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The Ongoing “Soft Revolution”

Slavoj Žižek

A Yuppie Reading Deleuze

In his admirable “The Pedagogy of Philosophy,” Jean-Jacques Lecercle described the scene of a yuppie on the Paris underground reading Deleuze and Guattari’s *What Is Philosophy?*

The incongruity of the scene induces a smile—after all, this is a book explicitly written against yuppies. . . . Your smile turns into a grin as you imagine that this enlightenment-seeking yuppie bought the book because of its title. . . . Already you see the puzzled look on the yuppie’s face, as he reads page after page of vintage Deleuze.¹

What, however, if there is no puzzled look, but enthusiasm, when the yuppie reads about impersonal imitation of affects, about the communication of affective intensities beneath the level of meaning (“Yes, this is how I design my advertisements!”), about exploding the limits of self-contained subjectivity and directly coupling man to a machine (“This reminds me of my son’s favorite toy, the Transformer, which can turn into a car or an action hero!”), or about the need to reinvent oneself permanently, opening oneself up to a multitude of desires that push us to the limit (“Is this not the aim of the virtual sex video game I am working on now? It is no longer a question of reproducing sexual bodily contact but of exploding the confines of established reality and imagining new, unheard-of intensive modes of sexual

1. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, “The Pedagogy of Philosophy,” review of *What Is Philosophy?* by Gilles Deleuze and *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas and Dorothea Olkowski, *Radical Philosophy*, no. 75 (Jan.–Feb. 1996): 44.

pleasures!”). One could call Deleuze the ideologist of late capitalism. The much celebrated Spinozan *imitatio affecti*, the impersonal circulation of affects bypassing persons, is the very logic of publicity, of video clips, and so on, where what matters is not the message about the product, but the intensity of the transmitted affects and perceptions. Furthermore, recall hardcore pornography scenes in which the very unity of the bodily self-experience is magically dissolved so that the spectator perceives the bodies as a kind of vaguely coordinated agglomerate of partial objects. Is this logic where we are no longer dealing with persons interacting, but with the multiplicity of intensities, of places of enjoyment, of bodies as a collective/impersonal desiring machine not eminently Deleuzian?

And, to go even a step further, the practice of fist-fucking is the exemplary case of what Deleuze called the “expansion of a concept.” The fist is put to a new use; the notion of penetration is expanded into the combination of the hand with sexual penetration, into the exploration of the inside of a body. No wonder Foucault, Deleuze’s Other, was practicing fisting: fist-fucking is *the* sexual invention of the twentieth century, a new model of eroticism and pleasure. It is no longer genitalized, but focused just on the penetration of the surface, with the role of the phallus being taken over by the hand, the autonomized partial object par excellence. And what about Transformer or animorph toys, a car or a plane that can be transformed into a humanoid robot, an animal that can be morphed into a human or robot? Is this not Deleuzian? There are no metaphors here; the point is not that the machinic or animal form is revealed as a mask containing a human shape but, rather, the existence of the becoming-machine or becoming-animal of the human, the flow of continuous morphing. The divide between machine and living organism is blurred; a car transmutes into a humanoid/cyborg organism. And the ultimate irony is that, for Deleuze, *the* sport was surfing, a Californian sport par excellence if there ever was one. No longer a sport of self-control and domination directed towards some goal, it is just a practice of inserting oneself into a wave and letting oneself be carried by it.² Brian Massumi clearly formulated this deadlock, which is based on the fact that today’s capitalism already overcame the logic of totalizing normality and adopted the logic of the erratic excess:

2. See Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York, 1995), p. 121.

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the more varied, and even erratic, the better. Normalcy starts to lose its hold. The regularities start to loosen. This loosening of normalcy is part of capitalism's dynamic. It's not a simple liberation. It's capitalism's own form of power. It's no longer disciplinary institutional power that defines everything, it's capitalism's power to produce variety—because markets get saturated. Produce variety and you produce a niche market. The oddest of affective tendencies are okay—as long as they pay. Capitalism starts intensifying or diversifying affect, but only in order to extract surplus-value. It hijacks affect in order to intensify profit potential. It literally valorises affect. The capitalist logic of surplus-value production starts to take over the relational field that is also the domain of political ecology, the ethical field of resistance to identity and predictable paths. It's very troubling and confusing, because it seems to me that there's been a certain kind of convergence between the dynamic of capitalist power and the dynamic of resistance.³

So, when Naomi Klein writes that “neo-liberal economics is biased at every level toward centralization, consolidation, homogenization. It is a war waged on diversity,” she is focusing on a figure of capitalism whose days are numbered. Would she not be applauded by contemporary capitalist modernizers? Is not the latest trend in corporate management itself “diversify, devolve power, try to mobilize local creativity and self-organization?”⁴ Is not anticentralization *the* topic of the “new” digitalized capitalism? The problem here is even more “troubling and confusing” than it may appear. As Lacan pointed out apropos of his deployment of the structural homology between surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment, what if the surplus-value does not simply hijack a preexisting relational field of affects? What if what appears an obstacle is effectively a positive condition of possibility, the element that triggers and propels the explosion of affective productivity? What if, consequently, one should precisely throw out the baby with the bath water and renounce the very notion of erratic affective productivity as the libidinal support of revolutionary activity?

More than ever, capital is the concrete universal of our historical epoch. That is, while it remains a particular formation, it overdetermines all alternative formations, as well as all noneconomic strata of social life. The twentieth-century communist movement defined itself as an opponent of capitalism and was defeated by it; fascism emerged as an attempt to master

3. Brian Massumi, “Navigating Movements,” interview with Mary Zournazi, in *Hope*, ed. Zournazi (New York, 2002), p. 224.

4. Naomi Klein, *Fences and Windows: Dispatches from the Frontlines of the Globalization Debate* (London, 2002), p. 245; hereafter abbreviated *FW*.

capitalism's excesses, to build a kind of capitalism without capitalism. For this reason, it is also much too simple, in a Heideggerian mood, to reduce capitalism to one of the ontic realizations of a more fundamental ontological attitude of will to power and technological domination (claiming that the alternatives to it remain caught within this same ontological horizon). Modern technological domination is inextricably intertwined with the social form of capital; it can only occur within this form, and, insofar as the alternative social formations display the same ontological attitude, this merely confirms that they are, in their innermost core, mediated by capital as their concrete universality, as the particular formation that colors the entire scope of alternatives, that is, that functions as the encompassing totality mediating all other particular formations. In his new book on modernity, Fredric Jameson offers a concise critique of the recently fashionable theories of alternate modernities:

How then can the ideologues of "modernity" in its current sense manage to distinguish their product—the information revolution, and globalized, free-market modernity—from the detestable older kind, without getting themselves involved in asking the kinds of serious political and economic, systemic questions that the concept of a postmodernity makes unavoidable? The answer is simple: you talk about "alternate" or "alternative" modernities. Everyone knows the formula by now: this means that there can be a modernity for everybody which is different from the standard or hegemonic Anglo-Saxon model. Whatever you dislike about the latter, including the subaltern position it leaves you in, can be effaced by the reassuring and "cultural" notion that you can fashion your own modernity differently, so that there can be a Latin-American kind, or an Indian kind or an African kind, and so forth. . . . But this is to overlook the other fundamental meaning of modernity which is that of a worldwide capitalism itself.⁵

As Jameson is well aware, the line goes on and on, up to those Muslims who dream about a specific Arab modernity that would magically bypass the destructive aspects of Western global capitalism. The significance of this critique reaches far beyond the case of modernity; it concerns the fundamental limitation of nominalist historicizing. The recourse to multitude (there is not one modernity with a fixed essence, there are multiple modernities, each of them irreducible to the others) is false not because it does not recognize a unique, fixed "essence" of modernity but because multi-

5. Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London, 2002), p. 12.

plication functions as the disavowal of the antagonism that inheres to the notion of modernity as such; the falsity of multiplication resides in the fact that it frees the universal notion of modernity of its antagonism, of the way it is embedded in the capitalist system, by relegating this aspect just to one of its historical subspecies. And, insofar as this inherent antagonism could be designated as a "castrative" dimension and, furthermore, insofar as, according to Freud, the disavowal of castration is represented as the multiplication of the phallus representatives (a multitude of phalluses signals castration, the lack of the one), it is easy to conceive such a multiplication of modernities as a form of fetishist disavowal. This logic holds also for other ideological notions, especially, today, for democracy. Those who want to distinguish another ("radical") democracy from its existing form and thereby cut off its links with capitalism commit the same categorical mistake.

At this point, one should introduce the difference between the works of Deleuze himself and the popular field of Deleuzianism: which of the two is the true target of our critique? The latter, because it goes without saying that Deleuze's thought is ridiculously simplified in its popular acceptance, so that it is easy to say that things are so much more complex in Deleuze; however, if there is something to be learned from the history of thought, from Christianity to Marx and Heidegger, it is that the roots of misappropriations are to be sought in the original thinker himself.

Microfascisms

The inverted mirror image or counterpart of this ambiguity of the Deleuzian attitude towards capitalism is the ambiguity of Deleuze's theory of fascism, a theory whose basic insight is that fascism does not take hold of subjects at the level of ideology, interests, and so on but directly at the level of bodily investments, libidinal gestures, and so on. Fascism enacts a certain assemblage of bodies, so one should fight it (also) at *this* level, with impersonal counterstrategies. At the same time, there is the opposition of micro and macro, molecular and molar. Fascism is a life-denying view, a view of renunciation, of the sacrificial subordination to Higher Goals; it relies on impersonal microstrategies, manipulations of intensities, which work as life-denying. Here, however, things get complicated. The fascist renunciation in the best Deleuzian way is a deceiving mask, a lure to distract us from the *positivity* of fascism's actual ideological functioning, which is one of superego obscene enjoyment. In short, fascism here is playing the old hypocritical game of a fake sacrifice, of the superficial renunciation of enjoyment destined to deceive the big Other, to conceal from it the fact that we *do* enjoy and enjoy even excessively. "God demands *constant enjoyment*, as the nor-

mal mode of existence for souls within the Order of the World. It is my duty to provide Him with it.”⁶ These words of Daniel Paul Schreber supply the best description of the superego in its extreme psychotic dimension.

Deleuze’s account of fascism is that, although subjects as individuals can rationally perceive that it is against their interests to follow it, it seizes them precisely at the impersonal level of pure intensities: “abstract” bodily motions, libidinally invested collective rhythmic movements, affects of hatred and passion that cannot be attributed to any determinate individual. The impersonal level of pure affects sustains fascism, not the level of represented and constituted reality. *The Sound of Music* is the ultimate example. Its “official” story line is antifascist, but its texture of intensities generates the opposite message. That is to say, the Austrians resisting the Nazi invasion are presented as “good fascists” (displaying their rootedness in the local patriarchal lifeworld, enjoying the stupidity of the yodelling culture, and so on), while the film’s portrait of the Nazis uncannily echoes the Nazi portrait of the Jews, uprooted political manipulators striving for global power. The struggle against fascism should be fought at this impersonal level of intensities—not (only) at the level of rational critique—by undermining the fascist libidinal economy with a more radical one.

However, productive as this Deleuzian approach is, it is time to problematize it and, with it, the general tendency, popular among (especially Western) Marxists and post-Marxists, of relying upon a set of simplistic clues for the triumph of fascism (or, nowadays, for the crisis of the Left)—as if the result would have been entirely different if only the Left were to fight fascism at the level of libidinal micropolitics, or, today, if only the Left were to abandon “class essentialism” and accept the multitude of “post-political” struggles as the proper terrain of its activity. If ever there was *the* case of leftist arrogant intellectual stupidity, this is the one. Back to Deleuze and Guattari: there are two problems with this theory. The notion that fascism could have been defeated earlier if only the Left would have countered it with its own politics of passions, an old idea defended already by Ernst Bloch and Wilhelm Reich, seems naïve enough. Furthermore, what Deleuze proposed as his big insight was already claimed—albeit in a different mode—by the most traditional Marxism, which often repeated that fascists disdain rational argumentation and play upon people’s base irrational instincts. More generally, this Deleuzian approach is all too abstract—all bad politics is declared fascist, so that fascism is elevated into a global container,

6. Daniel Paul Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, trans. and ed. Ida Macalpine and Richard A. Hunter (London, 1955), p. 209.

a catch-all, an all-encompassing term for everything that opposes the free flow of Becoming; it is

inseparable from a proliferation of molecular focuses in interaction, which skip from point to point, *before* beginning to resonate together in the National Socialist State. Rural fascism and city or neighborhood fascism, youth fascism and war veteran's fascism, fascism of the Left and fascism of the Right, fascism of the couple, family, school, and office.⁷

One is almost tempted to add: and the fascism of the irrationalist vitalism of Deleuze himself (in an early polemic, Alain Badiou effectively accused Deleuze of harboring fascist tendencies!). Deleuze and Guattari (especially Guattari) often indulge here in a true interpretive delirium of hasty generalizations; in one great arc, they draw a continuous line from the early Christian procedure of confessions through the self-probing of romantic subjectivity and the psychoanalytic treatment (confessing one's secret, perverse desires) up to the forced confessions of the Stalinist show trials (Guattari once directly characterized these trials as an exercise in collective psychoanalysis). To such analyses, one is tempted to respond by pointing out how the Stalinist trials were evidently productive; their actual goal was not to discover the truth, but to create new truth, to construct or generate it. It is here, against such generalizations, that one should evoke the lesson of Laclau's notion of hegemonic articulation: fascism emerges *only* when disparate elements start to resonate together. In fact, it *is* only a specific mode of this resonance of elements (elements that can also be inserted into totally different hegemonic chains of articulation).⁸ At this precise point, one should also emphasize the problematic nature of Deleuze's sympathy for Wilhelm Reich.⁹ Reich's thesis on the nuclear bourgeois family as the elementary cell generating the fascist authoritarian personality is blatantly wrong (demonstrated previously by the analyses of Adorno and Horkheimer in the 1930s).

And Stalinism?

The further problem here is that, following a long leftist tradition, Deleuze and Guattari avoid confronting the specificity of Stalinism, dismissing

7. Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Massumi (Minneapolis, 1987), p. 214.

8. See Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (London, 1977).

9. The entire analysis of fascism in *Anti-Oedipus* is deeply indebted to Reich; see, for example, Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis, 1983), p. 29.

it as fascism of the Left. The lack of a systematic and thorough confrontation with the phenomenon of Stalinism was already the absolute *scandal* of the Frankfurt school.¹⁰ How could a Marxist thought that claimed to focus on the conditions of the failure of the Marxist emancipatory project abstain from analyzing the nightmare of really existing socialism? Its focus on fascism was *also* a displacement, a silent admission of the failure to confront the true trauma. To put it in a slightly simplified way: Nazism was enacted by a group of people who wanted to do very bad things, and they did them; Stalinism, on the contrary, emerged as the result of a radical emancipatory attempt. If one is looking for the historic moment when the Stalinist state started to acquire its clear contours, it was not the War Communism of 1918–1920, but the epoch of the relaxation of New Economic Politics (NEP) that started in 1921, when, as a countermeasure to the retreat in the sphere of economy and culture, the Bolsheviks wanted to fortify their political power. Or, as Lenin himself expressed it in his unsurpassable style:

When an army is in retreat, a hundred times more discipline is required than when the army is advancing. . . . When a Menshevik says, “You are now retreating; I have been advocating retreat all the time; I agree with you, I am your man, let us retreat together,” we say in reply, “For public manifestation of Menshevism our revolutionary courts must pass the death sentence, otherwise they are not our courts, but God knows what.”¹¹

According to the standard leftist periodization (first proposed by Trotsky), the Thermidor of the October Revolution occurred in the mid-1920s—in short, when Trotsky lost power, when the revolutionary *élan* changed into the rule of the new nomenklatura bent on constructing socialism in one country. To this, one is tempted to oppose two alternatives: either the claim (advocated by Badiou and Sylvain Lazarus in France) that the proper revolutionary sequence ended precisely in October 1917, when the Bolsheviks took over state power and thereby started to function as a *state* party; or the

10. The very exceptions to this rule are telltale: Franz Neumann’s *Behemoth*, a study of National Socialism that, in the typical fashionable style of the late 1930s and 1940s, suggests that the three great world systems—the emerging New Deal capitalism, fascism, and Stalinism—tend towards the same bureaucratic, globally organized, “administered” society; Herbert Marcuse’s *Soviet Marxism*, his least passionate and arguably worst book, a strangely neutral analysis of the Soviet ideology with no clear commitments; and, finally, in the 1980s, attempts by some Habermasians who, reflecting upon the emerging dissident phenomena, endeavored to elaborate the notion of civil society as the site of resistance to the Communist regime—interesting politically, but far from offering a satisfactory global theory of the specificity of Stalinist “totalitarianism.”

11. V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, trans. Institute of Marxism-Leninism, 45 vols. (Moscow, 1960–70), 33:282.

claim (articulated and defended in detail by Sheila Fitzpatrick) that the collectivization and rapid industrialization of the late 1920s was part of the inherent dynamic of the October Revolution, so that the revolutionary sequence proper ended only in 1937; the true Thermidor occurred only when the big purges were cut short to prevent what Getty and Naumov called the complete suicide of the party,¹² and the party nomenklatura stabilized itself into a new class. And, effectively, it was only during the terrible events of 1928–1933 that the very body of Russian society effectively underwent a radical transformation; in the difficult but enthusiastic years of 1917–1921, the entire society was in a state of emergency; the period of NEP marked a step backwards, a consolidation of the Soviet state power that left intact the texture of the social body (the large majority of peasants, artisans, intellectuals, and so on). It was only the thrust of 1928 that directly and brutally aimed at transforming the very composure of the social body, liquidating peasants as a class of individual owners, replacing the old intelligentsia (teachers, doctors, scientists, engineers, and technicians) with a new one. Fitzpatrick puts it in plastic terms: if an emigrant who left Moscow in 1914 were to return in 1924, he would still recognize the same city, with the same array of shops, offices, theaters, and, in most cases, the same people in charge; if, however, he were to return another ten years later, in 1934, he would no longer recognize the city, so different was the entire texture of social life.¹³ The difficult thing to grasp about the terrible years after 1929, the years of the great push forward, was that, in all the horrors beyond recognition, one can discern a ruthless, but sincere and enthusiastic, will to a total revolutionary upheaval of the social body, to create a new state, intelligentsia, legal system.¹⁴ In the domain of historiography, the Thermidor occurred with the forceful reassertion of Russian nationalism, the reinterpretation of the great figures of the Russian past as “progressive” (including the tsars Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great and conservative composers like Tchaikovsky), and the ordered refocusing of history writing from anonymous mass trends towards great individuals and their heroic acts. In literary ideology and practice, the Thermidor coincides with the imposition of Socialist Realism—and here, precisely, one should not miss the mode of this imposition. It was *not* that the doctrine of Socialist Realism repressed the

12. See J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–39* (New Haven, Conn., 1999).

13. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford, 1994), p. 148.

14. If one is to experience the proper tragedy of the October Revolution, one only has to imagine it as a three-act drama, structured like J. B. Priestley's “Time and the Conways.” In act 1, we get the staged performance of 1920; in act 2, we get the Stalinist parade twenty years later; and, in act 3, we return to the performance of 1920 and see it to the end, with the unbearable awareness of what the October Revolution turned into two decades later.

thriving plurality of styles and schools; on the contrary, Socialist Realism was imposed against the predominance of the “proletarian-sectarian” RAPP (the acronym for the Revolutionary Association of Proletarian Writers) that, in the epoch of the “second revolution” (1928–1932), became “a sort of monster that seemed to be swallowing the small independent writers’ organizations one by one.”¹⁵ This is why the elevation of Socialist Realism into the “official” doctrine was greeted by the majority of writers with a sigh of relief; it was perceived (and also intended) as the defeat of proletarian sectarianism, as the assertion of the right of writers to refer to the large corpus of the progressive figures of the past, and of the primacy of wide humanism over class sectarianism.

How did Stalinism function at the level of political guidelines? At first, things may seem clear; Stalinism was a strictly centralized system of command, so the top leadership issued directives that had to be obeyed all the way down. Here, however, we encounter the first enigma: “How can one obey when one has not clearly been told what to do?” For example, in the collectivization drive of 1929–30, “no detailed instructions about how to collectivize were ever issued, and local officials who asked for such instructions were rebuked.” All that was effectively given was a sign, Stalin’s speech to the Communist Academy in December 1929, when he demanded that kulaks were to be “liquidated as a class.” The lower-level cadres, eager to fulfill the command, anxious not to be accused of tolerance towards the class enemy and a lack of vigilance, of course overfulfilled the order; it is only then that we get “the closest thing to an explicit public policy statement,” Stalin’s famous letter “Dizzy with success,” published in *Pravda* on 1 March 1930, which repudiates the excesses in what had been done without precise instructions by local officials.¹⁶

How, then, could these local cadres orient themselves? Were they totally at a loss, face to face with an unspecified general order? Not quite: the gap was ambiguously filled in by the so-called signals, the key element of the Stalinist semiotic space: “important policy changes were often ‘signalled’ rather than communicated in the form of a clear and detailed directive.” Such signals “indicated a shift of policy in a particular area without spelling out exactly what the new policy entailed or how it should be implemented.”¹⁷ They consisted of, say, an article by Stalin discussing a minor point of cultural politics, an anonymous derogatory comment in *Pravda*, a criticism of a local party functionary, the unexpected praise of a provincial

15. Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago, 1981), p. 32.

16. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1999), p. 26.

17. *Ibid.*

worker, even an explanatory note on a historical event that took place hundreds of years ago. The message to be deciphered from such signals was mostly quantitative; it concerned the level of pure intensities more than concrete content: speed up or slow down the pace of collectivization, and so on. These signals were of two basic types: the main type was the "hard-line" signal to proceed faster, to crush the enemy more mercilessly, even if one violates the existing laws. Say, in the big radicalization of the policy towards the Orthodox church at the end of the 1920s, the signal enjoined the mass closings and destruction of the churches and the arrests of priests, acts that countered the explicit existing laws (such instructions were issued to local party organizations, but treated as a secret not to be published). The profit from such a *modus operandi* is obvious; because these signals were never explicitly stated, they were much easier to repudiate or reinterpret than explicit policy statements. The complementary opposite signal pointed in the direction of relaxation and tolerance, as a rule attributed to Stalin himself, putting the blame for the "excesses" on the lower-level officials who did not understand Stalin's policy. Such a signal was also issued in an informal way, say, Stalin personally phoning Boris Pasternak, asking him with feigned surprise why he had not recently published a book; the news circulated quickly on the intelligentsia grapevine. The ambiguity was thus total: a local official, confronted by a general unspecified order, was caught in the unsolvable dilemma of how to avoid being accused of leniency, but also how to avoid being scapegoated as responsible for the "excesses." However, one should not forget that the deadlock of the party leadership emitting these signals was no less debilitating; with total power in their hands, they were not even able to issue explicit orders about what was to be done.

Netocracy?

The further paradox with regard to Stalinism is that the "procapitalist" aspect of Deleuze and Guattari was fully developed by Alexander Bard and Jan Soderqvist in their *Netocracy*,¹⁸ a supreme example of what one is tempted to call—not cyber-Communism—but, precisely, *cyber-Stalinism*; while cruelly dismissing Marxism as outdated, as part of the old industrial society, it takes from Stalinist Marxism a whole series of key features, from primitive economic determinism and linear historical evolutionism (the development of the forces of production—the shift of accent from industry

18. See Alexander Bard and Jan Soderqvist, *Netocracy: The New Power Elite and Life after Capitalism* (London, 2002).

to management of information—necessitates new social relations, the replacement of the class antagonism of capitalist and proletariat with the new class antagonism of netocrats and consumtariat) to the extremely rude notion of ideology (in the best naïve Enlightened way, ideology—from traditional religion to bourgeois humanism—is repeatedly dismissed as the instrument of the ruling classes and their paid intellectuals, destined to keep in check the lower classes). Here, then, is the basic vision of netocracy as a new mode of production (the term is inadequate because in it production precisely loses its key role); while in feudalism the key to social power was the ownership of land (legitimized by religious ideology) and in capitalism the key to power is the ownership of capital (with money as the measure of social status), with private property as the fundamental legal category and the market as the dominant field of social exchange (all of this legitimized by the humanist ideology of Man as an autonomous free agent), in the newly emerging netocracy the measure of power and social status is the access to key pieces of information. Money and material possessions are relegated to a secondary role. The dominated class is no longer the working class, but the class of consumerists (consumtariat), those condemned to consume the information prepared and manipulated by the netocratic elite. This shift in power generates an entirely new social logic and ideology; because information circulates and changes all the time, there is no longer a stable, long-term hierarchy, but a permanently changing network of power relations. Individuals are “nomadic,” “dividuals,” constantly reinventing themselves, adopting different roles; society itself is no longer a hierarchic whole, but a complex, open network of networks.

Netocracy presents the local groups of the new informational elite almost as islands of nonalienated, utopian communities. It describes the life of the new “symbolic class” for which lifestyle, access to exclusive information, and social circles matter more than money (top academics, journalists, designers, programmers, and so on do indeed live this way). The first problem here is that of *recognition*: do netocrats *really* not care about others, or is their ignorance feigned, a way to assert their elitism in the eyes of others? (Obviously, they don’t care for money because they have enough of it.) To what extent and in what more precise sense are they in power, independently of their wealth? Are the authors of *Netocracy* fully aware of the ultimate irony of their notion of “nomadic” subjects and thought as opposed to traditional, hierarchic thought? What they are actually claiming is that the netocrats, today’s elite, realize the dream of yesterday’s marginal philosophers and outcast artists (from Spinoza to Nietzsche and Deleuze). In short, and stated even more pointedly, the thought of Foucault, Deleuze,

and Guattari, the ultimate philosophers of resistance, of marginal positions crushed by the hegemonic power network, is effectively the ideology of the newly emerging ruling class.¹⁹

The problem of *Netocracy* is that it moves simultaneously too fast and not fast enough. As such, it shares the mistake of all those other attempts that much too quickly elevated a new entity into the successor of capitalism (an entity stuck at the same level as capitalism): the postindustrial society, the informational society. Against such temptations, one should insist that the "informational society" is simply *not* a concept at the same level as feudalism or capitalism. The picture of the accomplished rule of the netocracy is therefore, in spite of the authors' stress on new class antagonisms, a utopia: an inconsistent composite that cannot survive and reproduce itself on its own terms. All too many of the features of the new netocratic class are only sustainable within a capitalist regime. Therein resides the weakness of *Netocracy*; following the elementary logic of ideological mystification, it dismisses as remainders of the (capitalist and statist) past what are, effectively, positive conditions of the functioning of the informational society.

The key problem is the way netocracy relates to capitalism. On the one side, we have patents, copyrights, and so on—all the different modalities in which information itself is offered and sold on the market as intellectual property, as another commodity. And, when the authors claim that the true elite of netocracy is beyond patents and so on because its privilege is no longer based on possessing the information, but on being able to discern, in the confusingly massive quantity of information, the relevant material, they strangely miss the point. Why should this ability to discern what really matters, the ability to discard the irrelevant ballast, not be another—perhaps crucial—piece of information to be sold? In other words, they seem to forget here the basic lesson of today's cognitive sciences: already, at the

19. However, was Hegel ever really a state philosopher against the "marginal" nomadic series of Spinoza through Nietzsche? There are two brief periods when he may have qualified for this role: he himself in his last decade, and the conservative British Hegelians (Bradley and others), with their ridiculous misreading of Hegel. But what about the numerous explosive, revolutionary appropriations of Hegel, starting with Bakunin? What about Friedrich Wilhelm IV calling Schelling to Berlin in 1840 to fight Hegel's revolutionary influence ten years after Hegel's death? And what about Nietzsche as a German state philosopher of the majority of the first half of the twentieth century? In the Germany of the late nineteenth century, it was, rather, Nietzsche who was a proto-state philosopher against Hegel, not to mention Spinoza himself as the philosopher of the de Witt brothers' faction of the Dutch state. The philosopher whose watered-down version effectively can function as a state philosophy is Kant: from neo-Kantians a century ago to Luc Ferry, now a minister of education in France, and, up to a point, Habermas in Germany. The reason is that Kant ideally unites respect for the positive sciences with the limitation of the scope of scientific knowledge (thus making space for religion and morality)—this being exactly what a state ideology needs.

most elementary level of consciousness, information is the ability to abstract, to discern the relevant aspects in the confusing multitude with which we are constantly bombarded. On the other side, there is the prospect of the exchange of information *beyond* the property relations characterizing capitalism. This inner antagonism is realized in the basic tension within the new netocratic class between procapitalists (types like Bill Gates) and those advocating a postcapitalist utopia (and the authors are right in emphasizing that the future class struggle will be decided with regard to the possible coalition between the postcapitalist netocrats and the underprivileged consumtariat). Without this coalition and support from within netocracy, the consumtariat alone can only articulate its protest in violent negative actions lacking any positive, future-oriented program. The key point is thus that there is no “neutral” netocracy; there is either a procapitalist netocracy, itself part of late capitalism, or the postcapitalist netocracy, part of a different mode of production. To complicate things further, this postcapitalist perspective is, in itself, ambiguous; it can mean a more open “democratic” system or the emergence of a new hierarchy, a kind of informational/biogenetic neofeudalism.

Blows against the Empire

Today’s global capitalism can no longer be combined with democratic representation. The key economic decisions of bodies like the IMF or WTO are not legitimized by any democratic process, and this lack of democratic representation is structural, not empirical. For this reason, the call for a global (representative) democracy that would submit the IMF, WTO, and so on to some kind of democratic control (voiced, in Germany, by Habermas, Beck, Lafontaine, and others) is illusory. Can one really even imagine a worldwide vote for the board of the IMF? We are dealing with more than the usual complaint that parliamentary democracy is “formal”; here, even the form is absent.

Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* aims at providing a solution to this predicament.²⁰ Their wager is to repeat Marx. For Marx, highly organized corporate capitalism was already a form of socialism within capitalism (a kind of socialization of capitalism, with the absent owners becoming superfluous), so that one need only cut the nominal head off and we get socialism. In an identical fashion, Hardt and Negri see the same potential in the emerging hegemonic role of immaterial labor. Today, immaterial labor is hegemonic in the precise sense in which Marx proclaimed that, in nineteenth-century capitalism, large industrial production is hegemonic as the specific color

20. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, 2000).

giving its tone to the totality—not quantitatively, but playing the key, emblematic structural role. This, then, far from posing a mortal threat to democracy (as conservative cultural critics want us to believe), opens up a unique chance of “absolute democracy.” Why?

In immaterial production, the products are no longer material objects, but new social (interpersonal) relations themselves. Marx emphasized how material production is always also the (re)production of the social relations within which it occurs; with today’s capitalism, however, the production of social relations is the immediate goal of production. Hardt and Negri wager that this directly socialized, immaterial production not only renders owners progressively superfluous (who needs them when production is directly social, formally and as to its content?); the producers also master the regulation of social space because social relations (politics) *is* the stuff of their work. The way is thus open for “absolute democracy,” for the producers directly regulating their social relations without even the detour of democratic representation.

The problem here is, at a minimum, triple. First, can one really interpret this move towards the hegemonic role of immaterial labor as the move from production to communication to social interaction (that is, in Aristotelian terms, from *techne* as *poiesis* to *praxis*, namely, as the overcoming of the Arendtian distinction between production and *vis activa*, or of the Habermasian distinction between instrumental and communicational reason)? Second, how does this “politicization” of production, where production directly produces (new) social relations, affect the very notion of politics? Is such an “administration of people” (subordinated to the logic of profit) still politics, or is it the most radical sort of depoliticization, the entry into “post-politics”? And, last but not least, is democracy by necessity, with regard to its very notion, nonabsolute? There is no democracy without a hidden, presupposed elitism. Democracy is, by definition, not global; it *has* to be based on values or truths that one cannot select democratically. In democracy, one can fight for truth, but not decide what truth *is*. As Claude Lefort and others amply demonstrated, democracy is never simply representative in the sense of adequately expressing a preexisting set of interests, opinions, and so on because these interests and opinions are constituted only through such representation. In other words, the democratic articulation of an interest is always minimally performative; through their democratic representatives, people establish what their interests and opinions are. As Hegel already knew, “absolute democracy” could only actualize itself in the guise of its “oppositional determination,” as *terror*. There is, thus, a choice to be made here: do we accept democracy’s structural, not just accidental, imperfection, or do we also endorse its terroristic dimension?

Hardt and Negri's slogan—multitude as the site of resistance against the Empire—opens up a further series of problems, the primary one among them being the loss of the radical ambiguity of this term in Spinoza, from whom it is taken. When Spinoza describes how a multitude is formed through *imitatio affecti*, the mechanisms he evokes are thoroughly *neutral* with regard to their good or bad effects. Spinoza thus avoids both traps of the standard approach; he neither dismisses the mechanism that constitutes a multitude as the source of the irrational destructive mob, nor does he celebrate it as the source of altruistic self-overcoming and solidarity. Of course, he was deeply and painfully aware of the destructive potential of the multitude; recall *the* big political trauma of his life, the lynching of the de Witt brothers, his political allies. However, he was aware that the noblest collective acts are generated by exactly the same mechanism—in short, democracy and a lynch mob have the same source. The concept of multitude *qua* crowd is fundamentally ambiguous; multitude is resistance to the imposing One, but, at the same time, it designates what we call mob, a wild, irrational explosion of violence that, through *imitatio affecti*, feeds on and propels itself. This profound insight of Spinoza gets lost in today's ideology of multitude: the thorough “undecidability” of the crowd. *Crowd* designates a certain mechanism that engenders social links, and *this very same* mechanism that supports, say, the enthusiastic formation of social solidarity also supports the explosive spread of racist violence.

Furthermore, the question arises concerning the level at which a multitude functions—what a given field of multitudes excludes, what it *has* to exclude in order to function. There is, hence, always a nonmultiple excess beyond the multitude. Take multiculturalist identity politics—a thriving multitude of identities (religious, ethnic, sexual, cultural) asserted against the specter of antiquated class reductionism and essentialism. As it was noted long ago by many a perspicuous observer, in the mantra of class, gender, and race, class sticks out, never properly thematized. Another case of such a homogenization of multitudes is capital itself; capitalism is multiplicity in principle (totally monopolistic capital is conceptual nonsense), but, precisely as such, it needs a universal medium as the sole domain within which its multitude can thrive, the medium of a legally regulated market where contracts are respected and their breach punished, and so on. In what I would call a properly dialectical move, Ernesto Laclau points out how “it was only when *the* process of centralization *in early modernity* had advanced beyond a certain point that something resembling a unitary multitude could emerge through the transference of sovereignty from the king to the people.”²¹ In other words, not only can one not simply oppose the subver-

21. Laclau, “Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles?” unpublished manuscript.

sive immanent multitude to the centralizing transcendent state power, but it was the very establishment of a centralized state power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that created the space for the emergence of modern political multitude in the first place.

So, to ask a naïve question, what would "multitude in power" (not only as resistance) be? How would it *function*? Hardt and Negri distinguish two ways to oppose the global capitalist Empire: either the "protectionist" advocacy of the return to the strong nation-state, or the deployment of even more flexible forms of multitude. Along these lines, in his analysis of the Porto Alegre antiglobalist meeting, Hardt emphasizes the new logic of political space at work there; it was no longer the old us-versus-them binary logic, with the Leninist call for a firm, singular party line, but the coexistence of a multitude of political agencies and positions that are incompatible with each other as far as their ideological and programmatic accents are concerned (from "conservative" farmers and ecologists worried about the fate of their local tradition and patrimony, to human rights groups and agents standing for the interests of immigrants, advocating global mobility). It is, effectively, today's opposition to global capital that seems to provide a kind of negative mirror image in relation to Deleuze's claim about the inherently antagonistic nature of capitalist dynamics (a strong machine of deterritorialization that generates new modes of reterritorialization). Today's resistance to capitalism reproduces the same antagonism. Calls for the defense of particular (cultural, ethnic) identities being threatened by global dynamics coexist with the demands for more global mobility (against the new barriers imposed by capitalism, which concern, above all, the free movement of individuals). Is it, then, true that these tendencies (these *lignes de fuite*, as Deleuze would have put it) can coexist in a nonantagonistic way, as parts of the same global network of resistance? One is tempted to answer this claim by applying to it Laclau's notion of the chain of equivalences: this logic of multitude functions because we are still dealing with *resistance*. However, what happens when—if this really is the desire and will of these movements—we take it over? What would the multitude in power look like?

There was a similar constellation in the last years of really existing socialism: the nonantagonistic coexistence, within the oppositional field, of a multitude of ideologico-political tendencies, from liberal human-rights groups to "liberal" business-oriented groups, conservative religious groups, and leftist workers' demands. This multitude functioned well, as long as it was united in the opposition to "them," the Party hegemony. Once they found *themselves* in power, the game was over. Another case of acting multitude is the crowd that brought Hugo Chavez back into power in Venezuela. However, can we forget the obvious fact that Chavez functions as a Latin-

American *caudillo*, the unique leader whose function is to magically resolve the conflicting interests of those who support him? “Multitude in power” thus necessarily actualizes itself in the guise of an authoritarian leader whose charisma can serve as the empty signifier able to contain a multitude of interests (Juan Perón was a militaristic patriot to the Army, a devout Christian to the church, a supporter of the poor against oligarchy on behalf of workers, and so on). The favored example of the supporters (and practitioners) of the new, dispersed counterpower of the multitude is, of course, the Zapatista movement in Chiapas. Here is Klein’s description of how its leading figure, subcommandante Marcos, functions:

He wasn’t a commander barking orders, but a subcomandante, a conduit for the will of the councils. His first words, in his new persona, were “Through me speaks the will of the Zapatista National Liberation Army.” Further subjugating himself, Marcos says to those who seek him out that he is not a leader, but that his black mask is a mirror, reflecting each of their own struggles; that a Zapatista is anyone anywhere fighting injustice, that “We are you.” Most famously, he once told a reporter that “Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, . . . a single woman on the Metro at 10 P.M., a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums. . . .” Meanwhile, Marcos himself—the supposed non-self, the conduit, the mirror—writes in a tone so personal and poetic, so completely and unmistakably his own. [FW, pp. 211–12]

It is clear that such a structure can function only as the ethico-poetic shadow double of the existing positive state power structure. No wonder Marcos cannot show his face; no wonder his idea is to throw off his mask and disappear back into anonymity if and when the movement reaches its goals. If the Zapatistas were to effectively take power, statements like “through me speaks the will of” would immediately acquire a much more ominous dimension—their apparent modesty would reveal itself as extreme arrogance. Do we still remember how phrases like “I am nothing in myself, my entire strength is yours, I am just an expression of your will!” was the standard cliché of “totalitarian” leaders, the dark implication being, “so anyone who attacks me personally is effectively attacking you all, the entire people, your love for freedom and justice!” The greater the poetic potential of Marcos in opposition, as a critical voice of *virtual* protest, the greater would be the terror of Marcos as an *actual* leader. As to the political effects of the Zapatista movement, one should note the final irony here: Klein says that the main Zapatista political achievement was to help “topple the corrupt

seventy-one-year reign of the Institutional Revolutionary Party" (*FW*, p. 214); in other words, with Zapatista help, Mexico formed its first postrevolutionary government, a government that cut the last links with the historical heritage of Zapata and fully endorsed Mexico's integration into the neoliberal New World Order (no wonder the two presidents, Vicente Fox—ex-boss of the Mexican branch of Coca-Cola—and Bush, are personal friends).

However, the Zapatistas *did* develop a minimal, positive political program, that of local self-determination, of moving in where state power failed and enabling people to constitute new spaces of local community democracy. Klein writes, "What sets the Zapatistas apart from your average Marxist guerrilla insurgents is that their goal is not to win control but to seize and build autonomous spaces where 'democracy, liberty and justice' can thrive. . . . Marcos is convinced that these free spaces, born of reclaimed land, communal agriculture, resistance to privatization, will eventually create counterpowers to the state simply by existing as alternatives" (*FW*, p. 228). And, yet, we encounter here the same ambiguity: are these autonomous spaces germs of the organization-to-come of the entire society, or just phenomena emerging in the crevices and gaps of the social order? Marcos's formulation that the Zapatistas are not interested in the Revolution but, rather, in a revolution that makes revolution possible is deeply true, but nonetheless profoundly ambiguous. Does this mean that the Zapatistas are a "Cultural Revolution" laying the foundation for the actual political revolution (what, way back in the 1960s, Marcuse called "freedom as the condition of liberation"),²² or does it mean that they should remain merely a site of resistance, a corrective to the existing state power (not only without the aim to replace it but also without the aim to organize the conditions in which this power will disappear)?

Marcos's list of all those covered by the signifier *Zapatista*, all those rendered invisible by neoliberal globalization, effectively sounds like Laclau's "chain of equivalences," but with the twist that this chain clearly refers to a privileged central signifier, that of neoliberal global capitalism. So, when Klein herself had to note how the Zapatista movement is "keenly aware of the power of words and symbols" (*FW*, p. 213), when Marcos proclaims that *words* are his weapons, one should neither joyfully assert how we are dealing with a truly postmodern politics of the signifier, nor should one indulge in cynical quips about how the Zapatistas are well-versed in mobilizing the fetishizing power of logos (the focus of Klein's bestseller). One should, rather, reflect on how this use of mythical-poetic master signifiers affects

22. Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (New York, 1971).

the actual political impact of the movement. If the defenders of the Zapatistas were to reply here that, in this case, the central master signifier is not a totalizing-homogenizing force but just a kind of empty container, a designation that holds open the space for the thriving of the irreducible plurality, one should respond that this, precisely, is how master signifiers function in fascism and populism, in which the reference to a charismatic leader neutralizes the inconsistent multitude of ideological references.

The response of Negri and Hardt's partisans to this critique is, of course, that it continues to perceive the new situation from within the old framework. In the contemporary information society, the question of taking power is more and more irrelevant because there is no longer any central power agency that plays a de facto decisive role; power itself is shifting, de-centered, Protean. Perhaps, then, today, in the epoch of *homo sacer*, one of the options is to pursue the trend of self-organized collectives in areas outside the law.²³ Recall life in today's *favelas* in Latin American megalopolises. In some sense, they are the first liberated territories, the cells of futuristic, self-organized societies. Institutions like community kitchens are a model of socialized, communal, local life. (And, perhaps, from this standpoint, one can also approach, in a new way, the politics of drugs. Was it really an accident that when a strong, self-organized collective of those outside the law emerged it was soon corrupted by hard drugs—from African-American ghettos after the rebellions in the 1960s and Italian cities after the workers' unrests of the 1970s, up to today's *favelas*? And the same holds even for Poland after Jaruzelski's *coup* in 1980. All of a sudden, drugs were easily available, together with pornography, alcohol, and Eastern Wisdom manuals, ruining the self-organized civil society. Those in power knew full well when to use drugs as a weapon against self-organized resistance.)

However, what about the complex network of material, legal, and institutional conditions that must be maintained in order for the informational "multitude" to be able to function? So, when Klein writes, "Decentralizing power doesn't mean abandoning strong national and international standards—and stable, equitable funding—for health care, education, affordable housing and environmental protections. But it does mean that the mantra of the left needs to change from 'increase funding' to 'empower the grassroots'" (*FW*, p. 233), one should ask the naïve question: *how?* How are

23. Perhaps the greatest literary monument to such a utopia comes from an unexpected source—Mario Vargas Llosa's *The War of the End of the World* (1981), the novel about Canudos, an outlaw community deep in the Brazilian backlands that was a home to prostitutes, freaks, beggars, bandits, and the most wretched of the poor. Canudos, led by an apocalyptic prophet, was a utopian space without money, property, taxes, and marriage. In 1987, it was destroyed by the military forces of the Brazilian government.

these strong standards and funding—in short, the main ingredients of the welfare state—to be maintained? No wonder that, in a kind of ironic twist proper to the cunning of reason, Hardt and Negri end their *Empire* with a minimal positive political program of three points: the demand for global citizenship (so that the mobility of the working force under the present capitalist conditions is recognized); the right to a social wage (a minimal income guaranteed to everybody); the right to reappropriation (so that the key means of production, especially those of new informational media, are socially owned). The irony here is not only that the content of these demands (with which, *in abstractu*, every radical liberal or social democrat would agree) but their very form—*rights, demands*—unexpectedly bring back into the picture what the entire book was fighting against: political agents all of a sudden appear as subjects of universal rights, demanding their realization (from whom if not some universal form of legal state power?). In short (psychoanalytic terms), from the nomadic schizo outside the Law, we pass to the hysterical subject trying to provoke the Master by way of bombarding him with impossible demands. Massumi writes:

The way that a concept like hope can be made useful is when it is *not* connected to an expected success—when it starts to be something different from optimism—because when you start trying to think ahead into the future from the present point, rationally there really isn't much room for hope. Globally it's a very pessimistic affair, with economic inequalities increasing in many regions, with the global effects of environmental deterioration already being felt, with conflicts among nations and peoples apparently only getting more intractable, leading to mass displacements of workers and refugees . . . it seems such a mess that I think it can be paralysing. . . . On the other hand, if hope is separated from concepts of optimism and pessimism, from a wishful projection of success or even some kind of rational calculation of outcomes, then I think it starts to be interesting—because it places it in the *present*.²⁴

Thus, one should bear in mind the radical ambiguity of this position. The suspension of the teleological dimension, the immersion into the now, the fact that the process of liberation already has to practice freedom, all this remains tainted by the suspicion that the focus on the now is a desperate strategic retreat from the hopelessness of any approach based on the more global cognitive mapping of the situation.

The Liberal Fake

What makes the situation appear so hopeless is not only the "objective" socioeconomic constellation but, even more, the hegemony of the liberal-

24. Massumi, "Navigating Movements," p. 211.

democratic ideology that necessitates a break (with democracy as the master signifier) that few are ready to risk. Yet this break—the break with the liberal fake—is of the foremost urgency today.

Perhaps the best indicator of the liberal fake is the sincere horror expressed by liberals apropos overt racist excesses. Recall the well-known (true) story, retold again and again, of how, a century ago, the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court defined as “negro” anyone with even a minimum of African American blood—one sixty-fourth of your ancestry was enough, even if you looked white. What is wrong with the passionate retelling of such stories, which is usually accompanied by exclamations like, “You see, this was even worse than the Nazis, for whom you were counted as Jewish only if one-eighth or more of your ancestry was Jewish!”? The very focus on the excess automatically renders acceptable a more “moderate” form of the racist exclusion—say, “only” one-quarter or one-third of African American blood. In other words, the role of such excesses, the moral indignation they give rise to, is exactly the same as today’s indignation felt by good liberal democrats when they are confronted with violent, overtly racist populism—after shouting “Horrible! How dark and uncivilized! Wholly unacceptable! A threat to our basic democratic values!” they, of course, proceed to do the same thing in a more “civilized” way—the familiar reasoning that goes something like, “But the racist populists are manipulating the legitimate worries of ordinary people, so we do indeed have to take some measures!”

Therein resides the true problem with politicians like Le Pen in France. A close look at how Le Pen made it into the second round of the French presidential elections of 2002 renders clear the true stakes of the widespread emotion of fear and shame, panic even, that Le Pen’s first-round success generated among many a democratic leftist. The cause of panic was not Le Pen’s percentage as such but the fact that he finished *second* among the candidates, instead of Jospin, the “logical” candidate for this place. The panic was triggered by the fact that, in the democratic imaginary of the multiparty states in which the political field is bipolar, with the two big parties or blocks exchanging power, the second place symbolically signals the *electability* of a candidate. This is what disturbed the silent pact of today’s liberal democracies, which allow political freedom to everyone—on condition that a set of implicit rules clearly limits the scope of those who can effectively be elected.

So, then, is Le Pen unfit to be elected simply because he is heterogeneous to the liberal-democratic order, a foreign body in it? There is more to this. The misfortune (and role) of Le Pen was to introduce certain topics (the foreign threat, the necessity to limit immigration, and so on) that were then silently taken over not only by the conservative parties but even by the de facto politics of the “socialist” governments. Today, the need to “regulate”

the status of immigrants is part of the mainstream consensus; as the story goes, Le Pen did address and exploit real problems that bother people. The shame apropos Le Pen was thus the shame that arises when the hypocritical masks are torn down and we are directly confronted with our true stance.

Facts like these give us a clear indication of what the Left has been doing in the last few decades: ruthlessly pursuing the path of *giving way*, of accommodating itself, of making the "necessary compromises" with the declared enemy (in the same way the church had to compromise on the essentials in order to redefine its role in modern secular society) by way of reconciling the opposites, that is, its own position with that of the declared opponent. It stands for socialism, but can fully endorse economic Thatcherism; it stands for science, but can fully endorse the rule of the multitude of opinions; it stands for true popular democracy, but can also play the game of politics as spectacle and electoral spin; it stands for principled fidelity, but can be totally pragmatic; it stands for the freedom of the press, but can flatter and get the support of Murdoch. In the early days of his rule, Tony Blair liked to paraphrase the famous joke from Monty Python's *Life of Brian* ("All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh-water system and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?")²⁵ in order to ironically disarm his critics: "They betrayed socialism. True, they brought more social security, they did a lot for health care and education, and so on, but, in spite of all that, they betrayed socialism." As it is clear today, it is, rather, the inverse which applies: "We remain socialists. True, we practice Thatcherism in economics, we made a deal with Murdoch, and so on, but, nonetheless, we remain socialists."

In the old days of the twentieth century, great conservatives often did the tough job for the liberals; after the indecisive attitude of the socialist government, which ended up in the global crisis of the French Republic itself, it was de Gaulle who cut the Gordian knot by giving Algeria independence, Nixon who established diplomatic relations with China. Today, the opposite scenario is more the rule: the new Third Way Left does the job for economic conservative liberals, dismantling the welfare state, bringing privatization to an end, and so on.

In his brilliant analysis of the political *imbroglio* of the French Revolution of 1848, Marx pointed out the paradoxical status of the ruling Party of the Order. It was the coalition of the two royalist wings (Bourbons and Orleanists). However, because the two parties were, by definition, not able to find a common denominator at the level of royalism (one cannot be a roy-

25. *The Life of Brian*, VHS, dir. Terry Jones (1979).

alist in general because one should support a certain determinate royal house), the only way for the two to unite was under the banner of the “anonymous kingdom of the Republic”; the only way to be a royalist in general is to be a republican.²⁶ And, *mutatis mutandis*, is not something similar going on today? As we all know, capital nowadays is split into two factions (traditional industrial capital and “postmodern” digital-informational capital), and the only way for the two factions to find a common denominator is under the banner of the anonymous capitalism of social democracy; today, the only way to be a capitalist *in general* is to be a (Third Way) social democrat. This is how the opposition Left-Right works now; it is the new Third Way Left which stands for the interests of capital as such, in its totality (that is, in relative independence from its particular factions), while today’s Right, as a rule, advocates the interests of some particular section of capital in contrast to other sections—which is why, paradoxically, in order to win the majority it has to augment its electoral base by directly appealing to select parts of the working class as well. No wonder, then, we find in the modern Right parties explicit references to the interests of the working class (protectionist measures against cheap foreign labor and cheap imports, and so on).

However, condemning the postmodern Left for its accommodation is also wrong because one should ask the obvious hard question: *What was, effectively, the alternative?* If today’s “postpolitics” is opportunistic pragmatism with no principles, then the predominant leftist reaction to it can be aptly characterized as principled opportunism: one simply sticks to old formulas (such as the welfare state) and calls them principles, dispensing with the detailed analysis of how the situation changed—and thus retaining one’s position of Beautiful Soul. The inherent stupidity of the “principled” Left is clearly discernible in its standard reproach to any analysis that proposes a more complex picture of the situation, renouncing any simple prescriptions on how to act. “There is no clear political stance involved in your theory”—and this from people with no stance but their principled opportunism. Against such a stance, one should gather the courage to claim that the only way to effectively remain open to the revolutionary chance is to renounce easy calls to direct action, which necessarily involve us in an activity where things change so that the totality remains the same. Today’s predicament is that, if we succumb to the urge of directly doing something (for example, engaging in the antiglobalist struggle, helping the poor), we will certainly and undoubtedly contribute to the reproduction of the exist-

26. See Karl Marx, “Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850,” *Collected Works*, trans. Clemens Dutt, W. Lough, and C. P. Magill, ed. Jack Cohen et al., 49 vols. to date (London, 1975–), 10:95.

ing order. The only way to lay the foundations for a true, radical change is to withdraw from the compulsion to act, to do nothing—and, thus, to open up the space for a different kind of activity.

Today's antiglobalism seems to be caught in the antinomy of de- and reterritorialization. On the one hand, there are those who want to reterritorialize capitalism (conservatives, from ecologists to partisans of the nation-state and local roots or traditions); on the other hand, there are those who want an even more radical deterritorialization, liberated from the constraint of capital. But is this opposition not too simple? Is it not ultimately a false alternative? Is not the capitalist territory (everything must pass through the grid of market exchange) the very form and mobile of radical deterritorialization—its operator, as it were? (And does the same not go for the nation-state, this operator of the erasure of local traditions?) Positivity and negativity are here inextricably intertwined, which is why the true aim should be a new balance, a new *form* of de- and reterritorialization. This brings us back to the central sociopolitical antinomy of late capitalism, the way its pluralist dynamics of permanent deterritorialization coexists with its opposite, the paranoid logic of the One, thereby confirming that, perhaps, in the Deleuzian opposition between schizophrenia and paranoia, between the multitude and the One, we are dealing with two sides of the same coin.

If the Left were to choose the "principled" attitude of fidelity to its old program, it would simply marginalize itself. The task is a much harder one: to rethink thoroughly the leftist project, beyond the alternative of accommodating new circumstances and sticking to the old attitude. Apropos of the disintegration of state socialism two decades ago, one should not forget that, at approximately the same time, the Western social democratic welfare state ideology was also dealt a crucial blow, that it also ceased to function as the imaginary able to arouse a collective passionate following. The notion that the time of the welfare state has passed is today a piece of commonly accepted wisdom. What these two defeated ideologies shared is the notion that humanity as a collective subject has the capacity to somehow limit impersonal and anonymous sociohistoric development, to steer it in a desired direction. Today, such a notion is quickly dismissed as ideological or totalitarian; the social process is again perceived as dominated by an anonymous Fate beyond social control. The rise of global capitalism is presented to us as such a Fate, against which one cannot fight; one either adapts oneself to it or one falls out of step with history and is crushed. The only thing one can do is to make global capitalism as human as possible, to fight for global capitalism with a human face (this is what, ultimately, the Third Way is—or, rather, *was*—about).

Whenever a political project takes a radical turn, the inevitable blackmail pops up: "Of course these goals are in themselves desirable; however, if we do all of this, international capital will boycott us, the growth rate will fall, and so on." The sound barrier, the qualitative leap that occurs when one expands the quantity from local communities to wider social circles (up to the state itself), will have to be broken, and the risk will have to be taken to organize larger and larger social circles along the lines of the self-organization of excluded marginal communities. Many fetishes will have to be broken here; who cares if growth stalls and even becomes negative? Did we not get enough of the high growth rate whose effects in the social body were mostly felt in the guise of the new forms of poverty and dispossession? What about a negative growth that would translate into a qualitatively better, not higher, standard of living for the wider popular strata? *That* would have been an *act* in today's politics—to break the spell of automatically endorsing the frame, to break out of the debilitating alternative of either we just directly endorse free market globalization or we make impossible promises about how to have one's cake and eat it, too, of how to combine globalization with social solidarity.

How to Live with Catastrophes

Nowhere is today's resistance to the political act proper more palpable than in the obsession with *catastrophe*, the negative of the act. It is as if the supreme good today is that nothing should really happen. We can imagine an act only in the guise of a catastrophic disturbance, of a traumatic explosion of Evil. Susan Neiman is right. September 11th took so many leftist social critics by surprise because fascism was, for them, the last and seemingly final appearance of a directly transparent Evil.²⁷ After 1945, they perfected a mode of reading that taught us to recognize Evil in the guise of its opposite: liberal democracy itself legitimizes social orders that generate genocides and slaughter; today, massive crimes result from anonymous bureaucratic logic (what Chomsky called the invisible back-room boys). However, with September 11th, they suddenly encountered an Evil that fits the most naïve Hollywood image: a secret organization of fanatics that fully intends and plans in detail a terrorist attack whose aim is to kill thousands of random civilian victims. It is as if Arendt's banality of evil was again inverted; if anything, the al-Qaeda suicide attackers were not in any sense banal, but effectively demoniac. So, it seemed to the leftist intellectuals that if they were to directly condemn these attacks they would somehow undo

27. See Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J., 2002), p. 285.

the results of their complex analyses and regress to the Hollywood-fundamentalist level of George W. Bush.

In a further elaboration, one is tempted to propose four modes of Evil that, yet again, form a kind of Greimasian semiotic square: the totalitarian idealist Evil, accomplished with the best intentions (revolutionary terror); the authoritarian Evil, whose aim is simple corruption and power (and not any higher goal); the terrorist fundamentalist Evil, bent on the ruthless infliction of massive damage, destined to cause fear and panic; and, the Arendtian banal Evil, accomplished by anonymous bureaucratic structures. However, the first thing to note here is that the Marquis de Sade, the epitome of modern Evil, fits none of these four modes; he is, today, attractive because, in his works, the evil characters are larger-than-life demoniac characters who also reflect on what they are doing and do it in a fully intentional manner—the very opposite of Arendt's banality of Evil, of the Evil totally incommensurate with the gray, average, petite bourgeois characters (à la Eichmann) who organized it. It is here that Pasolini, in his *120 Days of Sodom*, is wrong: "Sade and Auschwitz have little in common. It is unlikely that a general formula will be found to unite them, and any attempt to do so may obscure what is morally important in each."²⁸

Evil is thus a much more twisted category than it may appear. It is not a simple eccentric obscenity to compare Angelis Silesius's famous mystical statement "the rose is without a 'why'" with Primo Levi's well-known experience in Auschwitz (although, undoubtedly, Levi himself would reject with indignation such a comparison): when, thirsty, he tried to reach for a piece of snow on the window shelf of his barrack, the guard outside yelled at him to move back; in reply to Levi's perplexed "Why?"—why the refusal of such an act that hurts no one and breaks no rules—the guard replied: "Hier ist kein warum" (there is no why here).²⁹ Perhaps the coincidence of these two *whys* is the ultimate infinite judgement of the twentieth century; the groundless fact of a rose enjoying its own existence meets its oppositional determination in the groundless prohibition of the guard done out of pure *jouissance*, just for the sake of it. In other words, what, in the domain of nature, is pure, preethical innocence returns (quite literally) with a vengeance in the domain of nature in the guise of the pure caprice of Evil. Schelling knew that true Evil is abyssal, inexplicable, exempted from the chain of causes.

The cause of today's persistence of the topic of Evil was succinctly formulated by Habermas: "Secular languages which only eliminate the sub-

28. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 280–81.

29. Primo Levi, "If This Is a Man," *The Truce* (London, 1987), p. 35.

stance once intended leave irritations. When sin was converted to culpability, and the breaking of divine commands to an offense against human laws, something was lost.”³⁰ Thus, the secular humanists feel their reactions to phenomena like holocausts and gulags (*and* others) are insufficient. Such phenomena demand reconfiguration in much stronger terms, something akin to the old religious topic of a cosmic perversion or catastrophe in which the world itself is out of joint. Therein resides the paradox of the theological significance of the Holocaust. Although it is usually conceived as the ultimate challenge to theology (if there is a god and if he is good, how could he have allowed such a horror to take place?), only theology enables us to somehow approach the scope of this catastrophe. The fiasco of god is still the fiasco of *god*.

It is against this background that one should deploy the dialectics of today’s forms of ideology, best exemplified by the ambiguity of the denouement in Bryan Singer’s neonoir *The Usual Suspects*. Just before the final moment when we are led to identify the crippled weakling Roger “Verbal” Kint as Keyser Soze, the invisible, all-powerful master criminal, and thus finally able to wrap up the threads of the narrative, this explanatory narrative is denounced as a fake, an impromptu, improvised lie. Therein resides the ultimate ambiguity: does Keyser Soze, this invisible, all-powerful agent of Evil, exist at all, or is he the fantasmatic invention of the pitiful Kint? Or, in a more complex way, is Soze the fabricator of his own myth? In a properly dialectical way, the very quilting point (*point de capiton*) that promises to establish the true narrative resolving all inconsistencies, radically undermines our narrative security, throwing us into an abyssal echoing of deceptions.³¹

We all know the cliché about conspiracy theories as the poor man’s ideology: when individuals lack the elementary cognitive mapping capabilities and resources that would enable them to locate their place within a social totality, they invent conspiracy theories that provide an ersatz mapping, explaining all the complexities of social life as the result of a hidden conspiracy. However, as Jameson likes to point out, this ideologico-critical dismissal is not enough; in today’s global capitalism, we *are* all too often dealing with effective conspiracies (say, the destruction of the Los Angeles public transport network was not an expression of some objective logic of capital but the result of an explicit conspiracy of car companies, road construction companies, and public agencies—and the same goes for many “tendencies” in today’s urban developments). The dismissal of the “para-

30. Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 110.

31. See the final pages of Ernest Larsen, *The Usual Suspects* (London, 2002).

noiac" ideological dimension of conspiracy theories should alert us to *actual* conspiracies going on all the time. Today, the ultimate ideology would be the self-complacent critico-ideological dismissal of conspiracies as mere fantasies. So, back to *The Usual Suspects*. The worst ideological reading of the film would be to read it as the assertion of the ideology of universalized textuality ("there is no reality, just a multitude of contingent stories we are telling ourselves about ourselves").

The present ideological trend in the U.S. clearly moves in this direction. President Bush is a pitiful Kint figure in power, following a doctrine now publicly declared as the official American "philosophy" of international politics.³² The "Bush doctrine" relies on the violent assertion of the paranoid logic of total control over *future* threats, justifying preemptive strikes against these supposed threats. The ineptness of such an approach for today's universe, in which knowledge circulates freely, is patent. The loop between the present and the future is closed; the prospect of a breathtaking terrorist act is evoked in order to justify incessant preemptive strikes now. The problem with this logic is that it presupposes that we can treat the future as something that, in a way, already took place.

At this point, it is crucial to avoid the "democratic" trap. Many "radical" leftists accept the legalistic logic of a transcendental guarantee; they refer to democracy as the ultimate guarantee of those who are aware that there is no guarantee. That is to say because no political act can claim a direct foundation in some transcendent figure of the big Other (of the "we are just instruments of a higher necessity or will" type) because every such act involves the risk of a contingent decision, nobody has the right to impose his choice on others—which means that every collective choice has to be democratically legitimized. From this perspective, democracy is not so much the guarantee of the right choice as a kind of opportunistic insurance against possible failure; if things turn out wrong, I can always say we are all responsible. Consequently, this last refuge must be dropped; one should fully assume the risk. The only adequate position is the one advocated already by Georg Lukács in his *History and Class Consciousness*: democratic struggle should not be fetishized; it is one of the forms of struggle; and its choice should be determined by a global strategic assessment of circumstances, not by its ostensibly superior intrinsic value. Like the Lacanian analyst, a political agent has to commit acts that can only be authorized by themselves, for which there is no external guarantee.

A crucial component of any populism is also the dismissal of the formal

32. See Office of the President, "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," 17 Sept. 2002, pp. 1–35, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf>

democratic procedure; even if these rules are still respected, it is always made clear that they do not provide the crucial legitimacy to political agents. Populism rather evokes the direct pathetic link between the charismatic leadership and the crowd, verified through plebiscites and mass gatherings.

What, then, are we blinded to when we dream the dream of the war on terror? Perhaps the first thing to note here is the deep satisfaction of American commentators in ascertaining how, after September 11th, the antiglobalist movement lost its *raison d'être*. What if this satisfaction tells more than it means to say? What if the war on terror is not so much an answer to the terrorist attacks themselves as an answer to the rise of the antiglobalist movement, a way to contain it and distract attention from it? What if this collateral damage of the war on terror is its true aim? One is tempted to say that we are dealing here with a case of what Stephen Jay Gould would have called (ideological) ex-aptation; the apparent secondary effect or profit (the fact that the antiglobalist protest is now also listed in the series of "terrorist" supporters) is crucial.

A Modest Proposal for an Act in the Middle East

The same focus on collateral damage also enables us to clarify somewhat the big mystery apropos of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: *why does it persist for so long when everybody knows the only viable solution*—the withdrawal of the Israelis from the West Bank and Gaza, the establishment of a Palestinian state, the renunciation by the Palestinians of the right of their refugees to return within the borders of the pre-1967 Israel, as well as some kind of a compromise concerning Jerusalem? Whenever the agreement seems at hand, it is inexplicably withdrawn. How often does it happen that, when peace seems just a matter of finding a proper formulation for some minor statements, everything suddenly falls apart, displaying the frailty of the negotiated compromise? There is effectively something of a neurotic symptom in the Middle East conflict; everyone sees the way to get rid of the obstacle, and yet, nonetheless, no one wants to remove it, as if there is some kind of pathological libidinal profit gained by persisting in the deadlock.

One is tempted to speak here of a symptomal *knot*. Is it not that, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the standard roles are somehow inverted, twisted around as in a knot? Israel—officially representing Western liberal modernity in the area—legitimizes itself in the terms of its ethnic-religious identity, while the Palestinians—decried as premodern fundamentalists—legitimize their demands in the terms of secular citizenship. So, we have the paradox of the state of Israel, the island of alleged liberal democratic modernity in the Middle East, countering the Arab demands with an even more fundamentalist ethnic-religious claim to their sacred land.

And, as the story of the Gordian knot tells us, the only way to resolve such a deadlock is not to unravel the knot, but to cut it. Yitzak Rabin took the first big step in this direction when he recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinians and thus the only true partner in negotiations. When Rabin announced negotiations with the PLO and proclaimed that the state of Israel should end the charade of negotiating with the Palestinians with no public links to the PLO and start talking with its real partners, the situation changed overnight. Therein resides the effect of a true political act; it changes the coordinates of the situation and renders the unthinkable thinkable. Rabin's military past was at once relegated to the less important past; he became the man who recognized the PLO as a legitimate partner. Although a Labor politician, Rabin thus accomplished a gesture that characterizes conservative politicians at their best. The Israeli elections of 28 January 2003 were, on the contrary, the clearest indicator of the failure of modern conservatives, of their inability to perform historical acts in the line of de Gaulle or even Richard Nixon. Along the same lines, 70 percent of Israelis know that the proposal of the Labor candidate Amram Mitzma—Israel's unconditional withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza—is the only solution to the crisis. However, since Mitzma is a decent ethical figure lacking strong-man charisma, they don't trust him to be able to accomplish this act. In the tradition of Rabin, therefore, somebody like Sharon needs to take over Mitzma's program—which, of course, Sharon is unable to do.

The underlying problem is not only that Arabs do not really accept the existence of the state of Israel; Israelis themselves also do not really accept the Palestinian presence on the West Bank. We all know Bertolt Brecht's quip apropos of the East Berlin workers' uprising in July 1953:

The secretary of the Writer's Union
 Had pamphlets distributed in the Stalin Allee
 Stating that the people
 Had forfeited the confidence of the government,
 And could win it back only
 By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
 In that case, for the government
 To dissolve the people
 And elect another?³³

Is not something homologous discernible today in the relationship between the state of Israel and Palestinians? The Israeli state is not satisfied with the

33. Bertolt Brecht, *Die Gedichte von Bertolt Brecht* (Frankfurt, 1981), pp. 1009–10; my trans.

people on the West Bank and in Gaza, so it considers the option of replacing them with another people. The Jews, the exemplary victims, are now considering a radical “ethnic cleansing” (the transfer—a perfect Orwellian misnomer—of the Palestinians from the West Bank).

If there ever was a passionate attachment to the lost object, a refusal to come to terms with its loss, it is the Jewish attachment to their land and Jerusalem: “see you next year in Jerusalem!” And are the present troubles not the supreme proof of the catastrophic consequences of such a radical fidelity? In the last two thousand years, when Jews were fundamentally a nation without land, living permanently in exile, their reference to Jerusalem was, at root, a purely negative one, a prohibition against painting an image of home, against feeling at home anywhere on earth. However, with the process of returning to Palestine, starting one hundred years ago, the metaphysical Other Place was directly identified with a determinate place on earth. When Jews lost their land and elevated it into the mythical lost object, Jerusalem became much more than a piece of land; it became the metaphor for the coming of the Messiah, for a metaphysical home, for the end of the wandering that characterizes human existence. The mechanism is well known; after an object is lost, it turns into a stand-in for much more, for all that we miss in our terrestrial lives. *When a thousand-year-old dream is finally close to realization, such a realization has to turn into a nightmare.*

It is therefore easy to answer the big question: what would be the truly radical ethico-political act today in the Middle East? For both Israelis and Arabs, it would consist in the gesture of renouncing the (political) control of Jerusalem, that is, of endorsing the transformation of the Old Town of Jerusalem into an extrastate place of religious worship controlled (temporarily) by some neutral international force. By renouncing the political control of Jerusalem, they are effectively renouncing nothing; they are *gaining* the elevation of Jerusalem into a genuinely extrapolitical, sacred site. What they would lose is, precisely and only, what already, in itself, *deserves* to be lost: the reduction of religion to a stake in political power plays.