
The Violence of Liberal Democracy

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The Violence of Liberal Democracy

The problem with the liberal democracy is that a priori, for structural reasons, it cannot be universalized. Hegel said that the moment of victory of a political force is the very moment of its splitting: the triumphant liberal-democratic “new world order” is more and more marked by a frontier separating its “inside” from its “outside”—a frontier between those who manage to remain “within” (the “developed,” those to whom the rules of human rights, social security, etc., apply), and the others, the excluded (the main concern of the “developed” apropos of them is to contain their explosive potential, even if the price to be paid for such containment is the neglect of elementary democratic principles).¹ This opposition, not the one between the capitalist and the socialist “bloc,” is what defines the contemporary constellation: the “socialist” bloc was the true “third way,” a desperate attempt at modernization outside the constraints of capitalism. What is effectively at stake in the present crisis of post-socialist states is precisely the struggle for one’s place, now that the illusion of the “third way” has evaporated: who will be admitted “inside,” integrated into the developed capitalist order, and who will remain excluded from it? Ex-Yugoslavia is perhaps the exemplary case: every actor in the bloody play of its disintegration endeavors to legitimize its place “inside” by presenting itself as the last bastion of European civilization (the current ideological designation for the capitalist “inside”) in the face of oriental barbarism. For the right-wing nationalist Austrians, this imaginary frontier is Karavanke, the mountain chain between Austria and Slovenia: beyond it, the rule of Slavic hordes begins. For the nationalist Slovenes, this frontier is the river Kolpa, separating Slovenia from Croatia: we are *Mittleuropa*, while the Croatians are already Balkan, involved in the irrational ethnic feuds which really do not concern us—we are on their side, we sympathize with them, yet in the same way one sympathizes with a third world victim of aggression... For Croatians, the crucial frontier, of course, is the one between them and the Serbians, i.e. between the Western catholic civilization

and the Eastern orthodox collective spirit which cannot comprehend the values of Western individualism. Serbians, finally, conceive of themselves as the last line of defense of the Christian Europe against the fundamentalist danger bodied forth by Muslim Albanians and Bosnians. (It should be clear, now, who, within the space of ex-Yugoslavia, effectively behaves in the civilized “European” way: those at the very bottom of this ladder, excluded from all—Albanians and Muslim Bosnians.) The traditional liberal opposition between “open” pluralist societies and “closed” nationalist-corporatist societies founded on the exclusion of the Other has thus to be brought to its point of self-reference: the liberal gaze itself functions according to the same logic, insofar as it is founded upon the exclusion of the Other to whom one attributes the fundamentalist nationalism, etc. On that account, events in ex-Yugoslavia exemplify perfectly the properly dialectical reversal: something which first appeared within the given set of circumstances as the most backward element, a left-over of the past, all of a sudden, with the shift in the general framework, emerges as the element of the future in the present context, as the premonition of what lies ahead. The outbursts of Balkan nationalism were first dismissed as the death throes of Communist totalitarianism disguised in new nationalist clothes, as a ridiculous anachronism that truly belongs to the nineteenth-century age of nation-states, not to our present era of multinationals and world-integration; however, it suddenly became clear that the ethnic conflicts of ex-Yugoslavia offer the first clear taste of the post-Cold War armed conflicts.

This antagonistic splitting opens up the field for the Khmer Rouge, Sendero Luminoso and other similar movements which seem to personify “radical Evil” in today’s politics: if “fundamentalism” functions as a kind of “negative judgement” on liberal capitalism, as an inherent negation of the universalist claim of liberal capitalism, then movements such as Sendero Luminoso enact an “infinite

judgement” on it. In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel conceives of the “rabble (*Poebel*)” as a necessary product of the modern society: a non-integrated segment in the legal order, prevented from partaking of its benefits, and for this very reason delivered from any responsibilities towards it—a necessary structural surplus excluded from the closed circuit of social edifice. It seems that only today, with the advent of late capitalism, has this notion of “rabble” achieved its adequate realization in social reality, through political forces which paradoxically unite the most radical indigenist antimodernism (the refusal of everything that defines modernity: market, money, individualism...) with the eminently modern project of effacing the entire symbolic tradition and beginning from a zero-point (in the case of Khmer rouge, this meant abolishing the entire system of education and killing intellectuals). What, precisely, constitutes the “shining path” of the Senderistas if not the idea to reinscribe the construction of socialism within the frame of the return to the ancient Inca empire? (The Khmer Rouge also conceived their regime as the return to the lost grandeur of the old Khmer kingdom.) The result of this desperate endeavor to surmount the antagonism between tradition and modernity is a double negation: a radically anti-capitalist movement (the refusal of integration into the world market) coupled to a systematic dissolution of all traditional hierarchical social links, beginning with the family (at the level of “micro-power,” the Khmer-Rouge regime functioned as an “anti-Oedipal” regime in its purest form, i.e. as the “dictature of adolescents,” instigating them to denounce their parents). The truth articulated in the paradox of this double negation is that capitalism cannot reproduce itself without the support of pre-capitalist forms of social links. In other words, far from presenting a case of exotic barbarism, the “radical Evil” of the Khmer Rouge and the Senderistas is conceivable only against the background of the constitutive antagonism of today’s capitalism. There is more than a contingent idiosyncrasy in the fact that, in both cases, the leader of the movement is an

intellectual well skilled in the subtleties of the Western culture (prior to becoming a revolutionary, Pol Pot was a professor at a French lycee in Phnom Penh, known for his subtle readings of Rimbaud and Mallarmé; Abimael Guzman, “presidente Gonzalo,” the leader of the Senderistas, is a philosophy-professor whose preferred authors are Hegel and Heidegger and whose doctoral thesis was on Kant’s theory of space...). For this reason, it is too simple to conceive of these movements as the last embodiment of the millenarist radicalism which structures social space as the exclusive antagonism between “us” and “them,” allowing for no possible forms of mediation; instead, these movements represent a desperate attempt to avoid the imbalance constitutive of capitalism without seeking support in some previous tradition supposed to enable us mastery of this imbalance (the Islamic fundamentalism which remains within this logic is for that reason ultimately a perverted instrument of modernization). In other words, behind Sendero Luminoso’s endeavor to erase an entire tradition and to begin from the zero-point in an act of creative sublimation, there is the correct insight into the complementary relationship of modernity and tradition: any true return to tradition is today a priori impossible, its role is simply to serve as a shock-absorber for the process of modernization.

The Khmer Rouge and the Senderistas therefore function as a kind of “infinite judgement” on late capitalism in the precise Kantian sense of the term: they are to be located in a third domain beyond the inherent antagonism that defines the late-capitalist dynamic (the antagonism between the modernist drive and the fundamentalist backlash), since they radically reject both poles of the opposition. As such, they are—to put it in Hegelese—an integral part of the notion of late capitalism: if one wants to comprise capitalism as a world-system, one must take into account its inherent negation, the “fundamentalism,” as well as its absolute negation, the infinite judgement on it.

It is against this background that one must judge the significance of the renewed (symbolic and real) violence against “foreigners” in the developed Western countries. Apropos of the French Revolution, Kant wrote that its world-historical significance is not to be sought in what actually happened on the streets of Paris, but in the enthusiasm this endeavor to realize freedom aroused in the educated, enlightened public: it may well be true that what actually took place in Paris was horrifying, that the most repulsive passions were let loose, yet the reverberations of these events within the enlightened public all around Europe bears witness not only to the possibility of freedom, but also to the very actuality of the tendency towards freedom *qua* anthropological fact.² The same step—the shift from the event’s immediate reality to the modality of its inscription into the big Other epitomized by passive observers—is to be repeated apropos of the anti-immigrant violent outbursts in Germany in the Summer of 1992 (in Rostock and other cities in the ex-East Germany): the true meaning of these events is to be sought in the fact that the neo-Nazi pogroms met with approval or at least “understanding” in the silent majority of observers—even some top Social Democratic politicians used them as an argument for reconsidering German Liberal immigrant policies. This shift in the *zeitgeist* is where the real danger lurks: it prepares the ground for the possible hegemony of an ideology which perceives the presence of “aliens” as a threat to national identity, as the principal cause of antagonisms that divide the political body.

What we must be particularly attentive to is the difference between this “postmodern” racism which now rages around Europe and the traditional form of racism. The old racism was direct and raw—“they” (Jews, Blacks, Arabs, Eastern Europeans...) are lazy, violent, plotting, eroding our national substance... — whereas the new racism is “reflected,” as it were squared, racism, which is why it can well assume the form of its opposite, of the fight *against* racism. Etienne

Balibar hit the mark by baptizing it “meta-racism.”³ That is to say, how does a “postmodern” racist react to the outbursts in Rostock? He or she of course begins by expressing horror and repulsion at the neo-Nazi violence, yet is quick to add that these events, deplorable as they are, must be seen in their context: they are actually a perverted, distorted expression and effect of a true problem, namely that in contemporary Babylon the experience of belonging to a well-defined ethnic community which gives meaning to the individual’s life is losing ground... In short, the true culprits are cosmopolitan universalists who, in the name of “multiculturalism,” mix races and thereby set in motion natural self-defence mechanisms.⁴ Apartheid is thus legitimized as the ultimate form of anti-racism, as an endeavor to prevent racial tensions and conflicts... What we have here is a palpable example of what Lacan has in mind when he insists that “there is no metalanguage”: the distance between metaracism and racism is void, metaracism is racism pure and simple, all the more dangerous for posing as its opposite and advocating racist measures as the very form of fighting racism.

1. This split is therefore *the very form of universality of the liberal democracy*: the liberal-democratic “new world order” affirms its universal scope by way of imposing this split as the determining antagonism, the structuring principle, of inter- and international relations. What we have here is an elementary case of the dialectic of identity and difference: the very *identity* of the liberal-democratic “order” consists in the *scissure* which separates its “inside” from its “outside.”

2. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992) p. 153.

3. See Etienne Balibar, “Is There a ‘Neo-Racism’?,” in Etienne Balibar and Emmanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*, (London: Verso Books, 1991).

4. Or, to quote from a recent letter to *Newsweek* magazine: “Maybe it’s fundamentally unnatural for different races or ethnic groups to live together. ... While no one can condone the attacks against foreigners in Germany, the Germans have every right to insist that their country remain ethnically German.”