

**M o r a l**



**l i n d n e s s**

The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity

**Zygmunt Bauman**

**Leonidas Donskis**



# Moral Blindness



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Liquid Modernity

Zygmunt Bauman and  
Leonidas Donskis

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First published in 2013 by Polity Press

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-6274-9

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-6275-6(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Sabon  
by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Group Limited, Bodmin, Cornwall

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# Introduction

## Towards a Theory of Human Secrecy and Unfathomability, or Exposing Elusive Forms of Evil

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**Leonidas Donskis** Zygmunt Bauman is not a typical sociologist. He is a philosopher of everyday life. His fabric of thought and language weaves together a diversity of strands: high theory; dreams and political visions; the anxiety and torments of that statistical unit of humanity, the little man or woman; astute criticism – sharp as a razor and merciless to boot – of the world’s powerful; and a sociological analysis of their tiresome ideas, their vanity, their unbridled quest for attention and popularity, and their insensitivity and self-deception.

Little wonder: Bauman’s sociology is above all a sociology of the imagination, of feelings, of human relations – love, friendship, despair, indifference, insensitivity – and of intimate experience. Moving easily from one discourse to another has become a signal feature of his thinking.

He is perhaps the world’s only sociologist (and Bauman *is* one of that field’s living greats, along with Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck) and one of the world’s great thinkers *simpliciter* (along with Umberto Eco, Giorgio Agamben, Michel Serres, Jürgen Habermas) who not only actively uses the language of high theory but agilely jumps from this language to that of advertising, commercials, SMS messages, the mantras of motivational speakers and business gurus, clichés, and Facebook comments; then comes back again to the language (and themes) of social theory, modern literature, and classics of philosophy.

His is a sociology aiming to reconstruct all layers of reality and to make its universal language accessible to all types of reader, not just the academic specialist. Its discursive power and ability to decipher reality performs that function of philosophy that André Glucksmann likens to the title cards in silent movies, cards that help both to construct and to reveal the reality depicted.

Bauman is an admitted methodological eclecticist: empathy and sensitivity are much more important to him than methodological or theoretical purity. Determined to walk the tightrope across the abyss separating high theory and TV reality shows, philosophy and political speeches, and religious thought and commercials, he understands well how comically isolated and one-sided he would appear if he tried to explain our world in the words of its political and financial elite or using only hermetical and esoteric academic texts.

He learned his theory and was most influenced, first, by Antonio Gramsci and later largely by Georg Simmel – not so much by his theory of conflict as his conception of the mental life (*Geistesleben*) and his *Lebensphilosophie*. It was this philosophy of life of the Germans – again, not so much Friedrich Nietzsche's as Ludwig Klages's and Eduard Spranger's (particularly his conception of the *Lebensformen*) – that supplied Bauman with many of his theoretical themes and forms of theorizing.

It is enough to recall Simmel's essay *Die Grosstädte und das Geistesleben* (The metropolis and mental life, 1903): this later found an echo in Thomas Mann's essay *Lübeck als geistige Lebensform* (Lübeck as a spiritual way of life, 1926); still later, in Lithuanian letters, it turned into Tomas Venclova and Czesław Miłosz's epistolary dialogue *Vilnius kaip dvasinio gyvenimo forma* (Vilnius as a spiritual way of life, 1978). A city becomes a form of life and thought, something in which history, architecture, music, the plastic arts, power, memory, exchanges, encounters between people and ideas, dissonances, finances, politics, books, and creeds all speak out – a space where the modern world is born and also acquires its forms for its future. This motif permeates many of Bauman's later works.

On the map of Bauman's thought we find not only the philosophical and sociological ideas of Gramsci and Simmel but also the ethical insights of his beloved philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, born and raised in Kaunas and also, according to Bauman, the

greatest ethicist of the twentieth century. Levinas's insights concern the miracle of recognizing the Other's personality and dignity even to the point of saving his life – without at the same time being able to explain the cause of this recognition, since such an explanation would destroy this miracle of morality and of the ethical tie. Bauman's books refer not only to these and other modern thinkers but to theologians, religious thinkers, and works of fiction as well, with the latter especially playing an important role in his creativity.

Just like the Polish sociologist Jerzy Szacki, Bauman was heavily if not decisively influenced by Stanisław Ossowski, his professor at the University of Warsaw. In receiving, from the king of Spain, the Prince of Asturias Award for notable achievements in the humanities, Bauman in his speech recalled what Ossowski had taught him first and foremost: namely, that sociology belongs to the humanities. Bauman then went on to say that sociology is an account of human experience – just as a novel is. And the greatest novel of all time is, he acknowledged, Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.

If Vytautas Kavolis held sociology and the social sciences in general to be 'a field bereft of melody', then Bauman is a counter-example to this: his sociology not only emits sounds but also looks you straight in the eye. This gaze is an ethical one: you can't turn away your eyes and fail to reply, because unlike a psychologically exploring look or one that absorbs (consumes) objects in its environment, the Baumanian look incorporates the principle of an ethical mirror. What comes back to you are all your activities, your language, and everything you said or did without thinking but only safely imitating: all your unreflected upon but silently endorsed evil.

Bauman's theoretical sensitivity and empathy may be likened to a way of speaking, an attitude that eliminates the prior asymmetry between the looker and the looked at. It's like Jan Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, overwhelming us by unexpectedly giving back to us our own gaze and leaving us voicelessly wondering: who is looking at whom? We at her, hanging along with many other immortal masterpieces of Dutch art at the Mauritshuis gallery in The Hague, or she at us? The gazed-at gazes at the gazer, thereby returning to the world all the forgotten dialogue. It is a dignified and silent gaze between equals – instead of that

boundless consuming, using, knowing, and aggressively indoctrinating that we get back in the guise of an alleged dialogue.

Bauman views the viewer, conceives the conceiver, and talks to the talker, for the audience of his readers and his partners in dialogue are not just theoreticians worthy of him, and not some fantasized personalities. He presents his ideas to the little man or woman – the persons whom globalization and the second (liquid) modernity has displaced. He continues the labours that Stephen Greenblatt, Carlo Ginzburg and Catherine Gallagher, the representatives of the new historicism and contrahistory (microhistory, small history) have begun, consciously rejecting history as a grand narrative. Instead of *un grand récit* they construct the historical anecdote, a detailed and meaningful narrative about actual people: *une petite histoire*.

The historical time of Bauman's theorizing is not linear but pointillist. The form of his history is constituted not by the greats of the world but by its little persons. It is the history not of the great thinkers but of the banishment of the small man to the margins. Bauman's sympathy is manifestly on the side of the losers in modernity, not its heroes. We will never know their names. They are like the non-professional actors with their amazingly individual and expressive faces (untouched by commercials, self-promotion, mass consumption, self-adulation, and conversion to a commodity) in the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini, such as *The Gospel According to St Matthew* and *Decameron*.

These are the biographies not of the pioneers of modern economic structure (capitalism, if you will), *les entrepreneurs*, the geniuses of early modern art, but of such people as the heretic Menocchio, burned at the stake and featured in Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller* (first published in Italian as *Il formaggio e i vermi* in 1976). These minor and tacit actors of history's drama give substance and shape to our own forms of anxiety, ambiguity, uncertainty and insecurity.

We live in a world in which contrasts of wealth and power are constantly increasing while differences in environmental security are steadily diminishing: today Western and Eastern Europe, the United States and Africa are equally (un)safe. Millionaires experience personal dramas and shocks that through social networks become instantly known to people having absolutely nothing in

common with them other than the capacity at any moment to experience such upheavals themselves. Politicians, thanks to mass democracy and mass education, possess unlimited opportunities to manipulate public opinion, although they themselves directly depend on attitudinal changes in mass society and can be destroyed by them.

Everything is permeated by ambivalence; there is no longer any unambiguous social situation, just as there are no more uncompromised actors on the stage of world history. To attempt to interpret such a world in terms of the categories of good and evil; the social and political optics of black and white; and almost Manichean separations, is today both impossible and grotesque. It is a world that has long ceased controlling itself (although it obsessively seeks to control individual people), a world that cannot respond to its own dilemmas and lessen the tensions it has sowed.

Happy are those epochs that had clear dramas, dreams, and doers of good or evil. Today technology has surpassed politics, the latter having in part become a supplement to technology and threatening to bring the creation of a technological society to completion. This society with its determinist consciousness regards a refusal to participate in the technological innovations and social networks (so indispensable for the exercise of social and political control) as sufficient grounds to remove all those who lag behind in the globalization process (or have disavowed its sanctified idea) to the margins of society.

If you're a politician and don't appear on TV, you don't exist. But that's old news. The fresh news is this: if you're not available in the social networks, you're nowhere. The world of technology will not forgive you this treachery. By refusing to join Facebook you lose friends (the grotesque thing is that on Facebook you may have thousands of friends even though, as classical literature has it, finding just one friend for life is a miracle and blessing). But it's not just a matter of losing relationships; it's social separation par excellence. If you don't declare and pay your taxes electronically you become socially isolated. Technology will not allow you to remain aloof. *I can* transmutes into *I must*. I can, therefore I am obliged to. No dilemmas allowed. We live in a reality of possibilities, not one of dilemmas.

In Voltaire's famous philosophical tale *Candide: or, Optimism* there is a worthwhile thought expressed in the utopian kingdom

of Eldorado. When Candide asks the people of Eldorado whether they have priests and nuns (none are to be seen), after moments of light confusion he hears the answer that all the inhabitants here are priests unto themselves – being thankful and wise they continuously praise God; hence they need no intermediaries. In Anatole France's novel *Les Dieux ont soif* (*The Gods Are Athirst*) a young revolutionary fanatic believes that sooner or later the Revolution will turn all Patriots and Citizens into Judges.

That's why the statement that *in the age of Facebook, Twitter, and the blogosphere, everyone who is on the network and writes is by that very fact a journalist* is neither artificial nor strange. If we can create the net of social relationships ourselves and participate in the global drama of human consciousness and sensitivity, what is left for journalism as a distinct and separate avocation? Doesn't it end up in the situation of King Lear, who divided all his wealth between his two elder daughters (communication and the political debates forming the public sphere) and was left with just his Fool?

We are taking part in the new human narrative, which in earlier times took on the forms of epic, saga, or novel, and now displays itself on TV screens and PC monitors. The new narrative is created in virtual space. That's why unifying thought and action, pragmatic openness and ethics, and reason and imagination becomes a challenge for journalism, which requires not only a constantly self-renewing strategy of representing and actualizing the world, of grasping and talking about problems, and of fostering dialogue, but also a kind of writing that does not create barriers where they have already ceased to exist a long time ago. It is a search for sensitivity, for new forms of acting in a manner appropriate to humans, a search that in close cooperation with the human and social sciences creates a new field of global mutual understanding, social critique, and self-interpretation. Without the emergence of such a field it's just unclear what is in store for philosophy, literature, and journalism. If they move closer together, they will survive and become more important than ever before. But if they grow further apart, we will all become barbarians.

Technology will not allow you to remain on the sidelines. *I can* transmutes into *I must*. I can, therefore I must. No dilemmas permitted. We live in a reality of possibilities, not one of dilemmas. This is something akin to the ethics of WikiLeaks, where there is

no morality left. It is obligatory to spy and to leak, though it's unclear for what reason and to what end. It's something that has to be done just because it's technologically feasible. There's a moral vacuum here created by a technology that has overtaken politics. The problem for such a consciousness is not the form or legitimacy of power but its quantity. For evil (by the way, secretly adored) is where there is more financial and political power. Therefore, for such a consciousness evil lurks in the West. It still has both a name and a geography, even though we have long ago arrived in a world in which evil is weak and powerless, hence dissipated and covering its tracks. Two of the manifestations of the new evil: insensitivity to human suffering, and the desire to colonize privacy by taking away a person's secret, the something that should never be talked about and made public. The global use of others' biographies, intimacies, lives and experiences is a symptom of insensitivity and meaninglessness.

To us it seems that evil lives somewhere else. We think it's not in us but lurks in certain places, certain fixed territories in the world that are hostile to us or in which things endangering all humankind take place. This naive illusion and type of self-deception is present in the world today no less than two or three hundred years ago. To represent evil as an objectively existing factor was long encouraged by religious stories and mythologies of evil. But even today we refuse to look for evil within ourselves. Why? Because it's unbearably difficult and completely overturns the logic of an ordinary person's everyday life.

For reasons of emotional and psychological security people generally try to overcome the continuous doubt and state of uncertainty they find in themselves – and with it the sense of insecurity which becomes particularly strong when we don't have clear and quick answers to the questions that agitate or even torment us. That's why stereotypes and conjectures are so prevalent in our popular culture and media: human beings need them as a safeguard for their emotional security. As Leszek Kołakowski has aptly observed, clichés and stereotypes, rather than testifying to human backwardness or stupidity, indicate human weakness and the fear that it is unbearably difficult to live beset by continuous doubts.

Believing or disbelieving conspiracy theories (which philosophically speaking are no more than guesses, frequently unable to be

confirmed and supported but at the same time not easily disprovable) has nothing to do with the real condition of science and knowledge. Conspiracy theories are believed in by intellectuals, scientists, and even sceptics. This is a topic deserving of an old Jewish joke: at the end of a post-mortem conversation between God and an atheist, the latter, when asked how he, disbelieving in God and generally not believing in anything and doubting everything, nevertheless believes that God doesn't exist, replies that, well, you have to believe in something...

Still, however that may be, the localization of evil in a specific nation or country is a much more complex phenomenon than just living in a world of stereotypes and guesses. Modern moral imagination constructs a phenomenon I would call the symbolic geography of evil. This is the conviction that possibilities of evil inhere not so much in each of us taken individually as in societies, political communities, and countries. Maybe Martin Luther had a hand in this by virtue of his belief that evil inheres in society and social relations, and that therefore one should be concerned with saving one's soul rather than getting involved in society's affairs.

Of course, it would be silly to deny that totalitarian and authoritarian systems distort the thinking, sensitivity and social relationships of entire countries, their societies, and individuals. But if everything were limited to Manichean separations between democracy and authoritarianism (oh *sancta simplicitas*, as if evil did not exist in democratic countries, in persons who value liberty and equality, and in their moral choices...) that would just be part of the problem. The symbolic geography of evil does not stop at the borders of political systems, it penetrates mentalities, cultures, national spirits, patterns of thought, and tendencies of consciousness.

The world analysed by Bauman ceases to be a cave inhabited by demons and monsters from which arise dangers to the good and bright part of humanity. Sadly and with a soft irony characteristic of him, Bauman writes about the hell that a totally normal and seemingly kind human being, fine neighbour and family man creates for the Other by refusing to grant him his individuality, mystery, dignity and a sensitive language.

In this respect Bauman is not far from Hannah Arendt's thought – especially when by her polemical study about Eichmann in



Jerusalem and the banality of evil she revealed disappointment with the evil of the new world. Everyone expects to see a monster or a creature of hell, but actually sees a banal bureaucrat of death whose entire personality and activity testifies to an extraordinary normality and even a high morality of duty. It's not surprising that Bauman interpreted the Holocaust not as an orgy of monsters and demons but as a set of horrible conditions under which the members of any nation would do the same things the Germans and other nations did – nations that were given the opportunity to interpret quickly and simply their own sufferings and events that had happened to them. The escape from unbearable human dilemmas to a sonorously formulated goal of struggle and to a program of annihilating one's ideological foe is the road to confirming the Holocaust. If you do not have the strength to look into the eyes of an innocent child but you know you are fighting your enemy, something happens that might be called a turning away of your gaze from a human being and directing it onto the sphere of a world-altering language and of instrumental reason.

These are circumstances and situations not experienced by those who have clear views on them. As Bauman has said during his lecture at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania,<sup>1</sup> there's nothing harder than writing about situations that you not only have not experienced but even wouldn't want to experience. For instance, what do you say about a human being who, one night during the Second World War, hears a knock at the door from a Jewish child who asks for shelter in the hope of being saved? The human being has to decide on the spot, knowing very well that he is risking his own life and that of his family. Such situations cannot be wished on anyone, including oneself.

Evil is not confined to war or totalitarian ideologies. Today it more frequently reveals itself in failing to react to someone else's suffering, in refusing to understand others, in insensitivity and in eyes turned away from a silent ethical gaze. It also inhabits secret services when they, motivated by love of country or sense of duty (whose depth and authenticity would not be questioned by experts

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<sup>1</sup>For more on the lecture that Zygmunt Bauman gave on 1 Oct. 2010 at Vytautas Magnus University, see <http://www.vdu.lt/lt/naujienos/prof-zygmuntas-baumanas-naturali-blogio-istorija-1> (accessed June 2012).

on Immanuel Kant's ethics nor by Kant himself), unflinchingly destroy a little man or woman's life just because there was perhaps no other way; or he or she was in the wrong place at the wrong time; or because the prevailing model of international relations changed; or the secret service of a friendly nation asked for this favour; or one just had to prove one's loyalty and dedication to the system, that is, the state and its controlling structures.

The destruction of a stranger's life without the slightest doubt that you are doing your duty and being a moral person – this is the new form of evil, the invisible shape of wickedness in liquid modernity, going along with a state that lends or surrenders itself completely to these evils, a state that fears only incompetence and falling behind its competitors but not doubting for a moment that people are nothing but statistical units. Statistics are more important than real human life; and a country's size and its economic and political power are much more important than the value of one of its inhabitants, even if he speaks on behalf of humanity. Nothing personal, it's just business: this is the new Satan of liquid modernity. But in contrast to Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* and its protagonist, Woland, who reveals the secret belief of Eastern Europeans that Christianity cannot explain evil, that the twentieth century makes it indubitable that evil exists as an independent and parallel reality and not as an insufficiency of good (as taught by St Augustine and believed for centuries), this liquid modernity turns into banality not toothless good, but evil itself.

The most displeasing and shocking truth of today is that evil is weak and invisible; therefore, it's much more dangerous than those demons and evil spirits we knew from the works of philosophers and literary writers. Evil is toothless and widely dispersed. Unfortunately, the sad truth is that it lurks in every normal and healthy human being. The worst is not the potential for evil present in each of us but the situations and circumstances that our faith, culture and human relationships cannot stop. Evil takes on the mask of weakness, and at the same time it is weakness.

Lucky were those times that had clear forms of evil. Today we no longer know what they are and where they are. It all becomes clear when somebody loses their memory and their capacity to see and feel. Here's a list of our new mental blocks. It includes our deliberate forgetting of the Other, our purposeful refusal to recognize and acknowledge a human being of another kind while

casting aside someone who is alive, real, and doing and saying something right beside us – all for the purpose of manufacturing a Facebook ‘friend’ distant from you and perhaps even living in another semiotic reality. On that list we also have alienation while simultaneously simulating friendship; not talking to and not seeing someone who is with us; and using the words ‘Faithfully yours’ in ending letters to someone we don’t know and have never met – the more insensitive the content, the more courtly the address. There’s also wishing to communicate, not with those who are next to you and who suffer in silence, but with someone imagined and fabricated, our own ideological or communicational projection – this wish goes hand in hand with an inflation of handy concepts and words. New forms of censorship coexist – most oddly – with the sadistic and cannibalistic language found on the internet and let loose in verbal orgies of faceless hatred, virtual cloacas of defecation on others, and unparalleled displays of human insensitivity (especially in anonymous commentaries).

This is moral blindness – self-chosen, self-imposed, or fatalistically accepted – in an epoch that more than anything needs quickness and acuteness of apprehension and feeling. In order that we regain our perceptiveness in dark times, it is necessary to give back dignity as well as the idea of the essential unfathomability of human beings, not only to the world’s greats but also to the crowd extras, the statistical individual, the statistical units, the crowd, the electorate, the man in the street, and the dear people, that is, all those self-deluding conceits constructed by technocrats parading as democrats and peddling the notion that we know all there is to know about people and their needs and that all these data are pinned down exactly and fully explained by the market, the state, sociological surveys, ratings, and everything else that turns people into the Global Anonymous.

Robbing humans of their faces and individuality is no less a form of evil than diminishing their dignity or looking for threats primarily among those who have immigrated or harbour different religious beliefs. This evil is overcome neither by political correctness nor by a bureaucratized, compulsory ‘tolerance’ (often turned into a caricature of the real thing), nor, finally, by multiculturalism, which is nothing other than just leaving humanity alone with all its injustices and degradations taking the form of new caste systems, contrasts of wealth and prestige, modern slavery, social apartheid

and hierarchies – all justified by appealing to cultural diversity and cultural ‘uniqueness’. This is cynical deceit; or naive self-deception and a palliative, at best.

Sometimes we are helped to see the light by texts that look us straight in the eye and ask questions. We cannot but answer them. We don’t have the right to ignore them if we want to stay in the zone of modern theoretical, political and ethical sensibility. They are texts such as those that Zygmunt Bauman is writing today.

Needless to say, this book conjointly written with one of the greatest thinkers of our times is a high point of my life. Such an opportunity can occur only once in a lifetime. For this, I am immensely grateful to Zygmunt Bauman – a major influence, a great inspiration, and a beloved friend.

This book is a dialogue on the possibility of a rediscovery of the sense of belonging as a viable alternative to fragmentation, atomization, and the resulting loss of sensitivity. It is also a dialogue on the new ethical perspective as the only way out of the trap and multiple threats posed by the adiaphorization of present humanity and its moral imagination. This book of warning also serves as a reminder of the art of life and the life of art, as it is shaped as an epistolary theoretical dialogue between friends. Elaborating on my thoughts, wrapping up and summing up my hints and questions into a coherent form of discourse, Zygmunt Bauman, in this book, sounds as intimate and friendly as a Renaissance humanist addressing his fellow humanist elsewhere – be this an allusion to Thomas More and Erasmus or Thomas More and Peter Giles or Thomas More and Raphael Hythloday.

Such a form allows us to work out a sociological and philosophical dialogue on the sad piece of news contrary to More’s *Utopia* – namely that, as I put it in one of my aphorisms penned as a variation on Milan Kundera: globalization is the last failed hope that, somewhere, there still exists a land where one can escape and find happiness. Or the last failed hope that, somewhere, there still exists a land different from yours in terms of being able to oppose the sense of meaninglessness, the loss of criteria and, ultimately, moral blindness and the loss of sensitivity.

**Zygmunt Bauman** Politics is not the only segment of multifaceted human activity-in-the-world afflicted by moral insensitivity.

It may even be viewed as a collateral casualty of an all-embracing and omnivorous pestilence, rather than its source and engine. Politics being an art of the possible, each kind of socio-cultural setting brings forth its own kind of politics while making all other types of political practices hard to come by and still harder to make effective. Our liquid modern setting is no exception to that rule.

When we deploy the concept of ‘moral insensitivity’ to denote a callous, compassionless and heartless kind of behaviour, or just an equanimous and indifferent posture taken and manifested towards other people’s trials and tribulations (the kind of posture epitomized by Pontius Pilate’s ‘hand-washing’ gesture), we use ‘insensitivity’ as a metaphor; its primary location lies in the sphere of the anatomical and physiological phenomena from which it is drawn – its primary meaning being the malfunction of some sense organs, whether optical, audial, olfactory or tactile, resulting in an inability to perceive stimuli which under ‘normal’ conditions would evoke images, sounds or other impressions.

Sometimes this organic, bodily insensitivity is desired, artificially induced or self-administered with the help of painkillers, and welcomed as a temporary measure for the duration of surgery or of a transient, or terminal, attack of a particularly painful organic disorder; it is never meant to render the organism *perpetually* immune to pain. Medical professionals would consider such a condition tantamount to inviting trouble: pain, after all, is a crucial weapon in the organism’s defence against potentially morbid threats; it signals the urgency of undertaking a remedial action before it is too late to intervene. If pain did not send a warning in time that something was wrong and called for intervention, the patient would postpone the search for a remedy until their condition might well be beyond treatment and repair (the organic disorders held to be the most awesome, because so difficult to cure, are the diseases that cause no pain in their initial stages, when they are still treatable and possibly curable). All the same, the thought of a permanently painless condition (that is, being anaesthetized and made insensitive to pain in the long term) does not strike us right away as evidently and unambiguously unwelcome, let alone threatening. The promise of being free of pain perpetually, insured against all its future appearances, is, let’s admit it, a temptation few people would be able to resist. But

freedom from pain is a mixed, to say the least, blessing...It prevents discomfort, and for a short time cuts down potentially severe suffering, but it may well prove a trap, while simultaneously rendering its 'satisfied customers' prone to fall into traps.

The function of pain to be an alert, a warning, and a prophylactic tends to be all but forgotten, however, when the notion of 'insensitivity' is transferred from organic and bodily phenomena to the universe of interhuman relations, and so attached to the qualifier 'moral'. The non-perception of early signals that something threatens to be or is already wrong with human togetherness and the viability of human community, and that if nothing is done things will get still worse, means the danger is lost from sight or played down for long enough to disable human interactions as potential factors of communal self-defence – by rendering them superficial, perfunctory, frail and fissiparous. This is, in the final account, what the process branded 'individualization' (epitomized in turn by the currently fashionable catch-phrase 'I need more space', translated as the demand to do away with the proximity and interference of others) indeed boils down to. Not necessarily 'immoral' in its intention, the process of individualization leads to a condition which has no need, and more importantly no place, for moral evaluation and regulation.

The relations individuals enter into with other individuals nowadays have been described as 'pure' – meaning 'no strings attached', no unconditional obligations assumed and so no predetermination, and therefore no mortgaging, of the future. The sole foundation and only reason for the relationship to continue is, it has been said, the amount of mutual satisfaction drawn from it. The advent and prevalence of 'pure relations' have been widely interpreted as a huge step on the road to individual 'liberation' (the latter having been, willy-nilly, reinterpreted as being free from the constraints which all obligations to others are bound to set on one's own choices). What makes such an interpretation questionable, however, is the notion of 'mutuality', which in this case is a gross, and unfounded, exaggeration. A coincidence of both sides of a relationship being simultaneously satisfied does not necessarily create mutuality: after all, it means no more than that each of the individuals in a relationship are satisfied *at the same time*. What makes the relationship stop short of genuine mutuality is the sometimes consoling, but at other times haunting and harrowing,

awareness that the termination of the relationship is bound to be a one-sided, unilateral decision: also a constraint on individual freedom not to be played down. The essential distinction of ‘networks’ – the name selected these days to replace the old-fashioned ideas, believed to be out-dated, of ‘community’ or ‘communion’ – is precisely this right to *unilateral* termination. Unlike communities, networks are individually put together and individually reshuffled or dismantled, and rely on the individual will to persist as their sole, however volatile, foundation. In a relationship, however, *two* individuals meet...An individual made morally ‘insensitive’ (that is, one who has been enabled and is willing to cast out of account the welfare of an-other) is, like it or not, simultaneously situated at the receiving end of the moral insensitivity of the objects of his or her own moral insensitivity. ‘Pure relations’ augur not so much a mutuality of liberation, as a mutuality of moral insensitivity. The Levinasian ‘party of two’ stops being a seedbed of morality. It turns instead into a factor of the *adiaphorization* (that is, exemption from the realm of moral evaluation) of the specifically *liquid* modern variety, complementing while also all too often supplanting the *solid* modern, bureaucratic variety.

The liquid modern variety of adiaphorization is cut after the pattern of the consumer–commodity relation, and its effectiveness relies on the transplantation of that pattern to interhuman relations. As consumers, we do not swear interminable loyalty to the commodity we seek and purchase in order to satisfy our needs or desires, and we continue to use its services as long as but no longer than it delivers on our expectations - or until we come across another commodity that promises to gratify the same desires more thoroughly than the one we purchased before. All consumer goods, including those described as ‘durable’, are eminently exchangeable and expendable; in consumerist – that is consumption inspired and consumption servicing – culture, the time between purchase and disposal tends to shrink to the degree to which the delights derived from the objects of consumption shift from their use to their appropriation. Longevity of use tends to be shortened and the incidents of rejection and disposal tend to become ever more frequent the faster the objects’ capacity to satisfy (and thus to remain desired) is used up. A consumerist attitude may lubricate the wheels of the economy; it sprinkles sand into the bearings of morality.

This is not, though, the sole calamity that affects morally saturated actions in a liquid modern setting. As a calculation of gains can never fully subdue and stifle the tacit yet admittedly refractory and stubbornly insubordinate pressures of moral impulse, the neglect of moral commands and disregard of responsibility evoked, in Levinas's terms, by the Face of an-Other leaves behind a bitter aftertaste, known as 'pangs of conscience' or 'moral scruples'. Here again consumerist offers come to the rescue: the sin of moral negligence can be repented and absolved with gifts supplied by shops, as the act of shopping, however selfish and self-referential its true motives and the temptations that made it happen, is represented as a moral deed. Capitalizing on the moral urges instigated by the misdemeanour it itself generated, encouraged and intensified, the consumerist culture thereby transforms every shop and service agency into a pharmacy purveying tranquillizers and anaesthetic drugs: in this case drugs intended to mitigate or altogether placate *moral*, rather than physical pains. As moral negligence grows in its reach and intensity, the demand for painkillers rises unstoppably and the consumption of moral tranquillizers turns into an addiction. As a result, induced and contrived moral insensitivity tends to turn into a compulsion, or 'second nature': into a permanent and quasi-universal condition – with moral pain being stripped in consequence of its salutary warning, alerting and activating role. With moral pain smothered before it becomes truly vexing and worrying, the web of human bonds woven of moral yarn becomes increasingly frail and fragile falling apart at the seams. With citizens trained to search for salvation from their troubles and a solution to their problems in consumer markets, politics may (or is prompted, pushed and ultimately coerced to) interpellate its subjects as consumers first and citizens a distant second; and redefine consumer zeal as citizen virtue, and consumer activity as the fulfilment of a citizen's primary duty...



# 1

## From the Devil to Frighteningly Normal and Sane People

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**Leonidas Donskis** After the twentieth century, we, especially Eastern Europeans like me, are inclined to demonize the manifestations of evil. In Western Europe and North America, humanists and social scientists are inclined to analyse *the anxiety of influence*, whereas Eastern Europeans are preoccupied with *the anxiety of destruction*. Central Europe's conception of modernity is akin to the Eastern European apocalyptic vision of modernity only in sharing the same anxiety of (physical) destruction.<sup>1</sup> But if in

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<sup>1</sup>If we accept the logic behind Milan Kundera's reasoning in his famous essay 'The tragedy of Central Europe', much of what had long been dealt with as Eastern Europe in the political sense historically belongs to Central Europe. If we agree with the assumption that multicultural and cosmopolitan cities along with major Roman Catholic and especially Baroque influences comprise the cultural boundaries of the region, then we could include Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Poland, Lithuania and the western part of the Ukraine in the symbolic space of Central Europe. Eastern Europe would include, first and foremost, Russia, Belarus, the eastern part of the Ukraine, Moldova, and to a lesser extent, Romania and Bulgaria. However arbitrary and debatable, these boundaries have their religious and historical-cultural divisions, especially after Russia's political influence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For more on this, see Milan Kundera, 'The tragedy of Central Europe', *New York Review of Books* 32:7 (26 Apr. 1984), pp. 33–8, and Leonidas Donskis (ed.), *Yet Another Europe after 1984: Rethinking Milan Kundera and the Idea of Central Europe* (Rodopi, 2012).

Eastern Europe the dark side of modernity asserts itself as an absolutely irrational force, annihilating the fragile cover of rationality and civilization, in twentieth-century Western European literature a totally different type of modernity manifests itself – one that is rational, subjugating all to itself, anonymous, depersonalized, safely splitting man's responsibility and rationality into separate spheres, fragmenting society into atoms, and through its hyperrationality making itself incomprehensible to any ordinary person. In short, if the apocalyptic prophet of modernity in Eastern Europe is Mikhail Bulgakov, then the latter's equivalent in Central Europe would undoubtedly be Franz Kafka and Robert Musil.

Yet during a public lecture on the natural history of evil you gave in September 2010 at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania, you shed new light on the 'demons and fiends' of evil: you recalled the case of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem aptly described by Hannah Arendt in her provocative book.<sup>2</sup> Everybody expected to see a senseless and pathological monster, yet they had to be discouraged and bitterly disappointed by psychiatrists hired by the court who reassured them that Eichmann was perfectly normal – the man might have made a good neighbour, a sweet and loyal husband, and a model family and community member. I believe that the hint you dropped there was extremely timely and relevant, keeping in mind our widespread propensity to explain away our traumatizing experiences by clinicalizing and demonizing anybody involved in a large-scale crime. In a way, it stands close to the point Milan Kundera makes in his *Une Rencontre*, writing about the protagonist of Anatole France's novel *Les Dieux ont soif*: the young painter Gamelin becomes a fanatic of the French Revolution, yet he is far from a monster in situations and exchanges that are distant from the Revolution and from their founding father Jacobins. And whereas Kundera elegantly links this quality of Gamelin's soul to *le désert du sérieux* or *le désert sans humour* (the desert of seriousness, the humourless desert), contrasting him to his neighbour Brotteaux, *l'homme qui refuse de croire* (a man who refuses to believe), whom Gamelin sends to the guillotine, the idea is quite clear: a decent man can harbour a monster inside him. What happens to that monster in peaceful

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<sup>2</sup>See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin Books, 2006).

times, and whether we can always contain him inside us, is another question.

What happens to this monster inside us during our liquid times, or dark times when we more often refuse to grant existence to the Other or to see and hear him or her, instead of offering a cannibal ideology? We tend to replace an eye-to-eye and face-to-face existential situation with an all-embracing classificatory system which consumes human lives and personalities as empirical data and evidence or statistics.

**Zygmunt Bauman** I wouldn't have ascribed the phenomenon of the 'demonization of evil' to the peculiarities of being 'Eastern European' – condemned to live for a few recent centuries at the 'limen' separating and attaching a 'civilizing centre', formed by the west of Europe with the 'modern breakthrough', from and to a vast hinterland, viewed and experienced by juxtaposition as 'uncivilized' and 'in need of civilizing' (undeveloped, backward, lagging behind). Evil needs to be demonized as long as the origins of goodness (grace, redemption, salvation) continue to be deified, as they were in all monotheistic faiths: the figure of the 'Devil' stands for the irreconcilability of the presence of evil in the world as it is lived in and through, with the figure of a loving God: a benevolent and merciful father and guardian of humanity, the fount of all that is good – the fundamental premise of all monotheism. The perennial question *unde malum*, of where evil comes from, complete with the temptation to pinpoint, disclose and depict a source of malevolence code-named 'Devil', has tormented the minds of theologians, philosophers and a large part of their clientele, yearning for a meaningful and veridical *Weltanschauung*, for more than two millennia.

Casting all-too-visible 'modernity' (an eminently human product and acknowledged as a human choice, as well as a mode of thinking and acting selected and practised by humans) in the role hitherto reserved for Satan – invisible to most and seen only by a selected few – was just one of the numerous aspects and consequences or side-effects of the 'modern project': to take the management of world affairs under human management. Given the strictly monotheistic stance of the 'modernity project', inherited lock, stock and barrel from centuries of church rule, the shift boiled down to a substitution of new (profane) entities with

different names for the old (sacred) entities – inside an otherwise unchanged age-old matrix. From now on, the query *unde malum* led to this-worldly, earthly addresses. One of them was the not yet fully civilized (purified, reformed, converted) plebeian ‘mass’ of commoners – residues of a premodern upbringing by ‘priests, old women and proverbs’ (as the Enlightenment philosophers dubbed religious instruction, family lore and communal tradition); and at the other resided the ancient tyrants, now reincarnated in the shape of modern dictators, despots deploying coercion and violence to promote peace and freedom (at least according to what they said and – possibly – to what they thought). Residents at both addresses, whether caught in action or supposed to be there yet sought in vain, were thoroughly examined, turned over, X-rayed, psychoanalyzed and medically tested, and all sorts of deformities suspected of gestating and incubating evil inclinations have been recorded. Nothing much followed, however, in a pragmatic sense. Therapies prescribed and put into operation might have removed or mitigated this or that suspect deformity, yet the question *unde malum* went on being asked since none of the recommended cures proved definitive and obviously there were more sources of evil than met the eye, many of them, perhaps the majority, staying stubbornly undisclosed. They were, moreover, shifting; each successive status quo seemed to possess its own specific sources of evil – and every focus on diverting and/or trying to plug and stop the sources already known, or believed to be known, brought forth a new state of affairs better insured against the notorious evils of the past but unprotected from the toxic effluvia of sources hitherto underestimated and disregarded or believed to be insignificant.

In the post-demonic chapter of the long (and still far from finished) story of the *unde malum* query, much attention was also devoted – aside from the ‘where from’ question but still in tune with the modern spirit – to the question of ‘how’: to the *technology* of evil-doing. Answers suggested to that question fell roughly under two rubrics: coercion and seduction. Arguably the most extreme expression was found for the first in George Orwell’s *1984*; for the second, in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Both types of answer were articulated in the West; in Orwell’s vision, however, painted as it was in direct response to the Russian communist experiment, an intimate kinship can easily be traced with

Eastern European discourse, going back to Fyodor Dostoevsky and beyond – to the three centuries of schism between the Christian Church in the West and the Eastern Orthodox. It was there, after all, that distrust of and resistance to the principle of personal freedoms and individual autonomy – two of the defining attributes of ‘Western civilization’ – were at their strongest. Orwell’s vision could be seen as inspired by the Eastern rather than the Western historic experience; that vision was, after all, an anticipation of the shape of the West after it was flooded, conquered, subdued and enslaved by Eastern-type despotism; its core image was that of a soldier’s jackboot trampling a human face into the ground. Huxley’s vision, by contrast, was a pre-emptive response to the impending arrival of a consumerist society, an eminently Western creation; its major theme was also the serfdom of disempowered humans, but in this case a ‘voluntary servitude’ (a term coined three centuries earlier by, if we believe Michel de Montaigne, Étienne de la Boétie), that is using more carrot than stick and deploying temptation and seduction as its major way of proceeding, instead of violence, overt command and brutal coercion. It has to be remembered, however, that both these utopias were preceded by Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, in which a blending and simultaneous as well as complementary deployment of *both* ‘methodologies of enslavement’, later to be elaborated separately by Orwell and Huxley, had already been envisaged.

You are so right when you draw into the forefront another motif in the seemingly everlasting and unfinishable debate of *unde malum*, conducted in our modern post-Devil era with the same, and growing, vigour as in the times of a scheming Devil, exorcisms, witch-hunting and pyres. It concerns the *motives* of evildoing, the ‘evildoer’s *personality*’, and most crucially in my view the mystery of monstrous deeds without monsters, and of evil deeds committed in the name of noble purposes (Albert Camus suggested that the most atrocious of human crimes were perpetrated in the name of the greater good...). Particularly apt and timely is the way you recall, invoking Kundera, Anatole France’s genuinely prophetic vision, which can be construed retrospectively as the original matrix for all the subsequent permutations, turns and twists of explanations advanced in subsequent social-scientific debates.

It is highly unlikely that readers in the twenty-first century of Anatole France’s novel *Les Dieux ont soif*, originally published in

1912,<sup>3</sup> won't be simultaneously bewildered and enraptured. In all likelihood, they will be overwhelmed, as I have been, with admiration for an author who, as Milan Kundera would say, not only managed to 'tear through the curtain of preinterpretations', the 'curtain hanging in front of the world', in order to free 'the great human conflicts from naïve interpretation as a struggle between good and evil, understanding them in the light of tragedy',<sup>4</sup> which in Kundera's opinion is the novelist's calling and the vocation of all novel-writing – but in addition to design and test, for the benefit of readers as yet unborn, the tools to be used to cut and tear curtains not yet woven, but ones that were bound to start being eagerly woven and hung 'in front of the world' well after his novel was finished, and particularly eagerly well after his death...

At the moment when Anatole France put aside his pen and took one last look at the finished novel, words like 'bolshivism', 'fascism', or indeed 'totalitarianism' were not listed in dictionaries, French ones or any others; and names like Stalin or Hitler did not appear in any of the history books. Anatole France's sight was focused, as you say, on Évariste Gamelin, a juvenile beginner in the world of the fine arts, a youngster of great talent and promise, and a still greater ability to disgust Watteau, Boucher, Fragonard and other dictators of popular taste – whose 'bad taste, bad drawings, bad designs', 'complete absence of clear style and clear line', 'complete unawareness of nature and truth', and fondness for 'masks, dolls, fripperies, childish nonsense' he explained by their readiness to 'work for tyrants and slaves'. Gamelin was sure that 'a hundred years hence all Watteau's paintings will have rotted away in attics' and predicted that 'by 1893 art students will be covering the canvases of Boucher with their own rough sketches'. The French Republic, still a tender, unsound and frail child of the Revolution, would grow to cut off, one after another, the many heads of the hydra of tyranny and slavery, including this one. There was no mercy for the conspirators against the Republic, as there was neither liberty for the enemies of liberty, nor tolerance for the enemies of tolerance. To the doubts voiced

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<sup>3</sup> Here quoted from Anatole France, *The Gods Will Have Blood*, trans. Frederick Davies (Penguin, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (Faber & Faber, 2007), pp. 92, 123, 110.

by his incredulous mother, Gamelin would respond without hesitation: 'We must put our trust in Robespierre; he is incorruptible. Above all, we must trust in Marat. He is the one who really loves the people, who realizes their true interests and serves them. He was always the first to unmask the traitors and frustrate plots.' In one of his authorial interventions, few and far between, France explains and brands the thoughts and deeds of his hero and his hero's likes as the 'serene fanaticism' of the 'little men, who had demolished the throne itself and turned upside down the old order of things'. In his recording of his own path from the youth of a Romanian fascist to the adulthood of a French philosopher, Émile Cioran summed up the lot of youngsters in the era of Robespierre and Marat, and Stalin and Hitler alike: 'Bad luck is their lot. It is they who voice the doctrine of intolerance and it is they who put that doctrine into practice. It is they who are thirsty – for blood, tumult, barbarity.'<sup>5</sup> Well, all the youngsters? And only the youngsters? And only in the eras of Robespierre or Stalin? All three suppositions sound obviously wrong.

How safe and comfortable, cosy and friendly the world would feel if it were monsters and only monsters who perpetrated monstrous deeds. Against monsters we are fairly well protected, and so we can rest assured that we are insured against the evil deeds that monsters are capable of and threaten to perpetrate. We have psychologists to spot psychopaths and sociopaths, we have sociologists to tell us where they are likely to propagate and congregate, we have judges to condemn them to confinement and isolation, and police or psychiatrists to make sure they stay there. Alas, good, ordinary, likeable American lads and lasses were neither monsters nor perverts. Had they not been assigned to lord over the inmates of Abu Ghraib, we would *never* have known (or as much as surmised, guessed, imagined, fantasized) about the horrifying things they were capable of contriving. It wouldn't have occurred to any of us that the smiling girl at the counter, once on an overseas assignment, might excel at devising ever more clever and fanciful, as well as wicked and perverse tricks – to harass, molest, torture and humiliate her wards. In their hometowns, their neighbours refuse to believe to this very day that those charming lads and lasses they have known since their childhood are the same

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Émile Cioran, *Précis de decomposition* (Gallimard, 1949).

folks as the monsters in the snapshots of the Abu Ghraib torture chambers. But they are.

In the conclusion of his psychological study of Chip Frederick, the suspected leader and guide of the torturers' pack, Philip Zimbardo had to say that

there is absolutely nothing in his record that I was able to uncover that would predict that Chip Frederick would engage in any form of abusive, sadistic behaviour. On the contrary, there is much in his record to suggest that had he not been forced to work and live in such an abnormal situation, he might have been the military's All-American poster soldier on its recruitment ads.

Sharply and uncompromisingly opposing the reduction of social phenomena to the level of the individual psyche, Hannah Arendt observed that the true genius among the Nazi seducers was Himmler, who – neither descending from the *bohème* as Goebbels did, nor being a sexual pervert like Streicher, an adventurer like Goering, a fanatic like Hitler or a madman like Alfred Rosenberg – ‘organized the masses into a system of total domination’, thanks to his (correct!) assumption that in their decisive majority men are not vampires or sadists, but job holders and family providers.<sup>6</sup> Reading *The Kindly Ones*, published by Jonathan Littell in 2009, one can unpack a covert critique of the common interpretation, endorsed by Arendt herself, of the ‘banality of evil’ thesis: namely, the supposition that the evildoer Eichmann was an ‘unthinking man’. From Littell’s portrait, Eichmann emerges as anything but an unthinking follower of orders or a slave to his own base passions. ‘He was certainly not the *enemy of mankind* described in Nuremberg’, ‘nor was he an incarnation of *banal evil*’; he was, on the contrary, ‘a very talented bureaucrat, extremely competent at his functions, with a certain stature and a considerable sense of personal initiative’.<sup>7</sup> As a manager, Eichmann would most certainly be the pride of any reputable European firm (one could add, including the companies with Jewish owners or top executives). Littell’s narrator, Dr Aue, insists that

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<sup>6</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Deutsch, 1986), p. 338.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones* (Chatto & Windus, 2009), pp. 569–70.



in the many personal encounters he had with Eichmann he never noticed any trace of a personal prejudice, let alone a passionate hatred of the Jews, whom he saw as no more, though no less either, than the objects his office demanded to be duly processed. Whether at home or in his job, Eichmann was consistently the same person. The kind of person he was, for instance, when together with his SS mates he performed two Brahms quartets: 'Eichmann played calmly, methodically, his eyes riveted to the score; he didn't make any mistakes.'<sup>8</sup>

LD From William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe onwards, that is to say, from these two brilliant men of letters who depicted Niccolò Machiavelli as an embodiment of evil, the Devil in politics has assumed a number of interpretations some of which are surprisingly close to what we take as important traits of modernity. For example, a total abolition of privacy leading to manipulation of people's secrets and abuses of their intimacy, which appears as a nightmarish vision of the future in such dystopias as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and George Orwell's *1984*, was foreseen, anticipated and wittily depicted in early modern European literature.

Suffice it to recall Luis Vélez de Guevara's *El Diablo cojuelo*, a seventeenth-century text where the Devil has the power to reveal the insides of the houses, or a variation of this theme in Alain-René Le Sage's novel *Le Diable boiteux*. What early modern writers took as a devilish force aimed at depriving human beings of their privacy and secrets has now become inseparable from the reality shows and other actions of wilful and joyful self-exposure in our self-revealing age. The interplay of religion, politics and literary imagination, this notion of the Devil is manifest behind modern European art: for instance, recall Asmodea from *The Book of Tobias*, a female version of the Devil, depicted in Francisco de Goya's painting *Asmodea*.

In your *Liquid Modernity* you analyse the loss of privacy in our liquid times. In *Liquid Surveillance*, written together with David Lyon, you clearly distinguish between the early anticipations of mass surveillance and the reality on the ground in our liquid surveillance epoch. All in all, it seems to me that you proclaimed that

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 565.

privacy is dead. Echoing Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas, we can assume that what happened from the Panopticon project to the colonization of privacy was the defeat inflicted by our epoch on the idea of the autonomous individual. If so, political liberty is on the way to disappearance. And we seem far from beating the drums at the threat. Instead, we celebrate it as our newly acquired security and a chance in the manner of a reality show to remind the world about our existence.

Is this our new form of praise of the Devil? A liquid praise of the Devil?

**ZB** A new form indeed, but not of ‘praise of’ the Devil, not of a languid and self-indulgent wallowing in raptures still only promised to come once the Faustian pact has been duly signed and sealed – but a luxuriating in the Devil’s gifts which have already been received, appropriated and consumed, interiorized and digested by us (while being appropriated, swallowed, consumed and digested by him, something akin to the ‘Alien’ from the film series under that title). And this is not the old, familiar Goethe’s Mephisto, either in its orthodox shape or in Istvan Szabo’s updated reincarnation, but a DIY (‘do it yourself’) Devil – diffused and scattered, deregulated and impersonal from being ground and pulverized and sprinkled all over the human swarm, spawning myriads of ‘local agents’ subsequently privatized and ‘subsidiarized’ to us, individual men and women. This is no longer a devil with an address, headquarters and executing arm like the devils of Zamyatin, Bulgakov or Orwell – or, for that matter, with a temple to summon and gather the congregation for a common prayer; we all carry prayer rugs wherever we go, and any high street will do for a prayer spot. We pray in public, even if (or because) the liturgy and the prayer books are self-referential...

You quote my original exchange with David Lyon – it has since grown into an ongoing conversation, from which permit me to quote one of my suggestions:

As for the ‘death of anonymity’ courtesy of the internet...we submit our rights to privacy to the slaughter of our own will. Or perhaps we just consent to the loss of privacy as a reasonable price for the wonders offered in exchange. Or the pressure to deliver our personal autonomy to the slaughterhouse is so overwhelming, so

close to the condition of a flock of sheep, that only few exceptionally rebellious, bold, pugnacious and resolute wills will earnestly attempt to withstand it. One way or the other, we are however offered, at least nominally, a choice, as well as a semblance at least of a two-way contract, and at least a formal right to protest and sue in case of its breach: something that in the case of mechanical drones that spy on us without asking our permission is never given.

All the same: once we are in, we stay hostages to fate. The collective intelligence of the internet's 2 billion users, and the digital fingerprints that so many users leave on websites, combine to make it more and more likely that every embarrassing video, every intimate photo, and every indelicate e-mail is attributed to its source, whether that source wants it to be or not. It took Rich Lam, a freelance photographer taking pictures of street riots in Vancouver, just one day to trace and identify a couple caught (by accident) passionately kissing in one of his photos. Everything private is now done, potentially, in public – and is potentially available for public consumption; and remains available for the duration, 'till the end of time, as the internet 'can't be made to forget' anything once recorded on any of its innumerable servers. 'This erosion of anonymity is a product of pervasive social media services, cheap cell-phone cameras, free photo and video web hosts, and perhaps most important of all, a change in people's views about what ought to be public and what ought to be private' [to quote Brian Stelter]. All those technical gadgets being, we are told, 'user-friendly' – though that favourite phrase of commercial copy means, under closer scrutiny, a product incomplete without the user's labour, after the pattern of IKEA furniture. And let me add: with users' enthusiastic devotion and deafening applause. A contemporary Étienne de la Boétie would be probably tempted to speak not of a voluntary, but DIY servitude...

Privacy, intimacy, anonymity, the right to secrets are all to be left outside the premises of the Society of Consumers or are routinely confiscated by the security officers at the entrance. In the society of consumers, we are all consumers of commodities, and commodities meant for consumption; since we are all commodities, we are obliged to create demand for ourselves. The internet, with its Facebooks and blogs, those poor people's high-street market versions of VIPs' boutique salons, is bound to follow the standards set by the factories of public celebrities; promoters are bound to be acutely aware that the more intimate, saucy and

scandalous the content of commercials, the more appealing and successful the promotion and the higher the ratings (of TV, glossy magazines, celebrity-hacking tabloids, etc.). The overall result is a 'confessional society', with microphones fixed inside confessionals and megaphones on public squares. Membership of the confessional society is invitingly open to all, but there is a heavy penalty attached to staying outside. Those reluctant to join are taught (usually the hard way) that the updated version of Descartes's Cogito is 'I am seen, therefore I am' – and that the more people who see me, the more I am...

Keeping oneself to oneself and opting out of the game of publicity is made near to impossible by simultaneous assaults on two fronts. One frontline has a long history, inherited from an era whose fears and terrors were recorded by the likes of George Orwell, with TV monitors and cameras rolled into one and watching made available solely in a package deal with being watched. A long history it might have, but in the latest chapter of that history, written in our security obsessed and addicted society, it has deployed brand new weapons of an unheard-of and until recently unimaginable ubiquity and power of penetration: self-propelled spying 'drones' the size of a hummingbird or an insect are currently cutting-edge technology, but they will soon be made out-of-date by the arrival of nanodrones. The second frontline, the DIY one described above, has, however, a very short past: it also uses technological gadgets that progress fast and are ever easier to obtain, but its deployment is home-grown, like a cottage industry, and presented as, as well as believed to be, voluntary.

LD We learn from Eastern European writers that a fatal forgetting and oblivion is a curse of Eastern and Central Europe. In one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century, a work of genius and of warning, and also a Faustian tale about a woman's deal with the Devil to save the love of her life, a tormented novelist confined to a mental asylum, *The Master and Margarita* (written in 1928–41, and published in a heavily censored version in 1966–7), Mikhail Bulgakov confers on the Devil an additional and, perhaps, pivotal aspect of his power.

The Devil can strip a human being, doomed to be confined to non-person and nonentity, of their memory. By losing their memory, people become incapable of any critical questioning of

themselves and the world around them. By losing the powers of individuality and association, they lose their basic moral and political sensibilities. Ultimately, they lose their sensitivity to another human being. The Devil, who safely lurks in the most destructive forms of modernity, deprives human beings of the sense of their place, home, memory and belonging.

It is not accidental that the character of this great novel, the poet Ivan Bezdomny (the Russian for Homeless), who also ends up in a mental asylum as a punishment for his childishly naive denial of history and universal humanity through the denial of the existence of both the Devil and God, or, as we will see, Dark and Light, is homeless in the ontological sense. That his last name means Homeless clearly signifies that Bulgakov took placelessness, homelessness, and forgetting as devilish aspects of the radical, or totalitarian, version of modernity. Bezdomny loses the very foundations of his personality by becoming totally divided, devoid of memory and unable to decipher the unifying principles of life and history. His mental illness diagnosed as schizophrenia is part of the Devil's punishment, like the loss of memory and sensitivity.

The Devil in history and politics is a characteristically Eastern and Central European theme, from Mikhail Bulgakov to Leszek Kołakowski, who had long intended to undertake a major work on the Devil in history and politics.

Grigory Kanovich, an Israeli-Lithuanian writer, describes loss of memory and sensitivity as an unavoidable aspect of how the Devil affects humanity during social upheavals, disasters, wars and calamities. In his novel *The Devil's Spell* (2009), he depicts, with epic brushwork, the wilful forgetting of crimes committed during the Holocaust in Lithuania as an aspect of the Devil's work. The emptiness of conscience, oblivion, and the will-to-forget as the final blow dealt to the victims who are blamed themselves for the crimes committed against them – here we have the devilish act of the deprivation of human memory and sensitivity. Ultimately, undistorted historical memory remains the only reliable and promised fatherland for European Jews after the Shoah.

Yet this has another side. Memory and memory politics have become an obvious aspect of foreign policies over the past years. We are witnessing a sinister tendency increasingly getting stronger in the United States and in Europe. Politicians increasingly find

themselves preoccupied with two domains that serve as a new source of inspiration – privacy and history. Birth, death, and sex constitute the new frontiers on the political battlefields. Since politics is dying out nowadays as a translation of our moral and existential concerns into rational and legitimate action for the benefit of society and humanity, and, instead, is becoming a set of managerial practices and skilful manipulations with public opinion, it is not unwise to assume that a swift politicization of privacy and history promises the way out of the present political and ideological vacuum. It is enough to remember the hottest debates over abortion, euthanasia and gay marriage over the past twenty or so years to conclude that the poor human individual, no matter whether she or he is on the way into the world, or dying, or consummating a marriage, continues to be regarded either as a property of the state and its institutions or, at best, as a mere instrument and hostage of a political doctrine.

Nothing new under the sky, though. Modernity always was, and continues to be, obsessed with how to get as much control over the human body and soul as possible without physically exterminating people. The same is true with regard to society's memory and collective sentiment. As we learn from Orwell's *1984*, history solely depends on those who control the archives and records. Since human individuals have no other form of existence than that which is granted them by the party, individual memory has no power to create or restore history. But if memory is controlled or manufactured and updated every day, history degenerates into a justificatory and legitimizing design of power and control. Logically enough, this leads the Inner Party to assert that who controls the past controls the future and who controls the present controls the past.

History can never be left solely to politicians, whether they are democratic or authoritarian. It is not a property of a political doctrine or of a regime it serves. History, if properly understood, is the symbolic design of our existence and the moral choices we make every day. Like human privacy, our right to study and critically question history is a cornerstone of freedom. At the same time, it makes perfect sense to reiterate the words of Michel Dumoulin, a history professor from the Catholic University of Louvain, who commented on the willingness of politicians to adopt the roles and functions of both historians and jurists:

‘Qu’on laisse les historiens faire leur boulot (Let the historians do their job).’<sup>9</sup>

What is the way out of this predicament of liquid modernity? Too much memory can kill us, not to mention our sense of humour, yet we are unable to abandon our memory.

**ZB** Again, in my reckoning, devils come in all sorts, and the ‘works of *the Devil*’ usually tend to be ambiguous and ambivalent: an act of exchange, a trade-off, a quid pro quo, tit for tat, you gain something while losing something else... The Devil’s power resides in his mastery of the counterfeit art.

The figure of the Devil is a trickster, a swindler, a charlatan, all in all a confidence artist projected at the scale of an IMAX screen, which is on average an overwhelming  $22 \times 16.1$  metres (about  $72 \times 53$  feet in size), but can be made – and surely will be – even larger. Stretched to such a terrifying size, the Devil embodies the inexorability, nay indomitability, of something that is not what it seems to be, neither what it pretends to be nor what you take it for: the horror of a changeling, showing its true nature only at the point of no return – or after it has been passed...

In one of his Talmudic studies, Emmanuel Levinas suggests that the genuinely irresistible pulling power of temptation derives from the sheer state of ‘being tempted’, rather than from the attractiveness of the states that are promised, believed and expected to be ushered in by surrender to that temptation. What temptation offers is bound to mix the desire for bliss with fear of the unknown. So long as a state is still only imagined and not yet experienced, it is admittedly a risky, perhaps even downright treacherous task to draw a line between good and evil. In the state of being tempted (and up to the very moment of surrender), fear of the unknown, of drawing the line wrongly, is subdued by the joy of still having the drawing pencil in one’s hand – of being in control. Levinas calls that state ‘temptation of temptation’: a state of being attracted, in the last account, by the ‘under-determination’, ‘inconclusiveness’, ‘incompleteness’ of the moment - that elusive, harrowingly brief moment of freedom, when you have already become free to choose (having emerged – a creature drawn out by temptation – from the dungeon of the routine, the humdrum, the monotonous and the

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<sup>9</sup>See ‘Les politiques peuvent-ils “dire l’histoire”?’ *Le Soir*, 25 Jan. 2012.

immovable) but have not yet chosen, keeping your freedom intact and unscathed. One could say it is a divine state, a glimpse of that infinite potency that is an attribute of God denied to us mortals. That is why temptation tends to be associated with the Devil and his works. The state of temptation is blasphemous, in as far as imagining oneself all-powerful is sacrilege. Allowing oneself to be tempted is the sacrilegious act for which surrender to the temptation is the statutory punishment. Being free to decide means having reached the vestibule of evil pandemonium. Dazzled by its splendours, it is all too easy to overlook the steep and slippery descent just on the other side of the threshold...

Now to one of the major instruments for immunizing temptation against the danger that its attractiveness will be eroded by the accumulating evidence of a fall... Yes, indeed, memory (by definition, memory of the *past*) can be *manipulated* (and it is, on the initiative of all sorts of people with devilish, counterfeiting intentions and ambitions, but not without the help and hard work of swarms of their hired hands – keen, lukewarm or reluctant, but always obedient – or their voluntary though sometimes inadvertent accomplices; this is what Winston Smith was employed for by the Ministry of Truth), but not *annihilated*. Memory stripped of event X is not a blank spot, it is still historical memory, only it becomes memory of a different history – a history that did not contain the event X. (By the way, Leonid Shestov, the great philosopher from Eastern Europe then France, considered this feat of ‘acting backwards’ ‘remaking what had already been made’, ‘undoing what had already been done’, and therefore ‘changing the past’, a crucial and monopolistic capacity of God when he insisted that God could change the past as much as he could change the future: for instance, he could make the outrage of poisoning Socrates by his fellow Athenians non-existent. If so, the Devil’s toying with the past is just one of his endless arrogant and desperate attempts to represent himself as ‘God’s alternative’ and to beat God at God’s own, his own by right, game. It is no wonder therefore, that Bezdomy could not deny the Devil without denying God – and it was precisely that unavoidable ‘doubleness’ of his denial that cast him into the lunatic asylum.) And so what happens is not the appearance of a ‘non-person’, but something akin to body-snatching: a surreptitious person-replacement (after all, we are increasingly, and ever deeper, immersed in a society of spare parts



and progressive ‘cyborgization,’ as well as being recommended and eager to recompose our identities, including the biographies that composed them in the first place – aren’t we?) A *different* person appears, one who still owns a memory of *a* past, albeit a *different* past, and just like his former incarnation he uses his memory to perceive and comprehend his present and to project his future.

As yet, no one has managed to strip humans of critical capacity, though there have been many who have successfully managed to redirect that capacity to alternative effects. What worries me most, however, about the plight of ‘memory of the past’ in our present-day mode of life is not the prospect of collective amnesia (this is not really on the cards) and so universal homelessness, but rather the ongoing transformation of the past into a container full of colourful or colourless, appetizing or insipid bits, all floating (to take a notion from Georg Simmel) with the same specific gravity; a container amenable to, and perpetually submitted, to chance dipping – allowing for endless permutations but devoid of any logic of its own, and its own hierarchy of importance. The work of the Devil? In order to overshadow or replace the occurrence of Jewish pogroms in Lithuania with the memory of Lithuanian Jews cooperating with Soviet occupants, candles could be lit to God or to the Devil in equal measure and with equal effect...

Besides, on that north-western peninsula of the Asiatic continent dubbed ‘Europe’, every and any identity, including national or ethnic identity, is less and less a principal frontline along which coercion and freedom, imposition and choice, inclusion and exclusion confront each other in a war of attrition; it is turning more and more into a play of temptations and a game of avoiding traps, a recent, updated version of snakes and ladders. For all practical intents and purposes, ‘identity’ is fast turning (at least in our part of the world) into ‘identainment’: it is moving from the theatre of war of physical and spiritual survival on to the stage of entertaining recreational play, turning into a concern and one of the favourite pastimes of *homo ludens* rather than *homo politicus*. It has been also largely *privatized*, shifted away and exiled from the area of ‘Politics’ (with a capital ‘P’) and cast into the poorly defined, loosely structured and incurably vulnerable and volatile realm of individually run ‘life politics’ – a space in large measure abandoned by policy-makers, or contracted out by design or default to the markets. Like most functions that have moved or have been

moved into that space, it is currently undergoing a fast yet thorough process of *commercialization*. The play titled ‘identity search’ or ‘identity-building’ is being variously staged by competing producers, spanning the whole spectrum of theatrical genres from epic drama to farce or grotesque, though tragedy-style productions have become fewer and farther between than in the relatively recent past.

To go on: historical memory is always a *mixed* blessing, and all too often it is a curse in a veneer-thin yet dazzlingly tempting and seductive disguise of a blessing. Memories can serve evil as keenly and effectively as we would like them to serve the cause of improvement and learning from mistakes. They can camouflage the ambushes of treacherous temptations as much as they can serve as portable warning signs. Victimization, as it were, degrades the victimizers, who dearly wish to forget a shameful and sorely inconvenient episode – but it does not ennoble the victimized, who dearly wish to keep their suffering vivid in their memory, mostly motivated by hope of obtaining compensation in the same currency. In a recent interview, my interviewer Artur Domosławski commented that assuming the right attitude would make it impossible to pass over in silence war crimes committed by the Israeli army and the persecution of Palestinians – and this was so precisely *because* of the cruel fate of European Jews: suffering discrimination, pogroms, ghettoization, and in the end an attempt at their ultimate destruction. I found myself in complete agreement with Domosławski’s suggestion. I believe that the mission of Holocaust survivors is to assist in the salvation of our jointly inhabited world from another catastrophe of a potentially similar character and magnitude. To this end, they need to bear witness to the gruesome and murderous tendencies – hidden, yet very much alive and resilient – built into the very foundations of our mode of coexistence. This is how Raul Hilberg, the greatest among the historians of the Holocaust, understood that mission when he repeated again and again that the Nazi machine of genocide did not differ in its structure from the ‘normal’ organization of German society: it was that self-same society playing one of its ‘normal’, everyday roles. Richard Rubenstein, a theologian, kept reminding whoever was willing to listen that – in just the same way as bodily hygiene, subtle philosophical ideas, exquisite works of art and wondrous music – serfdom, war, exploitation and

concentration camps were also mundane attributes of modern civilization. Shoah, he concluded, 'was not evidence of fall, but of the progress of civilization'.

Alas, this was not the only lesson that happened to have been drawn from the Holocaust. There was another: the one who strikes first comes out on top, and as long as he stays on top, he also stays unpunished. It is true that the rulers of Israel are not the only ones who seem to have learnt that sinister lesson, and they are not the only ones to blame for having offered Hitler – whether intentionally or inadvertently – such a posthumous victory of sorts. If this happens in Israel, however, a country seeing itself as the lawful heir to the Jewish fate, it carries a more profound shock than other cases possibly would: after all, it destroys another myth, one we all embrace and cherish – that suffering ennobles, and that the victims of the infliction of pain emerge from their trials luminously clean and morally elevated. In stark opposition to what we would dearly wish to be true, we suddenly realize that victims of cruelty wait for the occasion to repay their oppressors in their own currency – and if vengeance on their oppressors of yesterday, or their offspring, is unfeasible or inconvenient for one reason or another, they hurry at least to efface the ignominy and disgrace of their past weakness, to demonstrate their equality to the task and chase away the spectre of inherited and continuing inferiority. Anyone within reach may be picked on for the demonstration – a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.

The sad truth, and a truly tremendous shot in the Devil's arm, is that while the act of inflicting pain on others no doubt degrades and debases the perpetrators, the sufferers of the pain do not emerge from their trials morally unscathed either. The real consequence of brutality and persecution is that it sets into operation another 'schismogenetic chain' (to deploy the term coined by Gregory Bateson to denote a succession of actions and reactions that deepen the doggedness and pugnacity of both sides at each stage and widen the abyss that divides them) – and it takes a lot of good will and hard effort to opt out from stretching the chain indefinitely. Of the two evils, I would rather be a victim of nationalism than its carrier and practitioner. General Moczar, the man behind the anti-Semitic campaign in Poland, caused Janina and me a lot of pain, but he did not manage to soil our consciences. If anything, he stained his own – if he had one, that is.

You say: ‘Too much memory can kill us, not to mention our sense of humour, yet we are unable to abandon our memory.’ Beautifully put, with the sharpness and precision of a surgical scalpel; indeed it is difficult to conceive of a better summary of our predicament. But let’s remember as well that whereas one can live happily without memories (as all animals do), it’s well-nigh impossible to go on living without forgetting... No wonder that quite a few of the most brilliant and perceptive minds have advocated the manifold blessings of forgetting – managing to convince some (alas, very few) resourceful historical actors to follow suit. Two days after the murder of Julius Caesar, Cicero appealed to the Roman Senate to condemn the memory of ‘murderous quarrels’ to eternal oblivion for the sake of laying the foundation of peace. Louis XVIII, restored to the throne in 1814, decreed the forgetting of atrocities, including the regicide, committed during the French Revolution. He wrote into the new French constitution that ‘all inquiry into opinions and votes preceding the restoration are prohibited. Both the courts and the citizens are obliged in equal measure to forget them.’ And recall the exemplarily smooth and humane exit of South Africa, due largely to Nelson Mandela’s inspiration, from the long dark years of injustice, hatred and blood-letting. Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote that ‘forgetting is not only an absence and lack, but, as shown by Nietzsche, an elementary condition of mental life. Only thanks to forgetting does the mind have a chance of full renewal.’<sup>10</sup>

All things taken into account, is it better to remember harms and injustices suffered, or to forget them? Opinions continue to be – unpromisingly, discouragingly – divided and the courts are far from reaching a verdict. I suspect the jury will stay out for a very long time to come...

LD Evil lurks in what we tend to take as normality and even as the triviality and banality of mundane life, rather than in abnormal cases, pathologies, aberrations and the like. Whereas we in Eastern Europe still continue to be more preoccupied with the tragic in human history, you are inclined to shed more light on the banal and mundane. Therefore, it would be hardly possible to

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<sup>10</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Mohr, 1990), p. 21.

understand the phenomenon of loss of sensitivity without the concept of the adiaphorization of human behaviour. *Adiaphoron* in Greek means an unimportant thing (pl. *adiaphora*). This term was used by the Greek Stoics; later it was adopted by Martin Luther's fellow religious reformer Philipp Melancthon, who called the liturgical differences between Catholics and Protestants *adiaphora*, that is, things to which no heed should be paid. But in the sense you give it, an *adiaphoron* is a temporary withdrawal from one's own sensitivity zone; an ability not to react, or to react as if something were happening not to people but to natural physical objects, to things, or to non-humans. The things occurring are unimportant; they do not happen to us or with us. This helps explain the once popular public executions, which were attended, and observed as pleasing spectacles, by women with their babies, children, commoners and aristocrats (the latter watching from a distance).

Individual personhood diffused and dissolved in the throng, as well as publicly performed cruelties, all destroyed any real relation to the person being tortured and killed. All these people watching an execution would have been horrified if such a spectacle had threatened them or their loved ones personally. But since these cruelties were inflicted not on 'real people', but on criminals and 'enemies of the people' (during the French Revolution, say, when to the great delight of the masses, the royal family, the aristocrats, the Vendée activists, the conservative provincial royalists, and other enemies of the revolution were guillotined), the human power to feel sympathy and empathy was suppressed.

It turns out that a 'healthy and normal person' can for a time turn into as much of a moral idiot as a sadistic sociopath slowly killing another human being, or one showing no sympathy for a tortured human being's suffering. One doesn't even need clinical terms – moral insanity can befall even the healthy. The routinization of violence and killing during war leads to a condition in which people stop responding to war's horrors. On the other hand, constant stimuli force people to cease reacting to them, and they pay attention only to some more powerful social or informational stimulus. Ancient wisdom reminds us that by misusing a high social intonation or by sowing moral panic you sooner or later will lose quick and sufficient responses from others when you really do need their help. Let us just recall the fairy tale about the

young shepherd who likes to pull legs, fakes wolf attacks, and then receives no assistance when his herd is really attacked by wolves.

Incessant political scandals similarly diminish or entirely take away people's social and political sensitivity. For something to agitate society, it must really be unexpected or downright brutal. Thus inevitably mass society and mass culture adiaphorize us. Not just politicians but insensitive individuals whose social nature and attention are awakened only by sensational and destructive stimuli are in large part the result of the media. Stimulation becomes a method and a way of self-realization. Things turned into a routine do not turn anybody on – one needs to become a star or a victim to gain any sort of attention from one's society. As you have observed, only a celebrity and a famous victim can expect to be noticed by a society overstuffed with sensational, valueless information. Especially in an environment that recognizes only force and violence. Celebrity and stardom means success that leaves the masses with the illusion that they are not too far from it and can reach it. A star is a hero to those who have succeeded or who still believe that success will enter their lives.

But a victim is a hero to those who have been united by failures and degradations. The traditional mythic hero is a projection of power generalized into the belief that the present can always repeat the past – this, after all, is no more than what the historical hero means in the present-day world. The worst possible combination today, in your view, lies in the conflation of victim and hero, which resuscitates the dignity of the degraded but exacts the price of the hero's death and the glorification of destruction. The physical annihilation of the enemy or his embodiment, necessarily accompanied by the self-annihilation of the hero, that is, his becoming the victim, re-establishes the lost dignity: the perfect mixture of hero and victim is achieved by the cult of the shahids, or martyrs, in the consciousness of terrorists and those who believe in them.

You consider the adiaphorization of behaviour to be one of the most sensitive problems of our epoch. Its causes are manifold: instrumental rationality; mass society and mass culture, that is, being in a crowd each and every moment (just think of television and the internet); having the crowd in one's soul; and a conception of the world such that it seems you are always enveloped by

an anonymous power thanks to which no one will recognize, identify or shame you. Thus those things that we ourselves do not connect with our lives become of no importance to us; their existence is dissociated from our being in the world; and they do not belong to the sphere of our identity and self-conception. Something happens to others, but not to us. It cannot happen to us – this is a familiar feeling, provoked by our understanding of the technological and virtual human world.

When you constantly see crashing planes in the movies, you start looking at them as fictions that can never happen to you in real life. Violence shown every day ceases to provoke amazement, or disgust. It, as it were, grows on you. At the same time, it stays unreal – it still seems it cannot happen to us. It did not happen to us. It happened to someone else. It happened to others. These ‘others’ are fictions created by artists, analysts, scholars or journalists. Real is only what happens to me. What happens to me physically and directly. What can be proven.

Often we fail to tie together two connected and even mutually conditioning things: the excess of verbally and pictorially depicted violence and brutality in our media, and the undoubtedly sadistic and masochistic practice of political commentary seeking to belittle others and oneself. A brutal type of discourse cutting down others and oneself, that is, social and political commentary as a slow process of self-negation and self-destruction, has truly nothing in common with a critical attitude. For real and good criticism is a constructing of alternatives, an essaying of a thought or an action from the position of logic or another way of knowing or thinking. Verbal and mental cannibalism or mutual moral annihilation means just one thing – the disavowal of free discussion and its smothering before it has even started. Sadistic language usually aims to control, torture and thereby subjugate its object, while masochistic language is characterized by a way of making comments about oneself that would not occur even to a real enemy of that person or their country.

Isn't this sufficient to imply that we are in peril of losing calm and balanced discussion as we knew it for decades? What if this is all distorted into a mental or IT technique to provoke the mass reactions we need? And how can democracy and the public domain exist without informed opinions and political deliberations, rather than all those political scandals and reality shows

that we call politics nowadays? And aren't we in peril of losing our ability to follow what is happening in the world and to empathize with people who suffer? Isn't this intensification of virtual life with its side-effects, such as the sadistic language and mental cannibalism lurking in anonymous online chats and deeply offensive comments that are meant to hurt and discourage those who are visible and who expose themselves, a direct way to a loss of human compassion and sensitivity?

**ZB** Ludwig Wittgenstein remarked that the suffering of however many people, of all of humankind even, can never be greater – more acute, profound and cruel – than the suffering of one member of the human race. This is one pole of the moral-immoral axis. At the second pole is the idea that care for the health of the social body calls for drastic surgery: diseased (or disease-prone) parts of the body need to be amputated. The rest of moral discourse moves between those poles.

But by 'adiaphorization' I mean stratagems of placing, intentionally or by default, certain acts and/or omitted acts regarding certain categories of humans *outside* the moral-immoral axis – that is, outside the 'universe of moral obligations' and outside the realm of phenomena subject to moral evaluation; stratagems to declare such acts or inaction, explicitly or implicitly, 'morally neutral' and prevent the choices between them from being subject to ethical judgement – which means pre-empting moral opprobrium (a contrived return, one could say, to the paradisaical state of naivety preceding the first bite of the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil...). In popular wisdom, that set of stratagems tends to be collected under the rubric of the 'ends justify the means'; or 'evil as the act might be, yet it was necessary to defend or promote a greater good'. In classic 'solid' modernity, bureaucracy was the principal workshop in which morally loaded acts were remoulded as adiaphoric. Today, I suspect, it is the markets that have taken over most of that role.

To me the term 'adiaphoric' does not mean 'unimportant', but 'irrelevant', or better still 'indifferent' or 'equanimous' – following the intentions and suggestions of church councils ruminating on the concordance or contradiction of specific beliefs with the canons of Christian faith: beliefs proclaimed by *the Council* to be 'adiaphoric' could be held by members of the church without falling



into sin. In my somewhat secularized use, ‘adiaphoric’ acts are those exempted by *social consent* (universal or local) from ethical evaluation, and therefore free from carrying the threat of pangs of conscience and moral stigma. Courtesy of social (read, majority) consent, the self-esteem and self-righteousness of the actors are *a priori* protected from moral condemnation; moral conscience is thereby disarmed and made irrelevant as a constraining and limiting factor in the choice of actions.

Even if they are proclaimed ‘adiaphoric’ by people, authorized to deliver the verdict (an authority derived from their numbers or the offices they hold), acts and inaction all too often remain objects of passionate controversy; their moral innocence is hotly contested. A very common instance of this contention is the classification of the use of force as either defence of law and order (that is, legitimate violence), or acts of violence (that is, illegitimate coercion). It is easy to see that the difference between these two denominations rests ultimately on who is entitled by law to draw the line dividing the ‘legitimate’ from the ‘illegitimate’. The right to draw that line and the means to render it binding and obligatory is a principal stake in all power struggles.

Your worry as to whether we are ‘in peril of losing our ability to follow what is happening in the world and to empathize with people who suffer’ is fully justified. This peril exists in a life whose rhythm is dictated by the ratings wars and box-office returns of the media, in a speed-space (to borrow Paul Virilio’s term) in which IT-managed information ages well before settling down, striking roots and maturing into an informed debate – a ‘hurried life’ in which we all smart under the ‘tyranny of the moment’ that not so much forces or encourages us to forget what we had or could learn, as offers us little chance to memorize it and retain it in our memory. The great Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci used to say that ‘we are plagued by the fragility of the presentness which calls for a firm foundation where none exists’. And so, ‘when contemplating change, we are always torn between desire and fear, between anticipation and uncertainty.’<sup>11</sup> Uncertainty means *risk*: inseparable companion of all action and a sinister

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<sup>11</sup>See Alberto Melucci, *The Playing Self: Person and Meaning in the Planetary Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 43ff. This is an extended version of the Italian original, *Il gioco dell’io* (1991).

spectre haunting the compulsive decision-makers and choosers by necessity that we have been since, as Melucci pithily put it, ‘choice became a destiny’. What separates the present-day agony of choice from the discomforts that tormented the *homo eligens*, the ‘man choosing’, at all times is the discovery or suspicion that there are no preordained rules and universally approved objectives that can be followed to thereby absolve the choosers from the adverse consequences of their choices. Reference points and guidelines that seem trustworthy today are likely to be debunked tomorrow as misleading or corrupt. Allegedly rock-solid companies are unmasked as figments of the accountants’ imagination. Whatever is ‘good for you’ today may be reclassified tomorrow as your poison. Apparently firm commitments and solemnly signed agreements may be overturned overnight. And promises, or most of them, seem to be made solely to be betrayed and broken. There seems to be no stable, secure island among the tides. To quote Melucci once more, ‘we no longer possess a home; we are repeatedly called upon to build and then rebuild one, like the three little pigs of the fairy tale, or we have to carry it along with us on our backs like snails.’

The tsunami of information, opinions, suggestions, recommendations, advice and insinuation that inevitably overwhelms us on our meandering itineraries of life results in the ‘blasé attitude’ towards ‘knowledge, work and lifestyle’ (indeed, towards life as such and everything it contains) already noted by Georg Simmel at the start of the last century as surfacing first among residents of the ‘metropolis’ – the big and crowded modern city:

The essence of the blasé attitude consists in the blunting of discrimination. This does not mean that the objects are not perceived, as is the case with the half-wit, but rather that the meaning and differing values of things, and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial. They appear to the blasé person in an evenly flat and grey tone; no one object deserves preference over any other...<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Georg Simmel, ‘The metropolis and mental life’, here quoted in Kurt Wolff’s 1950 translation, as reprinted in *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, ed. Richard Sennett (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969), p. 52.

Joseph Roth pointed to one of the mechanisms of this desensitizing habituation:

When a catastrophe occurs, people at hand are shocked into helplessness. Certainly, acute catastrophes have that effect. It seems that people expect catastrophes to be brief. But chronic catastrophes are so unpalatable to neighbours that they gradually become indifferent to them and their victims, if not downright impatient... Once the emergency becomes protracted, helping hands return to pockets, the fires of compassion cool down.<sup>13</sup>

And so we rush to help victims of catastrophe in a momentary suspension of the habitual daily routine, carnival-style, only to return to that routine once a cheque has been mailed. The very briefness of the call shook us out of balance and equanimity and prompted us into action (as brief as the call). Under the tyranny of the moment, though, 'compassion fatigue' will set in, waiting for another shock to break it, again for only a fleeting moment. And so the horror of the one-off earthquake or flood stands a much better chance of spurring us into action than slowly (one can say imperceptibly) yet relentlessly rising inequality of income and life chances; a one-off act of cruelty is more likely to draw a crowd of protesters into the streets than the monotonously served doses of humiliation and indignity to which the excluded, the homeless, the downgraded are exposed, day in, day out. One iniquitous act of murder, or a railway catastrophe, hits minds and hearts more strongly than the trickling yet continuous and unstoppable, indeed routine tribute paid by humanity in the currency of lost or wasted lives to the juggernaut of technology and the malfunctioning of a society which is increasingly blasé, insensitive, listless and unconcerned, since consumed by the virus of adiaphorization...

In other words, a protracted catastrophe blazes the trail of its own continuation by consigning the initial shock and outrage to oblivion and thus emaciating and enfeebling human solidarity with its victims – and so the possibility is sapped that forces will be joined for the sake of staving off future victimhood...

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<sup>13</sup> *Juden auf Wanderschaft*, here quoted from Joseph Roth, *The Wandering Jews*, trans. Michael Hofmann (Granta, 2001), p. 125.

LD The Lithuanian writer Ricardas Gavelis (1950–2002) – ironic, caustic and brilliant, albeit little appreciated, not to say neglected, in his own country, who was especially active in the 1990s, once coined the term ‘the epoch of dilettantes’. Although he was far from engaging in a cult of ‘pure specialists’, Gavelis feared the domination of aggressive mediocrities with their ability to silence polite and calm men and women of letters who prefer to think twice before saying and undertaking something. His fear was not exaggerated. In fact, what happened in the post-Soviet political space was a revolution of dilettantes. People who were to become the ‘old new’ managerial and political classes, business community, jet set and the cultural elite were all recruited from the Communist Party or Communist Youth, which was a public secret in Eastern Europe. In fact, they had more social capital and networks than all other segments of post-Communist society put together.

‘Dilettante’ is not always a bad word, though. Just recall Tomaso Giovanni Albinoni, a great Venetian Baroque composer, who dared to call himself a Venetian dilettante. Yet Gavelis clearly meant something different. What is inexorably lost in translation here is the nuance of a silent independence and creativity of men and women of letters, a sort of slow food in societal life and culture, which facilitates and allows important things to happen, such as original books, civil society-oriented debates, and the birth of political ideas. Alas, we did not get any closer to such a slow food for thought; instead, having escaped the political kitsch and ideological tyranny of the Soviets, we found ourselves desperately trying to catch up with the academic junk food of Western Europe. We started remedying our malaise with the medicines which will only distance us from what Western liberal education used to be, instead of bringing us any closer to it.

What happened after 1990 in Eastern Europe was an extreme acceleration of unprecedented economic, social and political change without any chance left to slow down and think for a while. A laboratory of the most rapid change ever seen in modern history, Eastern Europe started losing the opportunity to think and react slowly. The need for immediate action or for a thunder-like reaction to the emergency calls and challenges of a radical transformation left no room for independent intellectuals, who had to choose between functioning as the new court rhetoricians and PR

folk serving the political class or allowing themselves to be relegated to the margins of international academic life.

True, there was one more option left for an Eastern European intellectual as a poor cousin of his or her Western European counterpart, aptly described by Ernest Gellner in his posthumously published essay 'The rest of history': namely, a permanent or temporary migration across the globe without any chance of a final recognition of his merits and creative contributions or without even a remote possibility of certainty. 'A wandering academic', 'a gypsy scholar', or, to use an American euphemism for a jobless academic, 'an independent scholar' (or 'unaffiliated scholar', to recall one more Orwellesque pearl of the seemingly sensitive Newspeak of the senseless and insensitive world of today) – these are all masks for the face of the existential and intellectual homelessness of an Eastern or Central European intellectual. Unless the entire world is in the process of becoming a Central Europe, this time-honoured embodiment and symbol of uncertainty, unsafety and insecurity...

Like the majority of European Union countries, Lithuania is now confined to the new managerial experiments – officially labelled as a substantial structural reform – which are trying to transform the universities into semi-corporate bodies run like business companies, with a paramount mission of service and efficiency, rather than original, in-depth research and top-level teaching. These senseless experiments are far from innocent and harmless. We are at serious and real risk of bidding farewell to the university as a cornerstone of European culture and as an institution which has survived states and forms of government. Even in Italy, the new managerial class has stopped talking about the autonomy of universities. The commodification of universities and education is too obvious to need emphasis. Yet one thing is much worse than that – namely, a gradual disappearance of the political in the realm of the university, and also a sliding into technocracy disguised as democracy and free choice.

Incidentally, it was Zamyatin's *We* that spoke to the death of the classical and the death of the past. In the Only State's education system, classical studies no longer exist, and the humanities in general disappear. The death of humanism and the prohibition of the study of history and classics in the education of the world of the future was written about as early as 1770 by the French writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier in his work of political fantasy

*L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fut jamais* (The year 2440: a dream if ever there was one), giving form to the extremes of the ideology of never-ending progress. In Zamyatin's dystopia, the past is associated with barbarians whose primitive works, threatening rationality and progress, cannot be studied, while the worst illness in the Only State is what the ancient Greeks referred to as the soul.

What, in your view, does a slow dying of classical and modern universities (modern in Humboldt's sense) signify? Are we witnessing the death of the Humboldtian concept of education as a cultivation of humanity in ourselves and as an awakening in us of the potential to shape the world around us? How are we going to sustain and cultivate *le devoir de mémoire* culture – the duty of memory – and our modern sensibilities without them?

**ZB** We live in an era of sound-bites, not thoughts: ephemera calculated, as George Steiner famously observed, for maximum impact and instant obsolescence. As a French journalist wittily suggested, were Émile Zola put in front of TV cameras today to state his case about the Dreyfus scandal, he would be given just enough time to yell 'J'accuse!' The standard form of interhuman communication is an iPhone message of words reduced to consonants and any word that can't survive such a reduction is disallowed and eliminated. The most popular communications, most widely echoed, yet, like an echo, reverberating for only the briefest of moments, are allowed no more than 140 characters. The span of human attention - that scarcest of commodities currently on the market – has been cut down to the size and duration of messages likely to be composed, sent and received. The first victim of a hurried life and the tyranny of the moment is language – emaciated, impoverished, vulgarized and squeezed out of the meanings it was presumed to carry. While 'intellectuals', the knights errant of meaningful words and their meanings, are their collateral casualties.

Dilettantes, says Gavelis? I guess this is what people of thought and words have *ceased to be*, rather than have become... Originally, and more than a century before the term 'intellectual' was coined (reputedly by Georges Clemenceau, to denote the residue of 'men of knowledge' who retain their passion while most of their comrades-in-arms have opted out for well-paid jobs in academia, politics, journalism, etc.), all these human beings consumed with the passion to explore, examine and understand (the

term ‘dilettante’ comes from Latin *delectare*, that is ‘to delight in’) were, so to speak, freelance and self-supported, or sustained by high and mighty patrons. Max Weber pointed out the difference between politicians who lived *for* politics and those who chose to live *off* politics... Perched on the elevated heights of their new locations, those politicians living *off* politics desperately sought ways to devalue the remaining passionate practitioners of the arts – and by the same token to stifle their own nostalgia for the delights of a passion they now sorely missed. They found satisfaction for both in branding the survivors of the relics of the ‘epoch of dilettantes’ as ‘mere amateurs’, as distinct from, and inferior to, their own professionalism. Clemenceau’s intellectuals – painfully aware of their responsibility for values transcending the limits of any profession in a world notorious for an ever stricter, more divisive, fragmenting and separating division of labour – vanished or underwent a mysterious conversion once they were inside the corporate buildings or out on the vast, rainy and windy expanses of the market. They were reincarnated as Michel Foucault’s ‘partial intellectuals’ (an oxymoron, to be sure): surgeons defending hospitals, stage actors demanding funds for theatres, academics concerned with the future of universities and research establishments – and, all in all, employees fighting to protect their jobs, sources of income, and whatever remained of their privileges.

Having refused to follow the herd of converts to the new Church of the Market and abandon their own mission, what could the ‘dilettante’ sharp-shooters of yore do under such circumstances? They could listen to Theodor Adorno:

For the intellectual, inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity... The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such... Above all, one should beware of seeking out the mighty, and ‘expecting something’ from them. The eye for possible advantages is the mortal enemy of all human relationships; from these solidarity and loyalty can ensue, but never from thoughts of practical ends.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>See Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. Jephcott (Verso, 1974), p. 26.

These words were been written from the hermitage of an émigré ('the past life of émigrés is, as we all know, annulled'<sup>15</sup>) – but by the time they were written intellectuals of the 'dilettante' variety had been forced or had volunteered to emigrate from the brave new world of 'partial intellectuals' and had firmly fixed their eyes on the 'possible advantages' 'from the mighty'...

Quite a lot of water has flowed under the bridges since Adorno jotted down his sad and sombre words. With decades of intense globalization, deregulation and individualization slicing lives into fragments and the flow of time into an endless series of episodes, Michel Houellebecq penned *Possibility of an Island*, the first great, and thus far unrivalled dystopia for a liquid, deregulated, consumption-obsessed, individualized era: a treatise not on the fate of intellectuals, but on a world in which the very concept of intellectuals was going to become a contradiction in terms if the processes of the last several decades went on unabated and nothing was done to redirect or arrest them.

Commenting on an interview conducted with Houellebecq by Susannah Hunnewell, I noted a while ago in my diary:

The authors of the greatest dystopias of yore, like Zamyatin, Orwell or Aldous Huxley, penned their visions of the horrors haunting the denizens of the solid modern world: a world of closely regimented and order-obsessed producers and soldiers. They hoped that their visions would shock their fellow travellers into the unknown and force them out of the torpor of sheep meekly marching to the slaughterhouse: this is what your lot will be like, they said – unless you rebel. Zamyatin, Orwell, Huxley, just like Houellebecq, were children of their times. This is why, *unlike* Houellebecq, they were bespoke tailors by intention: they believed in commissioning the future to order, and dismissed as a gross incongruence an idea of a future that was self-made. What they were frightened of were wrong measurements, unshapely designs and/or sloppy, drunk or corrupt tailors; they had no fear, though, that the tailor's shops would fall apart or be decommissioned or phased out – and they did not anticipate the advent of a tailor-free world.

Houellebecq, however, writes from the innards of just such a tailor-free world. The future, in such a world, is *self*-made: a DIY future, and none of the DIY addicts controls, wishes to control, or

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.



could control it. Once each is set on his or her own orbit, never criss-crossing, the contemporaries of Houellebecq have no need of dispatchers or conductors, any more than the planets and stars need road planners and traffic monitors. They are perfectly capable of finding the road to the slaughterhouse on their own. And they do – as the two principal protagonists of the story did, hoping (in vain alas, in vain...) to meet each other on that road. The slaughterhouse in Houellebecq's dystopia is also, as it were, DIY.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Zygmunt Bauman, *This is Not a Diary* (Polity, 2012).

## 2

# The Crisis of Politics and the Search for a Language of Sensitivity

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**Leonidas Donskis** An interesting discussion took place in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (26 September 1992). When asked by his interviewer whether intellectuals will succeed in maintaining their social significance, the Spanish literary critic and author Manuel Vázquez Montalbán (who is famous especially for his detective novels) wittily replied that ‘the connection between CNN and Jane Fonda will be the only organic intellectual in the world’.

Montalbán went on, adding that he has more confidence in intellectuals who appear in public collectively, rather than individually. And then he concluded that social criticism will survive into the twenty-first century, shaping new social movements. The only thing that we, in his own words, ‘individualist intellectuals’ are still good for is forming critically minded communities. According to the Spanish writer, the role of the intellectual will decrease, but at the same time stronger critical collectives will emerge.

Without a shadow of a doubt, intellectuals have a future, although it may significantly differ from that role of the lonely Tiresiuses and Cassandras, dissenters, naysayers and personifications of the conscience quite well known to us in Eastern and Central Europe over the past fifty years. In our self-absorbed age obsessed with consumption, intensity, attention-seeking, self-exposure and sensationalism, an individual intellectual can hardly avoid sinking into oblivion without becoming a victim or a celebrity.

Therefore, the fact is that we live in a world which leaves increasingly less room for people like Andrei Sakharov, John Paul II or Václav Havel. A seemingly unquestionable moral authority can easily be marginalized by assuming their name yet changing the logic of their moral choices – in silence and even without noticing it. A safe bureaucratic practice and a well-established routine can be as dangerous for the authenticity of the defence of human rights as a selective approach to it.

For instance, there is something profoundly embarrassing, not to say ironic and even sinister, about the way in which political groups negotiate and calculate their choices when they nominate human rights defenders for the Sakharov Prize in the European Parliament. What lurks behind a routinized realpolitik practice is a legitimizing authority of the greatest human rights defender, whose name is used for the self-establishing and self-aggrandizing purposes of politicians.

The anonymity and unaccountability of political and bureaucratic groups is as destructive to the fate of great intellectuals and critics as is political kitsch or the cult of celebrity within the media world. In fact, we live in a time when old-fashioned, or pre-Facebook era, intellectuals are in peril of being relegated to the margins of the public domain and politics. They are at risk of becoming non-entities.

This is no joke; indeed, far from it. If you go to the public, you can make yourself heard and visible only through IT and public communication novelties or through TV talk shows. The rest is history. All in all, technology has outpaced politics. Either you actively engage in the world of IT, or you don't exist any more. You can, therefore, you ought. You can be online; therefore, you ought to be online. If you are offline, you cease participating in reality. As simple as that.

Yet it is too early to play funeral music for intellectuals. They can survive by forming critically minded and interpretive communities, as mentioned by Montalbán. Moreover, they can be instrumental in shaping new social movements, which becomes especially obvious in the Facebook era. And social movements, for their part, can fundamentally reshape our political life, leaving little of what we knew thus far as conventional politics.

For all this looks like the end – or at least the beginning of the end – of Politics with a capital P in our contemporary world.

Classic politics was always associated with the power to turn private problems into public questions as well as the power to internalize public questions and turn them into private or even existential questions. Today this political mechanism is out of tune. What we in our postmodern politics treat as public questions most often are private problems of public figures.

It is a public secret, then, that ours is the time when politics bows out. Look at the numerous political clowns who are getting far more popular nowadays than any of the old-fashioned politicians of the bureaucratic or expert type. We are swiftly approaching a phase of political life when a major rival to a well-established political party will be not its fellow political party of a different cut or shade, but an influential non-governmental organization or a social movement.

Russian and Chinese autocrats feel this quite well. As we all know, NGOs are not welcome in tyrannical regimes; and nor is Facebook, especially after a series of Middle East 'Facebook revolutions', or the Arab Spring, or even now during the Facebook revolution of the young Spanish *indignados* in Madrid. In all likelihood, these acts of resistance and social unrest anticipate an era of virtual social movements which will be conducted or integrated by conventional or new political parties. Otherwise, political parties will be smashed by these movements from the face of the earth.

We live in a time of obsession with power.

As you have noticed, the old formula of politics as a carrot-and-stick strategy still holds, yet we, having seen in the twentieth century the worst nightmares of sticks, are now likely to experience the domination of carrots. Power manifests itself as financial and economic might and potential, rather than military force and the language of militarism. Yet the logic remains the same. This is the old good *Wille zur Macht*, or the will-to-power, whether it assumes the guise of Friedrich Nietzsche or Karl Marx. The point is not whether you have an identifiable *Weltanschauung*, a resilient identity or a major ideology; instead, the point is about how much power you have. I buy, therefore, I am.

We have become accustomed to regarding a human being as a mere statistical unit. It does not come as a shock to us to view human individuals as a workforce. The purchasing power of society and the ability to consume have become crucial criteria for

evaluating the degree of suitability of a country for the club of power – to which we apply various sonorous titles of international organizations. The question of whether you are a democracy becomes relevant only when you have no power and therefore have to be controlled by means of rhetorical or political sticks. If you are oil-rich or if you can consume or invest a great deal, it absolves you from your failure to respect modern political and moral sensibilities or to stay committed to civil liberties and human rights.

Looking closer, what is happening in Europe is a technocratic revolution. A decade or two ago it was crucial to have proof that you were a democracy to qualify for the club. What mattered was a set of values and commitments. These days, we are likely to enter a new stage in world politics: what really matters is your financial discipline, whether you can be suitable for a fiscal union, and your economic conduct.

Recalling Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (as an anagram of Nowhere, the title of this anti-utopian novel is a clear allusion to Thomas More's *Utopia*), here we have the political and moral logic of Europe turned upside down. In *Erewhon*, Butler pokes fun at a utopian community where illness becomes a liability and where a failure to remain healthy and fit is prosecuted. Something of this kind can be found in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* where a failure to be happy is seen as a symptom of backwardness. A caricature of the pursuit of happiness in a distant technocratic and technological society should not console us as something beyond our reality, though.

What we have in Europe now is an emerging concept of the liability of economic impotence. No kind of political and economic impotence shall remain unpunished. This is to say that we no longer have a right to fail, for so long an inescapable aspect of freedom. The right to be open to the possibility of bankruptcy or any other possibility of failure was part of the European saga of freedom as a fundamental choice we make every day as we face its consequences.

Those days are gone. Now you are at risk of becoming a gravedigger of Europe or even of the entire world if you send a wrong message to the global market. You may cause a global domino effect, thus letting down both your foes and your allies who equally depend on that same single world power structure.

This is a new language of power, hitherto unseen and unidentified by anybody in world history. Behave yourself, otherwise you will spoil the game and will let us down. In doing so, you will jeopardize the viability of a moral and social order within which no country or nation remains responsible for itself. Everything has its global repercussions and implications.

And how about the nations? We used to be certain that the European nations embodied the Calvinist principle of predestination, implying a possibility of being happy in this earthly life and in this-worldly reality; the Kantian principle of self-determination became more relevant in the nineteenth century. There was a world where the pursuit of happiness, like the possibility of salvation and self-fulfilment, spoke the language of the republic and its values: hence, the emergence of post-colonial nations after two world wars and after the break-up of empires.

What we have today in our second modernity bears little, if any, resemblance to this logic of the first modernity, as Ulrich Beck would have it; we can no longer experience the passions and longings of the twentieth century, not to mention the dramas of the nineteenth century, no matter how hard we try to relegitimize our historical and political narrative. To use your terms, liquid modernity has transformed us into a global community of consumers. What was a nation in the era of solid modernity as a community of memory, collective sentiment and moral choice is now a community of consumers who are obliged and expected to behave in order to qualify for the club.

In the epoch of Facebook, the nations are becoming extraterritorial units of a shared language and culture. We knew in the era of solid modernity that the nation was made up of several factors, first and foremost of a common territory, language and culture, as well as the modern division of labour, social mobility and literacy. Nowadays, the picture is rather different: a nation appears as an ensemble of mobile individuals with their logic of life deeply embedded in withdrawal-and-return. It has become a question of whether you are online or offline with regard to your country's problems and the debates around them, instead of having decided once and for all whether you are going to stay in that same place or vote for those same political actors for the rest of your days.

Either you are on or you are off. This is a daily plebiscite of a liquid modern society.

**Zygmunt Bauman** 'Technology has outpaced politics,' you say...And how right you are!

Prophetically as it were, because sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century, when few if any of the brightest minds imagined that technology would take over from its creators the right and the ability to make decisions, Robert Thomas Babington Macaulay observed that 'the gallery [of the House of Commons] in which the reporters sit has become a fourth estate of the realm'. Undoubtedly, by alluding to the *third* estate, which not so long before had been an upstart with ludicrously overgrown ambitions, yet had become no longer a laughing matter but a commanding voice in politics, Macaulay predicted the imminent rise in the power of the press – a rise sufficient to overpower and dispossess the currently acknowledged rulers of Britain. Long before Marshall McLuhan, Macaulay spotted a medium turning into the message after creaming off the authority of opinion-makers by taking over and monopolizing the access routes to the prospective and intended opinion-holders. Having grabbed the *means*, holding them close to their chest and manning every entry to the control towers with their own gatekeepers, the newspapers and still more the electronic sources of news, their successors, have indeed managed to appropriate complete or near complete control over the choice of *goals*. Messages without media to carry them to the intended addressees were doomed either to be still-born or to die intestate. In this sense, there is nothing new. Expropriation of the communicative media remains the state of the game, manifestly in the case of Chinese or Burmese dictators who threaten to switch off social websites, or latently as in wars of ratings between broadcasting companies – and in my view the only new question is whether in the field of the production and distribution of news and views the expropriators can be expropriated: more to the point, does the technology then unavailable, but now common and easily accessible, augur the expropriation of the expropriators?

The reaction of the official US establishment to the youth in Iran briefly venting their protest on the streets of Tehran against the fraudulent elections of June 2009 bore a striking resemblance

to a commercial campaign on behalf of the likes of Facebook, Google or Twitter. I suppose that some gallant investigative journalists, to whose company alas I do not belong, could have supplied weighty material proofs of such an impression. The *Wall Street Journal* pontificated: ‘this would not happen without Twitter’! Andrew Sullivan, an influential and well-informed American blogger, pointed to Twitter as ‘the critical tool for organizing the resistance in Iran’, while the venerable *New York Times* waxed lyrical, proclaiming a combat between ‘thugs firing bullets’ and ‘protesters firing tweets’.<sup>1</sup> Hillary Clinton went on record and announced in her ‘internet freedom’ speech of 21 January 2010 the birth of the ‘samizdat of our day’, proclaiming the need ‘to put these tools’ – meaning ‘viral videos and blog posts’ – ‘in the hands of people around the world who will use them to advance democracy and human rights’.<sup>2</sup> ‘Information freedom’, she opined, ‘supports the peace and security that provide a foundation for global progress.’ (Let me note right away, though, that not much water flowed under the Potomac bridges before the US political elite started, as if to follow the French injunction of *deux poids, deux mesures* (double standards), to demand restrictions on WikiLeaks and a prison sentence for its founder...). Ed Pilkington recalls Mark Pfeifle, a George Bush adviser who nominated Twitter for the Nobel Prize, and quotes Jared Cohen, an official in the US State Department, who described Facebook as ‘one of the most organic tools for democracy the world has ever seen’.<sup>3</sup> To put it in a nutshell, Jack Dorsey, Mark Zuckerberg and their companions-in-arms are the generals of the advancing Democracy and Human Rights Army – and we all, tweeting and sending Facebook messages, are its soldiers. Media is indeed the message – and the message of the digital media is the ‘information curtain descending’ and thereby uncovering a new planet-scape of people power and universal human rights.

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<sup>1</sup>‘Caught in the net’, *Economist*, 6 Jan. 2011, at <http://www.economist.com/node/17848401> (accessed June 2012).

<sup>2</sup>See Pat Kane’s review of Evgeny Morozov’s *The Net Delusion*, *Independent*, 7 Jan. 2012.

<sup>3</sup>Ed Pilkington, ‘Evgeny Morozov: how democracy slipped through the net’, *Guardian*, 13 Jan. 2011, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/jan/13/evgeny-morozov-the-net-delusion> (accessed June 2012).



It is this kind of non-common-sense among the US political and opinion-making elite and other unpaid salespersons of digital services that Evgeny Morozov, a student and newcomer to America from Belorussia, 26 years young, berated, ridiculed and condemned as a ‘net delusion’ in his recent book of the same title.<sup>4</sup> Among many other points Morozov managed to squeeze into his 400-page study was that, according to Al-Jazeera, there were only 60 active Twitter accounts in Tehran, and so the organizers of the demos mostly used such shamefully old-fashioned techniques for getting attention as making telephone calls or knocking on neighbours’ doors; but that the clever rulers of autocratic Iran, as internet-savvy as they are ruthless and unscrupulous, looked on Facebook to find links to any known dissidents, using that information to isolate, incarcerate and disempower the potential leaders of revolt – and nip any democratic challenge to autocracy (if there might ever be one) in the bud... And there are many and different ways in which authoritarian regimes can use the internet to their own advantage, Morozov points out – and they did use many of them, and go on using them.

To start with, social networks offer a cheaper, quicker, more thorough and altogether easier way to identify and locate current or potential dissidents than any of the traditional instruments of surveillance. And as David Lyon argues and attempts to show in our joint study,<sup>5</sup> surveillance through social networks is made so much more effective thanks to the cooperation of its intended objects and victims. We live in a confessional society, promoting public self-exposure to the rank of the prime and easiest available, as well as arguably the most potent and only truly proficient proof of social existence. Millions of Facebook users vie with each other to disclose and put on public record the most intimate and otherwise inaccessible aspects of their identity, social connections, thoughts, feelings and activities. Social websites are fields of a voluntary, do-it-yourself form of surveillance, beating hands down (both in volume and expenditure) the specialist agencies manned

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<sup>4</sup>Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (Allen Lane, 2011); the American version has the title *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*.

<sup>5</sup>See Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance* (Polity, 2012).

by professionals in spying and detection. A true windfall for every dictator and his secret services, genuinely like pennies from heaven – and a superb complement to the numerous ‘ban-optical’ institutions of democratic society concerned with preventing the unwanted and undeserving (that is, all those who behave or are likely to behave *unsuitably*) from being mistakenly admitted or worming themselves surreptitiously into our decent self-selected democratic company... One of the chapters of *The Net Delusion* is called ‘Why the KGB wants you to join Facebook’.

Morozov spies out the many ways in which authoritarian, nay tyrannical regimes can beat the alleged freedom fighters at their own game, using the technology in which the apostles and panegyrics of the internet’s democratic bias have vested their hopes. No news here; old technologies, as the *Economist* reminds us, were similarly used by past dictators to pacify and disarm their victims: research showed that East Germans with access to Western television were less likely to express dissatisfactions with the regime.<sup>6</sup> As to the admittedly much more potent, digital informatics, Morozov argues that ‘the internet has provided so many cheap and easily available entertainment fixes to those living under authoritarianism that it has become considerably harder to get people to care about politics at all.’ That is, unless politics is recycled into another exciting variety of entertainment, full of sound and fury yet comfortingly toothless, safe and innocuous; something practised by the new generation of ‘slacktivists’, who believe that ‘clicking on a Facebook petition counts as a political act’ and so ‘dissipate their energies on a thousand distractions’, each meant for instant consumption and one-off use, which the internet is a supreme master of producing and disposing of daily. (Just one of numerous examples of the effectiveness of political slacktivism in changing the ways and means of the ‘real world’ is the sad case of the Save the Children of Africa group: it took several years to collect the princely sum of \$12,000, while the unsaved children of Africa went on dying...)

With popular mistrust of the powers-that-be spreading and deepening, and popular esteem of the power-to-the-people potential of the internet rising sky-high through the joint efforts of Silicon Valley’s marketing and lyrics in the style of Hillary Clinton

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<sup>6</sup>‘Caught in the net’.

recited and broadcast from thousands of academic offices, it is no wonder that pro-government propaganda has a better chance of being listened to and absorbed if it arrives at its targets through the internet. The more clever of the authoritarians know this all too well: after all, informatics experts are all too available for hiring, eager to sell their services to the highest bidder. Hugo Chavez is on Twitter and allegedly boasts half a million Facebook friends; while in China there is apparently a genuine army of government-subsidized bloggers (baptised ‘the 50-cent party’ because they are paid 50 cents for every entry). Morozov keeps reminding his readers that, as Pat Kane puts it in the *Independent* of 7 January 2012, ‘patriotic service can be as much a motivation for the young socio-technical operative as the bohemian anarchism of Assange and his pals’. Info-hackers may equally enthusiastically and with the same volume of good will and sincerity join a new ‘Transparency International’ as a new ‘Red Brigade’. The internet would support both choices with the same equanimity.

It is an old, very old story told all over again: axes can be used to hew wood or to cut off heads. The choice does not belong to the axes but to those who hold them. Whatever the holder chooses, the axe won’t mind. And however sharp the edges with which it may currently be cutting, technology itself will not ‘advance democracy and human rights’ for (and instead of) you...

Again you are right when you refuse to vest your hopes for the reversal of the current insensitization of political language in the extant institutions of nation-state politics. This is for reasons we have already, even if in passing, debated: the advanced separation aimed at divorce between power (the ability to see things done) and politics (the capacity to decide what things are to be done), and the resulting ludicrous and degrading, all too manifest incapacity of nation-state politics to perform its function. Few people, if any, continue to expect salvation from on high: assurances voiced by ministers are listened to, if at all, with disbelief spiced with irony – the heap of frustrated hopes grows daily. In the full glare of TV screens the public spectacle keeps being replayed of statesmen and stateswomen proudly announcing on the evening news the decisive steps they have just taken – their measures to re-establish control over the course of affairs and put an end to another harrowing problem – only to wait nervously

till the stock exchanges open next morning in order to find out whether those measures stand the slightest chance of being implemented and if they do, whether their implementation is likely to have any tangible effect.

Our fathers could quarrel about what needed to be done, but they all agreed that once the task was defined the agency would be there, waiting to perform it – namely the states armed simultaneously with power (the ability to have things done) and politics (the ability to see to it that the right things are done). Our times, however, are prominent for the gathering evidence that these kinds of agencies are no longer in existence, and most certainly not to be found in what were once their heretofore usual places. Power and politics live and move in separation from each other and their divorce lurks round the corner. On the one hand, there is power, safely roaming the global expanses, free from political control and at liberty to select its own targets; on the other, there is politics, squeezed and robbed of all or nearly all of its power, muscles and teeth. We all, individuals by decree of fate, seem to be abandoned to our own individual resources, sorely inadequate for the grandiose tasks we already face, and for the still more awesome tasks to which we suspect we will be exposed unless a way of stopping them is found. At the bottom of all the crises abounding in our times lies the crisis of *agencies* and of the *instruments of effective action*. And its derivative: the vexing, demeaning and infuriating feeling of having been sentenced to *loneliness* in the face of *shared dangers*...

With the network of nation-state institutions no longer a player in which to invest hopes that more passable trails will be blazed and more harrowing blunders repaired, what force if any, can possibly fill the vacant position and role of agent of societal change?

A moot question, and an exceedingly contentious one. There is no shortage of exploratory sallies – desperate attempts to find new instruments of collective action that will be more effective in an increasingly globalized setting than the political tools invented and put in place in the post-Westphalian era of nation-building, and that will stand more chance of bringing the popular will to fruition than can be dreamt of by the ostensibly ‘sovereign’ state organs, squeezed in a double bind. The reconnaissance sorties keep on coming from many quarters of society, and particularly from the

‘precariat’, a rapidly growing stratum soaking in and absorbing whatever remains of the former proletariat and ever wider chunks of the middle classes, ‘united’ solely by the sensation of life lived on quicksand or at the foot of a volcano. The snag is that apart from that common sensation, there is little in the social condition and interests of the reconnaissance units that can be hoped to keep them together and inspire them to work together for long enough for them to be recycled into trustworthy, reliable and effective tools fit to be put in the place of the old ones, whose inadequacy to the present tasks and ever more evident indolence triggered the avalanche of experiments in the first place. One of these ongoing experiments, figuring most prominently in the public media, is a phenomenon collated from the mushrooming yet variegated manifestations of the ‘occupy movement’ from Tahrir Square to Manhattan’s Zuccotti Park, also known as the ‘movement of the indignant’. Harald Welzer may be on the right track right when he seeks the deep causes of that phenomenon in a growing public realization that ‘individualist strategies have a mainly sedative function. The level of international politics offers the prospect of change only in a distant future, and so cultural action is left with the *middle* level, the level of one’s own society, and the democratic issue of how people want to live in the future’<sup>7</sup> – even if in many, perhaps most cases that knowledge is rather subliminal or poorly articulated.

If Marx and Engels, those two hot-headed and short-tempered youngsters from the Rhineland, were setting out today to pen their manifesto, now almost two centuries old, they might well have started it with an altered observation that ‘a spectre hovers over the planet; the spectre of indignation...’ Reasons to be indignant are indeed aplenty – one can surmise, however, that a common denominator of the fairly variegated original spurs and the still more numerous inflows they attract on their way is a humiliating premonition of our ignorance and impotence, denying self-esteem and dignity (we have no inkling of what is going to happen and no way of preventing it from happening). The old, allegedly patented ways of tackling life’s challenges don’t work any more, while new and effective ones are nowhere to be seen or in abominably

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<sup>7</sup>See Harald Welzer, *Climate Wars: What People Will Be Killed For in the 21st Century* (Polity, 2012), p. 176.

short supply. One way or the other, indignation is there, and the way has been shown to copy and unload it: by going out into the streets and occupying them. The recruiting pool for potential occupiers is enormous, and growing day by day.

Having lost faith in salvation coming from ‘on high’ as we know it (that is, from parliaments and governmental offices) and looking for alternative ways to get the right things done, people are taking to the streets in a voyage of discovery and/or experimentation. They transform city squares into open-air laboratories, where tools of political action aimed at matching the enormity of the challenge are designed or stumbled on, put to the test, and perhaps even pass a baptism of fire... And for a number of reasons city streets are good places to set up such laboratories, and for quite a few other reasons the laboratories set up there seem to deliver, if only for the time being, what elsewhere was sought in vain...

The phenomenon of ‘people on the streets’ has so far shown its ability to remove the most hateful objects of their indignation, the figures blamed for their misery – like Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, or Gaddafi in Libya. It still needs to prove, though, that however effective its prowess at clearing the building site, it can also be of use in the building job that comes afterwards. The second, no less crucial unknown, is whether the site-clearing operation can be accomplished as easily in other than dictatorial countries. Tyrants tremble at the very sight of people taking to the streets uncommanded and uninvited, but global leaders of democratic countries, and the institutions they put together to guard the perpetual ‘reproduction of the same’, seem so far not to have noticed and not be worried; they go on recapitalizing the banks scattered over countless Wall Streets of the globe, whether occupied by local *indignados* or not. As Hervé le Tellier wittily observed in the same issue of *Le Monde*, our leaders speak of ‘political scandal, barbaric chaos, catastrophic anarchy, apocalyptic tragedy, hysterical hypocrisy’ (using all along, let us note, terms coined by our joint Greek ancestors more than two millennia ago!), implying that the blunders and misdemeanours of one country and its government can be blamed for the crisis into which the whole European system has fallen – exonerating by the same token the system itself...

And so ‘people occupying the streets’ may well shake the very foundations of a tyrannical or authoritarian regime which aspired to full and continuous control over its subjects’ conduct, and above all to expropriate them of the right of initiative. This hardly applies, however, to a democracy which can easily take huge doses of discontent in its stride, without a major shake-up, and assimilate any amount of opposition. *Movimientos los indignados* in Madrid, Athens or New York, unlike their predecessors – for instance, the people who occupied Václavské náměstí in Communist Prague – are still waiting in vain for their presence on the streets to be noticed by their governments, let alone to influence, even minimally, their policies. That applies offline, to people on the streets. It also applies, in enormously larger measure, to people online: on Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, trying earnestly to change history, including their own biography, by blogging, blurting out venom, blowing trumpets, twittering and calling others into action...

In their most recently published studies, *Les temps des riches: Anatomie d'une secession* (2011) by Thierry Pech, and *Les rémunérations obscènes* (2011) by Philippe Steiner, both authors put under the microscope the ‘revolt of the rich against the poor’ that has been taking place in the last three decades. The cutting of taxes paid by the rich and the removal of all the limits to the wealthiest people’s enrichment was promoted under the slogan: ‘when the rich pay less, the poor will live better.’ The fraudulence of the promised ‘trickle-down’ effect of opulence at the top has now been laid bare – for everybody to watch helplessly and bewail – but the ‘collateral casualties’ of the grand deception are here to stay for a long time to come. The foundations of social solidarity and communal responsibility have been sapped, the idea of social justice compromised, the shame and social condemnation attached to greed, rapacity and ostentatious consumption have been wiped away and they have been recycled into objects of public admiration and celebrity cult. This is the *cultural* impact of the ‘revolt of the rich’. But that cultural upheaval has now acquired *social* foundations of its own – in the shape of a new social formation: the precariat (a name derived from the concept of ‘precariousness’).

It was, as far as I know, the economist Professor Guy Standing who (hitting a bull’s eye!) coined the term ‘precariat’ to replace, simultaneously, the terms ‘proletariat’ and ‘middle class’, both well beyond their use-by date, fully and truly ‘zombie

terms', as Ulrich Beck would undoubtedly have classified them. As the blogger hiding under the pen name 'Ageing Baby Boomer' suggests,

It is the market that defines our choices and isolates us, ensuring that none of us questions how those choices are defined. Make the wrong choices and you will be punished. But what makes it so savage is that it takes no account of how some people are much better equipped than others – have the social capital, knowledge or financial resources – in order to make good choices.<sup>8</sup>

What 'unites' the precariat, integrating that exceedingly variegated aggregate into a cohesive category, is the condition of extreme disintegration, pulverization, atomization. Whatever their provenance or denomination, all precarians suffer – and each suffers alone, each individual's suffering being well-deserved individual punishment for individually committed sins of insufficient shrewdness and deficit of industry. Individually born sufferings are all strikingly similar: whether induced by a growing pile of utility bills and college fee invoices, the miserliness of wages topped up by the fragility of available jobs and inaccessibility of solid and reliable ones, the fogginess of longer-term life prospects, the restless spectre of redundancy and/or demotion – they all boil down to *existential uncertainty*: that awesome blend of ignorance and impotence, and an inexhaustible source of humiliation.

Sufferings like this don't add up: they divide and separate the sufferers. They deny the commonality of fate. They make calls to solidarity sound ludicrous. Precarians may envy or fear each other; sometimes they may pity, or even (though not too often) like one another. Few if any of them, however, would ever *respect* another creature 'like him' (or her). Indeed, why should he or she? Being 'like' I am myself, those other people must be as unworthy of respect as I am and deserve as much contempt and derision as I do! Precarians have good reason to refuse respect to other precarians and not to expect to be respected by them in their turn: their miserable and painful condition is an indelible trace and vivid evidence of inferiority and indignity. That condition, all too visible

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<sup>8</sup> At <http://www.creditcrunch.co.uk/forum/topic/8222-goodbye-proletariat-hello-precariat> (accessed May 2012).



however carefully swept under the carpet, testifies that those in authority, people who have the power to allow or to refuse rights, have refused to grant them the rights due to other, 'normal' and so respectable humans. And so it testifies, by proxy, to the humiliation and self-contempt that inevitably follow social endorsement of personal unworthiness and ignominy.

The prime meaning of being 'precarious' is, according to Oxford English Dictionary, to be 'held by the favour and at the pleasure of another; hence, uncertain'. The uncertainty dubbed 'precariousness' conveys preordained and predetermined asymmetry of the power to act: *they* can, *we* can't. And it's by *their* grace that we go on living: yet the grace may be withdrawn at short notice or without notice, and it's not in our power to prevent its withdrawal or even mitigate its threat. After all, *we* depend on that grace for our livelihood, whereas *they* would easily, and with much more comfort and much less worry, go on living had we altogether disappeared from their view...

Originally, the idea of 'precariousness' glossed over the plight and living experience of the large echelons of hangers-on and other parasites crowding around the princely and lordly kitchens. It was on the whim of the princes, lords of the manor and other high and mighty persons like them that their daily bread depended. The hangers-on owed their hosts/benefactors sycophancy and amusement; nothing was owed to them by their hosts. Those hosts, unlike their present-day successors, did have names and fixed addresses, however. They have since lost (freed themselves from?) both. The owners of the exquisitely frail and mobile tables at which contemporary precarians are occasionally allowed to sit are summarily called by abstract names like 'labour markets', the 'economic prosperity/depression cycle' or 'global forces'.

Unlike their liquid modern descendants a century later, contemporaries of Henry Ford, Sr, J.P. Morgan or John D. Rockefeller were denied the ultimate 'insecurity weapon' and so were unable to recycle the proletariat into a precariat. A choice to move their wealth to other places – places teeming with people ready to suffer without murmur any factory regime, however cruel, in exchange for any living wage, however miserable – was not available to them. Just like their factory hands, their capital was 'fixed' to the place: it was sunk in heavy and bulky machinery and locked inside tall factory walls. That the dependence was therefore *mutual*, and

that the two sides were bound to stay together for a very long time to come, was a public secret of which both sides were acutely aware...

Confronted with this tight interdependence with its long life expectancy, both sides had to come to the conclusion sooner or later that it was in their interest to develop, negotiate and observe a *modus vivendi* – that is a mode of coexistence which included a voluntary acceptance of unavoidable limits to their own freedom of manoeuvre and to how far the other side in the conflict of interests could and should be pushed. Exclusion was off limits, and so was indifference to misery and denial of rights. The sole alternative open to Henry Ford and the swelling ranks of his admirers, followers and imitators would have been tantamount to cutting the branch on which they were willy-nilly perched, to which they were tied as surely as their labourers were tied to their workbenches, and from which they could not move to more comfortable and inviting places. Transgressing the limits set by interdependence would mean destruction of the sources of their own enrichment; or fast exhausting the fertility of the soil on which their riches had grown and were hoped to go on growing, year in year out, into the future – perhaps forever. To put it in a nutshell, there were limits to the inequality which capital could survive... *Both sides of the conflict had vested interests in preventing inequality from running out of control.* And each side had a vested interest in keeping the other in the game.

There were, in other words, ‘natural’ limits to inequality and ‘natural’ barriers to social exclusion; the main cause of Karl Marx’s prophecy that the ‘proletariat’s absolute pauperization’ would become self-refuting and turn sour, and the main reason why the introduction of the social state, a state taking responsibility for keeping labour in a condition of readiness for employment, became a matter ‘beyond left and right’, a non-partisan issue. This was also the reason why the state needed to protect the capitalist order against the suicidal consequences of leaving unbridled the capitalists’ morbid predilections and their rapacity in pursuit of a quick profit – and for it to act on that need by introducing minimum wages or time limits to the working day and week, as well as legal protection for labour unions and other weapons of worker self-defence. And this was the reason why the gap between rich and poor was prevented from getting wider,

or even, to deploy the current idiom, ‘turned negative’. To survive, inequality needed to invent the art of self-limitation. And it did – and practised it, even though in fits and starts, for more than a century. All in all, those factors contributed to at least a partial reversal of the trend: to a mitigation of the degree of uncertainty haunting the subordinate classes, and thereby to a relative levelling up of the strength and chances of the sides engaged in the uncertainty game.

Those factors are now, ever more conspicuously, absent. The proletariat is fast turning into a precariat, accompanied by a rapidly expanding chunk of the middle classes. A reversal of this reincarnation is not on the cards. Reshaping the proletariat of yore into a fighting class was heavily power assisted – as is the present-day atomization of the precariat, its descendant and gravedigger of its tradition and legacy.

One more seminal change also followed. Unlike the ‘proletariat’ of yore, the ‘precariat’ embraces people of all economic classes. We all, or at least 99 percent of us (as the ‘occupiers of Wall Street’ insist), are now ‘precarians’: those already made redundant and those fearing that their jobs will not survive the next round of cuts or ‘restructuring’, along with university graduates vainly looking for jobs matching their skills and ambitions, as much as lifelong employees who tremble at the thought of losing their homes and life’s savings in the next round of stock exchange collapse, and the infinitely numerous others who have sound reasons not to trust the security of their place in society.

The big question, the life-and-death question, is whether the ‘precariat’ can be recast into a ‘historical agent’, as the ‘proletariat’ was or was hoped to be, capable of acting in solidarity and pursuing a shared concept of social justice and a shared vision of the ‘good society’ – a society hospitable to all its members. The question can only be answered by the way we, the precarians, act – singly, severally, or all together. One can surmise, however, that where the ‘social state’ aimed to answer this question in the positive, the concentrated pressure of present-day governments and intergovernmental organs on cuts in social spending (more precisely, cuts in provision for the poor and indolent, with rises for the wealthy and potent) is by design or by default targeted at making a positive answer implausible, if not outright impossible.

You are also right when you observe that the motives, itineraries and consequences of migration 'online' and 'offline' are poorly coordinated, if at all. Migration no longer requires changing geographic location, and clinging to the same place is not of itself evidence of belonging. But territoriality was by definition the foundation and safeguard of political sovereignty. Take out territoriality and what remains of sovereignty? That notion needs to be relegated to the class of 'zombie concepts', to borrow Ulrich Beck's felicitous term: the class of concepts that are already dead, but behave, and are viewed and treated, as if they were alive. Or to the class of Jean Baudrillard's 'simulacra', phenomena akin to psychosomatic diseases in which it is impossible to decide whether the patient is pretending to be ill or is indeed ill; phenomena composed entirely of appearances, stripped of the material and organic references customarily ascribed or imputed to them.

Under the circumstances, the biggest question is one you raise when you say that 'these acts of resistance and social unrest anticipate an era of virtual social movements which will be conducted or integrated by conventional or new political parties. Otherwise, political parties will be smashed by these movements from the face of the earth.' Well, my guess is that the court is still sitting. Things can turn either way, or even in a way impossible for us to anticipate. Not that long ago we watched with bated breath the events of the 'Arab Spring'. The 'great democratic revolution' which most Western observers expected to follow almost instantly is somehow reluctant to arrive – yet the crowds coming to Tahrir Square and refusing to leave it until their demands are taken note of nevertheless proved to have a much more seminal effect than the tents pitched around Wall Street, the City of London or the Greek and Spanish parliaments. Tyrannical regimes are much more sensitive (and vulnerable!) to people on the streets than democracies, which are used to that sight as part of their ordinary and well-nigh daily routine. Tyranny and a self-convoked crowd are incompatible; their coexistence is inconceivable, their simultaneity is bound to be brief, doomed to a violent denouement – one or the other must give up once they have tried in vain to force the other side to do it first (see Yemen, Syria, Egypt – a list certain to be extended). Democracy can take people on the streets in its stride, can borrow or steal their banners, and all without seriously changing its policies in anything but the

language used to sell them. Wall Street has so far hardly noticed that it has been occupied for months – and can fail to notice with impunity. And if you wished to pinpoint the moment of transition in Europe from dynastic/autocratic regimes to modern democracies, you could do worse than locate the point of time when the ‘rabble’, ‘riffraff’ or ‘mob’ (mobile vulgus, ‘populace on the move’) were replaced in the vocabulary of the political elite by terms like the ‘people’, ‘citizens’, the ‘electorate’, or... ‘taxpayers’.

And finally: you note that ‘in our self-absorbed age obsessed with consumption, intensity, attention-seeking, self-exposure and sensationalism, an individual intellectual can hardly avoid sinking into oblivion without becoming a victim or a celebrity’. Again, how right you are. Since C. Wright Mills demanded half a century ago, in the name of intellectuals, that the media be ‘returned’ to ‘us, to whom they belong by right’, much water has flowed under the bridges of the Potomac... The media, fully in the grip of the markets and up to their ears in ruthless ratings wars, have settled firmly in the space separating the formation of ideas from their distribution, from reception and retention. This space is strategically crucial: the one who occupies it takes charge of the issue of entry and exit visas, and for all practical intents and purposes controls the circulation of ideas in its totality. Régis Debray famously dubbed the current stage in the history of intellectuals ‘the age of mediocracy’, compressing in one concept two distinctive features: the power of the media, resulting in the rule of mediocrity. The intellectuals who successfully pass through the visa office run by the media are those who conform to the rules written down in the media’s statute books and embodied in their practices – rules obliging visa applications to be awarded or rejected depending on their impact on the ratings (sales figures, box-office returns, numbers of ‘likes’ and ‘visits’ recorded by websites) – which decides the volume and price of commercials and so also the levels of profits and stockholder dividends. People whose applications for entry are approved are currently embraced by the generic name of ‘celebrities’ (people who, according to Daniel J. Boorstin’s witty and caustic phrase, are well known for being well known, and whose names are often worth more than their services). In the competition for entry visas, intellectuals stand a poor chance compared to film and stage stars, footballers or serial murderers. And there are more than enough good reasons

to wonder whether the traits needed to enter the enchanted circle of celebrities are compatible with the assets conducive to the fulfilment of the intellectual's vocation – whether individually, or 'collectively' as Montalbán suggests... Yes indeed, as you say, 'it is a public secret... that ours is the time when politics bows out. Look at the numerous political clowns who are getting far more popular nowadays than any of the old-fashioned politicians of the bureaucratic or expert type.' Either 'political news' submits meekly to the rule of 'infotainment' or it stands no chance of being offered to anyone other than a narrow and usually marginalized 'niche audience'. Ordinary news in peak viewing hours is delivered by anchors standing up, or more often running around, and their most important qualification and asset is to recycle any political issue into an entertaining story and themselves into celebrities, watched day in day out for their placing in the league of the ongoing popularity contest, rather than for the weight of the things they could have been relied on to talk about, or any other value than entertainment.

In his 1989 book, Lutz Niethammer pointed out that the idea of the 'end of history', fast rising in popularity at the time he was writing, is neither just a passing fashion nor 'confined to the literal sense of the term that something, one more thing, has come to an end'. We are more likely to talk of 'our postmodern modernity (Welsch), where the reflexivity signals not the termination of a dynamic structure but dispersal of the hope associated with it'.<sup>9</sup> Which, for all practical intents and purposes, means the dispersal of hope imputed to politics 'as we (or rather our immediate ancestors) knew it': politics hitherto viewed as the prime boost and mover of history... Niethammer quotes Arnold Gehlen to the effect that 'nothing more can be expected in terms of the history of ideas'<sup>10</sup> – 'the history of ideas has been suspended, and... we have now arrived at posthistory. Thus Gottfried Benn's advice to the individual – "Count on your own resources" – should now be issued to humanity as a whole.' The 'end of history', we can say,

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<sup>9</sup>Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire. Ist die Geschichte zu Ende?* (Rowohlt, 1989); here quoted after Patrick Camiller's translation, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?* (Verso, 1992), pp. 1–2.

<sup>10</sup>From Arnold Gehlen, *Studien zur Anthropologie und Soziologie* (Luchterhand, 1963), pp. 322ff.

is only a hypothesis derived from the recognition of the 'end of politics', its main (perhaps even sole) engine, which in its turn can be traced back to its roots – the supposed end of ideas and intellectuals as their principal producers and carriers.

'Count on your own resources'. . . This is precisely what you have in mind, I suppose, when you point out that 'what we have in Europe now is an emerging concept of the liability of economic impotence. No kind of political and economic impotence shall remain unpunished. This is to say that we no longer have a right to fail, for so long an inescapable aspect of freedom.' The refusal of the right to fail seems to have been installed in the vehicle of modernity – as a sort of a brake which was hoped and expected to countervail and keep within limits the accelerating impact of freedom – from its earliest beginnings. We find it in one of the earliest modern utopias, Rabelais's *Abbey of Thélème*, in which happiness is the sole duty and unhappiness the sole punishable deviation from duty.

LD Dystopian literature depicted the nightmares of the twentieth century. Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984* and Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (though the latter qualifies for the club of novels of warning to a lesser extent) anticipated those simulations of reality, or fabrications of consciousness, that were, and continue to be, deeply and strikingly characteristic of the modern mass media world. That our perception of the world and our awareness may be framed by the mass media, that we deal with images, forgeries and phantoms instead of reality as it is, was plausibly shown by Jean Baudrillard.

Baudrillard's acclaimed theory of simulacra, or simulations of reality, which you have already mentioned, is quite similar to what Milan Kundera has aptly described as the world manufactured by the new type of mass media people whom he calls *imagologues*, the engineers and dispensers of images. *Imagology*, the art of making sets of ideals, anti-ideals and value-images that people are supposed to follow without thinking or critically questioning, is the offspring of the media and advertising. If that is so, as Kundera argues in his novel *Immortality*, reality disappears. An old lady in a nineteenth-century Bohemian village was far more in control of her own life, as well as the cycle of nature and mundane reality,

than a millionaire or a powerful politician nowadays who is obliged to put his life at the mercy of spin doctors.

If we take a closer look at Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Possibility of an Island*, we can see a similar view on what has happened to the politics of art and the art of politics. Art and fiction cannot survive without surrendering themselves to images full of sex, violence and coercion; moreover, they close ranks with fictionalized politics and sensationalist media messages by combining cheap sensationalism, noisy conspiracy theories, lawful insinuations, conjectures, and hatred skilfully translated into the language of political cartoons and political entertainment.

Yet there is no reason to exaggerate the role of imagologues, or, in present political parlance, spin doctors, as politicians themselves are keen on acting as constructs of the media. They are not the same breed or class of people they were from the time of the Puritan Revolution in England, the first action in modern history that established the rule of law as a controlling principle above the king, to the Second World War and the postwar epoch, with historic figures like Winston Churchill or Charles de Gaulle or Willy Brandt. Now they are pop culture stars, celebrities, victims or entertainers. In most cases, they function as the new class of politician-entertainers.

Only two things matter in the world of the technological and consumerist society, as depicted by Houellebecq: the entertainment of politics and the politics of entertainment. This is the reason why stand-up comedians, TV producers working on political entertainment, and TV hosts have become an inescapable and critically important part of the new establishment. Politicians cannot exist without imagologues, according to Kundera. And they can no longer exist without political humour, or, to be more precise, the entertainment world. They can change places at any time. Political humour and entertainment folk can go into politics, while politicians gladly become TV stars, preoccupied or at least tinged with political entertainment. Just think about Silvio Berlusconi.

Curiously enough, the new forms of political entertainment go hand in hand with a gradual disappearance of the old good humour. The new political humour is more about concealed hatred than jokes and laughter, and hatred turns out to be about angry political clownery nowadays. They are easily convertible and



interchangeable. Hatred becomes a valuable political commodity. Clownery becomes a widely accepted and assumed form of political intelligence service. Look at the head of Russia's Liberal Democrats, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who, to recall a witty description by a German politician, after five minutes of his talk in Germany proved an anti-liberal, after ten minutes an anti-democrat, and after fifteen a fascist.

It was with sound reason then that the British historian Peter Gay described the epoch of the invention of modern political cartoons as an era of hatred. If we make jokes on the fringes of what is allowed and on the edge of permissiveness, we are bound to border on hatred – precisely like the main character of Houellebecq's novel, Daniel, a highly successful and angry stand-up comedian in whose case indecent and dubious jokes about Jews, Palestinian Arabs, Muslims and immigrants make his name and become the name of the game.

In our technological consumerist society, entertainment is much preferable to genuine humour, which survives on the fringes of entertainment, power and prestige. The whole world has become political. As a result we have been freed of the stereotypes and nonsense of our earlier experience. But we will also lose humour, which was born of none other than stereotype – from safe nonsense in an unsafe world – and powerlessness. This is so not only because political animosities and hatred masquerade as entertainment and popular culture. The point is that politics is about empowerment, which is why it cannot tolerate weakness. The brilliant humour of East European Jews is a perfect example of existence on the other side of the field of power.

The political humour of our times – with its safe flirtation with power – is politics in its truest form. It is no longer anti-structure or a linguistic carnival, but a light and breezy adjustment to the structure and field of power. It is also a warning: ladies and gentlemen, you are not the only ones here. Share or you will perish. That's the name of the new game.

The overall crisis of politics may be one of the reasons why such a strong disenchantment with liberalism exists in Europe. The crisis of liberalism is too obvious to need emphasis. On a closer look, what is happening in Europe now appears as a huge wave of counter-liberalism, including severe violations of human rights in countries that hardly have any doubts about their commitment

to democracy and its sensibilities. And the worst has not yet come. The former liberal who chooses an amalgam of racism, xenophobia and praise of *Heimat* while remaining a hundred per cent committed to the free-market economy and its neoliberal aspect is hardly any different from the proponents of capitalism without democracy in China and Russia. Former stars of European liberalism turn conservative almost overnight; nay, they degenerate into the nightingales of far-right populism: suffice it to recall Viktor Orbán, the leader of Fidesz in Hungary, or the leader of the Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV) Geert Wilders in the Netherlands.

One more telling detail on a profound crisis of liberalism is in order. When asked about the chances that liberalism could change the intellectual landscape and the logic of political life in Eastern Europe, the Polish sociologist Jerzy Szacki expressed his grave doubts. He said that he feared, and with sound reason, that liberalism planted in the soil of post-Communist societies would become a caricature of itself, turning into an inversion of Marxism and celebrating and obsessively associating itself with economics and financial power, instead of speaking up in favour of liberty and human rights.

Szacki was a hundred per cent right and this is exactly what happened in Central and Eastern Europe. After the break-up of the former Soviet Union, what I would describe as the matrix of Central/East European politics emerged: the former Communist Party assumed all the financial power, creating a network within which economic and political power merged into an indivisible whole; whereas its opposing power, a conservative-nationalistic party with some remnants of former Communists prepared to paint their house in new colours nearly overnight, became something like its negative obverse – a churchly and more or less authoritarian unit fiercely opposed in its spirit to the former power structure, yet hardly differing from it in terms of democratic sensibilities.

And where were our would-be liberals left in this context? At best, they tended in those days to become detached and semi-academic clubs studying and celebrating Adam Smith and a grossly simplified concept of the invisible hand. In addition, an explosive proliferation of translations of Friedrich A. von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises and other *laissez-faire* liberal economists quickly led to

the sonorous titles with which newly born liberals in Eastern Europe christened centre-left liberals in Western Europe and North America – ‘socialists’, ‘communists’, ‘traitors of liberalism’ and the like.

I remember one quick exchange with an American colleague who was about to give a public lecture at Ohio University. Awaiting my public talk in a neighbouring auditorium, I wished him good luck, to which he reacted by offering a brief recollection of his impressions of the Czech Republic: commenting on the new draft of the constitution which he was to discuss, he noted ironically that what he encountered there was a striking version of Marxism turned upside down. ‘Not a single word about culture or education, just the economy,’ he sighed.

Yet this was merely an insignificant part of a painful problem. The fact that the majority of liberals in Central and Eastern Europe failed to reveal and appreciate the liberalism of Isaiah Berlin, John Gray or Michael Ignatieff – an inclusive and critical interpretive framework for the politics of dialogue and coexistence on grounds of mutual recognition and human worth, instead of a one-dimensional, doctrinal and partisan approach – was regrettable, but it was not to be the worst piece of news. More was to come.

The aforementioned political matrix of Central and Eastern Europe, opening up the political space for a bipartisan system with no authentic niche left for the liberals, allowed some catch-all or pocket parties set up by the new tycoons and those seeking political revenge to pass for liberal forces – and this was the real tragedy. The old-fashioned or worn-out modes of political discourse and rhetoric were a tiny segment of the post-Communist political drama; the fact that pocket parties or various sorts of quasi-liberal mixes were accepted into the political family of European liberals was far more painful for the future of liberalism.

Those political calculations and manifestations of political technocracy have already dealt a serious blow to European liberals. Desperately trying to recruit new ‘brethren in the faith’ in Eastern Europe, European liberals risk losing their own political identity and *raison d’être*. The caricature of liberal ideas in Eastern Europe, where liberalism has been confined to technocratic advocacy of the free market and the resulting vulgar

economic interpretation of the human world, is a result of the Eastern European intellectual and moral vacuum after 1990.

Regrettably, its counterpart in Western Europe does not look any better if we take into account the rejection of educational and moral aspects of politics which is a cancer of the new European liberalism obsessed with how to find a niche and be accommodated in global policy-making and *realpolitik*. A disdain for the humanities and liberal education, coupled with blindness to culture and its crucial role in Europe, seems a curse of European liberals.

I can easily imagine the reaction of those who would strongly oppose me by reminding me of the commitment of liberals to human rights. This may be true to some extent but we cannot deceive ourselves by taking liberals as the only champions of human rights – it makes no sense to assume a moral monopoly here, as many liberals are simply unaware of the dramas of the peoples and individuals from Central and Eastern Europe who engraved the names of great dissidents on the memory of this part of Europe. Nobody has a monopoly on truth in politics, and the same applies to virtue and ethics in general.

In our age of technocracy walking in the guise of democracy, liberals betray a human being every time they treat him or her just in terms of the workforce, as a statistical unit, or merely as part of a majority and ‘the electorate’. This is a crucial issue they have yet to address.

Another issue is what I would term, using your immortal adjective, a surgical and existential adjective indeed, liquid totalitarianism. As we know, the term ‘soft totalitarianism’ is on the lips of many commentators. They imply that the European Union is not a democracy, but instead a technocracy which walks in disguise as a democracy. Because of mass surveillance and secret intelligence services that increasingly cite the war on terror to demand that we be subject to body screening at the major airports of the world or that we should provide every single detail of our banking activities, without excluding the option of exposing the most personal and intimate aspects of our life, social analysts tend to describe this sinister propensity to strip us of our privacy as soft totalitarianism.

In fact, things may be close to the way they say they are. All these aspects of modernity, with its increasing obsession for

controlling our public activities without losing the sense of high alert when it comes to our privacy, allow us to safely assume that privacy is dead in our day. As a person who grew up and was brought up in the Brezhnev era, I thought a bit naively for some time that human dignity was severely violated solely and exclusively in the former Soviet Union: after all, we were unable to make a telephone call to a foreign country without official control and reports on our conversation, not to mention our correspondence and all other forms of human exchanges.

As you would have it, those days still belonged to the era of solid modernity when totalitarianism was clear, discernible, obvious, and manifestly evil. To use your terms, in the era of liquid modernity, mass surveillance and colonization of the private is alive and well, yet it assumes different forms. In the major dystopias of our times mentioned above, an individual is invaded, conquered and humiliated by the omnipotent state as he or she is deprived of privacy, including the most intimate aspects of it. The TV screen in Orwell's *1984* or reporting on one's neighbour, lover or friend (if it makes sense to use these terms, since love and friendship as modern feelings and expressions of free choice are abolished there) appears as a nightmare of modernity without a human face, or modernity where the jackboot is trampling on the human face.

The most horrible feature of this totalitarian version of modernity was the suggestion that we could penetrate every single aspect of the human personality. A human being is therefore deprived of any sort of secret, which makes us believe that we can know everything about him or her. And the ethos of the technological world paves the way for action: we can, therefore, we ought. The idea that we can know and tell everything about another human being is the worst kind of nightmare as far as the modern world is concerned. We believed for a long time that choice defines freedom; I would hasten to add that, especially nowadays, so does defence of the idea of the unfathomability of the human being and the idea of the untouchability of their privacy.

The beginnings of liquid totalitarianism, as opposed to solid and real totalitarianism, may be exposed in the West each time we see people craving for TV reality shows and obsessed with the idea of willingly and freely losing their privacy by exposing it on TV screens – with pride and joy. Yet there are other, far more real

forms of government and politics that merit and richly deserve this term. In fact, there is a long distance between the new forms of mass surveillance and social control in the West and the overt and explicit divorce of capitalism and freedom in China and Russia.

First and foremost, liquid totalitarianism manifests itself in the Chinese pattern of modernity, an opposing pattern to Western modernity, with its formula of capitalism without democracy or the free market without political liberty. The divorce of power and politics you have described has developed a distinctly Chinese version: financial power may exist and prosper there in so far as it does not merge or overlap with political power. Get rich but keep away from politics. Ideological politics is a fiction in China, since Mao Zedong was betrayed a thousand times by his party, which ceased being a Communist stronghold and, instead, turned into the managerial elite group. It is impossible to betray the Chinese Cultural Revolution and Communism more than the Chinese modernizers did under the guise of the magic touch of modernity, with the help of the free market and instrumental rationality.

Another case of liquid totalitarianism is Putin's Russia with its idea of managed democracy, equipped with Putinism, this vague and strange amalgam of nostalgia for the grandeur of the Soviet past, gangster and crony capitalism, endemic corruption, kleptocracy, self-censorship, and remote islands left for dissenting opinions and voices on the internet. By contrast with the Chinese version of the divorce of capitalism and political liberty, the Putinesque variety implies a total fusion of economic and political power combined with impunity and state terror, which overtly lends itself to gangs and criminal cliques of various shades.

The noted Russian political analyst, commentator and essayist Andrei Piontkovsky, one of the most courageous dissenting voices in Putin's Russia, aptly described a striking historical affinity between the Soviet Union on the eve of the 1937 purge and present-day Russia by pointing out that Ilya Ehrenburg had best expressed the mood of the intelligentsia with his phrase 'Never before have we had such a prosperous and happy life!' The irony is that the benefits that came to the intelligentsia from Stalin were merely a prelude to the horrors of the purge. 'Things are shockingly similar in Russia now,' says Piontkovsky. Like Stalin, Putin

simply bribed the intelligentsia. Less stick and more carrot. All in all, whereas Stalinism was a Shakespearean tragedy, Putinism is a farce.

**ZB** Your statement, Leonidas, is densely packed with issues, each one graver and weightier than the one before. It reads as prolegomena to all future analysis of the contemporary state of the game in politics and its links to the social structure, culture, patterns of human interaction, hegemonic worldviews...I doubt my ability to respond to all of its tremendously rich content, let alone to respond in a systematic way. I would rather limit myself to a few ideas inspired by reading your text.

You start from the changing nature of fears articulated and recorded in dystopian writings. Agnes Heller recently took a large sample of historical novels written in current times and tried to juxtapose their content and style with their predecessors in the last century to find shifts in the writers' perspectives, probably in accordance with the drift in their readers' expectations. There are many striking observations in Heller's study, but one of her findings goes straight to the heart of the problem you capture and vivisect. Where the fears and torments of heroes and victims alike in the historical novels of the last century arose from wars, inter-dynastic enmities, marching armies, clashes of powerful churches and other kinds of turbulence 'on high', now they arise from the grassroots level: from the diffused, dissipated, isolated, unplanned and unanticipated, as well as unpredictable, acts of separate individuals; they are the products of *individual* acts, even though there are more of them. To give you just one example, in *The Birth of Venus* by Sarah Dunant, set in the Florence of Savonarola's times, fears emanate from roaming thugs, numerous yet solitary and madmen running amuck. They are all, without exception, creations of an internalized horror of serial murderers lurking or suspected to be lurking in badly lit streets and pitch-dark corners, as well as of malevolent next-door neighbours – they do not come from invading, marauding and blood-thirsty armies, pestilence or famine. The sufferers are as isolated and left to their own ingenuity and acumen as their tormentors...

I guess we can regard new-style historical novels like this as another division of the category of dystopia, their sole difference from the main division being that they are set in a (by definition)

specific past instead of a (by definition) indefinite future. Whenever they are set, utopias currently being composed catch and recycle a novel kind of fear: fear by default rather than by design, horrors rising from the collapse of control (both the ability and the will to control), rather than from its excess and over-ambition. On the receiving side, that new quality of fear is reflected in the curse of loneliness: in the absence of offices in charge of fear production, a general staff to command and target their products as well as the seats of power to be stormed, taken over or set on fire in order to get rid of the sources of everybody's dreads and phobias, we are all condemned to confront our fears individually and concoct our own ruses and subterfuges to fight back against them, because the fears common to us all do not add up to a commonality of interests and a common cause, and don't blend into a stimulus to join forces. To put it in a nutshell, our fears, like so many other aspects of life in a liquid modern setting, have been *deregulated* and *privatized*. That transformation took place at both ends of the rulers-ruled interface simultaneously. And it could hardly have occurred otherwise than simultaneously.

Another question, about the quality of political leaders, and indeed of political leadership as such, which you've so poignantly analysed. In this context, allow me to quote in the following section a note I sent to *Sociologicky Casopis*, the Czech sociological journal, in which I tried to assess the meaning of Václav Havel's recent departure:

A few days ago hundreds of thousands, perhaps more than a million people took to the streets and public squares of Prague to bid farewell to Václav Havel, according to many observers the last great political-cum-spiritual leader (spiritual, in great measure, thanks to his political greatness – and political, in great measure, thanks to his spiritual greatness), the likes of whom we are unlikely to witness again in our lifetime. What we are unlikely to witness again either are comparable numbers of people prompted to take to the streets by their gratitude to and respect for a statesman, rather than by their wholesale indignation, resentment and derision for people in power and the politics 'as we know it'. In their farewell to Havel, the mourners bewailed a political leader who, in sharp distinction from the political operators of today, gave power to the powerless, instead of



stripping them of whatever shreds of power they might have retained.

Havel was one of those few – ever fewer and further between – political/spiritual leaders who single-handedly challenged, and to enormous effect, the irony and derision with which the capacity of an individual to change the course of events has been all too often treated by the learned as much as by popular opinion. Future historians will most probably place the name of Václav Havel on the list of great individuals who ‘made a difference’ – without whom the world would not and could not be like the world we’ve inherited. Historians will perhaps confirm as well the fearful anticipations of millions of mourners feeling bereaved by Havel’s departure, adding to that name the designation of ‘the last in the line of great political leaders who shaped the world we inhabit’. Bidding farewell to Havel, most of us – including our present-day appointed/elected leaders (however reluctant they may be to admit it) – have all the right and all the duty to look at themselves as dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants, of whom Václav Havel was, undoubtedly, one of the greatest. We look around in vain for those giants’ successors – and we do it in a time when we need them more than ever before in our collective memory.

Havel left us at a time when people at the head of state governments, even the governments of the so-called ‘powerful states’, are looked upon with a steadily rising dose of irony and disbelief. Trust in the ability of the extant political institutions to influence the course of history, let alone to control it or change it if required, is dwindling. Trust in politics as such has been set adrift by the repeated sightings of the impotence of governments – and it is still seeking in vain a safe haven to moor and cast anchor. It is ever clearer that the inherited network of political institutions can no longer deliver, whereas a new toolbox for effective collective action is, at the most, at the design stage, unlikely to be put into production soon or even recognized as worthy of being produced.

The growing weakness of the extant executive powers has been long noted, and seems ever more likely to be incurable. It is too blatantly displayed to be overlooked. The heads of the most powerful governments will meet on a Friday to debate and decide the right line of action, only to wait, trembling, till the stock exchange reopens on the Monday to find out whether their decision has a

leg to stand on. Indeed, the present interregnum was not born recently, not very recently at any rate. Its ever more obtrusive existence was not just signalled, but recognized years ago and reflected in the growing deficit of trust in the established vehicles of collective action, in falling interest in institutionalized politics and in the relentlessly spreading and already widespread, and ambient sentiment that salvation, were it at all conceivable, would not and/or could not arrive from on high. We may add that the drivers and conductors of those vehicles of collective action, whether acting singly or severally, have for a long time been doing everything imaginable to set that trust adrift by denying and discrediting the merits of acting-in-common, and to keep trust unanchored – by admonishing, nagging and nudging men and women far and wide to realize that, even if their shared problems are suffered in common, they nevertheless have thoroughly individual causes, and therefore can and should be individually faced and tackled, and individually, through the use of individual means, resolved.

With ever more evident social divisions seeking in vain for a political structure in which to find themselves reflected, as well as the political tools capable of servicing that reflection, the paramount, well-nigh defining trait of the ‘interregnum’ (namely, its tendency to allow almost anything to happen yet nothing to be accomplished with any degree of confidence and certainty of results) may well manifest itself with unprecedented force, and with consequences of unprecedented magnitude. Alliances put together in the ground-clearing phase (rainbow-like coalitions of otherwise incompatible interests, notoriously inclined to dissipate shortly after the end of the downpour that put them in place) may promptly fall apart or even explode, uncovering – for everybody to see – the nature of their ad hoc marriage of convenience. The ground-clearing phase has no need for strong leaders: quite the contrary, strong leaders with a strong vision and strong convictions might cause such rainbow-like coalitions to collapse well before the ground-clearing tasks were completed. Spokespeople for those on the move may declare that they are satisfied (though not necessarily for the right reasons) and neither need nor possess leaders – they may, indeed, view the leaderless condition of the people on the move as a sign of political progress and one of their foremost achievements. Vladimir Putin, when he declared (in all

likelihood prematurely) the defeat of the massive public protest against the derision with which the Russian powers that be treat their electorate, hit the nail on the head when he imputed the alleged failure of the opposition to the absence of a leader capable of putting together a programme the protesters would be willing to accept and able to support.

This is not at all surprising. This is what was to be expected in our times, which Antonio Gramsci dubbed in advance an ‘interregnum’ (a term long and unduly sunk in oblivion, but fortunately excavated recently and dusted off thanks to Professor Keith Tester): times in which the evidence is piling up almost daily that the old familiar and tested ways of doing things no longer work, while their more efficient replacements are nowhere in sight – or too precocious, volatile and inchoate to be noticed or to be taken seriously when (and if) they are noticed.

We can safely assume that the rising numbers of people who take to the streets nowadays, and settle for weeks or months on end in improvised shelters pitched on public squares, know – or, short of knowing for sure, have enough opportunity to guess or suspect – what they are running *from*. They know for sure, or at least they have good reason to believe that they know, what they would *not* like to continue to be done. What they don’t know, though, is what needs to be done *instead*. More importantly still, they have no inkling of *who* might prove to be potent and willing enough to take whatever they believe to be the right step. Twitter and Facebook messages summon them and send them to public squares to protest against ‘what is’ – the message-senders keep mum, however, on the moot question of what kind of ‘ought’ should replace that ‘is’; or they portray an ‘ought’ in sufficiently broad, sketchy, vague and above all ‘flexible’ outlines to pre-empt any part of it ossifying into a bone of contention. They also keep prudently silent about the thorny issue of the compatibility or incompatibility of their demands. Twitter and Facebook message-senders can neglect such caution only at the peril of the cause they promote. Were they to disregard the iron rules of all effective digital calls to arms, and all successful online-to-offline strategy, they would risk their messages being stillborn or dying without issue: few if any tents would be pitched on public squares in response to their calls, and very few would keep their initial residents for long.

Building sites, it seems, are currently in the process of being collectively cleared in anticipation of a different management of the space. People on the move do that job, or at least they earnestly try. But the future buildings intended to replace those vacated and/or dismantled are scattered over a multitude of private drawing boards, none of them having as yet reached the planning permission stage; as a matter of fact, no foundations have yet been laid for a planning office entitled and trusted to issue those permissions. While the power to clear sites seems to have grown considerably, the building industry is lagging far behind – and the distance between its capacities and the grandiosity of the unattended construction work keeps expanding.

It is the all too visible impotence and ineptitude of the extant political machinery that is the principal force prompting steadily growing numbers of people to go on the move, and keep on going. The integrating capacity of that force is confined to the operation of clearing the ground, however. It does not extend to the designers, architects and builders of the polis to be erected in its place. Our ‘interregnum’ is marked by a dismantling and discrediting of the institutions that used to service the processes of forming and integrating public visions, programmes and projects. Having been subjected to processes of thorough deregulation, fragmentation and privatization, together with the rest of the social fabric of human cohabitation, such institutions remain stripped of a large part of their executive capacity and most of their authority and trustworthiness, with only a vague chance of recovering them.

Any creation is all but unthinkable unless preceded by, or coterminous with, an act of destruction. Destruction, however, does not by itself determine the nature of a constructive sequel, or even make its imminence a foregone conclusion. As far as the institutional network of society is concerned, and in particular the vehicles of collective, integrated undertakings, it feels as if 2011 contributed considerably to the volume and capacity of available bulldozers, whereas in that year the production of construction cranes and other building equipment plunged even deeper into an already protracted recession, and the existing supplies were kept idle – put into mothballs in expectation of more propitious times, though they, alas, were stubbornly reluctant to arrive.

Leaders of ad hoc coalitions can be only ad hoc leaders. Not an attractive job for people with genuine leadership quality,

equipped with more than personal photogenic charm, wheeler-dealer skills and an appetite for instant, if fragile, notoriety. Each set of external circumstances creates its own set of realistic options for individual choices, but each option appeals to its own category of potential takers. A manifestly impotent politics concerned mainly with keeping its subjects at a safe distance, increasingly run by spin doctors and stage-managers of photo opportunities, and ever more remote from the daily concerns and worries at the grassroots, is hardly a magnet for individuals with visions and projects that reach beyond the next election date – individuals with the qualities indispensable for political leaders, as distinct from political machine operators. Potential political leaders are still being born; it is the deteriorating and increasingly decadent and powerless political structures that prevent them from coming of age...

Vladimir Putin summed up pretty accurately the current state of experimentation with alternative tools of effective political action to replace the outdated and ever less potent and more rickety ones. But how long his diagnosis will remain valid is not for him, nor as a matter of fact for anyone, to determine before it is decided by the people who make history while being made by it, whether by design or default. In the course of doing it, the urgent, imperative need for genuine political and spiritual leaders, as well as their likelihood, will become more and more evident. And then prospective leaders would do well to recall and learn from Václav Havel's experience and accomplishment; because even among the most outstanding political figures of recent times, Havel, as it were, stood out.

Unlike other bona fide political leaders, Havel had at his disposal none of the equipment deemed indispensable for exercising tangible influence. No massive political movement behind him, complete with ramified and well-entrenched political machinery. No access to profuse public funds. No army, missile launchers or police, whether secret or uniformed, to make his word flesh. No mass media to render him a celebrity, to convey his messages to millions and make millions eager to listen and to follow. As a matter of fact, Havel had just three weapons to use in his effort to change history: hope, courage and stubbornness – weapons all of us possess in one measure or another. The sole difference between Václav Havel and the rest of us is that we, unlike Havel,

seldom reach for those weapons; and when (or if) we do, we do it with much less – weaker and shorter-lived – determination.

To follow those recollections of Havel, let me note that however much at loggerheads with each other the great ideologies of the past political spectrum were, they all agreed on one point: while ferociously quarrelling about what was to be done, they hardly ever squabbled about the issue of who was going to do what in their opinion needed to be done. And there was no need to quarrel, because it was deemed self-evident that the agency bound to make the word flesh was the state; the all-powerful state, as people then believed, a state blending the power to do things with the ability to decide which things were to be done and which avoided, and exercising full sovereignty – that is, executive capacity – over its territory and the population inhabiting it. The simple recipe for having things done (whatever those things might be) was to take over the state apparatus in order to deploy the power it held. Power was visualized as ‘stored’ in governmental warehouses and ready to use (symbolized in the public imagination by the key releasing nuclear missiles which any successive US president has the right to press regardless of the political party that put him into the Oval Office). Whoever administers that warehouse has the capacity to do whatever he or she considers to be right and proper, or just expedient.

This is no longer the case, though. The power to have things done floats in the ‘space of flows’ (Manuel Castells); it is evasive, highly mobile, infuriatingly difficult to locate, pinpoint or fix, and like the legendary hydra has many heads. It is immune to locally set and territorially confined rules – and formidably resistant to all attempts at controlling its movements and rendering its moves, or responses to one’s own moves, predictable. The flipside is the rapid fall in the authority of state governments, which display their impotence daily, and every day more spectacularly. I guess that the fact that visions of a ‘good society’ have fallen out of fashion is ultimately because the powers able to put such visions into place have fallen out of sight. Why break one’s head trying to answer the question of ‘what to do’ if there is no answer to the question of ‘who’ll do it’?! We are currently going through multiple crises, but the most acute of them, indeed a ‘metacrisis’ makes all the others all but insoluble, is the *crisis of agency*. More to the point: of ‘agency as we know it’, the bequeathed and extant

agency of the state, tried and tested by the past generations who put it together and expected and recommended us to use it.

Corresponding and complementary to the decline and lapse of (effective, trustworthy) agency has been a seminal shift of the realm of ideology. Until half a century or so ago, ideologies were, so to speak, ‘wrapped around’ the state – its concerns and set purposes. Today’s ideologies are wrapped around the *absence* of the state as an effective instrument of action and change. In its extreme rendering, present-day ideology is ‘privatized’ – focusing on cutting out a relatively solid and tranquil niche in the quicksand, a safe and secure shelter inside a hopelessly and incurably unsafe and insecure social setting (such as building a family nuclear shelter in a world bent on MAD – ‘Mutually Assured Destruction’ – or buying oneself into a ‘gated community’ inside a city rife with violence and unstoppable decay). At some distance from the pole of the extreme ‘individualization’ and pulverization of social totalities extends a wide range of ideologies preoccupied with searching for and testing new forms of collective action as possible alternative(s) to the state now mostly conspicuous by its absence. The phenomenon of ‘people on the move’, briefly mentioned above, is one of those ideologies-in-action. Inchoate and precocious, obviously not fully formed, more a groping in the dark than a determined and consistent move in a direction already designed and chosen, it is thus far at a testing stage. The evidence gathered during the test is ambiguous, to say the least, and the jury is still out; in all probability, it will stay out for a considerable time to come. The signals are controversial, the fates of successive tests kaleidoscopic, and the content of their messages chameleon-like. The refusal to invest hopes in the extant political institutions is perhaps the sole invariable and integrating factor they share.

Another crucial point among many you named . . . You say: ‘The TV screen in Orwell’s *1984* or reporting on one’s neighbour, lover or friend (if it makes sense to use these terms, since love and friendship as modern feelings and expressions of free choice are abolished there) appears as a nightmare of modernity without a human face, or modernity where the jackboot is trampling on the human face.’ But then you imply that ‘in the era of liquid modernity, mass surveillance and colonization of the private is alive and well, yet it assumes different forms’. How true!

I think one more important insight needs to be brought into this context; it helps to clarify the mechanism servicing the mass surveillance and ‘colonization of the private’, and all in all the methodology of spiritual subordination and enslavement specific to our liquid modern times; as well as the power techniques deployed in the construction of those mechanisms.

Joseph S. Nye, Jr has turned upside down Machiavelli’s infamous recommendation to the Prince: *it is safer when people fear you than when they love you*.<sup>11</sup> Whether or not that recommendation was right for princes remains debatable; most certainly, however, it no longer makes sense for presidents and prime ministers.

Nye would agree that because of its eminently flickering habits, love is not particularly fit for a foundation on which long-term confidence can be built and rest; but neither, he adds, is the state of being frightened, and especially if it is not reconfirmed by the Prince continuing to deliver on his threat to punish: to be as cruel, ruthless, bestial – and above all as indomitable and irresistible – as he pretended and/or was believed to be. That recommendation turns out to be even more unreliable and frustrating if love (complete with awe, respect, trust and readiness to forgive occasional lapses, misdeeds and improprieties) is absent or not strong enough to compensate for displays of incompetence or impotence. In short, presidents and prime ministers beware: all said, *it is safer to be loved than to be feared*. If you have to resort to overt hostilities, don’t measure your success by the numbers of enemies killed, but by the quantity of friends, admirers and allies you’ve managed to summon, acquire and/or reassure.

You don’t believe this to be true? Just look at what happened to the Soviet Union: it emerged from the battlefields of the Second World War with an astonishing capital of admiration and respect among opinion-makers worldwide – only to squander it by drowning the Hungarian uprising in rivers of blood and then crushing and strangling the Czechoslovak experiment and its ‘socialism with a human face’, and topping up its ignominy with a disastrous economic performance and the misery produced and reproduced at home under the aegis of a planned economy. Or look at the United States of America, revered worldwide and

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr, *The Powers to Lead* (Oxford University Press, 2008).



looked up to when it emerged triumphant from two successive wars against totalitarian powers – only to fritter away an unprecedentedly huge, seemingly inexhaustible supply of trust, hope, adoration and love by invading Iraq and Afghanistan for fraudulent reasons and on false premises: while the weapons intended for frightening proved to be superbly effective and as murderous as one was led to expect (Saddam Hussein’s awesome army having been swept away in Blitzkrieg fashion, and it having taken just a few days for Taleban fortresses to fall apart and collapse on the ground like cardboard boxes, the US lost almost all the members of the initial coalition one by one and all its potential allies in the Arabic world. What did that amount to? The US killed about hundred thousand Iraqis, in and out of uniform but lost millions of sympathizers...)

In this book, Nye concluded that ‘the military-manufacturing model of leadership’ has fallen decidedly out of fashion; perhaps the idea of leadership as we know it has followed suit. At least, this is what the spokespeople of the ‘Wall Street Occupiers’ insist, making a merit out of its absence of leaders. Or this is what two Americans in every three confirm, reporting their lack of trust in the powers that be. Or what is suggested by recent research commissioned by Xerox Company, showing that success in collective undertakings depends 42 percent on teamwork, but only 10 percent on the quality of leaders.

People are no longer as meekly submissive as they used to be, or used to be believed to be, and are getting less prone than previously reckoned to fear the punishment for disobedience. It gets tougher to coerce them into doing what the powers-that-be want them to do. On the other hand, though, they become more amenable to seduction as the temptations gain in amplitude and technical sophistication. Present and future presidents and prime ministers pay note: Joseph S. Nye, Jr, seasoned and battle-tested counsellor of presidents and member of many think tanks of the highest rank, recommends all current and prospective powerholders to rely less on *hard* power (whether military or economic), and more on its *soft* alternative and complement. All in all, on *smart* power: the golden mean of the two, an optimal mixture too difficult to find thus far, but imperative to be sought with an eye to the right dose of each of the two ingredients: on an ideal combination of the threat to break necks and the effort to win hearts.

Among military and political elites alike, Nye's is an authoritative voice, widely and attentively listened to. He shows a way out from the long, and lengthening, series of failed military adventures and only thinly masked defeats. I guess that what his voice signals and reflects is sort of an end of an era: the era of wars as we knew them, wars understood as a principally symmetrical affair – a *combat*. The coercive instruments of 'hard power' have by no means been abandoned, and nor are those weapons likely to fall out of favour and use. But they are increasingly designed with the idea of making reciprocation, and so combat-style symmetry, all but impossible. Regular armies hardly ever meet face to face; weapons are hardly ever discharged point-blank. In terrorist activities as much as in the 'war against terrorism' (the terminological distinction reflecting the new asymmetry of hostilities), total avoidance of direct confrontation with the enemy is attempted by both sides with growing success. On the two sides of the frontline, two starkly different strategies and tactics of hostilities develop. Each side has its own limitations – but also its advantages, to which the other side has no effective response. As a result, the present-day hostilities replacing the combat of yesteryear consist of two unilateral, blatantly unsymmetrical actions aiming at rendering the very possibility of symmetry null and void.

On the one side, there is a tendency to reduce hostilities to actions at a distance large enough to deny the enemy the chance of replying or indeed preventing, let alone pre-empting, a response in kind; these actions are conducted with the help of smart missiles or ever more sophisticated drones, difficult to locate and divert. On the other side, on the contrary, the tendency is towards a simplification of weaponry: a reduction in the cost, size and complexity of its assembly and use. The cost of hijacking a plane and using it to devastating material – and even more disastrous psychological – effect is only a few dollars higher than the price of an air ticket. Measured by the standards of the first tendency, the effect tends to be disproportionably huge in proportion to the expenditure; but this is not the whole story of the asymmetry of costliness. The simplicity and easy accessibility of the materials from which their weapons are constructed make early detection of planned terrorist acts, and so their prevention, exceedingly difficult; but the crucial point that follows from that is that the costs of attempts to pre-empt the innumerable terrorist acts anticipated

(based almost entirely on guesswork and ‘playing it safe’) tend to far outstrip the costs of dealing with the damage perpetrated by the few acts already accomplished. As those costs have to be met entirely by the financial capacities of the side under assault, they may well in the long term turn into the terrorists’ most effective and most devastating weapon (just think how much it costs to spy out, spot and confiscate millions of water bottles, day in, day out, in thousands of airports around the world, just because someone, somewhere, sometime was caught or perhaps just suspected of assembling a cottage-industry or home-baked bomb by mixing small quantities of two liquids...). Some people reckon that the collapse of the Soviet Union was triggered by Reagan involving Gorbachev in an arms race the Soviet economy couldn’t enter without becoming bankrupt. Watching the already exorbitant, and still fast rising federal debt of the US, one may be excused for wondering whether Bin Laden and his successors might have managed to take a hint and learn the lesson, and are set to repeat Reagan’s feat...

LD The question of whether modern politics will survive the twenty-first century in the way it existed for centuries is no joke nowadays. The Manichaeism of the left and the right, which, in Milan Kundera’s words, ‘is as stupid as it is insurmountable’, and which is deeply grounded in Western Europe and North America, is much more than partisan politics. Had it been simply that, it would have been quite safe to assume that there was no other way to deal with the polarities and opposing visions of human existence than democratic politics, with its ethics of rational compromise, without losing one’s core principles, dignity and identity.

However, on a closer look it appears that this is not so. We are suffering from unproductive, albeit dramatic, encounters of irreconcilable and mutually exclusive moral concepts, cultural codes and visions of the world around us which politicians nowadays are trying to appropriate, accommodate and monopolize. Yet not a single chance exists to reconcile those poles and reach a common denominator.

At this point, a moral compromise of our time which we call human rights ideology could be quite deceptive even in the West. The undisguised irritation of right-wingers at every hint dropped by their colleagues from the left concerning LGBT (lesbian, gay,

bisexual and transgender) rights is reciprocated by the left whenever it comes to an attempt by the right to single out the persecution of Christians in the world, or merely to mention Christianity as a driving force behind Europe, or at least as a form of moral and political sensitivity – an attempt that is usually turned down by the left.

As long as politicians are preoccupied, not to say obsessed, with the human body, privacy and memory, they will tend to replace the search for a good policy with the quest for the moral majority, bulldozing their way towards new forms of social control, disguised as moral and educational concerns.

It was with sound reason, then, that Michel Houellebecq described this internal conflict of modernity as a clash of two fundamentally opposing anthropologies: the other-worldly one oriented towards a distant ideal in whose name its adherents speak and act in trying to cover the characteristically modern territory of human sensibility and life, and the this-worldly one, which does not pretend that it has any superior or paramount plane of existence and identity, and which is overtly materialistic and hedonistic. The first preserves life in all of its forms, fiercely opposing abortion and advocating the divine beginnings of the human being, and the second defends the relationship between the female body and her dignity, or that between privacy and freedom.

The first is a fraud in the sense that it presents itself as a time-honoured and ancient tradition speaking a modern language of power and behaving as an actor of today with the voice of a thousand-year-old collective prophet; yet, in a way, so is the second, since it tries hard to introduce itself as the voice of today, although it speaks out in favour of an old idea of anthropocentrism deeply embedded in the Renaissance. What is left behind the struggle of these two deeply antagonizing and mutually exclusive anthropologies is a fundamental tension of modernity.

What is a proper public agency (provided there is any at all) for the mystery of human life, freedom and conscience? Who speaks for us? Those who control us or those who supposedly know us better than we do? In fact, neither.

And this brings us to the next pivotal question: what is the potential of politics to represent modern humanity, and what is the future of political parties, those agents of power that speak in the name of the relationship between the individual and the

community, translating their private concerns into public matters, empowering them and connecting them to the public domain?

In the epoch of Facebook, and especially after the Arab Spring, it has become obvious that political parties will only survive into the next century, or perhaps just into the second half of this one, on condition that they begin to act as, and close ranks with, social movements. Otherwise, parties are in peril of becoming irrelevant and useless. Either they will come close to social movements as new expressions of sporadic social and political will (something similar to the *indignados* in Spain) or they will lose ground, functioning merely as outdated and banal cliques.

As groups of people conscious of their political goals and interests, political parties are at risk of being removed, in the long run, by politicized corporate or semi-religious groups, which can be tinged with vague postmodern sectarianism. Human bonds and joint dedications are much stronger in such quasi-religious groups than in political parties, whereas the pursuit of economic interest can be much more efficient in quasi-parties organized as new cells of the corporate world. In both cases, old-fashioned political parties that always relied on the classical logic of power deeply embedded in territorial unity as well as in the modern marriage of politics and culture will find themselves in a no-win situation.

Genuine democratic representation and legitimacy, rather than the search for efficacious forms of public communication, appears as a pivotal problem of present politics. In addition, that same question remains unanswered as to whether our modern political sensibilities are in tune or at odds with our ethical and existential concerns.

We cannot leave these out if we want to avoid the nightmare of a grotesque politics set to end up with TV reality shows becoming the predominant form of political life and new folk for politics being recruited exclusively from show business, sport and the adult movie industry.

### 3

## Between Fear and Indifference: The Loss of Sensitivity

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**Leonidas Donskis** Ours is a time of fear. We cultivate a culture of fear which is becoming increasingly powerful and global. Our self-revealing age, with its fixation on cheap sensationalism, political scandals, TV reality shows and other forms of self-exposure in exchange for public attention and fame, prizes moral panic and apocalyptic scenarios incomparably more than a balanced approach, light irony or modesty.

Behind this tendency is an overwhelming fear of crumbling to the ground or merely being oneself: the fear of unimportance; the fear of vanishing in the air leaving no trace of visibility and presence; fear of being like others; fear of being beyond the TV and media world, which is tantamount to becoming a nonentity or the end of one's existence. There was a time when fatalistic and pessimistic philosophers, with all their predictions of the inexorable doom of European culture or the breakdown of the Western World, sounded like a voice of the twentieth century with its sombre and tragic experiences of the First World War, America's Depression, the rise of totalitarian dictatorships and other forms of modern barbarity.

The paradox is that now it is almost *bon ton* to predict the collapse of Europe – financial, political and cultural. Visigoths are certainly coming, one way or another: African, Asian and East European migrants and refugees strip Europe of its historically formed identity, while Muslims pose a direct threat to the legacy

of Christianity and our fundamental rights and liberties. Funeral music for Europe has become commonplace over the past five or so years.

What was perceived by the perceptive, albeit sinister and dangerous, philosopher of culture Oswald Spengler to be an as yet unpronounced denial of, and an as yet undeclared parting from a great unifying principle – the principle clearly seen behind Giotto, Masaccio, Leonardo, Raphael, Hals, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Bach, Mozart and Beethoven – is proclaimed by our new internet and Facebook Cassandras as an onslaught of the new Visigoths. What the Austrian thinker Egon Friedell saw as a profound crisis of the European soul, our new Cassandras assess merely in terms of loss of power, domination and prestige. Suffice it to mention an amateurish and, in effect, regrettable, albeit enormously popular book, *Deutschland Schafft Sich Ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* (Germany abolishes itself: how we are putting our country at risk) (2010), an attempt to beat the drums of threat to German and European identity undertaken by Thilo Sarrazin, a former German finance ministry official and finance senator in Berlin.

The most astonishing, not to say incomprehensible, thing is that we live in relatively safe and happy times. Any comparison of our time, however confused and unpredictable it happens to be, with the epoch of two world wars strikes me as totally misguided, tasteless and, ultimately, thoughtless. Therefore, the question can be raised as to whether people understand what they say when they compare profoundly different things and beat the drums of threat. Books on the supposedly emerging ‘new liberal tyranny’, ‘soft totalitarianism’, ‘liberal fascism’, etc., started proliferating over the past decade.

The answer is not as easy as it may seem. The fear of modernity is old news. Every new phenomenon can cause an outbreak of moral panic and overreaction. Yet we can see here something like a tamed or domesticated fear. The point is that fear has long since become part of popular culture, nurturing our troubled and apocalyptic imagination: earthquakes, tsunamis, other natural disasters and war crimes have ceased to be on a remote plane of reality. Now they are with us all the time, feeding our sensationalist media and preventing us from the sweet dream that there is, or at least should be, a remote island somewhere where we could be absolutely safe and happy.

Fear wears various masks. It may speak the language of existential and intimate experience, yet on a closer look it appears that we are in control of large segments of organized fear: think about horror films and horror stories, functioning as an irreplaceable part of entertainment along with TV comic shows and stand-up comedians.

We don't quite fear, yet we fear. I fear, therefore, I am. Another side of that same coin, fear nurtures hatred, and hatred nurtures fear. Fear speaks the language of uncertainty, unsafety and insecurity, which our epoch provides in large quantities and even in abundance. The proliferation of conspiracy theories and vigorous, albeit simplistic, approaches to the European Union reminds us of how difficult or even unbearable our life can be in constant doubt and uncertainty.

As you would have it, there was a time when our rationalistic culture used to console people, suggesting that uncertainty was merely a temporary pause before the arrival of a new plausible theory or in-depth explanation. Now we have to learn how to live with a sense of constant uncertainty. What comes to a philosopher or an artist as an inspiration may become a calamity for ordinary people, fearing that their lives could be spoiled and wasted. And the trouble is that along comes a dodgy politician who firmly promises to handle an issue and chase away all our fears and discontents. Thus fear has become a political commodity, paving the way for a wave of populism and xenophobia in Europe.

Before our eyes, the culture of fear manufactures the politics of fear.

**Zygmunt Bauman** You are right, Leonidas – fear does not seem to be a revocable and curable abnormality, a cancerous growth on the brave new world of modernity, a malignant growth demanding excision yet still operable; nor is it likely that if the surgery were performed, the patient (modernity) would survive it and return unharmed and fit from the operating theatre. It seems rather that fear and modernity are twin brothers, or indeed *Siamese* twins, and of a kind which no surgeon, however dexterous and well equipped with the latest surgical technology, could separate without putting the very survival of *both* brothers at risk.

There are, and at all times there have been, three reasons to be afraid. One was (is, and will remain) ignorance: the not knowing



what will happen next, how vulnerable we are to blows, what kind of blows they will be and where they will come from. The second was (is, and will remain) impotence: the suspicion that there is nothing or next to nothing we can do to avert a blow or fend it off when it comes. The third was (is, and will remain) humiliation, a derivative of the first two: the looming threat to our self-esteem and self-confidence once it is revealed that we did not do all that could have been done, that our own inattention to signals, undue procrastination, sloth or deficit of will be in large part responsible for the devastation caused by the blow. As full knowledge of things to come is utterly unlikely ever to be achieved, and the tools available to pre-empt their coming can hardly ever be assumed to be a hundred per cent adequate, a degree of ignorance and lack of potency are bound to accompany humans in all their undertakings. To put it bluntly: fear is here to stay. This has been known to humans for time immemorial. The consideration of fear as a temporary irritant – to be moved out of the way and put paid to once and for all by the advancing troops of Reason – was only a relatively short, one-off episode in the modern segment of human history. That episode, as you rightly observe, is now by and large over.

‘We are so made’, wrote Sigmund Freud in 1929, and no one has seriously contradicted him since then, ‘that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things’. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, he quoted Goethe’s warning that ‘Alles in der Welt läßt sich ertragen, / Nur nicht eine Reihe von schönen Tagen’ (Nothing is harder to bear than a succession of fair days) in support of his own view, only slightly qualifying it as perhaps ‘an exaggeration’. While suffering can be a lasting and uninterrupted condition, happiness, that ‘intense enjoyment’, may be only a momentary, fleeting experience – lived through in a flash when the suffering comes to a halt. ‘Unhappiness’, Freud suggests, ‘is much less difficult to experience.’

Most of the time, then, we suffer – and all the time we fear the suffering that might be caused by the permanent threats hovering over our well-being. There are three directions from which we fear that suffering might descend: the superior power of nature, the feebleness of our own bodies and other human beings – and more precisely, given that we believe more strongly

in the possibility of reforming and improving human relations than in subduing Nature and putting an end to the weaknesses of the human body, from the inadequacy of the regulations which adjust the mutual relationships of human beings in the family, the state and society. Suffering, or the horror of suffering, being a permanent accompaniment of life, it is no wonder that the 'process of civilization', that long and perhaps interminable march towards a more hospitable and less dangerous mode of being-in-the-world, focuses on locating and blocking those three sources of human unhappiness.

The war declared on human discomfort in all its varieties is waged on all three fronts. While many victorious battles have been notched up on the first two fronts, and ever more enemy forces are being disarmed and put out of action, on the third line of battle the fate of the war remains in the balance and hostilities are unlikely ever to grind to a halt. In order to liberate humans from their fears, society must impose constraints upon its members; whereas in order to pursue their chase after happiness, men and women need to rebel against those constraints. The third of the three sources of human suffering cannot be regulated out of existence. The interface between the pursuit of individual happiness and the unencroachable conditions of life in common will remain a site of conflict forever. The instinctual impulses of humans are bound to clash with the demands of a civilization bent on fighting and conquering the causes of human suffering.

Civilization, insists Freud, is for that reason a trade-off: in order to gain something from it, humans must surrender something else. Both the things gained and those surrendered are highly valued and hotly desired; each formula of exchange is therefore no more than a temporary settlement, a product of a compromise that is never fully satisfactory for either of the two sides of the perpetually smouldering antagonism. The hostility would die down if both individual desires and societal demands could be catered for at the same time. But this is not to be. The freedom to act on one's urges, inclinations, impulses and desires, and the constraints imposed on it for the sake of security are both badly needed for a satisfactory – indeed endurable and liveable – life, as security without freedom would equal slavery, while freedom without security would spell chaos, disorientation, perpetual uncertainty

and ultimately an impotence to act purposefully. They are and will forever remain mutually irreconcilable.

Having implied that much, Freud came to the conclusion that psychological discomforts and afflictions arise mostly from the surrender of quite a lot of freedom in exchange for (a partial) improvement in security. Truncated and bridled freedom is the main casualty of the 'civilizing process' and the chief and most widespread discontent endemic to a civilized life. This was the verdict pronounced by Freud, let's recall, in 1929. I wonder whether the verdict would emerge unscathed were Freud to spell it out today, over eighty years later – I doubt it. While its premises would be retained (the demands of civilized life and, equally, the human instinctual equipment bequeathed by the evolution of the species stay fixed for a long time and are presumed to be immune to the vagaries of history), the verdict would in all likelihood be inverted...

Yes, Freud would repeat that civilization is a question of trade-off: you gain something but lose something else. But Freud might have located the roots of psychological discomforts, and so of the discontents they engender, on the opposite side of the value spectrum. He might have concluded that, at the present time, the disaffection of human beings with the state of affairs stems mostly from surrendering too much security in exchange for an unprecedented expansion of the realm of freedom. Freud wrote in German, and the meaning of the concept he used, *Sicherheit*, needs three words, not one, to be fully translated into English: certainty, security and safety. The *Sicherheit* we have in large part surrendered contains certainty about what the future will bring and what effects if any our actions will have, security in our socially assigned placing and life tasks, and safety from assault on our bodies and their extensions, our possessions. The surrender of *Sicherheit* results in *Unsicherheit*, a condition that doesn't submit so easily to dissection and anatomic scrutiny: all three of its constitutive parts contribute to the same suffering, anxiety and fear, and it is difficult to pinpoint the genuine causes of the discomfort experienced. Responsibility for anxiety may easily be imputed to the wrong cause, a circumstance which today's politicians, seeking electoral support, can and all too often do turn to their own benefit – even if not necessarily to the benefit of the electors. They naturally prefer to ascribe their electors' suffering to causes they can fight,

and be seen to be fighting (as when they propose to toughen immigration and asylum policy, or the deportation of undesirable aliens) than admit the genuine cause of uncertainty, which they have neither the capacity or will to fight, nor a realistic hope of conquering (such as the instability of jobs, the flexibility of labour markets, the threat of redundancy, the prospect of a tightening of the family budget, an unmanageable level of debt, a renewed worry about provision for old age, or the general frailty of human bonds and partnerships).

Living under conditions of prolonged and apparently incurable uncertainty portends two similarly humiliating sensations: of ignorance (not knowing what the future will bring) and impotence (being unable to influence its course). They are indeed humiliating: in our highly individualized society, where each individual is (counterfactually, as it were) presumed to bear full responsibility for his or her fate in life, they imply the sufferer's inadequacy to tasks which other people, evidently more successful, seem to be performing thanks to their greater skill and industry. Inadequacy suggests inferiority – and being inferior, and being seen as such, is a painful blow delivered to self-esteem, personal dignity and the courage of self-assertion. Depression is currently the most common psychological ailment. It haunts rising numbers of the people recently given the collective name of the 'precariat' – coined from the concept of 'precariousness', denoting existential uncertainty.

A hundred years ago human history was often represented as a story of progress in freedom. That implied, like other related popular stories, that history is consistently guided in the same, unchanging direction. The recent turns in the public mood suggest otherwise. 'Historic progress' seems more reminiscent of a pendulum than a straight line. At the time Freud was writing, the common complaint was a deficit of freedom; his contemporaries were prepared to resign much of their security in exchange for the removal of constraints imposed on their freedom. And they managed to do so in the end. Now, however, signs are multiplying that more and more people would not mind surrendering some of their freedom in exchange for being emancipated from the frightening spectre of existential insecurity. Are we witnessing another turn of the pendulum? And if it indeed happens, what consequences might it bring in its wake?

Fear is an integral part of the human condition. We can indeed eliminate most of the successive fear-causing menaces one by one (Sigmund Freud defined civilization as an arrangement of human affairs bent on doing just that: limiting, sometimes removing altogether, threats of harm perpetrated by the randomness of Nature, weaknesses of the body and neighbours' enmity), but at least so far our capacities stop well short of removing the 'mother of all fears', the 'fear of fears': that master-fear exhaled by the awareness of our mortality and the impossibility of escaping death. We may live nowadays in a 'culture of fear', but our knowledge of the inevitability of death is the prime reason we have culture, it is the principal spring and engine of culture – all and any culture. Culture can indeed be defined as an ongoing, perpetually incomplete, and in principle unfinishable effort to make mortal life liveable. Or one can try to move one step further and conclude that it is our knowledge of mortality, and so our perpetual fear of death, that makes our mode of being-in-the-world, and ourselves, human.

Culture is the sediment of the ongoing attempt *to make living with the awareness of mortality liveable*. And if by any chance we were to become immortal, as sometimes (foolishly) we dream, culture would grind to a halt, which is what Jorge Luis Borges's Joseph Cartaphilus of Smyrna found out, that indefatigable searcher for the City of the Immortals, or Daniel25, cloned and bound to be endlessly recloned, the hero of Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island*. As Joseph Cartaphilus witnessed: having once realized his own immortality, and knowing that 'over an infinitely long span of time all things happen to all men' and so for that very reason it would be just 'impossible that the Odyssey should *not* be composed at least once', Homer was bound to revert to troglodyte. And as Daniel25 found out, once the prospect of the end of time had been removed, and infinity of being had been assured, 'the sole fact of existing was already a misfortune' and the temptation to voluntarily surrender entitlement to further reclonings and thereby depart into 'simple nothingness, a pure absence of content' became impossible to resist.

It has been precisely the knowledge of having to die, of the non-negotiable brevity of time, of the possibility or likelihood of visions remaining *unfulfilled*, projects *unfinished* and things *not* done, that has spurred humans into action and the human imagination into flight. It was that knowledge that made cultural

creation a necessity and turned humans into creatures of culture. Since the beginning of culture and throughout its long history, its engine has been the need to fill the abyss separating transience from eternity, finitude from infinity, mortal life from immortality. Or the impetus to build a bridge to allow a passage from one edge of the abyss to the other. Or the urge to enable us mortals to engrave our continuous presence on eternity, leaving on it an immortal trace of our visit, however brief.

All that does not mean, of course, that the sources of fear, the place it occupies in the life formula, and the foci of the responses it evokes are immutable. On the contrary, each type of society and each historical era has fears of its own – time and society specific. While it is rather inadvisable to ponder the possibility of a ‘fear-free’ alternative, it is paramount to spell out the distinctive traits of fear specific to our time and society for the sake of the clarity of our purpose and the realism of our proposals.

Our ancestors swilled their daily dose of water when they were thirsty from nearby streams, rivers, wells, sometimes puddles . . . We buy a sealed plastic bottle filled with water in a nearby shop and then carry it with us all day long and wherever we go, to take a sip every now and then. Now this is a ‘difference that makes the difference’. A similar difference marks out contemporary fears from the fears of our ancestors. In both cases, what makes the difference is their commercialization. Fear, like water, has been made a consumer commodity and subjected to the logic and rules of the market. Fear has in addition been made a political commodity, a currency used in conducting the game of power. The volume and intensity of fear in human societies no longer reflect the objective gravity or imminence of menace; they are instead derivatives of the plenitude of market offers and the magnitude of commercial promotion (or propaganda).

Take the commercial uses of fear first. It is well known that the logic of marketing in a ‘developed’ (and compulsively, obsessively and addictively developing) economy is not ruled by the need to gratify existing needs, but the necessity of expanding needs to the level of the offer and supplementing them with desires, only loosely related to needs yet tightly correlated with the marketing techniques of temptation and seduction. Marketing is dedicated to the discovery or invention of questions to which the recently introduced products can be seen as providing the answers, and then to

inducing the largest numbers of potential clients to ask those questions with ever growing frequency. Like all other needs, the need for protection from menace tends to be magnified as a result and acquire a self-propelling and self-intensifying momentum. Once in the game of protection from danger, none of the defences already acquired feels sufficient and the tempting and seductive potential of 'new and improved' contraptions and gadgets is assured. On the other hand, the deeper the engagement in perpetually reinforcing and tightening defences, the deeper and more acute the fear of the menace: the image of the menace grows in awesomeness and terrifying ability in proportion to the growth of concerns with security and the visibility and obtrusiveness of security measures. A vicious circle indeed. Or a rare case of a genuinely 'self-sustaining' perpetuum mobile, no longer in need of input of energy from the outside, but drawing energy from its own momentum. Security obsessions are inexhaustible and insatiable; once they have been let loose, there is no stopping them. They are self-propelling and self-exacerbating; as they acquire their own momentum, they need no further boost from outside factors – they produce, on a constantly rising scale, their own reasons, explanations and justifications. The fever kindled and heated by the introduction, entrenchment, servicing and tightening of 'security measures' becomes the sole boost needed for the fears, anxieties and tensions of insecurity and uncertainty to self-reproduce, grow and proliferate. However radical they already are, the stratagems and contraptions designed, obtained and put into operation for the sake of security will hardly prove radical enough to qualm the fears – not for long, at any rate: any one of them may be outdone, superseded and rendered obsolete by treacherous plotters learning how to bypass or ignore them, and thus overcome every successive obstacle erected in their way.

Moazzam Begg, a British Muslim arrested in January 2002 and released without charge after three years imprisoned at Bagram and Guantanamo Bay, rightly points out in his book *Enemy Combatant* (2006) that the overall effect of a life lived under virtually incessant security alerts – warmongering, justifications of torture, arbitrary imprisonment and terror – is to 'have made the world much worse'. And, I would add, not a bit more secure; most certainly the world feels considerably less secure today than it did a dozen or two dozen years ago. It looks as if the paramount effect

of the profuse and immensely costly extraordinary security measures undertaken in the last decade has been a *deepening of our sense of danger, of the density of risks, and insecurity*. And there is little in the present tendency that promises a speedy return to the comforts of security. Sowing the seeds of fear results in rich crops in politics and trade; and the allure of an opulent harvest inspires seekers of political and commercial gain to force open ever new land for fear-growing plantations...

To sum up, perhaps the most pernicious, seminal and long-term effect of the security obsession (the 'collateral damage' it perpetrates) is a sapping of mutual trust and a sowing and breeding of mutual suspicion. From lack of trust, borderlines are drawn, and from suspicion they are fortified with mutual prejudices and recycled into frontlines. A deficit of trust inevitably leads to a wilting of communication; with the avoidance of communication and an absence of interest in its renewal, the 'strangeness' of strangers is bound to deepen and to acquire ever darker and more sinister tones, which in turn still more radically disqualifies them as potential partners in dialogue and in the negotiation of a mutually safe and agreeable mode of cohabitation. The treatment of strangers as a 'security problem' pure and simple stands behind one of the causes of the veritable 'perpetuum mobile' in patterns of human interaction. The mistrust of strangers and the tendency to stereotype them all, or selected categories, as timebombs ready to explode, grow in intensity out of their own logic and momentum, needing no further proof of their appropriateness and no additional stimuli from inimical acts of the targeted adversary (rather, they themselves produce such proof and stimuli in profusion). All in all, the major effect of the securitarian obsession is the fast *growth* instead of a shrinking of the mood of insecurity, with all its accoutrements of fear, anxiety, hostility, aggression and a fading or silencing of moral impulses.

All that does not mean that security and ethics are irreconcilable and bound to remain so. It only signals the pitfalls bound to be scattered by securitarian obsession on the road leading towards peaceful and mutually profitable, safe cohabitation (and indeed cooperation) of ethnicities, denominations and cultures in our globalized world of diasporas. Alas, although with the sharpening and entrenching of human differences in almost every contemporary human settlement and every neighbourhood, a well-disposed



and respectful dialogue between diasporas becomes an ever more important, indeed crucial condition of our shared planetary survival, it is also, for the reasons I tried to list above, becoming more difficult to attain and defend against the present and future odds. Being difficult, however, means only one thing: the need for a lot of good will, dedication, readiness for compromise, mutual respect and a shared distaste for any form of human humiliation; and, of course, a firm determination to restore the lost balance between the value of security and that of ethical propriety. With all such conditions met, and only once they are all met, it is dialogue and agreement (Hans Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons') that might (just might) in their turn become the new 'perpetuum mobile' dominant in the patterns of human cohabitation. That transformation, will have no victims – only beneficiaries.

Which prompts me to bring into our consideration yet another stimulus to beefing up, exacerbating and intensifying security obsessions and making the clouds of fear even denser and darker: namely, the legitimization needs of the state in the age of globalization...

Human uncertainty and vulnerability are the foundations of all political power: it is against those twin, hotly resented yet constant accompaniments of the human condition, and against the fear and anxiety they tend to generate, that the modern state has promised to protect its subjects; and it is mostly from that promise that it has drawn its *raison d'être* as well as its citizens' obedience and electoral support.

In a 'normal' modern society, vulnerability and insecurity of existence, and the necessity to live and act under conditions of acute and irredeemable uncertainty, are assured by the exposure of life pursuits to notoriously capricious and endemically unpredictable market forces. Except for the task of creating and protecting the legal conditions for market freedoms, there is no need for political power to contribute to the production of uncertainty and the resulting state of existential insecurity; the vagaries of the market are sufficient to erode the foundations of existential security and keep the spectre of social degradation, humiliation and exclusion hovering over most members of society. In demanding its subjects' obedience and observance of law, the state can rest its legitimacy on the promise to *mitigate* the extent of the existing vulnerability and frailty of its citizens' condition: to *limit* harms

and damages perpetrated by the free play of market forces, *shield* the vulnerable against excessively painful blows and insure the uncertain against the risks that free competition necessarily entails. This kind of legitimation found its ultimate expression in the self-definition of the modern form of governance as an ‘État-providence’: a community taking on itself, on its administration and management, the obligation and promise once imputed to divine providence – to protect the faithful against the inclement vicissitudes of fate, to help them in the event of personal misfortune and give them succour in their sorrows.

That formula for political power, its mission, task and function, is receding into the past. Institutions of the ‘providential state’, intended originally to deputize for and replace the somewhat less comprehensive and bafflingly, confusingly irregular insurance practices of Divine Providence, are now being progressively cut, dismantled or phased out, while the restraints previously imposed on business activities and on the free play of market competition and its consequences are being removed. The protective functions of the state are being tapered and ‘targeted’, reduced to covering a small minority of the unemployable and the invalid, though even that minority is tending to be reclassified step by step from the concern of social care into an issue of law and order; the incapacity of an individual to engage in the market game according to its statutory rules while using their own resources and at their own personal risk is tending to be increasingly criminalized, recast as a symptom of criminal intention, or at any rate of criminal potential. The state is washing its hands of the vulnerability and uncertainty arising from the logic (more precisely, the absence of logic) of free markets. The noxious frailty of social status is now redefined as a private affair – a matter for individuals to deal with and cope with using the resources in their private possession. As Ulrich Beck put it, individuals are now expected to seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions.<sup>1</sup>

These new trends have a side-effect: they sap the foundations on which state power increasingly rested through the greater part

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<sup>1</sup> See Ulrich Beck, *Risiko Gesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in einere andere Moderne* (Suhrkamp, 1986); here quoted after Mark Ritter’s translation, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Sage, 1992), p. 137.

of the modern era, when it claimed a crucial role in fighting against the vulnerability and uncertainty haunting its subjects. The widely noted growth of political apathy, loss of political interest and commitment ('no more salvation by society', as Peter Drucker succinctly, and famously, phrased it), and a massive retreat of the population from participating in the institutionalized politics both testify to the crumbling of the remaining foundations of state power.

Having rescinded its previous programmatic interference with market-produced existential uncertainty and insecurity, and having on the contrary proclaimed that removing, one by one, the residual constraints on profit-oriented activities is the prime task of any political power that cares for the well-being of its subjects, the contemporary state has to seek other, *non-economic* varieties of vulnerability and uncertainty on which to rest its legitimacy. That alternative seems to have been located (first and most spectacularly, but by no means exclusively, by the US administration) in the issue of *personal safety*: the prevailing or portending, overt or hidden, genuine or putative fears of *threats to human bodies, possessions and habitats* – whether they arise from pandemics and unhealthy diets or lifestyle regimes, from criminal activities, anti-social conduct by the 'underclass', or, most recently, global terrorism.

Unlike the existential insecurity born of the market, too evident to be seriously questioned or argued away and too profuse, visible and obvious for comfort, that *alternative* insecurity designed to restore the state's lost monopoly on the chances of redemption has to be artificially beefed up, or at least highly dramatized to inspire a sufficient volume of fear and at the same time outweigh, overshadow and relegate to a secondary position the *economically generated* insecurity about which the state administration can do next to nothing and about which nothing is what it is particularly eager to do. Unlike the case of market-generated threats to livelihood and welfare, the gravity and extent of dangers to personal safety must be presented in the darkest of colours, so that the non-materialization of the advertised threats and the predicted blows and suffering (indeed, anything less than the predicted disasters) can be applauded as a great victory of governmental reason over hostile fate: as a result of the laudable vigilance, care and good will of state organs.

A permanent state of alert: dangers proclaimed to be lurking just round the next corner, oozing and leaking from terrorists' camps masquerading as Islamic religious schools and congregations, from the *banlieues* populated by immigrants, the mean streets infested by the underclass, 'rough districts' incurably contaminated by violence, no-go areas of big cities; dangers from paedophiles and other sex offenders on the loose, obtrusive beggars, bloodthirsty juvenile gangs, loiterers and stalkers... The reasons to be afraid are many; since their genuine number and intensity are impossible to calculate from the perspective of narrow personal experience, yet another and perhaps the most powerful reason to be frightened is added: there is no way of knowing where and when the words of warning will turn into flesh.

LD In an adiaphorized reality, a successful, convincing experience of victimhood and a persuasive narrative of suffering become a road to success and recognition not because humanity and sensitivity triumph in that world but because an agonistic element accompanies suffering, martyrdom and victimhood – just as it accompanies economic competition or power struggles (a successful victim, too, enters into the world of power and prestige). Victims and martyrs compete: who is more convincing and which side has more authenticity? Successful suffering and a story that sways the majority open the gates to the structure of symbolic authority, power and recognition – or at least to safe formulas and a phraseology behind which political influence and power lie.

Simply put, victims are celebrities, and celebrities are victims. That is the story of success in liquid modernity. In a consuming world suffering is consumed, too, as are victims and stories – everything that is intense, that can be poignantly experienced either at a safe distance or through a protective and 'loving' power relation. Adiaphora are operative here, too – for, after all, we are not talking about a sympathetic relation to humans but about an access dictated by a safe distance from pain or by a power and caregiver relationship.

The new social networks, such as Facebook, serve to show off fragments of your privacy in the expectation that you, too, will receive attention in an era of indifferent consumption, routinized social action, and moral anaesthesia. The enthusiastic demonstration of your privacy (accompanied by stories about your work,

success and family, with personal and family photos displayed to hundreds and thousands of virtual ‘friends’) becomes a substitute for the public sphere and simultaneously a new – a liquid – public sphere. It is in this sphere that people seek inspiration, recognition, attention, new topics and character prototypes for nascent literary creations, at the same time as it becomes an arena in which a quasi-global audience of admirers and world friends takes shape.

It is, to recall Malcolm Muggeridge’s words, a *cri du coeur* of technological man desperately struggling with his sense of meaninglessness and seeking to overcome the apathy of his surroundings, the piercing cognitive silence and the moral vacuity spreading under the alarmist editorials and sensationalist headlines, the advertising slogans and the declarations of global conspiracies and of the end of the world. It is the lonely and desperate person’s search for a space of their own, one that will protect them if not physically, then at least virtually. In this respect, the Facebook phenomenon represents a struggle against one’s non-existence and non-presence in the world. It is an unconscious and often sporadic protest of the virtual crowd and its super-numeraries against the fact that they are non-beings, a fiction of importance and significance, since it is as if everything in the world is done in their name.

The struggle against meaninglessness, against insensitivity, against a failure to react and to extend recognition gives rise to such compensatory forms of struggle as a wildly spreading belief in conspiracy theories (which at least confirm your hunch that someone is trying to rub you out – in other words, there is somebody who does give a hoot about you) as well as an inflation of weighty words. Important terms referring to terrifying human experiences, such as *Holocaust*, *genocide*, *crime against humanity*, *apartheid*, are being used ever more freely and ever more irresponsibly when talking about God knows what. They are adapted like old furniture to a more modern interior design: a once-vibrant form of life and culture is turned into a lifeless decoration. In this case, another’s suffering and annihilation of humanity becomes at best a way of turning attention to oneself and one’s own way of talking (or one’s own ‘truth’).

The hysterical conflation of semantic fields and the resemanticization of terms, undertaken for the purpose of calling attention to yourself or of fortifying your faith or political doctrine (which

essentially neither interests nor excites anyone until you announce that you know it will atone for the world's sins or at least show the true face of evil), have their roots here, too.

As a result, there's an explosive and unstoppable proliferation of 'holocausts' and 'genocides': only if you have become a successful victim and overcome this anaesthetized layer will you be admitted into the field of distributed power and attention. If you lack real power but are authentically and uniquely powerless, at least you have touched real power and have a sense of its other, dark side. You weren't empowered but disempowered. If so, you can still be a witness to power – only from a different angle. You can, therefore you are. Thanks to your disempowerment, others can – once more you are, only in a different way.

As Daniel J. Boorstin accurately and humorously put it, a celebrity is a person well-known for his fame, and a bestseller is a book that sells out because of success in selling it. But what is authority and what does it mean to have it in such a society and social situation? Authority is what increases the number of viewers or readers.

In other words, public opinion research, questionnaires, telephone polls and obsessively counted ratings are what create authority and what themselves constitute an anonymous, dif-fused authority that the engineers of image and public opinion, the imagologists, as Milan Kundera called them, are quick to incarnate in the person of some current hero. How and from what else might authority be fashioned in a society that has lost its goals, vision, direction of development and criteria of evaluation?

The power and social roles of imagologists are also reinforced by the ever more indistinct boundary between the private and the public. The public place, known in ancient Greece as *agora*, became in the twentieth century a euphemism for the toilet – first and foremost in the former Soviet Union. Public discussions today are nothing but collections of private evaluations and experiences, easily recognizable and watched and commented upon by equally private persons. The latter are only for a moment turned into public figures by the imagologists or their technical and auxiliary personnel (including producers and impresarios, who in the absence of imagologists would at once lose their existence and social functions). Such a simulation of the public sphere, built up

and torn down in a jiffy, convinces the extras of this life that they, too, are seen, that is, that they exist at last – if only for a short while and thanks to the imagologists.

Here we have a partial fulfilment of Yevgeny Zamyatin's, Aldous Huxley's and George Orwell's bleak dystopian prophecies – a rapid disappearance of the private sphere, though not in a totalitarian system but in mass society and mass culture where all things (including people, their functions and their artefacts) are mutually replaceable. What we observe in the most diverse reality shows and various mass public TV discussions, accompanied by 'heartrending' sentimental stories and sadomasochistic revelations (the speakers and participants not even suspecting they are being manipulated) is just about what Jürgen Habermas identified as the vanishing of the private sphere. In his view, publicity simply completed an invasion into the private sphere, conquered it and colonized it. However that might be, at the same time, before our very eyes, the public space is also being pulled apart. These are two mutually conditioning processes.

You are reacting together with Jürgen Habermas to Richard Sennett's prophecy of the end of the public man, and you are talking about a parallel and evident tendency: the end of privacy and even its colonization in current public discourse and mass culture. Privacy has become one of the rarest commodities. It is not only joyously renounced in reality shows and profane television or by political clowns in general; it has become a key to commercial success and mass popularity. Of course, this is a merging of both tendencies: if the content of our public life is firmly won over by the private life of celebrities (which in fact is becoming our public life), then this means nothing other than that the public person and the public sphere are beginning to come to an end. Sennett was altogether right. But, in any case, as you acutely observed, the process is taking place in both directions: there is nothing left of privacy, either.

Here we might also offer some reflections on the end (or at least the beginning of the end) of Politics with capital P in our contemporary world. As you note, classical politics was always associated with the power to turn private problems into public questions, as well as the power to internalize public questions and turn them into private or even existential questions. Today this political mechanism is out of tune. What we in our postmodern

politics treat as public questions most often are private problems of public figures.

The consequences are dramatic. It is just not clear any more what freedom is. Is it the remnants of our privacy and our resolve not to sacrifice them to the new online social networks, mass popularity and deformed public space? Or, on the contrary, is it our participation in public space, which seemingly needs nothing more than our extreme and ecstatic experiences and those of the virtual crowd? Should we try to accept this new game without rules and support the public space with at least minimal alternatives? Or would it be better to quit looking for an effective public morality and political ethics, if everything gets immediately deformed in front of our eyes anyway? But what then is the future of politics?

And where then is our true place? In the social game whose rules we don't know and which we try to figure out only after having started to play and participate in it (for no one knows them, including the organizers)? Or in the forms of the past that are rejected as fictional only because they do not make it into the sphere of statistics, mass consumption and ratings, which in our culture without standards and criteria is perhaps the only sphere that should determine their value? But what is belonging to (and in) a world that has no clear and trustworthy criteria?

In solid modernity, where the importance of an identifiable territory corresponded to an individual's recognizable face in portraiture (these coincided with the supports of reality's factuality and the criteria of trustworthy reality), such criteria existed. But in liquid modernity the consumption of the world and of oneself creates another time and place: discontinuous pointillist time, just like pointillism in painting, makes the momentary impression or state into a more real thing than do long-term projects, history, the classical canon, and the past.

**ZB** Let me first go back to where you started – you touched on a tendency much too seminal to be lost amidst the other important issues you've raised. You said that 'in an adiaphorized reality, a successful, convincing experience of victimhood and a persuasive narrative of suffering become a road to success and recognition...' Well, we are talking here not just of a vanity competition, but of an updated version of the medieval market in indulgences, where



resourceful people could buy forgiveness for sins in advance of committing them. The currency serving the present-day version of such a market is a record of victimization and inflicted suffering, on the assumption that victims tend to emerge from these trials morally ennobled and so unlikely to be soiled by their subsequent deeds, however dirty they might be. In its vulgarized version, perhaps suggested by crooked, profit-sniffing lawyers, that assumption is recycled into the right of sufferers to compensation: balancing off the pain they suffered with appropriating the right to inflict pain on others – whether those others are guilty of their past agonies or only suspected of concocting new torments for the future. Victimization, as suggested by Gregory Bateson, already mentioned in our earlier conversation, promptly acquires its own momentum and self-propelling and self-enhancing capacity. Bateson's 'schismogenetic chains' are akin to Gordian knots which, as the ancient tradition avers, can only be cut, never untied. But do we have knives fit for the job of cutting them? Let alone doing that job without another round of bloodshed and setting off new and no less gory schismogenetic chains? This remains an open question, to which I haven't found a convincing answer...

But let me pass now to other matters in your statement.

'The Arab Spring triggers popular rebellions against autocrats across the Arab world. The Israeli Summer brings 250,000 Israelis into the streets, protesting the lack of affordable housing and the way their country is now dominated by an oligopoly of crony capitalists. From Athens to Barcelona, European town squares are being taken over by young people railing against unemployment and the injustice of yawning income gaps': so wrote Thomas L. Friedman of the *New York Times* on 12 August 2011.

People have taken to the streets. And to the public squares. First they did it on Prague's Václavské Náměstí, well back in 1989, and right after in one capital after another of the Soviet bloc countries. Then, famously, on Kiev's main city square. In all those places and some others as well, new habits started to be tested: it was no longer a march, a demo, from a gathering point to a destination. Rather, it was a permanent occupation of sorts, or a siege lasting as long as the demands weren't met.

What was tried and tested has recently turned into a norm. People tend to settle in public squares with the clear intention of staying there for quite a while – for as long as it takes to achieve

or be granted what it is they want. They take tents and sleeping bags with them, to show their determination. Some others come and go – but regularly: every day or evening, or once a week. What do they do once on the square? They listen to speeches, applaud or boo, carry billboards or banners, shout or sing. They want something to change. In each case, that ‘something’ is different. No one knows for sure whether it means the same to all those around. For many, its meaning is anything but crystal clear. But whatever that ‘something’ is, they savour the change already occurring: staying on Rothschild or Tahrir square day and night, surrounded by crowds evidently tuned in to the same wavelength of emotions, is such a change, already happening and being enjoyed. First rehearsed verbally on Facebook and Twitter, now experienced in the flesh. And without losing the traits that made it so endearing when it was tried out on the web: the ability to enjoy the present without mortgaging the future, rights without obligations.

The breathtakingly intoxicating experience of togetherness; perhaps, who knows, too early to say – solidarity. That change, already occurring, means: no longer alone. And it has taken so little effort to accomplish it, little more than pressing a ‘d’ in place of a ‘t’ in that nasty word ‘solitary’. Solidarity on demand, and lasting as long as (and not a minute longer than) the demand endures. Solidarity not so much in sharing the chosen cause as solidarity in having a cause; I and you and all the rest of us (‘us’, that is the people on the square) having a purpose and life having a meaning.

Under the date of 14 July 1789, Louis XVI, King of France, entered in his diary just one word: *Rien*. That day, a crowd of Parisian sans-culottes flooded on to the kinds of streets not usually visited by *les misérables*, not *en masse* at any rate – and certainly not to loiter on. That day they did, and refused to leave until they had overwhelmed the guards and captured the Bastille.

But how was Louis XVI to know? The thought of a crowd (the ‘great unwashed’, as Henry Peter Brougham was to dismiss some other people taking to some other streets a good few decades after the fall of the Bastille) turning history back to front, or front to back depending on where you were looking from, was not yet an idea to be taken seriously. Much water needed to flow under the Seine, the Rhine and the Thames before the arrival and the

presence of the 'mob' on the historical stage was noted, acknowledged – and feared, never to be dismissed again. After the warnings and alarms raised by the likes of Gustave Le Bon, Georges Sorel or Ortega y Gasset, writers of diaries would no longer write '*rien*' when they heard of crowds roaming the squares of the city centre; most likely, however, they would replace it with a huge question mark. All of them: those who contemplate, with Hillary Clinton, a vision of a democratically elected parliament rising from the ashes of the popular fury, those who nervously scan the crowds flooding Tahrir Square for the would-be founder of the next Islamic republic, and those who dream of the crowd righting wrongdoers' wrongs and bringing justice to the makers of injustice...

Joseph Conrad, a man of the sea by choice, is remembered as proclaiming that 'nothing is so seductive, so disillusioning or so enthralling as life on the sea'. Whereas a few years later Elias Canetti was to choose the sea (alongside fire, forest, sand, etc.) as one of the most poignant and illuminating metaphors for the human crowd. It was especially fitting perhaps for one of several varieties of crowds he named: the *reversal* crowd, an *instant revolution*, so to speak, that turns things momentarily into their opposites – jailed into jailer, jailer into jailed, herd into shepherd, (lonely) shepherd into sheep – and squeezes and congeals a bagful of crumbs into a monolithic whole, while recasting the crowd into an individual: an indivisible subject, as in the anthem's words, 'Nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout'(we are nothing, let us be all). One could stretch that 'reversal' idea to embrace the act of reversal itself: 'In the crowd,' wrote Canetti, 'the individual feels that he is transcending the limits of his own person.' The individual does not feel himself dissolving but expanding: it is he, the negligible *loner*, who now reincarnates as *the many* – the impression a hall of mirrors tries to reproduce, with a more limited and inferior effect.

The crowd also means instant liberation from phobias: 'There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown,' – says Canetti. 'He wants to see what is reaching towards him, and to be able to recognize or at least classify it. Man always tends to avoid physical contact with anything strange.' But in the crowd that fear of the unknown is paradoxically quashed by being inverted; the fear of being touched dissipates in the public rehearsal

of squeezing out the space between individuals, in the course of the many turning into one and the one into many, in the space recycling its separating and isolating role into one of merging and blending...

The formative experience that led Canetti to that reading of crowd psychology came in 1922 when he joined a mass demonstration protesting against the assassination of Walter Rathenau, the German-Jewish industrialist and statesman. In the crowd he discovered 'a total alteration of consciousness' that was both 'drastic and enigmatic'. As Roger Kimball has suggested, the way he described his first encounter with a crowd was little short of the kind of experience one finds recounted in certain species of mystic literature. It was

an intoxication; you were lost, you forgot yourself, you felt tremendously remote and yet fulfilled; whatever you felt, you didn't feel it for yourself; it was the most selfless thing you knew; and since selfishness was shown, talked, and *threatened* on all sides, you needed this experience of thunderous unselfishness like the blast of the trumpet at the Last Judgment....How could all this happen together? What was it?<sup>2</sup>

Now we can guess why the crowd is, like the sea, seducing and enthralling. Because in a crowd, as in the sea but not on the built-up, hard ground, criss-crossed with fences and fully mapped, anything or almost anything can happen, even if nothing or almost nothing can be done for sure. Alliances form as quickly and easily as they fall apart and dissipate. Visions dovetail as promptly as they split. Differences and contraries are suspended only to re-emerge with a vengeance. Here, indeed, the impossible turns possible! Or at least appears to.

People on the streets presage change. But do they also signal transition? Transition means more than mere change: 'transition' means a *passage* from a *here* to a *there* – but in the case of people on the streets or city squares only the 'here' from which they wish to escape is given, and the 'there' at which they aim is at best wrapped in fog. People took to the streets in the hope of finding an *alternative* society. What they've found thus far is the means to

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<sup>2</sup>Roger Kimball, 'Becoming Elias Canetti', *New Criterion*, Sept. 1986.

get rid of the *present* one; more to the point though, to get rid of the one among its features on which their diffuse indignation – resentment, vexation, rancour and anger – have momentarily focused. As demolition squads, people taking to the streets are faultless – or almost. Faults surface, though, once the ground has been cleared and the time comes for the laying of foundations and the erection of new buildings. And the faults derive their prominence from the same things to which the demolition squads owe their uncanny efficiency: from the *variegation, contrariety and even incompatibility of interests* suspended for the duration of the demolition but coming into their own and pushing to the fore the moment that job is finished; and from the achievement of the feat of reconciling the irreconcilable through a synchronization of *emotions*, qualities notorious for being as easy to arouse as they are prone to burn out and fade – burning out and fading much, much faster than the time needed to design and build an alternative society in which the sole reason for people to take to the streets will be to relish the joy of togetherness and friendship. Or, as Richard Sennett described the modality of the variety of humanism he urgently called for: for the sake of informal, open-ended cooperation. Informal: that is, the rules of cooperation not being set in advance, but emerging in the course of cooperation. Open-ended: that is, no side entering cooperation with a presumption of already knowing what is true and right – each being reconciled instead to playing the role of learner as much as teacher. And cooperation: that is, interaction being aimed at the mutual benefit of the participants rather than at their division into victors and defeated.

Is this programme sounding eerie, uncanny, nebulous, utopian and impossible to put into practice? Well, contrary to electronically inspired and boosted expectations, it takes time – a long time – to make the impossible possible. It also takes a lot of thought, debate, patience and endurance to accomplish. All these qualities so far remain in rather short supply – and in all probability will remain so as long as we are short of *social settings* more amenable to their production than the ones we commonly have at present. There is some likelihood that the past year will be recorded in history as a ‘year of people on the move’. When people move, two questions are in order. The first is: where are they moving from? The second is: where are they moving to? There

has been no shortage of answers to the first question; indeed, there have been a surfeit of answers – thoughtful and thoughtless, serious and fanciful, credible and chimerical. Thus far, though, we are looking for an answer to the second question in vain. All of us – including, most importantly, the people on the move.

The widening hiatus between the public awareness of what needs (read, is wished) to be stopped, abandoned or removed, and public awareness of what needs (read, is wished) to be put in its place has been one of the most conspicuous features of the ‘year of people on the move’. Another prominent feature was the growth of a unifying, socially integrative power of protest being set against the divisive, socially disintegrating impact of, or the absence of effectiveness of the available political programmes.

The more pronounced and lasting the effects of that year prove to be, the more likely it is that its following year will go down in history as the year of a renewed prominence of social conflicts and of a redrawing of their frontlines and interfaces. The ‘ground-clearing’ phase owed whatever success it managed to score to a sort of a temporary cover-up, and so apparent mitigation, of the dense and twisted tangle of social contradictions – and so, effectively, to a suspension or an interim deferment of their crystallization, articulation and manifestation. Once (or if) the direct objectives of the protest that set people on the move are reached, the admittedly thin veneer of unity will in all likelihood be torn apart, uncovering and exposing the reality of divisiveness and (for the reasons indicated above) catching the actors of the events unprepared and dangerously short of a clear idea of their own identities and interests (as we saw in the sequel to the Egyptian Spring and are likely to see in Libya or Tunisia).

But perhaps ‘our lifetime’ is an unduly and uncharacteristically extended time perspective to be of any use under our fluid and fast-changing condition. One of the probable effects of the passage from the ‘dismantling’ to the ‘composing’ phase of the interregnum may – just may – be to render our condition more inviting and hospitable to the half-forgotten art of political and spiritual leadership, while more resentful of, and resistant to the masters of stage-management and of massaging the facts, of brokering marriages and divorces and playing make-believe games.

LD How true, Zygmunt.

It was with sound reason that the French philosopher André Glucksmann exploded with a devastating criticism of the European Union for its failure to support the spirit of freedom and the craving for liberty so potently manifest in the Middle East and in the Arab world. Right before our eyes – on the internet and in the global media, which have become our home from home nowadays – a unique global political change occurred, most probably only second in scale and importance to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the former Soviet Union.

Yet it came to us as the winter of our discontent, rather than a time of joy. What happened to us then? Why on earth did we remain so complacent about, not to say insensitive to, the courage and resolve of the Arab peoples who revolted against their tyrants, thus creating a global chain reaction and a domino effect in world politics?

In Glucksmann's opinion, the EU was totally unprepared for such a turn in world politics. In fact, so was the United States. Glucksmann insisted that the EU and the US were too fixated for a long time on the regional 'safety and security' allegedly provided by 'our thugs' and 'our loyal and predictable' dictators such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf, and even Libya's Muammar Gaddafi – especially judging by the formerly affectionate relationship between Libya and Italy in their migration policies and security operations.

There is an even more unpleasant aspect of this hesitancy. To put aside all pearls of political correctness, the modern Arab world had long been perceived by Europeans and Americans alike as a realm of religious zeal, backwardness, bigotry and fanaticism, where the rule of law, political liberty and democracy did not apply, almost by definition, and where these had no possible chance.

Hence, the reliance on dictators who were smart enough to play the game with the West, instead of irritating and scaring it with the Russian- or Chinese-type scenarios of civilizational alternatives. As in similar cases of the disengagement and complacency of the US and the EU, sweetened and softened by endless tirades about the uniqueness of non-Western identities and cultures, what lay underneath, and continues to do so, was a profound disbelief in the simple truth that the Arab world is made up of people like

us. A seemingly simple, yet a surprisingly revealing point reiterated by the British historian Simon Schama over the past weeks.

Yet one more pivotal aspect of liquid modernity exists. This aspect has been aptly described by the British author and journalist David Aaronovitch. According to Aaronovitch, conspiracy theories reflect our unbearable fear of the indifference of the surrounding world towards us. Aptly describing the paradoxically comforting effect of the conspiracy theory, which, in his view, protects us from, to use the term coined by the London-based American psychoanalyst Dr Stephen Grosz, ‘the catastrophe of indifference’, Aaronovitch reminds us:

Everyone knows Oscar Wilde’s famous dictum ‘There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.’ Fewer will have heard Susan Sontag’s clever development of it: ‘I envy paranoids. They actually feel people are paying attention to them.’ If conspiracism is a projection of paranoia, it may exist in order to reassure us that we are not the totally unconsidered objects of a blind process. If Marilyn was murdered, then she did not die, as we most fear and as we most often observe, alone and ingloriously. A catastrophe occurred, but not the greater catastrophe that awaits all of us.<sup>3</sup>

As the phrase ‘nobody cares about you’ sounds like a cruel verdict tantamount to proof that we are a non-person or non-entity, we have only one tool at hand to actualize and fulfil ourselves as those who matter in this world – namely, to convince the world around us that we deserve to be a target group or that we qualify for an object of a conspiracy/desire to destroy us. In a world of desperate attention-seeking, indifference becomes a failure, if not a liability.

In a way, the conspiracy theory of society bears a family resemblance to such phenomena of the age of indifference as exaggerated, politically exploited victimhood, martyrdom, sensationalism of all shades in public life and politics, and a scandalized grasp of reality. To crack the armour of an indifferent world and try to get

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<sup>3</sup>David Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History* (Cape, 2009), p. 308.



at least a minimal amount of its temporary attention, we need an outbreak of collective hysteria, a sex or corruption scandal, or a plausible conspiracy theory on how the world hates and tries to subvert or eliminate us from within and from without. Therefore, much like TV celebrities or successful victims, the masterminds of conspiracies and conspiracy theories win exactly where people of long-term commitment and a moderate way of speaking and thinking tend to lose – they break the ice of silence and get the attention of the world. The winner takes all.

The conspiracy theory of society appears as a *cri du coeur* against the wall of liquid modern forms of social alienation, moral indifference, political disengagement, and silence. Like self-inflicted political martyrdom and a sense of self-cultivated victimhood, the conspiracy theory is a desperate attempt to win the hearts and minds of a world of mechanical rhetoric and polite indifference. This is the world where nobody responds to our letters or email messages and where nobody reciprocates our efforts unless we come up with a political sensation or a plausible account of our suffering, or unless we ourselves become good empirical evidence that can support someone else's social theory or political doctrine.

As the recently deceased intellectual historian and public intellectual Tony Judt subtly noted in reviewing Czesław Miłosz's *The Captive Mind*, and commenting on the phenomenon of Ketman, 'writing for the desk drawer becomes a sign of inner liberty',<sup>4</sup> which is the sad lot of an Eastern European intellectual obliged to choose between his country and his conscience.

Here comes the pivotal part of his perceptive review, when Judt reveals fear of indifference as a primary moving force behind the mental acrobatics and immoral manoeuvring described by Miłosz as Ketman. Judt quotes from *The Captive Mind*: 'Fear of the indifference with which the economic system of the West treats its artists and scholars is widespread among Eastern intellectuals. They say it is better to deal with an intelligent devil than with a good-natured idiot.'

And here we encounter another crucial aspect of the fear of indifference. Sometimes hatred and destructive forces scare the

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<sup>4</sup>Tony Judt, 'Captive minds', *New York Review of Books* 57:14 (30 Sept.–13 Oct. 2010), p. 8.

intellectual or any other anguished and cornered individual less than an indifference which relegates them to the margins of history and existence. As Martin Buber has it, 'Yet whoever hates directly is closer to a relation than those who are without love and hate.'<sup>5</sup>

We are living in an era not only of monetary inflation, but also of the inflation – hence devaluation – of concepts and values. Sworn oaths are debased before our very eyes. It used to be that by breaking an oath a person lost the right to participate in the public forum and to be a spokesman for truth and values. He would be stripped of everything except his personal and private life, and would be unable to speak on behalf of his group, his people or his society. Pledges have also suffered a devaluation. Once upon a time, if you went back on your word you were divested of even the tiniest measure of trust. Concepts are also being devalued; they are no longer reserved for the explicit task of describing precise instances of human experience. Everything is becoming uniformly important and unimportant. My very existence places me at the centre of the world.

In my experience, the pinnacle of concept inflation was reached ten years ago, when I came across articles in the American press describing the 'holocaust' of turkeys in the run-up to the Thanksgiving holiday. This was probably not a simple case of a word being used unthinkingly or irresponsibly. Disrespect for concepts and language only temporarily masks disrespect for others; and this disrespect eventually bubbles to the surface.

In recent decades, the concept of genocide has undergone a perilous devaluation. Here, I would like to stress that the devaluation of this concept has not been underpinned by a concern for humanity as whole or for the condition of contemporary humanness; just the opposite – it is a symptom of the history of the revaluation of the self as the world's navel and, concurrently, of an insensitivity towards humanity. Moreover, the immoderate use of this word threatens to stifle dialogue.

Since a martyrdom-seeking politics has become, in our world overwhelmed with total indifference, an efficient tool of attention seeking, if not a passport to the heaven of recognition, the Holocaust is perceived as a successful pattern of the politics of

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Scribner's, 1970), p. 68.

memory. Cynically speaking, it is treated as a success story in our world of comparative martyrology. Therefore, the pie is expected to be sliced and shared equally among all the victimized actors of history – Jews, Palestinian Arabs, Afro-Americans, Native Americans, Latin Americans, Muslims and Eastern Europeans alike. This is to say that a convincing martyrology, or a plausible account of suffering, becomes a password through the gates of power and recognition. We have to become a celebrity or a victim in our liquid modern times to get more attention and, therefore, to be granted visibility, which is the same as social and political existence nowadays, as you would have it. The more convincing we are as a victim, the more attention and publicity we get. The more we try to think the unthinkable and to speak the unspeakable, the more likely we become to qualify for a niche in a power structure, whether local or global.

As I have already mentioned, the inflation of concepts and terms leads to an attempt to invalidate ethical notions, not to say turn them into zombies, by instrumentalizing and mainstreaming them as a convenient aspect of foreign policies. In most cases, it rests on popular misconceptions and misinterpretations of modern history; sometimes this inflation comes in the guise of modern victimhood and attention-seeking, itself a hidden aspect of power and prestige.

Hence, the idea of double genocide widespread in Lithuania and beyond, which is based on the assumption of the symmetry in suffering of Eastern European Jews as victims of the Holocaust, and their non-Jewish compatriots and neighbours as victims of Stalinism and Communism – as if to say that the Holocaust was only about the Jews, whereas Stalinism was exclusively hostile only to the Balts and other non-Jews, as the Jews enormously contributed to Communist causes.

Needless to say, the distortion of history is too obvious here to need emphasis, yet it throws more light on why and how the wave of the obfuscation and trivialization of the Holocaust became possible in Lithuania, where an attempt was made to equalize the Holocaust as a major crime against humanity and the crimes of Communism, as if to say that we have experienced not one, but two Holocausts, two parallel realities of horror and hatred, a Holocaust of the Jews and a Holocaust of Gentiles, the former orchestrated by the Nazis, and the latter by the Communists.

Let me put aside all considerations about the moral and political aspect of this campaign or sinister tendency of memory politics. We have to understand how this mechanism works, as it is in the process of becoming a pattern for the rewriting of history, hijacking someone else's narrative, inflating the concepts, and then deliberately conflating the victims and the perpetrators within the framework of a symmetry theory or of a comparative martyrology perspective.

It is too obvious to need emphasis that identity, memory and victimhood tend to become deeply intertwined each time it comes to a search for a plausible historical-political narrative within the framework of political self-legitimation, which is itself a pivotal aspect of the process of political legitimation. Victimhood, as a mode of discourse and as a frame of meaning within a historical narrative, does not necessarily become a path to our sympathetic understanding of others, human compassion and a sense of belonging. Instead, it strengthens our feeling of having been singled out by those representing the power structure. If so, the world owes us something. And that something is a passport to power. As mentioned, successful victimhood is a prospective call to share power, to slice the cake of global attention and to grant access to realpolitik and the established political vocabulary.

Once I had the privilege of witnessing a stunning dialogue between a jazz musician and his audience. This was on 22 November 2006, when the Cuban-born American virtuoso jazz trumpeter Arturo Sandoval appeared at the Kaunas Jazz festival. The revelatory exchange took place after a few musical compositions that left no doubt we were hearing one of the greatest trumpet players of our times, a jazz legend like his great partner Dizzy Gillespie.

Suddenly Sandoval paused, turned to his audience and asked: 'Did any of you know the trumpeter Timofei Dokshizer: he lived in Vilnius and passed away recently?' Maybe a few souls responded, but most in the audience remained silent, having just roared in delight and given a standing ovation to this fascinating jazz virtuoso and one-man orchestra (Sandoval improvised marvellously not only with his trumpet but with his voice, as right there on the stage he showed the youngsters in his rhythm section how to swing and jam). It was evident that the audience was floored: they had

come to hear a world-famous musician, not stories about uninteresting local personalities no one had heard of.

‘Timofei Dokshizer was a great trumpet teacher and musician,’ said Sandoval. ‘I want to honour his memory and dedicate a piece to him. Is his wife in the hall?’ A small, humble woman stood up. It was Dokshizer’s widow. ‘Thank you,’ said Sandoval, nodding to her. At that moment the audience seemed moved by the episode, but soon it was again totally immersed in Sandoval’s magic rhythms and sounds.

Who was this Timofei Dokshizer (1921–2005)? Why did Sandoval take the time to honour a musician whose name was a puzzle to me too – before it suddenly dawned on me that he was talking about the great Ukrainian-born and world-famous trumpet virtuoso whose inimitable sound had already entranced me when many, many years ago I attended school and studied classical music? One of the aural miracles then was the solo trumpet in the ‘Neapolitan Dance’ from Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* ballet. Another was the ‘Flight of the Bumblebee’ from Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*. The trumpet player whose recordings were inseparable from my early-found love for classical music was none other than Timofei Dokshizer, who on 13 December 2011 would have turned 90.

Even I, a passionate music lover, fell into a trap set by my time period and my consciousness: I didn’t know that in his late age Dokshizer had lived and worked in Lithuania, and had spent many years and died in Vilnius. It took a lesson from a Cuban-born American about being sensitive to local memory and history to make me reflect seriously on the paradox of memory.

Where is memory’s home? Where does it come from? Is it just a cognitive process and a system of cultural codes that connects us with others and with a common past? Or is it something more – perhaps a sensitivity to something that becomes our language, our everyday existence, our experience, and episodes in our life that we regard as self-evidently understood? Is it perhaps the case that we’d lose our memory if we were surrounded only by people like us who wouldn’t become a challenge to us, wouldn’t present a need to more deeply understand ourselves, our past and all we’ve turned into – all the images, sounds, sensations and words that have formed us and constitute our silent, unspoken, most intimate identity?

Does memory live here, next to us? Or does it perhaps live right in us? Or does it, on the contrary, come to us from somewhere else? Do we become more sensitive to our environment just because we physically live here? Europe's history is full of examples of how artists and art scholars from one country discover the geniuses of another: in the nineteenth century Claude Monet discovered Frans Hals and his school in Harlem; Théophile Thoré discovered Jan Vermeer; Édouard Manet considered the Spanish Baroque master Diego Velázquez to be a genius for all times, a painters' painter (in Manet's words, *c'est le peintre des peintres*); and Vincent van Gogh held Rembrandt to be the one who taught and inspired him. The list goes on: William Shakespeare gained entrance into the hall of literary geniuses not thanks to his fellow Englishmen but thanks to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller.

Memory comes to us externally. It arises from the Other. It only seems to us that we preserve the memory of a certain place. In reality it comes to us from somewhere else and protects us. We need a sensation that creates and establishes and tells the world about us, but in reality it is others who give witness about us to the world. The memory saving us from non-being comes from somewhere else. Memory lives not here: it lives somewhere else.

We comfort ourselves with tales about how it is ourselves, and not somebody else, who guard our country's history and memory. But the truth capable of shocking many is that memory comes into our existence from the outside, for it is basically just our cognitive and existential dialogue with the being-in-the-world of us, ourselves, and the whole community of our sensibility and sentiment. Others find in us what we lose ourselves; we perish when we forget, as Milan Kundera might say.

What we painfully need in times of constant change that crushes everything is a sweet lie to ourselves, pleasing acts of self-deception about a shining past fitting into a purified theoretical and historical model – our protective armour, a wellspring of our faith in the future. All this would be human, understandable and unproblematic if in real politics and for extremely practical purposes we had no need of a political-historical narrative to justify our current political actions and moral choices. Sometimes this narrative is necessary only as an aspect of our foreign policy or as a code in our system of information and public communication.

In our strange age – an age of incessant self-discovery and self-uncovering – we continuously need to be motivated by a legitimizing discourse that is sustained by sensations, a modern system of inventing a glorious past, and a flow of stories that establish and legitimize us in a world to which we transmit the news about how one-of-a-kind and unique we are. Thus the paradox of memory is that others mostly need us as parts of reality and history but not as an imagined community united by a collective sensibility and sentiment.

Thus the memory that in fact preserves (and does not ideologically establish) us does come from outside us. Memory lives not here, but elsewhere. And deliberate forgetting is not a fantasy, but a fact. In many ways we are a community not of remembrance, but of organized, systematic and deliberate forgetting. Our sense of meaning after totalitarian modernity, with its world wars and all its other social catastrophes, all its identity-erasing and memory-suppressing traumas, could be born anew and preserve our present and past instead of founding us as perfect victims or as a new political sensation. Alas, our memory is like a tragic play of the imagination building monuments to itself, and not a web of connections tying a self-critical self to an open-minded identity.

The sword of wilful forgetting falls on those who remind us of our weaknesses and vices. It is hardly an accident that silence surrounds Ricardas Gavelis, who is being ignored as if erased from our public and official consciousness, although all of us owe this first-rate writer, this ironic, sharply critical and supremely insightful journalist great thanks and recognition for the intensity and precision with which he identified and courageously described the most problematic aspects of our life after the regaining of Lithuanian independence.

That's why it shouldn't amaze us that sometimes we have to recover our memory and learn to be alive to our present and to our past from a Cuban-born US trumpeter who has come to Lithuania to remind us of a great trumpet player we've largely forgotten, a Ukrainian-born, Russian-speaking genius of Vilnius, the memorable soloist of the 'Neapolitan Dance'.

The amount of negative information, brutal images and violence in the Lithuanian media raises the issue of whether the reasons behind publicizing this sort of information lie in extreme

commercialism or in a disguised power cult. The first pages of self-proclaimed 'serious' newspapers flash information about violent and brutal clashes in a local drinking hole between partners and couples who abuse alcohol. Criminality chronicles in Lithuania are so inflated and emphasized that it is becoming hard to believe that we live in a country that is not in the throes of war and still manages to uphold its internal social peace. It is close to impossible to find another country that features so many reports of violence and negative information in its media.

Attempts were made to explain this trend by blaming the growth of the tabloid press and the commercialization of journalism as a whole. Whatever the case, this argument is not completely convincing. The press and television in many countries are undergoing rapid commercialization. But neither in England, whose press and television is just as affected by rapid and uncontrollable commercialization, nor in the Benelux or Scandinavian countries can such an abundance of violent scenes be seen. Not to mention that even their tabloid press would hesitate to feature the type of information 'fed' to Lithuanians.

So how can the outbreak of this brutality and power cult in Lithuania be explained and the causes openly identified? Is outright commercialism simply encouraged by a lack of quality journalism or any valid alternative media, or do the reasons lie elsewhere? Are we lagging behind the West; or conversely, are we free from high culture and thus left in the middle of a modern barbarian avant-garde, far ahead of the West, where a rich heritage of civilization still manages to stop and restrain this outburst of brutality and vulgarity?

Perhaps we are trapped in the new barbarianism, which is still on its way in the West – capitalism without democracy (so far, this is the Chinese or present-day Russian model, but its spread throughout the world cannot be dismissed), a free market without personal freedom, the strengthening of economic dictatorship and the accompanying disappearance of political thinking, and the final transformation of politics into a part of mass culture and show business, with the real power and governance falling into the hands not of a publicly elected representative but of someone chosen by the most powerful segment of society, lying outside



public control – the heads of the central bureaucracy, business and the media?

Even if there is only a small grain of truth in these gloomy assumptions, they still fail to explain our extraordinary ability to create an emotional hell and present our country as if it were catastrophe-stricken or had become the most terrible place on Earth. It is strange that this internal hell is created by Lithuania itself. I have socialized with my students, who are from Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, countries that have had and continue to experience real problems. Complaints or talk about Lithuania's problems appeared overinflated and even improper compared with countries whose present-day situation is truly oppressive and tragic.

The key to solving this problem may be a simple detail: we do not relate (quite unreasonably) two mutually related and determining factors – the overabundance of reports of violence and brutality and their portrayal in our media, and the psychoanalytical implications of our undoubtedly sadistic and masochistic political commentary, where the predominant goal is to belittle others and oneself. Our brutal and degrading manner of speaking about others or ourselves, that is, social and political commentary as a slow process of self-negation and destruction, has in fact nothing to do with being critical.

Healthy criticism is the construction of alternatives and the trial of thoughts or actions from logical perspectives or other knowledge or known ways of thinking. Spoken and mental cannibalism or the moral destruction of one another can mean only one thing – the rejection of free and open discussion and its murder before it can even start. Sadistic language is commonly used to control and to torment, and in so doing, to overthrow the object under discussion, while masochistic language is typified by the type of self-commentary that not even the fiercest enemy of an individual or country would imagine inflicting.

As Erich Fromm noticed, only those who have not taken an interest in such topics will think that sadism and masochism are aspects of the structure of a character or personality that are in opposition to one another. They are in fact closely related and often become entangled into one sadomasochistic knot, precisely because they come from the one source – the fear of loneliness, rejection by the world, and isolation. As freedom is

usually understood by weaker individuals as standing naked and defenceless in front of a dark and hostile world, the only way to save oneself is to break a stranger's spirit, or one's own personality.

Do not read into my comments that I have in mind the authoritarian servitude of those who do no more than read and watch the violent media – I am not speaking about the victims. The authoritarian personality creates this type of media. It is its revenge on the world, and the dialectics of obedience and power, and the joy of demeaning oneself and others.

## Consuming University: The New Sense of Meaninglessness and the Loss of Criteria

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**Leonidas Donskis** My Finnish friend, a philosophy professor from Helsinki, once told me that for some of his colleagues Estonia is an example of the worst nightmare of libertarian politics. This remark, if publicized, would have dealt a blow to Lithuanians' sweet dream of standing in the shoes of the Estonians, enjoying Finland in the vicinity and celebrating from 70 kilometres away something radically different from post-Communist traumas and painful dilemmas. The dream was scattered by my colleague like a house of cards.

Too much individualism, atomization and fragmentation of societal ties, too little sensitivity and compassion, too huge a gap between the jet set and ordinary folk, no welfare state – these were the main points made by my Finnish friend. It is ironical that the post-Communist folk who had always thought of the West as a bliss of freedom and civil liberties – accompanied by some iniquities of capitalism – should have found themselves admiring the side-effects of the free-market economy that manifest themselves in our new habits of mind and of the heart.

'Whereas life in Helsinki is like constant Sunday afternoon, life in Riga is always Monday morning,' as a graduate student from Latvia once put it after a seminar of mine in Helsinki. I would start an argument by a reminder that we, Eastern Europeans, seem to have skipped the stage of political and moral individualism of the industrial era. Having been isolated from the social

and political change of the West for more than five decades, we find ourselves in the era of, as you put it, liquid modernity, with its toolboxes to enhance our powers of association – to use your term, the strategy of *do it yourself* and the mindset to *assume responsibility for the world*, Facebook as the embodiment of liquid friendship, that is, the weakening of human bonds, and social networks on the net as a new policy of inclusion and exclusion.

*Do it yourself*, DIY – this is a new code of behaviour widely taken on as a new moral responsibility by the modern individual. There was a time when we had good reason to expect to be, say, a scholar who clearly knew there would be a publisher, with a designer able to supply the layout of the book and a manager capable of a skilled strategy to promote and sell it. Last but not least, we expected to be paid for our endeavour, instead of paying the publisher ourselves for the work we had done for their benefit.

Nowadays things are tending to change in more than one way. In most cases – though, happily, not by any manner of means all – we have to pay, then provide camera-ready copy for the book, and also assume responsibility for a good marketing strategy. Do it yourself. Be an academic, a scholar and a manager at one and the same time. Get the money for your research, conduct your research, publish a monograph, and then attempt a PR move to promote it. Do it yourself. Make of yourself anything you want. You will be a self-made-man or a self-made-woman by acclamation and default, instead of free choice. This is no longer Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's dream of a human individual capable of shaping himself or herself. The paradox is that the individual is now shaped by globalization and its anonymous forces.

Somehow, this strikingly recalls Karl Marx's dream. There are many reasons to regard Marxism as having originated as a form of technological determinism. Marx's resentment against the modern division of labour as the principal reason behind the split of the human personality and the resulting alienation from its creations and products sheds much light on Marxism as an awkward reaction against solid modernity.

The humanization of science and technology, according to Marx, can occur only in communism as the new socio-economic

formation, which coincides with the end of prehistory and the beginning of real history. Therefore, communism will harmonize the human personality after its split by the modern division of labour and capitalism. It will do so by fully releasing the creative potential of humankind hitherto suppressed by modes of production based on the division of labour and excessively encouraged specialization. We will be able to toil and rejoice over physical work, while simultaneously cultivating our mind, soul and all other faculties of our creativity and imagination. We will display our magnificent abilities as a worker, a scholar or an artist as we wish, or at someone else's request. Here we clearly see the manifestly utopian moment in Marxism, its tirades against early utopias and French utopian socialism notwithstanding.

This is no joke nowadays. Instead of harmonizing and reconciling the faculties of the soul, we become individuals by default. We are supposed to act on behalf of the world. We have to tackle all the grave problems created by previous generations. We are expected to find the way out of the most painful predicaments of modernity – as courageous, self-asserting, self-sufficient, risk-maximizing and conscious individuals. Who cares that you warned us over and over again that there are no local solutions to globally produced problems, and that individuals cannot act as a viable and sufficient response to social and political challenges that became part of our lives by the accident and whim of history, rather than by our conscious choice. How true this is of the Baltic region, a laboratory of unbearably light, rapid and incessant change.

What crosses my mind as regards our destiny to be individuals by acclamation of the world, or simply by default, is a scene from the Monty Python film made with a stroke of genius, *Life of Brian*. Brian, a young man from Jerusalem mistaken for Jesus, wakes up after a sweet night of passionate love and appears naked at the window. He is saluted by the crowd. Becoming desperate and trying to get rid of the sound and fury of the true believers, Brian says: 'But you are all individuals! You are all different!' 'Yes, we are all individuals,' echoes the crowd. And a single voice in the crowd replies: 'I am not.'

Yes, we are all individuals nowadays. We are so by acclamation or by default, rather than by dramatic and intense moral choice.

Modernity seeks to control our memory and language in their entirety. Winston Smith in the novel *1984* attempts to recall a cherished boyhood song, which is taken over and finished by the character O'Brien, an alleged friend and brother-in-arms of Winston in the holy cause of resistance to the regime, who turns out to be a high-ranking official in the Inner Party. Oceania, where Orwell's book creates a new language, the New Speak, is supposed to become a place where human perception and understanding of space and time will be totally transformed. With this language, nobody will be able to understand Shakespeare.

This means that the reality represented in the classical literary imagination would become unrecognizable. Radically changing everyone's field of reference and system of concepts would make it easy to take away the dimension of the past. By controlling their field of reference and system of concepts, humanity's history can be firmly taken over in the manner required by the collective solipsism professed by Big Brother and the Party. As mentioned, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* speaks to the death of the classical and the death of the past. In the context of the dystopias of Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell, the compound phrase 'technocratic totalitarianism' would be a pleonasm, since no other form of totalitarianism seemed possible to them.

What kind of imagination constructs utopias and dystopias? To come up with an overarching answer is difficult. This is a form of imagination where plots dictated liberal, conservative and socialist thought and sensibility. Yet utopias and dystopias would never have been born without the conservative trajectory of this form of imagination, and without the conservative sensibility which lurks in the modern moral imagination. Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* depict a memory-free world deprived of public historical archives and the humanities in general, just as Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *The Year 2440* presents the world of the future where no room exists for history. The study and teaching of history is abandoned in the France of the twenty-fifth century, since to study a series of human follies and irrational actions is a disgrace. How on earth can a rational human being study a past deeply permeated by superstition and backwardness?

In the philosophical implications of Kundera's literature, history appears as a meaningful and silent moral alternative to

the brutality of geopolitics and power politics carried out by the powerful. Memory becomes a tool of the small and weak, while forgetting serves the interests of the big and mighty. In this way, memory manifests itself as an alternative moral imagination in opposition to the logic of power. Memory of the powerful is nothing more than a celebration of successful practice, in the sense of Niccolò Machiavelli's concept of *verità effettuale*. Memory is a practice, instead of an elusive human ability or potential.

Yet this thread of Kundera's thought does not exhaust his understanding of how memory works in the modern world. What Kundera implies is that memory uncovers its essence as a conscious effort to continue or prolong the existence of what deserves to exist. Therefore, the cultural canon is a mode of the existence of organized memory. Within the framework of organized memory, Shakespeare, Van Dyck, Hals, Vermeer or Rembrandt, depicting, portraying or otherwise individualizing their contemporaries, become part of the process of a conscious continuation of someone else's existence.

The question of whether universities will survive the twenty-first century as a recognizable classical institution of education and scholarship no longer seems either naive or incorrectly formulated. I think that observing what is happening today in Europe and especially Great Britain we are justified in pondering intellectual strategies for the future. So what do we do? Watch the universities slowly die, or create some alternatives that will last longer than the few terms politicians serve in Parliament and government?

The issue is quite straightforward: it can be explained in simple terms and plain language. The great transformation of the universities was begun by Margaret Thatcher, who in effect dismantled the old British academic system. As might have been expected, only the best universities withstood and survived her reforms, although some odd changes took place in them, too. The most eager to change were the universities that felt least safe – in other words, institutions that ranked somewhat or a lot below the top universities. Most odd is the importing of this process by Europe. For many years the Finnish academic system (with which I am well acquainted) was thoroughly envied by colleagues from other European countries. Today everything has turned around in that

Finland has let in a mixture of the American and British models, the general idea of which is the same: get the money yourself – without help from the state or even the university. The fact, recognized today by observers of academic life and analysts in the United States and Great Britain, is that what exists in the US as the internal governing model of Ivy League schools and the great California universities, and has never had anything in common with any government strategies, has in Europe become a new governing policy imposed from the top by the government. What has happened is a revolution of bureaucrats speaking in the name of freedom and competition but each day tearing these values down.

Imitating American private universities and business schools, in particular, Great Britain's and continental Europe's bureaucrats and politicians have adopted everything from a managerial jargon redolent of Orwellian newspeak to a governance of universities modelled on a business corporation; and what is saddest of all, they've endorsed a logic of quick results and achievements. In essence, a university, which is supposed to follow a logic (faithfully cherished for centuries) of deliberate thought, unhurried creativity and measured existence, is nowadays forced to become an outfit that rapidly reacts to market fluctuations as well as changes in public opinion and the political environment. This is the price we pay for higher education of the masses in a mass democracy and a mass society.

Perhaps a logic of fast consumption and rapid reaction did permit the formation of criteria for the effectiveness of factories, workshops, companies and stores of the industrial era. But transferred to the universities and research institutes of the post-industrial and information age, this logic becomes grotesque and absurd. It's possible to achieve quick results in uncomplicated systems or when working at the level of popular education. But truly great scholarship, foundational projects and the humanities and social sciences that change the world of ideas cannot, unlike applications of technology or popular theory, be developed rapidly and devoted to fast consumption, simply because their basic concern is with schools of thought and with self-correcting processes that can't be consummated in a day or two.

I recall a story that illustrates well this macabre mockery of everything that until recently symbolized European values and



high culture. A colleague of mine at Tallinn University unexpectedly experienced serious difficulties when the country's Ministry of Education expressed doubts as to whether he deserved the rank of professor. It turned out that this specialist on Renaissance culture and Italian literature had few publications compared with other colleagues, who had produced reams of papers read at conferences and published in journals. It wasn't easy for the professors at Tallinn to prove to the ministry that while some of his colleagues published one paper after another without much in the way of solid new argument, backing or references, this expert researcher of the Renaissance had prepared commentaries for a new Estonian edition of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Indeed, can a scholar of classical studies have a greater dream than to prepare comments and introductions for editions of Dante, Petrarch or Shakespeare? But try explaining this to a ministry bureaucrat who has counted the number of publications and totalled up the points. Dante is henceforward no argument.

I am afraid that during the next few decades humanities that have not been demolished, deformed, handicapped or malnourished will continue to exist only in the elite universities of Europe and the United States. All the other creators and consumers of academic junk food will sacrifice the humanities in favour of programmes (such as business, management, economics, law, political science, social work and nursing) that are in great demand (and valued precisely because they're in great demand).

Thus the only hope left will be the Ivy League, the elite universities of California, and at most fifty of the best European universities that all preserve the logic of intellectual and creative *slow food*. All the rest will have passed into the junk food category. A gourmet would rather starve than fool himself with junk food: it's better to consume fewer, but genuine things whose origins, value and method of preparation you know: that's precisely what Giacomo Maioli's Slow Food International movement is all about.

The capitalization of universities and the de facto libertarian model of their development, imposed from above by the state bureaucracy, is something so grotesque that the great liberals – above all, the liberal economists and political thinkers – never even dreamt of it. It is academic capitalism without freedom, a species of technocratic and bureaucratic tyranny implemented in

the name of freedom and progress. At the same time it is a technocratic simulacrum of the free market, in which competition is fabricated from criteria chosen so tendentiously that certain favoured institutions are guaranteed to win.

It's worth giving some thought to academic capitalism, spreading compulsorily through bureaucratic governance and the destruction of the universities' autonomy and academic freedom. One wouldn't be surprised to hear such things about China, Singapore or Russia, but in Europe it's just frightening. By the way, this logic isn't accidental – technocracy is no less a threat to democracy today than states like China or Russia, where political tyranny goes hand in hand with free market ideology, a selective application of its practical elements and endemic government corruption.

What does academic freedom mean for the bureaucracy and a political class symbiotically related to it? No more than an impediment to a technology-enabled form of social control that requires teachers and researchers to submit standardized accounts of their activities, with these accounts providing a basis for the distribution and spending of public funds. Academics who don't kowtow, and think they're not beholden to anyone are worth keeping in ignorance and permanent tension in order to make them realize who is the master of the situation and work off their debt to the university, programme or department for the privilege or benefit they've received. Then they duly become vassals and pages, and forget all the rhetoric of freedom and autonomy.

Nevertheless, this is a very shallow logic. The governance of non-state universities in the US works well not just because the tradition of private sponsorship and support is incomparably deeper in America than in Europe, but also because in the US there really is a strong and deep commitment by social partners and donors (including alumni) to their universities, rather than a vertical exploitation of these partners and donors for the aggrandizement of the state bureaucracy and the politicians. The boards of trustees overseeing US colleges and universities are different from the university councils now being formed in some of the European countries. The former are ethically guided by civic and scholarly responsibility and long-term commitment, while the latter are ad hoc collectives for changing (or deliberately keeping in place) some top administrators.

Thus the primary threat to Europe is that in many countries with a weak political class and a shallow democratic tradition the destruction of academic freedom and of the autonomy of the universities will inevitably deform politics itself. If even in Italy, the homeland of Bologna University, that autonomy is no longer officially invoked, what can we expect from countries for whose politicians freedom of thought exists only as long as it allows them to hear what they want to hear? In this way politicians are sawing off the branch they themselves are sitting on.

Where then are the resources from which to renew political life, to create a worthy political class and to educate public figures if there are no more islands of freedom where great value attaches not to answering complicated questions quickly but to preserving creative and reflective tensions for several decades so that later generations may receive a host of enlightening answers?

More generally, how will we form the next generation of European intellectuals and politicians if young people will never have an opportunity to experience what a non-vulgar, non-pragmatic, non-instrumentalized university is like? If students never see a free professor who will prostrate himself before no one, or a researcher who follows the principle *pauca paucis* (a few for the few), where will they learn to recognize and respect freedom of thought and intellectual integrity?

The universities of Europe have more than once in their history outlasted political institutions, centres of power, even states. Let's hope they will survive them in the future, too, although it might in some cases be a Pyrrhic victory and cost them their badge of civil enlightenment in an age of modern barbarism. Today governments and bureaucrats deliberately hold academic communities in a zone of ambiguity, obscurity and insecurity; they permanently reform and deform universities and thereby take away scholars' sense of security. Permanent change becomes a perfect form of social control.

**Zygmunt Bauman** You said that 'the great transformation of the universities was begun by Margaret Thatcher, who in effect dismantled the old British academic system'. I would rather replace 'by' with 'under', signalling a time coincidence rather than a causal relationship and a resolute as well as peremptory apportionment of authorship and victimhood. I remember Stuart Hall, one of the

most perceptive and insightful sages I have come across, reminding us many years ago that, unlike in the case of the Falklands, Margaret Thatcher did not send expeditionary forces with marine battalions and aircraft carriers to do this dismantling job; that the dismantling was accomplished with our own hands, the hands of academics, in a flurry of enthusiasm and with all the zeal, acumen and ingenuity we could muster. We lined up and vied to join the demolition squads. We are all accomplices in that accomplishment: even those few among us who felt like protesting and never gathered the courage and determination to stop the rot. I would not deny of course that Thatcher turned the lights green and let the beast out of the cage. But I believe that – Thatcher or no – the prospect of dismantling ‘the old British academic system’ was a powder keg waiting for a spark, and that no detonator, however powerful, would have set ‘the transformation’ on its explosive course had that powder keg not already been filled to the brim.

Let me add that many years after Stuart Hall’s verdict, it has lost none of its topicality. In the spring 2012 issue of the *Hedgehog Review* dedicated to the phenomenon of what they call ‘the corporate professor’, its substance has been restated as the right and proper description of the current state of universities. Contributors to the issue, as the editors sum it up, focus on ‘the ways in which professors themselves have bought into or been shaped by the corporate culture of the university and seem strangely inarticulate about the purposes and worth of higher education’. One of the contributors, Mark Edmundson (in ‘Under the sign of Satan: William Blake in the corporate university’), admits that he ‘sometimes thinks that there are more potential intellectual idealists among the administrators than among the faculty’, while Gaye Tuchman (in ‘Pressured and measured; professors at Wannabe U’) chimes in, finding professors ‘anxiously trying to fulfil the metrics of productivity and impact, in many cases, more eagerly than the administrators’; of the latter, she observes that ‘since Wan U’s president believed in corporate planning, as had her predecessors, she accepted the university’s ambition to attract customers through brand-recognition and improved competitive ranking’. The editors of the issue end up with a rhetorical question they are not ready to answer: ‘If professors can’t articulate what they do or why it matters in terms not beholden to the market, then who can?’

In his search for the deeper causes and wider ramifications of the dire straits American universities find themselves in, Henry A. Giroux has wandered well beyond the boundaries of college campuses, tracing one cause to ‘the big lie’ that ‘propagates the myth that the free-market system is the only mechanism to ensure human freedom and safeguard democracy’, itself a consequence of already entrenched ‘education deficit and the pervasive culture of (social and political) illiteracy that sustains it’.<sup>1</sup> As a motto for his study, Giroux selected a quotation from Martin Luther King, Jr: ‘Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity’ ...

Sowing, grafting, propagating and cultivating ‘ambiguity, obscurity and insecurity’ as you rightly say, is indeed, the strategy of dominance used in the liquid modern to elbow out the old-fashioned, unwieldy, conflict-prone and exorbitantly costly strategies of discipline through meticulous supervision and detailed normative regulation. It would be bizarre indeed were the universities exempt from this universal tendency to deregulate that underpinned all that: there is hardly any difference between universities and other corporations from the point of view of governments smarting under the ‘value-neutral’ (read, value indifferent) rule of stock markets, stock exchanges and stockbrokers. In the case of universities, just as with other entities in a metabolic relationship to free-floating and profit-seeking capital, the precept applies of ‘let them find their own level’ (first articulated by Norman Lamont in his public announcement that the pound sterling was leaving the ‘currency snake’). What you describe as the endemic instability and a jerkiness born of the need to note and follow – swiftly, promptly, with no second thoughts allowed – every and any minute shift in the mood of the market, that ‘mother of all uncertainties’, is the consequence of that ‘let them float’ strategy of domination (read, let them sink or swim) – less burdensome and cumbersome (and more amenable to cost-cutting) than the one it came to denigrate and ultimately replace. That strategy is behind the forced marriage between universities, with their eyes

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<sup>1</sup>Henry A. Giroux, ‘Beyond the politics of the big lie: the education deficit and the new authoritarianism’, *Truthout*, 19 June 2012, at <http://truth-out.org/opinion/item/9865> (accessed June 2012).

set on things eternal, and market stalls peddling their wares for the sake of immediate profits.

Not that the previous strategy, now discredited and rejected, replaced by the present-day strategy of commercialization coupled with a refusal to recognize any value that is not commercial and any potential except sales potential, necessarily augured a more secure life for the endemic university values you so poignantly and precisely spell out. I remember from the years of my own university service in Britain, which also happened to be the years of the last convulsions of the old-style domination, the dictatorial limits, with no appeal permitted, set by the 'manpower commissions' for university admissions. The limits were calculated on the basis of market demand for specific skills. As a rule, that demand changed well before there was any chance of those skills being acquired. The verdicts of the manpower commissions meant that the adjustment of the supply of labour to the structure of demand proved to be a recipe for the production of shortages and gluts of skills...

Yet there have been more causes for the present-day swings and fitfulness of university policies than inanities in the forms of governmental regulation and supervision; and in my view those causes are more fundamental and less rectifiable.

Without much ado we would all agree, I guess, that the mission of education, since it was articulated by the Ancients under the name of *paidea*, was, remains and probably will remain for the duration the preparation of newcomers to society to life in the society they are preparing to enter. If this is so, however, then education (including university education) now faces the deepest and most radical crisis in a history rich in crises: a kind of crisis that affects not just this part or that of its inherited or acquired customary ways of acting and reacting, but its very *raison d'être*: We are now expected to prepare the young for life in a world that (in practice even if not in theory) renders the very idea of 'being prepared' (that is, adequately trained and skilled, ready not to be taken by surprise by events and shifting trends) null and void. The first universities were established in the times when the Gothic cathedrals were erected, and they were meant to last if not for eternity, than surely until the Second Coming. Some dozens of generations later, however, their offspring are expected to perform their 'preparation for life' mission at a time when most architects

would not accept a permission to build unless it had attached to it a permission to dismantle, in twenty years or less.

Stephen Bertman coined the terms 'nowist culture' and 'hurried culture' to denote the way we live in our kind of society.<sup>2</sup> Apt terms indeed, and they come in particularly handy whenever we try to grasp the nature of the liquid modern human condition. We can say that this condition stands out more than anything for its (thus far unique) *renegotiation of the meaning of time*.

As I suggested a decade or so ago, time in the era of the liquid modern 'society of consumers' tends to be perceived as neither cyclical nor linear, in the way it was in other known societies of modern or premodern history; it is viewed and treated as *pointillist* instead – broken up into a multitude of separate morsels, each morsel reduced to a point ever more closely approximating its geometrical idealization of non-dimensionality. As we surely remember from school lessons in geometry, points have no length, width or depth: they exist, one is tempted to say, *before* space and time; in a point, space and time dimensions are yet to be born or erupt. But as with that unique point which turned into the 'big bang' that started the universe, as state-of-the-art cosmogony postulates, each point is presumed to have infinite potential to expand and an infinity of possibilities waiting to explode if it is properly ignited. And whether it will turn out that way can in no way be predicted from the points that preceded it.

Each point may therefore be suspected or believed to be pregnant with the chance of another 'big bang', even if on a much more modest scale, because it would be at an individual level. Successive life moments continue to be thought of as pregnant with possibilities of, regardless of the accumulating evidence that most chances tend to be misread, overlooked or missed, most points prove to be barren and most stirrings never bear fruit. A map of pointillist life, were it to be charted, would look like a graveyard of imaginary or unfulfilled possibilities. Or, depending on one's point of view, like a cemetery of wasted chances: in a pointillist universe, the rates of infant mortality and miscarriages of hopes are very high.

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<sup>2</sup>See Stephen Bertman, *Hyperculture: The Human Cost of Speed* (Praeger, 1998).

Precisely for that reason a 'nowist' life tends to be a precipitate, hectic, perpetually hurried life. The chances which each point might contain will follow it to its grave (and remember, points have an infinitely brief life expectation!); for *that* particular, and *unique* chance brandished by this particular and unique moment, there will be no 'second chance'. Each point might have been lived through as a new beginning, but more often than not the finishing line would have appeared right after the start, with pretty little happening in-between. Only an unstoppably expanding *multitude of new beginnings* might – just might – compensate for the profusion of false starts. The vast expanse of new beginnings believed to lie ahead – the points which have not so far been tested for their 'big bang' potential and which therefore have not so far been discredited – means that hope can be salvaged from the debris of premature endings or, rather, stillborn gambits.

In the 'nowist' life of the avid consumer of new experiences, the reason to hurry is not an urge to *acquire* and *collect*, but to *discard* and *replace*. There is a latent message behind every commercial, promising a new and unexplored opportunity of bliss. There is no point in crying over spilt milk. Either the 'big bang' happens right now, at this very moment and at the first try, or loitering at that particular point no longer makes sense; it is high time to move on to another point.

In the society of producers now receding into the past (at least in our part of the globe), the advice in such a case would have been to 'try harder'; but not in the society of consumers. Here, the failed tools are to be thrown on the rubbish tip rather than sharpened and applied again with increased skill, more dedication and to better effect. That rule applies in equal measure to appliances and artifices that stopped short of delivering the 'full satisfaction' promised, as well as to human relationships that delivered a 'bang' that was not quite as 'big' as expected. The rush ought to be at its most intense when one is running from one point (failed, failing, or about to start failing) to another (as yet untried). One should be wary of Faust's bitter lesson: of being cast into hell as a penalty for wishing a single moment – just because it was a particularly pleasing one – to last forever...

Another factor working in unison and intimately connected with the 'tyranny of the moment' (Thomas Hylland Eriksen's term) is what can be dubbed an 'information deluge'. On our



notoriously overcrowded consumer markets new products tend to emerge first, and only then seek their applications; many of them, perhaps most, are dumped without ever finding any. That is why temptation and seduction move to the top of marketing concerns and consume the lion's share of marketing costs. But even the lucky few products which manage to find or conjure up a need, a desire or a wish for which they can show themselves relevant, and make their claim convincing, soon tend to succumb to the pressure of 'new and improved' products (that is, products that promise to do all their predecessors could do, only quicker and better – and with the extra bonus of doing a few things that no consumer had thought they needed or intended to buy) – and all that happens well before the working capacity of a product meets its preordained end.

Moments are few, however, by comparison with the number of contenders, multiplying, let's remember, at an exponential pace. Hence the phenomenon of 'vertical stacking', a notion coined by Bill Martin to account for an amazing stockpiling of music fashions once gaps and fallow plots were filled to the brim and overflowing from the ever rising tide of supplies, while promoters had to feverishly struggle to stretch them beyond their capacity.<sup>3</sup> Or the introduction of digital media training in 'multitasking', exposing its practitioners to several information pumps simultaneously, though without them necessarily assimilating and retaining what was delivered.

The images of 'linear time' and 'progress' have been among the most prominent victims of the information deluge. In the case of popular music, all imaginable retro styles have found themselves crowded into one limited span of the music fans' attention, together with every conceivable form of recycling and plagiarism relying on the public's short memory to masquerade as the latest novelties. But the case of popular music is just one manifestation of a virtually universal tendency that affects in equal measure all areas of life serviced by the consumer industry.

In a world such as ours, one is therefore compelled to take life bit by bit, as it comes, expecting each bit to be different from the preceding one and to call for different knowledge and skills.

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<sup>3</sup>See Bill Martin, *Listening to the Future: The Time of Progressive Rock 1968–1978* (Feedback, 1997), p. 292.

A friend of mine, an émigré from Poland now living in one of the EU countries, a highly intelligent, superbly educated, uniquely creative person with full command of several languages, a person who would pass most tests and job interviews with flying colours, complained in a private letter of the 'labour market being frail like gossamer and brittle like china'. For two years she worked as a freelance translator and legal adviser, exposed in full measure to the usual ups and down of market fortunes. A single mother, she yearned for a more regular income, however, and so opted for steady employment with a salary cheque every month. For a year and a half she worked for a company briefing budding entrepreneurs on the intricacies of EU law, but as adventurous new businesses were slow in coming the company promptly went bankrupt. For another year and a half she worked for the Ministry of Agriculture, running a section dedicated to the development of contacts with the newly independent Baltic countries. Come an election and the new government coalition chose to 'subsidiarize' that worry to private initiative and so decided to disband the department. The next job lasted only half a year: the state board for ethnic equality followed the pattern of governmental hand-washing and was declared redundant...

And then, if the earth tremors of the labour market are not enough, there is the well-nigh universal ascent of the consumerist way of being-in-the-world, shaped according to the pattern of consumers in supermarkets – charged with the duty and spurred by the desire to make their choices between temptations laid out on the shelves in order to seduce. Consumerist culture posits the totality of the inhabited world – complete with its inanimate and animate, animal as well as human ingredients – as a huge container filled to the brim with nothing but objects of potential consumption. It thereby justifies and promotes the perception, assessment and evaluation of each and every worldly entity by the standards set by the practices of consumer markets. Those standards establish starkly asymmetrical relations between clients and commodities, consumers and consumer goods: the first expecting from the second solely the gratification of their needs, desires and wants, and the second deriving their sole meaning and value from the degree to which they meet those expectations. Consumers are free to set apart desirable from undesirable or indifferent objects – as well as free to determine to what extent the objects deemed

desirable meet their expectations and for how long that desirability will remain unimpaired.

To put it in a nutshell, it is the desires of consumers, and only those, that count, first and last. It is only in commercials (as in the memorable TV advertisement showing marching columns of funghi shouting ‘Make room for the mushrooms!’) that the objects of desire share in their consumers’ pleasures or suffer pangs of conscience if they frustrate the consumers’ expectations. No one really believes that the objects of consumption, archetypal ‘things’ devoid of senses, thoughts and emotions of their own, will resent rejection or the termination of their services (indeed, consignment to a rubbish tip). However satisfying the sensations of consuming may have been, their beneficiaries owe nothing in exchange to the sources of their pleasures. Most certainly, they don’t need to swear indefinite loyalty to the objects of consumption. The ‘things’ meant for consumption retain their utility for consumers, their one and only *raison d’être*, only as long as (and not for a moment longer than) it is judged that their pleasure-giving capacity remains undiminished.

Once the pleasure-generating capacity of the object falls below the promised or acceptable level, the time is ripe to get rid of that bland and bleak thing: that unexciting, pale replica or rather ugly caricature of the object that once glittered and tempted its way into desire. The reason for its degradation and disposal is not necessarily an unwelcome change (or any change for that matter) taking place in the object itself. It might be rather, and all too often is, something to do with the other contents of the gallery where prospective objects of desire are displayed, sought, viewed, appreciated and appropriated: a previously absent or overlooked object, somewhat better equipped to lavish pleasurable sensations and so more promising and tempting than the one already possessed and in use, has been spotted in the shop window or on the shop shelf. Or perhaps using and enjoying the current object of desire has gone on long enough to prompt a sort of ‘satisfaction fatigue’, particularly because its potential replacements have not yet been tested and so augur novel, hitherto unexperienced, unknown and untested delights, believed for that reason alone to be superior and so endowed (for the moment, at least) with more seductive power. Whatever the reason, it gets more and more difficult, nay impossible, to imagine why the thing that has lost much

or all of its capacity to entertain should not be duly sent off to where it now belongs – in the refuse dump.

What, however, if the ‘thing’ in question happens to be another sentient and conscious, feeling, thinking, judging and choosing entity: in short, another human being? However bizarre this may sound, this question is anything but fanciful. Quite a while ago Anthony Giddens, one of the most influential sociologists of recent decades, announced the advent of ‘pure relations’ – that is, relations with no commitments, of undefined length and reach. ‘Pure relations’ are founded on nothing but the gratification drawn from them – and once that gratification dwindles and fades, or is dwarfed by the availability of a yet more profound gratification, they have no reason whatsoever to be continued. Please note, however, that in this case ‘being gratified’ is a *two-pronged* affair. To assemble a ‘pure relation’, *both* partners need to expect it to provide gratification for their desires. To disassemble it, however, the disgruntlement and disaffection of *one* of the partners suffices. Putting the relationship together calls for a *bilateral* decision – taking it apart can be done *unilaterally*.

Each of the two partners in a pure relationship, in turn or simultaneously, will attempt to play the subject to the other as an object. Each one, in turn or simultaneously, may however come across an object that stoutly refuses to accept the role of ‘thing’, while attempting instead to degrade her or his protagonist to ‘thing’ status, thereby foiling his or her pretensions and aspirations to the status of ‘subject’. A paradox, therefore, of an unresolvable sort: each partner enters a ‘pure relationship’ assuming his or her own right to subjecthood and the counterpart’s demotion and submission to the status of thing; however, either partner’s success in making that assumption come true (that is, effectively disarming the other of his or her right to subjecthood) portends an end to the relationship.

A ‘pure relationship’ is therefore based on a fiction and wouldn’t survive the revelation of its truth: of the essential untransferability of the subject/object division endemic in the consumerist pattern to the realm of interhuman relationships. Rejection may arrive at any moment, at short or no notice; bonds are not really binding, they are endemically unstable and unreliable – just one more unknown and anxiety-generating variable in the insoluble equation called ‘life’. As long as their relation stays ‘pure’, with no

anchor cast in any other haven than that of the gratification of desire, both partners are doomed to an agony of possible rejection or condemned to a bitter awakening from their illusion. That awakening is bound to be all the more bitter because they did not recognize the paradox lurking at the heart of the 'purity' in advance, and therefore did not do enough, or did nothing, to negotiate a satisfactory or at least bearable compromise between the irreconcilable statuses.

The advent and prevalence of 'pure relations' have been widely yet wrongly interpreted as a huge step on the road to individual 'liberation' (the latter having been, willy-nilly, reinterpreted as being free from the constraints which all obligations to others are bound to set on one's own choices). What makes such an interpretation questionable, however, is that in this case the notion of 'mutuality' is a gross, and unfounded, exaggeration. The coincidence of both sides of a relationship being simultaneously satisfied does not necessarily create mutuality: after all, it means no more than that each of the individuals in the relationship are satisfied *at the same time*. What stops the relationship short of genuine mutuality is its inbuilt – sometimes consoling, but at other times haunting and harrowing – expectation: which is also a constraint on individual freedom not to be played down. The essential distinction of 'networks' – the name selected these days to replace the ideas of 'community' or 'communion' believed to be old-fashioned and outdated – is precisely this right to *unilateral* termination. Unlike communities, networks are individually put together and individually reshuffled or dismantled, and rely for their persistence on the individual will as their sole, however volatile, foundation.

In a relationship, however, *two* individuals meet... A morally 'insensitized' individual (i.e., one who has been enabled and is willing to take no account of the welfare of another) is willy-nilly simultaneously situated at the receiving end of the moral insensitivity of the objects of his or her own moral insensitivity. 'Pure relations' augur not so much a mutuality of liberation as a mutuality of moral insensitivity. The Levinasian 'party of two' stops being a seedbed of morality. Instead it turns into a factor of *adiaphorization* (that is, exemption from the realm of moral evaluation) of a specifically *liquid* modern variety, complementing while also all too often supplanting the *solid* modern, bureaucratic variety.

What is being done to things is naturally assumed, at any place or time, to be 'adiaphoric' – neither good nor bad, neither recommended nor condemned. Did not God give Adam unquestionable rule over things, including naming them, which means defining them? The liquid modern variety of adiaphorization is cut according to the pattern of consumer–commodity relations, and its effectiveness relies on the transplantation of that pattern to interhuman relations. As consumers, we do not swear interminable loyalty to the commodity we seek and purchase in order to satisfy our needs or desires, and we continue to use its services as long as, but no longer than, it delivers on our expectations – or until we come across another commodity that promises to gratify the same desires more thoroughly than the one we purchased before. All consumer goods, including those somewhat hypocritically and deceitfully described as 'durable', are eminently exchangeable and expendable; in consumerist, that is, a consumption-inspired and consumption-servicing culture, the time quickly tends to shrink between purchase and disposal. Finally, the delights derived from the objects of consumption shift from their use to their appropriation. Longevity of use tends to be shortened and the incidents of rejection and disposal tend to become ever more frequent as the objects' capacity to satisfy (and thus to remain desired) is used up faster. While a consumerist attitude may lubricate the wheels of the *economy*, it sprinkles sand into the bearings of *morality*.

This is not the sole calamity that affects morally saturated actions in a liquid modern setting. As a calculation of gains can never fully subdue and stifle the tacit yet refractory and stubbornly insubordinate pressures of the moral impulse, the neglect of moral commands and the disregard of the responsibility evoked, in Levinas's terms, by the Face of an-Other leave behind a bitter aftertaste, known under the name of 'pangs of conscience' or 'moral scruples'. Here again consumerist offers come to the rescue: the sin of moral negligence can be repented of and absolved with shop-supplied gifts, because the act of shopping, however selfish and self-referential the true motives and temptations that made it happen, is represented as a moral deed. Capitalizing on the redemptive moral urges instigated by the misdemeanour it itself generated, encouraged and intensified, consumerist culture thereby transforms every shop and service agency into a pharmacy

purveying tranquilizers and anaesthetic drugs: in this case drugs to mitigate or altogether placate *moral* rather than physical pains. As moral negligence grows in its reach and intensity, the demand for painkillers unstoppably rises and the consumption of moral tranquilizers turns into an addiction. As a result, an induced and contrived moral insensitivity tends to turn into a compulsion or 'second nature': into a permanent and quasi-universal condition – and moral pains are in consequence stripped of their salutary warning, alerting and activating role. With moral pains smothered before they become truly vexing and worrying, the web of human bonds woven of the moral yarn become increasingly frail and fragile, falling apart at the seams. With citizens trained to search for salvation from their troubles and the solution for their problems in consumer markets, politics can (or is prompted, pushed and ultimately coerced to) interpellate its subjects as consumers first and citizens a distant second; consumer zeal is redefined as citizen's virtue, and consumer activity as a fulfillment of a citizen's primary duty.

It is not just the politics and survival of the community that are threatened. Our person-to-person togetherness, and the satisfaction, the fulfilment we draw from it, also face danger when they are confronted with the combined pressure of a consumerist worldview and an ideal of 'pure relations'. 'The ultimate goal of technology, the telos of *techne*', suggested Jonathan Franzen in his commencement speech on 21 May 2011 at Kenyon College, 'is to replace a natural world that's indifferent to our wishes – a world of hurricanes and hardships and breakable hearts, a world of resistance – with a world so responsive to our wishes as to be, effectively, a mere extension of the self'. It is all about convenience, stupid – about an effortless comfort and comfortable effortless-ness; about making the world obedient and pliable; about excising from the world all that might stand, obstinately and pugnaciously, between will and reality. Correction: as reality is what resists the will, it is all about *getting rid of reality*. Living in a world made of one's wishes alone; of mine and your wishes, of our – purchasers, consumers, users and beneficiaries of technology – wishes.

One more recent departure portended by the profound changes in the status and role of universities, needs in my view to be at least briefly mentioned: the probable end to 'meritocracy', that fig leaf

used for years, and with more than a modicum of success, to hide the less prepossessing aspects of free market competition: its inalienable and incurable inclination to inflate social inequality. In Nathalie Brafman's article in *Le Monde* called 'Génération Y: du concept marketing à la réalité', she pronounced Generation Y to be 'more individualistic and disobedient to bosses, but above all more precarious' – compared with the 'boom' and 'X' generations that preceded it, that is.<sup>4</sup>

Between them, journalists, marketing experts and social researchers (in that order...) have assembled young men and women between about twenty and thirty years of age (that is, born roughly between the middle of the 1980s and the middle of the 1990s) into this imagined formation (class? category?) of 'Generation Y'. And what is becoming more obvious by the day is that a Generation Y composed of these young people may have a better founded claim than its predecessors to the status of a culturally specific 'formation', that is a bona fide 'generation', and so also a well-justified plea for the acute attention of traders, chasers of news, and scholars.

It is common to argue that the grounds for the claim and justification for the plea are first and foremost the fact that the members of Generation Y are the first to have entered a world already containing the internet and knowing as well as practising digital communication 'in real time'. If you share in the widespread assessment of the arrival of informatics as a watershed in human history, you are obliged to view Generation Y as at least a milestone in the history of culture. And it is so viewed; and, spied out, found and recorded accordingly. As an appetizer of sorts, Brafman suggests that the curious habit of the French of pronouncing 'Y' in an English way when it is linked to the idea of a generation – as 'why' – could be explained by this being a 'questioning generation'. In other words, a formation taking nothing for granted. Let me add right away, however, that the questions that generation is in the habit of asking are by and large addressed to the anonymous authors of Wikipedia, or to Facebook pals and Twitter addicts – but not to their parents or bosses or 'public authorities', from whom they don't seem to expect answers

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<sup>4</sup>Nathalie Brafman, 'Génération Y: du concept marketing à la réalité', *Le Monde*, 19 May 2012.



that are relevant, let alone authoritative, reliable and so worth listening to.

The surfeit of their questions is, I guess, as in so many other aspects of our consumerist society, an offer-driven demand; with an iPhone as good as grafted onto the body, there are constantly, 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, loads of answers feverishly searching for questions, as well as throngs of answer-peddlers frantically seeking a demand for their services. And another suspicion: do the Generation Y people spend so much time on the internet because they are tormented by questions they crave the answers to? Or are the questions they ask, once they are connected to their hundreds of Facebook friends, updated versions of Bronisław Malinowski's 'phatic expressions' (such as 'how do you do' or 'how are you', the kind of locutions whose only function is to perform a *sociating task*, as opposed to *conveying information*, the task in this case being to announce your presence and availability for sociating – not far from the 'small talk' conducted to ease boredom, but above all to escape alienation and loneliness at a crowded party)?

At surfing the infinitely vast expanses of the internet the members of Generation Y are indeed unequalled masters. And at 'being connected': they are the first generation in history to measure the number of their friends (translated nowadays primarily as companions-in-connecting) in the hundreds, if not the thousands. And they are the first to spend most of their waking time sociating through conversing – though not necessarily aloud, and seldom in full sentences. This is all true. But is it the whole truth of Generation Y? What about that part of the world which they have not experienced and could not, and which they have therefore had little if any chance of learning how to encounter point-blank, without electronic/digital mediation, along with the consequences that inescapable encounter might have had? The part which nonetheless pretends, and to spectacularly formidable and utterly unavoidable effect, to determine the rest of, and perhaps even the most important rest, of the truth of their lives?

It is that 'rest' which contains the part of the world that supplies another feature setting Generation Y apart from its predecessors: the precariousness of the place they have been offered by the society they are still struggling, with mixed success, to enter. Twenty-five percent of people below twenty-five years of

age remain unemployed in France. The generation as a whole are chained up to CDD (*contrat à durée déterminée*, fixed-term contracts) and *stages* (training practices) – both shrewdly evasive and crudely, mercilessly exploitative expedients. If in 2006 there were about 600,000 ‘*stagiaires*’ in France, their current number is estimated to vary somewhere between 1.2 and 1.5 million. And for most, visiting that liquid modern purgatory renamed ‘training practice’ is a necessity they are not allowed to miss: agreeing and submitting to such expedients as CDD or ‘*stages*’ is a necessary condition of finally reaching, at the advanced average age of thirty, the possibility of full-time employment of ‘infinite’ duration (?).

An immediate consequence of the frailty and inbuilt transience of the social positions the so-called ‘labour market’ is capable of offering is the profound change of attitude, widely signalled, towards the idea of a ‘job’ – and particularly of a steady job, one safe and reliable enough to be capable of determining the medium-term social standing and life prospects of its performer. Generation Y is marked by the unprecedented, and growing, ‘job cynicism’ of its members – and no wonder, since Alexandra De Felice, for instance, reputable commentator on the French labour market, expects an average member of Generation Y, if current trends continue, to change bosses and employers twenty-nine times in the course of their working life. Some other observers, however, such as Jean Pralong, professor at Rouen Business School, call for more realism in estimating the youngsters’ likelihood of matching the pace of job change to cynicism in their job attitudes: in a labour market in its present condition, it would take a lot of daring and courage to snap one’s finger at the boss and tell him face-to-face that one would rather go than stay with such a pain in the ass... So, according to Jean Pralong, the youngsters would rather bear their dreary plight, however off-putting that plight might be, if they were allowed to stay longer in their quasi-jobs. But they seldom are, and if they are, they do not know how long the stay of execution will last. One way or another, members of Generation Y differ from their predecessors by a complete or almost complete absence of job-related illusions, by an only lukewarm (if any) commitment to the jobs they currently hold and the companies that offered them, and a firm conviction that life is elsewhere, with a resolution (or at least a desire) to live it elsewhere. This is indeed

an attitude that was seldom to be found among the members of the 'boom' and 'X' generations.

Some of the bosses admit that the guilt is on their side. They are reluctant to lay the blame for the disenchantment and non-chalance prevalent among young employees on the youngsters themselves. Brafman quotes Gilles Babinet, a 45-year-old entrepreneur, who bewails the dispossession of the young generation of all or nearly all the autonomy their fathers had, and which they successfully guarded – priding themselves on possessing the moral, intellectual and economic principles of which their society was presumed to be the guardian and from which it wouldn't allow its members to budge. He believes that the kind of society entered by the Y Generation is, on the contrary, anything but seductive: if I were their age, Babinet admits, I'd behave exactly as they do...

As for the youngsters themselves, they are as blunt as their predicament is straightforward: we have not the slightest idea, they say, what tomorrow is likely to bring. The labour market closely guards its secrets, just like an impenetrable fortress: there is little point in trying to peep inside, let alone attempting to break open the gates. And as to guessing its intentions – it's hard to believe there are any. Tougher and more knowledgeable minds are known mostly for their abominable misjudgements in that guessing game... In a hazardous world, we have no choice but to be gamblers. Whether by choice, or by necessity; and in the end it does not matter by which, does it?

Well, these state-of-the-mind reports are remarkably similar to the confessions of the more thoughtful and sincere among the *precarians* – members of the *precariat*, the most rapidly growing section of our post-credit-collapse and post-certainty world. Precarians are defined by having their homes erected (complete with bedrooms and kitchens) on quicksand, and by their own self-confessed ignorance ('no idea what is going to hit me') and impotence ('even if I knew, I wouldn't have the power to divert the blow').

It has been thought up to now that the appearance and formidable, some say explosive, expansion of the precariat, sucking in and incorporating more and more of the former working and middle classes, was a phenomenon arising from a fast-changing *class* structure. It is indeed – but isn't it, in addition, also a matter of a changing *generational* structure? Of bringing forth a state of

affairs in which the suggestion ‘tell me the year of your birth and I’ll tell you to which social class you belong’ won’t sound very fanciful at all?

LD Dear Zygmunt, putting aside the new political and academic technocracy which masquerades as democracy, I would mention another disturbing phenomenon – the fate of wandering scholars. As mentioned, this sort of never-ending reform of academia undertaken by the political class, or the inability to exist otherwise than through changing or reforming others, rather than oneself, and thus stripping scholars and academics of a sense of safety and security, has become an inescapable part of the power discourse. Yet things are less obvious with wandering scholars.

The terms ‘wandering scholar’ and ‘gypsy scholar’ are all too familiar to those who have had to change jobs often, and who are constantly searching for new assignments. An even better understanding comes about from having been in these shoes personally. In fact, ‘wandering scholar’ and ‘independent scholar’ are no more than euphemisms disguising the sad reality of these people who see no reason to celebrate their wandering lifestyle of constantly changing jobs and places of residence. They would like nothing more than a stable position, but this style of employment is out of their reach; hence, they are always on the road.

Forming any kind of attachment to their temporary academic port is impossible, as they know that shortly they will be on their way again. The stronger the ties to a new position, or the deeper the friendships one allows oneself to form, the harder it is to move on, the longer the experience stays in one’s memory and the more painful it becomes. This type of lifestyle leaves no room for long-term commitments and fostering feelings of belonging to a particular community.

Intellectual topography and relating oneself to an ever new position and colleagues (there is usually closer involvement with other wanderers or foreigners, rather than an institution’s permanent staff) becomes an essential aspect of this lifestyle. Institutions allow you to be part of their ritual only for a short time, and leave a niche for meeting with colleagues and students, yet become distant as soon as you try to forget your guest status and that you are a mere episode in its saga of duration and dynamism.

The logic of duration and traditions, and the joy of unchanging and repeating routines are reserved for an institution's own permanent staff, while constant change and the joy of discovering new people and places is a grand privilege of the 'independents', that is, foreigners and wandering fellow-countrymen. Other wanderers or foreigners do not hesitate to protect you from their university's assumed superiority, power and political games. The gates of stability are also firmly closed to the other wanderers and foreigners, which is why it is easier to form genuine friendships with them. The permanents, that is, those holding permanent or at least long-term posts, give you the third degree to work out if you aspire to seek out a permanent spot for yourself. If the answer is no, relations are instantly warmer and are bound to improve, but if the answer is yes, you instantly get the polite but cold shoulder and the topic is never brought up again.

Wandering scholars are people of a liquid modernity who believe, or desperately try to convince themselves and others around them, that short-term relations and projects in our professional life help avoid stagnancy, continuously offer new opportunities and are more rewarding than long-term commitments. Wandering scholars and independent scholars are global thinkers who long to become local activists, but not necessarily in their immediate surroundings. The irony of the history of Europe and the whole Western world is that once upon a time it was considered a great honour and privilege to be an independent scholar. Instead of leaving their fate with universities, they chose journeys and the path of serving as educators of aristocrats and monarchs. This was the road taken by almost all of Europe's great thinkers – Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, Voltaire and Diderot.

Locke, who educated Lord Shaftesbury in philosophy (and with justification, as the latter became an important and noteworthy thinker), Voltaire, who was the philosophy tutor of Prussia's emperor, Frederick II, also known as Frederick the Great (a student who despite being of noble blood penned some deeply contemplative works), and Descartes, who led Christina, Queen of Sweden, through the philosophical labyrinths of the mind, symbolize true non-academic and independent philosophers. Spinoza was probably the one who most embodied this freedom – after the release of his *Theologico-Political Treatise* he was appointed to chair the faculty of philosophy as professor at the University of Heidelberg,

but he rejected the renowned university's offer and stayed on at his optical devices workshop in Holland, continuing his trade as a lens grinder.

In the later era of modernity – the second modernity era, as proclaimed by Ulrich Beck, or the liquid modern era, in your works – everything changed beyond recognition. Wandering academics became living beacons of the new socio-cultural logic, completely adopted in our times. Since it is seen as politically incorrect to use the terms 'unemployed researcher' or 'scholar without a permanent posting' in our 'sensitive' Western societies, a wandering and independent scholar is euphemistically known not only as a 'wandering scholar' or a 'gypsy scholar', but also as an 'unaffiliated scholar', or a scholar having no official affiliations with, and not bound to any academic institution.

It is clear that we have been witness to enormous changes in the Western world and in all Western consciousness. In effect, early modernism is irrelevant today, including the values of the Renaissance – with the origin of *studia humanitatis*, or modern humanities studies and interdisciplinary studies, and the formation of non-university based scholar groupings among the primary values I would mention – and there is a return to the logic of the Middle Ages, where the importance of the individual gives way to the corporation or institution. Importance is given not to people, but the power segment which incorporates the middle class – from buyers' guilds to today's transnational corporations and global bureaucracies. Not the state, but the city and region. Not the individual, but the institution which identifies who one is – all the beginnings of the Middle Age's social existentialism, revived for today's world.

Your professional life and whole existence is considered legitimate so long as there is an institution behind you. Without it, you lose elements of your identity and become a nobody. Fleeting college and university titles, living from one contract to the next, and the ever changing names of cities and countries surface as pieces of a sprawling and fragmented life, allowing power-holders or influential groups to identify you as a (situational) somebody. To them you are no more than a CV and a series of figures.

What type of people would Descartes, Spinoza, Pascal, Leibniz or Locke be in today's world? Charlatans, lunatics or absolute nobodies. They were the people of early modernity, or the first,

stable, self-sustaining and as yet not self-destroying modernity, who had simply outgrown the Renaissance. Today we would most likely not even know anything about them, as they would not be tied to any well-known academic institutions. The localization and 'shutting in' of scholars and thinkers in academic institutions occurred in the nineteenth century. It is interesting that Oswald Spengler, who hated academic philosophers and held them in contempt, gave his work *The Decline of the West* to be reviewed not by university professors, but to an intellectual politician, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1922, Walther Rathenau.

Never having completed his doctorate degree or adapted to the academic world, Ludwig Wittgenstein was probably the last great non-academic or semi-academic philosopher in the Western world. But his popularity only became widespread in his Cambridge period, and mainly thanks to his students and followers. Michel Foucault almost disappeared into obscurity from the academic world – meaning then from the whole existential field – while still young, when the University of Uppsala, where he lectured, rejected his doctoral thesis on the history of ideas as undefendable. These days this fact may appear as an unfortunate and strange lapse to Swedish academics, yet it is in fact symptomatic of the state of today's academic world – the road from grandeur to non-existence, or vice versa, is short and unpredictable.

There can be no other alternative in a world which recognizes a method, group or institution, but not a creative individual. According to you, an academic education, or even more so, the preparation for becoming a scholar lasts considerably longer than most familiar work positions, or postings offering at least a minimum period to stay and work in one place – it is not only positions that change rapidly and constantly, but also the international academic market and the whole demand structure.

Tenured positions are becoming rarer and rarer. They are in effect attainable only by those who have worked for one institution, or the whole system, for many years, or those who are politically in demand by the system. The greatest blessings a scholar can expect are the so-called tenure track positions that last for three years and leave the door open for contract extension, or even perhaps an offer of a tenured position. There are an extraordinary number of candidates for tenure track positions in universities in

the United States, not only from America itself, but also from Canada and other countries. The figure of 150–200 candidates per position indicates a fairly regular and non-prestigious rivalry – among philosophers, and humanities scholars in general, there are 300–400 candidates to a tenure track position at a second- or third-level American university.

Such figures indicate many things. First, that there is an oversupply of humanities scholars armed with doctorates in the West. Standing out in this mass and becoming known on a global scale is no easy task – only the most talented attain this level of acclaim, and only on condition that they have the support of noble-minded colleagues who are willing and able to help them on their way. Secondly, it is technically impossible to be unbiased and neutrally overview every candidate's dossier and achievements when there are 300 or more almost equally good applications. In other words, it all depends on the preconceived opinions and support of influential professors. In effect, a stand-off between method and jargon groups, or administrative and political influence groups. Thomas J. Scheff had no inhibitions in naming them 'academic gangs'.<sup>5</sup> You are identified as one of them in so far as you make 'correct' reference points and belong to that same holy land of a method...

I have not yet mentioned that of the 300 or so 'lucky ones' only a third are short-listed, and are then invited to meet with representatives of the university, often during annual conferences held by professional associations, which have for a long time functioned as a part of the academic market. The last round consists of five to six 'finalists' who are invited to the university for an open discussion and are perhaps given the opportunity to hold a public lecture. The rivalry in Great Britain, Australia, Canada and the remainder of the English-speaking world is not on the scale encountered in the United States, but still rather fierce. Whatever the case may be, in this respect English-speaking countries are considerably more liberal than continental Europe – in English-speaking countries it is still possible to receive short-term contracts or at least make it to the final interview stage, a feat which is unfortunately impossible for humanities and social sciences scholars in the rest of Europe.

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<sup>5</sup>Thomas J. Scheff, 'Academic gangs', *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 23 (1995), pp. 157–62.



In Europe, if you are not part of the system and do not have the support of influential powers (the academic bureaucracy and the most influential professors in your field), you simply do not exist. Fortune may smile upon you, or recognition and acknowledgement mechanisms in tune with your proudly individual creative and personal values may come into play, but these cases are more often an exception to the rule. Thus our whole professional life these days can be described as the realization of short-term consecutive projects accompanied by lack of a permanent position and the strong feelings of insecurity and uncertainty it conjures. Battles are waged not over matters of prestige or money (neither are an attainable feature of this profession these days), but for the right to a minimal sense of stability, emotional security and predictability – in short, for duration and certainty, not for continual change.

When the appeal of living from one project to the next is presented through rose-coloured spectacles, I cannot help but feel that it is not a postmodern extravagance but simply self-deceit, behind which lies the unrealized and ever-receding dream of having a stable position, to feel wanted and to fulfil one's human potential in a place which one feels is both important and meets one's approval – better still if this can be found in one's own country.

Niccolò Machiavelli's recommendation to Lorenzo de' Medici, one of the highlights in *The Prince*, referred to as a variation on the theme of Philip II of Macedon, Alexander the Great's father, deals with constant exile as a perfect means of control and of 'pacification' of an enemy. If you deprive a dissenting or hostile person of his roots, his political and cultural soil, if you compel him to be on the move all the time, ultimately stripping him of a sense of home, fellowship, safety, security and certainty, you condemn him to a rather humane form of slow death. This practice was established by Philip II of Macedon.

This is to say that the enemies of the prince continue to live without living. They are unable to examine or enjoy life; nor are they in control of any intimate aspects of reality any more. Exile becomes a fact of life without showing itself as a form of punishment or as a form of discipline. People cannot live and act otherwise once they stop being identified or appreciated anywhere. I am afraid that Machiavelli's curse of the modern person, or his 'innocent' piece of advice and recommendation, whichever it

seems to have been, has been learned by our political technocrats better than anything else.

Experience shows that very often wandering scholars who have at some stage not been recognized within their environment, and as a result escaped from local intrigues and the banality of battles for power and influence, return to this environment when their current position becomes at least somewhat similar to what they have already experienced, partly taking on the same rules and criteria, and still lacking sufficient resources and courage to let in the real outsiders. Here we find ourselves in a world gone astray, the world that has lost its track. As no criteria remain reliable in this reality of constant and incessant change, and as no person who was not moulded by 'our' system and who was cultivated elsewhere qualifies for the club of tenured professors, all we can rely on is to be a team-worker, that is, a person prepared to kill in himself or herself any critical and dissenting voice and to sacrifice any temptation to question the validity of collective and anonymous decisions shaped as an ethic of labour or as a professional ethic.

This sort of cultural malaise of academia manifests itself in a fierce defence of a method or of any other sort of social control disguised as fidelity and tradition, instead of a silent dedication to and a principled defence of humanity and sensitivity. We seem to have hopelessly lost the spirit of the Renaissance and of early modernity in general, with its propensity to speak up in favour of an individual and of a human relationship, rather than institutional loyalty. At this point, Umberto Eco's hint that he once dropped regarding our sliding into the Middle Ages was no joke. Liquid modernity bears a resemblance to the medieval reliance on institutions and control, as contrasted to the Renaissance and early modernity with its belief in the individual's ability to shape the world around him.

Severity is only a mask for rationality and righteousness that in turn conceals impulses of power and social control. This is more than true with regard to the new fetishism of market mechanisms and scholarly methods, which seem much more about how to eliminate an alternative than how to provide a blueprint for it.

To have a plausible political-historical narrative nowadays means to have viable politics, rather than policies masquerading as

politics. Politics becomes impossible without a good story in the form of a convincing plot or an inspiring vision. The same applies to good literature. When we fail a method in our scholarship, or when a method fails us, we switch to a story – this sounds much in tune with Umberto Eco. Where scholarly language fails, fiction comes as a way out of the predicament with an interpretation of the world around us.

The funny thing is that politics does not work without our stories. This is to say that modern politics needs the humanities much more than politicians suspect. Without travel accounts, humour, laughter, warning and moralizing, political concepts tend to become empty. With sound reason, therefore, Karl Marx once wittily noted that he learned much more about the nineteenth century's political and economic life from Honoré de Balzac's novels than from all the economists of that time put together.

This is the reason why Shakespeare was far and away the most profound political thinker of Renaissance Europe. Niccolò Machiavelli's works *Florentine Histories* and *Discourses on Livy* tell us much about his literary vocation and also about the talent of a storyteller – no less than the exuberant comedies he penned, such as *La Mandragola*.

Do we tell each other European stories nowadays to enhance our powers of interpretation and association, and to reveal one another's experiences, traumas, dreams, visions and fears? We don't, alas. Instead, we seem to have confined the entire European project merely to its economic and technical aspects.

Stories laid the foundation for Giovanni Boccaccio's masterpiece *The Decameron*; it was stories about the suffering of human beings, whatever their blood and creed, that made Voltaire's philosophical tales, such as *Candide, ou l'Optimisme*, truly European stories. It is worth taking into account that Voltaire far transcends European historical narrative by inventing and referring to the Other, be he Martin the Manichean in *Candide*, or a Canadian Huron (in fact, the offspring of a French military officer and a Canadian Huron beauty, as the tale tells us) in *L'Ingénu*, or Zadig, a philosopher in ancient Babylon, from *Zadig ou la Destinée*.

This reference as well as the human reality behind it crossed my mind almost immediately when I started teaching a course on politics and literature at the University of Bologna. The reason was quite simple: I had the entire fabric of Europe in my class,

because the course was given within the East European studies programme with the participation of students from Western, Central and Eastern Europe, including such non EU countries as Albania, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Russia, Serbia and Ukraine.

We easily surpassed and crossed the boundaries of an academic performance and discussion, in favour of human exchanges on the newly discovered and shocking moral blindness of classmates or neighbours, human dramas of high treason, moral treachery, disappointment, cowardice, cruelty and loss of sensitivity. How can we miss the point, in talking past and present to each other or listening to someone else's drama, that it was Dante who coined the phrase 'the cult of cruelty' and the English writer Rex Warner who forged the phrase 'the cult of power' – political idioms that we use constantly without being aware of the fact that they are not straight out of the vocabulary of today.

Suffice it to recall that the real founding fathers of Europe, Renaissance humanists Thomas More and Erasmus of Rotterdam, made friends in Paris, jointly translating Lucian from Greek into Latin and also connecting their friend, German painter Hans Holbein the Younger, to the royal court of the king of England, Henry VIII. Whereas the great Flemish painter Quentin Matsys saved for history the face of their friend in Antwerp, Peter Giles, Hans Holbein the Younger immortalized the faces of his benefactor Thomas More and Erasmus of Rotterdam.

Yet the bad news is that politics has nowadays colonized culture, and this happened unnoticed, albeit under our noses. This is not to say that culture is politically exploited and vulgarized for long-term or short-term political ends and objectives. In a democratic political setting, culture is separated from politics. An instrumentalist approach to culture immediately betrays either technocratic disdain for the world of arts and letters or poorly concealed hostility to human worth and liberty. However, in our brave new world, the problem lies elsewhere.

We don't need the humanities any more as a primary driving force behind our political and moral sensibilities. Instead, politicians try to keep academia as unsafe, uncertain and insecure as possible – by reshaping, or 'reforming', it into a branch of the corporate world. By and large, this idea of the need to politically rationalize, change, reshape, refurbish and renovate academia is a simulacrum. It conceals the fact that it is precisely the political

class and our bad policies that desperately need the change and reform. Yet power speaks: if I don't change you, you will come to change me.

We have stopped telling moving stories to each other. Instead, we nourish ourselves and the world around us with conspiracy theories (which are always about the big and powerful, instead of the small and humane), sensationalist stuff and crime or horror stories. In doing so, we are in peril of stepping away from our inmost European sensibilities, one of which has always been and continues to be the legitimacy of opposing narratives, attitudes and memories. Human beings are incomplete without one another.

In his reflections on Central Europe and Kundera, George Schöpflin, a British political theorist of Hungarian background who acts as a member of the European Parliament on behalf of Hungary, aptly described the phenomenon he termed the discursive handicap of Central Europe and the disparity of the linguistic and cultural voices of West and Central Europe. This creates an obvious asymmetry of power and prestige when it comes to the use of languages, discursive strategies and interpretations. This is more than true with regard to identity politics and educational strategy. For instance, Schöpflin writes:

Whereas no one would look twice at an analysis of the United States by someone who knows no English, their counterparts dealing with Central Europe have no such qualms. They do not learn Polish or Czech or Hungarian, but rely on translators and will accept what may be a very partial picture of Central European reality (and one they cannot verify). As a result, the Central European voice is weaker, and this is never recognized. Those with the more powerful voices shout loudest and drown out the weaker ones.<sup>6</sup>

I have analysed this sort of discursive handicap more than once. In fact, if you happen to be American, British or French, you talk

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<sup>6</sup>George Schöpflin, 'Central Europe: Kundera, incompleteness, and lack of agency', in Leonidas Donskis, ed., *Yet Another Europe after 1984: Rethinking Milan Kundera and the Idea of Central Europe* (Rodopi, 2012), p. 28.

prose simply by introducing yourself. Yet if you are a Lithuanian, a Latvian or an Estonian, you are obliged to work hard at telling stories about your country or introducing your partners in conversation to the history of your country. This is so, since you are a non-person in the quick identification system which is part of the mass narratives in the West.

It would never occur to a person from Tuscany that she or he has to insist on the fact that Italy is in Europe. Yet if you are a Baltic person amidst good people from major countries who are not at their best when confronted by history and culture, the status of your country can easily be put in question. Far from being a joke or an innocent story, this reflects the asymmetry of power and prestige not only in the world of public affairs but in the world of ideas as well. Once your country does not have the quick identification code in terms of its economic performance or political power, you are measured and perceived merely by your purchasing power or by your CV.

Schöpflin is absolutely right concerning the absurdity of disparity in the area of competence which exists between the West and Central and Eastern Europe. If you are not French but are fluent in the language and qualified in French philosophy or history of ideas, not to mention French literature, you will never get a senior post at a French university. The same applies in Great Britain – no matter how brilliant foreign researchers of Shakespeare or Marlowe or Hobbes, or of any other symbolic gatekeeper of English culture, might be, they will never get a post at a British university due to their continental upbringing and ‘nebulous’ educational system. Yet a qualified French or British scholar is always welcome at any decent Central and Eastern European university, including in such areas as Central and Eastern European studies, that is, the symbolic centre of identity.

The same with the United States – true, this country used to be more open to foreign talents in the area of humanities and social science disciplines. Some disciples of Mikhail Bakhtin, Yuri Lotman or Sergei Averintsev – major humanists of the world who were all of Russian background – got jobs in the US. Yet make no mistake: during the Cold War era the Soviet Union, that is, Russia, was an arch-enemy whose cultural codes and nuances of history and identity had to be studied. Much of the West’s infatuation with

Islamic studies nowadays stems from a similar, if not identical, impulse. Know thine enemy...

Eastern Europe was full of men and women of ideas, who spoke several languages and made translations of William Shakespeare, François Villon or William Blake, that were second to none in the world (among them, Boris Pasternak, Ilya Ehrenburg, Samuil Marshak), yet these people were perceived as lesser Europeans or, at best, as poor cousins of Europeans. Becoming a hostage of your country's politics or economic performance is a curse of modernity due to the fact that the predominant historical-political narratives and interpretations that sell well come from the West. If you are not a product of the Western educational system and if you have not been moulded by Western institutions of higher education, you will have to find a specific niche not to challenge or otherwise put into question the narratives that reflect the existing distribution of power and prestige.

True, there is such an area as Central and East European studies where Central and Eastern Europeans can fulfil themselves in the West as a result of their obvious advantages over their Western counterparts in terms of a good command of languages and local sensibilities. The trouble is that yet another Europe, that is, Central and Eastern Europe, does not have the symbolic gatekeepers that would prioritize their interpretations and perspectives. But if it did, it would be immediately qualified as xenophobic and provincial.

Unfortunately, Central and Eastern Europe's lack of strategy in the area of the humanities worsens the state of affairs. A rather similar situation in Western Europe is small consolation, as the asymmetry and disparity only widens the gulf and works for the benefit of Western narratives and institutions. This applies to the Baltic region as well, alas. If we don't reverse this situation, we will be at risk of self-inflicted intellectual and cultural colonialism.

Most telling is the fact that Central and Eastern Europe eagerly emulates the British system of academic management, which is merely about the commodification of universities and education initiated in the era of Margaret Thatcher. It is highly unlikely that this will help eliminate the aforementioned disparity and asymmetry.

We should not deceive ourselves.

## Rethinking *The Decline of the West*

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Leonidas Donskis

### Oswald Spengler: *The Decline of the West* Revisited

The European Union is experiencing a crisis that is still hard to believe. Usually Europe has been brought down by plagues and wars; but this time its fate is banally and prosaically (almost to the point of absurdity) decided not by figures worthy to be called historical – statesmen, masters of political theatre and rhetoric, diplomats and generals, all embodying the spirit of their times – but by bureaucrats and technocrats of politics and the market, all hand-picked precisely because of their near-perfect similarity to any other ordinary mortals. This is subject-matter worthy of Max Weber’s pen – in fact, it’s the Iron Cage of rational modernity that he described, the technical dispute taking place there, with only one important question left: how to avoid a market panic, sending the correct signals to investors and markets?

We still believe that Europe will deteriorate and fade in the way Oswald Spengler described – through quiet extinction of its culture, punctuated by world conflagrations; a new Caesarism; a brutal cult of force; and new types of war, arising not out of religious conflicts but provoked by existential emptiness and a sense of meaninglessness. But for now it is fading without anyone



believing it and being gripped by, it: the actors here are not historical and grand personalities but altogether banal and predictable types; not monarchs, popes, generals, philosophers, poets and revolutionaries, but bankers, financiers, investors and people who are geniuses at diagnosing market fluctuations and the instability and consequent global insecurity these create, as well as thick-skinned technocrats of the market and politics who have converted global crises into their own success.

Evil in our day is usually equated with immigrants and Muslims, and often with left-wing intellectuals and politicians – who in their turn associate evil with conservative and liberal ideas; but all are outdone by those who manage to gather together and situate all of the world's evil in the project of modernity and the liberalism identified with it. Hence we await freedom-hating fanatics and barbarians outside our gates, new cold and hot wars, and missile attacks from 'axis of evil' states, while we are quietly and successfully killed by our technocracy, the unnoticed death of a democracy no one finds indispensable, swift decisions *in camera* and a rationally inexplicable economy to which all forms of policy and state have been subordinated.

The state tacitly services global capital and performs the functions of a security firm while pretending to be interested in public morality, the human body, privacy and memory: valuable commodities at a political fair taking place every four or five years, that is, an election. It's a totally banal, quiet, unconvincing, privately held dying – for people trained by Hollywood fancies and aesthetics, it is difficult to believe that an epoch and its hopes are disappearing before their very eyes. And why is there no wailing and pain? Because the economy is just the self-same logic of force and domination; only it has transferred from the front for deployment in the market. Of course, it is better to choose peaceful forms of power, but – how do the predictions of European collapse come to be jokes as well as pieces of conventional wisdom? The case of Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) is especially eloquent. No wonder many commentators have recently taken to mentioning and citing this interwar German historian and philosopher. But Karl Marx's words about history repeating itself twice – first as tragedy, then as farce – are particularly appropriate in the case of Spengler and the extravagant and even pointless references to him in an utterly unsuitable context. If we see in Spengler only a Cassandra of his

times, we will have understood little of his insights, for in that period there were many other thinkers like him, though not all of them were listened to and became so well-known.

Some of them were reactionary or even dangerous thinkers; for example, the Polish historian Feliks Koneczny, who, like Arnold J. Toynbee (and later Samuel P. Huntington), made Christianity the watershed between Light and Darkness. For this reason, Pitirim A. Sorokin, who criticized Spengler acutely but nevertheless was influenced by him, regarded all these morphologists of history and culture who believed in the theory of culture's organic growth and dying as champions of totalitarian sociology. Other morphologists of culture were much less famous for their political insights and implications but rather asserted themselves as poetic interpreters of culture and Europe's crisis of the soul: here we might mention the brilliant Austrian thinker Egon Friedell and the Romanian philosopher of culture Lucian Blaga.

Spengler's story was a Shakespearean tragedy. One can dispute to the point of exhaustion whether William Shakespeare really existed and whether he was truly superior to his Elizabethan contemporaries Christopher Marlow and Ben Jonson, but several passages from *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* make all this discussion not just unnecessary but positively meaningless. His tragedies and great stories exist, and everything else is just detail. The same holds for Spengler: he, after all, belongs to the world of Shakespearean tragedy and not that of farce. Farcical is what certain reflections and echoes allegedly in the spirit of Spengler become when they crop up in the rhetoric of some contemporary politicians and journalists: just look at their clichés and indeed the whole industry of moral panic-mongering they're part of. The sombre, threatening warning sounded by the German politician and financier Thilo Sarrazin to the rapidly declining Germans (who unbelievably still dominate the European Union and are even saving it from collapse), a warning like that of the witches to Macbeth about his ineluctable fate, is an almost perfect example of such a farce.

Controversies about Spengler's theories – their allegedly reactionary nature, dangerous political implications, even affinity to National Socialism (the latter conjecture is neutralized by the fact that Spengler fell out of favour and came to be disliked by the Nazis, whom he himself despised as primitives and caricatures of their age: in this respect he differed markedly from the pro-Nazi

theoretician of law and politics Carl Schmitt, currently popular in Europe because of a renewed taste for sharp political doctrines) – prove very little in the context of the theory of Europe’s sunset.

What appears as an object of strange nostalgia in Europe today is not something from the repertoire of nineteenth-century intellectual thought – scepticism, doubt, liberal relativism – but rather strong and total theories like those from the beginning and middle of the twentieth century, theories that impose their network of concepts in such a way that it’s almost impossible to extricate ourselves from them, although these theories do explain much. Good examples are some determinist and fatalistic theories, especially twentieth-century theories of the life cycle of cultures and civilizations. It is very difficult to return to them or to abandon them for another all-encompassing theory that provides answers to everything that worries us. Take it or leave it...

Let’s admit that today Spengler’s dark prophecies acquire additional plausibility not because philosophy of culture is again fashionable (it was much more popular in the interwar years) but because of a quasi-Nietzschean *will-to-power* syndrome and visions of an ever stronger technological society. Spengler’s study about Prussianism and socialism (*Preussentum und Sozialismus*) has become not so much a prophecy of totalitarianism as a cold statement of its arrival. The cult in politics of the whip, Caesarism, brutal force and militarism allowed him to make the logical assumption of separating politics and force from any higher principle of unity and control – not necessarily religious but at least deriving from a sense of history or the idea of hallowing the past and honouring the canon.

Nowadays, with liberal ideas and doctrines experiencing a serious crisis and hardly convincing anyone, and with the Marxism that first vanquished them so resoundingly in the nineteenth century itself suffering moral defeat (not as a set of the most rational and often highly valuable ideas and theoretical insights, but as a theory determined totally and comprehensively to explain, to change and to control reality), strong but better theories are again in great demand. Thus what the average contemporary reader of Spengler would find more important is not his idea of the infinity of Western culture or the Faustian soul and its morphological interpretation but the thought that war and not peace is what humanity naturally desires and cannot

avoid. Hence, if you do not wage war, others will: that's his stark answer to critics who thought his militarism difficult to justify and highly overwrought.

But that's just a detail, for a much more unpleasant truth is the fact that Spengler has, in a most unexpected way, become routinized, trivialized, vulgarized, even commercialized, and made part of conventional wisdom. 'Europe is falling' and 'the Barbarians are at the gates' – this is nothing but the transmogrification of Spengler's historical pessimism into something straight out of political comedy. Who today talks about a failing Europe in an exalted and almost joyful tone? Above all those who have never come close to the great European tradition and in general don't have much to do with the classical canon and early modernity. Europe to these people isn't Dante, Masaccio, Rembrandt and Bach, but just an imagined territory that must be protected at all costs from immigrants (not necessarily as a workforce, to be sure, but as a presence on the streets and freely existing in our midst).

The culturally semi-literate *petit-bourgeoisie*, who before the Second World War cursed the Jews and now curses not just them, but Roma, Turks, Kurds, Moroccans, and sundry other Muslims as well, is the loudest present-day echo of Spengler's cultural pessimism in our mass society and mass culture: two phenomena Spengler himself manifestly lambasted. This is indeed a thought-provoking irony of history, especially when you know that this reticent tutor of mathematics not only wrote, in a wonderful poetic style, a sensational book then rejected by academics (such as Max Weber, who called Spengler the most amazing mediocrity of our times) though enthusiastically welcomed by artists, journalists and politicians, but also held controversial political views which were on the whole conservative rather than fascist or racist.

After the First World War, Spengler was avidly read, and admired, by readers of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse. Today Spengler's theses, torn from their rather sophisticated theoretical context, are parroted by those voting for Geert Wilders, Jean-Marie Le Pen and the latter's daughter, Marine Le Pen, that is, people who identify all of the world's evil with Muslims, Roma and immigrants from the Near East and Northern Africa. It's turned out to be a rich historical irony, a sad Spenglerian *Schicksal*, an ineluctable destiny – that this philosophy of loving and not resisting one's own fate, this

*amor fati*, this historical pessimism, has come to be the foundation for a Marxism of the racists and xenophobes, or perhaps we should call it a socialism of hatred, one that operates not on the basis of class, but of race and origin.

Today Spengler's once seemingly shocking insights have become clichés, part of a self-serving and self-exploiting discourse about mostly unprovable things, not far in spirit from other forms of moral panicking and sensationalist conjecturing, with various conspiracy theories included. The best aspect of Spengler's theory is not its novelty or even consistency but his insights for the present. Indeed, in terms of theoretical originality Spengler added nothing new to G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy of history, Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return, and the traces of the morphological theory of culture found in the works of the Russian Pan-Slavist historian Nikolai Danilevsky and his precursor, the German historian Heinrich Rückert.

Nor was Spengler the only one who, following the First World War took to writing about Europe's fall. His magnum opus, the two-volume treatise on the history and philosophy of culture, *The Decline of the West* (published in German as *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, first volume 1918, second volume 1923), very quickly earned recognition. A contemporary of his was the Africa expert Leo Frobenius, who enunciated the idea of the natural, spontaneous, self-sufficient and rationally inexplicable development of a culture, created the theory of culture's organic growth, and believed that each culture had a mysterious substance or soul from which its unique forms emerged: he called this mystic soul of culture *paideuma*.

Prior to the Second World War a similar theory of a culture's organic growth and a morphological interpretation of history was developed by the outstandingly talented Austrian journalist, cabaret artist, historian and philosopher Egon Friedell, mentioned above. Like other Jews from Austria, Germany and, in fact, the whole of Europe, he was unable to change or cheat his fate. His sense of Europe's downfall, which he called the crisis of Europe's soul, was only a prelude to his own personal tragedy: when the Nazis came to arrest him, Egon Friedell took his own life by jumping out of the window.

What, then, did Spengler really teach? First of all, he reiterated a rather old German theory in the philosophy of culture about an

essential difference between civilization and culture, something already discussed (with the relevant distinctions) by Immanuel Kant in his 1784 treatise *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*. Kant believed that we were sufficiently civilized with respect to manners and politeness and were also cultured enough to appreciate achievements in the arts and sciences, but we still had a long way to go before we became truly moral creatures. Later German philosophers also distinguished between culture and civilization but did it differently: Spengler's way wasn't that of Wilhelm von Humboldt but that of Alfred Weber and Ferdinand Tönnies, especially that of the latter, who distinguished an organic community based on tradition (*Gemeinschaft*) and a mechanical, fragmented and atomized society (*Gesellschaft*).

For Spengler, civilization is the desiccation of creativity and the silent death of culture. Culture is not intellectual and theoretically sophisticated. It is a pre-phenomenon of history from which everything arises that we see and read in the annals of history. It isn't history that gives birth to culture but vice versa: culture is the possibility and reality. Therefore possible culture (*mögliche Kultur*) is the possibility of history, and real culture (*wirkliche Kultur*) is history itself, or culture-turned-history. For we are always faced by the world as nature and the world as history. The world as nature is governed by causality, and the world as history by blind and inexplicable fate. Culture has no causes; it develops and unfolds as a flower which gives us beauty but certainly does not exist for our sake. Culture does not reflect or explain itself: it is supported by faith, a spontaneous sense of meaningfulness, and a desire to exist. On the other hand, civilization does not want to be, but explains itself and the whole world perfectly: it is the home of death and of an empty, soulless intellectuality and self-interpretation bereft of any sense that being in this world is meaningful.

Civilization is the last stage of a cyclically existing culture, its going out quietly and dying. How does that happen? Faith withers, philosophy dies, the arts degenerate. Forms of culture are no longer imbued with any style, all is loose and lax and governed by arbitrary valuations and tastes. Philosophy regresses into a closeted activity. There is more of a philosopher in a scientist, financial expert or statesman than in a professor of philosophy. (Just as, according to Spengler, the faces of US politicians remarkably resembled those of Roman senators, thus illustrating the idea

of the end of a cyclically recurrent history, so a philosophizing financier like George Soros would probably have seemed to Spengler to support this insight.) Art has become a tiresome and senseless exposition of advanced techniques or else a toxic and self-destructive form of expression. Culture has nothing more to do with history and existence. The only problem which is truly painfully experienced by humanity is life itself – or, more precisely, making a living and surviving. It's difficult not to agree with him.

Spengler believed in culture's soul and the elemental integral idea within it. Here lies the source of the infinity of the Faustian soul (European culture). In Spengler's view, the Apollonian soul (ancient Greek culture) possessed as yet no idea of infinity, which originated with the Faustian soul and indeed became its essence. It permeated Europe's modern mathematics, physics, perspectival painting and Baroque music – especially music created by the principle of counterpoint in which several themes can be developed unto infinity: only the form of the composition requires that everything be crowned with a powerful coda. Spengler singled out the cantatas, fugues, choral preludes and concertos of Johann Sebastian Bach, but also highlighted the *concerto grosso* form and *tema con variazioni* as manifestations of infinity in music. It's interesting that in his biography of Ludwig van Beethoven, Romain Rolland almost identically described the sonata form as exhibiting the idea of musical infinity.

Nevertheless, there is one facet of Spengler's thought that is politically dangerous, theoretically weak, and most vulnerable to criticism: the idea that cultures are closed and should be isolated from each other. It recalls the father of racism, Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, and his claim that the mixing of races is bound to destroy the white race and Europe as a whole. The thought that cultures lead parallel lives and never interact, that trying to live another culture's life always ends in pseudomorphosis (that is, a deceptive distribution of forms and a reaction of rejection – just as, in his opinion, the case of Slavophile ideas in Russia shows that Russia never was and never will be a European country), has its provocative charm but nonetheless slides on the surface and fails to grasp a deep-lying dialogue between cultures and their close interpenetration throughout history. No elaborate theory is needed here: if truth be told, without the cultural influence not only of the ancient Greeks, Romans and Jews, but also

that of the Arabs, Persians, Turks, Armenians and Russians, contemporary Europe would be nothing but a fictional entity.

Spengler predicted that right-wing intellectuals would emerge and even gain popularity in times of anxiety, when a strong political and moral vocabulary is needed along with a strong theory providing answers to the essential questions of existence. A similar syndrome of strong answers to sharp questions in Russia ended with the historical triumph of Marxism and the emergence of a radical revolutionary Russian intelligentsia, whose members fatally simplified dramatic and tragic things in a way that could not be forgiven by the seven authors (especially Nikolai Berdyaev) of essays collected in *Vekhi* (Signposts) and edited in 1909 by the Russian literary historian Mikhail Gershenzon. Unsafety, uncertainty and insecurity – this unholy trinity of modernity – led to revolution in Russia, and that revolution opened the flood-gates to extreme left-wing totalitarianism. In the West this trinity led to extreme right-wing totalitarianism (though in reality both dropped out of the political spectrum and turned into a hard to identify amalgamation of the far left and the far right).

Let's not fool ourselves. Even though we live in what superficially may seem calmer and safer times, we are actually in a situation similar to that which evolved in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. Once again a counter-liberal dawn is upon us. Once again thinkers who raise sceptical questions, harbour doubts and make sophisticated qualifications convince ever fewer people in Europe. Liberal relativism, with its anthropocentrism and human rights ideology so offensive to the far right and its theoreticians, is becoming increasingly unpopular. Our differences from that other epoch less than a hundred years ago stem not so much from the presence of more goodness and a higher degree of humanism in our times as from the weakness, helplessness and ephemerality of evil. Nowadays evil does not choose Hitler or Stalin as its personification but takes on the anonymous forms of callousness and non-recognition. Evil in our days is much more difficult to recognize; it is much more successful at hiding under various masks of anonymity spouting quasi-liberal rhetoric than when it stood denuded without any camouflage.

Once again far-right intellectuals are demanded who will both reject the present day as a fiction and death, as a danger to tradition (which, incidentally, there is no attempt to reconstruct and



reconstitute but is only used as an embellishment for very modern rhetoric and practices), and also become a support for a new industry of moral panic. And from an exaggerated reaction to violence, social change and changes in personal behaviour – a phenomenon attested to by sociologists – this industry has grown into something organized, a part of politics, providing the public with safe objects of fear, shock and justifiable hatred. It's obvious that the weakest members of society as well as those for whom the 'moral majority' feels the least sympathy and empathy are best suited to become such objects.

However that may be, during Spengler's times a Shakespearean drama unfolded: the First World War, then the emergence of the Weimar Republic in 1919 and its collapse after 1930, an almost universal crisis of liberal democracy, and the arrival in power of the Nazis. Spengler reacted to these tectonic breaks in European politics, breaks which cardinally changed history and the world. He was by no means alone in his extremely conservative reactions: other right-wing intellectuals included his political hero Walther Rathenau as well as the early Thomas Mann and Arthur Moeller van den Bruck. These were not, in some respects, progressive thinkers of their age, but neither were they precursors to the Nazis; in Spengler's and especially Thomas Mann's case they were, instead, conservative intellectuals who were seeking new foundations for German conservatism.

The end of the world had come more than once. I agree with Tomas Venclova, who once observed that after the Second World War it is no longer worth doubting that the end of the world has already occurred. There's nothing more to foretell and to fear because the worst that can happen has happened. Now the only danger is that of systematically and consciously forgetting it, or of deliberately making it into a trivial, vulgar and distorted thing. Hence there's a question left open: where does the greater danger lie? Is it in the tragedy or in its forgetting; in the end of the world or in its inflation – the devaluation of its idea by proclaiming it, not to keep it in remembrance but to increase your electorate and win your elections?

It's possible that we are approaching such a level of political degradation that, short of declaring an end of the world, or at the very least Europe's fall, and accompanying this declaration with suitable visual materials, you will have no chance at all of being

taken seriously and becoming a public figure. This situation would create an atmosphere like that in seventeenth-century Holland described by Voltaire in his *Candide: or, Optimism*, when the Jansenists (disparagingly called the convulsionists) could get attention in Amsterdam's streets only when they declared the end of the world. Indeed, in declarations of Europe's death and the world's end, there lurks something of a secular, sect-like ersatz theology: no wonder S. N. Eisenstadt asserted that contemporary religious fundamentalists of various stripes are resoundingly reminiscent of seventeenth-century eschatological sects, except that the latter ruled no states and had no weapons of mass destruction.

Thus the bad news is not Europe's impending end but the sad fact that a provocative and interesting theory that once stimulated much debate can be turned into a political anecdote which today leads a shadow existence in the heads and writings of angry mediocrities as a tool for spreading moral panic. I'm afraid this is not only Oswald Spengler's posthumous drama, but also perhaps the true European tragedy he didn't write.

Be that as it may, today the question regarded as considerably more important is how not to raise a panic in the markets and how to send the right signals to the investors. Sometimes one dies laughing. At other times laughter chases away dying. We live in a period when your words send a message to the Holy Market. It's possible that it appreciates your humour. Maybe it will see in it signs of recovery and strength.

There is the story of when Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, on a dreary night, called Mikhail Afanasyevich Bulgakov to ask whether it was true that he wanted to emigrate from the Soviet Union. 'No, comrade Stalin,' answered Bulgakov. 'I am a Russian writer, to whom my homeland and language are the most important things. But if no one takes my plays and no one performs my works, how am I to live?' Stalin probably appreciated his courage in the face of death because he told him: 'Call the Moscow Art Theatre – they'll probably change their mind.' Without waiting too long, Bulgakov did just that. 'Mikhail Afanasyevich, is that you?' the head of the theatre's literary department asked him in a wavering voice. 'Why aren't you bringing us your plays, we're impatiently waiting for them.'

Guts and self-confidence in the face of death postpone the catastrophe. Everything has already been seen or heard somewhere;

still, everything always takes place for the first time. Or maybe the last, too.

And here is my long question, or rather a chain of questions and provocations, to you, Zygmunt. True, this was also part of Spengler's overall political concern, which resulted in his gloomy prophecies. Yet the new cultural pessimists in our era of disengagement, anaesthesia and flirtation with the virtual crowd and anonymous sentiment are devoid of the philosophy of culture. For theirs is a dream of how to combine the benefits of the global economy with the charms of homogeneity. A dream doomed to failure. Here we are in a huge field of tension stemming from globalization, where the will (and necessity) to use a foreign and cheap workforce, on the one hand, clashes with the hope of not taking on the culture of this workforce and remaining within one's own culture and identity zone, on the other hand.

How can a good life and the use of a foreign workforce be combined with maintaining a familiar culture, language and historical identity? This is the hidden drama of present-day Europe, which Alain Finkielkraut insightfully termed an 'unprepared America'. In fact, Europe sometimes sounds and seems like a failed America. This is nothing other than the question of power stripped of its metaphysical, educational and religious foundations, or just a sort of Spenglerism stripped of *Kulturmorphologie* and, subsequently, confined to the will to power or a longing for it in an era when colonialism and the 'white man's burden' are irreversibly rejected and hopelessly discredited. Or, if you will, a painful drama of the loss of power and influence in a world that hardly accepts any other logic than that.

Civilization is therefore a reference point and a metaphor behind which we find ourselves in a world of fear and angst. It is no longer a concept referring to cultural accomplishments; nor does it have anything to do with the German notion *Zivilisation* as something alien to the world of *das rein Geistige*, the pure spirituality that dwells in the realm of *Kultur* and *Bildung*, as Norbert Elias once put it so lucidly and convincingly. Civilization is no longer about the gain; instead, it is about the loss. It is hardly a reference to a set of accomplishments or to the world of modern solitude and alienation found in every big city; it is much more likely to appear as an interpretive framework for our hidden discontents, fear, hatred, anticipation of war and anxiety of destruction.

Can it be that civilization is no longer about the gain and that it is about the loss? Is the entire discourse of the West or Europe still an asset, or is it now a liability? Is it possible that Spengler has become a reference point in dealing with the *Kulturpessimismus* which appears as part of conventional political wisdom nowadays?

**Zygmunt Bauman** I am overwhelmed, dear Leonidas... A long time has passed since I encountered a similarly incisive, poignant and illuminating reflection. It is a truly breathtaking *chef d'oeuvre*, a genuine masterpiece for the likes of which one would have to search hard in contemporary social scientific writings – and even so most probably in vain. Spengler redivivus, his message vulgarized, disfigured, hardly decipherable and all but incomprehensible after years of market-stall handling by merchants of infotainment now once more restored by you to all its pristine brilliance and original and undying topicality.

Spengler's fate was anything but unique. The prophets of Armageddon cannot count on public sympathy and their chance to attract (let alone hold) public attention is close to nil unless they fix their vision at the level of fortune telling at a village fair or seaside resort, or compose their story under the authority of the Mayan calendar ending in 2012. Arthur Koestler observed in 1954, when he recalled and reassessed the way Europe had sleepwalked into Hitler's slaughterhouse, from which what remained of Europe had just emerged: 'behind the shallow truism that "history repeats itself" hide the unexplored forces which lure men into repeating their own tragic errors... The neurotic who each time commits the same type of error and each time hopes to get away with it is not stupid; he is just ill. And the twentieth-century European has become a political neurotic'.<sup>1</sup> But a moment later he reflected again on the peculiarity of that century-long fit of neurotics and hastened to modify his verdict: 'Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah were pretty good propagandists, and yet they failed to shake their people and warn them. Cassandra's voice was said to have pierced walls, and yet the Trojan war took place.' Isn't there

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<sup>1</sup>From Arthur Koestler's reminiscences symptomatically titled *The Invisible Writing* (Vintage, 1969), pp. 232ff.

something neurotic in the sheer fact of being human? At all places and all times?

Günther Anders coined the term ‘apocalypse blindness’ to denote that probably incurable ailment of humanity. But isn’t that ailment an inalienable feature of the human mode of being-in-the-world? There is an incommensurability between the cause-and-effect links that are so deceptively neat when they are confined to the narrow time and space of scientific laboratories and technological research and design offices, and another reality, the ‘temporal, regional and biographical mismatch between cause and effect’ (to quote Harald Welzer’s seminal *Climate Wars* again) where ‘what might be done today would have no visible or tangible result for a number of decades’ (p. 132). Already there have been ‘unexpected technological, natural and social disasters that have exceeded the capacity to visualize and master them’, and there will be plenty more. ‘Technological, natural and social disasters...turn out to be *unimaginably* large, with no prior frame of reference capable of comprehending them.’ What will the outcome be for humanity’s self-confidence in its own ability to tackle the Apocalypse once it strikes (no ‘if’ here), let me ask? And the consequence of the temptation to turn one’s eyes away, for the sake of sanity and at least a residual hedonism, from the signs of its approach? The psychological impact of disasters has an inbuilt, self-intensifying potential and rising capacity to disorient, disarm and disable. To quote Welzer again: ‘Social disasters destroy social certainties: things that used to be taken for granted in everyday life suddenly become undependable; formulas for behaviour prove unworkable, rules cease to be valid’ (p. 135). Escaping that impact, if it is at all conceivable, wouldn’t suffice to rearm the disarmed and reassure the bewildered and confused, however. This is because ‘at the moment when history is taking place, what people experience is the “present day”’; ‘original events usually escape perception, precisely because they are unprecedented; people try to insert what is happening into their available reference framework’; ‘those living at the time of an event know nothing of how a future observer will see what is today’s present and tomorrow’s history’ (pp. 143–4).

Wisdom, like Franz Kafka’s Messiah, will come only on the day after its arrival...

But let's return to your superb *ex post facto* exposition of the posthumous life of Spengler's heroic attempt to break the above rule and reverse the procedure...

Having so vividly sketched the creed and dramatic itinerary of the *Kulturpessimismus* camp, you can now count me in... At least this is what most of my readers and listeners do. I have travelled a lot in recent years and lectured in many countries, but whatever the country and whichever the audience one question was almost invariably asked in the discussion that followed: Dear Sir, why are you such a pessimist?! With one symptomatic exception, though: when the topic of my lecture was the condition and prospects of Europe – then someone in the audience would surely ask me why I am such an optimist...

Mentally, perhaps viscerally as well, I rebel against the charge made against Europe that it is an 'unprepared America'. From my perspective, Europe is rather to be commended for its preparation to resist (if only partly, nevertheless to some significant degree) the tides of imposed or welcome Americanization. Somehow, despite all the evidence to the contrary, ample and profoundly depressing evidence, as I willingly admit, I can't accept that Europe has run out, or is near to running out of steam and its own, all-too-European momentum. I go on believing that the obituaries written for the great and unique historical adventure called 'Europe' or 'European civilization' are, to borrow Mark Twain's witticism, somewhat (if not grossly) exaggerated, and that Europe, however serious its numerous shortcomings and misdemeanours, has nevertheless acquired an awesomely precious, indeed priceless, dowry of skills and know-how, which it can still share with the rest of a planet that needs them now more than ever for its survival.

I can hardly prove my point; as a matter of fact, only the future (that by definition does not yet exist) can do that. I base my belief on hope, on that *third* stance which exposes the binary of optimism versus pessimism in the division of available *Weltanschauungen* as wrong, because not exhaustive. And I attach that hope to Europe and only to Europe, because it was Europe that invented the first, and so far the only self-critical and self-transgressive mode of being-in-the-world, a mode of being that consists in a *perpetual becoming* and, as Ernst Bloch put it bluntly, in *living towards the future*. All extra-European cases of a similar nature were imports from Europe and/or carry, despite all their local

idiosyncrasies, indelible marks of European inspiration and influence. Other civilizations have set their eyes and focused their acumen, cunning and contrived adroitness on freezing and ossifying, whereas Europe lives by thawing and melting – of which it was an uncontested pioneer and remains a grand master. Some other civilizations might have outscored Europe on stability and a capacity to arrest history, but Europe beats them all on adaptability and a capacity to set things in motion – all the way to thorough overhaul, innovation and reincarnation (your brilliant recycling of Spengler’s dark premonitions into a call-to-arms is another poignant manifestation of that outstanding European aptitude and dexterity). And it is precisely this ability, or its absence, in the present condition of the planet (borrowing from Antonio Gramsci, I call that condition, summarily, the state of ‘interregnum’) that is fast turning, into a matter of life and death, for humanity as a whole.

You name quite a few quandaries faced by Europe which have been left far from resolved or have been downright ignored and neglected. You are right. You point out the pulverization of the inherited and extant agencies of collective action and the bankruptcy of the ostensibly tested and viable means of such action. You are right again. Alas, unavoidably, and through no fault of your own, the picture you have drawn is as unprepossessing and discouraging as it is true. All the same, what you have done is to uncover the *grandiosity and unwieldiness of the task Europe is currently facing – not the inevitability, or even likelihood, of Europe’s failure*. The distinctive traits of the unique mode of life called ‘European civilization’ – its inborn transgressiveness, its by now instinctive tendency to aim at what-is-not-yet and its endemic disaffection with what-has-already-been-done, as well as its inbuilt resistance to turning that disaffection into an opprobrium cast on having acted in that way – are precisely the necessary conditions of effectively facing up to the challenge (even if they are, perhaps, insufficient, though that possibility cannot be tested in advance). The present need to rethink, refurbish and recreate the current manner of being-in-the-world, as well as its urgency, are not the first potentially morbid challenges in Europe’s history, and that fact, if anything, gives a reason to be hopeful.

And that despite the undeniably dark clouds currently gathering over the future of the European Union. It is becoming ever clearer

that none of the inherited and extant political agencies, originally designed to serve a society integrated at the nation-state level, is fit for that role in Europe; none is resourceful enough to match the volume and gravity of the current, let alone future, tasks. In so many countries, even the most resourceful among them, citizens are exposed day in, day out to the unedifying spectacle of governments looking to the 'markets' or to the 'decisions of investors' (the nickname for speculators in currency and stocks) for permission to do, or a prohibition of doing what they would like to do – and, in particular, what their citizens dearly wish and demand them to do. It is 'the markets' now (not without the connivance or even the explicit or tacit endorsement and sponsorship of the helpless and hapless state governments) that have usurped the first and the last word in negotiating the line separating the realistic from the unrealistic. And 'markets' are a shorthand name for anonymous, faceless forces with no address: forces elected by no one and which no one is able to constrain, control and guide.

The gathering and well-founded popular impression, and increasingly expert opinion as well, is that elected parliaments and the governments which parliaments are constitutionally obliged to direct, monitor and supervise are incapable of doing their jobs. Neither are the established political parties any more capable of performing their jobs, notorious as they are for retreating from their poetic electoral promises the moment their leaders enter ministerial office and find themselves confronted with the prose of market forces and stock exchanges overwhelming and untouchable, well beyond the reach of the authority ascribed to and/or tolerated in the organs and agencies of the ostensibly 'sovereign' nation-states. Hence the deep and deepening *crisis of trust*. The era of trust in the capacity of the nation-state's institutions is giving way to an era of institutional lack of self-confidence and a popular mistrust in governments' ability to act.

The idea of the territorial state's sovereignty goes back to 1555, to a meeting called in Augsburg by the warring dynastic rulers desperately seeking an exit, or at least a respite, from the protracted gory and devastating religious wars tearing Christian Europe apart; it was then that the formula *cuius regio, eius religio* (he who rules determines the religion of the ruled) was coined. The ruler's sovereignty suggested by that formula, as elaborated by Machiavelli, Luther, Jean Bodin (in his exceptionally influential



*De la République* published twenty-one years after the Augsburg treaty) or Hobbes, meant the full, unconstrained right of kings to proclaim and execute laws binding whoever happened to inhabit the territory under their rule (variously described as ascendancy, supremacy or dominance). Sovereignty meant supreme authority *within a territory* – unconstrained by external interference and indivisible. Since its inclusion in the political vocabulary, the concept of sovereignty has referred to a territorially confined state of affairs and territorially fixed entitlements. As Machiavelli argued, and all politicians worthy of that name were to reiterate afterwards, the sole obligation of the Prince is to *raison d'état* – 'état' being acknowledged as an invariably territorial entity defined by its borders. As the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* puts it, 'sovereign authority is exercised within borders, but also, by definition, with respect to others, who may not interfere with the sovereign's governance' – those 'others' being, obviously, authorities that were also territorially fixed, though located on the other side of the borders. Any attempt to meddle with the order of things established by the sovereign on the territory of his rule therefore becomes illegal, condemnable, a *casus belli*. The Augsburg formula may be read equally as the founding act of the modern phenomenon of state sovereignty, and, simultaneously and necessarily, as the textual source of the modern concept of state borders.

It took almost a hundred years more of bloodletting and devastation, however, until 1648 and the 'Westphalian sovereignty' agreement negotiated and signed that year and the year before in Osnabrück and Münster, for the principle recommended by the Augsburg formula to take hold in European social and political reality: the full sovereignty of every ruler over the territory he ruled and its residents – that is, the ruler's entitlement to impose 'positive' laws of his choice that would override the choices made individually by his subjects, including the choice of the God they ought to believe in and must worship. It was this formula that was inadvertently destined to provide, by the simple expedient of substituting 'natio' for 'religio', the mental frame or stencil used shortly after to create and operate the (secular) political order of the emergent modern Europe: the pattern of the *nation-state*. That nation-state consisted of a *nation* using the state's sovereignty to set apart 'us' from 'them' and reserving for itself the monopolistic, inalienable and indivisible right to design the order binding on the

country as a whole, and of a *state* claiming its right to the subjects' obedience by invoking the commonality of national history, destiny and well-being – those two constitutive elements of the pattern being presumed and/or postulated to territorially coincide.

That historically composed pattern, chosen from many other conceivable, feasible and plausible ordering principles, was 'naturalized' in the course of subsequent centuries – endowed with the status of self-evidence and unquestionability – in most of Europe, as well as gradually yet steadily being imposed by Europe-centred world empires on the planet as a whole. That took place in and through a long series of wars waged against local, all-too-often stubbornly resistant realities (think, for instance, of the crudely and bluntly artificial 'national borders' of postcolonial states that could barely contain tribal feuds within them, or the gory fate of the post-Yugoslav republics). When, after the horrors of the twentieth century's thirty years of world conflict, the first attempt in history was undertaken to establish a plausibly sustainable consensual order of planet-wide peaceful cohabitation, it was on the Westphalian model of sovereignty that the Charter of the United Nations was founded – by an assembly of rulers of sovereign states called to collectively monitor, supervise and defend tooth and nail that state of peaceful coexistence. Article 2(4) of that Charter prohibits attacks on the 'political independence and territorial integrity' of other states, while Article 2(7) sharply restricts the possibility of outside intervention into the affairs of a sovereign state, however outrageous those affairs might be.

We still live in the 'post-Westphalian era', licking still the unhealed (perhaps incurable) wounds which the *cuius regio, eius natio* rule has inflicted and continues to inflict on social bodies seeking or struggling to protect, retain or strengthen their integration. The process of emancipation from the shadows cast by 'Westphalian sovereignty' is protracted and so far it has been painful and anything but uniform. While many powers (finance, commercial interests, information networks, the drugs and weapons trade, criminality and terrorism) have already obtained the freedom to defy and neglect that phantom, in practice if not in theory, politics (the ability to decide how and why powers are to be deployed) is still smarting under its constraints. The conspicuous absence of global political agencies capable of catching up with the reach and capacity those powers have already achieved,

and regain its lost control over them is arguably the main obstacle on the rough and bumpy road towards a 'cosmopolitan consciousness' matching the new global interdependence of humanity.

As indicated, the United Nations, an institution brought into being as a reaction to wars initiated by acts of aggression perpetrated by some sovereign nation-states against the sovereignty of other nation-states, and the institution coming closest to the idea of a 'global political body', has the entrenchment and unyielding defence of the Westphalian principle written into its Charter. The kind of 'international' (read, interstate, intergovernmental, inter-ministerial) politics which the UN is bound to promote and practise, and the only one it is permitted to or can promote and practise, far from being a step on the road leading to a genuinely global politics, would prove to be a major barrier across that road, were it ever to be taken. On a somewhat lower but structurally homomorphic level, look at the fate of the euro, and the absurdity of a common currency served and sustained by seventeen finance ministers, each bound to represent and defend his or her country's sovereign rights. The plight of the euro, exposed to the vagaries of local (nation-state) politics smarting under pressures from two distinct, starkly heterogeneous, uncoordinated and thus not easily reconcilable authoritative centres (a nationally confined electorate and supranational European institutions, all too often instructed to act, and acting, at cross-purposes), is just one of many manifestations of a *double bind*: the condition of being clenched by a vice, immobilized and incapacitated between the ghost of the Westphalian state sovereignty on the one side, and the realities of global, or less than global but nonetheless supranational, dependency, on the other. When I write these words, the debate conducted by the twenty-seven member states of the European Union on the ways to save the euro, Greece and perhaps the European Union itself has been suspended until the Greek and French parliamentary elections (with the possibility of grave consequences from reaching a point of no return, and a certainty of yet more collateral damage brought down on Europe as a whole by another month of the free-for-all presented to the stock-exchange gamblers and currency speculators).

To put this in a nutshell, we are still deprived of an equivalent or homologue at global level of the institutions invented, designed and put into operation by our grandfathers and great-grandfathers

at the level of the territorial nation-state in order to secure a marriage of power and politics: institutions to serve, or at least intended and pressed to serve, the coalescence and coordination of diffuse interests and opinions, and their proper representation and reflection in the practice of executive organs and in universally binding codes of law as well as juridical procedures. What is left to us is to wonder whether this challenge can be met and this task performed by the extant political institutions, created and groomed as they were to serve a quite different (nation-state) level of human integration and to protect that level from every and any intrusions 'from above'. It all started, let's recall, from the monarchs of Christian Europe fighting to stave off the pretences of Popes to oversee their dominions ...

For a few centuries, that inherited settlement was relatively well attuned to the realities of the time, a time of power and politics locked in each other's company at the level of budding nation-state, a time of *Nationalökonomie* and of Reason identified with *raison d'état* – but this is no longer the case. *Our interdependence is already global, whereas our instruments of collective action and the expression of our will are still local and stoutly resisting extension, infringement and/or limitation.* The gap between the scope of interdependence and the reach of the institutions called on to service it is already abysmal, yet day by day it is widening and deepening. Filling or bridging that gap I regard as the 'meta-challenge' of our time – one that ought to be at the top of the preoccupations of the residents of the twenty-first century: a challenge that needs to be adequately met so that other challenges, lesser but derivative and inseparable, can start being earnestly, properly and effectively confronted.

There are reasons to interpret the initiatives taken by Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet, Paul-Henri Spaak, Konrad Adenauer and Alcide De Gasperi immediately after the end of the Second World War – to build a political superstructure over geographic Europe – as a reaction to a perceived fall in European self-assurance. It must have been obvious to those sober-minded activists that Europe's position in the world could not be sustained by the scattered, uncoordinated, often inconsistent actions of relatively small and weak, in any case not mighty enough, territorial nation-states. Before attempting to rebuild Europe's standing in the world, it was first necessary to reconcile its warring nation-states.

It is too early to sum up the results of this historic initiative. After all, the founding fathers of political Europe undertook quite a task – the building of a pan-European, transnational solidarity intended to unify the historically, albeit spontaneously created and long-established local solidarities which for hundreds of years had reasserted their identities by stirring up and stoking the fires of discord with their neighbours. There are those who doubt the possibility of such a transnational solidarity, known sometimes as ‘a sense of European identity.’ Nation and state, they say, are conjoined once and for all, in the eyes of God and of history, and only within this framework can human solidarity be a natural attribute of human coexistence; without a historically formed national destiny, only fragile, unstable and inherently temporary alliances are possible, entered into through tedious negotiation and sensible, but unenthusiastically accepted compromise.

Jürgen Habermas provided the toughest of arguments against this view, pointing out that democratic order need not be supported by an ingrained idea of ‘nation’ as a pre-political community of fate and destiny – that the might of a democratic constitutional state is based precisely on its potential to create and recreate social integration through the political engagement of its citizens. National community does not *precede* political community: it is its ongoing and perpetually reproduced *product*. The claim that a stable and self-perpetuating political system cannot exist without a consolidated ethno-cultural entity is neither more nor less convincing than the claim that no ethno-cultural entity is capable of consolidating, and acquiring the strength to self-perpetuate, without the help of an efficient political mechanism.

Speculating about the relative values of these opposing views has little chance of being fruitful, since the dispute can, and will, only be settled authoritatively by political will and the institutional achievements of Europeans (unfortunately, so far making their importance felt mainly by their invisibility) and not by philosophical deliberations, however subtle or logical. Let’s face it – the jury is still out on the fate of political unity in Europe and it is hard to say whether there is progress or regression in the matter. After the Lisbon Treaty and the establishment of the offices of European President and Head of European Diplomacy, both positions were

filled by individuals distinguished solely by their lack of clarity or authority... (Lately, travelling as I do, a great deal around Europe on lecture tours, I often ask people I meet if they know the names of the European President and the Head of Diplomacy, but I am still waiting in vain for an answer.) Not being a prophet, and not having acquired from my sociology studies the qualifications for being one, I shall refrain from passing premature judgement. I would like to share with you, however, one observation that sociological diagnosis does authorize me to make. Wherever its roots or the source of its power, the stimulus to political integration and the factor necessary for progress, is a *shared vision of a collective mission*. A unique mission, and what is more, a mission to which an existing or planned political body is particularly predestined, a mission furthermore which only that body and that body alone is capable of taking on successfully. Where are we to find such a mission in our Europe of 2012?

It would appear, and luckily so, that we will find it neither in military might nor – considering the economic miracles that are happening before our very eyes from China to Latin America – even in economic power. There is another sphere in which the historical experience of Europe and its acquired skills are second to none. And since it so happens that this sphere is literally a question of life and death for the future of the planet, then the value of what we, Europeans, can bring as a legacy for equipping the rapidly globalizing world cannot be underestimated. A globalized world, that is to say a world of universal interdependence, needs it more than anything else in order to aspire to what Immanuel Kant identified as *allgemeine Vereinigung der Menschheit* (a general unification of humankind), and by extension also to universal, worldwide peace. This legacy is the historical shaping of European culture and our contribution to it today.

Europe was able to and did learn the art of living with others. In Europe, as nowhere else, ‘the Other’ is the neighbour next door or across the hall, and Europeans, whether they like it or not, must negotiate the terms of neighbourhood in spite of the differences and the otherness that separate them. It is impossible to overstate the importance of that chance, and the importance of Europe’s determination to take it. Indeed it is a *sine qua non* in times when only friendship and robust (or in today’s parlance,

*proactive*) solidarity are able to lend a stable structure to human cohabitation. It is in the light of those sorts of observations that we Europeans should be asking ourselves the question: what steps are we to take in order to realize this vocation?

Seen from a bird's eye view, the world today appears to be an archipelago of diasporas; by their nature, diasporas pose a large question mark over the hitherto unquestioned assumptions about the inevitable correlation of identity and citizenship or habitat, of spirit and place, of a sense of belonging and territory. The whole of Europe is transforming before our very eyes, though in different regions and at different rates, into a mosaic of diasporas (or, to be more precise, into a collection of overlapping and intersecting ethnic archipelagos). With no policy of forceful assimilation, it is possible to effectively safeguard one's national identity on one of the diaspora islands, as one would at home. Perhaps even more effectively, since, in exile (whether as a refugee, an émigré or a deportee), this identity, as Martin Heidegger would have it, changes from something obvious and 'given' (*zuhanden*) into a 'task', something requiring constant attention and energetic effort (*vorhanden*). And in negotiating desirable identities, neighbouring or intermixed diasporas may also enrich one another and grow, not diminish in strength.

It is high time to bring back into our collective memory the fact that a conflict-free, mutually beneficial cohabitation of different cultures was for centuries considered the norm in many parts of geographic Europe defined as 'central', and continued to be so until very recently. If we believe Titus Livius, historian of the rise of the Roman Empire and author of *Ab urbe condita*, the rise of Rome from humble beginnings to ecumenical stature and the glory of an empire six centuries later, was due to a consistent practice of granting all conquered and annexed peoples full citizenship rights and unqualified access to the highest offices of the expanding country, while paying due tribute to the gods worshipped by the newcomers and granting them equal rights in the Roman pantheon. The Roman tradition of respect for the different cultures and the conventions, for the multiplicity rather than the uniformity of life forms (for solidarity achieved not *despite* but *because* of their differences), which underpinned the flowering of the empire, was not, as it turned out, to be inherited by the heirs of the Roman Empire or observed later in Europe's

history. Where it did continue, in its residual form, it was only on the outskirts of the past empire, far from the absolutist monarchies with their rivalries for supremacy in the European balance of power.

As Western Europe plunged into a century of bloody and destructive wars of religion, sowing the seeds of hereditary animosity, a significant part of Europe east of the Elbe was able to stay away from fratricidal massacres, thereby protecting the legacy of religious (hence – *avant la lettre* – cultural and community) tolerance. An outstanding example of an alternative to the Westphalian system was the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a Polish-Lithuanian state known for its generosity in granting self-governing powers and independent cultural identities to the ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities spread throughout its territory. In this way, it avoided the bloodshed and other religious atrocities that befell their other, less fortunate neighbours to the west, whose wounds then took centuries to heal. However, partitions effected by its voracious neighbours – dynastic monarchies of overt or covert national ambitions – dealt a fatal blow to this unique Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Cultural autonomies, fortunate majorities and unfortunate minorities alike, were subjected to forced Russification in the east, and a no less, perhaps even more ruthless Germanization to the west, supplemented by intermittent religious wars such as the anti-Catholic offensives of the Orthodox and Lutheran churches. Only areas to the south, annexed by a monarchy aspiring to principles close to those of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, escaped a similar fate.

History books credit modern history *ex post facto* with promoting the principles of tolerance, yet there is no doubt that cultural intolerance was an inseparable companion of the two major and tightly intertwined modern endeavours – that of nation-building and that of state-building. National languages called for the stifling and delegitimization of local dialects, state churches demanded the suppression of religious ‘sects’, and ‘national memory’ called for the annihilation of local and collective memory. Only one great European monarchy, close to the geographical centre of Europe, resisted this popular tendency right up to the outbreak of the First World War. This was Austro-Hungary, covering a large area populated by numerous



ethnic groups of a great variety of cultures, and governed from Vienna, at that time a cultural hothouse and a breeding ground for the most fascinating and far-reaching contributions to European philosophy, psychology, literature, music, and visual and dramatic arts.

It is no coincidence that it was there that a theory, or rather a programme, of political integration took root, based on the postulate of national/personal autonomy (*persönlich Prinzip*, as the most famous of its proponents, the Marxist writer Otto Bauer, would call it). Referring to Karl Renner's essay/manifesto *Staat und Nation*, Otto Bauer's book *Die Nationalitätenfrage und die Sozialdemokratie*, published eight years later, presents that postulate as a way of 'organizing nations not into territorial bodies, but into free associations of individuals', that is to say, a way to separate, or free a nation's existence from its dependence on territorial prerequisites, and *political* integration from *national* identities. A similar principle was formulated and promoted by Vladimir Medem, member of the Jewish Labour Bund, who referred for his part to the experiences of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In an essay published in Yiddish in 1904, entitled 'Social Democracy and the National Question', Medem proposed among other things that 'citizens of the given nations unite into cultural organizations practising in every region of the country' and that 'every citizen of the state would belong to a national group, whose choice would be left to his personal preference, rather than controlled by any administrative body'.

Those postulates and hopes found themselves amongst the casualties of the First World War. At the gathering of victors at Versailles, Woodrow Wilson, updating the Westphalia agreement of 1648, and raising its ideas to the rank of universality, proclaimed the indivisible sovereignty of a nation on its territory to be an indisputable principle of humanity (an idea which shocked Hannah Arendt, fully aware that the 'belt of mixed populations' in the Balkans, but also common throughout Central/Eastern Europe, was utterly unsuited to principles such as *ein Volk, ein Reich*). But even Wilson's ignorance, or arrogance, could not prevent another, admittedly half-hearted and short-lived attempt to find a form of coexistence better suited to the reality of overlapping and intersecting archipelagos of ethno-cultural diasporas,

in the form of Yugoslavia. And yet even that attempt was to be a few decades later, without much success, reduced to the perimeters of Bosnia – a region of long-lasting peaceful coexistence of many ethnic and religious groups, which nevertheless required a similarly mixed environment to survive. This environment destroyed the viciousness of ethnic cleansing initiated not least through the fault of the highest European authorities. It was, after all, Helmut Kohl who, in a moment of carelessness, disastrously blurted out that Slovenia deserved independence because it was ethnically homogeneous – a statement interpreted (undoubtedly against his intentions) as an official licence to expel and massacre...

It has now fallen to all of us as Europeans, however, to live in an era of advancing and possibly unstoppable diasporization, and thus with the prospect that all regions of Europe will be transformed into ‘bands of mixed populations’. According to the latest demographic predictions, the number of inhabitants of the European Union (currently around 400 million) is set to shrink to the order of 240 million in the next fifty years, which would effectively render obsolete the kinds of lifestyles we are accustomed to and are interested in maintaining. Demographers tell us, furthermore, that unless at least 30 million foreigners settle in Europe, the European system will be unable to survive. If there is any truth in these predictions, we must prepare ourselves for the possibility that this situation (brought to the boil, with tragic consequences, by the imposition of the principle of *ein Volk, ein Reich*) may well emerge in Europe as a whole. We are all, I repeat, changing, at different speeds but inexorably, into what Hannah Arendt termed a ‘belt of mixed populations’.

‘Proactive’ responses to the emerging situation are few, sluggish and painfully slow however – provoked by pressure or blackmailed by an occasional flaring up of tribal sentiments, they are offered with no particular enthusiasm; and yet the future of Europe’s political and cultural existence depends on rethinking and reversing the trends of the last four hundred years of European history. It is high time to consider whether the past of the geographically central part of Europe might not be the future for European politics and culture. In fact, might it not be the only future capable of safeguarding our European civilization?

LD

### Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island*: A Novel Warning

Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* is a twenty-first century novel of warning. This term applies to works of literature (basically dystopias) that take on utopian narratives, themes and subject-matters and then bring them to their logical conclusion by showing where the utopias finally end when they are turned into reality. That utopias are indeed implemented was well understood by Nicholas Berdyaev: his words that the time had come not to dream of utopias but to save humanity from their being realized have served as an epigraph for Aldous Huxley's dystopia *Brave New World*.

Novels of warning foretold the trajectories of modern world history better than all the cultural pessimists did, with their dark theories of cyclical history and culture. After the First World War, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* became the first novel of warning that admonished humanity about where modernity would lead if no one stopped its totalitarian and totally emancipated version, with its system of complete surveillance, transparent glass buildings, the demise of the family and the end of the humanities in their world of human studies: all this issuing in a society governed like a technological project from which what early modernity knew as love and friendship had vanished.<sup>2</sup>

Both Huxley's novel and George Orwell's *1984* would hardly have been possible without Zamyatin's brilliant insights and Chekhovian sensibility and subtlety in revealing humanity's true hell. The latter, it turns out, always resides not in failed social visions and dreams, nor in paroxysms of violence and brutality, but in our impaired powers of community, in the constricted ties of our humanity, in the loneliness that kills, and in the death of a former love that has turned into treachery, hatred or, even worse, icy indifference. In this respect, Michel Houellebecq, with a shattering accuracy and out of an almost weird literary loyalty, is

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<sup>2</sup>Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Mirra Ginsburg (Harper Voyager, 2001).

continuing the work begun by the dystopias, warning humanity about the direction we are rolling in and what we will soon experience.

Usually held to be one of the Russian Serapion Brothers (who included such impressive writers and literary scholars as Mikhail Zoshchenko, Viktor Shklovsky, Vsevolod Ivanov, Veniamin Kaverin and Lev Lunts), Zamyatin is justly praised for prophesying the emergence of totalitarianism and envisaging the aims of the future mega-machine era. Even more important, in my view, is that he was one of the first to foresee the death of the humanities, and undoubtedly the first to uncover the passing of the world of feelings, which means that in the new world it is no longer possible to understand what created and underpinned European culture – neither Dante, nor Shakespeare, nor the whole great literature of the Renaissance and the Baroque.

Mikhail Bulgakov foresaw Satan's entry into the world in the guise of anti-human modernity, though in his *Master and Margarita* the Prince of Darkness Woland could still say that manuscripts don't burn. But later there came a time when it transpired not only that they did burn but also that they no longer meant anything to humans. This was not because no one read them. Orwell guessed that sooner or later totalitarianism would destroy language and the zones of sensitivity that enable us to recognize the great texts of literature and philosophy. He understood that modernity would struggle against the past and memory, those homes of our dreams and alternatives. But the truth that Zamyatin opened up for us – and Michel Houellebecq, that genius of psychological and sociological insight, most profoundly developed – is that soon Dante and Shakespeare will no longer mean anything to us because we no longer experience the feelings and human dramas that gave rise to these immortal works.

*The Possibility of an Island*, that gospel of modernity turned upside down, might be compared to Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: Houellebecq's narrator Daniel calls himself a Zarathustra of the present-day middle class, but he describes those whom Nietzsche's Zarathustra calls the last men. Houellebecq's novel lays bare the death of God in a rather unexpected way: He dies as social and human ties are snuffed out.

Interestingly enough, this philosophical implication of the novel (so close to your thought, Zygmunt) reaches back to

Giambattista Vico's *La Scienza Nuova*, a work in which God's existence is proven through the powers of human community and civil society: sociability, language and feelings. In short, if you weaken or destroy the foundations of human sociability, the sphere of language and feelings, you hand human beings over to Satan: this is the theological and philosophical implication of the *New Science*. Vico also mentions the *bestioni*, the new barbarians, insensitive to everything, who emerge after the returns and repetitions (*ricorsi*) at history's end. Resembling the giants still popular in Renaissance literature, in Houellebecq's novel they are rather members of the new humanity: people whom nothing binds to each other; people of pure intelligence but bereft of emotions and feelings. Is the death of sociability indeed the death of God?

Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* is a literary equivalent of what Oswald Spengler and Egon Friedell (and Nietzsche before them) were trying to express in philosophy, and Thomas Mann expressed in literature. It is a *Bildungsroman* for our times, or, much more accurately put, a *Zivilisationsroman*, keeping in mind what Thomas Mann thought of the *Zivilisations-literaten* headed by his elder brother Heinrich Mann (even though later Thomas Mann himself became a secular, rational, 'rootless' and cosmopolitan world author of the type he despised in his youth). It would be possible to claim that Houellebecq embodies exactly that type of writer, only taking this form of writing to its very death. Like avant-garde music which, as Theodor W. Adorno put it, negates reality by its very form and affirms only its own death and the impossibility of existing in reality as it is, Houellebecq's novel is a work that destroys itself.

So what kind of world does it reveal? Recalling Sławomir Mrożek's words that tomorrow is the present day except that it comes a day after, we can try imagining a world that jolts us not because of what it has in store for us tomorrow (global nuclear destruction, which Houellebecq describes and the possibility of which almost no one in the depth of their soul doubts) but because of what is already happening here and now right before our eyes. The reality of *The Possibility of an Island* is the individual's total isolation accompanied by society's atomization and fragmentation. We often hear and read these terms and know what they mean, but we chase away the thought that the phenomena and

processes they denote are part of existing reality rather than just a theoretical abstraction or possibility.

Here we directly confront these processes and see where they lead. All that's left of human ties is just an all-embracing and paralysing fear of death. And beyond that there's only emptiness and the dread of extinction. Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* is a sociological theory of society's death, a theory cast in literary form and developing a convincing narrative. The death of sociability in late modernity is no fantasy at all. People no longer want to be together. They no longer have any reason to stay with one another. The new exodus, the dispersal of small poor nations is no news and no sensation. Just look at Lithuania or, more obviously still, Armenia.

Just as, according to Houellebecq, Marxism was killed by the same country in which it was turned into a secular state religion (Russia), and just as Islam will die where it was born, in a Middle East to be permeated by modernity, the sexual revolution, women's emancipation and the cults of consumerism, youth, individual liberty, success and sensual pleasure, in the same way nationalism and the quest for collective ideals and dreams will be sacrificed in the regions where it once was lively and strong: the small nations of Europe. These countries are no longer unified by the theological and philosophical doctrines or dogmas for which people sacrificed themselves or, more often, killed others; they are unified by their fear of ageing and by their contempt for the old body. As Houellebecq sarcastically states in a throwaway line: 'life begins at fifty, that's true; inasmuch as it ends at forty'.<sup>3</sup>

Our culture today uses a concern about, and struggle for equality and human rights as a mask to cover its indifference, its consumption of itself and others, its turning away from faces and eyes, its safe isolation. Thus our culture is ready to live with everything except senescence. Sooner or later this culture will attempt to break the last taboos, those against paedophilia, cannibalism and incest. These aren't what shake us down to our depths – it is death and extinction that cause real terror in our hearts, especially in an age when science, technologies and genetics bring us ever closer to the manufacturing of life and immortality.

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island* (Phoenix, 2006), p. 16.

What's terrible is not the prospect we will all die, but the possibility that we'll miss by a decade or two the time when geneticists breed a race of wealthy supermen who'll leave all their riches to a technological or social engineering group posing as an eschatological sect waiting for the end of the world (like the Elohimites of Houellebecq's imagination).

Philippe Ariès in his study *L'Homme devant la mort* (in English as *The Hour of Our Death*) wrote that the modern West clinicalized and isolated death. Now it is about to do the same with old age, that prelude to death that continuously awakens our fear of extinction. Death is simply no longer acceptable to a modern being thirsting to be young. Equally unacceptable is the senescence that is a merciless reminder of death's inevitability. Modernity is the war that metaphysical youth (eros, sex, desire, passion) wages against metaphysical senescence (a detached life without desires, without the intoxication of using oneself and others, without excitement and playfulness). Hence Daniel<sup>25</sup>, the genetic DNA descendant of the narrator, Daniel<sup>1</sup>, lives the life of an oldster. This is the way reason and isolation retaliate against emotions, passion, desire and feelings; the way old age takes revenge on youth.

The essence of contemporary culture and control is to excite desires, inflame them to the maximum, and then curb them with extreme forms of restraint. This is how the Devil plays with modern society, alternating between a carrot and a stick. The idea is to provoke and to prohibit, to awaken an all-embracing sexual desire and then to repress its satisfaction. Leading an individual inexorably towards desiring and yearning is both to take away his or her power of self-control and to appropriate someone else's dignity: you see a being, no longer resembling himself or herself, deformed and inflamed with desire, but one whom you successfully control. You've aroused desires and you know what that being yearns for above all and how they could at any time be seduced – you know this, yet you are able to tell them where to go and thus take away their final shred of self-respect and dignity.

What happens to love and eroticism? Their place is taken by masturbation, this 'sex with the only person I really love' (a phrase attributed to Woody Allen, but probably belonging to Jacques Lacan). It's no longer an encounter with another body and soul, but a continuation of technological man's self-sufficiency, simply exciting and stimulating oneself in virtual

space through pornography. The eros of dying sociability is just sex without feelings and a sexual life without deeper experience. It's mechanical, without laughter, tears, jealousy and a wish to flow, and be, together. The effective use and abuse of oneself and others becomes the sole strategy in life. We each have a beginning and an end, so let's use each other before our validity expires: this is an open secret but it seems to be the only strategy fit for people's mutual relations in contemporary life.

Houellebecq makes evident one more current phenomenon – the new determinism, this failure to believe that even rational, critical and liberally minded people can change the direction of civilization. In *The Possibility of an Island* there is no insurrection, rebellion, disagreement or holding of different opinions. In this world there are also no longer any protesting or dissident people who have resolved to make their individual experience a political and public one, that is, there are no intellectuals. Only an angry and venomous humour is left, this disguised form of hatred, and also a lucrative and useful undertaking thanks to which the novel's (anti-) hero and narrator becomes a rich man. Engaging in some light social criticism but occasionally taking risks and even walking on a razor's edge, Daniel carves the most obscene humour out of a tree of deep enmity and hatred – the relations between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, but also the mutual antipathy between the European lower middle classes and successful immigrants to Europe. Hence the successful, recognition-bringing salacious stories mixed together with political allusions: Palestinian Arab whores, Israeli pornography, and so on.

The thing is that the whole world has turned into politics. And that has abolished the stereotype and silliness dictated by primary experience. Humour will leave the scene with them, for humour was born of nothing other than stereotype and an aura of safe silliness in an insecure world – in other words, helplessness. And politics is empowerment; therefore it hates helplessness. Jewish humour was a perfect example of being outside the field of power; while political humour nowadays, safely flirting with power, is politics par excellence. It's no longer an anti-structure or linguistic carnival, as Mikhail Bakhtin might say; just a gentle adjustment, light as a summer breeze, of the political structure and field of power. It's also a warning to the effect that you're not alone here, gentlemen: we, too, want power – so share it, or you'll perish.



Houellebecq plays the game of rejecting political taboos. He makes embarrassing and shocking points that once earned the likes of Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and Otto Weininger, held today to be textbook misogynists, a bad reputation. In Houellebecq's words, 'women in general lack a sense of humour, which is why they consider humour to be one of the virile qualities'. Almost the same thing was asserted by Otto Weininger in his *Sex and Character*; to which we can add that the latter didn't doubt that women and Jews (beings he thought similar in psychological-historical type) didn't have a sense of humour and therefore could be mean and spiteful. Just as, in Weininger's view, neither women nor Jews had a feel for aesthetic form; hence they couldn't become great graphic artists like Van Dyck. These and similar expressions read today like examples of overt and repugnant anti-Semitism and misogyny, yet Houellebecq seems to believe that a writer can be absolved from hate speech and similar abuse inasmuch as he plays the game of pushing us to the limit – as if to say that we have to spell out that enough is enough, sending a message that morally misguided and politically ambivalent literature can be as toxic and dangerous as the politics of hatred.

These things are by no means accidental. The new determinism, fatalism and pessimism is a Western intellectual topic that leads us inexorably back to the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the extinction of the great culture of Vienna prior to the Second World War, with its Spenglerian *Schicksal* and Freudian discontent. Our epoch is one of determinism, fatalism and the total absence of alternatives. The love of one's own fate, no matter what it is, an *amor fati* as in Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*. As you, Zygmunt, once said, *The Possibility of an Island* is a renewed version of *The Decline of the West*, retracing the dynamics of ruins in our historical imagination – from a total, unified structure to a fragment, from a form of national rationality to an individualized rationality, from solid modernity to its liquid phase.

To be sure, rejecting Spengler and writing him off as an antiquated and superficial thinker after the Second World War was a case, rather, of renouncing the form of his thought: after all, Spengler was accepted by those devotees of the *Bildungsroman* and cultural pessimists who read Thomas Mann and took his *Magic Mountain* seriously, as well as by those who at the beginning of the twentieth century did not write off Nietzsche as a madman and

anti-philosopher. It was only later that Western nominalism and methodological individualism did its work: scholars rejected not only Spengler's tendency to employ biological metaphors and look for isomorphisms and analogies, but also the morphological depth of his philosophy of culture, his subtle interpretations of cultural time and space. They threw the baby out with the bathwater.

In many ways Houellebecq does what Spengler does – only differently. His epoch is no longer one of the cyclical interpretation of history and of the *Bildungsroman*. Houellebecq is a master of sociologically perceptive narration and at the same time a sociologizing novelist. Or perhaps a sociologist of culture's crisis masked as a writer of fiction. Houellebecq's power of suggestion lies in his grasp of the language of his time: he is an interpreter of a world taken over by the fear of death and extinction, the cult of pleasure and consumption; a sensitive cynic (to use an oxymoron); and a man without a skin and open nerves but with a field of power, a man who has turned his scoffing and humour-wrapped hatred into a commodity and a tool of success.

The emancipation of the individual leads to the implosion of the great religions. Houellebecq foresees not only the sunset of Christianity already happening but the impending one of Islam; thus the Muslim-haters and those paranoiacs who identify all evil with Islam can rest quietly: good news and satisfaction is waiting for them. Islam will be destroyed by feminism and the sexual revolution. The only thing that has a chance of surviving in the world is the totally manipulative, hedonistic and immortality-affording 'Elohimite' movement, a sect with its own ersatz religion. With it there'll remain and gain ascendancy all the following: fatalism, determinism, dreams of immortality, and the technocratic elite's promise of liberating mankind from its unbearable burden of freedom, of openness to death and of the consciousness of its own finitude. In this one knot are tied and mixed together the dream of immortality, the cult of pleasure, technological society, a power of control that unconditionally believes in, while secretly hating, itself, a cult of youth and a stigmatization of old age. Showing contempt for growing old easily becomes a caricature of itself: the world is full of seventy-year-old young men and similarly aged young women to whom nothing is more important than hiding their true age and successful intercourse with a young partner.

Houellebecq transfers the logic of determinism to human relations as well. These relations are born, they mature, then wither and die, like bodies, societies and cultures. Without the relations between man and woman expressed in words, a meeting of the eyes, touching, undressing, confessions, erotic fantasies, sex, eternal and fatal tension, and all the possibilities of starting and ending a relationship and being disappointed, human relations quickly peter out, even though, according to Houellebecq, they are condemned to end, in any case. The history of human relations is always cyclical: they begin, develop, then wither and quietly fade away.

Only a loved one or friend breaks out of the cycle and overpowers it. Conquering the cycle of human relations and their death constitutes the very essence of love and friendship. For boredom and a sense of futility is the fate of technological man, as Malcolm Muggeridge wrote; and determinism and fatalism are aspects, or even necessary conditions, of technological society (the new humanity, as Houellebecq would put it). There are no alternatives to this epoch and its spirit of self-destruction. Because no one lives for anything that is beyond us, or at least isn't ourselves, nothing can become a great existential concern or challenge, other than life itself.

The same was affirmed by Spengler: this civilization will lead to a quiet extinction of the West, accompanied by a dramatic self-interpretation. The sense of impending death maximally expands interpretive capacities. They are directed not towards the reality outside us but towards ourselves: this is the psychological culture of our daily self-discovery which actualizes ourselves but not our ties with other people. All that's left of society are atomized, lonely, fragmented individuals with impaired powers of association: their only problem is with themselves and their impending death and extinction. A living culture creates its own and life's forms; a dying culture no longer creates anything but only interprets itself. The happy do not count the hours, as folk wisdom tells us: this corresponds philosophically to the Spengler-Houellebecq idea that time becomes a problem only to someone who has no other goal or source of meaning than the continuation at any price of their own life, or who feels that the eerily ticking clock is counting out not minutes but seconds. Time is an illness, and its quickening beat is a sharpened sense of death.

When life itself becomes the only problem, the extension of one's own life (projecting this on to the nation or state itself, making it into a question of biological survival represented as an alleged concern with unique historical entities and forms of their unique creativity), as well as dreams of immortality attained not through fulfilment of a transcendental promise but by science, genetics, technologies and instrumental rationality, become the only significant reality. Not freedom, not self-realization, but the extension of one's earthly life and a mechanical immortality – if that is possible, of course.

No, it's not immortality through creativity, love, children, friends and the extension of another person and their thought through one's own sensitivity or interpretation. It's our own immortality or recurrent self-renewal, achieved in the same way that good technologists secure the longevity or the repeated renewal of a building, construction, machine or instrument. Such a fantasy of immortality testifies not only to a dead religion, an exhausted and dissipated faith, but also to a desiccated sociability.

What is the message that Houellebecq's Daniel and his beloved dog, Fox (together with all their subsequent reincarnations), send to the world? It's that we, that is, the last persons on earth, no longer love people. We love animals. For dogs as well as people are renewed. A dog passing away at his master's feet when the master knows that after this dog there will be another one, which will also pass away, becomes not a painful experience but just the realization that something you have got used to and taken pleasure from will have to be replaced by another package of life. Here we approach the essence of the Faustian soul – not only the idea of infinity but also the thirst for immortality, which issues not in a pact with Satan but in a dedication to science and technology (which might come down to the same thing, with a different narrative: it is not in the name of infinite knowledge and infinite love that immortality is sought, but in the name of that same life defined in its own terms – and nothing more).

Manufactured life is Faust's grand theme. Let us recall the medieval *Miracle of Theophilus*, Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Goethe's *Faust*, and the Renaissance idea of the *homunculus* – in Houellebecq's novel of warning all this becomes not literary conceit but reality. The consequences to the world and humankind of factory-produced life were already intimated in

Mikhail Bulgakov's stories *The Fatal Eggs* and *Heart of a Dog*. The latter's hero, the biologist Professor Filip Filippovich Preobrazhensky (whose name in Russian means a magus having the power to transfigure the world), undertakes not to turn a dog into a man (the latter would be serendipity, that is, an unexpected and unplanned scientific discovery or a side-effect becoming a discovery), but to rejuvenate a human organism, which is good news to the world and for the professor's grand mission. As Spengler would say, the contents of the Faustian soul – the ideas of infinite knowledge, mathematical infinity, infinite sets, polyphony in music and perspective in painting – now transmute into a dream to live forever, to survive financially and not to fail politically.

Does hope remain? Is there an alternative? After all, the world of evil, whether we return to the classical theories of theology and ethics or to an entirely secular interpretation of evil, is a realm without any human sympathy, any compassion, love or friendship. Still, Houellebecq leaves us with a hope. Just like his brilliant insight that true talent is always inevitably accompanied by naivety (a conniving and manipulative person is rarely talented), so his words about love being a mixture of desire and compassion become the hope of liquid modern man. Paraphrasing Houellebecq I would say that love is a fusion of desire and compassion in the face of inexorably approaching old age and death.

Daniel's short and unhappy love for Esther, like his sincere affection for Fox – that's hope. If the demise of powers of community, society and sociability is the beginning of the end of the world, and individuals who use but do not want to see and hear one another hasten mutual self-destruction, then this cycle can be overcome only by a victory, even if only momentary, against determinism: for example, an unexpected expression of compassion. The withdrawal of Daniel<sup>25</sup> from a predicted and unalterable state, to which the new people have been condemned by the Supreme Sister and the Seven Founders, becomes an act of hope. The withdrawal of Maria<sup>23</sup> a little earlier also becomes a protest and a challenge. So does leaving behind Plato's *Symposium*, in which Aristophanes expounds his conception of love – an easily crumbled manuscript that Daniel<sup>25</sup> still manages to read in time.

For, as Michel Houellebecq would say, the history of human relationships is always cyclical: they come into existence, develop, then wither and die. But hope lies in the fact that, as we've already

said, there is someone who breaks out of this cycle and vanquishes it: a loved one or a friend. This overcoming of the living cycle of human relations and of their demise makes up the very essence of love and friendship. And of the hope that, as Dylan Thomas put it, ‘death shall have no dominion’.

**ZB** I could not agree more with your unpacking of Houellebecq’s dystopian message. Indeed, Houellebecq’s greatness is manifested in doing for us the work in which we should all be, but are not, engaged: in ruminating on the shape of things as they are bound to come if that work is not picked up and pursued.

Indeed, what if...?

What if we succeeded in our present dream of a fear-free existence, and our audacious project to make that dream come completely true, once and for all, by conquering fear’s most indomitable, prohibitive and unconquerable fortress – human mortality?

What if our – the moderns’ – long march towards a life free of inconveniences, discomforts, discomfitures, and worries reached its horizon, and no hardships or annoyances remained for us to be troubled by and to be forced to fight?

What if the project of remaking the world into a place more hospitable to humanity was fully and truly, irrevocably, abandoned, and we settled for securing comfortable enclaves for a worry-free existence (i.e., estates meant for single occupation, as genuinely worry-free abodes need, by definition, to be) in the midst of a savaged and savage, alien and alienated, world?

What if we no longer needed to dirty our hands because we had washed off all the greasy soot of responsibility for anything except ourselves?

What if the present-day efforts to separate and isolate ourselves from anything troublesome and from every source of anxiety, rather than facing them point-blank, succeeded in reaching their manifest or latent objectives, and the *Lebenswelt* of the ‘neo-humans’ thereby created (‘neo’ by contrast with the human beings who, in Aristotle’s theory and Socrates’ practice, require a polis for living) was at long last emancipated from the banes of nosy neighbours, meddling strangers, quarrelsome antagonists and intimate friends, wearing their hearts on their sleeves, their arms open for a hug?

Houellebecq's *Possibility of an Island* is indeed the first great, and thus far unrivalled, dystopia destined for, and made to the measure of, the liquid, deregulated, consumption-obsessed, individualized era of modernity...

LD

### Loyalty, Treachery, Situational Conscience and the Loss of Sensitivity

Dear Zygmunt, I am tempted to look at the loss of sensitivity in liquid modernity through the fate of two phenomena that are inseparable from modern moral and political sensibilities – loyalty and treachery.

We live at a time when human beings are totally determined by their situation and are constantly taking themselves apart before desperately trying to reassemble themselves again. Ernest Gellner hit the mark by dubbing these heroes of modernity *modular man*,<sup>4</sup> with reference to the furniture that was popular in England in the 1960s. The idea was simple: pieces of furniture could be assembled and put together as you wished. If your financial resources permitted, you could buy enough components to make a table, chairs and cabinets; if they were modest, a smaller quantity of these same components would suffice just for a bed. There was nothing fixed there; everything could radically change the next day.

According to Gellner, the fate of modular furniture befell modern human identity. It can be fabricated in any way you like. On the one hand, this is part of the project of modernity and its great promise: human beings no longer belong to anyone or anything with their whole personality for all their life; therefore, they freely choose their forms of community, associations and organizations. If you rent an apartment, pay your landlord all the rent due and then decide to rent another flat, no one will consider your decision to be a breach of trust and an act of disloyalty, much less of treachery. The same logic applies to your participation in clubs,

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<sup>4</sup>See Ernest Gellner, 'The importance of being modular', in John A. Hall (ed.), *Civil Society: Theory, History, Comparison* (Polity, 1995), p. 34.

societies and associations. You freely joined them, and you can equally freely relinquish them without necessarily having to justify yourself or getting a stigma or badge of dishonour.

On the other hand, and paradoxically, the disappearance from our lives of a unique way of choosing forms of life, a social environment and life partners has caused a veritable revolution in modern existence. If membership in a club or community is not rigidly fixed and is readily changeable, then inevitably things enter into our lives that perhaps we didn't want, but they are part and parcel of modernity's package. Take it or leave it. Together with a modular, freely created and recreated identity, we also inexorably get the unavoidable fact of our mutual exchangeability. No institution becomes yours by any fundamental one-time ethical choice. You find yourself belonging to a nation in one of two ways – either by default, without anybody so much as thinking about it, just by conveniently evading any tormenting dilemma requiring an existential answer, *or* by choosing it as a project of a community of memory and sentiment, by exchanging rings of the imagination, so to speak, and thus by joining your biography to the history of something bigger than you.

Gellner openly put the label *nationalist* on nineteenth-century modular man. For a long time the liberal project was indeed a loyal friend, perhaps even a brother to nationalism; only later did they become foes, when under the influence of Social Darwinism and racism, radical nationalists began to strip nationalism of its lovely Romantic component and take on the view that what animates a nation is not a disdain for empires, nor a resolve to struggle and die for an ideal of freedom that brings humanity closer together, but a biological principle, the call of blood and soil, a fate stronger than can be sealed by even the most beautiful use of the language, cultural fidelity, and devotion to the country's freedom and well-being. Nationalism dissolved empires, brought down monarchies and gave the coup de grâce to Europe's aristocracy: old Europe ceased to exist as soon as it became clear that the majestic culture of Europe had been built on a union of imperial power, tradition and faith, a foundation so evidently meaning the subjugation of other nations and countries.

At the same time the epoch of modular man fashioned social, political and cultural masks that concealed the dark side of modernity. Together with freedom there came social mobility and the



opportunity to create bonds not through your class, faith and laws, that is, through loyalty in the classical sense of that concept (being on this side of, rather than beyond, juridical and political space), but through language, the same newspapers read by everybody, common trajectories of memory, and a territorial (no longer regional and local, but state-territorial) and historical feeling of attachment.

Add to this the new polemicists and journalists of public life, who discover not only forms of the past but their own alleged affinity to the common man – even though the passages produced by a sophisticated left-leaning journalist or a conservative historian of noble birth about the common man are often no more than a manufacture of, and search for solidarity within themselves even as they try to convince themselves that they are looking for, and struggling on behalf of the truth. And what is history to the non-historian? Isn't it something that resembles what doctrinal disputes become not to the expert of canon law or the theologian, but to the ordinary person?

Briefly put, the genie is out of the bottle. You can become what you will. Your nation is something you choose – just like any other fundamental form of modern identity. This is the source of your remarkable insight that the weaker our powers of community and our culture of bonding become, the more fiercely we search for our identity. The essence of being human does not lie in self-definition. If our sociability is impaired and we no longer have any powers of communion, then identity becomes a meaningless quest for masks. For, after all, identity acquires meaning only in virtue of a connection with somebody else. It isn't what we think about ourselves. Identity is our tender dream about our similarity to those we wish to identify with, and also about our differences from them. It is also what others dream, think, and say of us.

Thus in addition to the modular man there is another excellent metaphor, or perhaps a whole story, for modernity. That's Don Juan, who in your eyes – recall your *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* – is its real hero. *Chi son'io tu non saprai* ('Who I am you won't know'): these words from Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, words written by the librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte (who had Don Juan getting intimate with two thousand women) reveal the crux of the modern manipulator's asymmetry. You won't see me because I'll withdraw and leave you when it'll no longer be

safe for me to stay with you and reveal too much of myself and my hidden suffering or weakness. Who I am, you'll never know, but I'll find out everything about you (of course, that's a man's tragic illusion: he will never know anything about a woman – the only thing he can do is hurt her and make her unhappy).

This is not Charles Baudelaire's *flâneur* wandering about town, seeking to experience it, trying eagerly to catch intense, passionate, burning or, alternatively, modest, stealthy and quick glances, as the last stanza from *À une passante* has it: 'Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais, Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!' (For I know not where you fled, you know not where I go, O you whom I would have loved, O you who knew it!). This is the fear of being recognized because you are planning a treachery and hence cannot reveal your hand. On the other hand, it's the fear of putting a stop to changing and searching. Don Juan, after all, equates happiness with change – he is searching for a woman of perfect beauty; therefore, any enduring connection with, or longer lasting look at her will sooner or later sow a doubt as to whether there isn't an even more beautiful woman somewhere around the corner. Thus happiness consists in the good fortune of being fast, effective, unrecognized and, most important of all, unburdened by any deeper commitments.

According to you, Don Juan, or Don Giovanni, is the hero of modernity because for him the meaning of joy and existing is velocity, change, variability and the chance of always starting anew, as if it were possible in human relations to gain something meaningful without continuous conversation, participation of feeling, communication and the giving of oneself. Don Juan is the champion of fast, intensive, strong experience, pleasure and seduction (that is, manipulation and the exploitation of someone else's trust).

Here we come face-to-face with the question, 'What, in our epoch, happens to, or more accurately, becomes of such fundamental things as loyalty and treachery?' Let's start with the observation that both do exist, yet it is ever more difficult clearly to recognize, name and define these fundamental forms of human relationship. Why? Because these concepts no longer stir us. They don't leave us with any deeper experiences. They're like King Lear who left his riches and powers to his two elder daughters, Goneril and Regan; disowned the only authentic being in his

family, his youngest daughter, Cordelia; and finally was left with only his Fool.

In an epoch of situational man constantly changing himself and his story (or the legend of his descent), loyalty becomes something uncomfortably moralizing, old-fashioned, rigid, inoperative, needlessly complicating life. Hence the inability to discern loyalty's depths. For faithfulness is not a weakness, an aversion to risk and a fear of making changes, as contemporary people formed by listening to business gurus or reading fashionable magazines will undoubtedly surmise; rather, it is the strength to brave the dangers of self-revelation and to survive the final knowledge of oneself.

Fidelity is founded on a deep paradox and an asymmetry that is quite unlike what Don Juan stands for: it is the courage to reveal one's weaknesses and limitations to a loved one while at the same time not wishing to see the display of one's febleness that endless changes would only provoke. In other words, it is to abstain from intense changes directed only at oneself which would deform one's character and the bases of love or friendship. It is a resistance to change and to the intense new experiences that in our popular culture are seen as keys to happiness.

The formula for fidelity and love is as follows: you will find out my name and everything about me for sure, but I am not totally certain whether I wish to know everything about myself – if that discovery happens without you. If it is with you, then fine, I'm ready.

Sandro Botticelli, through his model Simonetta Vespucci, would say this about love: 'I love what I eternalize, what humanity won't be able to turn its gaze from, what it sees with my eyes.' Pedro Almodóvar would speak up through his films: 'I love those to whom I want to speak, I love what, when I see it, I can't stop talking about.' I guess David Lynch might say: 'I love those with whom I want to joke around, whose smile I long to see, whose laughter I want to hear.'

Faithfulness is the desire to talk, to make jokes, to offer revelations about oneself and the surrounding world, and to do this together with a chosen other. Not alone, not with just any other, but with a loved human being. Loyalty is the strategy of discovering this world together. Milan Kundera has written that to be is to exist in the eyes of the one you love. Treachery is capitulation, surrender and a failure to open up yourself and your human

potential in the company of one human being. It is to fragment yourself into episodes from which you can no longer pull yourself together into one whole. It is an escape from discovering yourself through one human being – your lover or friend. Or treachery becomes your defeat by the fear that soon that weakness which you tried with all your strength to hide will be revealed. It is then that brief encounters help: the more often and the more briefly you're together with accidental partners (even if you call them friends or lovers), the easier it is to conceal your inability to create long-term relationships, which require hard work with yourself.

A human being's unknowability (more accurately, a refusal to know him or her as no more than a physical object or part of nature, without their own free participation), the belief that God manifests himself in human beings through a human connection, love, friendship, powers of community and sociality – these are the impulses that compel us not to go on looking for something else. The woman loved becomes the most beautiful one, and not the one whose look hasn't yet caught yours, the one whom you haven't yet seen in the crowd, the one fantasized about who hasn't yet wreaked havoc on your soul. You refuse to know the other completely, for that would be like believing you can know God – after all, it's we who are His creatures.

You can know only your own text or creation, or the cultural and historical forms created by humankind in general, as Giambattista Vico thought in the eighteenth century. He didn't believe that the Cartesian project of knowing the world would be crowned by success and make humans happy. It's not mathematics and the quest to explore nature, but trying to solve the riddle of human sociality through language, politics, rhetoric, literature, rituals and the arts that will become the royal road to oneself. We cannot know ourselves as the work of God. We can only interpret our own works. In any case, God is within us as our power of community and sociality: love and faithfulness are His language in us. But you cannot hope to know everything about a human being and think you can know them to the end because in that way you destroy their freedom and uniqueness. Besides, a person has a right to inviolability and to that which he doesn't want to reveal to anyone, to secrets that ought never to be verbalized or discussed.

It's not for nothing that Bruno Bettelheim proposed a new interpretation of Charles Perrault's fairy tale *Bluebeard*: he guessed

that what lay behind the cruel punishment or revenge was a drama of treachery.<sup>5</sup> The forbidden room, in his view, represented something that couldn't be trespassed on without violating the space of another person's dignity. One ought not to know all about another person because that destroys his or her integrity, freedom and inviolability, and also deforms our own relations with that other human being. Bettelheim surmised that behind Bluebeard's closed doors there lay a drama of faithlessness and treachery, and that treachery would tell us about other impermissible things and expose in us forces and impulses that a wise and moral person tries to suppress.

It's illicit and dangerous to know everything about the other. Or about oneself. If you want to know about yourself, it is meaningful to do so only with another and through another, with their observation and participation – in other words, through love.

Self-knowledge in isolation from the other produces monsters of reason and imagination. Knowing another while seeking to remain unknown and invisible destroys sympathy and human empathy. If you want to know another person, you can aspire to this only through empathy and love, but not by making the other person into a field of observation, a set of data or a tool of doctrine. If you love a person, then refuse to know everything about her or him. This is an impulse negating what is peculiar to Don Juan. A wise person deliberately does not want to find out everything about himself without the participation of the person he loves. For without love and loved ones you will discover within yourself a monster – sooner or later.

But Don Juan remains alien to this moral logic. *Chi son'io tu non saprai*. I know, but you don't. I experience, but you do not. I see you, but you don't see me. I seek another person's self-disclosure and self-revelation without giving even the tiniest bit of myself in return and not revealing either my feelings or my pains or the true condition of my soul, and sometimes not even my name. The asymmetry of power putting on the mask of passion. The desire to categorize the other, to pigeonhole her or him a while creating an illusion of feeling and a legend of passion. The

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<sup>5</sup>See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Penguin Books, 1991), p. 300.

failure to experience feeling and passion while simulating having and losing them – these are forms of modern ambivalence that we can find in Don Juan’s meandering subject-matter and its later interpretations, already at some remove from Tirso de Molina’s original version and its medieval ancestors.

Stefan Zweig, in his perceptive essay on Don Juan and Giacomo Casanova, convincingly exposed the irreconcilable differences between these two European (anti-) heroes. Don Juan is a collector of women whom he doesn’t really love: what is important for him is to establish a relationship of conquest, a relationship of having a woman right there, of using her body and physical beauty, a relationship of availability and manipulation, in short. Casanova, on the other hand, according to Zweig, sincerely becomes enamoured of women and makes them feel like queens: he genuinely believes he has fallen in love with them and endeavours to give a woman as much joy and pleasure as possible. Casanova is a perfect lover and a virtuoso of short-lived romances. Don Juan also engages in short-lived affairs and then quickly withdraws, but he doesn’t genuinely fall in love and nothing quivers in his soul when he permanently breaks up with a woman.

They are both heroes of modernity in that they masterfully construct short-term relationships. It’s ironic that today we have to mobilize business managers, administrators, communication specialists and producers to create the miracle of a short-lived fascination for, and being liked by large groups of people; while Don Juan and Casanova were indeed the classical protagonists of this technique of evanescent relationships, though each in his own way, as we’ve seen.

You can’t know everything about yourself and your future. Knowledge of his destiny killed the Scottish warrior and nobleman Macbeth. If it weren’t for the witches’ prophecy, the protagonist of William Shakespeare’s tragedy would not have committed crimes for the sake of gaining the crown and power and would not have betrayed his king, Duncan, and his closest friend and brother-in-arms, Banquo. Finding out his destiny or desiring to prove himself by finding out everything (in our popular culture that would be experiencing everything and being seen by everyone while you ‘experience everything’): this was fatal. Macbeth ascertains his fate in the absence of his friends, and therefore his loneliness leads him tragically to betray them. For friends are an

alternative to blind fate. And Macbeth did not have the courage to embrace this alternative.

The secret services of our day, their obsession for knowing everything and then destroying people by blackmail, are contemporary realizations of a Satanic topic in Baroque literature. It is enough to recall Luis Vélez de Guevara's novel *El Diablo cojuelo*, whose more famous version was later created by Alain-René Le Sage as *Le diable boiteux*. As I have mentioned previously, in these novels the Devil knows everything that happens in people's households, knows all the details of their secret and intimate lives: their feelings, betrayals, bestialities, deceits, their poisonings for money and for inheritances, their histories of bankruptcy and success, their revelries, lecheries and love affairs. To the student who freed him from a magus's spell, the Devil displays the whole panorama of Madrid's nightlife.

It is interesting that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries being robbed of one's intimate life and privacy or their disclosure to others was held to be a Satanic act. Nowadays people themselves happily do this on various TV reality shows or when they become politicians, stars, victims, or the main actors in scandals. If we believe the moral implications of Baroque literature, it is we who have taken over Satan's 'values' and live by them even when we practise modern forms of exorcism and use violent means to convert others to our faith.

From the epoch of Niccolò Machiavelli onwards a quiet revolution has taken place in the process of becoming a personality. If the criterion and definition of truth given by, among others, Thomas Aquinas (the correspondence of a thing to the intellect: *adaequatio rei et intellectus*) was still operative in science and philosophy, it undoubtedly ceased to hold in practical life and politics, where it was no longer believed that power derived from God and that politics is intrinsically an abode of virtue and a form of wisdom. The modern revolution engineered by Machiavelli's political thought is best embodied in his concept of *verità effettuale* (efficacious truth), whereby truth becomes practice – in fact, practical action. Truth in politics is reached by the person who generates action and achieves results, but not by the person who defines, articulates and questions (in the light of virtue) or examines (in the context of the classical canon) that action and those results.

The politician who creates an enduring practice, who transforms an idea into an action and who institutionalizes that idea is the one who has truth on their side. How a politician does all that is of secondary importance. It is not the goal that justifies the means that comes to be considered right, historical and immortal, but an actor who wedges his sceptics and critics from all periods and from a variety of cultures into the same form of politics and life. Truth is counted as what continues to be remembered, while failure is condemned to die and to be stigmatized as fiasco and shame. Truth is success, and, conversely, success is truth. Survival at the cost of virtue and higher morality sounds out as an early voice of the modern world; only later will that voice be caricatured by Social Darwinists and racists as the symbolic centre of the struggle to survive.

The tyrant who has centralized the state and liquidated his opponents becomes father of his nation, but a despot who has tried to do the same but has lost out or has failed to reach all his goals earns universal scorn and is actively forgotten. Forces that have successfully executed a coup d'état or revolution become heroic insurrectionists against reactionary, morally bankrupt institutions, but if they are unsuccessful they become mere conspirators or rioters. Shame and stigma attach not to a rejection of virtue, to an embrace of wickedness and to an active choice of evil, but to a loss of power, to an inability to hold on to it, to suffering defeat. Power is honoured, but utter powerlessness or even just weakness does not deserve a philosophical conception of its own or any kind of sympathy. In this paradigm, sympathy and compassion are due only to those who do not participate in the sphere of power. But if you are in it, it is either success that awaits you, or else death and disappearance. Death can be a simple forgetting: they are the same.

That is why, in this paradigm of modern instrumentalism, treachery is easily justified: if it ends in the retention or enlargement of power, it is easy to position it as a painful sacrifice in the name of the state or as a big and common purpose or ideal. But if the treachery ends in failure and the conspirators suffer a fiasco, then with help from symbolic authority and the state machinery it is securely placed in the exalted category of supreme disloyalty to the state – *high treason*. If the conspiracy went well and the head of state or of the institution is liquidated or at least compromised,



then the conspirators become patriots and statesmen; but if the old system prevails and sweeps up all those who organized the conspiracy, the latter are not only destroyed but left to history as traitors and persons incapable of loyalty, that is, as weaklings all around. Finally, there is also a metaphysics of treachery: it can be explained as disappointment with former friends, partners, companions-in-arms and ideals, but that doesn't change the heart of the matter. A treachery interpreting itself in this way sounds like a naive hostage to self-suggested disappointment and to the discovery of a new world, but its deep causes lie somewhere else.

In our days treachery has become the chance, fortune and practice of situational man, a pragmatist and instrumentalist torn from his human essence and isolated from and by other people. As is well known, remorse and guilt today have become political commodities in games of public communication, just as careful doses of hatred have. Perhaps infidelity has become not so much an article of trade as an element of instrumental reason and situational virtue.

In a world of intermittent human ties and of inflated words and vows, faithlessness no longer shocks. When fidelity ceases to be at the centre of our personality and a force that integrates all of a human being's identity, then treachery becomes a situational 'norm' and 'virtue'. Treachery, it seems, has been turned upside down into a virtue and a norm of contemporary politics, only short-lived and situational like Gellner's modular man and his constantly changing and transformed 'commitments'.

For it is only in relations of true fidelity that the concept of treachery and the practice deriving from it get their sense. Where there is no loyalty and fidelity, treachery is just a routine everyday act of breaking one's word and lying, justified by a constant and dramatic change in the situation (alleged or real), 'new challenges' and 'unforeseen circumstances'.

Our current world is slowly turning us into small Don Juans. It's not only sex without feelings, physical intimacy without love, being together without an all-pervading sense that this is fragile and that therefore such an encounter ought to be looked at as a miracle that will vanish if we don't do anything. It's also fabricating one's success and building one's legend at other people's expense, using them as situations, fragments and individual components of one's own project.

So let's not ask in what shape or form we will sooner or later meet up with the Stone Guest from *Don Juan* and *Don Giovanni* – Donna Anna's father. He will come like those things that return like a boomerang, things we openly laugh at in this global epoch of youth and the cult of the young body: old age, loneliness and forgetting.

It's worth remembering that nothing in human history has ever conquered this – except love, friendship, loyalty, and their honest, faithful midwife, the spirit of creativity.