

fifty-four . . . if fifty, at twenty-seven). A good lifestyle, physical fitness, the best medicine, healthy food, family love and support can do nothing about it – pure fatalism, undiluted by environmental variability. There is as yet no cure; we can do nothing about it.²⁵ So what should we do when we know that we can submit ourselves to testing and thus acquire knowledge which, if positive, tells us exactly when we will go mad and die? Can we imagine a clearer confrontation with the meaningless contingency that rules our life?

Thus Huntington's chorea presents us with a disturbing alternative: if there is a history of this disease in my family, should I take the test which will tell me if (and when) I will inevitably get it or not? What is the answer? If I cannot bear the prospect of knowing when I will die, the (more fantastic than realistic) ideal solution may seem to be the following one: I authorize another person or institution whom I trust completely to test me and *not to tell me the result*, only to kill me unexpectedly and painlessly in my sleep just before the onslaught of the fatal illness, if the result was positive. . . . The problem with this solution, however, is that *I know that the Other knows* (the truth about my illness), and this ruins everything, exposing me to horrifying gnawing suspicion.

Lacan drew attention to the paradoxical status of this *knowledge about the Other's knowledge*. Take the final reversal of Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence*, in which the husband, who for many years has harboured an illicit passionate love for Countess Olenska, learns that his young wife *knew* about his secret passion all the time. Perhaps this would also offer a way to redeem the unfortunate *Bridges of Madison County*: if, at the end for the film, the dying Francesca were to learn that her allegedly simple-minded, down-to-earth husband knew all the time about her

25 See Matt Ridley, *Genome*, New York: Perennial 2000, p. 64.

brief passionate affair with the *National Geographic* photographer, and how much this meant to her, but kept silent about it in order not to hurt her. That is the enigma of knowledge: how is it possible that the whole psychic economy of a situation changes radically not when the hero directly learns something (some long repressed secret), but when he *gets to know that the other* (whom he thought ignorant) *also knew it all the time*, and just pretended not to know in order to keep up appearances – is there anything more humiliating than the situation of a husband who, after a long secret love affair, learns all of a sudden that his wife knew about it all the time, but kept silent about it out of politeness or, even worse, out of love for him?

Is the ideal solution, then, the opposite one: if I suspect that my child may have the disease, I test him *without him knowing it*, and then kill him painlessly just before the onslaught? The ultimate fantasy of happiness here would be that of an anonymous state institution doing this for all of us without our knowledge – but, again, the question crops up: do we know about it (about the fact that the other knows) or not? The way to a perfect totalitarian society is open. . . . There is only one way out of this conundrum: what if what is false here is the underlying premise, the notion that the ultimate ethical duty is that of protecting the Other from pain, of keeping him or her in protective ignorance? So when Habermas advocates constraints on biogenetic manipulation with reference to the threat it poses to human autonomy, freedom and dignity,²⁶ he is philosophically 'cheating', concealing the true reason why his line of argument appears to be convincing: what he is really referring to is not autonomy and freedom, but happiness – it is on behalf of happiness that he, the great representative of the Enlightenment tradition, ended up

26 See Jürgen Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2001.

on the same side as conservative advocates of blessed ignorance.

Which ideological constellation sustains this 'pursuit of happiness'? The well-known and highly successful animated series *The Land Before Time*, produced by Steven Spielberg, provides what is arguably the clearest articulation of the hegemonic liberal multiculturalist ideology. The same message is repeated again and again: we are all different – some of us are big, some are small; some know how to fight, others know how to flee – but we should learn to live with these differences, to perceive them as something which makes our lives richer (recall the echo of this attitude in the recent reports on how the al-Qaeda prisoners are treated at Guantanamo Bay: they are given food appropriate to their specific cultural and religious needs, allowed to pray . . .). From and on the outside, we appear different, but inside, we are all the same – frightened individuals at a loss in the world, needing the help of others. In one of the songs, the big bad dinosaurs sing about how those who are big can break all the rules, behave badly, squash those who are helpless and small:

When you're big / You can push all / The little ones around
/ They're looking up / While you are looking down . . .
Things are better when you're big . . . All the rules that
grown-ups made / They don't apply to you.

The answer of the small oppressed ones in the following song is not to fight the big ones, but to understand that, behind their bullying exterior, they are no different from us – secretly afraid, with their share of problems:

They have feelings just like we do / They have problems too.
/ We think because they're big / they don't, but they do.
They're louder and they're stronger, / and they make a

bigger fuss, / but way down deep inside / I think they're kids like us.

The obvious conclusion is therefore the praise of differences:

It takes all sorts / To make a world / Short and tall sorts /
Large and small sorts / To fill this pretty planet / with love
and laughter. / To make it great to live in / Tomorrow
and the day after. / It takes all types / without a doubt / dumb
and wise types / every size types / To do all the things /
That need to be done / To make our life fun.

No wonder, then, that the final message of the films is that pagan wisdom: life is an eternal cycle in which older generations are replaced by new ones, in which everything that appears has to disappear sooner or later. . . . The problem, of course, is how far do we go? It takes all sorts – does that mean nice and brutal, poor and rich, victims and torturers? The reference to the dinosaur kingdom is especially ambiguous here, with its brutal character of animal species devouring each other – is this also one of the things that 'need to be done to make our life fun'? The very inner inconsistency of this vision of the prelapsarian 'land before time' thus bears witness to how the message of collaboration-in-differences is ideology at its purest – why? Because, precisely, any notion of a 'vertical' *antagonism* that cut through the social body is strictly censored, substituted by and/or translated into the wholly different notion of 'horizontal' differences with which we have to learn to live, because they complement each other. The underlying ontological vision here is that of the irreducible plurality of particular constellations, each of them multiple and displaced in itself, which can never be subsumed under any neutral universal container. The moment we find ourselves on this level, Hollywood meets the

most radical postcolonial critique of ideological universality: the central problem is perceived as that of impossible universality. Instead of imposing our notion of universality (universal human rights, etc.), universality – the shared space of understanding between different cultures – should be conceived of as an infinite task of translation, a constant reworking of one's own particular position. Is it necessary to add that this notion of universality as the infinite work of translation has nothing whatsoever to do with those magic moments in which effective universality makes its violent appearance in the guise of a shattering ethico-political act? The actual universality is not the never-won neutral space of translation from one particular culture to another, but, rather, the violent experience of how, across the cultural divide, we share the same antagonism.

At this point, of course, an obvious criticism imposes itself: is not such tolerant Hollywood wisdom a caricature of truly radical postcolonial studies? To this, we should reply: *is it really?* If anything, there is more truth in this simplified flat caricature than in the most elaborated postcolonial theory: at least Hollywood distills the actual ideological message out of the pseudo-sophisticated jargon. Today's hegemonic attitude is that of 'resistance' – all the poetics of the dispersed marginal sexual, ethnic, lifestyle 'multitudes' (gays, the mentally ill, prisoners . . .) 'resisting' the mysterious central (capitalized) Power. Everyone 'resists' – from gays and lesbians to Rightist survivalists – so why not draw the logical conclusion that this discourse of 'resistance' is the norm today, and, as such, the main obstacle to the emergence of the discourse which would actually question the dominant relations?²⁷ So the first thing to

27 Along these lines, we should especially emphasize the ambiguous ('undecidable', to use the fashionable term) nature of contemporary feminism in developed Western countries – the predominant American feminism, with its legalistic twist à la Catherine

do is to attack the very core of this hegemonic attitude, the notion that 'respect for Otherness' is the most elementary ethical axiom:

I must particularly insist that the formula 'respect for the Other' has nothing to do with any serious definition of Good and Evil. What does 'respect for the Other' mean when one is at war against an enemy, when one is brutally left by a woman for someone else, when one must judge the works of a mediocre 'artist,' when science is faced with obscurantist sects, etc.? Very often, it is the 'respect for Others' that is injurious, that is Evil. Especially when it is resistance against others, or even hatred of others, that drives a subjectively just action.²⁸

The obvious criticism here is: do not Badiou's own examples display the limit of his logic? Yes, hatred for the enemy, intolerance of false wisdom, and so on, but is not the lesson of the last century that even – and especially – when we are caught up in such a struggle, we should respect a certain limit – the limit, precisely, of the Other's radical Otherness? We should never reduce the Other to our enemy, to the bearer of false knowledge, and so forth: always in him or her there is the Absolute of the impenetrable abyss of another person. The twentieth century's totalitarianism, with its millions of victims, shows the ultimate outcome of following to the end what appears to us a

MacKinnon, is ultimately a profoundly reactionary ideological movement, always ready to legitimize US army interventions with feminist concerns, always there to make dismissive patronizing remarks about Third World populations (from its hypocritical obsession with clitoridectomy to MacKinnon's racist remarks about how ethnic cleansing and rape are in Serb genes . . .).

28 'On Evil: An Interview With Alain Badiou', *Cabinet*, Issue 5 (Winter 2001), p. 72.

'subjectively just action' – no wonder, then, that Badiou ended up directly supporting Communist terror.

This, precisely, is the line of reasoning we should reject; let us take the extreme case, a mortal and violent struggle against a Fascist enemy. Should we show respect for the abyss of the radical Otherness of Hitler's personality beneath all his evil acts? It is here that we should apply Christ's famous words about how he has come to bring the sword and division, not unity and peace: *out of our very love for humanity*, including (whatever remains of) the humanity of the Nazis themselves, we should fight them in an absolutely ruthless and disrespectful way. In short, the Jewish saying often quoted apropos of the Holocaust ('When somebody saves one man from death, he saves the whole of humanity') should be supplemented with: 'When somebody kills just one true enemy of humanity, he (not kills, but) *saves* the whole of humanity.' The true ethical test is not only the readiness to save victims, but also – even more, perhaps – the ruthless dedication to annihilating those who made them victims.

What the emphasis on multitude and diversity masks is, of course, the underlying monotony of today's global life. In his perspicuous booklet on Deleuze,²⁹ Alain Badiou drew attention to how, if ever there was a philosopher who, apropos of any topic whatsoever, from philosophy to literature and cinema, repeated and rediscovered the same conceptual matrix again and again, it was Deleuze. The irony of this insight is that this, precisely, is the standard criticism of Hegel – whatever he is writing or talking about, Hegel always manages to squeeze it into the same mould of the dialectical process. Is there not a kind of poetic justice in the fact that the one philosopher about

29 See Alain Badiou, *Deleuze*, Paris: Hachette 1997.

whom one can in fact make this claim is Deleuze, the anti-Hegelian? And this is especially pertinent with regard to social analysis: is there anything more monotonous than the Deleuzian poetry of contemporary life as the decentred proliferation of multitudes, of non-totalizable differences? What occludes (and thereby sustains) this monotony is the multiplicity of resignifications and displacements to which the basic ideological texture is submitted.

Unbreakable (M. Night Shyamalan, 2000 – with Bruce Willis) is paradigmatic of today's ideological constellation in its very contrast between form and content. Its content cannot fail to strike us as childishly ridiculous: the hero discovers that he is actually a real-life comic-strip hero who cannot be wounded, who is invincible . . . As for its form, it is a rather refined psychological drama shot in a slow melancholic mood: the suffering of the hero who finds it traumatically difficult to accept what he really is, his interpellation, his symbolic mandate.³⁰ This is well illustrated in the scene where his own son wants to shoot him, thus proving to him that he really is invincible: when the father resists, the son starts to cry, desperate that his father is not able to accept the truth about himself. Why does Willis resist being shot at? Is he simply afraid to die, or is he, rather, afraid of getting firm proof that he is invincible? And is this not the same dilemma as that of Kierkegaard's 'sickness unto death'? We are afraid to discover not that we are mortal but, rather, that we are *immortal*. Here, we should link Kierkegaard with Badiou: it is difficult, properly traumatic, for a human animal to accept that his or her

30 And the difficulty of assuming interpellation is a great topic of post-traditional Hollywood. Which is the unifying feature between two Martin Scorsese films, *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Kundun*? In both cases, the human incarnation of the divine figure (Christ, the Dalai Lama) is depicted in the difficult process of assuming his mandate.

life is not just a stupid process of reproduction and pleasure-seeking, but that it is in the service of a Truth. And this is how ideology seems to work today, in our self-proclaimed postideological universe: we perform our symbolic mandates without assuming them and 'taking them seriously': while a father functions as a father, he accompanies his function with a constant flow of ironic/reflexive comments on the stupidity of being a father, and so on.

The recent Dreamworks animated blockbuster *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jensen, 2001) expresses this predominant functioning of ideology perfectly: the standard fairytale storyline (the hero and his endearingly confused comic helper go to defeat the dragon and save the princess from its clutches) is clothed in jokingly Brechtian 'extraneations' (when the large crowd observes the wedding in the church, it is given instructions how to react, as in the faked spontaneity of a TV show: 'Laugh!', 'Respectful silence!'), politically correct twists (after the kiss between the two lovers, it is not the ugly ogre who turns into a beautiful prince, it is the beautiful princess who turns into a plump ordinary girl), ironic stabs at feminine vanity (while the sleeping princess awaits her saviour's kiss, she quickly arranges her hair so that she appears more beautiful), unexpected reversals of bad into good characters (the evil dragon turns out to be a caring female who later helps the heroes), up to anachronistic references to modern mores and popular culture.

Instead of praising these displacements and reinscriptions too readily as potentially 'subversive' and elevating *Shrek* into yet another 'site of resistance', we should focus on the obvious fact that, through all these displacements, *the same old story is being told*. In short, the true function of these displacement and subversions is precisely to make the traditional story relevant to our 'postmodern' age – and thus to prevent us from replacing it

with a new narrative. No wonder the finale of the film consists of an ironic version of 'I'm a Believer', the old Monkees' from the 1960s: this is how we are believers today – we make fun of our beliefs, while continuing to practise them, that is, we rely on them as the underlying structure of our daily practice.

In the good old German Democratic Republic, it was impossible for the same person to combine three features: conviction (belief in the official ideology), intelligence, and honesty. If you were believed and were intelligent, you were not honest; if you were intelligent and honest, you were not a believer; if you were a believer and honest, you were not intelligent. Does not the same also hold for the ideology of liberal democracy? If you (pretend to) take the hegemonic liberal ideology seriously, you cannot be both intelligent and honest: you are either stupid or a corrupted cynic. So, if I may indulge in a rather tasteless allusion to Agamben's *Homo sacer*, I can risk the claim that the predominant liberal mode of subjectivity today is *Homo sucker*: while he tries to exploit and manipulate others, he ends up being the ultimate sucker himself. When we think we are making fun of the ruling ideology, we are merely strengthening its hold over us.

31 And this stance is far from being limited to Western 'postmodern' countries. In 2001, there emerged in Russia a movement called 'Walking Together', the official Putin youth organization whose ideology is 'Eurasian', advocating 'Russian values' against the West. One of their original ideas is to resort to burning books: in order to fight the influence of Western liberal decadence, they propose meetings where people bring their decadent books and in return get free copies of proper Russian books, while the decadent books are thrown on a pile and publicly burned. Of course, this call to burning books was dismissed, in Russia itself and abroad, as a con interlude not taken seriously by the top Putin nomenklatura itself precisely as such, however, it works as an indication of a potent future – it was Herbert Marcuse who, apropos of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, claimed that, in the history of the emergence of Fascism, comedy precedes tragedy, the ultimate horror first appears as perceived as) operetta-like comedy.

There are two lessons to be drawn from this ideological constellation. First, we should be careful not to attribute to the Other the naive belief we are unable to sustain, transforming him or her into a 'subject supposed to believe'. Even a case of the greatest certainty – the notorious case of the 'Muslim fundamentalist' on a suicide mission – is not as conclusive as it may appear: is it really so clear that these people, at least, *must* 'really believe' that, after their death, they will wake up in heaven with seventy virgins at their disposal (recall the story of a suicide terrorist who, before going to accomplish his mission, even sprinkled himself with perfume, so that he would smell nice for the virgins)? What if, however, they are terribly unsure about their belief, and they use their suicidal act as a means of resolving this deadlock of doubt by asserting this belief: 'I don't know if I really believe – but, by killing myself for the Cause, I will proof *in actu* that I believe . . .'? Similarly, we should avoid the conclusion that Aleksandr Fadeyev, the arch-Stalinist writer and president of the Soviet Writers' Union who shot himself after hearing Khrushchev's secret report at the Twentieth Congress, must have been an 'honest believer': in all probability, he was fully aware of the utter corruption of the system; what he believed in was the big Other, that is, the public appearance of the socialist New Man, and so on. Consequently, he did not kill himself because he learnt anything new in Khrushchev's report; none of his illusions was shattered – what was shattered was *his belief in the 'performative force' of the ideological illusion itself*.

Fadeyev's suicide may be compared to that of the German mayor who, in early 1945, when the US Army occupied his town and forced him to visit the nearby concentration camp, immediately committed suicide upon his return home: not because he was not aware of what was going on in the name of the regime he served, so that when he was confronted with the truth, he could not bear it, and killed himself; on the contrary,

he knew more or less everything – the one who did not know was the big Other, the order of social appearances, so that his suicide was the ultimate act of hypocrisy, of *pretending* that he did not know. He killed himself to save the appearance of his honest ignorance. (It is almost as if Stalin was right when he condemned suicide as the act of ultimate cowardice, as the ultimate betrayal of the Party – at least if we apply his words to these cases. . . .)

The same goes for the much-celebrated 'honest Nazi', the mayor of a small East German town, who, when the Russians were approaching in February 1945, put on his mayoral uniform and all his medals, and took a stroll along the main street, where the Russians shot him down – in contrast to many others, who quickly destroyed all traces of their Nazi past: is this gesture – of publicly proclaiming one's allegiance to Nazi Germany in the hour of its defeat – really so noble? What was there for the mayor to be proud of? As if he did not know in what kind of state he was living! Was his gesture not also, therefore, a desperate hypocritical attempt to bestow a kind of nobility on a life which was – even in the very best of cases – full of compromises with the worst criminals?

The second lesson: instead of conceding any territory to the enemy in advance, we should struggle even for notions which appear to belong to the enemy 'naturally'. So, perhaps, we should unashamedly return to the great American tradition of Westerns, admired by Alain Badiou as the great genre of ethical *courage*. Of course, we cannot return to the naivety of the Westerns of the 1930s and early 1940s: the rise of what André Bazin called the 'meta-Westerns' of the early 1950s deprived the genre of its innocence. However, the genre was given a new lease of life in the second half of the 1950s – take Delmer Daves's two great masterpieces, *3.10 to Yuma* and *The Hanging Tree*, both far superior to the ultimate 'meta-Western' which

seems to embody the courageous act at its purest, Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon*. What both films share is the structure of displaced decision: the key Act is performed not by the central character who appears to be the focus of the ethical ordeal, but by a secondary character who may even be the very source of temptation. (There is an echo of this even in *High Noon*: at the very end, it becomes clear that it is not Gary Cooper whose courage is in fact tested, but his young wife, played by Grace Kelly.)

3.10 to *Yuma* tells the story of a poor farmer (Van Heflin) who, for 200 dollars which he badly needs in order to save his cattle from drought, accepts the job of escorting a bandit with a high price on his head (Glenn Ford) from the hotel where he is being held to the train that will take him to prison in Yuma. What we have, of course, is a classic story of an ethical ordeal; throughout the film, it seems that the person who is submitted to the ordeal is the farmer himself, exposed as he is to temptations in the style of the (undeservedly) more famous *High Noon*: all those who promised to help him abandon him when they discover that the hotel is surrounded by a gang sworn to save their boss; the imprisoned bandit himself alternately threatens the farmer and tries to bribe him, and so on. The last scene, however, in retrospect, totally changes our perception of the film: near the train, which is already leaving the station, the bandit and the farmer find themselves face to face with the entire gang waiting for the right moment to shoot the farmer, and thus free their boss. At this tense moment, when the situation seems hopeless for the farmer, the bandit suddenly turns to him and says: 'Trust me! Let's jump on the wagon together!' In short, the one who has really suffered an ordeal is the bandit, the apparent agent of temptation: at the end, he is won over by the farmer's integrity and sacrifices his own freedom for him.

And, *mutatis mutandis*, does not the same hold for all of us

today – for 'progressive' Western intellectuals who pass high judgements about how either workers in our societies or Third World crowds cravenly betrayed their revolutionary vocation and succumbed to nationalist or capitalist temptations? Take the repellent figure of the comfortable, well-paid English or French 'radical Leftist' condemning the Yugoslav masses for succumbing to the ethnic siren songs in the late 1980s: it was these 'radical Leftists' who were actually on trial, and who miserably failed the test in their misperception of the post-Yugoslav war. The same goes even more for the liberal multiculturalists who deplore the rise of New Right violence in Western societies: by adopting an arrogant patronizing attitude towards the phenomena they condemn, they fail the test. . . . Yes, the reborn patriots are right: today we really need new courage, and it is the lack of this courage (which is ultimately always also the courage to question *one's own* position) which is most conspicuous in the reaction of American (and European) intellectuals to September 11 and its aftermath.

In the second part of *Harmonielehre*, his major theoretical manifesto from 1911, Arnold Schoenberg develops his opposition to tonal music in terms which, superficially, almost recall late Nazi anti-Semitic tracts: tonal music has become a 'diseased', 'degenerated' world in need of a cleansing solution; the tonal system has succumbed to 'inbreeding and incest'; Romantic chords such as the diminished seventh are 'hermaphroditic', 'vagrant' and 'cosmopolitan' . . . nothing easier than to claim that such a Messianic-apocalyptic attitude is part of the same 'deeper spiritual situation' which gave birth to the Nazi 'final solution'. This, however, is precisely the conclusion we should avoid: what makes Nazism repulsive is not the rhetoric of a final solution as such, but the concrete twist it gives to it. Another popular topic of this kind of analysis is the allegedly 'proto-Fascist' character of mass choreography displaying

disciplined movements of thousands of bodies (parades, mass performances in stadiums, etc.); if we also see this in Socialism, we immediately draw the conclusion that there is a 'deeper solidarity' between the two 'totalitarianisms'. Such a procedure, the very prototype of ideological liberalism, misses the point: not only are such mass performances not inherently Fascist; they are not even 'neutral', waiting to be appropriated by Left or Right – it was Nazism which stole them and appropriated them from the workers' movement, their original site of birth.

It is here that we should oppose the standard historicist genealogy (the search for origins, influences, etc.) to the strict Nietzschean genealogy. Apropos of Nazism, the standard genealogy is exemplified by the search for the 'proto-Fascist' elements or kernel out of which Nazism grew (when, in Wagner's *Ring*, Hagen chases the Rhine gold; when the German Romantics aestheticized politics . . .); while the Nietzschean genealogy fully takes into account the rupture constitutive of a new historical event: none of the 'proto-Fascist' elements is Fascist *per se*, the only thing that makes them 'Fascist' is their specific articulation – or, to put it in Stephen Jay Gould's terms, all these elements are 'ex-apted' by Fascism. In other words, there is no 'Fascism *avant la lettre*', because it is the *letter itself* (*the nomination*) which makes Fascism proper out of the bundle of elements.

Along the same lines, we should radically reject the notion that discipline (from self-control to physical training) is a 'proto-Fascist' feature – the very predicate 'proto-Fascist' should be abandoned: it is the exemplary case of a pseudo-concept whose function is to block conceptual analysis: when we say that the organized spectacle of thousands of bodies (or, say, the admiration of sports which demand great effort and self-control like mountain climbing) is 'proto-Fascist', are we saying absolutely nothing, we are simply expressing a vague association which masks our ignorance. So when, decades ago, kung fu films were

popular (Bruce Lee, etc.), was it not obvious that we were dealing with a genuine working-class ideology of youngsters whose only path to success was the disciplinary training of their only possession, their bodies? Spontaneity and the 'let it go' attitude of indulging in excessive freedoms belong to those who have the means to afford it – those who have nothing have only their discipline. The 'bad' physical discipline, if there is one, is not collective training but, rather, jogging and body-building as part of the subjective economy of the realization of the Self's inner potentials – no wonder an obsession with one's body is an almost obligatory part of ex-Leftist radicals' passage into the 'maturity' of pragmatic politics: from Jane Fonda to Joschka Fischer, the 'latency period' between the two phases is marked by the focus on one's own body.

There is a well-known Israeli joke about Bill Clinton visiting Bibi Netanyahu: when Clinton sees a mysterious blue phone in Bibi's office, he asks Bibi what it is, and Bibi answers that it allows him to dial Him up there in the sky. Upon his return to the States, the envious Clinton demands that his secret service should provide him with such a phone – at any cost. They deliver it within two weeks, and it works, but the phone bill is exorbitant – two million dollars for a one-minute talk with Him up there. So Clinton furiously calls Bibi and complains: 'How can you afford such a phone, if even we, who support you financially, can't? Is this how you spend our money?' Bibi answers calmly: 'No, it's not that – you see, for us, Jews, that call counts as a local call!' Interestingly, in the Soviet version of the joke, God is replaced by Hell: when Nixon visits Brezhnev and sees a special phone, Brezhnev explains to him that this is a link to Hell; at the end of the joke, when Nixon complains about the price of the call, Brezhnev calmly answers: 'For us in the Soviet Union, the call to Hell counts as a local call.'

A postmodern liberal democrat's first, quasi-automatic,

reaction to this joke would be: this, precisely, is the source of Evil today – people who think they have a direct line to God (Truth, Justice, Democracy, or some other Absolute), and feel justified in denouncing others, their opponents, as having a direct line to Hell (Evil Empires or axes of Evil); against this absolutization, we should modestly accept that all our positions are relative, conditioned by contingent historical constellations, so that no one has definitive Solutions, merely pragmatic temporary solutions. The falsity of this stance was denounced by Chesterton: 'At any street corner we may meet a man who utters the frantic and blasphemous statement that he may be wrong. Every day one comes across somebody who says that of course his view may not be the right one. Of course his view must be the right one, or it is not his view.'³² Is the same falsity not clearly discernible in the rhetoric of many a postmodern deconstructionist? Chesterton is quite right to use the strong term 'blasphemous', which must be given its whole weight here: the apparently modest relativization of one's own position is the mode of appearance of its very opposite, of privileging one's own position of enunciation. Compare the struggle and pain of the 'fundamentalist' with the serene peace of the liberal democrat who, from his safe subjective position, ironically dismisses every full-fledged engagement, every 'dogmatic' taking sides.

So are we preaching the old lesson of how the ideological meaning of an element does not dwell in this element itself, but hinges on the way it is 'appropriated', articulated into a chain? Yes – with one fateful proviso: that we should summon up the courage to abandon 'democracy' as the Master-Signifier of this chain. Democracy is today's main political fetish, the disavowal

³² Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 37.

of basic social antagonisms: in the electoral situation, the social hierarchy is momentarily suspended, the social body is reduced to a pure multitude which can be numbered, and here the antagonism is also suspended. A decade ago, in the State of Louisiana's governor elections, when the only alternative to the ex-KKK David Duke was a corrupt Democrat, many cars displayed a sticker: 'Vote for a crook – it's important!' In the May 2002 French presidential elections, Front National leader Jean-Marie Le Pen got through to the final round against the incumbent, Jacques Chirac, who is suspected of financial impropriety. Faced with this unenviable choice, demonstrators displayed a banner reading 'L'arnaque plutôt que la haine [Swindling is better than hating]'. That is the ultimate paradox of democracy: within the existing political order, every campaign against corruption ends up being co-opted by the populist extreme Right. In Italy, the ultimate outcome of the 'clean hands' campaign which destroyed the old political establishment centred on Christian Democracy is Berlusconi in power; in Austria, Haider legitimized his rise to power in anti-corruption terms; even in the USA, it is accepted common wisdom that Democratic Congressmen are more corrupt than Republican ones. The idea of a 'honest democracy' is an illusion, as is the notion of the order of Law without its obscene superego supplement: what looks like a contingent distortion of the democratic project is inscribed into its very notion – that is, democracy is *démocrassouille*. The democratic political order is of its very nature susceptible to corruption. The ultimate choice is: do we accept and endorse this corruption in a spirit of realistic resigned wisdom, or can we summon up the courage to formulate a Leftist alternative to democracy in order to break the vicious cycle of democratic corruption and the Rightist campaigns to get rid of it?³³

³³ This inherent limitation of democracy also accounts for the unique

Where, then, should we look for an alternative? Here, we should proceed with extreme caution and, simultaneously, without any prejudices – why should we not see emancipatory potential even in such an apparently ‘reactionary’ notion as ‘Russian identity’? Perhaps the peculiarity of words can be our guide in this matter: often, in Russian, there are two words for (what appears to us, Westerners) the same term – one designating its ordinary meaning, the other a more ethically charged ‘absolute’ use. There is *istina*, the common notion of truth as adequacy to facts; and (usually capitalized) *Pravda*, the absolute Truth also designating the ethically committed ideal Order of the Good. There is *svoboda*, the ordinary freedom to do as we like within the existing social order; and *volja*, the more metaphysically charged absolute drive to follow one’s will right up to self-destruction – as the Russians like to say, in the West, you have *svoboda*, but we have *volja*. There is *gosudarstvo*, the state in its ordinary administrative aspects; and *derzhava*, the State as the unique agency of absolute Power. (Applying the well-known Benjamin–Schmitt distinction, I may venture to claim that the difference between *gosudarstvo* and *derzhava* is the one between constituted and constituting power: *gosudarstvo* is the state administrative machine running its course prescribed by legal regulations; while *derzhava* is the agent of unconditional Power.) There are

power of fascination exerted by the figure of Salvador Allende: in so far as he tried to combine socialism with ‘pluralist democracy’, his true role is not that of a model to follow, but (independently of his subjective intentions) that of a negative hero whose task was to demonstrate, by means of his very defeat (tragic death in 1973), the impossibility of socialism without violence, in a ‘soft’ parliamentary way. That is to say, let us face it: we (old enough to be his contemporaries) all knew that his project was doomed, so that we were ultimately just waiting for it to happen, secretly even craving for his death.

intellectuals, educated people, and *intelligentsia*, intellectuals charged with and dedicated to a special mission to reform society.³⁴ (Along the same lines, there is already in Marx the implicit distinction between ‘working class’ – a simple category of social Being – and ‘proletariat’ – a category of Truth, the revolutionary Subject proper.)

Is not this opposition ultimately the one, elaborated by Alain Badiou, between Event and the positivity of mere Being? ‘*Istina*’ is the mere factual truth (correspondence, adequacy), while ‘*Pravda*’ designates the self-relating Event of truth; ‘*svoboda*’ is the ordinary freedom of choice, while ‘*volja*’ is the resolute Event of freedom. . . . In Russian, this gap is directly inscribed, appears as such, and thus reveals the radical risk involved in every Truth-Event: there is no ontological guarantee that ‘*Pravda*’ will succeed in asserting itself at the level of facts (covered by ‘*istina*’). And, again, it seems as if the awareness of this gap itself is inscribed in Russian language, in the unique expression *awos* or *na awos*, which means something like ‘on our luck’; it articulates the hope that things will turn out all right when one makes a risky radical gesture without being able to discern all its possible consequences – something like Napoleon’s *on attaque, et puis on verra*, often quoted by Lenin. The interesting feature of this expression is that it combines voluntarism, an active attitude of taking risks, with a more fundamental fatalism: one acts, makes a leap, and then one hopes that things will turn out all right. . . . What if this stance is precisely what we need today, split as we are between

34 These distinctions are counterbalanced by some important condensations, multiple meanings of terms; say, the Russian term for peace, *mir*, also means ‘world, universe’ and the closed universe of the premodern farming village community, with the underlying idea, of course, that the whole cosmos is a harmonious Whole, like a well-regulated farming village.

Western utilitarian pragmatism and Oriental fatalism as the two faces of today's global 'spontaneous ideology'?

The Dutch Rightist populist politician Pim Fortuyn, killed in early May 2002, two weeks before elections in which he was expected to win a fifth of the votes, was a paradoxical symptomatic figure: a Rightist populist whose personal features, and even (most of his) opinions, were almost perfectly politically correct: he was gay, had good personal relations with many immigrants, with an innate sense of irony, and so on – in short, he was a good tolerant liberal with regard to everything except his basic political stance. What he embodied was thus the intersection between Rightist populism and liberal political correctness – perhaps he had to die because he was living proof that the opposition between Rightist populism and liberal tolerance is a false one, that we are dealing with two sides of the same coin. Should we not, therefore, be striving for the exact opposite of the unfortunate Fortuyn: not the Fascist with a human face, but the freedom fighter with an inhuman face?

4

FROM HOMO SUCKER TO HOMO SACER

The danger the West is courting in its 'war on terrorism' was, yet again, clearly perceived by Chesterton who, in the very last pages of his *Orthodoxy*, that ultimate piece of Catholic propaganda, deployed the fundamental deadlock of pseudo-revolutionary critics of religion: they start by denouncing religion as the force of oppression which threatens human freedom; in fighting religion, however, they are compelled to forsake freedom itself, thus sacrificing precisely that which they wanted to defend – the ultimate victim of the atheist theoretical and practical rejection of religion is not religion (which, unperturbed, continues its life), but freedom itself, allegedly threatened by it. The radical atheist universe, deprived of religious reference, is the grey universe of egalitarian terror and tyranny:

Men who begin to fight the Church for the sake of freedom and humanity end by flinging away freedom and humanity if only they may fight the Church . . . I know a man who has such a passion for proving that he will have no personal existence after death that he falls back on the position that he has