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Badiou: Notes From an Ongoing Debate

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Introduction - Two dialectical axioms

In his *Logiques des mondes* (Badiou 2006), Alain Badiou provides a succinct definition of “democratic materialism” and its opposite, “materialist dialectics”: the axiom which condenses the first one is “There is nothing but bodies and languages ...,” to which materialist dialectics adds “... with the exception of truths.” This opposition is not so much the opposition of two ideologies or philosophies as the opposition between non-reflected presuppositions/beliefs into which we are “thrown” insofar as we are immersed into our life-world, and the reflective attitude of thought proper which enables us to subtract ourselves from this immersion, to “unplug” ourselves, as Morpheus would have put it in *The Matrix*, a film much appreciated by Badiou, the film in which one also finds a precise account of the need, evoked by Badiou, to control oneself (when Morpheus explains to Neo the lot of ordinary people totally caught (“plugged”) in the Matrix, he says: “Everyone who is not unplugged is a potential agent”).

This is why Badiou’s axiom of “democratic materialism” is his answer to the question of our spontaneous (non-reflexive) ideological beliefs: “What do I think when I am outside my own control? Or, rather, which is our (my) spontaneous belief?” Furthermore, this opposition is immediately linked to what (once) one called “class struggle in philosophy,” the orientation most identified by the names of Lenin, Mao Zedong and Althusser – here is Mao’s succinct formulation: “It is only when there is class struggle that there can be philosophy.” The ruling class (whose ideas are the ruling ideas) is represented by the spontaneous ideology, while the dominated class has to fight its way through intense conceptual work, which is why, for Badiou, the key reference is here Plato – not the caricatured Plato, the anti-democratic philosopher of the aristocratic reaction to Athenian democracy, but the Plato who was the first to clearly assert the field of rationality freed from

inherited beliefs.

After all the bad words about the "phono-logocentric" character of Plato's criticism of writing, it is perhaps time to assert its positive, egalitarian-democratic, aspect: in pre-democratic despotic state, writing was the monopoly of the ruling elite, its character was sacred, »so it is written« was the ultimate seal of authority, the presupposed mysterious meaning of the written text was the object of belief par excellence. The aim of Plato's critique of writing is thus double: to deprive writing of its sacred character, and to assert the field of rationality freed from beliefs, i.e., to distinguish logos (the domain of dialectics, of rational reasoning which admits no external authority) from mythos (traditional beliefs):

The significance of Plato's criticism thus appears: to remove from writing its sacred character. The way to truth is not writing but dialectics, i.e. the spoken word with its implication of two or rather three parties: the speaker, the listener and the language they share. With his criticism, Plato, for the first time in man's history, distilled the notion of rationality as such, free from all mixture with belief. ^[1]

(The qualification I am tempted to add here is that, perhaps, one should nonetheless suspend Badiou's understandable reticence apropos "dialectical materialism" and turn around the subject-predicate relationship between the two opposites: "materialist democracy" versus "dialectical materialism.")

The Third Moment of Politics

There is a more constrained anthropological version of this axiom: for democratic materialism, "there is nothing but individuals and communities," to which materialist dialectics adds: "Insofar as there is a truth, a subject subtracts itself to all community and destroys all individuation." (Badiou 2006: 9-17) The passage from the Two to Three is crucial here, and one should bear in mind all its Platonic, properly meta-physical, thrust in the direction of what, prima facie, cannot but appear as a proto-idealist gesture of asserting that material reality is not all that there is, that there is also another level of incorporeal truths.

Along these lines, one is tempted to supplement Badiou in two ways. First, are bodies and languages not synonymous with being, its multiplicity, and worlds? The Three we are dealing with is thus the Three of being, worlds and truths: for democratic materialism, there are only the multiplicity of being (the endlessly differentiated reality) and different worlds – linguistic universes - within which individuals and communities experience this reality. (One should then, against Badiou, insist on the strict equality between world and

language: every world sustained by language, and every “spoken” language sustains a world – this is what Heidegger aimed at in his thesis on language as a “house of being.”) Is this effectively not our spontaneous ideology? There is an endlessly differentiated, complex, reality, which we, individuals and communities embedded in it, always experience from a particular, finite, perspective of our historical world.

What democratic materialism furiously rejects is the notion that there can be an infinite universal Truth which cuts across this multitude of worlds – in politics, this means “totalitarianism” which imposes its truth as universal. This is why one should reject, say, Jacobins, who imposed onto the plurality of the French society their universal notions of equality and other truths, and thus necessarily ended in terror... This brings us to the second supplement: there is an even more narrow political version of the democratic-materialist axiom: “All that takes place in today’s society is the dynamics of post-modern globalization, and the (conservative-nostalgic, fundamentalist, Old Leftist, nationalist, religious...) reactions and resistances to it” – to which, of course, materialist dialectics adds its proviso: “... with the exception of the radical-emancipatory (Communist) politics of truth.” It is here that the materialist-dialectic passage from the Two to Three gains all its weight: the axiom of Communist politics is not simply the dualist “class struggle,” but, more precisely, the Third moment as the subtraction from the Two of the hegemonic politics. That is to say, the hegemonic ideological field imposes on us a field of (ideological) visibility with its own “principal contradiction” (today, it is the opposition of market-freedom-democracy and fundamentalist-terrorist-totalitarianism - “Islamofascism” etc.), and the first thing to do is to reject (to subtract from) this opposition, to perceive it as a false opposition destined to obfuscate the true line of division.

The *false point* of hegemonic politics

This allows us also to approach in a new way Badiou’s concept of “point” as the point of decision, as the moment at which the complexity of a situation is “filtered” through a binary disposition and thus reduced to a simple choice: all things considered, are we AGAINST or FOR (should we attack or retreat? support that proclamation or oppose it? etc. etc.). With regard to the Third moment as the subtraction from the Two of the hegemonic politics, one should always bear in mind that one of the basic operations of the hegemonic ideology is *to enforce a false point*, to impose on us a false choice – like, in today’s “war on terror,” when anyone who draws attention to the complexity and ambiguity of the situation, is sooner or later interrupted by a brutal voice telling him: “OK, enough of this muddle – we are in the middle of a difficult struggle in which the fate of our free world is at stake, so please, make it clear, where do you really stand: do you support freedom and democracy or not?”

(One can also imagine a humanitarian version of such a pseudo-ethical blackmail: “OK, enough of this muddle about the neocolonialism, the responsibility of the West, and so on – do you want to do something to really help the millions suffering in Africa, or do you just want to use them to score points in your ideologico-political struggle?”)

The obverse of this imposition of a false choice is, of course, the blurring of the true line of division – here, Nazism is still unsurpassed with his designation of the Jewish enemy as the agent of the “plutocratic-bolshevik plot.” In this designation, the mechanism is almost laid bare: the true opposition (“plutocrats” versus “Bolsheviks,” i.e., capitalists versus proletariat) is literally obliterated, blurred into One, and therein resides the function of the name “Jew” – to serve as the operator of this obliteration. The first task of the emancipatory politics is therefore to distinguish between “false” and “true” points, “false” and “true” choices, i.e., to bring back the third element whose obliteration sustains the false choice – like, today, the false choice “liberal democracy or Islamofascism” is sustained by the obliteration of the radical secular emancipatory politics. So one should be clear here in rejecting the dangerous motto “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” which leads us to discover “progressive” anti-imperialist potential in fundamentalist Islamist movements: the ideological universe of movements like Hezbollah is based on the blurring of distinctions between capitalist neoimperialism and secular progressive emancipation: within the Hezbollah ideological space, women’s emancipation, gay rights, etc., are NOTHING BUT the “decadent” moral aspect of Western imperialism...

Badiou's *Evental Breaks*

In his recent reading of Badiou, Adrian Johnston^[2] discerned a further ideologico-critical potential of the Badiouian topic of evental breaks: when the balance of an ideological situation is disturbed by arising “symptomal knots,” elements which, while formally part of the situation, do not fit into it, the ideological defense can adopt two main strategies, the false “eventalization” of the dynamics which is thoroughly part of the existing situation, and the disavowal of the signs which delineate true evental possibilities, their reading as minor accidents or external disturbances:

“one, making mere modifications appear to promise evental newness (a tactic that comes to the fore in the ideology of late-capitalism, whose noisily marketed “perpetual revolution” is really just an instance of the cliché “the more things change, the more they stay the same”—or, as Badiou puts it, “capitalism itself is the obsession of novelty and the perpetual renovation of forms”); two, making the sites sheltering potentially explosive evental upheavals appear to be, at a minimum, unremarkable features of the banal, everyday landscape, and, at most, nothing more than temporary, correctable glitches in the functioning of the established system.”

Perhaps, this line of thought needs just one qualification: Johnston writes that “the ideology of the worldly state, through a sort of bluff or masquerade, disguises its non-integrated weakest points, its Achilles’ heels, as fully integrated cogs and components of its allegedly harmonious functioning—rather than as loci containing the potential to throw monkey wrenches in its gears and thereby generate eventual dysfunctions of this regime, a regime that is never so deeply entrenched as it would like to appear to be in the eyes of its subjects.” Would it not rather be that one of the ideological strategies is to fully admit the threatening character of a disfunction, and to treat it as an external intrusion, not as the necessary result of the system’s inner dynamics? The model is here, of course, the Fascist notion of social antagonisms as the result of a foreign intruder – Jews – disturbing the organic totality of the social edifice.

Recall the difference between the standard capitalist and the Marxist notion of economic crisis: for the standard capitalist view, crises are “temporary, correctable glitches” in the functioning of the system, while from the Marxist point, they are its moment of truth, the “exception” which only allows us to grasp the functioning of the system (in the same way that, for Freud, dreams and symptoms are not secondary malfunctionings of our psychic apparatus, but moments through which one can discern the repressed basic functioning of the psychic apparatus). No wonder Johnston uses here the Deleuzian term “minimal difference” - “a minimal/miniscule difference (here construed as the difference between the change-category statuses simultaneously assigned to a single intra-situational multiple both by the ideology of the state and, in opposition, by another, non-statist framework)”: when we pass from the notion of crisis as occasional contingent malfunctioning of the system to the notion of crisis as the symptomatic point at which the “truth” of the system becomes visible, we are talking about one and the same actual event – the difference is purely virtual, it does not concern any of its actual properties, but only the way this event is supplemented by the virtual tapestry of its ideological and notional background (like Schumann’s melody for piano first played with and then without the third line of notes written only for the eyes). Johnston is right here in critically taking note of

“Badiou’s quick dismissal of apparently gradualist measures of seemingly minor political adjustments and reforms (i.e., not-quite-evental gestures) in the spheres of legislation and socio-economics while awaiting the quasi-divine intervention of the system-shattering eventual rupture ushering in an uncompromisingly “perfect” revolution. But, the preceding analyses call into question whether he can be entirely confident and sure that what appears to be gradual or minor really is so, or, rather, simply seems this way solely under the shadow of statist ideology’s assignation of change-category statuses.”

One cannot ever be sure in advance if what appears (within the register and the space of visibility of the ruling ideology) as “minor” measures will not set in motion a process that will lead to the radical (evental) transformation of the whole field. There are situations in which a minimal measure of social reform can have much stronger large-scale consequences than self-professed “radical” changes, and this “inherent incalculability to the factors involved in setting the pace of the cadence of socio-political change” points towards the dimension of what Badiou tried to capture under the title of the “materialist notion of grace.” So when Johnston raises the question of

“what if the pre-evental actors “don’t really know exactly what they’re doing or quite where they’re going? What if, under the influence of statist ideology, they anticipate that a particular gesture will effectuate a system-preserving modification only to find out, after-the-fact of this gesture, that their intervention unexpectedly hastened (rather than delayed) the demise of this very system?”

- is not the first association that comes to mind here that of Mikhail Gorbachov’s perestroika which, while aiming at minor improvements that would make the system more efficient, triggered the process of its total disintegration? These, then, are the two extremes between which political interventions has to find their way: the Scylla of “minor” reforms which eventually lead to total collapse (recall also the – justified, we can say today – Mao Ze Dong’s fear that even a minimal compromise with market economy will open up the path that ends in total surrender to capitalism), and the Karybda of “radical” changes which in the long run merely fortify the system (Roosevelt’s New Deal, etc.). Among other things, this also opens up the question of how “radical” different forms of resistance are: what may appears as “radical critical stance” or as subversive activity can effectively function as the system’s “inherent transgression,” so that, often, a minor legal reform which merely aims at bringing the system in accordance with its professed ideological goals can be more subversive than the open questioning of the system’s basic presuppositions.

The Politics of Minimal Differences

These considerations enable us to define the art of a *politics of minimal difference*: to be able to identify and then do focus on a minimal (ideological, legislative, etc.) measure which, prima facie, not only does not question the system’s premises, but even seem to merely apply to its actual functioning its own principles and thus render it more self-consistent; however, a critico-ideological *parallax view* leads us to surmise that this minimal measure, while in no way disturbing the system’s explicit mode of functioning, effectively

“move its underground,” introduces a crack in its foundations. Today, more than ever, we effectively need what Johnston calls a “pre-evental discipline of time”:

“This other sort of temporal discipline would be neither the undisciplined impatience of hurriedly doing anything and everything to enact some ill-defined, poorly conceived notion of making things different nor the quietist patience of either resigning oneself to the current state of affairs drifting along interminably and/or awaiting the unpredictable arrival of a not-to-be-actively-precipitated “x” sparking genuine change (Badiou’s philosophy sometimes seems to be in danger of licensing a version of this latter mode of quietism). Those subjected to today’s frenetic socio-economic forms of late-capitalism are constantly at risk of succumbing to various forms of what one could refer to loosely as “attention deficit disorder,” that is, a frantic, thoughtless jumping from present to ever-new present. At the political level, such capitalist impatience must be countered with the discipline of what could be designated as a specifically communist patience (designated thus in line with Badiou’s assertion that all authentic forms of politics are “communist” in the broad sense of being both emancipatory as well as “generic” qua radically egalitarian and non-identitarian) - not the quietist patience condemned above, but, instead, the calm contemplation of the details of situations, states, and worlds with an eye to the discerning of ideologically veiled weak points in the structural architecture of the statist system. Given the theoretical validity of assuming that these camouflaged Achilles’ heels (as hidden evental sites) can and do exist in one’s worldly context, one should be patiently hopeful that one’s apparently minor gestures, carried out under the guidance of a pre-evental surveillance of the situation in search of its concealed kernels of real transformation, might come to entail major repercussions for the state-of-the-situation and/or transcendental regime of the world.”

Premature Actualisation

There is, however, a limit to this strategy: if followed thoroughly, it ends up in a kind of “active quietism”: while forever postponing the Big Act, all one does is to engage in small interventions with the secret hope that somehow, inexplicably, by means of a magic “jump from quantity to quality,” they will lead to global radical change. This strategy has to be supplemented by the readiness and ability to discern the moment when the possibility of the Big Change is approaching, and, at that point, to quickly change the strategy, take the risk and engage in total struggle. In other words, one should not forget that, in politics, “major repercussions” do not come by themselves: true, one has to lay the ground for them by means of the patient work, but one should also know to seize the moment when it arrives. Even more, the lesson of Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of reformism is pertinent here: it is not enough to patiently wait for the “right moment” of the revolution; if one merely waits for it, it will never come, i.e., one has to start with “premature” attempts which – therein resides the “pedagogy of the revolution” – in their very failure to achieve their professed goal create the (subjective) conditions for the “right” moment. The “specifically communist patience” is not just the patient waiting for the moment when radical change will explode like what the system theory calls “emergent property”; it is also the patience of losing the battles in order

to gain the final fight (recall Mao's slogan: "from defeat to defeat, to the final victory"). Or, to put it in more Badiouian time: the fact that the eventual irruption functions as a break in time, as introducing a totally different order of temporality (the temporality of the "work of love," the fidelity to the event), means that, from the perspective of non-evental time of historical evolution, there is NEVER a "proper moment" for the revolutionary event, the situation is never "mature" for the revolutionary act – the act is always, by definition, "premature." Recall what truly deserves the title of the *repetition* of the French Revolution: the Haiti revolution led by Toussaint l'Ouverture – it was clearly "ahead of his time," "premature," and as such doomed to fail, yet, precisely as such, it was perhaps even more of an Event than the French Revolution itself. These past defeats accumulate the utopian energy which will explode in the final battle: "maturation" is not waiting for "objective" circumstances to reach maturity, but the accumulation of defeats.

The Marxist Wager

Progressive liberals today often complain that they would like to join a "revolution" (a more radical emancipatory political movement), but no matter how desperately they search for it, they just "don't see it" (they don't see anywhere in the social space a political agent with a will and strength to seriously engage in such activity). While there is a moment of truth in it, one should nonetheless also add that the very attitude of these liberals is in itself part of a problem: if one just waits to "see" a revolutionary movement, it will, of course, never arise, and one will never see it. What Hegel says about the curtain that separates appearances from true reality (behind the veil of appearance there is nothing, only what the subject who looks there put it there), holds also for a revolutionary process: "seeing" and "desire" are here inextricably linked, i.e., the revolutionary potential is not there to discover as an objective social fact, one "sees it" only insofar as one "desires" it (engages oneself in the movement).

No wonder Mensheviks and those who opposed Lenin's call for a revolutionary takeover in the summer of 1917 "didn't see" the conditions for it as "ripe" and opposed it as "premature" – they simply did not WANT the revolution. (Another version of this skeptical argument about "seeing" is that liberals claim how capitalism is today so global and all-encompassing that they cannot "see" any serious alternative to it, that they cannot imagine a feasible "outside" to it. The reply to this is that, insofar as this is true, they do not see at all, tout court: the task is not to see the outside, but to see in the first place (to grasp the nature of today's capitalism) – the Marxist wager is that, when we "see" this, we see enough, inclusive of how to get out...) So our reply to the worried progressive liberals, eager to join the revolution, and just not seeing its chances anywhere around, should be like the answer

to the proverbial ecologist worried about the prospect of catastrophe: don't worry, the catastrophe will arrive...

Eating the Cake and Keeping It

To complicate the image further, we often have an event which succeeds through the self-erasure of its eventual dimension, as it was the case with the Jacobins in the French Revolution: once their (necessary) job was done, they were not only overthrown and liquidated, they were even retroactively deprived of their eventual status, reduced to a historical accident, to a freakish abomination, to an (avoidable) excess of the historical development. (It was none other than Hegel who, in his very *critique* of the Jacobine *abstract freedom*, perceived the necessity of this moment, dispelling the liberal dream of bypassing 1794, i.e., of passing directly from 1789 to the established bourgeois daily life. The dream denounced by Robespierre as the dream of those who want "revolution without revolution" is the dream of having 1789 without 1793, of eating the cake and keeping it...) This theme was often varied by Marx and Engels – how, once the *normal* pragmatic-utilitarian bourgeois daily life was established, its own violent heroic origins were disavowed. This possibility – not only the (obvious) possibility of an eventual sequence reaching its end, but a much more unsettling possibility of an event disavowing itself, erasing its own traces, as the ultimate indication of its triumph, is not taken into account by Badiou: "the possibility and ramifications of there being radical breaks and discontinuities that might, in part due to their own reverberations unfolding off into the future, become invisible to those living in realities founded on such eclipsed points of origin."

Such a self-erasure of the event opens up the space for what, in the Benjaminian mode, one is tempted to call the Leftist politics of melancholy. In a first approach, this term cannot but appear as an oxymoron: is not a revolutionary orientation towards future the very opposite of the melancholic attachment to the past? What if, however, the future one should be faithful to is the future of the past itself, i.e., the emancipatory potential that was not realized due to the failure of the past emancipatory attempts and for this reason continues to haunt us? In his ironic comments on the French Revolution, Marx opposes the revolutionary enthusiasm to the sobering effect of the "morning after": the actual result of the sublime revolutionary explosion, of the Event of freedom, equality, and brotherhood, is the miserable utilitarian/egotistic universe of market calculations. (And, incidentally, is not this gap even wider in the case of the October Revolution?) However, one should not simplify Marx: his point is not the rather commonsensical insight into how the vulgar reality of commerce is the *truth* of the theater of revolutionary enthusiasm, *what all the fuss really was about*. In the revolutionary explosion as an Event, another utopian dimension shines through, the

dimension of universal emancipation which, precisely, is the excess betrayed by the market reality which takes over *the day after* – as such, this excess is not simply abolished, dismissed as irrelevant, but, as it were, transposed into the virtual state, continuing to haunt the emancipatory imaginary as a dream waiting to be realized. The excess of revolutionary enthusiasm over its own *actual social base* or substance is thus literally that the future of/in the past, a ghost-like Event waiting for its proper embodiment.

Repetition and Resurrection

Perhaps, the reason Badiou neglects this dimension is his all too crude opposition between repetition and the cut of the Event, his dismissal of repetition as an obstacle to the rise of the New, ultimately as the death drive itself, the morbid attachment to some obscure jouissance which entraps the subject in the self-destructive vicious cycle. In this sense, “life” as the subjective category of the fidelity to an Event “keeps at a distance the conservation drive (the instinct misnamed ‘of life’), as well as the mortifying drive (the death instinct). Life is what breaks up with drives.” (Badiou 2006: 531) What Badiou misses here is the fact that “death drive” is, paradoxically, the Freudian name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis: for an uncanny excess of life, for an “undead” urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. As such, death drive stands for the very opposite of the obscure tendency to self-annihilation or self-destruction – as is rendered clear in the work of Wagner whom Badiou admires so much. It is precisely the reference to Wagner which enables us to see how the Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension. Death drive does NOT reside in Wagner's heroes' longing to die, to find peace in death: it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying - a name for the “undead” eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain.

It is at this point that one should turn to Deleuze against Badiou, to Deleuze's precise elaborations on repetition as the very form of the emergence of the New. Of course, Badiou is too refined a thinker not to perceive the evental dimension of repetition: when, in *Logiques des mondes*, he deploys the three “subjective destinations” of an event (faithful, reactive, obscure), he adds a fourth one, that of “resurrection,” the subjective re-activation of an event whose traces were obliterated, “repressed” into the historico-ideological unconscious: “every faithful subject can thus reincorporate into its evental present a truth fragment which in the old present was pushed beneath the bar of occultation. This reincorporation is what we call resurrection.” (Badiou 2006: 75) His beautifully developed example is that of Spartacus: erased from official history, his name was resurrected first by the black slaves' rebellion in

Haiti (the progressive governor Laveaux called Toussaint Louverture “black Spartacus”), and, a century later, by the two German *Spartakists*, Rosa Luxembourg and Karl Liebknecht. What matters here, however, is that Badiou shirks from calling this resurrection *repetition*...

Terror Revisited

Is, however, there not something terrorist in the very notion of “death drive” as a political category? Yes – and why not? Therein resides one of Badiou’s key contributions to the contemporary political debate: his courageous rehabilitation of the notion of terror: “Materialist dialectics assumes, without particular joy, that, till now, no political subject was able to arrive at the eternity of the truth it was deploying without moments of terror. Since, as Saint-Just asked: “What do those who want neither Virtue nor Terror want?” His answer is well-known: they want corruption – another name for the subject’s defeat.” (Badiou 2006: 98) In *Le siècle*, Badiou conceives as a sign of the political regression that occurred towards the end of the XXth century the shift from “humanism AND terror” to “humanism OR terror.” In 1945, Maurice Merleau-Ponty write *Humanism and Terror*, his defense of the Soviet Communism as involving a kind of Pascalean wager that announces the topic of what Bernard Williams later developed as “moral luck”: the present terror will be retroactively justified if the society that will emerge from it will be truly human; today, such a conjunction of terror and humanism is properly unthinkable, the predominant liberal view replaces AND with OR: either humanism or terror... More precisely, there are four variations on this motif: humanism AND terror, humanism OR terror, each either in a “positive” or in a “negative” sense.

“Humanism and terror” in a positive sense is what Merleau-Ponty elaborated, it sustains Stalinism (the forceful – “terrorist” - engendering of the New Man), and is already clearly discernible in the French Revolution, in the guise of Robespierre’s conjunction of virtue and terror. This conjunction can be negated in two ways. It can involve the choice “humanism OR terror,” i.e., the liberal-humanist project in all its versions, from the dissident anti-Stalinist humanism up to today’s neo-Habermasians (Luc Ferry & Alain Renault in France) and other defenders of human rights AGAINST (totalitarian, fundamentalist) terror. Or it can retain the conjunction “humanism AND terror,” but in a negative mode: all those philosophical and ideological orientations, from Heidegger and conservative Christians to partisans of Oriental spirituality and Deep Ecology, who perceive terror as the truth - the ultimate consequence - of the humanist project itself, of its *hubris*.

There is, however, a fourth variation, usually left aside: the choice “humanism OR terror,” but with TERROR, not humanism, as a positive term. This is a radical position

difficult to sustain, but, perhaps, our only hope: it does not amount to the obscene madness of openly pursuing a “terrorist and inhuman politics”, but something much more difficult to think. In today’s “post-deconstructionist” thought (if one risks this ridiculous designation which cannot but sound as its own parody), the term “inhuman” gained a new weight, especially in the work of Agamben and Badiou. It is against this background that one can understand why Lacan speaks of the *inhuman core* of the neighbor. Back in the 1960s, the era of structuralism, Louis Althusser launched the notorious formula of “theoretical anti-humanism,” allowing, demanding even, that it be supplemented by *practical humanism*. In our practice, we should act as humanists, respecting the others, treating them as free persons with full dignity, creators of their world. However, in theory, we should no less always bear in mind that humanism is an ideology, the way we spontaneously experience our predicament, and that the true knowledge of humans and their history should treat individuals not as autonomous subjects, but as elements in a structure which follows its own laws. In contrast to Althusser, Lacan accomplishes the passage from theoretical to practical anti-humanism, i.e., to an ethics that goes beyond the dimension of what Nietzsche called “human, all too human,” and confront the inhuman core of humanity. This does not mean only an ethics which no longer denies, but fearlessly takes into account, the latent monstrosity of being-human, the diabolic dimension which exploded in phenomena usually covered by the concept-name “Auschwitz” – an ethics that would be still possible after Auschwitz, to paraphrase Adorno. This inhuman dimension is for Lacan at the same time the ultimate support of ethics – as we shall see in the last chapter, therein resides the ultimate wager of Lacan’s “ethics of psychoanalysis.”

The Noumenal and Phenomenal

Deleuze often varies the motif of how, in becoming post-human, we should learn to practice “a perception as it was before men (or after) /.../ released from their human coordinates” (Cinema 1, 122): those who fully endorse the Nietzschean “return of the same” are strong enough to sustain the vision of the “iridescent chaos of a world before man” (ibid., 81). Although Deleuze resorts here openly to Kant’s language, talking about the direct access to “things (the way they are) in themselves,” his point is precisely that one should subtract the opposition between phenomena and things-in-themselves, between the phenomenal and the noumenal level, from its Kantian functioning, where noumena are transcendent things that forever elude our grasp. What Deleuze refers to as “things in themselves” is in a way even more phenomenal than our shared phenomenal reality: it is the impossible phenomenon, the phenomenon that is excluded from our symbolically-constituted reality. The gap that separates us from noumena is thus primarily not epistemological, but practico-ethical and libidinal: there is no “true reality” behind or beneath

phenomena, noumena are phenomenal things which are "too strong", too intens(ive), for our perceptual apparatus attuned to constituted reality – epistemological failure is a secondary effect of libidinal terror, i.e., the underlying logic is a reversal of Kant's "You can, because you must!": "You cannot (know noumena), because you must not!"

Imagine someone being forced to witness a terrifying torture: in a way, the monstrosity of what he saw would make this an experience of the noumenal impossible-real that would shatter the coordinates of our common reality. (The same holds for witnessing an intense sexual activity.) In this sense, if we were to discover films shot in a concentration camp among the Musulmannen, showing scenes from their daily life, how they are systematically mistreated and deprived of all dignity, we would have "seen too much", the prohibited, we would have entered a forbidden territory of what should have remained unseen. This is also what makes it so unbearable to witness the last moments of people who know they are shortly going to die and are in this sense already living-dead – again, imagine that we would have discovered, among the ruins of the Twin Towers, a video camera with magically survived the crash intact and is full of shots of what went on among the passengers of the plane in the minutes before it crashed into one of the Towers. In all these cases, it is that, effectively, we would have seen things as they are "in themselves", outside human coordinates, outside our human reality – we would have seen the world with inhuman eyes. (Maybe the US authorities do possess such shots and, for understandable reasons, are keeping them secret.) The lesson is here profoundly Hegelian: the difference between the phenomenal and the noumenal has to be reflected/transposed back into the phenomenal, as the split between the *gentrified* normal phenomenon and the *impossible* phenomenon.

In philosophical terms, this *inhuman* dimension can be defined as that of a subject subtracted from all form of human *individuality* or *personality* (which is why, in today's popular culture, one of the exemplary figures of pure subject is a non-human – alien, cyborg – who displays more fidelity to the task, dignity and freedom than its human counterparts, from the Schwarzenegger-figure in Terminator to the Rutger-Hauer-android in *Blade Runner*). Recall Husserl's dark dream, from his Cartesian Meditations, of how the transcendental cogito would remain unaffected by a plague that would annihilate entire humanity: it is easy, apropos this example, to score cheap points about the self-destructive background of the transcendental subjectivity, and about how Husserl misses the paradox of what Foucault, in his *Les mots et les choses*, called the *transcendental-empirical doublet*, of the link that forever attaches the transcendental ego to the empirical ego, so that the annihilation of the latter by definition leads to the disparition of the first. However, what if, fully recognizing this dependence as a fact (and nothing more than this – a stupid fact of being), one nonetheless insists on the truth of its negation, the truth of the assertion of the independence of the subject with regard to the empirical *individuas qua* living being? Is this

independence not demonstrated in the ultimate gesture of risking one's life, on being ready to forsake one's being? Recall Mao Zedong's reaction to the atomic bomb threat from 1955:

The United States cannot annihilate the Chinese nation with its small stack of atom bombs. Even if the U.S. atom bombs were so powerful that, when dropped on China, they would make a hole right through the earth, or even blow it up, that would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole, though it might be a major event for the solar system. (*The Chinese People Cannot Be Cowed by the Atom Bomb*)

There evidently is an “inhuman madness” in this argument: is the fact that the destruction of the planet Earth “would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole” not a rather poor solace for the extinguished humanity?

The argument only works if, in a Kantian way, one presupposes a pure transcendental subject non-affected by this catastrophe – a subject which, although non-existing in reality, IS operative as a virtual point of reference. Che Guevara approached the same line of thought when, in the midst of the unbearable tension of the Cuban missile crisis, he advocated a fearless approach of risking the new world war which would involve (at least) the total annihilation of the Cuban people – he praised the heroic readiness of the Cuban people to risk its disappearance. In this precise sense, Antigone herself was inhuman (in contrast to Ismene, her “human, all too human” sister). One likes to quote the chorus from *Antigone* about man as the most “demonic” of all creatures, as a being of excess, a being which violates all proper measures; however, it is crucial to bear in mind the exact location of these lines: the Chorus intervenes immediately after it becomes known that somebody (it is not yet known who this was) has defied Creon’s order and performed the funeral ritual on his body. It is THIS act which is perceived as a “demonic” excessive act, and not Creon’s prohibition – Antigone is far from being the place-holder of moderation, of respect for proper limits, against Creon’s sacrilegious hubris.

Conclusion - The Politics of Terror

What, then, would be the possible contours of a new politics of terror? Recall Badiou’s “eternal Idea” of the politics of revolutionary justice, at work from the ancient Chinese Legists through Jacobins to Lenin and Mao, which consists of four moments: voluntarism (the belief that one can “move mountains,” ignoring “objective” laws and obstacles), terror (a ruthless will to crush the enemy of the people), egalitarian justice (its immediate brutal imposition, with no understanding for the “complex circumstances” which allegedly compel us to proceed gradually), and, last but not least, trust in the people – suffice it to recall two examples here, Robespierre himself, his “great truth” (“the characteristic of popular

government is to be trustful towards the people and severe towards itself”), and Mao’s critique of Stalin’s Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR, where he qualifies Stalin’s point of view as “almost altogether wrong. The basic error is mistrust of the peasants.”). (Badiou 2006: 29-37) Does the ecological challenge not offer a unique chance to re-invent this “eternal Idea”? That is to say, is the only appropriate way to counter the threat of ecological catastrophe not precisely the combination of these four moments? What is demanded is:

Strict egalitarian justice (all people should pay the same price in eventual renunciations, i.e., one should impose the same world-wide norms of per capita energy consumption, carbon dioxide emissions, etc.; the developed nations should not be allowed to poison the environment at the present rate, blaming the developing Third World countries, from Brasil to China, for ruining our shared environment with their rapid development);

Terror (ruthless punishment of all who violate the imposed protective measures, inclusive of severe limitations of liberal “freedoms,” technological control of the prospective law-breakers);

Voluntarism (the only way to confront the threat of the ecological catastrophe is by means of large-scale collective decisions which will run counter the “spontaneous” immanent logic of capitalist development – it is not the question of helping the historical tendency or necessity to realize itself, but to “stop the train” of history which runs towards the precipice of global catastrophe;

And, last but not least, all this combined with the trust in the people (the wager that the large majority of the people support these severe measures, see them as their own, and are ready to participate in their enforcement). At this level, one should not be afraid to assert, as a combination of terror and trust in the people, the reactivation of one of the figures of all egalitarian-revolutionary terror, the “informer” who denounces the culprits to the authorities. (Already in the case of the Enron scandal, the Time magazine was right to celebrate the insiders who tipped-off the financial authorities as true public heroes.)

Endnotes

1. Moustapha Safouan, “Why Are the Arabs Not Free: the Politics of Writing” (unpublished manuscript).

2. E.g. see Adrian Johnston's *The Quick and the Dead* in IJŽS Vol 1.2 similar themes of which is currently part of a planned manuscript *The Cadence of Change: Badiou, Žizek, and Political Transformations*.

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