

their ideological imagination?) is undercut by the 'desacros-matisation' at the end, when Haili, the key Muslim soldier, is fully shown and identified as the childhood best friend of Milan, the main Serb character:

Do not these examples illustrate the notorious 'clash of civilizations' thesis? There is, of course, a partial truth in this notion – witness the surprise of the average American: 'How is it possible that these people display and practise such a disregard for their own lives?' Is not the obverse of this surprise the rather sad fact that we, in First World countries, find it more and more difficult even to imagine a public or universal Cause for which we would be ready to sacrifice our life? When, after the bombings, even the Taliban Foreign Minister said that he could 'feel the pain' of the American children, did he not thereby confirm the hegemonic ideological role of Bill Clinton's trademark phrase? It does seem as if the split between First World and Third World runs more and more along the lines of the opposition between leading a long and satisfying life full of material and cultural wealth, and dedicating one's life to some transcendent Cause.

Two philosophical references immediately suggest themselves apropos of this ideological antagonism between the Western consumerist way of life and Muslim radicalism: Hegel and Nietzsche. Is not this antagonism the one between what Nietzsche called 'passive' and 'active' nihilism? We in the West are the Nietzschean Last Men, immersed in stupid daily pleasures, while the Muslim radicals are ready to risk everything, engaged in the struggle even up to their own self-destruction. (We cannot fail to note the significant role of the stock exchange in the attacks: the ultimate proof of their traumatic impact was that the New York Stock Exchange was closed for four days, and its opening the following Monday was presented as the key sign that things were returning to normal.) Furthermore, if we look

at this opposition through the lens of the Hegelian struggle between Master and Servant, we cannot avoid a paradox: although we in the West are perceived as exploiting masters, it is we who occupy the position of the Servant who, since he clings to life and its pleasures, is unable to risk his life (recall Colin Powell's notion of a high-tech war with no human casualties), while the poor Muslim radicals are Masters ready to risk their life . . . This notion of the 'clash of civilizations', however, must be rejected out of hand: what we are witnessing today are, rather, clashes *within* each civilization. Furthermore, a brief look at the comparative history of Islam and Christianity tells us that the 'human rights record' of Islam (to use this anachronistic term) is much better than that of Christianity: in past centuries, Islam has been significantly more tolerant towards other religions than Christianity. Now it is also time to remember that it was through the Arabs that, in the Middle Ages, we in Western Europe regained access to our Ancient Greek heritage. While they in no way excuse today's acts of horror, these facts none the less clearly demonstrate that we are dealing not with a feature inscribed into Islam 'as such', but with the outcome of modern sociopolitical conditions.

If we look more closely, what is this 'clash of civilizations' actually about? Are not all real-life 'clashes' clearly related to global capitalism? The Muslim 'fundamentalist' target is not only global capitalism's corrosive impact on social life, but also the corrupt 'traditionalist' regimes in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and so on. The most horrifying slaughters (those in Rwanda, Congo, and Sierra Leone) not only took place – and are still taking place – within the same 'civilization', but are also clearly related to the interplay of global economic interests. Even in the few cases which would vaguely fit the definition of the 'clash of civilizations' (Bosnia and Kosovo, southern Sudan, etc.), the shadow of other interests is easily discernible. A proper dose of

'economic reductionism' would therefore be appropriate here: instead of endless analyses of how Islamic 'fundamentalism' is intolerant towards our liberal societies, and other 'clash-of-civilization' topics, we should refocus our attention on the economic background to the conflict – the clash of *economic* interests, and of the geopolitical interests of the United States itself (how to retain privileged links with Israel and with conservative Arab regimes like those of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait).

Beneath the opposition between 'liberal' and 'fundamentalist' societies, 'McWorld versus Jihad', there is the embarrassing third term: countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, deeply conservative monarchies but American economic allies, fully integrated into Western capitalism. Here, the USA has a very precise and simple interest: in order that these countries can be counted on for their oil reserves, they have to remain undemocratic (the underlying notion, of course, is that any democratic awakening could give rise to anti-American attitudes). This is an old story whose infamous first chapter after World War II was the CIA-orchestrated *coup d'état* against Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister, Hedayat Mossadegh, in 1953 – there was no 'fundamentalism' there, not even a 'Soviet threat', just a plain democratic awakening, with the idea that the country should take control of its oil resources and break up the monopoly of the Western oil companies. The lengths to which the USA is ready to go in order to maintain this pact were revealed in the Gulf War in 1990, when Jewish American soldiers stationed in Saudi Arabia had to be transported by helicopter to aircraft carriers in the Gulf in order to pray, since non-Muslim rituals are prohibited on Saudi soil.

This 'perverted' position of the truly 'fundamentalist' conservative Arab regimes is the key to the (often comical) conundrums of American politics in the Middle East: they stand for the point at which the USA is forced explicitly to

acknowledge the primacy of economy over democracy – that is, the secondary and manipulative character of legitimizing international interventions – by claiming to protect democracy and human rights. What we should always bear in mind apropos of Afghanistan is that until the 1970s – that is, prior to the time when the country got directly caught up in the superpower struggle – it was one of the most tolerant Muslim societies, with a long secular tradition: Kabul was known as a city with a vibrant cultural and political life. The paradox is thus that the rise of the Taliban, this apparent 'regression' into ultra-fundamentalism, far from expressing some deep 'traditionalist' tendency, was the result of the country being caught up in the whirlpool of international politics – it was not only a defensive reaction to it, it emerged directly as a result of the support of foreign powers (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the USA itself).

As for the 'clash of civilizations', let us recall the letter from the seven-year-old American girl whose father was a pilot fighting in Afghanistan: she wrote that – although she loved her father very much, she was ready to let him die, to sacrifice him for her country. When President Bush quoted these lines, they were perceived as a 'normal' outburst of American patriotism; let us conduct a simple mental experiment and imagine an Arab Muslim girl pathetically reciting into the camera the same words about her father fighting for the Taliban – we do not have to think for long about what our reaction would have been: morbid Muslim fundamentalism which does not stop even at the cruel manipulation and exploitation of children. . . . Every feature attributed to the Other is already present at the very heart of the USA. Murderous fanaticism? There are in the USA today more than two million Rightist populist 'fundamentalists' who also practise a terror of their own, legitimized by (their understanding of) Christianity. Since America is, in a way, 'harbouring' them,

should the US Army have punished Americans themselves after the Oklahoma bombing? And what about the way Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson reacted to the events of September 11, perceiving them as a sign that God had withdrawn His protection from the USA because of the sinful lives of the Americans, putting the blame on hedonist materialism, liberalism, and rampant sexuality, and claiming that America got what it deserved? The fact that this very same condemnation of 'liberal' America as the one from the Muslim Other came from the very heart of *l'Amérique profonde* should give us food for thought. On October 19, George W. Bush himself had to concede that the most probable perpetrators of the anthrax attacks were not Muslim terrorists but America's own extreme Right Christian fundamentalists – again, does not the fact that acts first attributed to an external enemy may turn out to be acts perpetrated at the very heart of *l'Amérique profonde* provide an unexpected confirmation of the thesis that the true clash is the clash within each civilization?¹⁹

Now, in the months following the attacks, it is as if we are living in the unique time between a traumatic event and its symbolic impact, as in those brief moments after we have been deeply cut, before the full extent of the pain strikes us. We do not yet know how the events will be symbolized, what their symbolic efficiency will be, what acts they will be

19 According to some conservative US lawyers, an act done out of religious conviction cannot by definition be insane, since religion stands for the highest spiritual dimension of humanity. How, then, are we to categorize the Palestinian suicide bombers? Is their religious belief authentic or not? If not, can the same insanity label be applied to hometown American Christian terrorists? This is the old Enlightenment topic of the fragile border between religion and madness, or religious 'superstition' and pure 'rational' religion.

evoked to justify. If nothing else, we can clearly experience yet again the limitations of our democracy: decisions are being made which will affect the fate of all of us, and all of us just wait, aware that we are utterly powerless. In the aftermath of September 11 the Americans *en masse* rediscovered their American pride, displaying flags and singing together in public, but I should emphasize more than ever that there is nothing 'innocent' about this rediscovery of American innocence, about getting rid of the sense of historical guilt or irony which prevented many Americans from fully assuming their national identity. What this gesture amounted to was 'objectively' assuming the burden of all that being 'American' stood for in the past – an exemplary case of ideological interpellation, of fully assuming one's symbolic mandate, which comes on the scene after the perplexity caused by some historical trauma. In the traumatic aftermath of September 11, when the old security seemed to be momentarily shattered, what could be more 'natural' than taking refuge in the innocence of a firm ideological identification?²⁰ However, it is precisely such moments of transparent innocence, of 'back to basics', when the gesture of identification seems 'natural', that are, from the standpoint of the critique of ideology, the most obscure – even, in a certain way, obscurity itself.

Let us recall another such innocently transparent moment, the endlessly reproduced video shot from Beijing's Avenue of Eternal Peace, at the height of the 'troubles' in 1989, of a tiny young man with a can who, alone, stands in front of an advancing gigantic tank, and courageously tries to prevent its advance, so that, when the tank tries to go round him by turning right or

20 Here I draw on my critical elaboration of Althusser's notion of interpellation in Chapter 3 of *Metastases of Enjoyment*, London and New York: Verso 1995.

left, the man also moves aside, again standing in its way: 'The representation is so powerful that it demolishes all other understandings. This street scene, this time and this event, have come to constitute the compass point for virtually all Western journeys into the interior of the contemporary political and cultural life of China.'²¹

Again, this very moment of transparent clarity (things are presented in their utmost nakedness: a lone man against the brute force of the State) is, for our Western gaze, sustained by a cobweb of ideological implications, embodying a series of oppositions: individual versus state; peaceful resistance versus state violence; man versus machine; the inner force of a tiny individual versus the impotence of the powerful machine. . . . These implications, against the background of which the shot exerts its full direct impact, these 'meditations' which sustain the shot's immediate impact, are not present for a Chinese observer, since such a series of oppositions is inherent to the European ideological legacy. And the same ideological background also overdetermines, say, our perception of the horrifying images of tiny individuals jumping from the burning WTC tower to certain death.

So what about the phrase which reverberates everywhere: 'Nothing will ever be the same after September 11'? Significantly, this phrase is never further elaborated – it is just an empty gesture of saying something 'deep' without really knowing what we want to say. So our first reaction to it should be: Really? What if, precisely, nothing epochal happened on September 11? What if – as the massive display of American patriotism seems to demonstrate – the shattering experience of

September 11 ultimately served as a device which enabled the hegemonic American ideology to 'go back to its basics', to reassert its basic ideological co-ordinates against the antiglobalist and other critical temptations? Perhaps I should none the less qualify this statement by introducing the temporality of *futur antérieur*: on September 11, the USA was given the opportunity to realize what kind of world it was part of. It might have taken this opportunity – but it did not; instead it opted to reassert its traditional ideological commitments: out with feelings of responsibility and guilt towards the impoverished Third World, we are the victims now! So when, apropos of the Hague Tribunal, Timothy Garton Ash pathetically claims: 'No Hitler or Duce, no Pinochet, no Idi Amin and no Pol Pot should any longer be allowed to feel safe from the intervention of the people's justice behind the palace gates of sovereignty',²² we should simply take note of who is *missing* in this series of names which, apart from the standard couple of Hitler and Mussolini, contains three Third World dictators: where is at least one name from the Big Seven – say, somebody like Kissinger?

Consider the collapse of a political regime – say, the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1990: at a certain moment, people became aware all of a sudden that the game was over, that the Communists had lost. The break was purely symbolic; nothing changed 'in reality' – none the less, from that moment on, the final collapse of the regime was merely a matter of days away. . . . What if something of the same order *did* occur on 11 September? Perhaps the ultimate victim of the WTC collapse will be a certain figure of the big Other, the American Sphere. During Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Party,

21 Michael Dutton, *Streetlife China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, p. 17.

22 Timothy Garton Ash, 'Slobo und Carla', *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, 14 March 2002, p. 15 (my translation).

denouncing Stalin's crimes, a dozen or so delegates suffered nervous breakdowns and had to be carried out and given medical help; one of them, Bolesław Bierut, the hardline General Secretary of the Polish Communist Party, even died of a heart attack a few days later. (And the model Stalinist writer Alexander Fadeyev shot himself a few days later.) The point is not that they were 'honest Communists' — most of them were brutal manipulators without any subjective illusions about the nature of the Soviet regime. What broke down was their 'objective' illusion, the figure of the 'big Other' against the background of which they could exert their ruthless drive for power: the Other on to which they transposed their belief, the Other which, as it were, believed on their behalf, their subject-supposed-to-believe, disintegrated. And did not something analogous happen in the aftermath of September 11? Was not September 11 2001 the Twentieth Congress of the American Dream?

September 11 is already being appropriated for ideological causes: from the claims in all the mass media that antiglobalization is now out, to the notion that the shock of the WTC attacks revealed the substanceless character of postmodern Cultural Studies, their lack of contact with 'real life'. While the second notion is (partially) right for the wrong reasons, the first is downright wrong. What is true is that the relatively trifling character of standard Cultural Studies critical topics was thereby revealed: what is the use of a politically incorrect expression with possible racist undertones, compared with the tortuous death of thousands? This is the dilemma of Cultural Studies: will they stick to the same topics, directly admitting that their fight against oppression is a fight within First World capitalism's universe — which means that, in the wider conflict between the Western First World and the outside threat to it, one should reassert one's fidelity to the basic American liberal-

democratic framework? Or will they risk taking the step into radicalizing their critical stance; will they problematize this framework itself? As for the end of antiglobalization, the dark hints from the first days after September 11 that the attacks could also have been the work of antiglobalist terrorists is, of course, nothing but a crude manipulation: the only way to conceive of what happened on September 11 is to locate it in the context of the antagonisms of global capitalism.

We do not yet know what consequences this event will have for the economy, ideology, politics and war, but one thing is certain: the USA, which, until now, perceived itself as an island exempt from this kind of violence, witnessing it only from the safe distance of the TV screen, is now directly involved. So the alternative is: will the Americans decide to fortify their 'sphere' further, or to risk stepping out of it? Either America will persist in — even strengthen the deeply immoral attitude of 'Why should this happen to us? Things like this don't happen *here!*', leading to more aggressivity towards the threatening Outside — in short: to a paranoid acting out. Or America will finally risk stepping through the fantasmatic screen that separates it from the Outside World, accepting its arrival in the Real world, making the long-overdue move from 'A thing like this shouldn't happen *here!*' to 'A thing like this shouldn't happen *anywhere!*'. That is the true lesson of the attacks: the only way to ensure that it will not happen here again is to prevent it happening anywhere else. In short, America should learn humbly to accept its own vulnerability as part of this world, enacting the punishment of those responsible as a sad duty, not as an exultating retaliation — what we are getting instead is the forceful reassertion of the exceptional role of the USA as a global policeman, as if what causes resentment against the USA is not its excess of power, but its lack of it.

The WTC attacks confront us with the necessity of resisting

the temptation of a double blackmail. If we simply, only and unconditionally condemn it, we simply appear to endorse the blatantly ideological position of American innocence under attack by Third World Evil; if we draw attention to the deeper sociopolitical causes of Arab extremism, we simply appear to blame the victim which ultimately got what it deserved. . . .

The only possible solution here is to reject this very opposition and to adopt both positions simultaneously; this can be done only if we resort to the dialectical category of totality: there is no choice between these two positions; each one is one-sided and false. Far from offering a case apropos of which we can adopt a clear ethical stance, we encounter here the limit of moral reasoning: from the moral standpoint, the victims are innocent, the act was an abominable crime, this very innocence, however, is not innocent – to adopt such an 'innocent' position in today's global capitalist universe is in itself a false abstraction. The same goes for the more ideological clash of interpretations: we can claim that the attack on the WTC was an attack on everything that is worth fighting for in democratic freedoms – the decadent Western way of life condemned by Muslim and other fundamentalists is the universe of women's rights and multiculturalist tolerance;²³ we could also claim, however, that it was an attack on the very centre and symbol of global financial capitalism. This, of course, in no way entails the compromise notion of shared guilt (the terrorists are to blame, but the Americans are also partly to blame . . .) – the point is, rather, that the two sides are not really opposed; that they belong to the

23 Along these lines, recall the Taliban Foreign Minister's answer, to a Western journalists' question: why do women in Afghanistan not play a greater role (or, rather, any role) in public affairs? 'How can you trust a person who bleeds on her own every month for a couple of days!'

same field. In short, the position to adopt is to accept the necessity of the fight against terrorism, but to redefine and expand its terms so that it will also include (some) American and other Western powers' acts: the choice between Bush and Bin Laden is not our choice; they are both 'Them' against Us. The fact that global capitalism is a totality means that it is the dialectical unity of itself and of its other, of the forces which resist it on 'fundamentalist' ideological grounds.

Consequently, of the two main stories which emerged after September 11, both are worse, as Stalin would have put it. The American patriotic narrative – the innocence under siege, the surge of patriotic pride – is, of course, vain, however, is the Leftist narrative (with its *Schadenfreude*: the USA got what it deserved, what it had been doing to others for decades) really any better? The predominant reaction of European – but also American – Leftists was nothing less than scandalous: all imaginable stupidities were said and written, up to the 'feminist' point that the WTC towers were two phallic symbols, waiting to be destroyed ('castrated'). Was there not something petty and miserable in the mathematics reminding us of Holocaust revisionism (what are the 3,000 dead against millions in Rwanda, Kongo, etc.)? And what about the fact that the CIA (co-)created the Taliban and Bin Laden, financing and helping them to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan? Why was this fact quoted as an argument against attacking them? Would it not be much more logical to claim that it is precisely America's duty to rid us of the monster it created? The moment we think in the terms of 'Yes, the WTC collapse was a tragedy, but we should not fully solidarize with the victims, since this would mean supporting US imperialism', the ethical catastrophe is already here: the only appropriate stance is unconditional solidarity with *all* victims. The ethical stance proper is replaced here by the moralizing mathematics of guilt and horror, which misses the key point: the terrifying death of

each individual is absolute and incomparable. In short, let us conduct a simple mental experiment: if you detect in yourself any reluctance to empathize fully with the victims of the WTC collapse, if you feel the urge to qualify your empathy with 'Yes, but what about the millions who suffer in Africa . . .', you are not demonstrating your Third World sympathies, but merely the *mauvaise foi* which bears witness to your implicit patronizing racist attitude towards Third World victims. (More precisely, the problem with such comparative statements is that they are both necessary and inadmissible: one *has* to make them, one *has* to make the point that much worse horrors are taking place around the world on a daily basis – but one *has* to do it without getting involved in the obscene mathematics of guilt.)

One of the current Leftist wisdoms is best exemplified by the image on the cover of the Verso catalogue for spring 2002: George Bush as a Muslim cleric with a beard – the global capitalist liberalism which opposes Muslim fundamentalism is itself a mode of fundamentalism, so that, in the current 'war on terrorism', we are in effect dealing with a clash of fundamentalisms. Despite its rhetorical efficiency, this *doxa* obfuscates the opposite – much more unsettling – paradox: the Muslim fundamentalists are not true fundamentalists, they are already 'modernists', a product and a phenomenon of modern global capitalism – they stand for the way the Arab world strives to accommodate itself to global capitalism. We should therefore also reject the standard liberal wisdom according to which Islam still needs to accomplish the Protestant revolution which would open it up to modernity: this Protestant revolution was already accomplished more than two centuries ago, in the guise of the Wahhabi movement which emerged in (what is today) Saudi Arabia. Its basic tenet, the exercise of *jihad* (the right to reinterpret Islam on the basis of changing conditions), is the precise counterpart to Luther's reading of the Bible. *Jihad* is a properly dialectical notion: neither a

spontaneous immersion in old traditions nor the need to 'adapt to new conditions' and compromise, but the urge to *reinvest eternity itself* in new historical conditions. The Wahhabis were extreme 'purist' and 'dogmatic', opposed to any kind of cheap accommodation to new trends of Western modernity; and, simultaneously, they advocated the ruthless abandonment of old superstitious organic mores – the very formula of the 'Protestant' return to origins against the corrupting inertia of tradition.

Another way in which the Left miserably failed is that, in the weeks after the attacks, it reverted to the old mantra 'Give peace a chance! War does not stop violence!' – a true case of hysterical precipitation, reacting to something which will not even happen in the expected form. Instead of a concrete analysis of the new complex situation after the attacks, of the chances it gives the Left to propose its own interpretation of the events, we got the blind ritualistic chant 'No war!', which fails to address even the elementary fact, *de facto* acknowledged by the US government itself (through its postponing of the retaliatory action for a month), that this is not a war like others, that the bombing of Afghanistan is not a solution. A sad situation, in which George Bush showed more power of reflection than most of the Left! Yet another false Leftist argument was that the perpetrators of the WTC attacks should be persecuted and treated as criminals – what happened was a criminal act. This notion completely misses the political dimension of today's 'terrorism'.²⁴

²⁴ When we are dealing with today's Left, we should also always bear in mind the Leftist narcissism for the lost Cause, best characterized as the inversion of Talleyrand's well-known cynicism: when, while at dinner, he overheard the sounds of a street battle, he commented to his companions at the table: 'You see, our side is winning!' Asked 'Which side?', he answered: 'We'll know tomorrow, when we find out who won!' The Leftist nostalgic's attitude is: 'You see, our side is losing!' 'Which side?' 'We'll know that tomorrow, when we find out who lost!'

With such a 'Left', who needs the Right? No wonder, then, that in the face of such 'Leftist' follies, the case with which the hegemonic ideology appropriated the September 11 tragedy and imposed its basic message was even greater than one might expect given that the mainstream Right and Liberal Centre control the mass media: the easy games are over now, we should take sides – against or for (terrorism). And since nobody is openly for, this means that doubt itself, a questioning attitude, is denounced as covert support for terrorism. . . . This, precisely, is the temptation to be resisted: *precisely in such moments of apparent clarity of choice, mystification is total*. The choice proposed to us is not the true choice. Today, more than ever, we should summon up the strength to step back and reflect upon the background of the situation. Intellectuals who succumbed to temptation are exemplified by the group of fifty who, in February 2002, signed the ridiculous appeal to American patriotism – a clear case of the pragmatic paradox of self-cancelling designation (the intellectuals who signed that appeal thereby irrevocably lost their status as intellectuals).

First complication: is the crucial choice today really that of liberal democracy versus fundamentalism or its derivations (like modernization versus resistance to it)? The only way to account for the complexity and the strange twists of today's global situation is to insist that the true choice is the one between capitalism and its Other (at this moment represented by marginal currents like the antiglobalization movement); this choice is then accompanied by phenomena which are structurally secondary, crucial among them the inherent tension between capitalism and its own excess. Throughout the twentieth century, the same pattern is clearly discernible: in order to crush its true enemy, capitalism started to play with fire, and mobilized its obscene excess in the guise of Fascism; this excess, however, took on a life of its own, and became so strong that mainstream

'liberal' capitalism had to join forces with its true enemy (Communism) to subdue it. Significantly, the war between capitalism and Communism was a cold one, while the big Hot War was fought against Fascism. And is not the case of the Taliban the same? After their ghost was concocted to fight Communism, they turned into the main enemy. Consequently, even if terrorism burns us all, the US 'war on terrorism' is not our struggle, but a struggle internal to the capitalist universe. The first duty of a progressive intellectual (if this term has any meaning left in it today) is not to fight the enemy's struggles for him.

Second complication: we should 'deconstruct' Afghanistan itself; it never existed 'in itself', it was the creation of outside forces from the very beginning. If we follow the 'natural' lines of ethnic division, then the northern and western parts of Afghanistan should have been included in the ex-Soviet Muslim republics (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) or Iran; while the west and south, together with the northeast of Pakistan, should form a Pashtun state of its own (the Pashtuns are split around 50/50 between Afghanistan and Pakistan). And what about the weird wormlike protuberance on the northeast, populated by Tajiks? It was artificially carved out a hundred years ago as a buffer zone, to prevent direct contact between British and Russian domains. At the same time, the Pashtun area was split by the arbitrary Durand Line to prevent the Pashtuns from threatening British interests in Pakistan (then India). (And it would be easy to show that the same goes for Pakistan itself – a land with no tradition of its own, an artificial entity if ever there was one.)

So, far from being an ancient realm outside the scope of modernization, until recently untouched by history, the *very existence of Afghanistan is the result of the interplay of foreign powers*. The closest one can get to Afghanistan in Europe would be something like Belgium: a buffer zone between France and the Netherlands which originated in the war between Protestants

and Catholics (the Belgians are basically Dutch people who remained Catholic). If the Afghans are known as opium producers, the Belgians are known for producing another, more benign, stuff of sinful pleasures (chocolate). If the Taliban Afghans terrorize women, the Belgians are known for child pornography and abuse. Finally, if this image of the Belgians as chocolate-eaters and child-abusers is a media cliché, so is the image of *Afghanistan as a country of opium and female oppression*. It is like the old sad joke: 'Jews and cyclists are at the root of all our problems?' 'Why cyclists?' 'Why Jews?'

America's 'holiday from history' was a fake: America's peace was bought by the catastrophes going on elsewhere. These days, the predominant point of view is that of an innocent gaze confronting unspeakable Evil which struck from the Outside – and again, apropos of this gaze, we should summon up the strength to apply to it Hegel's well-known dictum that Evil resides (also) in the innocent gaze itself which perceives Evil all around. There is thus an element of truth even in the most constricted Moral Majority vision of a depraved America dedicated to mindless pleasures, in the conservative horror at this netherworld of exploitation and pathological violence: what they don't get is merely the Hegelian speculative identity between this netherworld and their own position of fake purity – the fact that so many fundamentalist preachers have turned out to be secret sexual perverts is more than a contingent empirical fact. The infamous Jimmy Swaggart's claim that the fact that he visited prostitutes only gave additional strength to his preaching (he knew from intimate struggle what he was preaching against), although undoubtedly hypocritical on the immediate subjective level, is none the less objectively true.

Can we imagine a greater irony than the fact that the first codename for the US operation against terrorists was 'Infinite Justice' (later changed in response to the reproach from

American Islamic clerics that only God can exert infinite justice)? Taken seriously, this name is profoundly ambiguous: either it means that the Americans have the right ruthlessly to destroy not only all terrorists but also all who gave them material, moral, ideological, etc., support – and this process will be, by definition, endless in the precise sense of Hegelian 'bad infinity', the work will never really be accomplished, there will always be some other terrorist threat (and, in fact, in April 2002, Dick Cheney directly stated that the 'war on terrorism' will probably never end, at least not in our lifetimes); or it means that the justice exerted must be truly infinite in the strict Hegelian sense – that, in relating to others, it has to relate to itself: in short, that it has to ask how we ourselves, who exert justice are involved in what we are fighting against. When, on September 22 2001, Jacques Derrida received the Theodor Adorno award, he referred in his speech to the WTC attacks: 'My unconditional compassion, addressed at the victims of September 11, does not prevent me from saying aloud: with regard to this crime, I do not believe that anyone is politically guiltless.' This self-relating, this inclusion of oneself in the picture, is the only true 'infinite justice'.

Against the cynical double-talk about 'infinite justice', I am tempted to recall the words of the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar in his address to the American people on September 25 2001: 'You accept everything your government says, whether it is true or false . . . Can't you think for yourselves? . . . It would be better for you to use your own sense and understanding' While these statements are undoubtedly a cynical manipulation (what about giving the same right to use one's own sense and understanding to Afghans themselves?), are they not nevertheless, when taken in an abstract decontextualized sense, quite appropriate?

3

HAPPINESS AFTER
SEPTEMBER 11

In psychoanalysis, the betrayal of desire has a precise name: happiness. When, exactly, can people be said to be happy? In a country like Czechoslovakia in the late 1970s and 1980s, people actually were in a way happy: three fundamental conditions of happiness were fulfilled there.

1. Their material needs were basically satisfied – not too well satisfied, since the excess of consumption can in itself generate unhappiness. It is good to experience a brief shortage of some goods on the market from time to time (no coffee for a couple of days, then no beef, then no TV sets): these brief periods of shortage functioned as exceptions which reminded people that they should be glad that such goods were generally available – if everything is available all the time, people take this availability as an evident fact of life, and no longer appreciate their luck. Thus life went on in a regular and predictable way, without any great efforts or shocks; one was allowed to withdraw into one's own private world.

2. A second – extremely important – feature: there was the

Other (the Party) to be blamed for everything that went wrong, so that one did not feel truly responsible – if there was a temporary shortage of some goods, even if a storm caused great damage, it was 'their' fault.

3. And – last, but not least – there was an Other Place (the consumerist West) which one was allowed to dream about, and even visit sometimes – this place was just at the right distance: not too far away, not too near.

This fragile balance was disturbed – by what? By desire, precisely. Desire was the force which compelled the people to go further – and end up in a system in which the vast majority are definitely *less* happy.

Happiness is thus – to put it in Alain Badiou's terms – not a category of truth, but a category of mere Being, and, as such, confused, indeterminate, inconsistent (take the proverbial answer of a German immigrant to the USA who, asked: 'Are you happy?', answered: 'Yes, yes, I am very happy, *aber glücklich bin ich nicht* . . .'). It is a *pagan* concept: for pagans, the goal of life is to be happy (the idea of living 'happily ever after' is a Christianized version of paganism), and religious experience and political activity are considered the highest forms of happiness (see Aristotle) – no wonder the Dalai Lama has had such success recently preaching the gospel of happiness around the world, and no wonder he is finding the greatest response precisely in the USA, the ultimate empire of the (pursuit of) happiness. . . . In short, 'happiness' belongs to the pleasure principle, and what undermines it is the insistence of a Beyond of the pleasure principle.

In a strict Lacanian sense of the term, we should thus posit that 'happiness' relies on the subject's inability or unreadiness fully to confront the consequences of its desire: the price of happiness is that the subject remains stuck in the inconsistency of its desire. In our daily lives, we (pretend to) desire things

which we do not really desire, so that, ultimately, the worst thing that can happen is for us to get what we 'officially' desire. Happiness is thus inherently hypocritical: it is the happiness of dreaming about things we do not really want. When today's Left bombards the capitalist system with demands that it obviously cannot fulfil (Full employment! Retain the welfare state! Full rights for immigrants!), it is basically playing a game of hysterical provocation, of addressing the Master with a demand which will be impossible for him to meet, and will thus expose his impotence. The problem with this strategy, however, is not only that the system cannot meet these demands, but that, in addition, those who voice them do not really want them to be realized. For example, when 'radical' academics demand full rights for immigrants and opening of the borders, are they aware that the direct implementation of this demand would, for obvious reasons, inundate developed Western countries with millions of newcomers, thus provoking a violent working-class racist backlash which would then endanger the privileged position of these very academics? Of course they are, but they count on the fact that their demand will not be met – in this way, they can hypocritically retain their clear radical conscience while continuing to enjoy their privileged position. In 1994, when a new wave of emigration from Cuba to the USA was on the cards, Fidel Castro warned the USA that if they did not stop inciting Cubans to emigrate, Cuba would no longer prevent them from doing it – which the Cuban authorities in effect did a couple of days later, embarrassing the USA with thousands of unwanted newcomers. . . . Is this not like the proverbial woman who snapped back at a man who was making macho advances to her: 'Shut up, or you'll have to do what you're boasting about!'

In both cases, the gesture is that of calling the other's bluff, counting on the fact that what the other really fears is that one will fully comply with his or her demand. And would not the

same gesture also throw our radical academics into a panic? Here the old 68 motto '*Soyons réalistes, demandons l'impossible!*' acquires a new cynical and sinister meaning which, perhaps, reveals its truth: 'Let's be realists: we, the academic Left, want to appear critical, while fully enjoying the privileges the system offers us. So let's bombard the system with impossible demands: we all know that these demands won't be met, so we can be sure that nothing will actually change, and we'll maintain our privileged status!' If someone accuses a big corporation of particular financial crimes, he or she is exposed to risks which can go right up to murder attempts; if he or she asks the same corporation to finance a research project into the link between global capitalism and the emergence of hybrid postcolonial identities, he or she stands a good chance of getting hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Conservatives are therefore fully justified in legitimizing their opposition to radical knowledge in terms of happiness: knowledge ultimately makes us unhappy. Contrary to the notion that curiosity is innate to humans – that there is deep within each of us a *Wissenstrieb*, a drive to know – Jacques Lacan claims that the spontaneous attitude of a human being is that of 'I don't want to know about it' – a fundamental resistance against knowing too much. Every true progress in knowledge has to be bought by a painful struggle against our spontaneous propensities – is not today's biogenetics the clearest proof of these limits of our readiness to know? The gene responsible for Huntington's chorea is isolated, so that each of us can learn precisely not only if he or she will get Huntington's, but also when he or she will get it. The onset of the disease depends on a genetic transcription error – the stuttering repetition of the 'word' CAG in the middle of the gene: the age at which the illness will appear depends strictly and implacably on the number of repetitions of CAG in one place in this gene (if there are forty repetitions, you will get the first symptoms at fifty-nine; if forty-one, at