconi achieve? His victory provides a depressing lesson about the role of morality in politics: the ultimate outcome of the great moral-political catharsis – the anti-corruption campaign of “clean hands” which, a decade ago, ruined Christian Democracy, and with it the ideological polarity of Christian Democrats and Communists which dominated postwar Italian politics – is Berlusconi in power. It is something like Rupert Murdoch winning a British election: a political movement run as a business-publicity enterprise. Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* is no longer a political party, but – as its name indicates – more like a sports fan club. If, in the good old Socialist countries, sport was directly politicized (remember the DDR's enormous investment in its top athletes), now, politics itself is turned into a sporting contest. And the parallel goes even further: if the Communist regimes nationalized industry, Berlusconi is, in a way, privatizing the state itself. For this reason, all the Leftists' and liberal democrats' worry about the danger of neo-Fascism lurking beneath Berlusconi's victory is misplaced and, in a way, much too optimistic: Fascism is still a determinate political project, while in the case of Berlusconi, there is ultimately *nothing* lurking beneath, no secret ideological project, just the sheer assurance that things will function, that he will do better. In short, Berlusconi is *post-politics at its purest*.¹⁹⁸ The ultimate sign of “post-politics” in all Western countries is the growth of a managerial approach to government: government is reconceived as a managerial function, deprived of its properly political dimension.

The true stake of today's political struggles is: which of the two former main parties, the conservatives or the “moderate Left”, will succeed in presenting itself as truly embodying the post-ideological spirit, against the other party dismissed as “still caught in the old ideological machine”? If the 1980s belonged to the conservatives, the lesson of the 1990s seemed to be that, in our late capitalist societies, Third Way social democracy (or, even more relevantly, post-Communism in the ex-Socialist countries) actually functions as the representative of capital as such, in its totality, against its particular factions represented by the various “conservative” parties, which then, in order to present themselves as addressing the entire population, also try to satisfy the particular demands of the anti-capitalist strata (say, of domestic “patriotic” middle-class workers threatened by cheap immigrant labour – recall the CDU, which, against the Social Democratic proposal

that Germany should import 50,000 Indian computer programmers, launched the infamous slogan "Kinder statt Inder! / Children rather than Indians!"). This economic constellation explains to a great extent how and why Third Way Social Democrats can simultaneously stand both for the interests of big capital and for the multiculturalist tolerance which aims at protecting the interests of ethnic minorities.

The Third Way dream of the Left was that the pact with the Devil might work out: OK, no revolution, we accept capitalism as the only game in town, but at least we will be able to save some of the achievements of the Welfare State, and build a society that is tolerant towards sexual, religious and ethnic minorities. If the trend announced by Berlusconi's victory persists, a much darker prospect is discernible on the horizon: a world in which the unlimited rule of capital is supplemented not by Left-liberal tolerance, but by a typical post-political mixture of pure publicity spectacle and Moral Majority concerns (remember that the Vatican gave Berlusconi its tacit support!). If there is a hidden ideological agenda to Berlusconi's "post-politics", it is – to put it bluntly – the disintegration of the fundamental post-World War II democratic pact. In recent years, there have already been numerous signs that the post-World War II anti-Fascist pact is slowly cracking: from "revisionist" historians to the New Right populists, so-called "taboos" are disappearing. . . . Paradoxically, those who undermine this pact refer to the very liberal universalized logic of victimization: sure, there were victims of Fascism, but what about other victims of the Postwar expulsions? What about the Germans evicted from their homes in Czechoslovakia? Do they not also have some right to (financial) compensation?

The immediate future belongs not to outright Rightist provocateurs like Jean-Marie Le Pen or Pat Buchanan, but to people like Berlusconi and Haider: these advocates of global capital in the sheep's clothing of populist nationalism. The struggle between them and the Third Way Left is the struggle over who will be more effective in counteracting the excesses of global capitalism: Third Way multiculturalist tolerance or populist homophobia. Will this boring alternative be Europe's answer to globalization? Berlusconi is therefore post-politics at its worst: even *The Economist*, that staunch voice of anti-Left liberalism, was accused by Berlusconi of being part of a "Communist plot" when it asked some searching questions about how a convicted criminal can become Prime Minister! What this means is that, for Berlusconi, all opposition to his post-politics is rooted in a "Communist plot". And in a way, he is right: this is the only true opposition; all the others – liberals or Third Way Leftists – are basically playing the same game as he is, only with a different gloss. Is the Third Way

Left really able to offer a global alternative to Berlusconi's politics? And the hope is that Berlusconi will also be right about the second aspect of his paranoiac cognitive mapping: that his victory will give an impetus to the more radical Left.

Return versus Repetition

Where, then, are we today? The entire history of the Soviet Union can be comprehended as analogous to Freud's famous image of Rome, a city whose history is deposited in its present in the guise of different layers of archaeological remainders, each new level covering up the preceding one, like (another model) the seven layers of Troy; so that history, in its regress towards ever older epochs, proceeds like an archaeologist, discovering new layers by probing deeper and deeper into the ground. Was not the (official ideological) history of the Soviet Union the same accumulation of exclusions, of turning people into non-persons, of a retroactive rewriting of history?

Quite logically, "de-Stalinization" was indicated by the opposite process of "rehabilitation", of admitting "errors" in the past politics of the Party. The gradual "rehabilitation" of the demonized Bolshevik ex-leaders can thus serve as perhaps the most sensitive index of how far (and in what direction) the "de-Stalinization" of the Soviet Union was going. The first to be rehabilitated were the senior military leaders shot in 1937 (Tukhachevsky and others); the last to be rehabilitated, in the Gorbachev era, just before the collapse of the Communist regime, was Bukharin – this last rehabilitation, of course, was a clear sign of the turn towards capitalism: the Bukharin who was rehabilitated was the one who, in the 1920s, advocated a pact between workers and peasants (owners of their land), launching the famous slogan "Enrich yourselves!", and opposed forced collectivization. Significantly, however, one figure was *never* rehabilitated, excluded by the Communists as well as by the anti-Communist Russian nationalists: Trotsky, the "wandering Jew" of the Revolution, the true anti-Stalin, the arch-enemy, opposing "permanent revolution" to the idea of "building socialism in one country".

I am tempted here to risk a parallel with Freud's distinction between primordial (founding) and secondary repression in the Unconscious: Trotsky's exclusion amounted to something like the "primordial repression" of the Soviet State, to something which can never be readmitted through "rehabilitation", since the entire Order relied on this negative gesture of exclusion.¹⁹⁹ Trotsky is the one for whom there is no room either in pre-1990 Really Existing Socialism or in post-1990 Really Existing Capitalism,

in which even those who are nostalgic for Communism do not know what to do with Trotsky's permanent revolution – perhaps the signifier "Trotsky" is the most appropriate designation of that which is worth redeeming in the Leninist legacy. Here we should look at "Hölderlin's Hyperion", a bizarre but crucial short essay by Georg Lukács written in 1935, in which Lukács praises Hegel's endorsement of the Napoleonic Thermidor against Hölderlin's intransigent fidelity to the heroic revolutionary utopia:

Hegel comes to terms with the post-Thermidorian epoch and the close of the revolutionary period of bourgeois development, and he builds up his philosophy precisely on an understanding of this new turning-point in world history. Hölderlin makes no compromise with the post-Thermidorian reality; he remains faithful to the old revolutionary ideal of renovating "polis" democracy and is broken by a reality which has no place for his ideals, not even on the level of poetry and thought.²⁰⁰

Here Lukács is referring to Marx's notion that the heroic period of the French Revolution was the necessary enthusiastic breakthrough followed by the unheroic phase of market relations: the true social function of the Revolution was to establish the conditions for the prosaic reign of the bourgeois economy, and the true heroism lies not in blindly clinging to the early revolutionary enthusiasm, but in recognizing "the rose in the cross of the present", as Hegel liked to paraphrase Luther – that is, in abandoning the position of the Beautiful Soul, and fully accepting the present as the only possible domain of actual freedom. Thus it was this "compromise" with social reality which enabled Hegel to take his crucial philosophical step forward: that of overcoming the proto-Fascist notion of "organic" community in his *System der Sittlichkeit* manuscript, and engaging in a dialectical analysis of the antagonisms of bourgeois civil society. (That is the properly dialectical paradox of the proto-Fascist endeavour to return to a premodern "organic" community: far from being simply "reactionary", Fascist "feudal Socialism" is a kind of compromise solution, an *ersatz* attempt to build socialism within the constraints of capitalism itself.) It is obvious that Lukács's analysis is deeply allegorical: it was written a couple of months after Trotsky launched his thesis that Stalinism was the Thermidor of the October Revolution. Lukács's text should therefore be read as an answer to Trotsky: he accepts Trotsky's characterization of Stalin's regime as "Thermidorian", giving it a positive twist – instead of bemoaning the loss of utopian energy, we should, in a heroically resigned way, accept its consequences as the only actual space of social progress.

For Marx, of course, the sobering "morning after" which follows the

revolutionary intoxication indicates the original limitation of the "bourgeois" revolutionary project, the falsity of its promise of universal freedom: the "truth" of universal human rights are the rights of commerce and private property. If we read Lukács's endorsement of the Stalinist Thermidor, it implies (arguably against his conscious intention) an utterly pessimistic anti-Marxist perspective: the proletarian revolution itself is also characterized by the gap between its illusory universal assertion of freedom and the ensuing awakening in the new relations of domination and exploitation, which means that the Communist project of realizing "actual freedom" failed.

What, then, are we to do in these circumstances? The problem with those few remaining orthodox "Leninists" who behave as if we can simply recycle the old Leninism, and continue to talk about the corrupted leaders' betrayal of the working masses' revolutionary impulses, is that it is not quite clear from which subjective position of enunciation they speak: they either engage themselves in passionate discussions about the past (demonstrating with admirable erudition how and where anti-Communist "Leninologists" falsify Lenin, etc.), in which case they avoid the question of *why (apart from a purely historical interest) this matters at all today*; or, the closer they get to contemporary politics, the closer they are to adopting a purely jargonistic pose which threatens no one.

When, in the last months of 2000, the Milošević regime in Serbia was finally toppled, many Marxists in the West raised the question: "What about the coal miners whose strike led to the disruption of the electricity supply, and thus, in effect, brought Milošević down? Was that not a genuine workers' movement, which was then manipulated by the politicians, who were nationalists or corrupted by the CIA?" The same symptomatic point emerges apropos of every new social upheaval (like the disintegration of Real Socialism ten years ago): in each of these cases, they identify some working-class movement which allegedly displayed a true revolutionary – or, at least, Socialist – potential, but was first exploited and then betrayed by pro-capitalist and/or nationalist forces. In this way, we can continue to dream that Revolution is round the corner: all we need is the authentic leadership which would be able to organize the workers' revolutionary potential. If we can believe its members, Solidarność was originally a workers' democratic-socialist movement, later "betrayed" by its leadership, which was corrupted by the Church and the CIA.

There is, of course, an element of truth in this approach: the ultimate irony of the disintegration of Communism was that the great revolts (the GDR in 1953; Hungary in 1956; Solidarity in Poland) were originally *workers' uprisings* which only later paved the way for the classic "anti-

Communist" movements – before succumbing to the "external" enemy, the regime got a message about its falsity from those whom these "workers' and peasants' states" evoked as their own social base. This very fact, however, also demonstrates how the workers' revolt lacked any substantial socialist commitment: in all cases, once the movement exploded, it was smoothly hegemonized by the standard "bourgeois" ideology (political freedom, private property, national sovereignty, etc.).

This mysterious working class whose revolutionary thrust is repeatedly thwarted by treacherous nationalist and/or liberal politicians is the *fetish* of some of the remaining Trotskyists, these actual Hölderlins of today's Marxism – the singular point of disavowal which enables them to sustain their overall interpretation of the state of things. Their fetishist fixation on the old Marxist-Leninist framework is the exact opposite of the fashionable talk about "new paradigms", about how we should leave behind old "zombie-concepts" like working class, and so on – the two complementary ways of avoiding the effort to think the New which is emerging today. The first thing to do here is to cancel this disavowal by fully admitting that this "authentic" working class simply *does not exist*.²⁰¹ And if we add to this position four further ones, we get a pretty clear picture of the sad predicament of today's Left: the acceptance of Cultural Wars (feminist, gay, anti-racist, etc., multiculturalist struggles) as the dominant terrain of emancipatory politics; the purely defensive stance of protecting the achievements of the Welfare State; the naïve belief in cyber-communism (the idea that the new media are directly creating conditions for a new authentic community); and, finally, the Third Way, capitulation itself. Let us just hope that the present anti-globalization movement will introduce a new dimension by, finally, again conceiving of capitalism neither as a solution nor as one of the problems, but as *the* problem itself.

The reference to Lenin should serve as the signifier of the effort to break the vicious circle of these false options. The first thing to do is to learn to decode the way the basic political conflict continues to function as the secret point of reference of even seemingly "apolitical" antagonisms.

Let us take Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Decalogue*, a series conspicuous for its "apolitical" stance: the first thing that strikes the viewer who is aware of the historical circumstances in which *Decalogue* was shot is the total absence of any reference to politics: although the series was shot in the most turbulent period of post-World War II Polish history (the state of emergency imposed by General Jaruzelski's *coup d'état* in order to curb Solidarity), Kieslowski resisted the temptation to score easy points by spicing up the story with direct dissident thrills. A close analysis, however, demonstrates

how this very avoidance of explicit politicization was, in its proper historical context, a political gesture *par excellence* – the gesture of rejecting not only the ruling Communist regime but also the “dissident” opposition, at least in its classic anti-Communist form. Furthermore, the political dimension is not simply absent, but *actively erased*: in so far as the conflict between science and religion in *Decalogue 1* is the encoded formulation of the *political struggle between* (“scientific” atheist) Communists and (religious) Solidarity dissidents,²⁰² the catastrophe in which science and religion suspend each other announces the depoliticization of the universe of the *Decalogue*, a limitation to the world of middle-class privacy, with its typical traumas (ethical choices, fidelity, abortion).

From here, I am tempted to return to Kieslowski's earlier *Blind Chance* – this is the film's storyline. Witek runs to catch a train. Three variations follow on how such a seemingly banal incident could influence the rest of his life. One: he catches the train, meets an honest Communist, and becomes a Party activist himself. Two: while running for the train, he knocks down a railway guard, is arrested, brought to trial and sentenced to unpaid labour in a park, where he meets someone from the opposition. He, in turn, becomes a militant dissident. Three: he simply misses the train, returns to his interrupted studies, marries a fellow student and leads a peaceful life as a doctor unwilling to get mixed up in politics. He is sent abroad to a symposium; the plane he is on explodes in midair. . . . In so far as there are reasons to claim that the only “true” story is the third one (the first two being just Witek's hallucinated alternatives when he is approaching death), the film indicates the escape into privacy after the deadlock of the struggle between Communists and dissidents – in short, *Blind Chance* provides the key to decode *Decalogue 1*.

However, is this triad really complete, are the options really exhausted, as the final catastrophe (the hero's death in the plane crash) seems to indicate, functioning as a kind of closure? What if there is a *fourth* option: repoliticization *beyond* the opposition Communism/dissidence, and its sublation in post-Communist post-political society?²⁰³ This politicization is not simply external to the previous one; its base should, rather, be conceived as the intersection of the two apparently opposite poles of Communism and dissidence. Does not *Decalogue 10* point in this direction, with its society of philatelists, a kind of secret authentic community, thriving under Socialism because it is allowed contact with foreign countries?²⁰⁴ Are not these philatelists, then, the model for other societies in which the communal spirit survives, from psychoanalytic associations to subversive half-illegal political organizations? There is yet another aspect to this: Fredric Jameson has pointed out

how, today, the standard doxa against conspiracy theories (they are the political epistemology of the poor, projecting their perplexity into the fantasy of a secret enemy which pulls the strings, and the reference to whom thus explains all) is no longer sufficient. Today, a lot of ongoing phenomena have to be explained through some kind of conspiracy theory (acts of semi-clandestine government agencies; the strategies of large companies). And, in order to fight them, we are more and more in need of our own half-clandestine organizations. Perhaps Lenin's formula of the Party from his much-vilified *What Is to Be Done?* has acquired new relevance today.

John Berger recently made a salient point apropos of a French poster for the Internet investment brokers Selftrade: under the image of a hammer and sickle cast in solid gold and embedded with diamonds, the caption reads: "And what if everybody profited from the stock market?" The strategy of this poster is obvious: today, the stock market fulfils egalitarian Communist criteria: everybody can participate in it. Berger indulges in a simple mental experiment: "Imagine a communications campaign today using an image of a swastika cast in solid gold and embedded with diamonds! It would of course not work. Why? The Swastika addressed potential victors not the defeated. It invoked domination not justice."²⁰⁵ The hammer and sickle, in contrast, invoked the hope that "history would eventually be on the side of those struggling for fraternal justice".²⁰⁶ The irony is thus that, at the very moment when this hope is officially proclaimed dead by the hegemonic ideology of the "end of ideologies", a paradigmatically "post-industrial" enterprise (is there anything more "post-industrial" than dealing with stocks on the Internet?) has to mobilize this dormant hope in order to get its message through.²⁰⁷ "Repeating Lenin" means giving new life to this hope, which still continues to haunt us.

As a result, *repeating* Lenin does not mean a *return* to Lenin – to repeat Lenin is to accept that "Lenin is dead", that his particular solution failed, even failed monstrously, but that there was a utopian spark in it worth saving.²⁰⁸ Repeating Lenin means that we have to distinguish between what Lenin actually did and the field of possibilities he opened up, the tension in Lenin between what he actually did and another dimension: what was "in Lenin more than Lenin himself". To repeat Lenin is to repeat not what Lenin *did* but what he *failed to do*, his missed opportunities. Today, Lenin looks like a figure from a different time zone: it is not that his notions of the centralized Party, and so on, seem to pose a "totalitarian threat" – it is rather that they seem to belong to a different epoch to which we can no longer properly relate.

Instead of reading this fact as proof that Lenin is outdated, however, we

should, perhaps, risk the opposite conjecture: what if this impenetrability of Lenin is a sign that there is something wrong with *our* epoch? What if the fact that we experience Lenin as irrelevant, "out of sync" with our postmodern times, imparts the much more unsettling message that our time itself is "out of sync", that a certain historical dimension is disappearing from it?²⁰⁹ If, to some people, such an assertion appears dangerously close to Hegel's infamous quip when his deduction that there should be only eight planets circulating around the Sun was proved wrong by the discovery of the ninth planet (Pluto): "So much the worse for the facts!", then we should be ready fully to assume this paradox.

How did the ideology of Enlightenment evolve in eighteenth-century France? First there was the epoch of salons, in which philosophers tried to shock their benefactors, the generous Counts and Countesses, even Kings and Empresses (Holbach Frederick the Great, Diderot Catherine the Great) with their "radical" ideas on equality, the origin of power, the nature of man, and so on – all this remaining a kind of intellectual game. At this stage, the idea that someone could take these ideas literally, as the blueprint for a radical sociopolitical transformation, would probably have shocked the ideologues themselves, who were either part of the entourage of an enlightened nobleman or a lone pathetic figure like Rousseau – their reaction would have been that of Ivan Karamazov, disgusted upon learning that his bastard half-brother and servant have acted on his nihilistic ruminations, killing his father. This passage from intellectual game to an idea which actually "seizes the masses" is the moment of *truth* – in it, the intellectual gets his own message back in its inverted/true form. In France, we go from the gentle reflections of Rousseau to the Jacobin Terror; within the history of Marxism, it is only with Lenin that this passage occurs, that the games are *really* over. And it is up to us to repeat this same passage, and accomplish the fateful step from ludic "postmodern" radicalism to the domain in which the *games are over*.

There is an old joke about socialism as the synthesis of the highest achievements of the whole of human history to date: from prehistoric societies it took primitivism; from the Ancient world it took slavery; from medieval society brutal domination; from capitalism exploitation; and from socialism the name. . . .²¹⁰ Could not something similar be said about our attempt to repeat Lenin's gesture? From conservative cultural criticism it takes the idea that today's democracy is no longer the site where crucial decisions are made; from cyberspace ideologues the idea that the global

digital network offers a new space for communal life, and so on; and from Lenin more or less just the name itself. . . . This very fact could, however, be turned in an argument for the "return to Lenin": the extent to which the signifier "Lenin" retains its subversive edge is easily demonstrated – when, for example, one makes the "Leninist" point that today's democracy is exhausted, that the key decisions are not taken there, one is directly accused of "totalitarianism"; when a similar point is made by sociologists, or even Václav Havel, they are praised for the depth of their insight. . . . This resistance is the answer to the question "Why Lenin?": it is the signifier "Lenin" which formalizes this content found elsewhere, transforming a series of common notions into a subversive theoretical formation.

Notes

1. There is also, of course, a false reference to "concrete circumstances" – recall Silvio Berlusconi who, in September 2001, after the widespread critical reaction against his remarks on the superiority of Western Christian civilization over Islam, countered that the scandal was cooked up by journalists who used his remarks out of context. It is significant that when people defend themselves in this way, they never give us a positive definition of the context in which such remarks are acceptable (the same happened to the British representative of Louis Farrakhan, who also claimed that Farrakhan's anti-Semitic remarks were "torn out of their proper context"; when he was given time to elaborate this "proper context" in a TV interview, he naturally refused to do so). To put it in Hegelian terms, such a direct and unspecified reference to "context" is abstraction at its purest.

2. Quoted from Peter McLaren, *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution*, Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield 2000, p. xxv.

3. See Jürgen Habermas, *Die Neue Unübersichtlichkeit*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1985.

4. Here I draw on Anna Kornbluh, "The Family Man", unpublished manuscript (UCLA, March 2001).

5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Vermischte Schriften I*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1997, p. 404.

6. Furthermore, the struggle against Eurocentric racism often generates a racism of its own. Shepard Krech's *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: Norton 1999) demonstrates convincingly how the myth of Native Americans living in undisturbed balance with nature, instead of trying to dominate and transform it, is the ultimate racist myth, implicitly reducing Native Americans to beings who, like animals, left no traces on their land, while "aggressive" Western man cultivated it. This notion obliterates the key fact that the preservation and conservation of natural resources are decidedly Western concepts, foreign in fundamental ways to a Native American world-view.

7. For this notion, see Chapter 3 of Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London and New York: Verso 1997.

8. Conspiracy theories are the obverse of the Enlightenment conviction that Reason (rational conscious intention) rules the world: if this is the case, then Reason's very (apparent) failure to establish its reign has to be accounted for in the terms of Reason – not simply as Reason's failure to master the complexity of real life, but as the result of some dark powers which are *rationaly* plotting against the rule of Reason (from the idea that the masses are ignorant and act against their interests because reactionary forces of religion are manipulating them to the Stalinist notion that, behind the "difficulties" in the construction of socialism, there must be some counter-revolutionary plot). Does not all this confirm Adorno's and Horkheimer's thesis that modern anti-Semitism (the conspiracy theory *par excellence*) is grounded in the Enlightenment?

9. I owe this example to Anna Kornbluh (UCLA), whose unpublished paper "Multiculturalism and Multinational Corporate Capitalism" includes a justified critique of some of my formulations concerning multiculturalism in Chapter 4 of *The Ticklish Subject* (London and New York: Verso 1999).

10. McLaren, *Che Guevara*, p. x.

11. Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, London: Routledge 1995, p. 97.

12. Parallel to this attitude of "respect for the Other's specific customs", which in fact involves a humiliating condescension, is the false imposed subjectivization we often encounter in the pedagogical process: after explaining some point in an allegedly "objective", impartial way, the teacher turns to a pupil and asks him: "Now, in order to prove that you were able to follow my explanation, please put it *in your own words* . . .".

13. The "bourgeois" way out of this predicament is the displacement of tolerance on to the State: the State should be neutral, indifferent, so that we, individuals, can go on hating and struggling, while the State guarantees the neutral frame which prevents us from actually hurting others.

14. There is, of course, an element of partial truth in this position. I myself am mindful of how, every time I visit my Western friends, they explain to me in detail the real stakes of the post-Yugoslav war, everything I always wanted to know about Slovene nationalism and "egotism", and so on – an exemplary case of Leftist racism, if ever there was one. The way to fight it, however, is to provide a better concrete analysis, not to counter them with "Only someone from ex-Yugoslavia can really grasp what the war was about."

15. Alain Badiou, *D'un désastre obscur*, Paris: Éditions de l'Aube 1998, p. 50.

16. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989.

Along similar lines, Habermas, Rorty's great opponent, elevates the rise of the "public sphere" of civil society, the space of free discussion that mediates between private lives and political/state apparatuses in the Enlightenment era. The problem is that this space of enlightened public debate was always redoubled by the fear of the irrational/passionate crowd which can, through contamination (what Spinoza called *imitatio affecti*), explode into murderous violence based on superstitions manipulated by priests or other ideologues. So the enlightened space of rational debate was always based on certain exclusions: on the exclusion of those who were not considered "rational" enough (the lower classes, women, children, savages, criminals . . .) – they needed the pressure of "irrational" authority to keep them in check; that is to say, for

