

The Impasses of Today's Radical Politics

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The wound of Eurocentrism

With regard to global capitalism which, although it originated in Europe, is today a global phenomenon where Europe is more and more losing its leading role, one should be especially careful with non-reflected anti-Eurocentrism which can sometimes serve as the ideological cover for the rejection of what is worth fighting for in the European legacy. An exemplary case of succumbing to this danger is Walter D Mignolo's recent critique of my defense of Leftist Eurocentrism:

As a non-European thinker, my senses reacted to the first sentence of Zizek's article: *When one says Eurocentrism, every self-respecting postmodern leftist intellectual has as violent a reaction as Joseph Goebbels had to culture - to reach for a gun, hurling accusations of proto-fascist Eurocentrist cultural imperialism. However, is it possible to imagine a leftist appropriation of the European political legacy? [...]* My response to that paragraph, published in a couple of places, is the following: *When one says Eurocentrism, every self-respecting decolonial intellectual has not as violent a reaction as Joseph Goebbels had to culture - to reach for a gun, hurling accusations of proto-fascist Eurocentrist cultural imperialism. A self-respecting decolonial intellectual will reach instead to Frantz Fanon: 'Now, comrades, now is the time to decide to change sides. We must shake off the great mantle of night, which has enveloped us, and reach for the light. The new day, which is dawning, must find us determined, enlightened and resolute. So, my brothers, how could we fail to understand that we have better things to do than follow that Europe's footsteps.' [...]* we, decolonial intellectuals, if not philosophers, 'have better things to do' as Fanon would say, than being engaged with issues debated by European philosophers.¹

What Mignolo proposes is thus a version of Baudrillard's battle cry "Forget Foucault!": forget Europe, we have better things to do than deal with European philosophy, even better things than endlessly deconstructing it. The irony here is that this battle cry obviously did not hold for Fanon himself, who dealt extensively and intensively with

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1 Quoted from <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/20132672747320891.html>.

Hegel, psychoanalysis, Sartre, and even Lacan. So, when I read lines like Mignolo's, I also reach for Fanon – this Fanon:

I am a man, and what I have to recapture is the whole past of the world. I am not responsible solely for the slave revolt in Santo Domingo. Every time a man has contributed to the victory of the dignity of the spirit, every time a man has said no to an attempt to subjugate his fellows, I have felt solidarity with his act. In no way does my basic vocation have to be drawn from the past of peoples of color. In no way do I have to dedicate myself to reviving a black civilization unjustly ignored. I will not make myself the man of any past. /.../ My black skin is not a repository for specific values. /.../ Haven't I got better things to do on this earth than avenge the Blacks of the seventeenth century? /.../ I as a man of color do not have the right to hope that in the white man there will be a crystallization of guilt toward the past of my race. I as a man of color do not have the right to seek ways of stamping down the pride of my former master. I have neither the right nor the duty to demand reparations for my subjugated ancestors. There is no black mission; there is no white burden. /.../ I do not want to be the victim of the Ruse of a black world. /.../ Am I going to ask today's white men to answer for the slave traders of the seventeenth century? Am I going to try by every means available to cause guilt to burgeon in their souls? /.../ I am not a slave to slavery that dehumanized my ancestors. /.../ it would be of enormous interest to discover a black literature or architecture from the third century before Christ. We would be overjoyed to learn of the existence of a correspondence between some black philosopher and Plato. But we can absolutely not see how this fact would change the lives of eight-years-old kids working in the cane fields of Martinique or Guadeloupe. /.../ I find myself in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: That of demanding human behavior from the other.²

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2 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove Press 2008, p. 201-206.

What Fanon clearly saw is that today's global world is capitalist, and as such cannot be effectively problematized from the standpoint of pre-capitalist local cultures. This is why the lesson of Marx's two short 1853 articles on India ("The British rule in India," "The Future Results of British Rule in India"), usually dismissed by postcolonial studies as embarrassing cases of Marx's "Eurocentrism", are today more actual than ever. Marx admits without restraint the brutality and exploitative hypocrisy of the British colonization of India, which goes up to the systematic use of torture prohibited in the West but "outsourced" to Indians (really, nothing new under the sun – there were Guantanos already in the midst of 19th century British India): "The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked."³ All Marx adds is that

England has broken down the entire framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing. This loss of his old world, with no gain of a new one, imparts a particular kind of melancholy to the present misery of the Hindoo, and separates Hindostan, ruled by Britain, from all its ancient traditions, and from the whole of its past history. /.../ England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.⁴

One should not dismiss the talk of the »unconscious tool of history« as the expression of a naive teleology, of the trust into the Cunning of Reason which makes even the vilest crimes instruments of progress – the point is simply that the British colonization of India created conditions for the double liberation of India: from the constraints of its own tradition as well as from colonization itself. This is why the quoted passage does

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3 Quoted from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/07/22.htm>.

4 Quoted from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/06/25.htm>.

not display the same dismissive attitude towards “unhistorical nations” as the one clearly discernible in “The Magyar Struggle,” a newspaper text written by Friedrich Engels and published in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* on January 13, 1849. The historical context of this text is the approaching defeat of the 1848 revolution, when the small Slavic nations (with the exception of Poles) militarily supported the Austrian emperor in his effort to crush the Hungarian uprising (which explains Engels’s furious aggressivity):

Among all the large and small nations of Austria, only three standard-bearers of progress took an active part in history, and still retain their vitality — the *Germans*, the *Poles* and the *Magyars*. Hence they are now revolutionary. / All the other large and small nationalities and peoples are destined to perish before long in the revolutionary world storm. For that reason they are now counter-revolutionary. /.../ There is no country in Europe which does not have in some corner or other one or several ruined fragments of peoples, the remnant of a former population that was suppressed and held in bondage by the nation which later became the main vehicle of historical development. These relics of a nation mercilessly trampled under foot in the course of history, as Hegel says, these *residual fragments of peoples* always become fanatical standard-bearers of counter-revolution and remain so until their complete extirpation or loss of their national character, just as their whole existence in general is itself a protest against a great historical revolution. /.../ But at the first victorious uprising of the French proletariat, which Louis Napoleon is striving with all his might to conjure up, the Austrian Germans and Magyars will be set free and wreak a bloody revenge on the Slav barbarians. The general war which will then break out will smash this Slav Sonderbund and wipe out all these petty hidebound nations, down to their very names. /The next world war will result in the disappearance from the face of the earth not only of reactionary classes and dynasties, but also of entire reactionary peoples. And that, too, is a step forward.⁵

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5 On account of the (obviously) problematic nature of this passage, one should quote it also in original: »Die ganze frühere Geschichte Östreichs beweist es bis auf diesen Tag, und das Jahr 1848 hat es bestätigt. Unter allen den Nationen und Natiönchen Östreichs sind nur drei, die die Träger des Fortschritts waren, die aktiv in die Geschichte eingegriffen haben, die noch jetzt lebensfähig sind - die *Deutschen*, die *Polen*, die *Magyaren*. Daher sind sie jetzt revolutionär. / Alle

These lines sound like Mao's distinction between bourgeois and proletarian nations, but in the inverted sense: there are not just classes struggling within nations, the struggle goes on also between progressive and reactionary nations, with all this implies, namely the destruction of »these petty hidebound nations, down to their very names,« in the revolutionary process. Engels's line of thought relies on a simplified pseudo-Hegelianism: there is historical progress, there are nations which are part of this progress (»historical nations«) and nations which are inert bystanders or even actively oppose it, and the latter are destined to perish. (Engels further embellishes this line of thought with a Hegelian-sounding reflexive twist: how could these nations not be reactionary when their existence itself is a reaction, a remainder of the past?) Engels stuck to this position to the end, convinced that, with the exception of Poles, small Slavic nations are all looking toward Russia, the bullwark of reaction, for their liberation. In 1882, he wrote to Bernstein (who had sympathies for Southern Slaves): »We must co-operate in the work of setting the West European proletariat free and subordinate everything else to that goal. No matter how interesting the Balkan Slavs, etc., might be, the moment their desire for liberation clashes with the interests of the proletariat they can go hang for all I care.» And in a letter to Kautsky from the same year, he again asserts the opposition of progressive and reactionary nations: "Thus I hold the view that there are *two* nations in Europe which do not only have the right but the duty to be nationalistic before they become internationalists: the Irish and the Poles. They are internationalists of the best kind if they are very nationalistic. The Poles have understood this in all crises and have proved it on the battlefields

andern großen und kleinen Stämme und Völker haben zunächst die Mission, im revolutionären Weltsturm unterzugehen. Daher sind sie jetzt kontrerevolutionär. /.../ Es ist kein Land in Europa, das nicht in irgendeinem Winkel eine oder mehrere Völkerruinen besitzt, Überbleibsel einer früheren Bewohnerschaft, zurückgedrängt und unterjocht von der Nation, welche später Trägerin der geschichtlichen Entwicklung wurde. Diese Reste einer von dem Gang der Geschichte, wie Hegel sagt, unbarmherzig zertretenen Nation, diese *Völkerabfälle* werden jedesmal und bleiben bis zu ihrer gänzlichen Vertilgung oder Entnationalisierung die fanatischen Träger der Kontrerevolution, wie ihre ganze Existenz überhaupt schon ein Protest gegen eine große geschichtliche Revolution ist. /.../ Aber bei dem ersten siegreichen Aufstand des französischen Proletariats, den Louis-Napoleon mit aller Gewalt heraufzubeschwören bemüht ist, werden die österreichischen Deutschen und Magyaren frei werden und an den slawischen Barbaren blutige Rache nehmen. Der allgemeine Krieg, der dann ausbricht, wird diesen slawischen Sonderbund zersprengen und alle diese kleinen stierköpfigen Nationen bis auf ihren Namen vernichten. / Der nächste Weltkrieg wird nicht nur reaktionäre Klassen und Dynastien, er wird auch ganze reaktionäre Völker vom Erdboden verschwinden machen. Und das ist auch ein Fortschritt.« The key sentence is sometimes translated "The chief mission of all other races and peoples, large and small, is to perish in the revolutionary holocaust." and, as such, used against Marx as the forefather of holocaust – however, the word "holocaust" is not used in this sentence where it is said that the mission of counterrevolutionary nations is "im revolutionären Weltsturm unterzugehen« (to perish/founder in the revolutionary worldstorn).

of all revolutions. Take away their expectation to re-establish Poland; or persuade them that the new Poland will soon fall into their laps by itself, and they are finished with their interest in the European Revolution.” As for the Southern Slavs: “Only when with the collapse of Tsarism the nationalist ambitions of these dwarfs of peoples will be freed from association with Panslavist tendencies of world domination, only then we can let them take their fate in their own hands. And I am certain that six months of independence will suffice for most Austro-Hungarian Slavs to bring them to a point where they will beg to be readmitted. But these tiny nations can never be granted the right, which they now assign to themselves in Serbia, Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia, to prevent the extension of the European railroad net to Constantinople.” The great opponent of Engels is here none other than Lenin, who formulated his position in quite unambiguous terms:

The proletariat of the oppressing nations cannot confine itself to the general hackneyed phrases against annexations and for the equal rights of nations in general, that may be repeated by any pacifist bourgeois. The proletariat cannot evade the question that is particularly ‘unpleasant’ for the imperialist bourgeoisie, namely, the question of the frontiers of a state that is based on national oppression. The proletariat cannot but fight against the forcible retention of the oppressed nations within the boundaries of a given state, and this is exactly what the struggle for the right of self-determination means. The proletariat must demand the right of political secession for the colonies and for the nations that ‘its own’ nation oppresses. Unless it does this, proletarian internationalism will remain a meaningless phrase; mutual confidence and class solidarity between the workers of the oppressing and oppressed nations will be impossible.⁶

Lenin remained faithful to this position to the end: in his last struggle against Stalin’s project for the centralized Soviet Union, he advocated the unconditional right of small nations to secede (in this case, Georgia was at stake), insisting on the full sovereignty of the national entities that composed the Soviet State - no wonder that, on 27 September 1922, in

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6 V.I. Lenin, »The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination« (January-February 1916).

a letter to the members of the Politburo, Stalin openly accused Lenin of «national liberalism»... But already Marx's text on India diverges radically from Engels' position: Marx's point is not that Indians "are destined to perish before long in the revolutionary world storm,« but almost the exact opposite: getting caught into the universal capitalist dynamics will enable Indians to get rid of their traditional constraints and engage in a modern struggle for liberation from the British colonial yoke. Lenin is also stuck onto this view: after the failure of the European revolution in early 1920s was clear, he saw the main task of the Soviet power to simply bring European modernity to Russia: instead of talking about big goals like building Socialism, one should patiently engage in spreading (bourgeois) culture and civilization, in total opposition to « socialism in one country.» This modesty is sometimes surprisingly open, like when Lenin mocks all attempt to « build Socialism» in the Soviet Union. How different is this stance from Mignolo's view of the anti-capitalist struggle:

as we know from history, the identification of the problem doesn't mean that there is only one solution. Or better yet, we can coincide in the prospective of harmony as a desirable global future, but Communism is only one way to move toward it. There cannot be only one solution simply because there are many ways of being, which means of thinking and doing. Communism is an option and not an Abstract Universal. /.../ In the non-European World, Communism is part of the problem rather than the solution. Which doesn't mean that if you are not Communist, in the non-European world, you are Capitalist. /.../ So the fact that Zizek, and other European intellectuals, are seriously rethinking Communism means that they are engaging in one option (the reorientation of the Left) among many, today, marching toward the prospect of harmony overcoming the necessity of war; overcoming success and competition which engender corruption and selfishness, and promoting the plenitude of life over development and death.⁷

Mignolo relies here on an all too naïve distinction between problem and solution: if there is a thing we really know from history, it is that, while "the identification of the problem doesn't mean that there is only one

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7 Quoted from <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/20132672747320891.html>.

solution,” there also is also only a single identification of the problem. When we encounter a problem (like a global economic crisis), we get a multitude of formulations in what this problem resides, which are its causes (or, to put it in a more postmodern vein, a multitude of narratives): too much state regulation, not enough state regulation, moral roots of the crisis, too great power of the financial capital, capitalism as such, etc. These different identifications of the problem form a dialectical unity with the proposed solutions, or, one can even say that the identification of a problem is already formulated from the standpoint of its alleged/imagined solution. Communism is therefore not just one of the solutions but, first of all, a unique formulation of the problem as it appears within the Communist horizon. Mignolo’s identification of the problem, as well as his formulation of the common goal shared by all proposed solutions, is a proof of his limitation, and is as such worth reading carefully: the common goal - “*marching* toward the prospect of harmony, promoting the plenitude of life”; the problem - “the necessity of war; success and competition which engender corruption and selfishness; development and death.” His goal - harmony, plenitude of life - is a true Abstract Universal if there ever was one, an empty container which can mean many incompatible things (depending on what we understand by plenitude of life and harmony). (One can also add in an acerbic mode that many anti-capitalist movements achieved great results in “overcoming success.”) The fast equation of development and death, as well as the abstract rejection of war, corruption, and selfishness, are no less meaningless abstractions. (And, incidentally, the abstract opposition of war and harmony is especially suspicious, since it can be also read as a call against aggravating social antagonisms, for a peaceful harmony of the social organism - if this is the direction taken, I much prefer to be called a “Left Fascist,” insisting on the emancipatory dimension of struggle.)

What Mignolo offers are not alternate modernities, but a kind of alternate postmodernity, i.e., different ways to overcome European (capitalist) modernity. Against such an approach, one should definitely defend the European universalist legacy - in what precise sense? According to some Indian cultural theorists, the fact that they are compelled to use the English language is a form of cultural colonialism which censors their true identity: “We have to speak in an imposed foreign language to express our innermost identity, and does this not put us in a position of radical alienation - even our resistance to colonization has to be formulated in the language of the colonizer?” The answer to this is: yes - but this

imposition of English (a foreign language) created the very X which is “oppressed” by it, i.e., what is oppressed is not the actual pre-colonial India, but the authentic dream of a new universalist democratic India.

Was Malcolm X not following the same insight when he adopted X as his family name? The point of choosing X as his family name, and thereby signaling that the slave traders who brought the enslaved Africans from their homeland brutally deprived them of their family and ethnic roots, of their entire cultural life-world, was not to mobilize the blacks to fight for the return to some primordial African roots, but precisely to seize the opening provided by X, an unknown new (lack of) identity engendered by the very process of slavery which made the African roots forever lost. The idea is that this X which deprives the blacks of their particular tradition offers a unique chance to redefine (reinvent) themselves, to freely form a new identity much more universal than white people’s professed universality. (As is well known, Malcolm X found this new identity in the universalism of Islam.) The same experience of the unintended liberating dimension opened up by the very enslavement is beautifully retold in Frederick Douglas’ narrative of his life, where he reports on the radical change in his life when he went to live as a slave with the family of Mr. and Mrs. Auld⁸; the latter

had never had a slave under her control previously to myself, and prior to her marriage she had been dependent upon her own industry for a living. She was by trade a weaver; and by constant application to her business, she had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery. I was utterly astonished at her goodness. I scarcely knew how to behave towards her. /.../ My early instruction was all out of place. The crouching servility, usually so acceptable a quality in a slave, did not answer when manifested toward her. Her favor was not gained by it; she seemed to be disturbed by it. She did not deem it impudent or unmannerly for a slave to look her in the face.

Mrs. Auld’s attitude was not primarily an expression of her personal goodness – she simply didn’t really know about slavery, how slavery functioned, and looked at the young Frederick with a pre-lapsarian

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⁸ I owe this example to Ed Cadava, Princeton.

innocence, perceiving him as just another human being; so when she became aware that the young boy doesn't know to read and write, she "very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters." This, however, was not enough to put the young Frederick on the path of liberation; Mr. Auld's violent reaction to his wife's effort to teach the young slave reading and writing was crucial. From Mr. Auld's perspective, his wife's pre-lapsarian innocence was in reality the very opposite of what it appeared to be – in his eyes, his wife was unknowingly playing the role of the snake seducing the young Frederick to eat from the prohibited tree of knowledge:

Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, 'If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master - to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now,' said he, 'if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.' These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty - to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his

wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.

Note the quasi-humanitarian accent of Mr. Auld's argumentation – the young boy should not learn to read and write not only because this would make him unfit as a slave, and thus of no use to his master, but also *for his own good*: “As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.” The last sentence should not be dismissed as hypocrisy (although it undoubtedly is deeply hypocritical): compared with the life of an uneducated slave who had the luck to be owned by relatively kind masters, engaging in the struggle for emancipation first effectively brings only discontent and unhappiness. The magnificent and precise conclusion of the quoted passage should therefore be taken literally: “In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.” Mrs. Auld did not want to liberate Frederick from slavery – how could she when she was not even fully aware of what it was to be a slave? In short, her reaction was moralistic, not political: the reaction of spontaneous decency and kindness. It was only through the husband's directly racist-paternalist reaction that Frederick became aware of the political-emancipatory (and even properly revolutionary) dimension of what does it mean to know to read and write. Without the husband's brutal intervention, Frederick would become an educated household slave loving and respecting his owners, not the emancipatory symbol he is now.

So, back to India, “reconciliation” means reconciliation with English language which is to be accepted not only as the obstacle to a new India to be discarded for some local language, but as an enabling medium, as the positive condition of liberation. The true victory over colonization

is not the return to any pre-colonial authentic substance, even less any “synthesis” between modern civilization and pre-modern origins, but, paradoxically, the *fully accomplished loss of these pre-modern origins*. In other words, colonialism is not overcome when the intrusion of English language as a medium is abolished, but when the colonizers are, as it were, beaten at their own game - when the new Indian identity is effortlessly formulated in English, i.e., when English language is “denaturalized,” when it loses its privileged link to the “native” Anglo-Saxon English-speakers. It is crucial to know that this role of English language was clearly perceived by many intellectuals among Dalits (the “untouchables”), the lowest cast: a large section of Dalits welcomed English and in fact even the colonial encounter. For Ambedkar (the main political figure of Dalits) and his legates, British colonialism — unwittingly and incidentally at least — gives scope for so-called rule of law and formal equality for all Indians. Before that, Indians had only caste laws, which gave Dalits almost no rights and only duties.⁹ Furthermore, in India, the real endangered tribal groups (like those in the jungles around Hyderabad) do not fight for their traditional values and ties; they engage much more strongly in Maoist struggle (the Naxalite guerilla movement) which is formulated in universal terms of overcoming capitalism. It is high-class and -cast post-colonial theorists (mostly Brahmin), not those who really belong to indigenous tribal groups, who celebrate the perseverance of local traditions and communal ethics as resistance to global capitalism. Back in ancient China, the first to accomplish such a reversal was the king of Qin who ruthlessly united China and, in 221 BC, proclaimed himself its First Emperor; this arch-model of “totalitarian” rule, also relied so heavily on the advice of the “Legalist” philosophers that one can see in him the first case of a state order imposed on a society by a conscious and well-planned decision to break with past traditions and impose a new order conceived in theory:

The king of Qin was not necessarily the brains of the outfit – his advisers, free of the strictures of courtly life, were the ones who had masterminded his rise to power. The plan to install him as the ruler of the world had commenced before he was even born, with the contention of long-dead scholars that the world required

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9 Chandra Bhan Prasad, a leading dalit intellectual, celebrated English by anointing the “Dalit Goddess, English”. See <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/nation/jai-angrezi-devi-maiyya-ki>. I owe this data to my good friend S.Anand (New Delhi).

an enlightened prince. It had proceeded with /.../ an alliance of scholars in search of a patron who might allow them to secure their own political ends. Ying Zheng, the king of Qin, became the First Emperor with the help of great minds.¹⁰

These Legalists – first among them Han Fei and the great Li Si - emerged out of the crisis of Confucianism. When, in the 5th to 3rd centuries BC, China went through the period of the “Warring States,” Confucians perceived as the ultimate cause of this slow but persistent decay the betrayal of old traditions and customs. Most troubling to Confucius was his perception that the political institutions of his day had completely broken down. He attributed this collapse to the fact that those who wielded power, as well as those who occupied subordinate positions, did so by making claim to titles for which they were not worthy. When asked about the principles of good government, Confucius is reported to have replied: “Good government consists in the ruler being a ruler, the minister being a minister, the father being a father, and the son being a son.” In Europe, we call this a corporate vision: society is like a body where each individual has to stay at his proper place and play his particular role. This is the very opposite of democracy: in democracy, nobody is constrained to his or her particular place; everybody has the right to participate in universal affairs, to have his word in the deliberations about where our society goes. No wonder, then, that Confucius’ description of the disorder he sees in society around him - “Rulers do not rule and subjects do not serve” – provides a good description of a democratic society in which the united subjects rule and the nominal rulers serve them.

What “Legalist” did was to drop the very coordinates of such a perception of the situation: for the Confucians, the land was in chaos because old traditions were not obeyed, and states like Qin with their centralized-military organization dismissive of the old customs were perceived as the embodiment of what is wrong. However, in contrast to his teacher Xunzi who regarded nations like Qin as a threat to peace, Han Fei “proposed the unthinkable, that maybe the way of the Qin government was not an anomaly to be addressed, but a practice to be emulated.”¹¹ The solution resided in what appeared as problem: the true

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10 Jonathan Clements, *The First Emperor of China*, Chalford: Sutton Publishing 2006, p. 16.

11 Clements, op.cit., p. 34.

cause of the troubles was not the abandonment of old traditions, but *these traditions themselves* which daily demonstrated their inability to serve as guiding principles of social life - as Hegel put it in the “Foreword” to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the standard by means of which we measure the situation and establish that the situation is problematic, is part of the problem and should be abandoned. Han Fei applied the same logic to the fact that (the majority of) men are evil by nature, not ready to act for the Common Good: instead of bemoaning it, he saw the human evil as a chance for state power, as something that a power enlightened by the right theory (a theory which describes things the way they really are, “beyond good and evil”) can steer by applying on it a proper mechanism:

Where Xunzi saw an unfortunate observation, that men were evil by nature, Han Fei saw a challenge for the institution of stern laws to control this nature and use it to the benefit of the state.¹²

One of the great achievements of contemporary Leftist political theory (Althusser, Balibar, Negri) was to rehabilitate Macchiavelli, to save him from the standard “Macchiavelist” reading. Since Legalists are often presented as ur-Macchiavelists, one should do the same with them, extricating a radical-emancipatory kernel from their predominant image as proto-“totalitarians.” The great insight of Legalists was to perceive the wound (to the social body), the disintegration of old habits, as a chance for the new order.

At a more general level, one should bear in mind that global capitalism does not automatically push all its subjects towards hedonist/ permissive individualism, and the fact that, in many countries that recently entered the road of rapid capitalist modernization (like India), many individuals stick to the so-called traditional (pre-modern) beliefs and ethics (family values, rejection of unbridled hedonism, strong ethnic identification, giving preference to community ties over individual achievement, respect for elders...) in no way proves that they are not fully “modern,” as if people in the liberal West can afford direct and full capitalist modernization, while those from less developed Asian, Latin American and African countries can only survive the onslaught of capitalist dynamics through the help of the crutches of traditional ties, i.e., as if traditional values are needed when local populations are not

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¹² Op.cit., p. 77.

able to survive capitalism by way of adopting its own liberal-hedonist individualist ethics. Post-colonial “subaltern” theorists who see in the persistence of premodern traditions global capitalism and its violent modernization disruptive of traditional ties are here thoroughly wrong: on the contrary, fidelity to premodern (“Asian”) values is paradoxically *the very feature which allows countries like China, Singapore, and India to follow the path of capitalist dynamics even more radically than Western liberal countries*. A reference to traditional values enable individuals to justify their ruthless engagement in market competition in ethical terms (“I am really doing it to help my parents, to earn enough money so that my children and cousins will be able to study...”).¹³

There is a nicely-vulgar joke about Christ: the night before he was arrested and crucified, his followers started to worry - Christ was still a virgin, wouldn't it be nice to have him experience a little bit of pleasure before he will die? So they asked Mary Magdalene to go to the tent where Christ was resting and seduce him; Mary said she will do it gladly and went in, but five minutes later, she ran out screaming, terrified and furious. The followers asked her what went wrong, and she explained: “I slowly undressed, spread my legs and showed to Christ my pussy; he looked at it, said ‘What a terrible wound! It should be healed!’ and gently put his palm on it...” So beware of people too intent on healing other people's wounds – what if one enjoys one's wound? In exactly the same way, directly healing the wound of colonialism (effectively returning to the pre-colonial reality) would have been a nightmare: if today's Indians were to find themselves in pre-colonial reality, they would have undoubtedly uttered the same terrified scream as Mary Magdalene. It is precisely apropos the wound of colonialism that Wagner's *die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur der Sie schlug* holds: the very disintegration of traditional forms opens up the space of liberation. As it was clear to Nelson Mandela and the ANC, white supremacy and the temptation of returning to tribal roots are two sides of the same coin.¹⁴

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13 I owe this line of thought to Saroi Giri, New Delhi. - We can say something similar about today's China: it is wrong to claim that China faces the choice of becoming a truly capitalist country or of maintaining the Communist rule which thwarts full capitalist development. This choice is a false one: in today's China, capitalist growth is exploding not in spite of the Communist rule but because of it, i.e., far from being an obstacle to capitalist development, the Communist rule guarantees the best conditions for unbridled capitalism.

14 Let us risk another extreme example of such a liberating wound. On October 7 2013, media reported that a “Baby factory” just opened in India, where surrogate mothers will carry Western couples' babies for about 8,000 USD. The factory, built by doctor Nayna Patel, will house hundreds of surrogate mothers in the multi-million-pound complex which will have a gift shop and hotel rooms for people

According to the standard liberal myth, the universality of human rights brings peace, it establishes the conditions of peaceful co-existence between the multiplicity of particular cultures, while from the standpoint of the colonized, liberal universality is false, it functions as a violent intrusion of a foreign culture dissolving our particular roots. Even if he admits some truth in this reproach, a liberal would continue to strive for “universality without wounds,” for a universal frame which would not impinge violently on particular cultures. From a properly dialectical perspective, we should strive for (or, rather, endorse the necessity of) an exactly inverted approach: a wound as such is liberating – or, rather, contains a liberating potential -, so while we should definitely problematize the positive content of the imposed universality (the particular content it secretly privileges), we should fully endorse the liberating aspect of the wound (to our particular identity) as such.¹⁵

To put it in yet another way, what the experience of English language as an oppressive imposition obfuscates is that the same holds for EVERY language: language is as such a parasitic foreign intruder. Throughout his work, Lacan varies Heidegger’s motif of language as the house of being: language is not man’s creation and instrument, it is man who “dwells” in language: “Psychoanalysis should be the science of language inhabited by the subject.”¹⁶ Lacan’s “paranoiac” twist, his additional Freudian turn of the screw, comes from his characterization of this house as a *torture-house*: “In the light of the Freudian experience, man is a subject caught in and tortured by language.”¹⁷ Not only does man dwell in the “prison-house of language” (the title of Fredric Jameson’s early book on structuralism), he dwells in a torture-house of language: the entire psychopathology deployed by Freud, from conversion-symptoms inscribed into the body

coming to collect newborn. Women who will make babies for a fee as a way of escaping extreme poverty will be impregnated using sperm and embryos sent by courier, with childless couples visiting India only to pick up their new son or daughter. Dr Patel views her work as a “feminist mission” to bring needy women together with would-be mothers who are unable to conceive – no doubt a statement of brutal cynicism. However, cannot we imagine a situation in which lending a womb to another woman would definitely amount to a feminist act of solidarity which challenges traditional notions of substantial femininity?

15 But what about the opposite experience of our own language as provincial, primitive, marked by pathologies of private passions and obscenities which obscure clear reasoning and expression, the experience which pushes us towards using the universal secondary language in order to think clearly and freely? Is this not the logic of the constitution of the national language which replaces the multiplicity of dialects?

16 Lacan, op.cit., p. 276.

17 Ibid.

up to total psychotic breakdowns, are scars of this permanent torture, so many signs of an original and irremediable gap between subject and language, so many signs that man cannot ever be at home in his own home. This is what Heidegger ignores: this dark torturing other side of our dwelling in language – and this is why there is also no place for the Real of *jouissance* in Heidegger's edifice, since the torturing aspect of language concerns primarily the vicissitudes of libido.

A, not G flat

So if we discard the obscene notion that it is better to be “authentically” tortured by one’s “own” language than by a foreign imposed one, one should first emphasize the liberating aspect of being compelled to use a foreign “universal” language. There was a certain historical wisdom in the fact that, from medieval times till recently, the *lingua franca* of the West was Latin, a “secondary” inauthentic language, a “fall” from Greek, and not Greek with all its authentic burden: it was this very emptiness and “inauthenticity” of the Latin which allowed Europeans to fill it in with their own particular contents, in contrast to the stuffing overbearing nature of the Greek. Beckett learned this lesson, and started to write in French, a foreign language, leaving behind the “authenticity” of his roots. So, to recapitulate: the function of experiencing the foreign language as an oppressive imposition is to obfuscate this oppressive dimension in our own language, i.e., to retroactively elevate our own maternal tongue into a lost paradise of full authentic expression. The move to be accomplished when we experience the imposed foreign language as oppressive, as out of sync with our innermost life, is thus to transpose this discord into our own maternal tongue.¹⁸ Such a move is, of course, an extremely painful one, it equals the loss of the very substance of our being, of our concrete historical roots – as George Orwell put it, it means that, in a way, I have to “alter myself so completely that at the end I should hardly be recognizable as the same person.” Are we ready to do it? Back in 1937, Orwell deployed the ambiguity of the predominant Leftist attitude towards the class difference:

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¹⁸ But what about the opposite experience of our own language as provincial, primitive, marked by pathologies of private passions and obscenities which obscure clear reasoning and expression, the experience which pushes us towards using the universal secondary language in order to think clearly and freely? Is this not the logic of the constitution of the national language which replaces the multiplicity of dialects?

We all rail against class-distinctions, but very few people seriously want to abolish them. Here you come upon the important fact that every revolutionary opinion draws part of its strength from a secret conviction that nothing can be changed. /.../The fact that has got to be faced is that to abolish class-distinctions means abolishing a part of yourself. Here am I, a typical member of the middle class. It is easy for me to say that I want to get rid of class-distinctions, but nearly everything I think and do is a result of class-distinctions. All my notions—notions of good and evil, of pleasant and unpleasant, of funny and serious, of ugly and beautiful—are essentially *middle-class* notions; my taste in books and food and clothes, my sense of honor, my table manners, my turns of speech, my accent, even the characteristic movements of my body, are the products of a special kind of upbringing and a special niche about half-way up the social hierarchy.¹⁹

So where is Orwell himself here? He rejects patronizing compassion or any attempt to “become like workers” – he wants workers to wash more, etc. But does this mean he wants to remain middle-class and therefore accepts that class differences are to remain? The problem is that the way Orwell formulates the alternative - “sticking to one’s middle-class values or becoming like workers” is a false one: being an authentic revolutionary has nothing whatsoever to do with “becoming like workers,” with imitating the life style of the poor classes. The goal of the revolutionary activity is, on the contrary, *to change the entire social situation so that workers themselves will no longer be “workers.”* In other words, *both poles of Orwell’s dilemma – sticking to middle-class values or effectively becoming like workers – are typical middle-class options.* Robespierre and Lenin were distinctly middle-class in their private sensibility - the point is not to become like workers, but to change the workers’ lot. Orwell’s insight holds only for a certain kind of “bourgeois” Leftists; there are Leftists who do have the courage of their convictions, who do not only want “revolution without revolution,” as Robespierre put it – Jacobins and Bolsheviks, among others... The starting point of these true revolutionaries can be the very position of the “bourgeois” Leftists; what happens is that, in the middle of their pseudo-radical posturing,

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¹⁹ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), quoted from http://www.orwell.ru/library/novels/The_Road_to_Wigan_Pier/english/e_rtwp.

they get caught into their own game and are ready to put in question their subjective position. It is difficult to imagine a more trenchant political example of the weight of Lacan's distinction between the "subject of the enunciated" and the "subject of the enunciation": first, in a direct negation, you start by wanting to "change the world" without endangering the subjective position from which you are ready to enforce the change; then, in the "negation of negation," the subject enacting the change is ready to pay the subjective price for it, to change himself, or, to quote Gandhi's formula, to be himself the change he wants to see in the world.

Is "to alter myself so completely that at the end I should hardly be recognizable as the same person" not an event of radical self-transformation comparable to rebirth? Orwell's point is that radicals invoke the need for revolutionary change as a kind of superstitious token that should achieve the opposite; i.e., *prevent* the change from really occurring – today's academic Leftist who criticizes the capitalist cultural imperialism is in reality horrified at the idea that his field of study would really break down. Think about big international art biennales, a true capitalist venture as a rule sustained by "anti-capitalist" ideology whose predominant form is a mixture of anti-Eurocentrism, critique of modernity ("we live on a post-Kantian universe"), and warnings on how even art events are moments of the circulation of capital – to which one cannot but reply with a version of the old Marx brothers' quip: "They say today's art scene is part of capitalist machinery, but this shouldn't deceive you – it really is part of capitalist machinery!" (In the morass of such ideological denegations, one cannot but find refreshing, subversive even, a direct assertion of "bourgeois" values, as with Robert Pippin who recently claim that his entire philosophical project is to defend the bourgeois way of life. If one is consequent enough in this assertion, one soon discovers inconsistencies in the bourgeois way of life, inconsistencies which compel us to move beyond this way of life precisely in order to save what is worth saving in it.)

Is then a conference on the idea of Communism also destined to become this kind of pseudo-event, a Communist biennale? Or are we setting in motion something that has the potential to develop into an actual force of social transformation? It may appear that one cannot act today, that all we can really do is just to state things. But in a situation like today's, just to state what can be is much stronger than all calls to action which are as a rule just so many excuses NOT to do anything. Let me quote Alain Badiou's provocative thesis: "It is better to do nothing

than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent." Better to do nothing than to engage in localized acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run smoother (acts like providing the space for the multitude of new subjectivities, etc.). The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to "be active," to "participate," to mask the Nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, "do something," academics participate in meaningless "debates," etc., and the truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw from it. Those in power often prefer even a "critical" participation, a dialogue, to silence – just to engage us in a "dialogue," to make it sure our ominous passivity is broken. This is why the title of the fourth The Idea of Communism meeting in Seoul, September 27-29 2013, was fully justified: "Stop to think!"

And there are events which point in this direction here in Korea – I have in mind the widespread workers' resistance to the rapid passage into a post-historical society. As far as I can judge, this resistance reaches far beyond a simple workers struggle for better wages and working conditions – it is a struggle for an entire way of life, the resistance of a *world* threatened by rapid modernization of Korea. "World" stands here for a specific horizon of meaning, for an entire civilization or, rather, *culture* with its daily rituals and manners which are threatened by the post-historical commodification. Is this resistance conservative? Today's mainstream self-declared political and cultural conservatives are not really conservatives: fully endorsing capitalist continuous self-revolutionizing, they just want to make it more efficient by supplementing it with some traditional institutions (religion, etc.) to contain its destructive consequences for social life and maintain social cohesion. A true conservative today is the one who fully admits the antagonisms and deadlocks of global capitalisms, the one who rejects simple progressivism, and is attentive to the dark obverse of progress. In this sense, only a radical Leftist can be today a true conservative.

But where is the potential for change in such a stance? It may appear that one cannot act today, that all we can really do is just to state things. But in a situation like today's, just to state what is, a constatif, can be the strongest performatif, much stronger than all calls to action which are as a rule just so many excuses NOT to do anything - such a subversive constatif was described long ago by John Jay Chapman (1862-1933), a today half-forgotten American political activist and essayist²⁰ who wrote

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20 A bizarre episode from Chapman's life demonstrates that he was well aware what a true

about political radicals:

The radicals are really always saying the same thing. They do not change; everybody else changes. They are accused of the most incompatible crimes, of egoism and a mania for power, indifference to the fate of their own cause, fanaticism, triviality, want of humor, buffoonery and irreverence. But they sound a certain note. Hence the great practical power of consistent radicals. To all appearance nobody follows them, yet everyone believes them. They hold a tuning-fork and sound A, and everybody knows it really is A, though the time-honored pitch is G flat. The community cannot get that A out of its head. Nothing can prevent an upward tendency in the popular tone so long as the real A is kept sounding.²¹

One should emphasize here the moment of passivity and immobility: in Kierkegaard's terms, a radical is not a creative genius but an apostle who just embodies and delivers a truth – he just goes on and on with repeating the same message (“class struggle goes on”; “capitalism engenders antagonisms”; etc. etc.), and although it may appear that nobody follows him, everyone believes him, i.e., everybody secretly knows he is telling the truth – which is why he is constantly accused “of the most incompatible crimes, of egoism and a mania for power, indifference to the fate of their own cause, fanaticism, triviality, want of humor, buffoonery and irreverence.” And what this means is that, in the choice between dignity and risking to appear a buffoon, a true political radical easily renounces dignity.

The motto that united the Turks who protested on Taksim Square was »Dignity!« – a good but ambiguous slogan. The term »dignity« is appropriate insofar as it makes it clear that protests are not just about particular material demands, but about the protesters' freedom and emancipation. In the case of Taksim Square protests, the call for dignity did not refer only to corruption and cheating; it was also and crucially directed against the patronizing ideology of the Turkish Prime Minister. The direct target of Gezi Park protests was neither neoliberal capitalism

engagement means: in 1887, when he was a law student, Champan assaulted and beat a man for insulting his girlfriend, Minna Timmins; tormented by remorse, he punished himself for this act by putting his left hand into fire - it was so badly burnt that it had to be amputated.

21 John Jay Chapman, *Practical Agitation*, New York: Charles Scribner & Sons 1900, p. 63-64.

nor Islamism, but the personality of Erdoğan: the demand was for *him* to step down – why? Which of his features was experienced as so annoying that it made him the target of secular educated protesters as well as of the anti-capitalist Muslim youth, the object of a hatred that fused them together? Here is Bülent Somay's explanation:

Everybody wanted *PM Erdoğan* to resign. Because, many activists explained both during and after the Resistance, he was constantly meddling with their lifestyles, telling women to have at least three children, telling them not to have C-sections, not to have abortions, telling people not to drink, not to smoke, not to hold hands in public, to be obedient and religious. He was constantly telling them what was best for them ('shop and pray'). This was probably the best indication of the neo-liberal ('shop') soft-Islamic ('pray') character of the JDP rule: PM Erdoğan's utopia for Istanbul (and we should remember that he was the Mayor of Istanbul for four years) was a huge shopping mall and a huge mosque in Taksim Square and Gezi Park. He had become 'Daddy Knows Best' in all avenues of life, and tried to do this in a clumsy patronising disguise, which was quickly discarded during Gezi events to reveal the profoundly authoritarian character behind the image.²²

Is "shop and pray" not a perfect late-capitalist version of the old Christian *ora et labora*, with the identity of a worker (toiling peasant) replaced by a consumer? The underlying wager is, of course, that praying (a codename for the fidelity to old communal traditions) makes us even better "shoppers," i.e., participants in the global capitalist market. However, the call for dignity is not only a protest against such patronizing injunction to »shop and pray«; dignity is also the appearance of dignity, and in this case the demand for dignity means that I want to be duped and controlled in such a way that proper appearances are maintained, that I don't lose my face – is this not a key feature of our democracies? Walter Lippmann, the icon of American journalism in the XXth century, played a key role in the self-understanding of the US democracy; in *Public Opinion* (1922)²³, he wrote that a "governing class" must rise to face the

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²² Bülent Somay, »*L'Orient n'existe pas*« (doctoral thesis, Birkbeck School of Law, London 2013).

²³ See Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion*, Charleston: BiblioLife 2008.

challenge - he saw the public as Plato did, a great beast or a bewildered herd – floundering in the “chaos of local opinions.” So the herd of citizens must be governed by “a specialized class whose interests reach beyond the locality” – this elite class is to act as a machinery of knowledge that circumvents the primary defect of democracy, the impossible ideal of the “omni-competent citizen”. This is how our democracies function – with our consent: there is no mystery in what Lippmann was saying, it is an obvious fact; the mystery is that, knowing it, we play the game. We act *as if* we are free and freely deciding, silently not only accepting but even *demanding* that an invisible injunction (inscribed into the very form of our free speech) tells us what to do and think. As Marx knew it long ago, the secret is in the form itself. In this sense, in a democracy, every ordinary citizen effectively is a king – but a king in a constitutional democracy, a king who only formally decides, whose function is to sign measures proposed by executive administration. This is why the problem of democratic rituals is homologous to the big problem of constitutional democracy: how to protect the dignity of the king? How to maintain the appearance that the king effectively decides, when we all know this is not true? What we call “crisis of democracy” does not occur when people stop believing in their own power, but, on the contrary, when they stop trusting the elites, those who are supposed to know for them and provide the guidelines, when they experience the anxiety signaling that “the (true) throne is empty,” that the decision is now *really* theirs. There is, thus, in “free elections” always a minimal aspect of politeness: those in power politely pretend that they do not really hold power, and ask us to freely decide if we want to give them power - in a way which mirrors the logic of a gesture meant to be refused. So, back to Turkey, is it only this type of dignity that the protesters want, tired as they are of the primitive and openly direct way they are cheated and manipulated? Is their demand “We want to be cheated in a proper way, make at least an honest effort to cheat us without insulting our intelligence!”, or is it really more? If we aim at more, then we should be aware that the first step of liberation is to get rid of the appearance of false freedom and to openly proclaim our unfreedom. Say, the first step towards feminine liberation is to throw off the appearance of the respect for women and to openly proclaim that women are oppressed – today's master more than ever doesn't want to appear as master.²⁴

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²⁴ When, in the Summer of 2013, Western European states grounded Evo Morales' presidential plane with which he was returning from Moscow to Bolivia, suspecting that Edward Snowden was hidden in it on his way to the Bolivian exile, the most humiliating aspect was the Europeans' attempt to retain

Towards a new Master

In the very last pages of his monumental *Second World War*, Winston Churchill ponders on the enigma of a military decision: after the specialists (economic and military analysts, psychologists, meteorologists...) propose their multiple, elaborated and refined analysis, somebody must assume the simple and for that very reason most difficult act of transposing this complex multitude, where for every reason for there are two reasons against, into a simple “Yes” or “No” - we shall attack, we continue to wait... This gesture which can never be fully grounded in reasons, is that of a Master. It is for the experts to present the situation in its complexity, and it is for the Master to simplify it into a point of decision.

Such a figure of a Master is needed especially in situations of deep crisis. The function of a Master here is to enact an authentic division – a division between those who want to drag on within the old parameters and those who are aware of the necessary change. President Obama is often accused of dividing the American people instead of bringing them all together to find broad bi-partisan solutions – but what if this, precisely, is what is good about him? In situations of deep crisis, an authentic division is urgently needed – a division between those who want to drag on within the old parameters and those who are aware of the necessary change. Such a division, not the opportunistic compromises, is the only path to true unity. Let us take an example which surely is not problematic: France in 1940. Even Jacques Duclos, the second man of the French Communist Party, admitted in a private conversation that if, at that point in time, free elections were to be held in France, Marshal Petain would have won with 90% of the votes. When de Gaulle, in his historic act, refused to acknowledge the capitulation to Germans and continued to resist, he claimed that it is only he, not the Vichy regime, who speaks on behalf of the true France (on behalf of true France as such, not only on behalf of the “majority of the French”!), what he was saying was deeply true even if it was “democratically” not only without legitimization, but clearly opposed to the opinion of the majority of the French people... And Margaret Thatcher, the “lady who is not for turning,” WAS such a Master sticking to her decision which was at first perceived as crazy, gradually

their dignity: instead of openly admitting that they were acting under US pressure, or pretending that they simply followed the law, they justified the grounding on pure technicalities, claiming that the flight was not properly registered in their air traffic control. The effect was miserable – European not only appeared as US servants, they even wanted to cover up their servitude with ridiculous technicalities.

elevating her singular madness into an accepted norm. When Thatcher was asked about her greatest achievement, she promptly answered: “The New Labor.” And she was right: her triumph was that even her political enemies adopted her basic economic policies – the true triumph is not the victory over the enemy, it occurs when the enemy itself starts to use your language, so that your ideas form the foundation of the entire field.

So what remains today of Thatcher’s legacy today? Neoliberal hegemony is clearly falling apart. The only solution is to repeat Thatcher’s gesture in the opposite direction. Thatcher was perhaps the only true Thatcherite – she clearly believed in her ideas. Today’s neoliberalism, on the contrary, “only imagines that it believes in itself and demands that the world should imagine the same thing” (to quote Marx). In short, today, cynicism is openly on display. Recall again the cruel joke from Lubitch’s *To Be Or Not to Be*: when asked about the German concentration camps in the occupied Poland, the responsible Nazi officer “concentration camp Erhardt” snaps back: “We do the concentrating, and the Poles do the camping.” Does the same not hold for the Enron bankruptcy in January 2002 (as well as all financial meltdowns that followed), which can be interpreted as a kind of ironic commentary on the notion of risk society? Thousands of employees who lost their jobs and savings were certainly exposed to a risk, but without any true choice - the risk appeared to them as a blind fate. Those, on the contrary, who effectively did have an insight into the risks as well as a possibility to intervene in the situation (the top managers), minimized their risks by cashing in their stocks and options before the bankruptcy – so it is true that we live in a society of risky choices, but ones (the Wall Street managers) do the choosing, while others (the common people paying mortgages) do the risking...

As we have already pointed out, one of the weird consequences of the financial meltdown and the measures taken to counteract it (enormous sums of money to help banks) was the revival in the work of Ayn Rand, the closest one can come to the ideologist of the “greed is good” radical capitalism – the sales of her *magnum opus Atlas Shrugged* exploded again. According to some reports, there are already signs that the scenario described in *Atlas Shrugged* – the creative capitalists themselves going on strike – is enacted. John Campbell, a Republican congressman, said: “The achievers are going on strike. I’m seeing, at a small level, a kind of protest from the people who create jobs /.../ who are pulling back from their ambitions because they see how they’ll be punished for them.” The ridicule of this reaction is that it totally misreads the situation: most of

the gigantic sums of bail-out money is going precisely to the Randian deregulated “titans” who failed in their “creative” schemes and thereby brought about the meltdown. It is not the great creative geniuses who are now helping lazy ordinary people, it is the ordinary taxpayers who are helping the failed “creative geniuses.”

The other aspect of Thatcher’s legacy targeted by her Leftist critics was her “authoritarian” form of leadership: her lack of the sense for democratic coordination. Here, however, things are more complex than it may appear. The ongoing popular protests around Europe converge in a series of demands which, in their very spontaneity and obviousness, form a kind of “epistemological obstacle” to the proper confrontation with the ongoing crisis of our political system. These effectively read as a popularized version of Deleuzian politics: people know what they want, they are able to discover and formulate this, but only through their own continuous engagement and activity, so we need active participatory democracy, not just representative democracy with its electoral ritual which every four years interrupts the voters’ passivity; we need the self-organization of the multitude, not a centralized Leninist Party with the Leader... It is this myth of non-representative direct self-organization which is the last trap, the deepest illusion that should fall, that is most difficult to renounce. Yes, there are, in every revolutionary process, ecstatic moments of group solidarity when thousands, hundreds of thousands, together occupy a public place, like in Tahrir square 2 years ago; yes, there are moments of intense collective participation where local communities debate and decide, when people live in a kind of permanent emergency state, taking things into their own hands, with no Leader guiding them... but such states don’t last, and “tiredness” is here not a simple psychological fact, it is a category of social ontology. The large majority – me included – WANTS to be passive and just rely on an efficient state apparatus to guarantee the smooth running of the entire social edifice, so that I can pursue my work in peace. Walter Lippmann wrote in his *Public Opinion* (1922) that the herd of citizens must be governed by “a specialized class whose interests reach beyond the locality” – this elite class is to act as a machinery of knowledge that circumvents the primary defect of democracy, the impossible ideal of the “omni-competent citizen”. This is how our democracies function – with our consent: there is no mystery in what Lippmann was saying, it is an obvious fact; the mystery is that, knowing it, we play the game. We act as *if* we are free and freely deciding, silently not only accepting but even

demanding that an invisible injunction (inscribed into the very form of our free speech) tells us what to do and think. “People know what they want” – no, they don’t, and they don’t want to know it, they need a good elite, which is why a proper politician does not only advocate people’s interests, it is through him that they discover what they “really want.”

Following the spirit of today’s ideology which demands the shift from traditional hierarchy, a pyramid-like subordination to a Master, to pluralizing rhizomatic networks, political analysts like to point out that the new anti-globalist protests all around Europe and US, from OWS to Greece and Spain, have no central agency, no Central Committee, coordinating their activity – there are just multiple groups interacting, mostly through new media like Facebook or Twitter, and coordinating their activity spontaneously. This is why, when the police apparatuses of power look for the secret organizing committees, they miss the point - in the Slovene capital Ljubljana, 10000 protesters gathered in front of the Parliament and proudly proclaimed: “The protest is attended by 10000 organizers.” But is this “molecular” spontaneous self-organization really the most efficient new form of “resistance”? Is it not that²⁵ the opposite side, especially capital, already acts more and more as what Deleuzian theory calls the post-Oedipal multitude? Power itself has to enter a dialogue at this level, answering twitter with twitter - Pope and prime ministers are now on Twitter. Plus those in power know how to use the web to spread obscene rumors which they cannot afford to put in circulation officially – but if an anonymous twitter makes some hints... We should not be afraid to go the end in this line of reasoning: the opposition between centralized-hierarchic vertical power and horizontal multitudes is inherent to the existing social and political order, none of the two is a priori “better” or more “progressive.”²⁶

Furthermore, as to the molecular self-organizing multitude, against the hierarchic order sustained by the reference to a charismatic Leader,

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25 As Wendy Brown noted at a public debate at Birkbeck College.

26 As to “direct democracy,” the case of Switzerland often mentioned in this context is instructive: Switzerland is often celebrated as “the closest state in the world to direct democracy,” yet it is precisely because of its forms of “direct democracy” (referenda, local people’s initiatives, etc.) that Switzerland gave vote to women only in 1971, that it prohibited construction of minarets a couple of years ago, that it resists naturalization of immigrant workers, etc. Plus the way a referendum is organized has a peculiarity: together with the paper on which to write one’s decision, each voter gets a leaflet containing the government’s “suggestion” about how to vote. Not to mention the fact that Switzerland, this model of direct democracy, has one of the most non-transparent mechanisms of decision-making: big strategic decisions are made by councils out of public debate and control.

note the irony of the fact that Venezuela, a country praised by many for its attempts to develop modes of direct democracy (local councils, cooperatives, workers running factories), is also a country whose president was Hugo Chavez, a strong charismatic Leader if there ever was one. It is as if the Freudian rule of transference is at work here also: in order for the individuals to “reach beyond themselves,” to break out of the passivity of representative politics and engage themselves as direct political agents, the reference to a Leader is necessary, a Leader who allows them to pull themselves out of the swamp like Baron Munchhausen, a Leader who is “supposed to know” what they want. This is why, in their book of dialogues, Alain Badiou and Elisabeth Roudinesco were right to point out how horizontal networking does undermine the classic Master, but it simultaneously breeds new forms of domination which are much stronger than the classic Master; Badiou’s thesis is that a subject needs a Master to elevate itself above the “human animal” and to practice fidelity to a Truth-Event:

Roudinesco – In the last resort, what was lost in psychoanalytic societies is the position of the Master to the benefit of the position of small bosses.

Aeschimann – What do you mean by ‘master’?

Roudinesco – The position of the master allows transference: the psychoanalyst is ‘supposed to know’ what the analysand will discover. Without this knowledge attributed to the psychoanalyst, the search for the origin of suffering is quasi impossible.

Aeschimann – Do we really have to go through the restoration of the master?

Badiou – The master is the one who helps the individual to become subject. That is to say, if one admits that the subject emerges in the tension between the individual and the universality, then it is obvious that the individual needs a mediation, and thereby an authority, in order to progress on this path. The crisis of the master is a logical consequence of the crisis of the subject, and psychoanalysis did not escape it. One has to renew the position of the master, it is not true that one can do without it, even and especially in the perspective of emancipation.

Roudinesco – When the master disappears, he is replaced by the boss, by his authoritarianism, and sooner or later this always ends in

fascism – unfortunately, history has proven this to us.«

And Badiou is not afraid to oppose the necessary role of the Master to our “democratic” sensitivity:

I am convinced that one has to reestablish the capital function of leaders in the Communist process, whichever its stage. Two crucial episodes in which the leadership was insufficient were the Paris Commune (no worthy leader, with the exception of Dombrowski in the strictly military domain) and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (Mao too old and tired, and the ‘group of the GPCR’ infected by ultra-Leftism). This was a severe lesson.

This capital function of leaders is not compatible with the predominant ‘democratic’ ambience, which is why I am engaged in a bitter struggle against this ambience (after all, one has to begin with ideology). When I am dealing with people whose jargon is Lacanian I say ‘a figure of Master.’ When they are militants I say ‘dictatorship’ (in the sense of Carl Schmitt). When they are workers I say ‘leader of a crowd,’ and so on. It is so that I am quickly understood.²⁷

But is this effectively the case? Is the only alternative to the Master the (potentially “totalitarian”) “boss”? In psychoanalysis, Master is by definition an impostor, and the whole point of the analytic process is to dissolve the transference to the Master *qua* “subject supposed to know” – the conclusion of analysis involves the fall of the subject-supposed-to-know. While Jacques-Alain Miller (as an analyst) endorses this fall, he nonetheless agrees with Badiou that the domain of the politics is the domain of the discourse of the Master; their difference resides in the fact that, while Badiou opts for full engagement, Miller advocates a cynical distance towards the Master: a psychoanalyst

occupies the position of ironist who takes care not to intervene into the political field. He acts so that semblances remain at their places while making it sure that subjects under his care do

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27 Personal communication (April 2013).

not take them for *real*. /.../ one should somehow bring oneself to remain *taken in by them* (fooled by them). Lacan could say that 'those who are not taken in err': if one doesn't act as if semblances are real, if one doesn't leave their efficiency undisturbed, things turn for the worse.²⁸

One should reject this shared premise: the axiom of radical emancipatory politics is that Master is NOT the ultimate horizon of our social life, that one can form a collective not held together by a Master figure. Without this axiom, there is no Communist politics proper but just pragmatic ameliorations of the existing order. However, we should at the same time follow the lesson of psychoanalysis: the only path to liberation leads through transference, and this is why figure of a Master is unavoidable. So we should fearlessly follow Badiou's suggestion: in order to effectively awaken individuals from their dogmatic "democratic slumber," from their blind reliance on institutionalized forms of representative democracy, appeals to direct self-organization are not enough, a new figure of the Master is needed. Recall the famous lines from Arthur Rimbaud's "*A une raison*" ("To a Reason"):

A tap of your finger on the drum releases all sounds and initiates the new harmony.

A step of yours is the conscription of the new men and their marching orders.

You look away: the new love!

You look back, — the new love!

There is absolutely nothing inherently "Fascist" in these lines – the supreme paradox of the political dynamics is that a Master is needed to pull individuals out of the quagmire of their inertia and motivate them towards self-transcending emancipatory struggle for freedom. What we need today, in this situation, is thus a Thatcher of the Left: a leader who would repeat Thatcher's gesture in the opposite direction, transforming the entire field of presuppositions shared by today's political elite of all main orientations. This is also why we should reject the ideology of what

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²⁸ Quoted from Nicolas Fleury, *Le reel insense. Introduction a la pensee de Jacques-Alain Miller*, Paris: Germina 2010, p. 93-94.

Saroj Giri called “anarchic horizontalism,” the distrust of all hierarchic structures, of the very idea of “vanguard” when one part of a progressive movement assumes leadership and mobilizes other parts:

If consensus and horizontalism are not to remain stuck in nursing quasi-liberal egos, then we must be able to delineate how they can contribute towards a more substantive notion of politics – one which involves a verticalism. Perhaps this would be a better way to revive a communist politics instead of taking politically correct vows of horizontalism and consensus.²⁹

Giri takes the example of the Spokes Council in Oakland OWS movement, as a body separate from the General Assembly, “a separate body, which was not to be confused with the movement, taking key decisions and implementing them: was this (incipient) verticalism violating democratic decision making or was it the natural working of horizontalism, giving us a verticalism which is the unfolding of horizontalism, horizontalism’s truth? [...] *the minority providing the line of march to the movement does not amount to a reified subjectivity.*”³⁰ The same goes for so-called “extreme” tactics which can be counterproductive, but they can also radicalize a broad circle of supporters: “such practices that are the actions of a radical minority do not lead to disunity but to a higher revolutionary unity.”³¹

“The right of distress”

So what is the elementary gesture of this Master? Surprisingly, Hegel pointed out the way here - let us begin with his account of the “right of distress Hegel pointed the way here in his account of the “right of distress (*Notrecht*)”³²:

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29 Saroj Giri, “Communism, Occupy and the Question of Form,” *Ephemera* volume 13(3), p. 594.

30 Giri, op.cit., p. 595.

31 Op.cit., p. 590.

32 I owe this reference to Hegel's *Notrecht* to Costas Douzinas who developed it in his intervention “The Right to Revolution?” at the Hegel-colloquium *The Actuality of the Absolute* organized by the Birkbeck School of Law in London, May 10-12 2013. Passages from Hegel's Philosophy of Right are quoted from www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/prconten.html.

“§ 127 The particularity of the interests of the natural will, taken in their entirety as a single whole, is personal existence or life. In extreme danger and in conflict with the rightful property of someone else, this life may claim (as a right, not a mercy) a right of distress [*Notrecht*], because in such a situation there is on the one hand an infinite injury to a man’s existence and the consequent loss of rights altogether, and on the other hand only an injury to a single restricted embodiment of freedom, and this implies a recognition both of right as such and also of the injured man’s capacity for rights, because the injury affects only this property of his.

Remark: The right of distress is the basis of *beneficium competentiae* whereby a debtor is allowed to retain of his tools, farming implements, clothes, or, in short, of his resources, i.e. of his creditor’s property, so much as is regarded as indispensable if he is to continue to support life – to support it, of course, on his own social level.

Addition: Life as the sum of ends has a right against abstract right. If for example it is only by stealing bread that the wolf can be kept from the door, the action is of course an encroachment on someone’s property, but it would be wrong to treat this action as an ordinary theft. To refuse to allow a man in jeopardy of his life to take such steps for self-preservation would be to stigmatize him as without rights, and since he would be deprived of his life, his freedom would be annulled altogether. /.../

§ 128 This distress reveals the finitude and therefore the contingency of both right and welfare of right as the abstract embodiment of freedom without embodying the particular person, and of welfare as the sphere of the particular will without the universality of right.

Hegel does not talk here about humanitarian considerations which should temper our legalistic zeal (if an impoverished father steals bread to feed his starving child, we should show mercy and understanding even if he broke the law...). The partisans of such an approach which constrains its zeal to fighting suffering while leaving intact the economic-legal edifice within which this suffering takes place, “only demonstrate that, for all their bloodthirsty, mock-humanist yelping, they regard the social

conditions in which the bourgeoisie is dominant as the final product, the *non plus ultra* of history» - Marx's old characterization which perfectly fits today's humanitarians like Bill Gates. What Hegel talks about is a basic legal right, a right which is as a *right* superior to other particular legal rights. In other words, we are not dealing simply with the conflict between the demands of life and the constraints of the legal system of rights, but with a right (to life) that overcomes all formal rights, i.e., with a *conflict inherent to the sphere of rights*, a conflict which is unavoidable and *necessary* insofar as it serves as an indication of the finitude, inconsistency, and "abstract" character of the system of legal rights as such. "To refuse to allow a man in jeopardy of his life to take such steps for self-preservation /like stealing the food necessary for his survival/ would be to *stigmatize him as without rights*" – so, again, the point is not that the punishment for justified stealing would deprive the subject of his life, but that it would exclude him from the domain of rights, i.e., that it would reduce him to bare life outside the domain of law, of the legal order. In other words, this refusal deprives the subject of his very *right to have rights*. Furthermore, the quoted *Remark* applies this logic to the situation of a debtor, claiming that he should be allowed to retain of his resources so much as is regarded as indispensable if he is to continue with his life not just at the level of bare survival, but "on his own social level" – a claim that is today fully relevant with regard to the situation of the impoverished majority in the indebted states like Greece. However, the key question here is: can we universalize this "right of distress," extending it to an entire social class and its acts against the property of another class? Although Hegel does not directly address this question, a positive answer imposes itself from Hegel's description of "rabble" as a group/class whose exclusion from the domain of social recognition is *systematic*: "§ 244, *Addition*: Against nature man can claim no right, but once society is established, poverty immediately takes the form of a wrong done to one class by another." In such a situation in which a whole class of people is systematically pushed beneath the level of dignified survival, to refuse to allow them to take "steps for self-preservation" (which, in this case, can only mean the open rebellion against the established legal order) is to *stigmatize them as without rights*. In short, what we get in such a reading of Hegel is nothing less than a Maoist Hegel, a Hegel which is telling us what Mao was telling to the young at the outset of the Cultural Revolution: "*It is right to rebel!*" This is the lesson of a true Master.

A true Master is not an agent of discipline and prohibition, his message is not “You cannot!”, also not “You have to...!”, but a releasing »You can!« - what? Do the impossible, i.e., what appears impossible within the coordinates of the existing constellation – and today, this means something very precise: you can think beyond capitalism and liberal democracy as the ultimate framework of our lives. A Master is a vanishing mediator who gives you back to yourself, who delivers you to the abyss of your freedom: when we listen to a true leader, we discover what we want (or, rather, what we always-already wanted without knowing it). A Master is needed because we cannot accede to our freedom directly – for gain this access we have to be pushed from outside since our “natural state” is one of inert hedonism, of what Badiou called “human animal.” The underlying paradox is here that the more we live as “free individuals with no Master,” the more we are effectively non-free, caught within the existing frame of possibilities – we have to be pushed/ disturbed into freedom by a Master.

There was a trace of this authentic Master's call even in Obama's motto from his first presidential campaign: “Yes, we can!” A new possibility was thereby opened – but, one might say, did Hitler also not do something formally similar? Was his message to the German people not “Yes, we can...” – kill the Jews, squash democracy, act in a racist way, attack other nations? A closer analysis immediately brings out the difference: far from being an authentic Master, Hitler was a populist demagogue who carefully played upon people's obscure desires. It may seem that, in doing this, Hitler followed Steve Jobs' infamous motto: »A lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them.« However, in spite of all one has to criticize in the activity of Jobs, he was close to an authentic Master in how he understood his motto. When he was asked how much inquiry into what customers want Apple uses, he snapped back: »None. It's not the customers' job to know what they want... we figure out what we want.«³³ Note the surprising turn of this argumentation: after denying that customers know what they want, Jobs doesn't go on with the expected direct reversal “it is our task (the

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33 In India, thousands of impoverished intellectual workers are employed in what is ironically called “like-farms”: they are (miserably) paid to seat the whole day in front of a computer and endlessly press the button “like” on pages which ask the visitors or customers to click on “like” or “dislike” for a product in question. In this way, a product can artificially appear as very popular and thereby seduce ignorant prospective customers into buying it (or at least checking-up on it), following the logic of “there must be something in it of so many customers are satisfied by it” – so much about the reliability of customer reactions... (I owe this information to Saroj Giri, New Delhi.)

task of creative capitalists) to figure out what customers want and then ‘show it to them’ on the market.” Instead, he continues “we figure out what we want” – this is how a true Master works: he doesn’t try to guess what people want; he simply obeys his own desire so that it is to the people to decide if they will follow him. In other words, his power stems from his fidelity to his desire, from not compromising it. Therein resides the difference between a true Master and, say, a Stalinist leader who pretends to know (better than the people themselves) what people really want (what is really good for them), and is then ready to enforce this on them even against their will.

Hegel’s solution to the deadlock of the Master – to have a Master (like a King) reduced to its Name, a purely symbolic authority totally dissociated of all actual qualifications for his job, a monarch whose only function is to sign his name on proposals prepared by experts – should not be confused with the cynical stance of “let’s have a master about whom we know he is an idiot” – one cannot cheat in this way since one has to make a choice: either we really don’t take the master figure seriously (and in this case the master simply doesn’t function performatively), or we take the master seriously in our acts in spite of our direct conscious irony (which can go up to actually despising the master). In the latter case, we are simply dealing with a case of disavowal, of “I know very well, but...”: our ironic distance is part of the transferential relation to the master figure, it functions as a subjective illusion enabling us to effectively endure the master, i.e., we pretend not to take the master seriously so that we can endure the fact that the master really is our master.

A similar mechanism of cheating is to accept the need for the figure of a political master, but to claim that such a figure should only be allowed to rise up after a process of collective deliberation: the master cannot directly be called to bring the solution when people find themselves in a deadlock – in such a case we only get a dictator who himself doesn’t really know what to do. People first have to unite their will around a determinate project, only then can they allow a master-like figure to lead them along the way outlined in their project... Logical as it may appear to be, such a notion as it were puts the cart ahead of the horse: a true leader does not do what people want or plan; he tells the people what they want, it is only through him that they realize what they want. Therein resides the act of a true political leader: after listening to him, people all of a sudden realize what they always-already knew

they wanted, it clarifies to them their own position, it enables them to recognize themselves, their own innermost need, in the project he proposes to them.

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