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Author(s): Slavoj Žižek

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# A Plea for Leninist Intolerance

Slavoj Žižek

## *Lenin's Choice*

What is tolerance today? The most popular TV show of the fall of 2000 in France, with a viewer rating two times higher than that of the notorious *Big Brother* reality soap, is *C'est mon choix* (It's my choice) on France 3, a talk-show whose guest is each time an ordinary (or, exceptionally, well-known) person who made a peculiar choice that determined his or her entire lifestyle. For example, one of them decided never to wear underwear, another constantly tried to find a more appropriate sexual partner for his father and mother. Extravagance is allowed, solicited even, but *with the explicit exclusion of the choices that may disturb the public* (say, a person whose choice is to be and act as a racist is a priori excluded).

Can one imagine a better summary of what the freedom of choice effectively amounts to in our liberal societies? Ulrich Beck introduced the notion of "reflexive society" in which all patterns of interaction, from the forms of sexual partnership up to ethnic identity itself, have to be renegotiated or reinvented.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the properly *frustrating* dimension of this eternal stimulus to make free choices is best rendered by the situation of having to choose a product in online shopping, where one has to make an almost endless series of choices: if you want it with X, click A, if not,

The present text is an elaborated version of my introductory intervention at the colloquium "The Retrieval of Lenin," Essen, 2–4 Febr. 2001.

1. See Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society*, trans. Mark Ritter (Oxford, 1999).

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click B. We can go on making our small choices, “reinventing ourselves,” on condition that these choices do not disturb the social and ideological balance. With regard to *C'est mon choix*, the truly radical thing would have been to focus precisely on the disturbing choices: to invite people like dedicated racists, whose choice—whose difference—*does* make a difference. Phenomena like these make it all the more necessary today to *reassert* Lenin's opposition of “formal” and “actual” freedom. Let us then fearlessly evoke Lenin at his worst—say, his polemics against the Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionaries' critique of Bolshevik power in 1922:

Indeed, the sermons which . . . the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries preach express their true nature: “The revolution has gone too far. What you are saying now we have been saying all the time, permit us to say it again.” But we say in reply: “Permit us to put you before a firing squad for saying that. Either you refrain from expressing your views, or, if you insist on expressing your political views publicly in the present circumstances, when our position is far more difficult than it was when the whiteguards were directly attacking us, then you will have only yourselves to blame if we treat you as the worst and most pernicious whiteguard elements.”<sup>2</sup>

This Leninist forced choice—not “Your money or your life!” but “No critique or your life!” combined with his dismissive attitude toward the liberal notion of freedom, accounts for his bad reputation among liberals. And, effectively, is today, after the terrifying experience of the *Realsozialismus*, not more than obvious where the fault of this reasoning resides? First, it reduces a historical constellation to a closed, fully contextualized situation in which the “objective” consequences of one's acts are fully determined (“independently of your intentions, what you are doing now objectively serves . . .”); second, the party usurps the right to decide what your acts “objectively mean.” Is this, however, the whole story? There is, nonetheless, a rational kernel in Lenin's obsessive tirades against formal freedom worth saving today; when he underlines that there is no pure democracy, that we should always ask whom a freedom under consideration serves, his point is precisely to maintain the possibility of a *true*

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2. V. I. Lenin, “Political Report of the Central Committee of the R.C.P. (B.), 27 March [1922],” *Collected Works*, trans. pub., ed. David Skvirsky and George Hanna, 45 vols. (Moscow, 1966), 33:283.

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**Slavoj Žižek**, philosopher and psychoanalyst, is senior researcher at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut in Essen, Germany. His most recent publications are *On Belief* (2001), *The Frigate of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski and Post-Theory* (2001), and *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (2001).

choice. Formal freedom is the freedom of choice *within* the coordinates of the existing power relations, while actual freedom designates the site of an intervention that undermines these very coordinates.

The first public reaction to the idea of reactualizing Lenin is, of course, an outburst of sarcastic laughter: Marx—okay, even on Wall Street they love him today—the poet of commodities, who provided perfect descriptions of capitalist dynamics, Marx of cultural studies, who portrayed the alienation and reification of our daily lives . . . but Lenin, no, you can't be serious! The working-class movement, revolutionary party, and similar zombie-concepts? Doesn't Lenin stand precisely for the *failure* to put Marxism into practice, for the big catastrophe that left its mark on twentieth-century world politics, for the real socialist experiment that culminated in an economically inefficient dictatorship? So, in contemporary academic politics, a proposal to deal with Lenin is twice qualified: Yes, why not, we live in a liberal democracy, there is freedom of thought. However, one should 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. Therein resides the lesson painfully learned through the experience of the twentieth-century totalitarianisms.

What are we to say to this? Again, the problem resides in the implicit qualifications that can be easily discerned by the concrete analysis of the concrete situation, as Lenin himself would have put it. Fidelity to the democratic consensus means the acceptance of the present liberal-parliamentary consensus, which precludes any serious questioning of how this liberal-democratic order is complicit in the phenomena it officially condemns and, of course, any serious attempt to imagine a society whose sociopolitical order would be different. In short, it means say and write whatever you want on the condition that what you do does not effectively question or disturb the predominant political consensus. So everything is allowed, solicited even, as a critical topic: the prospects of a global ecological catastrophe, violations of human rights, sexism, homophobia, antifeminism, growing violence not only in faraway countries but also in our megalopolises, the gap between the First and the Third World, between the rich and the poor, the shattering impact of the digitalization of our daily lives, and so on. There is nothing easier today than to get international, state, or corporate funds for multidisciplinary research into how to fight the new forms of ethnic, religious, or sexist violence. The problem is that all this occurs against the background of a fundamental *Denkverbot*, a prohibition against thinking. Today's liberal-democratic hegemony is sustained by a kind of unwritten *Denkverbot* similar to the infamous *Berufsverbot* in Germany of the late sixties; the moment one shows a minimal sign of engaging in political projects that aim to seriously challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately: "Benevolent as it is,

this will necessarily end in a new gulag!” And it is exactly the same thing that the demand for scientific objectivity means; the moment one seriously questions the existing liberal consensus, one is accused of abandoning scientific objectivity for the outdated ideological positions. This is the point that one cannot and should not concede: *today, actual freedom of thought must mean the freedom to question the predominant liberal-democratic post-ideological consensus—or it means nothing.*

Habermas designated the present era as that of a *neue Undurchsichtigkeit*, the new opacity.<sup>3</sup> More than ever, our daily experience is mistifying. Modernization generates new obscurantisms; the reduction of freedom is presented to us as the arrival of new freedoms. In these circumstances, one should be especially careful *not to confuse the ruling ideology with ideology that seems to dominate.* More than ever, one should bear in mind Walter Benjamin’s claim that it is not enough to ask how a certain theory (or art) declares itself to stay with regard to social struggles. One should also ask how it effectively functions *in* these very struggles. In sex, the effectively hegemonic attitude is not patriarchal repression but free promiscuity; in art, provocations in the style of the notorious “Sensation” exhibitions *are* the norm, an example of art fully integrated into the establishment.

One is therefore tempted to turn around Marx’s eleventh thesis: the first task today is precisely *not* to succumb to the temptation to act, to directly intervene and change things (which then inevitably ends in a cul de sac of debilitating impossibility, leaving one to ask, What can one do against global capital?) but to question the hegemonic ideological coordinates. If, today, one follows a direct call to act, this act will not be performed in an empty space; it will be an act *within* the hegemonic ideological coordinates: those who “really want to do something to help people” get involved in (undoubtedly honorable) exploits like Doctors without Borders, Greenpeace, feminist and antiracist campaigns, which are all not only tolerated but even supported by the media, even if they seemingly enter economic territory (say, denouncing and boycotting companies that do not respect ecological conditions or that use child labor). They are tolerated and supported as long as they do not get too close to a certain limit. Let us take two predominant topics from today’s American radical academia, postcolonial and queer studies. The problem of postcolonialism is undoubtedly crucial; however, postcolonial studies tends to translate it into the multiculturalist problematic of the colonized minorities’ right to narrate their victimizing experience, of the power mechanisms that repress otherness, so that, at the end of the day, we learn that the root of postcolonial exploitation is our intolerance toward the Other and, furthermore, that this intolerance itself is rooted in our intolerance

3. See Jürgen Habermas, *Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985).

toward the “Stranger in Ourselves,” in our inability to confront what we repressed in and of ourselves. Thus the politico-economic struggle is thus imperceptibly transformed into a pseudopschoanalytic drama of the subject unable to confront its inner traumas. The true corruption of American academia is not primarily financial, it is not only that they 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. With regard to this radical chic, the first gesture toward Third Way ideologists and practitioners should be that of praise; they, at least, play their game in a straight way and are honest in their acceptance of global capitalist coordinates in contrast to the pseudoradical academic leftists who adopt the attitude of utter disdain toward the Third Way, while their own radicality ultimately amounts to an empty gesture that obliges no one to anything determinate.

So how are we to respond to the eternal dilemma of the radical Left? Should one strategically support center-left figures like Bill Clinton against the conservatives, or should one adopt the stance of “It doesn’t matter, we shouldn’t get involved in these fights—in a way, it is 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 the variation of old Stalin’s answer to the question “Which deviation is worse, the rightist or the leftist one?” *They are both worse*. What one should do is adopt the stance of the proper dialectical paradox. In principle, of course, one should be indifferent toward 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 to be paid may appear much too high—recall the catastrophic consequences of the German Communist Party’s decision in the early thirties *not* to focus on the struggle against the Nazis, with the justification that the Nazi dictatorship is the last, desperate stage of the capitalist domination, which will open eyes to the working class, shattering their belief in bourgeois democratic institutions. Along these lines, Claude Lefort himself, 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 150 years of the leftist workers’ struggle and pressure upon the state; it incorporated demands that were one hundred or even fewer years ago dismissed by liberals as horror.<sup>4</sup> As proof, one should just 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 key ones), all others are today part of the consensus (at least that of the disintegrating welfare state): universal suffrage, the right to free education, universal health care, care for the retired, limitation of child labor, and so on.

4. See Claude Lefort, *La Complication* (Paris, 1999).

Today, in a time of continuous swift changes, from the digital revolution to the retreat of old social forms, this thought is more than ever exposed to the temptation of losing its nerve, of precociously abandoning the old conceptual coordinates. The media constantly bombard us with the need to abandon the old paradigms, insisting that if we are to survive we have to change our most fundamental notions of personal identity, society, environment, and so forth. New Age wisdom claims that we are entering a new “posthuman” era; postmodern political thought is telling us that we are entering a postindustrial phase in which the old categories of labor, collectivity, class, and the like are theoretical zombies, no longer applicable to the dynamics of modernization. And the same holds for psychoanalysis: starting from the rise of the ego-psychology in the 1930s, psychoanalysts have been losing their nerve, laying down their (theoretical) arms, hastening to concede that the oedipal matrix of socialization is no longer operative, that we live in times of universalized perversion, that the concept of repression is of no use in our permissive times. The Third Way ideology and political practice is effectively the model of this defeat, of this inability to recognize how the new is here to enable the old to survive. Against this temptation, one should rather follow the unsurpassed model of Pascal and ask the difficult question: how are we to remain faithful to the old in the new conditions? Only in this way can we generate something effectively new.

### *Of Apes and Men*

To reinvent Lenin's legacy today is to reinvent the politics of truth. We live in a postmodern era in which truth-claims as such are dismissed as an expression of hidden power mechanisms; as the reborn pseudo-Nietzscheans like to emphasize, truth is the lie that is most efficient in asserting our will to power. The very question, apropos of some statement, Is it true? is supplanted by the question, Under what power conditions can this statement be uttered? What we get instead of universal truth is a multitude of perspectives, or, as it is fashionable to put it today, of narratives—not only those of literature, but also politics, religion, and science, all of which are different narratives, stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, and the ultimate goal of ethics is to guarantee the neutral space in which this multitude of narratives can peacefully coexist, in which everyone, from ethnic to sexual minorities, will have the right and possibility to tell his or her story. *The* two philosophers of today's global capitalism are the two great left-liberal progressives, Richard Rorty and Peter Singer, both honest in their consequent stances. Rorty defines the basic coordinates: the fundamental dimension of a human being is the ability to suffer, to experience pain and humiliation. Consequently, because humans are symbolic animals, the fundamental right is the right to

narrate one's experience of suffering and humiliation.<sup>5</sup> Singer then provides the Darwinian background.<sup>6</sup>

Singer, a social Darwinist with a collectivist socialist face, starts innocently enough, trying to argue that people will be happier if they lead lives committed to ethics, for a life spent trying to help others and reduce suffering is really the most moral and fulfilling one. He radicalizes and actualizes Jeremy Bentham, the father of utilitarianism: the ultimate ethical criterion is not the dignity (rationality, soul) of man but the ability to *suffer*, to experience pain, which man shares with animals. With inexorable radicality, Singer levels the animal/human divide. Better to kill an old suffering woman than healthy animals. Look an orangutan straight in the eye and what do you see? A none-too-distant cousin, a creature worthy of all the legal rights and privileges that humans enjoy. One should thus extend aspects of equality, including the right to life, the protection of individual liberties, the prohibition of torture, at least to the nonhuman great apes (chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas).

Singer argues that "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 one-time perception of an ethical difference between, say, men and women, or blacks and whites. Intelligence is no basis for determining ethical stature. The lives of humans are not worth more than the lives of animals simply because they display more intelligence (if intelligence were a standard of judgment, Singer points out, we could perform medical experiments on the mentally retarded with moral impunity). Ultimately, all things being equal, an animal has as much interest in living as a human. Therefore, all things being equal, medical experimentation on animals is immoral. Those who advocate such experiments claim that sacrificing the lives of twenty animals will save millions of human lives. However, what about sacrificing twenty humans to save millions of animals? As Singer's critics like to point out, the horrifying extension of this principle is that the interests of twenty people outweigh the interests of one, which gives the green light to all sorts of human rights abuses.

Consequently, Singer argues that we can no longer rely on traditional ethics for answers to the dilemmas that our constellation imposes on ourselves; he proposes a new ethics meant to protect the quality, not the sanctity, of human life. As sharp boundaries disappear between life and death, between humans and animals, this new ethics casts doubt on the morality of animal research while offering a sympathetic assessment of infanticide. When a baby is born with severe defects of the sort that always used to kill babies, are doctors and parents now morally obligated to use the latest

5. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

6. See Peter Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life* (New York, 2000).



technologies, regardless of cost? *No*. When a pregnant woman loses all brain function, should doctors use new procedures to keep her body living until the baby can be born? *No*. Can a doctor ethically help terminally ill patients to kill themselves? *Yes*.

One cannot dismiss Singer as a monstrous exaggeration. What Adorno said about psychoanalysis (its truth resides in its very exaggerations) fully holds for Singer: he is so traumatic and intolerable because his scandalous “exaggerations” directly renders visible the truth of the so-called postmodern ethics.<sup>7</sup> Is the ultimate horizon of the postmodern “identity politics” effectively not Darwinian, defending the right of some particular species of humankind within the panoply of their proliferating multitude (for example, gays with AIDS, black single mothers)? The very opposition between conservative and progressive politics can be conceived in Darwinian terms. Ultimately, conservatives defend the right of those with might (their very success proves that they won in the struggle for survival) while progressives advocate the protection of endangered human species, that is, of those losing the struggle for survival.

One of the divisions in the chapter on reason in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* speaks about *das geistige Tierreich* (the spiritual animal kingdom) or the social world that lacks any spiritual substance, so that, in it, individuals effectively interact as “intelligent animals.” They use reason, but only in order to assert their individual interests, to manipulate others into serving their own pleasures.<sup>8</sup> Is not a world in which the highest rights are human rights precisely such a spiritual animal kingdom, a universe? There is, however, a price to be paid for such liberation—in such a universe, human rights ultimately function as *animal* rights. This, then, is the ultimate truth of Singer: our universe of human rights is the universe of animal rights.

The obvious counterargument is here: so what? Why should we not reduce humankind to its proper place, to that of one of the animal species? What gets lost in this reduction? Jacques-Alain Miller, the main pupil of Jacques Lacan, once described an uncanny laboratory experiment with rats.<sup>9</sup> In a labyrinthine setup, a desired object (a piece of good food or a sexual partner) is first made easily accessible to a rat; then, the setup is changed in such a way that the rat sees and thereby knows where the desired object is, but cannot gain access to it. In exchange for it, as a kind of consolation prize, a series of similar objects of inferior value is made easily accessible. How does the rat react to it? For some time, it tries to find its way to the “true” object; then, upon ascertaining that this object

7. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London, 1996), p. 49.

8. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford, 1977), p. 178.

9. See Jacques-Alain Miller, *Ce qui fait insigne*, unpublished seminar 1984–85; lecture given 3 Dec. 1984.

is definitely out of reach, the rat will renounce it and put up with some of the inferior substitute objects. In short, it will act as a “rational” subject of utilitarianism.

It is only now, however, that the true experiment begins: the scientists performed a surgical operation on the rat, messing about with its brain, doing things to it with laser beams about which, as Miller put it delicately, it is better to know nothing. So what happened when the altered rat was again let loose in the labyrinth, the one in which the “true” object is inaccessible? *The rat insisted*; it never became fully reconciled to the loss of the “true” object and resigned itself to one of the inferior substitutes, but repeatedly returned to it, attempted to reach it. In short, the rat was in a sense *humanized*; it assumed the tragic “human” relationship toward the unattainable *absolute object* that, on account of its very inaccessibility, forever captivates our desire. On the other hand, this very “conservative” fixation pushes us to continuing renovation because we never can fully integrate this excess into our life process. So we can see why Freud used the term *Todestrieb*: the lesson of psychoanalysis is that humans are not simply alive but are possessed by a strange drive to enjoy life in excess of the ordinary run of things. “Death” stands simply and precisely for the dimension beyond ordinary biological life.

What, then, gets lost in Singer’s *geistige Tierreich*? The thing, that something to which we are unconditionally attached irrespective of its positive qualities. In Singer’s universe, there is a place for mad cows but no place for an Indian sacred cow. In other words, what gets lost here is simply the dimension of truth—*not* objective truth as the notion of reality from a point of view that somehow floats above the multitude of particular narratives but truth as the singular universal. When Lenin said, “The Marxian doctrine is omnipotent because it is true,” everything depends on how we understand “truth” here.<sup>10</sup> Is it a neutral objective knowledge or the truth of an engaged subject? Lenin’s wager—one that is today, in our era of postmodern relativism, more relevant than ever—is that universal truth and partisanship, the gesture of taking sides, are not only not mutually exclusive but condition each other. In a concrete situation, its *universal* truth can only be articulated from a thoroughly *partisan* position; truth is by definition one-sided. This, of course, goes against the predominant doxa of compromise, of finding a middle path among the multitude of conflicting interests. If one does not specify the *criteria* of the different, alternate narrativization, then this endeavour courts the danger of endorsing, in the politically correct mood, ridiculous narratives like those about the supremacy of some aboriginal holistic wisdom, or those that dismiss science as just another narrative on par with premodern superstitions.

10. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 19:23.

*“Entre nous: If they kill me . . .”*

So how can the reference to Lenin deliver us from this predicament? Some leftists want to redeem Lenin (partially, at least) by opposing the “bad” Jacobin-elitist Lenin of *What Is to Be Done?*, the Lenin who relied on the Party as the professional, intellectual elite that 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 the public affairs into their hands. However, this opposition has its limits; the key premise of *State and Revolution* is that one cannot fully “democratize” the state, that state as such, in its very notion, is a dictatorship of one class over another. The logical conclusion from this premise is that, *insofar as we still dwell within the domain of the state*, we are legitimized to exercise full violent terror, since, within this domain, every democracy is a fake. Because state is an instrument of oppression, it is not worth trying to improve its apparatuses such as the protection of the legal order, elections, laws guaranteeing personal freedoms, and so forth. All this becomes irrelevant. The moment of truth in this reproach is that one cannot separate the unique constellation that enabled the revolutionary takeover in October 1917 from its later Stalinist turn; the very constellation that rendered the revolution possible (peasants’ dissatisfaction, a well-organized revolutionary elite) led to the “Stalinist” turn in its aftermath. Therein resides the proper Leninist *tragedy*.

Let us just recall some details of the daily life of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1917 and the following years, which, in their very triviality, render palpable the gap separating them from the Stalinist *nomenklatura*. When, on the evening of 24 October 1917, Lenin left his flat for the Smolny Institute to coordinate the revolutionary takeover, he took a tram and asked the conductress if there was any fighting going on in the center that day. In the years after the October Revolution, Lenin mostly drove around in a car only with 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 and then compelled to walk to the nearest police station. When Lenin was shot on 30 August 1918, he was engaged in conversation with a couple of complaining women in front of a factory he just visited. Gil drove the bleeding Lenin to the Kremlin, where there were no doctors, so his wife Nadezhda Krupskaya suggested someone should run out to the nearest grocer’s shop for a lemon. The standard meal in the Kremlin cantina in 1918 was buckwheat porridge and thin vegetable soup. So much for the privileges of *nomenklatura*!

In what, then, resides Lenin’s greatness? Recall Lenin’s shock when, in the fall of 1914, all European social democratic parties (with the honorable exception of the Russian Bolsheviks and the Serb Social Democrats)

adopted the “patriotic line,” succumbing to the war fervor and voting for military credits. Lenin even thought that the issue of *Vorwärts*, German Social Democracy’s daily newspaper, which reported how the social democrats in the Reichstag voted for military credits, was a trick 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 fervor” in one’s own country! How many great minds (inclusive of Freud) succumbed to the nationalist temptation, even if only for a couple of weeks! This shock of 1914 was, in Alain Badiou’s terms, a *desastre*, a catastrophe in which an entire world disappeared, not only idyllic bourgeois progressivism, faith in progress, but *also* the socialist movement that accompanied it. Lenin himself (the Lenin of *What Is to Be Done?*) lost the ground under his feet. There is in his desperate reaction no satisfaction, no “I told you so!” *This*, the moment of *Verzweiflung*, *this* the catastrophe that opened up the site for the Leninist event, for breaking the evolutionary historicism of the Second International. And only Lenin was the one at the level of this opening, the one to articulate the truth of *this* catastrophe. Through this moment of despair, the Lenin who, through reading Hegel, was able to detect the unique chance for revolution, was born. His *State and Revolution* is strictly correlative to this shattering experience, and Lenin’s full subjective engagement in it is clear from this famous letter to Kamenev:

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*.<sup>11</sup>

The existential engagement is extreme here, and the kernel of the Leninist utopia arises out of the ashes of the catastrophe of 1914, in his settling of accounts with the Second International orthodoxy. This includes 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 the social matters. This was for Lenin no theoretical project for some distant future. In October 1917, Lenin claimed that “we can at once set in motion a state apparatus constituting of ten if not twenty million people.”<sup>12</sup> *This urge of the moment is the true utopia*. One cannot overestimate

11. Lenin, letter to Kamenev, July 1917, *Collected Works*, 41:67.

12. Quoted in Neil Harding, *Leninism* (Durham, N.C., 1996), p. 309; hereafter abbreviated *L*.

the explosive potential of *State and Revolution*, for in this book, “the vocabulary and grammar of the Western tradition of politics was abruptly dispensed with” (L, p. 152). What then followed can be called, borrowing the title of Althusser’s text on Machiavelli, *la solitude de Lenine*, the time when he basically stood alone, struggling against the current in his own party. When, in his “April Theses” from 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. Within the Bolshevik party, no prominent leader 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 theses. Far from being opportunistic, flattering and exploiting the prevailing mood of the populace, Lenin’s views were highly idiosyncratic. Bogdanov characterized the “April Theses” as “the delirium of a madman,” and Krupskaya herself concluded that “I am afraid it looks as if Lenin has gone crazy” (L, p. 86).

Lenin is for us not the nostalgic name for old dogmatic certainty; quite on the contrary, to put it in Kierkegaard’s terms, the Lenin we want to retrieve is the Lenin-in-becoming, the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which old coordinates proved useless and who was thus compelled to *reinvent* Marxism. Recall 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 to nostalgically *reenact* the good old revolutionary times, nor to opportunistically-pragmatically *adjust* the old program to “new conditions” but to *repeat*, in present worldwide conditions, the Leninist gesture of reinventing the revolutionary project in the conditions of imperialism and colonialism. Or, more precisely, subsequent to the politico-ideological collapse of the long era of progressivism founded upon the catastrophe of 1914. Eric Hobsbawm 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.”<sup>13</sup> What Lenin did for 1914 we should do for 1990. “Lenin” stands for the compelling *freedom* to suspend the stale, existing (post)ideological coordinates, the debilitating *Denkverbot* in which we live. This simply means that we obtain the right to think again.

### *A Cyberspace Lenin?*

Lenin’s stance against economism as well as against pure politics is crucial today, apropos of the split attitude toward economy in (what re-

13. See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (New York, 1996).

mains of) the radical circles. On the one hand, there are the pure politicians who abandon economy as the site of struggle and intervention; on the other hand, there are 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 return to Lenin: yes, the economy is the key domain, the battle will be decided there; one has to break the spell of global capitalism. But the intervention should be properly *political*, not economic.

The battle to be fought is thus a twofold one: first, yes, anticapitalism. However, anticapitalism without problematizing capitalism's *political* form (again, liberal parliamentary democracy) is not sufficient, no matter how radical it is. Perhaps *the* lure today is the belief that one can undermine capitalism without effectively problematizing the liberal-democratic legacy, a legacy that—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 or vampire that deterritorializes and swallows all, indomitable, dynamic, ever raising from the dead, each crisis making it stronger, a Dionysus-Phoenix reborn. It is in this poetic (anti)capitalist reference to Marx that Marx is *really dead*, for he is appropriated when deprived of his political sting.

Capitalism is not just a historical epoch among others; in a way, the once fashionable and today forgotten Francis Fukuyama *was* right—global capitalism is “the end of history.” A certain excess that was, as it were, kept under check, perceived as a localizable perversion, as an excess, a deviation, is in capitalism elevated to the very principle of social life, in the speculative movement of money begetting more money, of a system that 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. And, perhaps, it is only today, in global capitalism's postindustrial, digitalized form, that, to put it in Hegelian terms, really existing capitalism is reaching the level of its notion. Perhaps, one should again follow Marx's old antievolutionist motto (incidentally, taken verbatim from Hegel) that the anatomy of man provides the key for the anatomy of a monkey; that is, in order to deploy the inherent notional structure of a social formation, one must start with its most developed form. Marx located the elementary capitalist antagonism in the opposition between use- and exchange-value. In capitalism, the potential of this opposition is fully realized; the domain of exchange-values acquires autonomy and is transformed into the specter of self-propelling speculative capital that needs 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 is for him the gap between use- 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 particularly appropriate today, when the tension between the virtual and real universes is reaching almost palpably unbearable proportions. On the one hand, we have crazy, solipsistic speculations about futures, mergers, and the like following their own inherent logic; on the other hand, reality is catching up in the guise of ecological catastrophes, poverty, Third World diseases that imperil social life, mad cow disease. This is why cyber-capitalists can appear as the paradigmatic capitalists today; this is why Bill Gates can dream of cyberspace as providing the frame for "frictionless capitalism." What we have here is an ideological short circuit between the two versions of the gap separating reality and virtuality—the gap between real production and the virtual spectral domain of capital and the gap between experiential reality and virtual reality of cyberspace. It effectively seems that the cyberspace gap between my fascinating screen persona and the miserable flesh that is me off the screen translates into the immediate experience of the gap between the Real of the speculative circulation of capital and the drab reality of impoverished masses. However, is this—this recourse to "reality," which will sooner or later catch up with the virtual game—really the only way to mount a 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 gap with "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.

What all this means is that the urgent task of economic analysis today is, again, to *repeat* Marx's critique of political economy without succumbing to the tempting multitude of ideologies of postindustrial societies. It is my hypothesis that 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 borrowed money, really owning nothing, even indebted, but nonetheless controlling things. A corporation is owned by another corporation, who is again borrowing money from banks, who may ultimately manipulate money owned by ordinary people like ourselves. With Bill Gates, the notion of the private ownership of the means of production becomes meaningless, at least in the standard meaning of the term. 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 its acceleration; however, an electron's mass at rest is zero. Its mass consists only of the surplus generated by the acceleration of its movement, as if we were dealing with a nothing that acquires some deceptive substance only by magically spinning itself into its own excess. Does today's virtual capitalist not function in a homologous way? His "net value" is zero, for he operates just with the surplus, borrowing from the future.

So where is Lenin in all this? According to the predominant *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" (*L*, p. 168). Technocratic postpolitics? Lenin's ideas about the road to socialism running through the terrain of monopoly capitalism may appear 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 here is 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. [Quoted in *L*, p. 145]

Is this not the most radical expression of Marx's notion of a *general intellect* regulating all social life in a transparent way, of a postpolitical world in which the administration of people is supplanted by the administration of things? It is, of course, easy to play against this quote the tune of the critique of instrumental reason and the administered world (*verwaltete Welt*): the totalitarian potential is inscribed in this very form of total social control.<sup>14</sup> It is easy to remark sarcastically how, in the Stalinist epoch, the apparatus of social administration effectively became *even bigger*. Furthermore, is this postpolitical vision not the very opposite of the Maoist notion of the eternity of the class struggle (suggested by the axiom, everything is political)? Are, however, things really so unambiguous? What if one replaces 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 effectively the theory of the detective novel *avant la lettre*; because poor Aristotle didn't yet know of the detective novel, he had to refer to the only examples at his disposal, the

14. See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York, 1973), p. 706.



tragedies.<sup>15</sup> Along the same lines, Lenin was effectively developing the theory of the role of the World Wide Web, but, since the net was unknown to him, he had to refer to the unfortunate central banks. Consequently, can one 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?*” Under these conditions, one is tempted to resuscitate the old, opprobrious, and half-forgotten Marxian dialectics of productive forces and relations of production: it is already a commonplace to claim that, ironically, it was this very dialectics that buried really existing socialism. Socialism was unable to sustain the passage from an industrial to postindustrial economy. However, does capitalism really provide the natural frame for the 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 its monopoly through the state apparatus (recall the court-ordered split of the Microsoft corporation), would it not be more logical just to *socialize* it, rendering it freely accessible?

The key antagonism of the so-called new (digital) industries is, thus, how to maintain the form of (private) property—the only one within which the logic of profit can be maintained (relevant to the Napster problem, the free circulation of music). And do the legal complications in biogenetics not point in the same direction? The key element of the new international trade agreements is the “protection of intellectual property”; whenever, in a merger, 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 that bring the notion of property to extraordinary dialectical paradoxes; for example, in India, local communities suddenly discover that medical practices and materials they had been using for centuries are now owned by American companies and must be bought from them. Likewise, with the biogenetic companies patenting genes, we are all discovering that parts of ourselves, our genetic components, are already copyrighted, owned by others.

Today we can already discern the signs of a kind of general unease. Recall the series of events usually listed under the name of Seattle. The ten-year honeymoon of triumphant global capitalism is over; the long-overdue seven-year itch is here—witness the panicked reactions of big media, which from *Time* magazine to CNN suddenly started to warn about the Marxists manipulating the crowd of “honest” protesters. The problem is now the strictly Leninist one: how to *actualize* the media’s accusations, how to invent the organizational structure that will confer on this unrest the *form* of a universal political demand. Otherwise the momen-

15. See Dorothy L. Sayers, “Aristotle on Detective Fiction,” *Unpopular Opinions* (New York, 1947), pp. 222–36.

tum will be lost, and what will remain is a marginal disturbance, perhaps organized as a new Greenpeace, endowed with a certain efficiency but also strictly limited goals, marketing strategy, and so forth. In other words, the key Leninist lesson today is that 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 answer of the Jacobins to the Girondin compromisers: “You want revolution without a revolution!” Today’s challenge 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 get active in new social movements, from feminism to ecology to antiracism. And, again, the limit of these movements is that they are not *political* in the sense of the universal singular: they are one-issue movements that lack the dimension of universality; that is, they do not relate to the social *totality*.

Here, Lenin’s reproach to liberals is crucial. They only *exploit* the working classes’ discontent to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the conservatives instead of identifying with it to the end.<sup>16</sup> Is this also not the case with 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*. Recall how, at Seattle, Bill Clinton himself deftly referred to the protesters on the streets outside, reminding the gathered leaders inside the guarded palaces that they should listen to the message of the demonstrators (a message that, of course, Clinton interpreted, depriving it of the subversive sting attributed to the dangerous extremists introducing chaos and violence into the majority of peaceful protesters). It’s the same with all new social movements, up to the Zapatistas in Chiapas: systemic politics is always ready to listen to their demands, thus depriving them of their proper political sting. The system is by definition ecumenic, open, tolerant, ready to listen to all; even if one insists on one’s demands, they are deprived of their universal political sting by the very form of negotiation.

### *The Leninist Utopia*

What, then, is the criterion of the political act? Success as such clearly doesn’t count, even if we define it in Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical way (as the wager that the future will retroactively redeem our present horrible acts); neither do any abstract-universal ethical norms.<sup>17</sup> The only criteria

16. I owe this point to Alan Shandro’s intervention “Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony” at the colloquium “The Retrieval of Lenin.”

17. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: The Communist Problem*, trans. John O’Neill (Oxford, 2000).

is the absolutely *inherent* one: that of the *enacted utopia*. In a proper revolutionary breakthrough, the utopian future is neither simply fully realized, present, nor simply evoked as a distant promise that 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—for a brief time allowed to act *as if* the utopian future were (not yet fully here, but) already at hand, just there to be grabbed. Revolution is not experienced as a present hardship we have to endure for the happiness and freedom of the future generations but as the present hardship over which this future happiness and freedom already cast their shadow—in it, we *already are free while fighting for freedom, we already are happy while fighting 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 delegitimized by the long term outcome of the present acts; it is as it were *its own ontological proof*, an immediate index of its own truth.

In spite of all its horrors, the great Cultural Revolution in China undoubtedly did contain elements of such an enacted utopia. Say, at its very end, before the agitation was blocked by Mao himself (because he already achieved his goal of reestablishing his full power and getting rid of the top *nomenklatura* competition), there was the Shanghai Commune in which one million workers, who simply took the official slogans seriously, demanded the abolition of the state and even 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, incidently, mostly were 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.

Let us recall the performance of “Storming the Winter Palace” in Petrograd, on the third anniversary of the October Revolution, on 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 at the very place where the event really took place three years earlier; their work was coordinated by the Army officers, as well as by avant-garde artists, musicians, and directors, from Malevich to Meyerhold. Although this was acting and not reality, the soldiers and sailors were playing themselves. Many of them not only actually participated in the event of 1917 but were also simultaneously involved in the real battles of the civil war that were raging in the near vicinity of Petrograd, a city under siege and suffering from severe

shortages of food. 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"; and the formalist theoretician Viktor Shklovsky noted that "some kind of elemental process is taking place where the living fabric of life is being transformed into the theatrical."<sup>18</sup> We all remember the infamous self-celebratory First of May parades that were one of the supreme signs of recognition of the Stalinist regimes. If one needs proof of how Leninism functioned in an entirely different way, are such performances not 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?

Perhaps the supreme example of the linkage between this utopian dimension and the "terrorist" dimension is the fate of Dmitri Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. Listening to the orchestral depiction of the sexual act in the second act, one is almost tempted to agree with Comrade Stalin who, after furiously leaving the Bolshoi theater after this very scene of the sexual encounter, in his infinite wisdom ordered the anonymous article "Muddle Instead of Music" to be published in the 28 January 1936 issue of *Pravda*. It says: "The music quacks, hoots, pants, and gasps in order to express the love scenes as naturally as possible."<sup>19</sup> The lesson of this mickeymousing is the Hegelian one: pure tautological repetition is the greatest contradiction. We (wrongly) think that the music merely follows visual movements, while it actually strongly colors, distorts, even, our visual perception, giving an exaggerated comical twist to gestures on the stage (or screen). We all know of the comical effect that occurs when, while we watch an opera on TV, the sound is suddenly suspended: deprived of their vocal ground, the singers dignified gestures change into ridiculous gesticulating. *Lady Macbeth's* sexual scenes produce the obverse effect: the very *addition* of music, although it only slavishly echoes sexual gestures, "extraneates" the passionate quasi animal coupling into a ridiculous performance, transforming the lovers into puppets who blindly follow the rhythm set by the music.

Shostakovich's redemption of Katerina's two murders as the justified acts of a victim of patriarchal oppression is effectively more ominous than it may appear; the price for this justification, the only way to make the murders palpable, is the derogation, dehumanization even, of the victims (her husband's father is portrayed as an old lecherous ruffian while the son is an impotent weakling without any clear characterization, avoided because it might have given rise to a sympathy for him in the murder scene). In a complementary way, Katerina herself is purified of any ethical

18. Quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), p. 144.

19. Anon., "Muddle Instead of Music," *Pravda*, 28 Jan. 1936, p. 1.

ambiguity (there are no hints of an inner ethical struggle while she commits the murders, or of any pangs of conscience afterwards). She is portrayed not so much as a fighter for personal freedom and dignity against patriarchal oppression but as a woman totally enslaved to her sexual passion, ready to crush ruthlessly everything that stands in the way of its gratification. In this sense, she is also dehumanized so that, paradoxically, the only human element in the opera is a collective one, the convict's chorus with its two laments in the last act. Furthermore, Richard Taruskin was right to emphasize the historical context of the opera: the years of the ruthless terror against the kulaks. Are the murdered father and son not two exemplary kulaks? In the first two years of the opera's triumphant performance, before Stalin's ban, was it possible for the public not to perceive how its violent content echoes the violence of "dekulakization"? The opera's official condemnation should thus not blind us to the fact that it is a deeply disturbing *Stalinist* work that legitimizes the ongoing, murderous antikulak campaign. Taruskin's conclusion is thus that *Lady Macbeth* is "a profoundly inhumane work of art." "If ever an opera deserved to be banned it was this one, and matters are not changed by the fact that its actual ban was for wrong and hateful reasons."<sup>20</sup>

And does the same not go for another prohibited (in this case, literally destroyed) Soviet masterpiece from exactly the same period, Sergei Eisenstein's *Bezhin Meadow* (1934–36) of which the negatives themselves were burned? This veritable missing link (or, rather, vanishing mediator) between Eisenstein I (of the intellectual montage and brilliant dialectical use of formal antagonisms) and Eisenstein II (of *Nevsy* and *Ivan*, of the pathetic rendering of large historical frescoes in an organic form) was partly based on the story of Pavlik Morozov, a young village hero who was killed by his relatives in the northern Urals in 1932 because he had denounced his father to the village soviet for speculating. After his death, Morozov was elevated to a cult figure all around the Soviet Union. In the film, Stepok, a young village boy, organizes the local Young Pioneers to guard the harvest of the farm collective each night, thereby frustrating his own father's plans to sabotage it. In the film's climax, during one of the nightly confrontations between the father and the son, the father kills Stepok. The next morning, a typical Eisenstein scene celebrating the exuberant orgy of revolutionary destructive violence takes place, when the frustrated Pioneers force their way into the local church and desecrate it (recall the similar scene from *October*, in which the victorious revolutionaries, after penetrating the wine cellars of the Winter Palace, there indulge in the ecstatic orgy of smashing thousands of the expensive wine bottles):

On one level, the audience is encouraged to sympathise with the peasants robbing the church of its relics, squabbling over an icon,

20. Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton, N.J., 1997), p. 509.

sacrilegiously trying on vestments, heretically laughing at the statuary—while Eisenstein's profound admiration and knowledge of religious art creates a parallel revulsion at the vandalism. A young girl is framed in a mirror as if in a picture of the Virgin Mary, a young child is a cherub, a statue of the crucified Christ is held as in a Pietá.<sup>21</sup>

When Boris Shumyatsky, the official head of the Soviet film industry (until he was, only two years later, accused of being an English spy, arrested, and shot), vetoed the film on 17 March 1937, he explained his reasons in an interesting article in *Pravda*.<sup>22</sup> His main reproach was that, instead of locating the conflict in the concrete circumstances of the class struggle in the countryside (the “dekulakization”), Eisenstein staged the conflict in an almost biblical, atemporal mythical space, as an abstract fight between good and evil, elementary cosmic forces. Stepok is presented in pale and luminous tones, a wan boy in his white shirt, as if wrapped up in a halo, as a kind of spectral, innocent saint whose fate was already decided by a supernatural destiny. (In the self-criticism that followed, Eisenstein himself claimed that the father's killing of the son was “reminiscent of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac.”)<sup>23</sup> Connected with this reproach was the standard accusation of formalism, of indulging in eccentric framing, lighting, and cuts, instead of deploying the story in a direct, psychologically realistic way that would allow easy emotional identification on the part of the viewer. From today's perspective, of course (and bearing in mind Eisenstein's fascination with and detailed knowledge of psychoanalysis), it is easy to identify this eternal mythic space as the scene in which the underlying libidinal economy of the father/son conflict (the inverted Oedipus in which the obscene, corrupted father kills the innocent, asexual son) is played out. Far from being simply too intellectual, prohibiting the viewer's empathy, *Bezhin Meadow* was so disturbing because its very formalist excess allowed the repressed libidinal tension to be directly articulated.

The reason the film had to be prohibited was thus that such a direct rendering of the underlying libidinal tensions, such a direct celebration of ecstatic and destructive sacrilegious, revolutionary violence was not admissible in the new conditions of socialist realism. Why not? Because the Stalinist ideology functioned only on condition that it did *not* directly display this underlying libidinal economy. (No wonder Eisenstein was enthusiastic about Alexander Medvedkin's *Happiness* from 1935, in which similar revolutionary obscenities abound; in an extraordinary moment, a priest imagines he sees the breasts of a nun through her habit.) And, back

21. Ronald Bergan, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Life in Conflict* (London, 1997), p. 287.

22. See Boris Shumyatsky, “O fil'me *Bezhin Lug*,” *Pravda*, 19 Mar. 1937, p. 3; for an English translation, see “Boris Shumyatsky: The Film *Bezhin Meadow*,” in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents*, trans. Richard Taylor, ed. Taylor and Ian Christie (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), pp. 378–81.

23. Quoted in Bergan, *Sergei Eisenstein*, p. 283.

to Shostakovich, what if his *Lady Macbeth* was also prohibited for similar reasons—not because he openly depicted sexuality, but because this open depiction, *as well as* the open support of the killing of the kulak patriarchal “oppressors” had to be publicly disavowed. And this also enables us to see why Taruskin’s accusation against *Lady Macbeth* as the legitimization of the mass murder of the kulaks misses the point. The direct, violent aspect of it *had* to be publicly disavowed, which is why its direct rendering was unacceptable. The direct depiction of sex and of violence were two sides of the same coin (which openly coincide in the erotically charged, “orgasmic” character of the church desecration in *Bezhin Meadow*).

It is at this precise point concerning political terror that one can locate the gap that separates Leninism from Stalinism.<sup>24</sup> In Lenin’s times, terror was openly admitted (Trotsky sometimes even boasted in an almost cocky way about the nondemocratic nature of the Bolshevik regime and the terror it used), while in Stalin’s times, the symbolic status of the terror thoroughly changed; terror turned into the publicly nonacknowledged, obscene shadowy supplement of the public official discourse. It is significant that the climax of terror (1936–37) took place after the new constitution was accepted in 1935. This constitution was supposed to end the state of emergency and to mark the return of the things to normal: the suspension of the civil rights of the whole strata of population (kulaks, ex-capitalists) was recalled, the right to vote was now universal, and so forth. 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 would no longer be a class society; the subject of the state is no longer the working class (workers and peasants) but the people. However, this would *not* mean that the Stalinist constitution was simple hypocrisy concealing social reality. The possibility of terror is inscribed into its very core. Since the class war is now proclaimed over and the Soviet Union is conceived of as the classless country of the People, those who (are still presumed to) oppose the regime would no longer be mere class enemies in a conflict that tears apart the social body but enemies of the people, insects, worthless scum, which is to be excluded from humanity itself.

This repression of the regime’s own excess was strictly correlative to the invention of the psychological individual that took place in the Soviet Union in the late twenties and early thirties. Russian avant-garde art of the early twenties (futurism, constructivism) not only zealously endorsed industrialization, it even endeavored to reinvent a new industrial man, one who was no longer the old man of sentimental passions and traditions but the new man who gladly accepts his role as a bolt or screw in the gigantic coordinated industrial machine. As such, it was subversive in its

24. One is tempted to question the very term *Leninism*. Is it not that it was invented under Stalin? And does the same not go for Marxism (as a teaching) which was basically a Leninist invention, so that Marxism is a Leninist notion and Leninism a Stalinist one?

very ultraorthodoxy, that is, in its overidentification with the core of the official ideology: the human image that we get in Eisenstein, Meyerhold, constructivist paintings, and so on emphasizes the beauty of his or her mechanical movements, his or her thorough depsychologization. What was perceived in the West as the ultimate nightmare of liberal individualism, as the ideological counterpoint to Taylorization, to Fordist ribbon-work, was in Russia hailed as the *utopian* prospect of liberation. Recall how Meyerhold violently asserted the “behaviorist” approach to acting—no longer advocating emphatic familiarization with the person the actor is playing but ruthless bodily training aimed at cold physical discipline, at the ability of the actor to perform the series of mechanized movements.<sup>25</sup> This is what was unbearable to *and in* the official Stalinist ideology, so that Stalinist socialist realism effectively *was* an attempt to reassert a “socialism with a human face,” that is, 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 rendered as parts of the global machine, but as warm, passionate persons.

The entire history of the Soviet Union can be comprehended as homologous to Freud’s famous image of Rome, a city whose history is sedimented in its present in the guise of different layers of archeological remainders, each new level covering up the preceding one, like the seven layers of Troy. One must proceed like an archeologist, discovering Soviet history’s new layers by probing deeper and deeper into the ground. Was the (official ideological) history of the Soviet Union not the same accumulation of exclusions of Freud’s Rome, of turning persons into nonpersons, of the retroactive rewriting of history? Quite logically, destalinization was signalled by the opposite process of rehabilitation, of admitting “errors” in the past politics of the Party. The gradual rehabilitation of the demonized ex-leaders of the Bolsheviks can thus serve as perhaps the most sensitive index of how far (and in what direction) the destalinization of the Soviet Union was going. The first to be rehabilitated were the high military leaders shot in 1937 (Tukhachevsky and others); the last to be rehabilitated, already in the Gorbachev era, just before the collapse of the Communist regime, was Nicolay Ivanovich Bukharin. This last rehabilitation, of course, was a clear sign of the turn toward capitalism: the Bukharin who was rehabilitated was the one who, in the twenties, advocated the pact between workers and peasants (owners of their land), launching the famous slogan “Get rich!” and opposed forced collectivization. Significantly, however, one figure was never rehabilitated, excluded by the communists as well as by the anticommunist Russian nationalists: Trotsky, the “wandering Jew” of the Revolution, the true anti-Stalin, the archenemy, opposing “permanent revolution” to the idea of building socialism

25. See Buck-Morss’s outstanding *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, chaps. 2 and 3.



in one country. One is tempted to risk here the parallel with Freud's distinction between primordial (founding) and secondary repression in the unconscious; for Trotsky's exclusion amounted to something like the primordial repression of the Soviet state, to something that cannot ever be readmitted through "rehabilitation," since the entire order relied on this negative gesture of exclusion. (It is fashionable to claim that the irony of Stalin's politics from 1928 onwards was that it effectively *was* a kind of permanent revolution, a permanent state of emergency in which revolution repeatedly devoured its own children. However, this claim is misleading, because the Stalinist terror is the paradoxical result of the attempt to *stabilize* the Soviet Union into a state like any other, with firm boundaries and institutions; terror was a gesture of panic, a defense reaction against the threat to this state stability.) So Trotsky is the one for whom there is a place neither in the pre-1990 nor in the post-1990 capitalist universe in which even the Communist nostalgics don't 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.

The problem with those few remaining orthodox "Leninists" who behave as if one can simply recycle the old Leninism, continuing to speak on themes like class struggle and the betrayal by the corrupted leaders 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 the anticommunist "Leninologists" falsify Lenin, and so forth), 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 some purely jargonistic pose that threatens no one. Their symptomatic point emerges apropos of every new social upheaval (the disintegration of real socialism ten years ago, the fall of Milosevic); in each of these cases, they identify some working class movement (say, the striking miners in Serbia) that allegedly displayed a true revolutionary or, at least, Socialist potential, but was first exploited and then betrayed by the procapitalist and/or nationalist forces. This way, one can continue to dream that revolution is round the corner; all we need is the authentic leadership that would be able to organize the workers' revolutionary potential. If one is to believe them, *Solidarnosc* was originally a workers' democratic-socialist movement, later "betrayed" by the corruption of its leadership by the Church and the CIA. And if we add to this position four further ones, we get a pretty full picture of the sad predicament of today's Left: the acceptance of the cultural wars (feminist, gay, antiracist, multiculturalist struggles) as the dominant terrain of emancipatory politics; the purely defensive protection of the achievements of the welfare state; the naive belief in cybercommunism (the idea that the new media

are directly creating conditions for a new, authentic community); and, finally, the Third Way, capitulation itself. The reference to Lenin should serve as the signifier of the effort to break the vicious circle of these false options.

Consequently, to *repeat* 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. To repeat Lenin means that one has to distinguish between what Lenin actually did and the field of possibilities that he opened up, the tension in Lenin between what he effectively did and another dimension one might call what was “in Lenin more than Lenin himself.” There are parts of Lenin that should simply be abandoned today. It may appear attractive to reassert the lesson of Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirico-criticism* apropos of today’s New Age reading of quantum physics, where, also, matter is supposed to “disappear,” to dissolve in the immaterial waves of energy fields. It is also true (as Lucio Colletti emphasized) that Lenin’s distinction between the philosophical and scientific notion of matter undermines the very notion of dialectics in or of nature; because the philosophical notion of matter holds that reality exists independently of mind, any intervention of philosophy into the sciences is precluded. However . . . this “however” concerns the fact that, in *Materialism and Empirico-criticism*, there is *no place for dialectics, for Hegel*. What are Lenin’s basic theses? He rejects the reduction of knowledge to phenomenalist or pragmatic instrumentalism (namely, the assertion that, in scientific knowledge, we get to know the way things exist independently of our minds—the infamous “theory of reflection”) and insists 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 this, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of analytical philosophy, not the basic position of Karl Popper, the archetypal anti-Hegelian? In his short article “Lenin and Popper,” Colletti recalls how, in a private letter from 1970, first published in *Die Zeit*, Popper wrote: “Lenin’s book on empirico-criticism is, in my opinion, truly excellent.”<sup>26</sup>

To repeat Lenin is to repeat not what Lenin *did*, but what he *failed to do*, his *missed* opportunities. Today, Lenin appears as a figure from a different era: it’s not that his notions such as a centralized party seem to pose a totalitarian threat; it’s rather that they seem to belong to a different epoch to which we can no longer properly relate. However, instead of reading this fact as proof that Lenin is outdated, one should, perhaps, risk the opposite conjecture. What if this impenetrability of Lenin is a sign that there is something wrong with *our* epoch, that a certain historical dimension is disappearing from it.

26. See Lucio Colletti, “Popper e Lenin,” *Fine della filosofia e altri saggi* (Rome, 1996), pp. 44–51.