

# On Žižek's Authority

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**Abstract:** In this essay I explore Žižek's notion of authority. I argue that Žižek's theoretical framework is indispensable for addressing a pressing philosophical-historical enigma: how does authority—seemingly an artifact of the past—persist in a world increasingly consumed by a frenzy of transgressive and anti-authoritarian conduct? How do we comprehend the modern and post-modern revivals of authority? These considerations of authority lead naturally into account of contemporary new authoritarianism and the ways in which it authorizes its violence. New Authoritarianism, as well as contemporary war manifest as infinitizing pursuits of limits.

**Keywords:** Žižek, Arendt, Authority, War, Genocide, unwritten law.

As it happens, I am the father of two boys: one shares a birthday with Slavoj Žižek, the other with Donald Trump. This coincidence struck me as I was finishing my book, *The Emperor's New Nudity*,<sup>1</sup> which delves into the form of authoritarianism epitomized by Trump. Žižek's political ontology has been pivotal not only for this analysis but also for my broader intellectual development. In what follows, I argue that Žižek's theoretical framework allows us to explore a crucial philosophical-historical enigma: how does authority—seemingly an artifact of the past—persist in a world increasingly consumed by a frenzy of transgressive and anti-authoritarian conduct? How do we comprehend the modern and post-modern revivals of authority?

While Trump has become a focal point for me—a gateway to broader subjects like the intersection of authority and technology—I have never directly addressed Žižek before. There's a good reason for that. Walter Benjamin once wrote of his relationship to theology: "My thinking is related to theology as the blotting pad is related to ink. It is saturated with it." I feel similarly about Žižek's intellectual authority. When I mention my children's birthdate curiosity, people often respond "Of course, Žižek is the Trump of theory," or something similar. What makes such a statement conceivable, and worth mentioning, while no doubt it must be rejected? Both Trump and Žižek derive part of their allure from their capacity to flout unwritten rules, to say things no one else can. With Trump, this trait is central to his authority. Both figures are polarizing—an enigmatic core of new authoritarianism. Apart from the essential, if obvious, issue of power—the ability to determine people's fates—the clearest distinction lies in the examples they set. Exemplary figures cannot be imitated, which is precisely why they inspire mimetic efforts. Part of the suffocating impact of transgressive authority figures stems from their exceptionalism—the ability to break rules that others cannot. While Žižek is undoubtedly imitable, his work, with its unmatched insight, provokes thought in the most literal sense. Ultimately, in his Žižek's intellectual activity, Žižek proves it is possible to derive non-perverse intellectual joy from confronting even the most dreadful contradictions that plague our reality.

Yet, Žižek’s authority extends beyond the intellectual to the political. It carries weight within what remains of the left, a group to which I belong. As a member of the waning Israeli left, grappling with the painful atrocities committed by my state in my name—where declaring “not in my name” fails to cleanse one’s hands of collective crimes—I find it impossible to produce a standard academic paper. Therefore, in writing on Žižek’s notion of authority, I do not presume to definitively establish it within his work. Instead, I aim to open some space between the lines, so that new insights might emerge. It is on Žižek’s authority, so to speak, that I take the liberty to go beyond a discussion of his thoughts and follow his lead in tackling the paradoxes of our reality. Perhaps this is a fitting measure of intellectual authority: a thinker’s power lies not in fully encompassing reality within their conceptual framework, but in fostering spaces for thinking to emerge in others.

### **Father Knows Worst: The advent of The Rule of The Worst**

The phrase “father knows best” encapsulates and simplifies an old, fading and highly discredited notion of paternal authority: father – or any other authority figure unfortunate enough to assume this place of privilege – is privy to knowledge that makes him fit to rule. This knowledge is assumed, implicit in the rule of authority. Put your trust in me, is the message of authority. I know what I’m doing. Of course, we are by now long accustomed to see this position as fake, and father figures as imposters. Indeed, a major strain of the enlightenment project was intended precisely to relieve us from the unthinking reliance on figures of authority, to dare to think for ourselves, as Kant famously put it.<sup>2</sup> This was the core of enlightenment’s emancipatory promise: think for yourself, authorize yourself to think, and external authority just might wither away.

How are we to understand the movement from “dad to worse” (*père au pire*), the steady slide of liberal democracies, grounded in the promise of enlightenment, into what can be called the rule of the worst (kakistocracy)? Two and half decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we witness all around us the rise of authority figures and political parties that seem to garner more legitimacy the more they demonstrate just how unfit to rule they are. Reasonable as we are, we pull our hair in despair.

But are they truly the worst? Can we not easily imagine, right around the corner, something even worse? Behind the vain vengefulness of a re-elected Trump, promising to act as a dictator against his political enemies, doesn’t there lie something worse still, the crystallizing ideology, say, of Christian Nationalism? Is what we are witnessing a step in the direction of something worse, familiar to us from the 20th century, namely full-blown fascism and totalitarianism? Or perhaps, this comparison itself is a dangerous distraction, specters of past historical events leading us astray from coming to terms with how deeply boring and disappointing

our postmodern dystopia truly is, denying us even of the apocalyptic, final dramatic clash between good and evil?

The spontaneous suspicion towards figures of authority also informs political theory, here, as a suspicion towards the very significance of authority and its figures, a worry that focusing on the political drama of elections, the battle for positions of power is merely a distraction from the deep structure or the mechanics of power. We are, as Foucault famously put it, to cut off the head of the king in political theory,<sup>3</sup> presumably a more difficult feat than the beheading of real-life, historical monarchs.

Yet even headless – perhaps especially so – authority figures seem to come back from the dead to haunt us. From the gallows of history, an archaic figure of authority is making an inglorious comeback. What is coming to assume the position of old fathers, those supposed to know best, are new iterations of the worst kind of father: fathers who know worst. Leaders who come to assume positions of power not because they best know how to rule, but because they seem relieved from the basic duty to rule themselves. Leaders who garner support and legitimacy not despite, but directly due to their display of an unencumbered, mindless, will.

### **In Search of a Missing Concept: Authority and Tradition – A Hermeneutical Circle**

In Žižek's extensive oeuvre, abundant with references and analysis of figures and structures of authority, there is no explicit formulation of the concept of authority. And so, a first step in a commentary on Žižek's notion of authority has to be somewhat reconstructive. Relying on Arendt's classical treatment of the topic, my first move will be to situate Žižek's prominent contribution to the notion of authority, i.e, his development of the notion of unwritten law, as a crucial element in thinking on authority. Arendt's treatment of the topic is crucial for raising the core challenge the notion of authority put in front of us, namely, the question of its persistence.

In her well-known essay "What is Authority?", Arendt approaches the object of her essay, Authority, obliquely, making clear right from the beginning that authority is no longer known to us, a thing of the past, felt by us only through the symptoms of its – probably fatal – crisis:

In order to avoid misunderstanding, it might have been wiser to ask in the title: What was – and not what is – authority? For it is my contention that we are tempted and entitled to raise this question because authority has vanished from the modern world. Since we can no longer fall back upon authentic and undisputable experience common to all, the very term has become clouded by controversy and confusion. Little about its nature appears self-evident or even comprehensible to everybody, except that the political scientist may still remember that this concept was once fundamental to political

theory, or that most will agree that a constant, ever-widening and deepening crisis of authority has accompanied the development of the modern world in our century.<sup>4</sup>

So, authority is a thing of the past. This brief formula captures both what is perhaps the most essential feature of authority, and the reason for its epistemological unavailability. This unavailability or opacity of authority is a constant, and yet also what underwrites its profound transformation in modernity. Authority and tradition, I argue, form a hermeneutical circle, which, in one way, is precisely what had made authority such an elusive concept, and, in another way, all there is to know about both terms. Let us begin with the modern, epistemological barrier: definitions of authority rely on a concept of tradition, whereas definitions of tradition rely on a concept of authority. We understand tradition to be that form of life in which authority is, or was, in full sway, and authority, as a mode of power that relies on tradition for its legitimacy. This is why “traditional” societies are the original object of anthropology, what fascinated moderns about them – authority at its purest is the authority of a life form, of the unwritten rules of society, without recourse to grand mechanisms of control and enforcement such as the law and state bureaucracy. What, in the absence of modern mechanisms of power, holds such societies in order?<sup>5</sup>

The famous, fraught coupling of power and authority should be situated here: whatever else we might understand by authority, it is both inherently linked, and yet distinguished appositionally, from the coercive use of power. Can we conceive of an efficacy that is different in kind from the compulsory action of one body on another? This is indeed the problem raised by Arendt. Authority is eclipsed, for us, because we find it next to impossible to think of such a modality of power, a power which is not measured by its actualization. Its effectiveness is increased in direct proportion to its remaining virtuality. What makes authority difficult to grasp is precisely its strange, indirect presence. Since authority is unapproachable, inaccessible, we might get a better understanding of Arendt’s interpretation of it if we follow her strategy, and approach it through its very disappearance, by means of that which eclipses it. Significantly, Arendt views the rise of the functional view of society as the other side of the decline of authority.<sup>6</sup>

For Arendt, the fact that we can speak of a function of authority already means that it is utterly lost to us. Although Arendt doesn’t quite spell it out, we may offer several different ways in which authority as it emerges from her essay is the obverse of the functional:

1. If authority is lost once we can speak of it as a function, this is because authority “functions” to the extent that it is taken for granted, presupposed, operative in so far as it forms the very background of our reality. “The groundwork” of the world, as Arendt puts it.<sup>7</sup> It is to be taken on trust,

implicitly. To view it as a function is the first sign of its malfunctioning, so to speak, its loss of immediacy and transparency. If authority cannot be taken for granted, it cannot be taken at all. In this sense, authority is necessarily veiled, we are not to see behind its curtain. Recall the famous quote attributed to Bismarck, according to which laws and sausages are two things the public should not be made aware of their process of production. The function of authority is mysterious, indeed, the mystery as to its functioning is the essential ingredient of its unique functionality. This is one way of understanding the importance of ceremony, or what Walter Benjamin called “Cult Value” for traditional authority.<sup>8</sup> And hence the appearance of authority via the medium of crisis – it only comes to view when things are not quite right, where there is a significant enough disturbance to the “smooth running” of things. As Agamben notes, the authority of the senate was invoked, in Roman law, in the “interregnum”, in the time between one established, or posited order, and the next, in the vacuum of power.<sup>9</sup>

2. Authority does not perform a function. It is profoundly anti-instrumental and cannot be viewed as a means to an end. We know this, although we hardly understand it – authority is not something to be executed, realized, but a virtual presence that accompanies power, giving it symbolic support, or withholding it. It ceremoniously augments acts and institutions by sanctioning them, permitting them a symbolic entrance into the space of possibility.<sup>10</sup> Authority is not something to be enforced, it does not hinge on its realized effects, it is – “more than advice, less than command” as the famous quote from Mommsen describes it. Authority is superfluous, signatorial, and yet, as such – essential.

3. Authority is substantial, it attaches itself to concrete individuals – a person, a tradition. It is never, as Arendt emphasizes, “authority in general”. It is rooted or seeks to be so, by no means something transferrable and translatable the way a function is. Put in problematic functional terms, it is precisely what endows a person, an institution or an activity with substance, a dimension of depth, gravity, the density of a substance.

4. Authority belongs to a substantial We, a pre-individual sense of community, of commitment to our way of life. To view it as a function is to view things from outside, as it were, from a sociological, scientific point of view, which can only conceive of society as a functional construct. Authority, we have already hinted, is directly linked to the mysterious way in which I am inscribed into a given community. It is a view from within a medium of tradition. Hence, Arendt’s turn to the particular history she sees herself an heir to, the history of western political thought. This is also why, on her account, when authority is intact, it brings together freedom and hierarchy. Properly authorized, things are in their right place, so to speak. There is an accepted hierarchy, a sacred order. Hierarchy and freedom

coincide, in so far as I can see my concrete freedom as inseparable from the totality to which I belong. It is, say, as a father that I realize myself, as a son and a citizen of my country, as opposed to a liberal, formal-legal abstraction. It is an order in which differences, between the young and the old, between men and women, between nobles and serfs, have to be accepted and reinforced.

5. Authority is paradigmatic. It belongs to an order in which the singular is not poised as the opposite of the general rule, but as its expression or manifestation. The link between Authority and Charisma has to do with this feature.<sup>11</sup> Authority is not an office, a role – a function – that can be fulfilled. Terms like a position of authority, or “the authorities”, betray the extent to which we can only understand authority in functional terms. The mystery raised by Lorraine Daston as to the now lost meaning of paradigm as rule, and not as its opposition,<sup>12</sup> is not merely analogous to the eclipse of authority, but belongs to one and the same constellation. As emerges from Daston’s study of rules, the capacities associated with learning from example (discretion) are inseparable from structures of authority, such as monasteries.<sup>13</sup> To learn the lessons of the paradigmatic exemplar is the other side of the coin, that could also be described as learning to respect authorities. Both aspects belong to, depend on, and reinforce a medium of tradition.

6. Finally, authority is grounded in the law in so far as it is both given and transcendent, a medium in which society is constituted rather than a constituted, man-made order. This is what distinguishes it from tyranny, according to Arendt:

“...even the most draconic authoritarian government is bound by laws. Its acts are tested by a code which was made either not by man at all, as in the case of the law of nature or God’s commandments or the platonic ideas, or at least not by those actually in power. The source of authority in authoritarian government is always a force external and superior to its own power; it is always this source, this external force which transcends the political realm, from which authorities derive their “authority”, that is, their legitimacy, and against which their power can be checked.”<sup>14</sup>

The law is operative in an authoritarian structure, in so far as it is precisely not a function anyone can master, that is, precisely in so far as the law has no human author, and no human can place himself in the position of its author.

Arendt seems to share a widespread narrative regarding the historical process: as technical rationality becomes more and more prevalent, authority slides out of sight. Power, and indeed violence, come to the front. In this, Arendt is representative of a much more prevalent set of

assumptions regarding the modernization of power, in which otherwise very different theorists and thinkers, such as Marx, Adorno, Heidegger, Foucault and Agamben all partake, namely the assumption that modernization speaks to the withering significance of authority. What takes the role of authority are abstract structures and dynamics of power. Žižek's theoretical framework allows us to take into account the ways in which modernization doesn't simply leave authority behind, but rather, maintains it precisely as something left behind, as a remainder, a dirty little secret.

### **Unwritten Rules: Authority, Ideology, Transgression**

As a rule, the unwritten law makes its appearance in the philosophical canon fleetingly, in critical, illuminating points of the philosophical text, never to be explicitly defined. Alongside Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche and Benjamin, Žižek's development of the topic has proven indispensable. Žižek's crucial development of the topic lies in his account of the obscene support of "normal" social life. Authority, at its most innocent, is already transgressive. He writes:

When does one belong to a community? The difference concerns the netherworld of unwritten obscene rules which regulate the "inherent transgression" of the community, the way we are allowed/expected to violate its explicit rules. This is why the subject who closely follows the explicit rules of the community will never be accepted by its members as "one of us": he or she does not participate in the transgressive rituals which actually keep this community together, and society, as opposed to community, is a collective which can dispense with this set of unwritten rules – since this is impossible, there is no society without community.<sup>15</sup>

As in the constitution of the individual mind, relying on his famed joint reading of Lacan and Hegel, the constitution of reality according to Žižek relies on a primordially lost bit of the real, so in social reality, what Hegel would call ethical substance, and others form of life, at the level of the groundwork of the world, as Arendt put it, the set of implicit rules that govern everyday reality in a given social group, relies, on Žižek's account, on a unique kind of meta-rule, governing which rules are respected and obeyed and which are transgressed. In this, the unwritten rules of a given society symbolize the constitutive crime upon which order is formed, the stain of illegitimacy that casts its shadow on legitimate rule. The "big" secret of the illegitimacy of legitimate rule is, or perhaps, simply, its constructed, artificial nature, is, in Žižek's account, an open secret, something directly enjoyed by members of a given community, indeed, it is what creates a sense of naturalization, so to speak, why, as he puts it, there is no society without community.

In the classical modality of authority, the figure of authority, say the king, gives body (figure) to the unwritten law that authorizes him; he is not its source. In his *Seminar II*, Lacan gives this dimension of the “the law in so far as it is not understood” (in his words) a psychoanalytic name: censorship.

By definition, no one is taken to be ignorant of the law, but it is never understood, for no one can grasp it in its entirety. The primitive who is caught up in the laws of kinship, of alliance, of the exchange of women, never has, even if he is very learned, a complete vision of what it is in this totality of the law that has a hold over him... That is censorship. It is the law in so far it is not understood.<sup>16</sup>

Lacan’s point about censorship is subtle and can be easily missed. Censorship turns an impossibility into a prohibition. The law has an unknowable, unwritten dimension. In order to become full subjects of the law, censorship forbids us from admitting something everybody knows all too well. In this way, censorship “symbolizes,” by means of prohibition, what is structurally impossible in the law. What is untotalizable about the law, its unsayable, unknowable dimension—our very immersion in it, the way we are inscribed in it—is totalized by isolating special well-known things and making them forbidden to discourse. This is one way in which to understand the strange feature of “taboo,” noted by Freud, its reference to both the prohibited, terrifying thing and the prohibition itself.<sup>17</sup> By making something “taboo,” we isolate areas of discourse which we are to circumvent, so as not to encounter head on what, in discourse, is for us thinglike, nondiscursive in its effect—sheer opacity.

Lacan makes his point by means of a rather humoristic—and strangely current—example, in which the law forbids us from saying that the king of England is an idiot under penalty of death by beheading.

If it is forbidden to say that the king of England is an idiot, under pain of having one’s head cut off, one will not say it, and in consequence of this sole fact, one will be led into not saying a great many other things—that is to say, everything which reveals the glaring reality that the king of England is an idiot. ... The subject of the king of England has many reasons for wanting to express things which have a most direct relation with the fact that the king of England is an idiot. Let us say it passes into his dreams ... the subject dreams that he has his head cut off.<sup>18</sup>

Censorship forbids us, that is, from making explicit what everybody knows but can only be alluded to, hinted at, expressed indirectly, a driver of subtle subversion – that, underneath the crown, there is a human being just like us, more or less an idiot. He is merely fulfilling a function. To make the mechanics of authority explicit is tantamount to sacrilege – it points

out the constructed, arbitrary structure of rule. To admit this is taboo. Making public what everybody knows involves a strange “reflective” twist. It transforms what “everybody knows” into something which “everybody knows that everybody knows.” It discloses an open secret. From this point on, you may go on ignoring it, but you are, as it were, explicitly implicated in the act of censorship. The subject of such open secrets is a figure of the “big other” dubbed by Slavoj Žižek the other supposed to believe, the subject whose innocence must be protected. To bypass censorship is to make the “innocent” other aware of what everybody else already knows.

So where are we now? Everyone is allowed, indeed incited, to say that the king of England is an idiot. It even seems to be inscribed into the ceremony of coronation—in a video that went viral, we all had to watch Charles III, during a signing ceremony, get annoyed at a pen, like him failing to fulfill its one and only function—to produce a signature!<sup>19</sup> We are ceremoniously anticeremonial. Furthermore, we now have kings, authority figures, that ceaselessly display their idiocy, making themselves utterly immune from such ridicule. Not only immune—the more they are mocked, the stronger they seem to get. Has censorship been lifted? Are we no longer under the influence of the unwritten law, the law insofar as it is not understood? Does it no longer have a hold on us?

What interests Lacan in censorship is its productive function. The forbidden statement incites much psychic activity in the subjects of this king of England, and censorship appears by means of their dreams: being unable to say that the king is an idiot, the subject dreams that he has his head cut off. Censorship is productive of fantasies in which we may not directly fulfill the wish of lifting the censorship, say by dreaming that we are dancing and cursing on the king’s grave, but rather in which we are punished for having thus transgressively wished. The transgressive wish itself, mind you, appears only indirectly, implicit in our punishment. Today we can mock the king, the king makes a mockery of himself, but we still dream—now more than ever—that our heads have been cut off. Our fantasy of being seized by blind mechanisms of power, being headless subjects, is the clearest sign that censorship is more powerful than ever at the very moment it seems to have disappeared. It is within this dream that we need to search for what could be called the censorship of censorship.

There is a crucial lesson here as to the nature and history of the unwritten law. As Žižek notes, in twentieth-century totalitarianism we witness an extra twist in this scheme: more than any forbidden content, what must never be avowed is the prohibition itself.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, censorship is always “self-censorship,” it must always conceal its own act. However, if this is indeed a structural feature of the unwritten law – ingrained in the very fact of its being unwritten – can we speak of significant historical changes? Paradoxical as this must sound, we might detect a general trajectory, in which the unwritten law becomes increasingly more unwritten, becoming, as it were, more and more itself, more and more fully transparent,

and more and more present in its very transparency, the more everything is made explicit and comes into the open. Coming back to Žižek's basic insight regarding the inherent transgression of a community, how are to account for what seems like increasingly more pathological structures? If such transgressiveness is the norm, how are we then to account for more acutely "pathological" societal structures, such as "totalitarianism"?

Commenting on Hitler's many allusions, throughout his *Mein Kampf* to the manipulation of the masses, Žižek issues a warning from drawing the conclusion that we should view Hitler as a "cynical" manipulator.

[N]otwithstanding his awareness of manipulation, Hitler basically believed in its results. For example, he knows that the image of the Jew as enemy who takes "all the threads in his hands" is only a means by which to channel the aggressive energy of the masses, to frustrate its radicalization in the direction of the class struggle, and so on, yet, at the same time, he "really believes" that the Jews are the primordial enemy. The uncanny dimension of this split, of this simultaneous coexistence of the ultimate cynicism and ultimate fanaticism, is what we avoid as soon as we interpret it as the cynicism of manipulation – as soon as we see the moment of truth only in the manipulation (the popular concept of the Nazis as heedless cynical authority who manipulate everything); this avoidance enables us to reduce the Nazi subject to the traditional utilitarian-egotistic bourgeois subject.<sup>21</sup>

Challenging the simple opposition between cynicism and fanaticism is necessary not only as an empirical analysis of past iterations of totalitarianism, but also on more theoretical grounds. What arises out of Žižek's account is the way in which the position of disillusioned knowledge not only does not amount to simple, level-headed sobriety, nor to render authority simply superfluous, but indeed underpins the most ferocious ideological fervor. The stance of objective knowledge can, and has been enlisted for complex dynamics of self-delusion and mass exploitation, even annihilation.

In a few highly condensed pages that follow, Žižek goes on to offer a typology of modalities of authority, based on his reading of Octavo Manoni's formulations of disavowal, laying emphasis on its variations. On Manoni's account, while disavowal speaks to the unique character of the perverse relation to symbolic castration, we have an everyday experience of it, in the common expression "I know full well, but nonetheless".<sup>22</sup> The basic attitude towards authority is situated according to Žižek in the gap, afforded by disavowal, between (real) knowledge and (symbolic) belief. That is, the traumatic truth is not repressed, or denied, but rather recognized, explicitly, yet disavowed, isn't allowed to impact the belief.

Žižek distinguishes between traditional disavowal, which establishes the "mystique of the institution", endowing the very symbolic mask with efficacy, manipulative authority, and totalitarian authority:

Traditional authority is based on what we could call the Mystique of the institution. Authority bases its charismatic power on symbolic ritual, on the form of the institution as such. The king, the judge, the president, and so on, can be personally dishonest, rotten, but when they adopt the insignia of authority, they experience a kind of mystic transubstantiation...the second mode corresponds to what might be called manipulative authority: authority which is no longer based on the mystique of the institution – on the performative power of symbolic ritual – but directly on the manipulation of its subjects. ... the basic attitude of manipulative authority is consequently cynical... the cynic, from the fact that “the other does not exist” that the other (the symbolic order) is only a fiction, erroneously concludes that the other does not function, is not effectual...The third mode, fetishism strictu sense, would be the matrix of totalitarian authority: the point is no longer that the other (ordinary people) would be deceived manipulatively but that we are ourselves those who – although we know very well” that we are people like others at the same time consider ourselves to be “people of a special mold, made of special stuff” – as individual we participate in the fetish of the object-party, direct embodiment of the will of history.<sup>23</sup>

Symbolic fictions do not lose their effective hold on us once we perceive them for what they are, “mere’ fictions.” On the contrary, we are rendered more powerless in the face of them. In the first modality, ritual utilizes a traumatic encounter with deceit and cruelty, in order to force an internalization, a way in which the very encounter with the real is codified into the necessity to keep the way of life, maintain the sanctity of the mask. We might not believe in the fiction, but precisely because of that, we come to see ourselves as responsible to pass it on, it augments it, as it were, just as Arendt understood authority’s strange functioning. In the second modality, which Žižek expands on in reference to Manoni’s interpretation of Casanova falling into his own circle of deceit, a fiction, now only to be understood as a manipulative lie, is experienced directly as traumatic when realized, with no possible sublimation. Knowledge here functions on another level, recording, and thereby disregarding, the very structure of disavowal.<sup>24</sup> With Totalitarianism, the “nonetheless” is transformed into a “just because”. It is no longer despite evidence to the contrary, but directly because of it, that the ultimate truth is afforded even more urgency.

The breach between cynicism and totalitarian logic can be well illustrated by the different attitude to the experience that “the emperor has no clothes” a variation on this theme is typical cynical wisdom: phrases about values honor, honesty, are all empty words, they serve only to deceive the suckers, what counts is only the Real” (money, power, influence) the cynic overlooks here that we are

naked only beneath our clothes: a cynical kind of demystification is itself still all too naïve in that it fails to notice how the “naked real” is sustained in the symbolic fiction. The totalitarian, too, does not believe in the symbolic fiction, in his version of the emperor’s clothes. He knows very well that the emperor is naked (in the case of the communist totalitarian, that the system is actually corrupt, that talk about socialist democracy is just empty verbiage, and so on). Yet in contrast to traditional authority, what he adds is not “but nevertheless” but “just because”: just because the emperor is naked we must hold together the more, work for the good, our cause is all the more necessary.<sup>25</sup>

Why and how is the cynical avowal of reality transformed, in totalitarian ideology, into fanatic zeal? Because in classical totalitarian logic, truth has a unique performative dimension, having to do with the fetishist role. It is because fetishism *strictu sensu* knows that the other is lacking, that he can serve as its instrument.

There is a surprising kinship on this point between Žižek’s analysis and Arendt’s classical study of totalitarianism. As Arendt closes her book, she notes that we should expect the new form of government she labels totalitarianism, like the old ones, to remain with us. Furthermore, the logical space in which Arendt situated totalitarianism was the same logical space left vacant, so to speak, by the decline of traditional authority. For Arendt, totalitarianism was neither tyranny—“the rule of one against all”—nor democracy, the rule of the many, but a strange mixture of both. For her, the lack of rational goals in totalitarian regimes, their unique, shocking brand of “madness,” is ultimately explained by ideology.

Instead of saying that totalitarian government is unprecedented, we could also say that it has exploded the very alternative on which all definitions of the essence of governments have been based in political philosophy, that is the alternative between lawful and lawless government, between arbitrary and legitimate power. It defies, it is true, all positive laws. ... But it operates neither without the guidance of law nor is it arbitrary, for it claims to strictly obey those laws of Nature or of History from which all positive laws always have been supposed to spring. It is the monstrous, yet seemingly unanswerable claim of totalitarian rule that, far from being “lawless,” it goes to the sources of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation, that far from being arbitrary it is more obedient to those suprahuman forces than any government ever was before, and that far from wielding its power in the interest of one man, it is quite prepared to sacrifice everybody’s vital immediate interests to the execution of what it assumes to be the law of History or the law of Nature.<sup>26</sup>

Let us quickly contrast this description to the manner in which, in her essay on authority, Arendt describes the transcendence of the source of legitimacy. In traditional authoritarian rule, the source of authority always lies somewhere beyond the power of rulers. Let us just note how central this analysis is to Arendt's overall description of twentieth-century totalitarianism. Many of the peculiarities of totalitarianism as she describes them find their rationale in this account of the merger of lawlessness and lawfulness which lies at the heart of totalitarian ideology, including its strange relation with the truth. Since the ultimate truth served by totalitarians is an ironclad logic of *movement*, its "truth" is profoundly performative. To cite the example used by Arendt, the claim made by the Soviet regime in the 1930s that only Moscow has an underground train—on its face, patently absurd and easily disproved—is true from the perspective of the fulfilled History, in which Moscow has conquered, defeated, and destroyed all the infrastructure of its enemies. Call it an eventual truth. It is in serving as instruments of the "big other" of history (communist totalitarianism) or nature (racism, National Socialism) that a different, more metaphysical terrain of truth is being served, a truth to be realized by the political movement. In such an ideological constellation, the unwritten law in which positive law is grounded becomes itself the object of special, higher knowledge, a higher terrain of truth above mundane factuality. What is mobilized are the laws governing movement, the laws of becoming, and so the knowledge in question is "secularized" apocalyptic knowledge, the knowledge of things to come. Such knowledge is performative in a special, millenarian sense—knowing what is to come, we are charged with the task of bringing it about. It is the notion of such a servile position in regard to a higher task that seems to stand in the strongest contrast with contemporary authoritarian figures, who seem to be brazen, shamelessly self-interested, indulging in hedonistic pleasures. Their capacity to transgress the unwritten rules that apply to other politicians (and ordinary citizens) is one of their most striking features.

### **In Search of a Limit: New Authoritarianism and Substanceless Transgression**

Let us now briefly examine the singularity of the new model of authority in relation to the classic concept of charisma, honing in on its relation to the unwritten law. Max Weber writes about the hostile attitude of the charismatic leader toward the legal system:

Genuine charismatic domination, therefore, knows of no abstract legal codes and statutes and of no "formal" way of adjudication. Its "objective" law emanates concretely from the highly personal experience of heavenly grace and from the god-like strength of the hero. Charismatic domination means a rejection of all ties to any external

order in favor of the exclusive glorification of the genuine mentality of the prophet and hero. Hence, its attitude is revolutionary and transvalues everything; it makes a sovereign break with all traditional or rational norms: “It is written, but I say unto you.”<sup>27</sup>

The final phrase of this excerpt is highly significant for our investigation of the uniqueness of new authoritarianism. “It is written, but I say unto you” is the basic formula Jesus uses to confer authority upon himself in the Sermon on the Mount as the bearer of the new word of God that overrules established law. This is not the place to discuss the influence of Christian political theology on Weber’s thought, but it is important to note this allusion at a moment when present political reality forces us to revise and update social theory. Weber develops his notion of charismatic power by drawing on the work of Sohm on the power of the church, as distinguished from the enforceable power of the state. This is what we know, from our discussion of Arendt, as authority. In any case, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus brings to its culmination a critical process with a rich history: censuring existing law in the name of the unwritten law that underpins it and allows for its critique. In the case of Jesus, the unwritten law in question is divine law, but what matters to us is that historically speaking, very disparate categories of unwritten law, such as custom or tradition, natural law, and divine law can all be used for the same purpose—a grounded and thorough critique of the existing order. Jesus wishes to replace the letter of the law with the spirit of the law, which he is uniquely qualified to put into words. By identifying himself directly with the unwritten law, Jesus establishes a radical model of revolutionary-charismatic criticism. We might also note that Arendt sees twentieth-century totalitarianism as an apex of this tradition: totalitarian movements transcend lawfulness and lawlessness as they see themselves as servants of the unwritten law of movement, a law of becoming underlying the stability of all positive law.

Despite the frequent use by Trump and his ilk of the accusatory slogan “fake news” to mean “don’t believe them, I am the only one you should believe,” it is hard to attribute anything close to Jesus’s sense of mission to the charismatic leaders of the new right. Their goal is not to give expression to the essence of the law hidden behind the language of the law, but to reveal the essence of the unwritten as such. Their message, when all is said and done, is not “so it is written, but I say unto you,” but “this is the unwritten; here, let me show it to you.” The violation of unwritten rules is an act of exposure. The new political power’s recourse to obscene behavior as a means of mobilizing support should direct our attention, therefore, in the first instance to the importance of the unwritten—or tacit—nature of social ethical rules. For what captivates those watching the rise of this political power, whether in horror or admiration, is how politicians of the new breed bring the tacit dimension of social life,

the rules we normally obey without being able to formulate them, to light by violating those same rules. Contrary to written law, the unwritten nature of these rules imbues them with an inherent mystery. It would seem that these rules become tangible only when they are violated, and it is this newfound tangibility that surrounds politicians of the new breed with a unique aura, as proof of their mysterious social clout.

What is it then that transgressive authority figures are figures, or symptoms of? Transgression here is no longer the support of authority, but also directly the message. Just consider how in the extremely consequential 2024 election for US presidency, we witnessed a strange imbalance: whereas for Biden, the issue of his mental competence to rule at his advanced age seems crucial, his gaffs and lapses highly detrimental for his chances of reelection, the same doesn't seem to apply for Trump, only 4 years his junior, and no less prone to gaffs and lapses. While this is certainly unfair, it is not devoid of rationale. Indeed, part of what makes this election so dramatic and consequential is the way in which in it, two standards of rule come to a clash. Both candidates are truly held to different standards: Biden is measured by his ability to maintain the figure of the competent "dad" who knows best, that is, someone who approximates, to the best of his abilities, an ideal of better knowledge, whereas Trump answers to a much more elusive standard, the standard of "the worst", measured by his capacity to display that he knows something of the worst, his capacity, as it were, to put us in touch with the limit. Indeed, the imbalance in question has to do with a unique feature of the limit: limits cannot be reached, but they can be crossed. Crossing a limit by being "the worst", transgressing all norms, can give us a sense of being in touch with something the mere approximation of a standard cannot.

While in their transgressivity new authoritarian leaders recall Freud's myth of the primal father, they should not be taken as direct reincarnations of what is oldest. That is not how the repressed returns. After all, the primal father is a myth, expressing the primordially of authority as we know it, as a set of unwritten rules which normally go unquestioned, rules inscribed in our very inhibitions and taboos. It expresses an unrest which belongs to our "second nature", an uneasiness towards the human condition. As a myth, the tale of the primal, uncastrated father expresses a condition, a limit which determines our field of possibility, by allowing within the frame of our imagination for a figuration of what exceeds it, the possibility excluded from our condition, or the impossible. The possibility of a life unbound by rules. What Freud expressed in the form of a myth, a story of brothers whose promiscuous father of the hoard, sexually in possession of all the females, evokes such resentment and jealousy in them that they conspire to unite in rebellion against him, murder him, and then proceed to impose on themselves the sexual prohibitions from which the dead father is now the only one exempted, can be expressed by the pithy Lacanian formula "father... or worse" (*père ou pire*). The myth and the

formula alike express the understanding that in becoming speaking beings, it is as *if* we have opted for the discontent entailed with being subject to rules from which a stain of arbitrariness cannot be entirely removed (we cannot, as it were, give grounds to that which grounds us, hence the nagging notion of our ground or condition as resulting from some primal, mythical choice), but have thereby overcome something worse, one image of which is the violent rule of the arbitrary.

The primal father is a figurative mode of appearance of the worst, the threat lurking behind the impossible alternative for symbolic castration, the psychoanalytic name for the drama of limits. Far from being mythical figures of libidinal freedom from rules and inhibitions, offering us perhaps a liberating path towards the same, fathers who know worst are rather a distorted outlet for us to collectively experience primal, symbolic castration. What we lack all knowledge of, what we can only represent in mythical or formulaic form, is granted a strange new positivity in them. In tarrying with the worst they seemingly allow us access to something constitutive of our subjectivity. They bring about in a forceful manner the primal experience of limits by routinely transgressing them. What we can only construe as a forced choice constitutive of subjectivity, that is, a choice the result of which we are, not one we have taken, a choice detectable in what determines us, is dramatically put forward through such figures as a real choice that lies ahead of us, yet to be determined. As those who “know worst”, they allow us a strangely positive experience of the worst averted by castration. Through them, we can experience “the worst” - a notion of limit, something we never can experientially reach - as an object of possible knowledge. The “worst” assumes the shape of an option, something which may or may not be opted for. Limits seem to lose the transparency of the frame and enter into the picture.

In this sense, the rule of the worst speaks to something broader than an emerging form of government. It speaks to a prevailing mood of our time. If ours is the “darkest timeline”, as the popular internet meme goes, referring to the multi-verse theory as imagined by comic books and movies, it is so in a very precise, if paradoxical sense: It is the worst possible world precisely in that it could be worse. Indeed, it is getting worse. Bad as things get, we can trust one thing: there is worse still to come. If the climate crisis is the process in which our natural environment, the earth, is gradually turning into a hellscape, degree after degree, the rule of the worst is the political form in which we gradually transform our societies into a hellscape. In both cases, the very fact that things can, and in all likelihood will, get worse, strangely helps maintain us in the grip of what ought to be averted at all costs. Like the proverbial boiling frog, we can continue saying, “it’s not so bad, could be worse”, until we can’t. Where’s the limit, the absolute worst? Under the rule of the worst, we do not receive a clear answer to that question, but we are making the question itself omnipresent, coloring the entire horizon. What will he do next?

Will that be the end of it? What natural disasters still await us, and which will be the “big one”, after which everything changes forever? Where, in short, is the limit?

And yet, while more than merely analogous, the comparison between the climate crisis and the political one does not yield an identity. For in the political field, we are directly engaged and active, many of us enthralled, eagerly anticipating the increase in chaos, others terrified by it. It is in the political field that a new sense of “realism” is emerging most distinctly, and a new modality of the “passion for the real” along with it.

### **Maddening: War on the Limits**

The same dreadful experimentation with limits, sheds light on some of the perplexities pertaining to war in our time. There is a peculiar apocalyptic streak to the current war, and not just in the terrifying, immediate sense of the prospect of a war that will effectively end all wars—and with them the entire race. By an apocalyptic element, what I have in mind is rather the following: war, which is a negative entity to begin with – war, in short, is the realization of contradiction, it is where we experience the unthinkable – becomes through history ‘conscious of itself’, meaning that its negative, contradictory nature gradually emerges onto the surface.<sup>28</sup> The contradictions inherent in war are being subsumed by the war-discourse, and duplicated in it.

The current global struggle for hegemony is a seething crucible of adversities, whose potential overheating effectively means mass annihilation. It is a battle fought in constant equivocation between the perpetual war on terrorism – a 20th century legacy, of an endless war, and the global or world war – another legacy of the 20th century, this time of spatially boundless war – in an ever more rapid approach towards the ultimate terminus: the absolute, final war, the final legacy of the 20th century, a war unlimited in scope of destruction. We are dreaded by the prospect of a third world war, which many of us declare to already be taking place. I take this very ambiguity—whether we are in the midst or on the brink of world war—to be the crucial point. It is a war on the precipice. A war that escalates piecemeal, all but imperceptibly, as if in search of a boiling point, a point where water finally evaporates. Our war ridden epoch is, in that sense, an epoch of overt, self-conscious contradiction: we are fighting, both explicitly and directly, for the cause of preventing or containing a graver war—the very one we seem to be getting closer to with each day of fighting. If war in general, as I argued, is a limit condition, the war taking shape in front of our eyes is a war on limits, continuously, and self-consciously raising the question: what, if any, are the limits of war?

Let me and try and make this point a little more concrete. We hear much talk today of proxy wars. This can become useful if we take it that the proxy is not only a war fought by proxies, keeping bigger powers from

directly engaging in warfare and playing a supportive role, but if we also understand in proxy war something like quasi war, or war by approximation, a very real war that is, at the same time, “merely” an approximation of a bigger war. These are wars that are already taking place, wreaking havoc, but they are conceived as a way to avoid a bigger, even more consequential confrontation. A proxy war then would need to be understood as both relying on and eroding the distinction between an actual war and a potential one. Alluding to the infamous name given to the above-mentioned incorporation of Kant’s outlook on war<sup>29</sup> into the rationale of the Cold War, MAD, the acronym for mutually assured destruction, we can speak today of a maddening war, in the dual sense that it drives those of us trying to make sense of it crazy, but also that it does so precisely by making mutually assured destruction, the condition to be avoided at all costs, into a verb, into something we keep approximating in the name of avoiding it.<sup>30</sup>

In this constellation, it is not only the geographical distinction between local, regional, and global conflict, the geographical limits of war that are endangered. For we are dealing with wars that threaten to spill over, and seem more and more difficult to contain spatially, but even more fundamentally, we witness a war on the precipice, on the edge, a war that is continuously pushing towards a wider, even less containable conflict. Spilling over doesn’t only mean involving more parties in direct conflict, but also, expanding the levels of violence and destruction, pushing ever more closely towards complete mass destruction. So we have the spatial limits, and the scope of war being expanded, pushed to the brink. We also have wars with no end in sight, pushing against the “normal” passage into some kind of new political arrangement.

Further, in war today, an “irrational” willingness to sacrifice life, is becoming integrated into the logic of deterrence, supposedly grounded in the safeguarding of life. We witness a strange blending of the two rivaling sides in Hegel’s mythical struggle to the death: clinging to prestige, showing oneself willing to sacrifice life for some higher freedom, is presented as an essential ingredient of deterrence. The other side must know that we are, to some extent, crazy and unpredictable, untethered to our interests of survival and prosperity. That is the only way for us to win, namely, to survive and one day perhaps to prosper. And so clinging to honor and clinging to life become interlocked.

When I say that the negativity of war is being integrated into the very practice and discourse of contemporary war, so as not to say logic, I can think of no more horrifying example than my own country. In a new book, Bob Woodward quotes president Biden scolding prime minister Netanyahu, yelling at him “you have no strategy.” I cannot avoid the terrifying thought that in this age of the “self-conscious”, or maddening war, having no strategy functions effectively as a sort of strategy. Certainly, Netanyahu’s infamous avoidance of any settlement, his final non-solution so to

speak, has turned Bartleby's famous "I prefer not to" into a new kind of state power. By avoiding an end to the war, Netanyahu is getting closer and closer to shaping the war he wants: A civilizational struggle against the enemies of "the west", and a sidestepping of the very local, and traumatic conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, which has reached genocidal proportions.

In postponing an end to the war, Netanyahu has also found a new and surprising way to remain in power, which goes well beyond the Hobbesian Paradigm, and even its much more archaic roots, which we can find in Aeschylus's *Eumenides*. We have a deep-rooted conception according to which civilian unity under the rule of law is the perquisite for war against foreign enemies. Famously for Hobbes, failing to provide security against foreign enemies is the one clear case of the violation of the pact between the populace and the sovereign, rendering the legitimacy of sovereignty, null and void. In today's maddening reality, prolonging war indefinitely has become a strategy to avoid the consequences of such dramatic, absolute failures of the sovereign pact, and war is waged indefinitely, not in order to keep the populace united under a shared goal, but impotent, torn between the necessity to fight foreign threats and the sense of utter powerlessness to remove a failed government. In today's constellation, where civil society is often in direct clash with state power, revisiting Hegel's insight about the complicated triangulation in modernity of family, civil society, and state becomes an urgent task. If contemporary war is indeed a war on limits, perhaps ending a war entails the ability to draw a line, to find the way to establish a limit from within, so as to free ourselves, at least, from the torturing question: where is the limit? The limit is not out there to be discovered, but right here, namely, wherever we manage to draw it.

### **From War to Worst: What in War is More than War itself**

Why is it then, that it seems harder than ever to draw limits? In Israel today, war, a horrid reality in and of itself, has come to serve as a mask for something worse. What can be worse than war? It is the inherent perversion of war, which has come to be known by the name genocide. Genocide, let me be clear, is very much a reality. And yet, it is poorly conceived. It seems criminal to offer some initial remarks on this heaviest of topics, but also an inescapable duty. For the conceptual issue here is not a mere theoretical nicety. It is not only that talking about war, is a way not to talk about genocide. Prolonging the reality of war has become a way to make the most recorded and reported crime against humanity in contemporary history practically invisible to some of its perpetrators.

In Israel today, genocidal violence against Gazans, and more and more, West Bank Palestinians, is normalized under the guise of war. "There are no innocents in Gaza", is, according to a recent poll, a state-

ment 64 percent of Israelis identify with. Since all Gazans are Hamas, and Hamas has proven its determination to exterminate all Jews in Israel (and beyond), so goes the reasoning, a war of annihilation has become inescapable, it's either us or them. It is striking that in this atmosphere, where politicians have publicly made genocidal statements, making what is usually the difficult legal exercise, the establishment of intent, a foregone conclusion, genocide must be denied. The attitude many Israelis have adopted towards the Gaza genocide is something like this: 1. Palestinians deserve to be annihilated (there are no innocents in Gaza). 2. Anybody else would be, and has been in similar situations, even more recklessly violent towards them and 3. there is no genocide. In this, Israelis repeat the oddity of neo-Nazi holocaust denial.<sup>31</sup> Why, if annihilation is legitimate, desirable even, would you deny its reality?

We see here yet another testament that, while taboos might have lost their efficiency in preventing the horrible act, that does not amount to them being simply irrelevant or impotent. We see today in Israel that genocide can be advocated, debated against in social media, but not admitted. No one can first-personally stand behind this explicit intent.

What then is genocide? What is the political ontology that singles it out as a violent phenomenon? We could say that genocide is murder in the plural: it is composed of a myriad of acts, some horrid on their own, some in of small consequence (stopping one truck from supplying food, for instance). It is directed to the many, a group, but more significantly, it is carried out by a collective of a special kind. It is a "we" with no "I," no one to assume responsibility first-personally. Genocide is what is in war more than itself. If war can be understood as a communication by means of power, the imposition of my will on the other, as advocated in the realistic approach heralded by von Clausewitz, it can only achieve its end, find resolution, when annihilation, the destruction of the enemy is foreclosed. When it remains a threat, an unrealized potential.

Genocide is a horrible totality that doesn't coalesce, that has the structure and dynamics of a bad infinity, the infinitization of violence. It is not only the destruction of what is genetic, productive, namely, lives and the conditions of life, but it is the becoming genetic, assuming the shape of production, of destruction itself. In every image of the destruction of Gaza, we can see this surplus of destruction, its need for infinite production. Genocide opens up a black hole, which must swallow everything. We can imagine what would the Nazis do had they managed to get all the Jews? Certainly, they would have had to expand the category, so they could continue with the extermination. Here too, we find the problematic effect of *déjà vu*, the immediate identification of contemporary horrors with past ones. Of course, we should compare, but comparing means learning both from what is similar, and what is different. War serves as a mask, covering up genocide, in the very (constrained and contained) chaos it generates. The trains that transported the masses condemned to the

extermination factories were a symbol of efficiency and precision, standardization, the core technology of the industrial age. We have discovered that all of these—tools that led to the liberation of productive forces—can be harnessed for the industrial production of death. Artificial intelligence, the symbol of too late capitalism, does something else, perhaps even more radical. It errs on our behalf, for us.

### **The Body Heap Paradox**

The infinitization of violence also explains how the fundamental bond of complicity, which, we learn from Žižek, is what forges a community out of a collective, is weaponized in a collective crime. The continuous violation of norms and boundaries – each violation more extreme than the last – not only undermines the grip on sanity, the anchorage in a stable reality, but also weakens the capacity to act according to principle. Where and when do we set boundaries with full force and at any cost? We find ourselves in a trap of accomplices: we have already given a hand to this wrongdoing, turned a blind eye to that, so now stop? Was one Gazan baby not enough for you? 30, 400? Having failed to stop everything, drawn a limit, has already made you one of us, a partner in crime. You're in it with us. In this way, no one can escape the collective stain of the crime. The small segment of the population that feels suffocatingly impotent to prevent it, those who feel unbearable guilt, effectively serve to deny the very reality of the horrible violence. A right wing commentator on social media made the incisors, but nonetheless, pointed remark in response to a recent publication on the atrocities in Gazan, the hunger campaign. "You do not really believe this is genocide. If you would, you wouldn't be posting about it on social media". There is a kernel of truth in his critique - there is an unbearable, performative paradox in protesting against genocide. It is, by its very nature, a crime that has to be stopped by all means, not argued about or protested against. And so, the "slow boil" massacre, and its unprecedented visual exposure, serve to render the crime strangely invisible. Can a democracy enact a genocide, while debating it? Isn't this in itself a clear sign that we have passed out of anything resembling liberal democracy?

### **Populism of the Wish**

This allows us perhaps to wager an answer as to the unique popularity of the supposed populism. In general, populism is an inept term to describe new authoritarianism. Not only does it fail to address precisely why such modes of power are popular, the very word reeks of elitism, as if what people want can only be base and unworthy of serious consideration.

What does the people want? Everything, nothing. There is no such thing as a collective will, and it's not even clear that there is such a thing as a private will. But we have constructed different mechanisms to ex-

press such a general desire: elections, surveys. These mechanisms do not reveal what the majority wants, and certainly not the entire collectivity in the first-person plural; rather, they reveal a non-personal desire—a desire that cannot belong to anyone in the first person. (No one 64%, wants anything.) This is not a false desire, but something much more disturbing. A monstrous desire, a jumble of limbs that does not coalesce into a single body, no body in particular, but—somehow—seems right for everyone in general. It is precisely because one cannot identify with it directly that it takes on an objective dimension. An independent existence.

In other words—and this is important—what is at stake in polling is not just empty fantasy. These mechanisms reveal something troubling about us, precisely because they cannot be identified with directly. They appear as the will we refuse to admit exists, and therefore suspect, it is a deeper, more systemic than each individual's explicit desire. Private, personal desire is hesitant and contradictory, and then coalesces into a resolve, but it never does truly shed its doubts. Surveys provide a numerical expression of the collective mood, of the tendency. The virtual vector of the impulse.

As such, they seem dangerously similar to a wish we lack the courage to express. It's not my desire, not my wish. It's a general wish—a sense of where the wind is blowing, its tendency. And where do I stand in relation to the wind? The left (despite the shameful 30 percent) and the Arabs together are what remains of the collective unconscious. Conscience spoils the mood.

But what is a wish? Among other things, a wish is distinguished from desire by the fact that we do not want to realize it. Not necessarily that we don't want it to be fulfilled; not all wishes are Oedipal in a direct sense, but we certainly do not want to be the ones bringing it into realization. This is the fundamental meaning of a wish: not merely something we would like or request for ourselves, without truly understanding what we are asking for, but something that can only be fulfilled effortlessly and without direct intervention on our part. Even expressing a wish is a risk—a step too far, which endangers its fulfillment. Hence, the silence that surrounds the wish, as well as the well-known warning: "Be careful with your wishes." A wish invites an alien agent, a fairy or a god, to fulfill something that we cannot even imagine the world of its fulfillment.

This is the demonic aspect of the new right. The transgressive right—those who break accepted norms and ignore the will of the majority, as reflected in surveys—does so partly in the name of impulse and wish, which also find expression in surveys. The wish to live in a space where there is no longer a need to confront the gaze, language, or wishes of others.

Perhaps we are acting against your superficial desire to put an end to the war—that is the transgressive "populist" message—but we do so in the name of your concealed wish, increasingly rising out of concealment as it is already. We go against the explicit will in the name of a wish that is no longer entirely denied. The disconnect between the Israeli majority's

opposition to war and the decline in support for a political solution to the conflict, along with the disturbing rise in support for transfer, and genocidal statements (no innocents in Gaza) is positioned here.

Here, it is necessary to remember, time and again: we are not merely the sum of our wishes and impulses. We are those who learn to live alongside them. I am no more myself when seized by the impulse to kill the one who cut me off on the road than I am the adult who successfully—again!—overcomes that impulse. I am no more the child who expressed a wish than the grown-up who witnessed its ironic fulfillment.

So, be careful—not only with your wishes, but especially with those who seek to realize them for you.

- 1 Kremnitzer, 2024.
- 2 Kant, 1991, pp. 54-60.
- 3 Foucault, 1979, pp. 131-137.
- 4 Arendt, 1961, p. 91.
- 5 See Maine, 1914, pp. 359-383; Mamdani, 2012, pp. 21-23.
- 6 Ibid, 102.
- 7 Ibid, 95.
- 8 Benjamin, 1969, p. 7.
- 9 Agamben, 2005, p. 79.
- 10 This is perhaps the key to its fraught distinction and relation to power, as we commonly understand that term, a relation “at once antagonistic and supplementary” (Agamben, 2005, p. 80).
- 11 Agamben, 2005, p. 83-84.
- 12 Daston, 2022, p. 8
- 13 Daston, 2022, p. 41-44.
- 14 Arendt, 1961, p. 97.
- 15 Žižek, 1991, lxi.
- 16 Lacan, 1991, p. 127.
- 17 Freud, 1950, p. 21.
- 18 Lacan, 1991, p.128
- 19 Benjamin, 1996, p. 249.
- 20 Žižek, 1997, pp. 37-38.
- 21 Žižek, 1991, pp. 244-245.
- 22 More recently, Alenka Zupančič has taken up a detailed reading of Manoni in her book *Disavowal*. She notes how the very saying differs from both the standard neurotic case, in which the symptoms do the declaring, and from properly fetishist solutions, in which the fetish holds the belief, relieves the believer from the burden of containing contradictory statements. See Zupančič, 2024.
- 23 Žižek, 1991, p. 249.
- 24 Zupančič, 2024.
- 25 Žižek, 1991, p. 252.
- 26 Arendt, 1958, p. 461.
- 27 Weber, 1968, pp. 23-4.
- 28 Kremnitzer, Forthcoming.
- 29 Attay Kremer has recently explicated in two papers, some of the stakes of the Kant-Hegel debate regarding war, in both its ethical-ontological aspect, and its relation to the nature-history distinction. See Kremer, forthcoming, Kremer forthcoming.
- 30 Dupuy, 2023.
- 31 I owe this comparison to Attay Kremer.

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