

Between Friends

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For my remarks, I propose to start from Slavoj's words in the concluding statement of the materials furnished to us, "Welcome to the Civilization of the Liar's Paradox," and will move quickly to a section in which Slavoj takes up the motif of what is commonly diagnosed today as "the death of truth."

Rumors seem to fit perfectly today's predicament which many people characterize as the "death of truth" – a characterization which is obviously wrong. The implication of those who use this term is that once before (say, till the 1980s), in spite of all manipulations and distortions, truth did somehow prevail, and that the "death of truth" is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Already a quick overview tells us that this was not the case: how many violations of human rights and humanitarian catastrophes remained invisible, from the Vietnam war to the invasion of Iraq. Just remember the times of Reagan, Nixon, Bush.... The difference was not that the past was more "truthful" but that the ideological hegemony was much stronger, so that, instead of today's greater melee of local "truths," one "truth" (or, rather, one Big Lie) basically prevailed. In the West, this was the liberal-democratic Truth (with a Leftist or Rightist twist). What is happening today is that, with the populist wave which unsettled the political establishment, the Truth/Lie which served as ideological foundation of this establishment is also falling apart. And the ultimate reason for this disintegration is not the rise of postmodern relativism but the failure of the ruling establishment which is no longer able to maintain its ideological hegemony. [...]

So when we hear claims that with the ongoing "collapse of the information ecosystem" our society is falling apart, we should be very clear about what this means: not just that fake news abound, but that what is disintegrating is the Big Lie that till now held together our social space – the "death of truth" thus opens up the possibility for a new authentic truth... or for an even worse big Lie. Is this not happening today with the retreat of liberal democracy which is step by step overshadowed by multiple figures of new Fascism, from neo-feudal populism to religious authoritarianism?

In his previous paragraphs, Slavoj addresses some of the psychic and rhetorical mechanisms by which a concrete, or what he will call at the end of the passage from which I have cited, an "authentic truth," is avoided or obscured—mechanisms that serve the legitimacy and hegemony of what Slavoj calls "the Big Lie" that has structured governing Western ideologies.

I don't want to pause to analyse the proposition, which I find, in its immediate impact in this brief statement, provocative and important. I want to share, rather, two reactions to the words I have cited that shape the path I would take in undertaking a broader analysis.

The first reaction took form as I considered a text that reached me on the day I received Slavoj's essay. This is a letter composed by a group of Nobel Laureates that draws from an example of a letter written by Italian intellectuals in 1925 in response to Mussolini's accession to power for a new declaration against fascism.¹ The text moved and cheered me, at first glance. I then paused as I turned to ask myself whether, and to what degree, it might itself be caught in some way in the Big Lie.

The letter moved me spontaneously because I admired such a gesture in this dark moment of newly ascendant fascism, and I certainly embrace some of its guiding assertions. I strive daily to get a handle on the very real threats and challenges facing my colleagues in the academy and beyond. This is, after all, my job—my first responsibility at the EGS, whose primary purpose in such a moment is to preserve and strengthen a place of gathering (and even shelter) for those attempting to think their time and speak concretely in relation to it. The latter words are pitched quite high, but I do believe that we must be ready, in such a time, to state a reason for being.

And we must be wary of abstraction in such statements. From the perspective of Slavoj's words, we can recognize fairly quickly that despite its real strengths, the letter from the Nobel laureates suffers from a tinge of abstraction—something that is all too common in mission statements in academic discourse. (I think, in a related way, of conference presentations or TED talks that seek to offer us solace regarding the propagation and development of AI by telling us that we, the capable and alerted, need only work together to mitigate the growing danger in our creations. Who is this "we?"—and can they seriously be trusted to interrupt the political and economic interests at work?). Without any significant analysis of the socio-economic conditions of the modern university and modern research, or of the many mediatized platforms for intellectual exchange, stirring declarations from the academy (be this Nobel or otherwise) easily risk reproducing, even despite themselves, some aspect of the Big Lie.

Questions for statements on behalf of intellectual responsibility like the one that overtook me after reading Slavoj's essay should address all of us who are gathering here; they should be at least latent, I believe, in all of our deliberations. I learned many years ago from activist groups fighting for the role of philosophy in the French educational system that one must always attend to the institutional conditions of one's practice as an intellectual, whatever one's place, be this in the academy or in the media (Slavoj, of course functions as one of our leading public intellectuals while finding welcome harbour as a professor at the EGS). What does it take in a university or in the media (powerfully neutralizing platforms) to serve the cause of enabling the emergence of a new and concrete "authentic truth"?

That is a very big question. My aim in this moment is simply to put it on our table, and with that I turn to my second reaction to Slavoj's essay. That second reaction links to a motif that runs throughout the material

Slavoj has shared with us, namely the terrible realities that confront us with the situation in Gaza, including the fact that even addressing this question or opening it in some sites, and even some countries, can be hazardous for the intellectual.

How do we address the “Big Lie” that has enabled and enveloped that situation? Obviously, there is an ongoing work of critical history to be done that addresses not only Western geo-political and economic interests at work in the Middle East, but even their more unseemly elements, namely racism. I won’t pause over these, but I would like to say a couple words about the way in which the governing ideological order in our Western democracies has appropriated and accommodated the post-war response to the fact of the Holocaust. For many, at least in the intellectual world to which I have belonged, the words “never forget” emerged as a kind of watchword that captured a broader consensus. But with the de-constitution of the “Big Lie” to which Slavoj refers, that watchword falters and is exposed to question. For example, it is difficult not to ask, today, “What, precisely, were we not to forget?” The question emerges not because we have forgotten what we are supposedly not to forget (though clearly that has happened to some measure, at least by denegation), but rather because it now appears that there was possibly some misapprehension of the imperative on the part of the liberal West that adopted it, or at least some inability to think what was spoken there. Because manifestly there has been some terrible forgetting, or at least denial, by those prosecuting the conflict or abetting its unfolding. (I believe one might even suggest that the collapse of the holding power of the watchword helps dramatically to foreground the existence of “the Big Lie.”) I will not address this question directly at this point, but I will be returning to it at least indirectly as I take up another point with respect to Slavoj’s concern with the possibilities for approaching “new authentic truths.”

In the texts by Slavoj submitted for our discussion, one finds a returning motif, which is Slavoj’s insistence that we must think a more local truth in the face of the spread of a “worldless” capitalism and the dehumanizing technologies that serve (and now accelerate) its insidious propagation.² I learned from Gérard Granel some years ago to address this phenomenon as an unholy jointure of *Technik* and Capital, and I feel very sympathetic with Slavoj’s concern, particularly as regards the issues we face in the ecological crisis that now faces us.

Slavoj does not expand on what he intends with the term “local.” Clearly, it is a term that requires extensive and even imaginative scrutiny in itself. But from his reference to the Basque struggles, one will recognize a leftist motif with which people of my generation will be quite familiar. One important facet of this struggle has concerned language and an effort, undertaken across the globe, to preserve local languages from destruction. Those who have resided in the U.K. will be familiar with this from efforts to preserve Welsh, Celtic, and even Scots; but again, the struggle has

been pursued in many parts of the world. On this matter, I want only to signal a path of reflection that I have pursued with respect to the topic of a “6th extinction,” which the exigency of introducing the notion of the “anthropocene” has pressed upon us. I needn’t enter the debates, but I would note that if one examines the maps that document the destruction of species, and maps that document the effacement of human languages, and if one overlays them, then one has grounds for a possible skeptical response to the official view that humankind is not one of the species that faces significant danger of extinction (or if not extinction, a quite dramatic and ruinous transformation).³ My core point is that the question of language belongs to the issue of how we might work with the term “local.” And I would specify that I think far more is at stake here than the hegemony of the English language (or others), given that the threat to language usage posed by AI is now a general one of uncanny and devastating force.

You will see from this last remark that it is difficult for me to avoid responding to Slavoj’s evocation of locality and “authentic truth” from the grounds of my work on Heidegger. I refer, of course, to Heidegger’s thought on the human relation to language, which has been the topic of much of my work. But the notion of locality also cannot fail to evoke, for someone like myself, the motif of dwelling, particularly if our concern is an earthly or even bodily being in the world. I won’t take advantage of the absence of my friend and valued colleague to engage a debate on Heidegger that I have sought with him (unsuccessfully!) for quite some time in Saas Fee. I simply want to note that if we approach this question of dwelling with Heidegger’s own guide, which is Hölderlin, we can recover a thought of dwelling that can be of use—though I believe we must always recall Hölderlin’s personal despair in this matter, and his identification with a fundamentally *exiled* Oedipus, that “poor stranger in Greece” (from “In lieblicher Bläue...”). In Hölderlin’s thinking and writing, there was always a shadowing *Unheimlichkeit*. Even the beautiful words about the “philosophical light” outside his window in the homecoming he describes in the second of the famous letters he wrote to his friend Casimir Böhlendorf are accompanied by his expressed desire that he always remember how he got there—which necessarily means remembering his exposure to an inappropriable alterity.

An insistent appeal to the local and efforts to realize some social instantiation of it easily devolve into an appeal to identity that brings with it the problems that have fueled the critique of the metaphysics and the general task of deconstruction. No deployment of local reference and cultural identity that proceeds to seek social control can finally suppress *das Unbehagen in der Kultur*—that “thing” (as Lyotard named it) whose destabilizing presence prompts manifestations of paranoia and various forms of scapegoating and xenophobia. I move too quickly and state the obvious, but this is why critical thought and work like Slavoj’s remains an essential and ongoing necessity.

Here, a reference to Heidegger's own grasp of the task of deconstruction evidently cannot suffice—unless we undertake to rethink what he offered furtively in the existential analytic with the notion of *Mitsein* (being-with). The notion has to be rethought thoroughly, which is to say from the ground, or rather the groundless, up. Heidegger cannot take us far with that work (though there are significant hints), and his own steps with the concept were infamous. He turned *Mitsein* into a relationality that allowed for the definition of a national subject. But he left an opening that was exploited by several French writers, principally among them Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot's manner of forcing that opening with his thought of friendship and community is of particular importance for us by reason of his manner of giving this thought an ethico-political meaning that surfaced quite dramatically in the 1960's, first with a notion of refusal (which is echoed by Slavoj in an interesting way in his essay on the "liar's paradox") and then a thought of freedom. That latter thought takes on particular force when we read it against the backdrop of Blanchot's experience with the group that formed around Robert Antelme and honored the witness he bore as a survivor of Nazi camps, including Dachau, where he was finally rescued. Here, as it happens, in Blanchot's meditation on that witness (I use the word loosely here, because there is more than Antelme's extremely important account of his captivity in The Human Race (*L'espèce humaine*)⁴; there is also a very singular form of being with those close to him, something borne in his singular presence), we find something of an answer to what it is not to forget. That answer appears in a text to which I have turned frequently and will cite partially once again for its force and brevity. Less than a page in length, the text, "In the Night that is

Watched Over," recounts Blanchot's experience of a voice that he takes to be Antelme's which comes to him in his sleeplessness. That voice points to the effacement of a memory of the camps.

"But," I say, speaking, not speaking, "do we forget?"—"Yes, you forget; you forget all the more for remembering. Your memory does not impede you from living, from surviving, nor even from loving me. But one does not love a dead person, because then the meaning escapes you, the impossibility of meaning, the nonbeing and impossibility of nonbeing."

When I reread these lines, I know that I have already lost sight of Robert Antelme, the incomparable friend I knew. He was so simple, and at the same time so rich, with a knowledge that the greatest minds lacked. In the experience of servitude that was his, even if he shared it with others, he kept the human truth from which he knew not to exclude even those who oppressed him.

But he went even further: not recognizing a companion (K.) he had come to see in the infirmary, who was still alive, he understood

that there is a nothingness in life itself, an unfathomable void against which one has to defend oneself, even while acknowledging its approach. We must learn to live with this void.⁵

As you will see, there are two things Blanchot underscores in what he takes to be an admonition from Antelme—two elements in the knowledge Antelme brought back with him and that Blanchot takes up in something like a work of anamnesis. The first point comes in a swift reference to a new thought of humanism that Antelme articulates in The Human Race, and from the grounds of which Antelme would articulate a quite forbidding form of human responsibility. Here, as Blanchot would say, is “authentic truth.” For Antelme, any social structure of the modern capitalist world in which one group conceives itself as somehow superior to any other (or “more properly human”) is actually a reflection of what was instituted in the camps in a horrifying form. Never forgetting would mean never condoning such structures and never allowing such horror. I won’t dwell on this point now, but I think it is obvious that the contemporary world is suffering a form of forgetting that involves a terrible reversion.

I described Antelme’s new humanism above as radical, and I did so not only because his experience and the work that followed led to a singular communist commitment. Its real radicality finds its source in the second point adduced by Blanchot, namely that we assume in human existence a relation to nothingness that is unsublatable—something that introduces the trace of an incommensurable in every human relation. Blanchot, following Antelme faithfully, goes very far with this, and I won’t try to unfold what this means on this occasion. But on the way in this course of thought, and this means in the company of Levinas, but also with that of Antelme, Duras, Morin, Mascolo, Vittorini, and others who visited that singular “locality” referred to as “6 rue Saint Benoît,” Blanchot came to articulate something that is perhaps close to the Jewish humanism to which Udi Aloni refers to in the statement cited by Slavoj in the essay “Sumud.” He thought a humanism without vengeance (or *ressentiment*) that is essentially “exilic” inasmuch as it places a movement of “going out” toward the other—and first of all the human other—into any search for authentic truth.

I want to say in a far too hasty conclusion that I don’t believe Blanchot’s exilic humanism is necessarily incompatible with a thought of locality, I want to suggest that one can dwell in a locality “exilically” if one assumes one’s native strangeness. But this requires a more consequent thought of hospitality and openness than the West has been able to embrace. And therein lies the task.

1 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jun/13/nobel-laureates-fascism?CMP=oth_b-aplnews_d-1

2 See “The Global World of Local Traditions,” and “Sumud: Remember this Word..”

3 For this “official view,” I refer to The International Union for Conservation of Nature’s Red List of Threatened Species. My remarks on the death of languages are partly informed by the work of Romaine and Nettle 2000.

4 Antelme 1998.

5 Blanchot 2010, p. 133.

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