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VIOLENCE

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

VIOLENCE

SIX SIDEWAYS REFLECTIONS

Slavoj Žižek

BIG IDEAS/SMALL BOOKS

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Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo

SOS VIOLENCE

Violence: Subjective and Objective

In 1922 the Soviet government organised the forced expulsion of leading anti-communist intellectuals, from philosophers and theologians to economists and historians. They left Russia for Germany on a boat known as the *Philosophy Steamer*. Prior to his expulsion, Nikolai Lossky, one of those forced into exile, had enjoyed with his family the comfortable life of the haute bourgeoisie, supported by servants and nannies. He

simply couldn't understand who would want to destroy his way of life. What had the Losskys and their kind done? His boys and their friends, as they inherited the best of what Russia had to offer, helped fill the world with talk of literature and music and art, and they led gentle lives. What was wrong with that?¹

While Lossky was without doubt a sincere and benevolent person, really caring for the poor and trying to civilise Russian life, such an attitude betrays a breathtaking insensitivity to the *systemic* violence that had to go on in order for such a comfortable life to be possible. We're talking here of the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence. The Losskys and their kind effectively "did nothing

bad.” There was no subjective evil in their life, just the invisible background of this systemic violence. “Then suddenly, into this almost Proustian world . . . Leninism broke in. The day Andrei Lossky was born, in May 1917, the family could hear the sound of riderless horses galloping down neighboring Ivanovskaya Street.”² Such ominous intrusions multiplied. Once, in his school, Lossky’s son was brutally taunted by a working-class schoolmate who shouted at him that “the days of him and his family are over now . . .” In their benevolent-gentle innocence, the Losskys perceived such signs of the forthcoming catastrophe as emerging out of nowhere, as signals of an incomprehensibly malevolent new spirit. What they didn’t understand was that in the guise of this irrational subjective violence, they were getting back the message they themselves sent out in its inverted true form. It is this violence which seems to arise “out of nowhere” that, perhaps, fits what Walter Benjamin, in his “Critique of Violence,” called pure, divine violence.³

Opposing all forms of violence, from direct, physical violence (mass murder, terror) to ideological violence (racism, incitement, sexual discrimination), seems to be the main preoccupation of the tolerant liberal attitude that predominates today. An SOS call sustains such talk, drowning out all other approaches: everything else can and has to wait . . . Is there not something suspicious, indeed symptomatic, about this focus on subjective violence—that violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds? Doesn’t it desperately try to distract our attention from the true locus of trouble, by obliterating

from view other forms of violence and thus actively participating in them? According to a well-known anecdote, a German officer visited Picasso in his Paris studio during the Second World War. There he saw *Guernica* and, shocked at the modernist “chaos” of the painting, asked Picasso: “Did you do this?” Picasso calmly replied: “No, *you* did this!” Today, many a liberal, when faced with violent outbursts such as the recent looting in the suburbs of Paris, asks the few remaining leftists who still count on a radical social transformation: “Isn’t it *you* who did this? Is *this* what you want?” And we should reply, like Picasso: “No, *you* did this! This is the true result of *your* politics!”

There is an old joke about a husband who returns home earlier than usual from work and finds his wife in bed with another man. The surprised wife exclaims: “Why have you come back early?” The husband furiously snaps back: “What are you doing in bed with another man?” The wife calmly replies: “I asked you a question first—don’t try to squeeze out of it by changing the topic!”⁴ The same goes for violence: the task is precisely to *change the topic*, to move from the desperate humanitarian SOS call to stop violence to the analysis of that other SOS, the complex interaction of the three modes of violence: subjective, objective, and symbolic. The lesson is thus that one should resist the fascination of subjective violence, of violence enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds: subjective violence is just the most visible of the three.



The notion of objective violence needs to be thoroughly historicised: it took on a new shape with capitalism. Marx described the mad, self-enhancing circulation of capital, whose solipsistic path of parthenogenesis reaches its apogee in today's meta-reflexive speculations on futures. It is far too simplistic to claim that the spectre of this self-engendering monster that pursues its path disregarding any human or environmental concern is an ideological abstraction and that behind this abstraction there are real people and natural objects on whose productive capacities and resources capital's circulation is based and on which it feeds like a gigantic parasite. The problem is that this "abstraction" is not only in our financial speculators' misperception of social reality, but that it is "real" in the precise sense of determining the structure of the material social processes: the fate of whole strata of the population and sometimes of whole countries can be decided by the "solipsistic" speculative dance of capital, which pursues its goal of profitability in blessed indifference to how its movement will affect social reality. So Marx's point is not primarily to reduce this second dimension to the first one, that is, to demonstrate how the theological mad dance of commodities arises out of the antagonisms of "real life." Rather his point is that *one cannot properly grasp the first (the social reality of material production and social interaction) without the second*: it is the self-propelling metaphysical dance of capital that runs the show, that provides the key to real-life developments and catastrophes. Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than any direct pre-

capitalist socio-ideological violence: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their “evil” intentions, but is purely “objective,” systemic, anonymous. Here we encounter the Lacanian difference between reality and the Real: “reality” is the social reality of the actual people involved in interaction and in the productive processes, while the Real is the inexorable “abstract,” spectral logic of capital that determines what goes on in social reality. One can experience this gap in a palpable way when one visits a country where life is obviously in shambles. We see a lot of ecological decay and human misery. However, the economist’s report that one reads afterwards informs us that the country’s economic situation is “financially sound” – reality doesn’t matter, what matters is the situation of capital . . .

Is this not truer than ever today? Do phenomena usually designated as those of virtual capitalism (the futures trade and similar abstract financial speculations) not point towards the reign of the “real abstraction” at its purest, far more radical than in Marx’s time? In short, the highest form of ideology does not reside in getting caught in ideological spectrality, forgetting about its foundation in real people and their relations, but precisely in overlooking this Real of spectrality and in pretending directly to address “real people with their real worries.” Visitors to the London Stock Exchange get a free leaflet which explains that the stock market is not about mysterious fluctuations, but about real people and their products. This really is ideology at its purest.

Hegel’s fundamental rule is that “objective”

excess—the direct reign of abstract universality which imposes its law mechanically and with utter disregard for the concerned subject caught in its web—is always supplemented by “subjective” excess—the irregular, arbitrary exercise of whims. An exemplary case of this interdependence is provided by Etienne Balibar, who distinguishes two opposite but complementary modes of excessive violence: the “ultra-objective” or systemic violence that is inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism, which involve the “automatic” creation of excluded and dispensable individuals from the homeless to the unemployed, and the “ultra-subjective” violence of newly emerging ethnic and/or religious, in short racist, “fundamentalisms.”⁵

Our blindness to the results of systemic violence is perhaps most clearly perceptible in debates about communist crimes. Responsibility for communist crimes is easy to allocate: we are dealing with subjective evil, with agents who did wrong. We can even identify the ideological sources of the crimes—totalitarian ideology, *The Communist Manifesto*, Rousseau, even Plato. But when one draws attention to the millions who died as the result of capitalist globalisation, from the tragedy of Mexico in the sixteenth century through to the Belgian Congo holocaust a century ago, responsibility is largely denied. All this seems just to have happened as the result of an “objective” process, which nobody planned and executed and for which there was no “Capitalist Manifesto.” (The one who came closest to writing it was Ayn Rand.)⁶ The fact that the Belgian king Leopold II who presided over the Congo holocaust was a great humanitarian and proclaimed a saint

by the Pope cannot be dismissed as a mere case of ideological hypocrisy and cynicism. Subjectively, he may well have been a sincere humanitarian, even modestly counteracting the catastrophic consequences of the vast economic project which was the ruthless exploitation of the natural resources of the Congo over which he presided. The country was his personal fiefdom! The ultimate irony is that even most of the profits from this endeavour were for the benefit of the Belgian people, for public works, museums, and so on. King Leopold was surely the precursor of today's "liberal communists," including . . .

The Good Men from Porto Davos

In the last decade, Davos and Porto Alegre figured as the twin cities of globalisation. Davos, an exclusive Swiss resort, is where the global elite of managers, statesmen, and media personalities meet under heavy police protection, in conditions of a state of siege, and try to convince us and themselves that globalisation is its own best remedy. Porto Alegre is the sub-tropical Brazilian town where the counter-elite of the anti-globalisation movement meet, and try to convince us and themselves that capitalist globalisation is not our fate, that—as the official slogan puts it—“another world is possible.” Over these last years, however, the Porto Alegre reunions seem somehow to have lost their impetus. We hear less and less of them. Where have the bright stars of Porto Alegre gone?

Some of them, at least, went to Davos. What increasingly gives the predominant tone to Davos meetings is the group of entrepreneurs, some of whom ironically

refer to themselves as “liberal communists,” who no longer accept the opposition between Davos (global capitalism) and Porto Alegre (the new social movements alternative to global capitalism). Their claim is that we can have the global capitalist cake, i.e., thrive as profitable entrepreneurs, and eat it, too, i.e., endorse the anti-capitalist causes of social responsibility and ecological concern. No need for Porto Alegre, since Davos itself can become Porto Davos.

The new liberal communists are, of course, our usual suspects: Bill Gates and George Soros, the CEOs of Google, IBM, Intel, eBay, as well as their court philosophers, most notably the journalist Thomas Friedman. What makes this group interesting is that their ideology has become all but indistinguishable from the new breed of anti-globalist leftist radicals: Toni Negri himself, the guru of the postmodern left, praises digital capitalism as containing *in nuce* all the elements of communism—one has only to drop the capitalist form, and the revolutionary goal is achieved. Both the old right, with its ridiculous belief in authority and order and parochial patriotism, and the old left with its capitalised Struggle against Capitalism, are today’s true conservatives fighting their shadow-theatre struggles and out of touch with the new realities. The signifier of this new reality in the liberal communist Newspeak is “smart”: smart indicates the dynamic and nomadic as against centralised bureaucracy; dialogue and cooperation against hierarchical authority; flexibility against routine; culture and knowledge against old industrial production;

spontaneous interaction and autopoiesis against fixed hierarchy.

Bill Gates is the icon of what he has called “frictionless capitalism,” a post-industrial society in which we witness the “end of labor,” in which software is winning over hardware and the young nerd over the older dark-suited manager. In the new company headquarters, there is little external discipline. Former hackers who dominate the scene work long hours and enjoy free drinks in green surroundings. A crucial feature of Gates as icon is that he is perceived as the ex-hacker who made it. One needs to confer on the term “hacker” all its subversive/marginal/anti-establishment connotations. Hackers want to disturb the smooth functioning of large bureaucratic corporations. At the fantasmatic level, the underlying notion here is that Gates is a subversive, marginal hooligan who has taken over and dressed himself up as a respectable chairman.

Liberal communists are big executives recuperating the spirit of contest, or, to put it the other way round, counter-cultural geeks who take over big corporations. Their dogma is a new, postmodernised version of Adam Smith’s old invisible hand of the market. Market and social responsibility here are not opposites. They can be reunited for mutual benefit. As Thomas Friedman, one of their gurus, puts it, nobody has to be vile in order to do business; collaboration with and participation of the employees, dialogue with customers, respect for the environment, transparency of deals, are nowadays the keys to success. In a perceptive account, Olivier Malnuit enumerates the ten commandments of the liberal communist:

1. Give everything away for free (free access, no copyright . . .); just charge for the additional services, which will make you even richer.
2. Change the world, don't just sell things: global revolution, a change of society will make things better.
3. Be caring, sharing, and aware of social responsibility.
4. Be creative: focus on design, new technologies, and sciences.
5. Tell it all: there should be no secrets. Endorse and practise the cult of transparency, the free flow of information, all humanity should collaborate and interact.
6. Don't work and take on a fixed nine-to-five job. Just engage in improvised smart, dynamic, flexible communications.
7. Go back to school and engage in permanent education.
8. Act as an enzyme: work not only for the market, but trigger new forms of social collaborations.
9. Die poor: return your wealth to those who need it, since you have more than you can ever spend.
10. Stand in for the state: practise the partnership of companies with the state.⁷

Liberal communists are pragmatic. They hate a doctrinaire approach. For them there is no single exploited working class today. There are only concrete problems to be solved: starvation in Africa, the plight of Muslim women, religious fundamentalist violence. When there is a humanitarian crisis in Africa—and liberal communists

really love humanitarian crises, which bring out the best in them! – there is no point in engaging in old-style anti-imperialist rhetoric. Instead, all of us should just concentrate on what really does the work of solving the problem: engage people, governments, and business in a common enterprise; start moving things, instead of relying on centralised state help; approach the crisis in a creative and unconventional way, without fretting over labels.

Liberal communists like examples such as the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. They point out that the decision of some large international corporations to ignore apartheid rules in their South African companies, abolishing all segregation, paying blacks and whites the same salary for the same job, and so on, was as important as the direct political struggle. Is this not an ideal case of the overlapping between the struggle for political freedom and business interests? The self-same companies can now thrive in post-apartheid South Africa.

Liberal communists also love the student protests which shattered France in May 1968: what an explosion of youthful energy and creativity! How it shattered the confines of the rigid bureaucratic order! What new impetus it gave to economic and social life, once the political illusions dropped away! After all, many of them were young then, protesting and fighting cops on the streets. If they've changed now, it's not because they resigned themselves to reality, but because they needed to change in order *really* to change the world, *really* to revolutionise our lives. Hadn't Marx already asked: what are political upheavals in comparison with the invention of

the steam engine? Didn't this do more than all revolutions to change our lives? And would Marx not have said today: what are all the protests against global capitalism worth in comparison with the invention of the internet?

Above all, liberal communists are true citizens of the world. They are good people who worry. They worry about populist fundamentalists *and* irresponsible, greedy capitalist corporations. They see the "deeper causes" of today's problems: it is mass poverty and hopelessness which breed fundamentalist terror. So their goal is not to earn money, but to change the world, though if this makes them more money as a by-product, who's to complain! Bill Gates is already the single greatest benefactor in the history of humanity, displaying his love for neighbours with hundreds of millions freely given to education, and the battles against hunger and malaria. The catch, of course, is that in order to give, first you have to take—or, as some would put it, create. The justification of liberal communists is that in order to really help people, you must have the means to do it, and as experience of the dismal failure of all centralised statist and collectivist approaches teaches, private initiative is the efficient way. So if the state wants to regulate their business, to tax them excessively, is it aware that in this way it is effectively undermining the stated goal of its activity—that is, to make life better for the large majority, to really help those in need?

Liberal communists do not want to be just machines for generating profits. They want their lives to have a deeper meaning. They are against old-fashioned religion, but for spirituality, for non-confessional medita-

tion. Everybody knows that Buddhism foreshadows the brain sciences, that the power of meditation can be measured scientifically! Their preferred motto is social responsibility and gratitude: they are the first to admit that society was incredibly good to them by allowing them to deploy their talents and amass wealth, so it is their duty to give something back to society and help people. After all, what is the point of their success, if not to help people? It is only this caring that makes business success worthwhile . . .

We need to ask ourselves whether there really is something new here. Is it not merely that an attitude which, in the wild old capitalist days of the U.S. industrial barons, was something of an exception (although not as much as it may appear) has now gained universal currency? Good old Andrew Carnegie employed a private army brutally to suppress organised labour in his steelworks and then distributed large parts of his wealth to educational, artistic, and humanitarian causes. A man of steel, he proved he had a heart of gold. In the same way, today's liberal communists give away with one hand what they first took with the other. This brings to mind a chocolate laxative available in the U.S. It is publicised with the paradoxical injunction: "Do you have constipation? Eat more of this chocolate!" In other words, eat the very thing that causes constipation in order to be cured of it.

The same structure—the thing itself is the remedy against the threat it poses—is widely visible in today's ideological landscape. Take the figure of the financier and philanthropist George Soros, for instance. Soros stands for the most ruthless financial speculative

exploitation combined with its counter-agent, humanitarian concern about the catastrophic social consequences of an unbridled market economy. Even his daily routine is marked by a self-eliminating counterpoint: half of his working time is devoted to financial speculation and the other half to humanitarian activities—such as providing finance for cultural and democratic activities in post-communist countries, writing essays and books—which ultimately fight the effects of his own speculation.

The two faces of Bill Gates parallel the two faces of Soros. The cruel businessman destroys or buys out competitors, aims at virtual monopoly, employs all the tricks of the trade to achieve his goals. Meanwhile, the greatest philanthropist in the history of mankind quaintly asks: “What does it serve to have computers, if people do not have enough to eat and are dying of dysentery?” In liberal communist ethics, the ruthless pursuit of profit is counteracted by charity. Charity is the humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploitation. In a superego blackmail of gigantic proportions, the developed countries “help” the undeveloped with aid, credits, and so on, and thereby avoid the key issue, namely their complicity in and co-responsibility for the miserable situation of the undeveloped.⁸

Referring to Georges Bataille’s notion of the “general economy” of sovereign expenditure, which he opposes to the “restrained economy” of capitalism’s endless profiteering, the German post-humanist philosopher Peter Sloterdijk provides the outlines of capitalism’s split from itself, its immanent self-overcoming: capitalism culminates when it “creates out of itself its own most

radical—and the only fruitful—opposite, totally different from what the classic Left, caught in its miserabilism, was able to dream about.”⁹ His positive mention of Andrew Carnegie shows the way; the sovereign self-negating gesture of the endless accumulation of wealth is to spend this wealth for things beyond price, and outside market circulation: public good, arts and sciences, health, etc. This concluding “sovereign” gesture enables the capitalist to break out of the vicious cycle of endless expanded reproduction, of gaining money in order to earn more money. When he donates his accumulated wealth to public good, the capitalist self-negates himself as the mere personification of capital and its reproductive circulation: his life acquires meaning. It is no longer just expanded reproduction as self-goal. Furthermore, the capitalist thus accomplishes the shift from *eros* to *thymos*, from the perverted “erotic” logic of accumulation to public recognition and reputation. What this amounts to is nothing less than elevating figures like Soros or Gates to personifications of the inherent self-negation of the capitalist process itself: their work of charity—their immense donations to public welfare—is not just a personal idiosyncrasy. Whether sincere or hypocritical, it is the logical concluding point of capitalist circulation, necessary from the strictly economic standpoint, since it allows the capitalist system to postpone its crisis. It re-establishes balance—a kind of redistribution of wealth to the truly needy—without falling into a fateful trap: the destructive logic of resentment and enforced statist redistribution of wealth which can only end in generalised misery. It also avoids, one might add, the other mode of re-establishing a kind of

balance and asserting *thymos* through sovereign expenditure, namely wars . . .

This paradox signals a sad predicament of ours: today's capitalism cannot reproduce itself on its own. It needs extra-economic charity to sustain the cycle of social reproduction.

A Liberal-Communist Village

It is the merit of M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* that it renders the liberal-communist way of life, based on fear, at its purest. Those who all too easily dismiss Shyamalan's films as the lowest of New Age kitsch are in for some surprises here. The eponymous village in Pennsylvania is cut off from the rest of the world and surrounded by woods full of dangerous monsters, known to the villagers as "Those We Don't Speak Of." Most villagers are content to live by the bargain they made with the creatures: they don't enter the forest, the creatures don't enter the town. Conflict arises when the young Lucius Hunt wishes to leave the village in search of new medicines and the pact is broken. Lucius and Ivy Walker, the village leader's blind daughter, decide to get married. This makes the village idiot madly jealous; he stabs Lucius and nearly kills him, leaving him at the mercy of an infection that requires medicine from the outside world. Ivy's father then tells her about the town's secret: there are no monsters, and the year isn't really 1897. The town elders were part of a twentieth-century crime victims' support group which decided to withdraw from the century completely; Walker's father had been a millionaire businessman, so they bought land, called it a "wildlife preserve," surrounded it with

a big fence and lots of guards, bribed government officials to reroute aeroplanes away from the community, and moved inside, concocting the story about “Those We Don’t Speak Of” to keep anyone from leaving. With her father’s blessing, Ivy slips outside, meets a friendly security guard who gives her some medicine, and returns to save her betrothed’s life. At the film’s end, the village elders decide to go on with their secluded lives: the village idiot’s death can be presented to the uninitiated as proof that monsters exist, thereby confirming the founding myth of the community. Sacrificial logic is reasserted as the condition of community, as its secret bond.

No wonder most critics dismissed the film as the worst case of ideological cocooning: “It’s easy to understand why he’s attracted to setting a movie in a period where people proclaimed their emotions in full and heartfelt sentences, or why he enjoys building a village that’s impenetrable to the outside world. He’s not making movies. He’s making cocoons.”¹⁰ Underlying the film is thus the desire to recreate a closed universe of authenticity in which innocence is protected from the corrosive force of modernity: “It’s all about how to protect your innocence from getting hurt by the ‘creatures’ in your life; the desire to protect your children from going into the unknown. If these ‘creatures’ have hurt you, you don’t want them to hurt your children and the younger generation may be willing to risk that.”¹¹

A closer look reveals the film to be much more ambiguous. When reviewers noticed that “the movie is in H. P. Lovecraft territory: severe, wintry New England

palette; a suggestion of inbreeding; hushed mentions of 'the Old Ones,' 'Those We Don't Speak Of,'¹² as a rule they forgot to note the political context. The late-nineteenth-century self-subsistent community evokes the many utopian-socialist experiments that sprang up in America. This does not mean that the Lovecraft reference to supernatural horror is just a mask or a false lure. We have two universes: the modern, open "risk society" versus the safety of the old secluded universe of Meaning—but the price of Meaning is a finite, closed space guarded by unnameable monsters. Evil is not simply excluded in this closed utopian space—it is transformed into a mythic threat with which the community establishes a temporary truce and against which it has to maintain a permanent state of emergency.

The "Deleted Scenes" special feature on a DVD release all too often makes the viewer realise that the director was only too right to delete them. The DVD edition of *The Village* is an exception. One of the deleted scenes shows a drill: Walker rings the bell, which signals a speedy practice retreat into underground shelters. Here is where the people must go in the event that the creatures attack. It is as if authentic community is possible only in conditions of permanent threat, in a continuous state of emergency.¹³ This threat is orchestrated, as we learn, in the best "totalitarian" manner by the inner circle, the "elders" of the community itself, in order to prevent the uninitiated youngsters from leaving the village and risking the passage through the forest to the decadent towns. Evil itself has to be redoubled: the "real" evil of late-capitalist social disin-

tegration has to be transposed into the archaic magic-mythic evil of “monsters.” The evil is a part of the inner circle itself: it is *imagined* by its members. We seem to be back, here, with G. K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday*, in which the highest police authority is the same person as the super-criminal, staging a battle with himself. In a proto-Hegelian way, the external threat the community is fighting is its own inherent essence . . .¹⁴

And what if this is true in a much more radical way than may at first appear? What if the true evil of our societies is not their capitalist dynamics as such, but our attempts to extricate ourselves from them—all the while profiting—by carving out self-enclosed communal spaces, from “gated communities” to exclusive racial or religious groups? That is to say, is the point of *The Village* not precisely to demonstrate that today, a return to an authentic community in which speech still directly expresses true emotions—the village of the socialist utopia—is a fake which can only be staged as a spectacle for the very rich? The exemplary figures of evil today are not ordinary consumers who pollute the environment and live in a violent world of disintegrating social links, but those who, while fully engaged in creating conditions for such universal devastation and pollution, buy their way out of their own activity, living in gated communities, eating organic food, taking holidays in wildlife preserves, and so on.

In Alfonso Cuarón’s film *Children of Men*, based on the P. D. James novel, the liberal-communist village is the United Kingdom itself. It is 2027. The human race is infertile. The earth’s youngest inhabitant, born eighteen

years earlier, has just been killed in Buenos Aires. The U.K. lives in a permanent state of emergency: anti-terrorist squads chase illegal immigrants, the state power administering a dwindling population which vegetates in sterile hedonism. Hedonist permissiveness plus new forms of social apartheid and control based on fear—are these not what our societies are now about? But here is Cuarón's stroke of genius: "Many of the stories of the future involve something like 'Big Brother,' but I think that's a twentieth-century view of tyranny. The tyranny happening now is taking new disguises—the tyranny of the twenty-first century is called 'democracy.'"¹⁵ This is why the rulers of Cuarón's world are not grey and uniformed Orwellian "totalitarian" bureaucrats, but enlightened, democratic administrators, cultured, each with his or her own "life style." When the hero visits an ex-friend, now a top government official, to gain a special permit for a refugee, we enter something like a Manhattan upper-class gay couple's loft, the informally dressed official with his crippled partner at the table.

Children of Men is obviously not a film about infertility as a biological problem. The infertility Cuarón's film is about was diagnosed long ago by Friedrich Nietzsche, when he perceived how Western civilisation was moving in the direction of the Last Man, an apathetic creature with no great passion or commitment. Unable to dream, tired of life, he takes no risks, seeking only comfort and security, an expression of tolerance with one another: "A little poison now and then: that makes for pleasant dreams. And much poison at the end, for a pleasant death. They have their

little pleasures for the day, and their little pleasures for the night, but they have a regard for health. 'We have discovered happiness,'—say the Last Men, and they blink."¹⁶

We from the First World countries find it more and more difficult even to imagine a public or universal cause for which one would be ready to sacrifice one's life. Indeed, the split between First and Third World runs increasingly along the lines of an opposition between leading a long, satisfying life full of material and cultural wealth, and dedicating one's life to some transcendent cause. Isn't this the antagonism between what Nietzsche called "passive" and "active" nihilism? We in the West are the Last Men, immersed in stupid daily pleasures, while the Muslim radicals are ready to risk everything, engaged in the nihilist struggle up to the point of self-destruction. What is gradually disappearing in this opposition between those who are "in," the Last Men who dwell in aseptic gated communities, and those who are "out," are the good old middle classes. The "middle class is a luxury capitalism can no longer afford."¹⁷ The only place in *Children of Men* where a strange sense of freedom prevails is Bexhill on Sea, a kind of liberated territory outside the all-pervasive and suffocating oppression. The town, isolated by a wall and turned into a refugee camp, is run by its inhabitants, who are illegal immigrants. Life is thriving here with Islamic fundamentalist military demonstrations, but also with acts of authentic solidarity. No wonder that rare creature, the newborn child, makes its appearance here. At the film's end, this Bexhill on Sea is ruthlessly bombed by the air force.

Sexuality in the Atonal World

What kind of sexuality fits this universe? On 6 August 2006 London hosted the U.K.'s first "masturbate-a-thon," a collective event in which hundreds of men and women pleased themselves for charity, raising money for sexual and reproductive health agencies. They also raised awareness and dispelled the shame and taboos that persist around this most commonplace, natural, and safe form of sexual activity. The formula was invented at Good Vibrations—a San Francisco sexual-health company—as part of a National Masturbation Month, which they founded and have been hosting since 1995 when the original San Francisco M-A-T took place. Here is how Dr. Carol Queen justifies it all:

We live in a society in which sexual expression has always been legislated and restricted and the pursuit of pure pleasure is frequently condemned as selfish and childish. A lot of people who consider themselves free of sexual hang-ups have simply rewritten the equation "sex is only good if it involves procreation" to "sex is only good if it involves two loving people" . . . Masturbation is our first sexual activity, a natural source of pleasure that's available to us throughout our lives, and a unique form of creative self-expression. Each time you masturbate, you're celebrating your sexuality and your innate capacity for pleasure, so give yourself a hand! . . . Masturbation can be a radical act, and the culture that suppresses masturbation may suppress many other personal freedoms as well. While celebrating National Masturbation Month and doing

your part to bring self-love out of the closet, keep in mind that erotic freedom is essential to true well-being, everywhere.¹⁸

The ideological stance underlying the notion of the masturbate-a-thon is marked by a conflict between its form and content: it builds a collective out of individuals who are ready to *share* with others the solipsistic egotism of their stupid pleasure. This contradiction, however, is more apparent than real. Freud already knew about the link between narcissism and immersion in a crowd, best rendered precisely by the Californian phrase “to share an experience.” This coincidence of opposed features is grounded in the exclusion that they share: one not only can be, one *is* alone in a crowd. Both an individual’s isolation and his immersion in a crowd exclude intersubjectivity proper, the encounter with an Other. This is why, as the French philosopher Alain Badiou set out in a perspicuous way, today more than ever one should insist on a focus on love, not mere enjoyment: it is love, the encounter of the Two, which “transubstantiates” idiotic masturbatory enjoyment into an event proper.¹⁹ A minimally refined sensitivity tells us that it is more difficult to masturbate in front of an other than to be engaged in a sexual interaction with him or her: the very fact that the other is reduced to an observer, not participating in my activity, makes my act much more “shameful.” Events such as the masturbate-a-thon signal the end of shame proper. This is what makes it one of the clearest indications of where we stand today, of an ideology which sustains our most intimate self-experience.

“Why masturbate?” Here is the list of reasons proposed by Queen:

- Because sexual pleasure is each person’s birthright.
- Because masturbation is the ultimate safe sex.
- Because masturbation is a joyous expression of self-love.
- Because masturbation offers numerous health benefits including menstrual cramp relief, stress reduction, endorphin release, stronger pelvic muscles, reduction of prostate gland infection for men, and resistance to yeast infections for women.
- Because masturbation is an excellent cardiovascular workout.
- Because each person is their own best lover.
- Because masturbation increases sexual awareness.

Everything is here: increased self-awareness, health benefits, struggle against social oppression, the most radical politically correct stance (here, it’s certain that nobody is harassed), and the affirmation of sexual pleasure at its most elementary—“each person is their own best lover.” The use of the expression usually reserved for homosexuals (masturbation “brings self-love out of the closet”) hints at a kind of implicit teleology of the gradual exclusion of all otherness: first, in homosexuality, the other sex is excluded (one does it with another person of the same sex). Then, in a kind of mockingly Hegelian negation of negation, the very dimension of otherness is cancelled: one does it with oneself.

In December 2006, the New York City authorities declared that to chose one's gender—and so, if necessary, to have a sex-change operation performed—is one of the inalienable human rights. The ultimate difference, the “transcendental” difference that grounds human identity itself, thus turns into something open to manipulation: the ultimate plasticity of being human is asserted instead. The masturbate-a-thon is the ideal form of sex activity of this transgendered subject, or, in other words, of *you*, the subject *Time* magazine elevated into “Person of the Year” in its 18 December 2006 issue. This annual honour went not to Ahmadinejad, Chavez, Kim Jong-Il, or any other member of the gang of usual suspects, but to “you”: each and every one of us who is using or creating content on the World Wide Web. The cover showed a white keyboard with a mirror for a computer screen where each of us readers can see his or her own reflection. To justify the choice, the editors cited the shift from institutions to individuals who are re-emerging as the citizens of the new digital democracy.

There is more than meets the eye in this choice, and in more than the usual sense of the term. If there ever was an *ideological* choice, this is it: the message—a new cyber-democracy in which millions can directly communicate and self-organise, by-passing centralised state control—covers up a series of disturbing gaps and tensions. The first and obvious point of irony is that what everyone who looks at the *Time* cover sees is not others with whom he or she is supposed to be in direct exchange, but their own mirror-image. No wonder that

Leibniz is one of the predominant philosophical references of the cyberspace theorists: does our immersion in cyberspace not go hand in hand with our reduction to a Leibnizean monad which mirrors the entire universe, though “without windows” that would directly open up to external reality? It could be said that the typical World Wide Web surfer today, sitting alone in front of a PC screen, is increasingly a monad with no direct windows onto reality, encountering only virtual simulacra, and yet immersed more than ever in a global communication network. The masturbate-a-thon, which builds a collective out of individuals who are ready to share the solipsism of their own stupid enjoyment, is the form of sexuality which fits these cyberspace coordinates perfectly.

Alain Badiou develops the notion of “atonal” worlds—*monde atone*—which lack the intervention of a Master-Signifier to impose meaningful order onto the confused multiplicity of reality.²⁰ What is a Master-Signifier?²¹ In the very last pages of his monumental *Second World War*, Winston Churchill ponders on the enigma of a political decision: after the specialists—economic and military analysts, psychologists, meteorologists—propose their multiple, elaborated, and refined analyses, somebody must assume the simple and for that very reason most difficult act of transposing this complex multitude of views, where for every reason for, there are two reasons against and vice versa, into a simple, decisive Yes or No. We shall attack or we continue to wait. None other than John F. Kennedy provided a concise description of this point: “the essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer—often, indeed, to the decider him-

self." This decisive gesture which can never be fully grounded in reasons is that of a Master.

A basic feature of our postmodern world is that it tries to dispense with this agency of the ordering Master-Signifier: the complexity of the world needs to be asserted unconditionally. Every Master-Signifier meant to impose some order on it must be deconstructed, dispersed: "the modern apology for the 'complexity' of the world . . . is really nothing but a generalized desire for atony."²² Badiou's excellent example of such an "atonal" world is the politically correct vision of sexuality as promoted by gender studies with its obsessive rejection of binary logic: this world is a nuanced world of multiple sexual practices which tolerates no decision, no instance of the Two, no evaluation, in the strong Nietzschean sense of the term.

Michel Houellebecq's novels are interesting in this context.²³ He endlessly varies the motif of the failure of the event of love in contemporary Western societies characterised, as one reviewer put it, by "the collapse of religion and tradition, the unrestrained worship of pleasure and youth, and the prospect of a future totalized by scientific rationality and joylessness."²⁴ Here is the dark side of 1960s "sexual liberation": the full commodification of sexuality. Houellebecq depicts the morning-after of the Sexual Revolution, the sterility of a universe dominated by the superego injunction to enjoy. All of his work focuses on the antinomy of love and sexuality: sex is an absolute necessity, to renounce it is to wither away, so love cannot flourish without sex; simultaneously, however, love is impossible precisely because of sex: sex, which "proliferates as the epitome of late capitalism's dominance,

has permanently stained human relationships as inevitable reproductions of the dehumanizing nature of liberal society; it has, essentially, ruined love.”²⁵ Sex is thus, to put it in Derridean terms, simultaneously the condition of the possibility and of the impossibility of love.



We live in a society where a kind of Hegelian speculative identity of opposites exists. Certain features, attitudes, and norms of life are no longer perceived as ideologically marked. They appear to be neutral, non-ideological, natural, commonsensical. We designate as ideology that which stands out from this background: extreme religious zeal or dedication to a particular political orientation. The Hegelian point here would be that it is precisely the neutralisation of some features into a spontaneously accepted background that marks out ideology at its purest and at its most effective. This is the dialectical “coincidence of opposites”: the actualisation of a notion or an ideology at its purest coincides with, or, more precisely, appears as its opposite, as non-ideology. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same holds for violence. Social-symbolic violence at its purest appears as its opposite, as the spontaneity of the milieu in which we dwell, of the air we breathe.

This is why the delicate liberal communist–frightened, caring, fighting violence–and the blind fundamentalist exploding in rage are two sides of the same coin. While they fight subjective violence, liberal communists are the very agents of the structural violence which creates

the conditions for the explosions of subjective violence. The same philanthropists who give millions for AIDS or education in tolerance have ruined the lives of thousands through financial speculation and thus created the conditions for the rise of the very intolerance that is being fought. In the 1960s and '70s it was possible to buy soft-porn postcards of a girl clad in a bikini or wearing an evening gown; however, when one moved the postcard a little bit or looked at it from a slightly different perspective, her clothes magically disappeared to reveal the girl's naked body. When we are bombarded by the heartwarming news of a debt cancellation or a big humanitarian campaign to eradicate a dangerous epidemic, just move the postcard a little to catch a glimpse of the obscene figure of the liberal communist at work beneath.

We should have no illusions: liberal communists are the enemy of every progressive struggle today. All other enemies—religious fundamentalists and terrorists, corrupted and inefficient state bureaucracies—are particular figures whose rise and fall depends on contingent local circumstances. Precisely because they want to resolve all the secondary malfunctions of the global system, liberal communists are the direct embodiment of what is wrong with the system as such. This needs to be borne in mind in the midst of the various tactical alliances and compromises one has to make with liberal communists when fighting racism, sexism, and religious obscurantism.

What, then, should be done with our liberal communist who is undoubtedly a good man and really worried about the poverty and violence in the world and can

afford his worries? Indeed, what to do with a man who cannot be bought by the corporate interests because he co-owns the corporation; who holds to what he says about fighting poverty because he profits by it; who honestly expresses his opinion because he is so powerful that he can afford to; who is brave and wise in ruthlessly pursuing his enterprises, and does not consider his personal advantages, since all his needs are already satisfied; and who, furthermore, is a good friend, particularly of his Davos colleagues? Bertolt Brecht provided an answer in his poem "The Interrogation of the Good":

Step forward: we hear
That you are a good man.
You cannot be bought, but the lightning
Which strikes the house, also
Cannot be bought.
You hold to what you said.
But what did you say?
You are honest, you say your opinion.
Which opinion?
You are brave.
Against whom?
You are wise.
For whom?
You do not consider your personal advantages.
Whose advantages do you consider then?
You are a good friend.
Are you also a good friend of the good people?

Hear us then: we know
You are our enemy. This is why we shall

Now put you in front of a wall. But in consideration of
your merits and good qualities
We shall put you in front of a good wall and shoot you
With a good bullet from a good gun and bury you
With a good shovel in the good earth.²⁶