

FROM DEMOCRACY TO DIVINE VIOLENCE

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I

In today's era, which proclaims itself postideological, ideology is thus more than ever a field of struggle—among other things, the struggle for appropriating past traditions. One of the clearest indications of our predicament is the liberal appropriation of Martin Luther King, in itself an exemplary ideological operation. Henry Louis Taylor recently remarked: “Everyone knows—even the smallest kid knows about Martin Luther King—can say his most famous moment was that ‘I have a dream’ speech. No one can go further than one sentence. All we know is that this guy had a dream. We don’t know what that dream was.” King had come a long way from the crowds who cheered him at the 1963 March on Washington, when he was introduced as “the moral leader of our nation”: by taking on issues outside segregation, he had lost much of the public support and was more and more

considered to be a pariah. He took on issues of poverty and militarism because he considered them vital to make equality something real and not just racial brotherhood but equality in fact. To put it in Badiou's terms, King followed the "axiom of equality" well beyond the topic of racial segregation: he was working on antipoverty and antiwar issues at the time of his death. He had spoken out against the Vietnam War and was in Memphis when he was killed in April 1968 in support of striking sanitation workers. Following King meant following the unpopular road, not the popular one. Today the equality between whites and blacks is celebrated as part of the American Dream, perceived as a self-evident politico-ethical axiom—however, in the 1920s and 1930s the Communists were the ONLY political force that argued for complete equality between the races.

So let me dive into the deep water of ideology and directly address the problem of democracy. When one is accused of undermining democracy, one's answer should thus be a paraphrase of the reply to the similar reproach (that communists are undermining family, property, freedom, etc.) in *The Communist Manifesto*: the ruling order itself is already undermining them. In the same way that (market) freedom is unfreedom for those selling their working force, in the same way family is undermined by the bourgeois family as legalized prostitution, democracy is undermined by its parliamentary form, with its concomitant passivization of the large majority as well as the growing executive privileges implied by the spreading logic of emergency state.

In the fall of 2007 a public debate was raging in the Czech Republic: although a large majority of people (around 70 percent) were opposed to the installation of U.S. Army radars on their territory, the government went on with the project. Government representatives rejected calls for a referendum, claiming that one does not decide with voting about such a sensitive national security matter—it should be left to military experts. (Interestingly, the same representatives evoked a purely political reason for the decision: the U.S. helped the

Czechs three times in their history to achieve freedom (1918, 1945, 1989), so now Czechs should return the favor . . .) If one follows this logic to the end, one arrives at a strange result: what then IS there to vote about? Should economic decisions not also be left to economic experts, etc.?

This brings us to the important topic of the blurred relationship between power and knowledge in modern societies. Jacques Lacan's originality in dealing with the couple knowledge/power was little noticed: in contrast to Foucault, who endlessly varied the motif of their conjunction (knowledge is not neutral, it is in itself an apparatus of power and control), Lacan insists on the disjunction between knowledge and power—in our era, knowledge has assumed a disproportionate growth in relationship to the effects of power. There are many ways to read this thesis. First, one can read it as stating an obvious, although often ignored, fact: we get to know more things much faster, and we do not know what to do about them. The prospect of ecological crisis is paradigmatic here: what if what makes us unable to act is not the fact that we “do not yet know enough” (is human industry really responsible for global warming, etc.), but, on the contrary, the fact that we know too much and do not know what to do with this mass of inconsistent knowledge, how to subordinate it to a Master-Signifier? This brings us to a more pertinent level, that of the tension between S1 and S2: the chain of knowledge is no longer totalized/quilted by Master-Signifiers. The exponential uncontrollable growth of scientific knowledge concerns drive as acephalous. Thus push-to-knowledge unleashes a “power that is not that of mastery”: a power proper to the exercise of knowledge as such. The Church sensed this lack, quickly offering itself as the Master that will guarantee the explosion of scientific knowledge will remain within “human limits” and not overwhelm us—a vain hope, of course.

How right Lacan is when he sees modernity as the rise of the “university discourse” becomes clear when we focus on the phrase “to serve the people”. not only is the leader legitimized by serving the

people, the king himself has to reinvent his function as the “highest servant of the people” (as Frederick the Great put it). What is crucial is that there is no one who does not serve, but is simply being served: ordinary people serve the state or the People, the state itself serves the people. This logic reaches its climax in Stalinism where the entire population serves: ordinary workers are supposed to sacrifice their well-being for their community, the leaders work night and day, serving the people (although their “truth” is SI, the Master-Signifier) . . . The agency being served, People, has no substantial positive existence: it is the name for the abyssal Moloch every existing individual serves. The price of this paradox is, of course, a set of self-referential paradoxes: the people as individuals serve themselves as People, and their Leaders directly embody their universal interest as People, etc. The refreshing thing would have been to find individuals ready to naively adopt the position of the Master, simply claiming “I AM the one you are serving!” without this position of a Master being alienated in the knowledge of their Servants-Leaders.

2

The case of China is exemplary of this deadlock of democracy. Faced with today’s explosion of capitalism in China, analysts often ask when political democracy as the “natural” political accompaniment of capitalism will enforce itself. However, a closer analysis quickly dispells this hope.

Instead of perceiving what goes on in today’s China as an oriental-despotic distortion of capitalism, one should see in it the repetition of the development of capitalism in Europe itself. In early modernity most European states were far from democratic—if they were democratic (as was the case of the Netherlands), it was only for the liberal elite, not for the workers. Conditions for capitalism were created and sustained by a brutal state dictatorship, very much like

today's China: the state legalizing violent expropriations of common people, which made them proletarians, and disciplining them in their new role. All the features we identify today with liberal democracy and freedom (trade unions, universal vote, free universal education, freedom of the press, etc.) were won in a long, difficult struggle of the lower classes throughout the nineteenth century, they were far from a natural consequence of capitalist relations. Recall the list of demands with which *The Communist Manifesto* concludes: most of them, but for the abolition of private property with the means of production, are today widely accepted in "bourgeois" democracies—the result of popular struggles.

Recall another ignored fact: today, the equality between whites and blacks is celebrated as part of the American Dream, perceived as a self-evident politico-ethical axiom—however, in the 1920s and 1930s the Communists were the ONLY political force that argued for complete equality between the races. Those who advocate the natural link between capitalism and democracy cheat in the same way the Catholic Church is cheating when it presents itself as the natural advocate of democracy and human rights against the threat of totalitarianism—as if the Church had not accepted democracy only at the end of the nineteenth century, and even this with teeth clenched, as a desperate compromise, making it clear that it preferred monarchy and that this was a concession to new times. The Catholic Church as a beacon of the respect for freedom and human dignity? Let us make a simple mental experiment. Until the early 1960s the Church maintained the (in)famous index of works whose reading was prohibited to (ordinary) Catholics; one could only imagine how the artistic and intellectual history of modern Europe might look if we erased from it all works that, at one time or another, found themselves on this index—a modern Europe without Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Kafka, Sartre, not to mention the large majority of modern literary classics.

There is thus nothing exotic in today's China: what happens there merely repeats our own forgotten past. So what about the afterthought of some Western liberal critics: how much faster would China's development have been had it been combined with political democracy? In a TV interview a couple of years ago, Ralf Dahrendorf linked the growing distrust in democracy to the fact that, after every revolutionary change, the road to new prosperity leads through a "valley of tears": after the breakdown of socialism, one cannot directly pass to the abundance of a successful market economy—the limited, but real, socialist welfare and security had to be dismantled, and these first steps are necessarily painful; and the same goes for Western Europe, where the passage from the Welfare State to new global economy involves painful renunciations, less security, less guaranteed social care. For Dahrendorf, the problem is best encapsulated by the simple fact that this painful passage through the "valley of tears" lasts longer than the average period between (democratic) elections, so that the temptation is great to postpone the difficult changes for short-term electoral gains. Paradigmatic here is the disappointment of the large strata of postcommunist nations with the economic results of the new democratic order: in the glorious days of 1989 they equated democracy with the abundance of Western consumerist societies and now, ten years later, when the abundance is still missing, they blame democracy itself . . . Unfortunately, he focuses much less on the opposite temptation: if the majority resists the necessary structural changes in economy, would (one of) the logical conclusion(s) not be that, for a decade or so, an enlightened elite should take power, even by nondemocratic means, to enforce the necessary measures and thus lay the foundations for a truly stable democracy? Along these lines, Fareed Zakaria points out how democracy can only "catch on" in economically developed countries: if the developing countries are "prematurely democratized," the result is a populism that ends in economic catastrophe and political despo-

tism—no wonder today's most economically successful Third World countries (Taiwan, South Korea, Chile) embraced full democracy only after a period of authoritarian rule.

Is this line of reasoning not the best argument for the Chinese way to capitalism as opposed to the Russian way? After the collapse of communism, Russia adopted a "shock therapy" and threw itself directly into democracy and the fast track to capitalism—with economic bankruptcy the result. (There are good reasons to be modestly paranoid here: were the Western economic advisers to Yeltsin who proposed this way really as innocent as they appeared, or were they serving U.S. interests by weakening Russia economically?) The Chinese, on the contrary, followed the path of Chile and South Korea, using unencumbered authoritarian state power to control the social costs of the passage to capitalism, thus avoiding the chaos. In short, the weird combination of capitalism and communist rule, far from a ridiculous anomaly, proved a blessing (not even) in disguise; China developed so fast not in spite of authoritarian communist rule but because of it. So, to conclude with a Stalinist-sounding suspicion: what if those who worry about the lack of democracy in China really worry about the fast development of China that makes it the next global superpower, threatening Western primacy?

Even a further paradox is at work here: beyond all the cheap jibes and superficial analogies exists a profound structural homology between the Maoist permanent self-revolutionizing, the permanent struggle against the ossification of State structures, and the inherent dynamics of capitalism. Here one is tempted to paraphrase Bertolt Brecht's pun "What is the robbing of a bank compared to the founding of a new bank?": what are the violent and destructive outbursts of a Red Guardist caught in the Cultural Revolution compared to the true Cultural Revolution, the permanent dissolution of all life-forms necessitated by capitalist reproduction? Today the tragedy of the Great Leap Forward repeats itself as the comedy of the rapid capitalist Great Leap Forward into modernization, with the old

slogan “iron foundry into every village” reemerging as “a skyscraper into every street.”

So what about a quasi-Leninist defense of the Chinese capitalist explosion as a big prolonged case of NEP (the New Economic Politics, adopted by the Soviet Union, destroyed at the end of the civil war in 1921, which allowed private property and market exchange and lasted roughly till 1928), with the Communist Party firmly exerting political control, able at any moment to step in and undo its concessions to the class enemy? All one can do is bring this logic to its extreme: insofar as there is a tension in capitalist democracies between the democratic-egalitarian sovereignty of the people and the class divisions of the economic sphere, and insofar as the state can in principle enforce expropriations, etc., is not capitalism as such in a way one big NEP detour on a road that should pass directly from feudal or slave relations of domination to communist egalitarian justice?

And what if the promised democratic second stage that follows the authoritarian valley of tears never arrives? This, perhaps, is what is so unsettling about today's China: the suspicion that its authoritarian capitalism is not merely a reminder of our past, the repetition of the process of capitalist accumulation that, in Europe, went on from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, but a sign of the future? What if “the vicious combination of the Asian knout and the European stock market” proves itself to be economically more efficient than our liberal capitalism? What if it signals that democracy, as we understand it, is no longer a condition and driver of economic development, but its obstacle?

3

So where does this limitation of democracy become directly palpable? One cannot miss the irony of the fact that the name of the

emancipatory political movement that suffered this international pressure is *Lavalas*—“flood” in Creole: it is the flood of the expropriated overflowing the gated communities. This is why the title of Peter Hallward’s book on the overthrow of Aristide—*Damming the Flood*—is quite appropriate, inscribing the Haitian events into the global tendency of new dams and walls popping out everywhere after 9/11, confronting us with the truth of “globalization,” the inner lines of division that sustain it.

Haiti was an exception from the very beginning, from its very revolutionary fight against slavery that ended in independence in January 1804: “Only in Haiti was the declaration of human freedom universally consistent. Only in Haiti was this declaration sustained at all costs, in direct opposition to the social order and economic logic of the day.” For that reason, “there is no single event in the whole of modern history whose implications were more threatening to the dominant global order of things.” The Haitian Revolution truly deserves the title of the *repetition* of the French Revolution: led by Toussaint l’Ouverture, it was clearly “ahead of its time,” “premature,” and doomed to fail, yet, precisely as such, it was perhaps even more of an Event than the French Revolution itself. It was the first time that the colonized rebelled not on behalf of returning to their precolonial “roots” but on behalf of the very modern principles of freedom and equality. And the sign of the Jacobins’ authenticity is that they immediately recognized the slaves’ uprising—the black delegation from Haiti was enthusiastically received in the National Assembly. (As expected, things changed after the Thermidor: Napoleon quickly sent the army to reoccupy Haiti.)

For this reason, the threat resided in the “mere existence of an independent Haiti,” pronounced already by Talleyrand “a horrible spectacle for all white nations.” Haiti HAD thus to be made an exemplary case of economic failure, to dissuade other countries from taking the same path. The price—LITERAL price—of the “premature” independence was horrible: after two decades of embargo,

France, the previous colonial master, established trade and diplomatic relations only in 1825, and for this Haiti had to agree to pay the sum of 150 million francs as a “compensation” for the loss of its *slavés*. This sum, roughly equal to the French annual budget at the time, was later cut to 90 million, but it continued to be a heavy burden that prevented any economic growth: at the end of the nineteenth century Haiti’s payments to France consumed around 80 percent of the national budget, and the last installment was paid in 1947. When, in 2004, celebrating the bicentennial of the independence, the Lavalas president Jean-Baptiste Aristide demanded that France return this extorted sum, his claim was flatly rejected by a French commission (whose member was also Regis Debray)—so while U.S. liberals ponder the possibility of reimbursing U.S. blacks for slavery, Haiti’s demand to be reimbursed for the tremendous amount the ex-slaves had to pay to have their freedom recognized was ignored by liberal opinion, even if the extortion here was double: the slaves were first exploited, then had to pay for the recognition of their hard-won freedom.

The story goes on today: what is for most of us a fond childhood memory—making mud cakes—is as desperate reality in Haiti slums like Cité Soleil. According to a recent AP report, a rise in food prices gave a new boost to a traditional Haitian remedy for hunger pangs: cookies made of dried yellow dirt. The mud, which has long been prized by pregnant women and children as an antacid and source of calcium, is considerably cheaper than real food: dirt to make one hundred cookies now costs five dollars. Merchants truck it from the country’s central plateau to the market, where women buy it, process it into mud cookies, and leave them to dry under the scorching sun; the finished cookies are carried in buckets to markets or sold on the streets.

It is interesting to note that U.S.-French cooperation in overthrowing Aristide took place soon after the public discord about the attack on Iraq and was quite appropriately celebrated as the reaffir-

mation of the basic alliance that underlies their occasional conflicts; even Brazil's Lula, Toni Negri's hero, condoned the 2004 overthrow of Aristide. An unholy alliance was thus put together to discredit the Lavalas government as mob rule violating human rights, and President Aristide as a power-mad fundamentalist dictator—from illegal mercenary death squads and U.S.-sponsored “democratic fronts” to humanitarian NGOs and even some “radical left” organizations, financed by the U.S., that denounced Aristide’s “capitulation” to IMF . . . Aristide himself provided a perspicuous characterization of this overlapping between radical left and liberal right. “somewhere, somehow, there’s a little secret satisfaction, perhaps an unconscious satisfaction, in saying things that powerful white people want you to say.” In short, the ruling ideology often remains the left’s Ego-Ideal.

4

The case of Haiti also enables us to throw new light on the big (defining) problem of Western Marxism, that of the missing revolutionary subject: how is it that the working class does not complete the passage from in-itself to for-itself and constitute itself as a revolutionary agent? This problem provided the main *raison d'être* of its reference to psychoanalysis, which was evoked precisely to explain the unconscious libidinal mechanisms that prevent the rise of class consciousness inscribed into the very being (social situation) of the working class. In this way the truth of the Marxist socioeconomic analysis was saved, there was no reason to give ground to the “revisionist” theories about the rise of the middle classes, etc. For this same reason, Western Marxism was also in a constant search for other social agents who could play the role of revolutionary agent, as the understudy replacing the indisposed working class: third world peasants, students, and intellectuals, the excluded . . .

Therein resides the core of truth of Peter Sloterdijk's thesis, according to which the idea of Judgment Day, when all accumulated debts will be fully paid and an out-of-joint world will finally be set straight, is taken over in secularized form by the modern leftist project, where the agent of judgment is no longer God, but the people. Leftist political movements are like "banks of rage": they collect rage investments from people and promise them large-scale revenge, the reestablishment of global justice. Since, after the revolutionary explosion of rage, full satisfaction never takes place and an inequality and hierarchy reemerge, a push always arises for the *second*—true, integral—revolution that will satisfy the disappointed and truly finish the emancipatory work: 1792 after 1789, October after February . . . The problem is simply that there is never enough rage capital. That is why it is necessary to borrow from or combine with other rages: national or cultural. In fascism the national rage predominates; Mao's communism mobilizes the rage of exploited poor farmers, not proletarians. In our own time, when this global rage has exhausted its potential, two main forms of rage remain: Islam (the rage of the victims of capitalist globalization) plus "irrational" youth outbursts, to which one should add Latino American populism, ecologists, anti-consumerists, and other forms of antiglobalist resentment: the Porto Alegre movement failed to establish itself as a global bank for this rage, since it lacked a positive alternate vision.

The failure of the working class as revolutionary subject already lies in the very core of the Bolshevik revolution: Lenin's art was to detect the "rage potential" of disappointed peasants. The October Revolution was victorious because of the slogan "land and peace," addressed to the vast peasant majority, seizing the short moment of their radical dissatisfaction. Lenin was already thinking along these lines a decade earlier, which is why he was horrified at the prospect of the success of the Stolypin land reforms aimed at creating a new strong class of independent farmers—he wrote that if Stolypin succeeded, the chance for a revolution would be lost for decades.

All successful socialist revolutions, from Cuba to Yugoslavia, followed this model, seizing the opportunity in an extreme critical situation, co-opting the national-liberation or other “rage capitals.” Of course, a partisan of the logic of hegemony would here point out that this is the very “normal” logic of revolution, that the “critical mass” is reached precisely and only through a series of equivalences among multiple demands that is always radically contingent and dependent on a specific—unique even—set of circumstances. A revolution never occurs when all antagonisms collapse into the big One, but when they synergetically combine their power . . . But the problem is here more complex: the point is not just that revolution no longer rides the train of History, following its Laws, since there is no History, since history is a contingent open process; the problem is a different one: it is as if there IS a Law of History, a more or less clear predominant main line of historical development, and that revolution can only occur in its interstices, “against the current.” Revolutionaries have to wait patiently for the (usually very brief) period of time when the system openly malfunctions or collapses, seize the window of opportunity, grab the power, which at that moment, as it were, lies on the street, IS for grabs, and then fortify their hold on power, building repressive apparatuses, etc., so that, once the moment of confusion is over, the majority gets sober and is disappointed by the new regime, it is too late to get rid of it; they are firmly entrenched. The case of the communist ex-Yugoslavia is typical here: throughout World War II the communists ruthlessly hege-
monized the resistance against the German occupying forces, monopolizing their role of antifascist struggle by way of actively trying to destroy all alternate (“bourgeois”) resisting forces, while, simultaneously, strictly denying the communist nature of their struggle (if someone formulated the suspicion that they had plans to grab power and enact a communist revolution at war’s end, he was swiftly denounced as spreading enemy propaganda). After the war, once they grabbed complete power, things swiftly changed and the regime

openly displayed its communist nature. The communists, although genuinely popular till around 1946, nonetheless almost openly cheated in the 1946 general elections; when they were asked why they were doing it, since they could also have easily won free elections, their answer (in private, of course) was that this was true, but they would have lost the NEXT elections four years later, so it was better to make certain from the start what kind of elections they were ready to tolerate—in short, they were fully aware of the unique opportunity that brought them to power. The awareness of their failure to build and sustain a genuine long-term hegemony of popular support was thus from the very beginning taken into account.

Today one should shift this perspective totally and break the circle of such patient waiting for the unpredictable opportunity of social disintegration opening up the brief chance of grabbing power. Maybe—just maybe—this desperate waiting and *search* for the revolutionary agent is the form of appearance of its very opposite, the fear of *finding* it, of seeing it where it already bulges. For example, what about the fact that, today, the members-only phenomenon is exploding into a whole way of life, encompassing everything from private banking conditions to invitation-only health clinics: those with money are increasingly locking their entire lives behind closed doors. Rather than attend media-heavy events, they arrange private concerts, fashion shows, and art exhibitions in their own homes. They shop after-hours, and have their neighbors (and potential friends) vetted for class and cash. A new global class is thus emerging with, say, an Indian passport, a castle in Scotland, a pied-à-terre in New York, and a private Caribbean island—the paradox is that the members of this global class dine privately, shop privately, view art privately—everything is private. They are thus creating a lifeworld of their own to solve their hermeneutic problem—as Todd Millay says, “wealthy families can’t just invite people over and expect them to understand what it’s like to have \$300 million.” So what ARE their contacts with the world at large? Double, as expected: business plus

humanitarianism (environment, fighting diseases, supporting arts . . .). The global citizens live their lives mostly in pristine nature—trekking in Patagonia, swimming on private islands. One cannot but note that the basic life-attitude of these gated superrich is *fear*: fear of external social life itself. The highest priorities of the “ultrahigh-networth individuals” are thus how to keep security risks—diseases, exposure to violent crime threats—at a minimum.

So aren't these “global citizens” living in secluded areas the true counterpole to those living in slums and other “white spots” of the public space? They are the two faces of the same coin, the two extremes of the new class division. The city that comes closest to this division is São Paulo in Lula's Brazil: a city with 250 heliports in its central downtown area. In order to insulate themselves from the dangers of mingling with ordinary people, the rich prefer to use helicopters, so that, when one looks around in São Paulo, one effectively feels like being in a futuristic city out of films like *Blade Runner* and *The Fifth Element*: ordinary people swarming the dangerous streets down on earth, the rich moving around on a higher level, in the air.

5

So, back to Haiti, the Lavalas struggle is exemplary of a principled heroism and the limitations of what can be done today: it didn't withdraw into the interstices of state power and “resist” from there, it heroically assumed state power, well aware that they are taking power in the most unfavorable circumstances, when all the trends of capitalist “modernization” and “structural readjustments,” but also of the postmodern left, were against them—where was Negri's voice, otherwise celebrating Lula's rule in Brazil? Constrained by the measures imposed by the U.S. and IMF that were destined to enact “necessary structural readjustments,” Aristide combined a politics of small and precise pragmatic measures (building schools and hospi-

tals, creating infrastructure, raising minimal wages) with occasional acts of popular violence, reacting to military gangs—the single most controversial thing about Aristide, which earned him comparisons with Sendero Luminoso or Pol Pot, is his occasional condoning of *Pere Lebrun* (a form of popular self-defense: “necklacing,” killing a police assassin or an informer with a burning tire; the name ironically refers to a local tire dealer; later the term stood for all forms of popular violence). In a speech on August 4, 1991, he advised an enthusiastic crowd to remember “when to use it and where to use it.” Liberals immediately draw the parallel between *chimeres*, the Lavalas popular self-defense units, and *tonton macoutes*, the notorious murderous gangs of the Duvalier dictatorship—their preferred strategy is always the one of equating leftist and rightist “fundamentalists” so that, as with Simon Critchley, al Qaeda becomes a new reincarnation of the Leninist party, etc. Asked about *chimeres*, Aristide said: “the very word says it all. *Chimeres* are people who are impoverished, who live in a state of profound insecurity and chronic unemployment. They are the victims of structural injustice, of systematic social violence. . . . It’s not surprising that they should confront those who have always benefited from this same social violence.”

These desperate acts of violent popular self-defense were examples of what Benjamin called “divine violence”: they are to be located “beyond good and evil” in a kind of politico-religious suspension of the ethical. Although we are dealing with what, to an ordinary moral consciousness, cannot but appear as “immoral” acts of killing, *one has no right to condemn them*, since they replied to years—centuries even—of systematic state and economic violence and exploitation. Jean Améry made this very point, referring to Frantz Fanon:

“I was my body and nothing else: in hunger, in the blow that I suffered, in the blow that I dealt. My body, debilitated and crusted with filth, was my calamity. My body when it tensed to strike, was my physical and metaphysical dignity. In situations like mine, physical violence is the sole means for restoring a disjointed personality. In

the punch I was myself—for myself and for my opponent. What I later read in Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre*, in a theoretical analysis of the behaviour of colonised peoples, I anticipated back then when I gave concrete form to my dignity by punching a human face."

And the same point was made by none other than Hegel. When Hegel emphasizes how society—the existing social order—is the ultimate space in which the subject finds his substantial content and recognition, i.e., how subjective freedom can actualize itself only in the rationality of the universal ethical order, the implied (although not explicitly stated) obverse is that those who do NOT find this recognition have also the right to rebel: if a class of people is systematically deprived of their rights, of their very dignity as persons, they are *eo ipso* also released from their duties toward the social order, because this order is no longer their ethical substance—or, to quote Robin Wood: "When a social order fails to actualize its own ethical principles, that amounts to the self-destruction of those principles." Wood is fully justified in pointing out how the dismissive tone of Hegel's statements about the "rabble" should not blind us to the basic fact that he considered their rebellion rationally fully justified: the "rabble" is a class of people to whom systematically, not just in a contingent way, recognition by the ethical substance is denied, so they also do not owe anything to society, are dispensed of any duties toward it. As is well known, this is the starting point of the Marxian analysis: the "proletariat" designates such an "irrational" element of the "rational" social totality, its unaccountable "part of no part," the element systematically generated by it and, simultaneously, denied the basic rights that define this totality.

So what is divine violence? Its place can be defined in a very precise formal way. Badiou already elaborated the constitutive excess of representation over the represented: at the level of the Law, the state Power only represents the interests, etc. of its subjects; it is serving them, responsible to them, and itself subjected to their control; however, at the level of the superego underside, the public message of

responsibility, etc., is supplemented by the obscene message of unconditional exercise of Power: laws do not really bind me, I can do to you WHATEVER I WANT, I can treat you as guilty if I decide to do so, I can destroy you if I say so . . . This obscene excess is a *necessary* constituent of the notion of sovereignty—the asymmetry is here structural, i.e., the law can only sustain its authority if subjects hear in it an echo of the obscene unconditional self-assertion. And the people’s “divine violence” is correlative to this excess of power: it is its counterpart—it targets this excess and undermines it.

6

The alternative “either struggle for state power (which makes us the same as the enemy we are fighting) or withdrawal to a resistance from a distance towards the state” is a false one—both its terms share the same premise: that a state-form, the way we know it, is here to stay, so that all we can do is take over the state or maintain a distance toward it. Here one should shamelessly repeat the lesson of Lenin’s *State and Revolution*: the goal of revolutionary violence is not to take over the state power but to transform it, radically changing its functioning, its relation to its base, etc. Therein resides the key component of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”—Bulent Somay (personal communication) was right to point out that what qualifies the proletariat for this position is ultimately a *negative* feature: all other classes are (potentially) capable of reaching the status of the “ruling class,” in other words, of establishing themselves as the class controlling the state apparatus:

What makes the working class into an agency and provides it with a mission is neither its poverty, nor its militant and pseudo-military organization, nor its proximity to the (chiefly industrial) means of production. It is only its structural inabil-

ity to organize itself into yet another ruling class that provides the working class with such a mission. The proletariat is the only (revolutionary) class in history that abolishes itself in the act of abolishing its opposite.

One should draw from this insight the only appropriate conclusion: “dictatorship of the proletariat” is a kind of (necessary) oxymoron, NOT a state form in which the proletariat is the ruling class. We effectively have the “dictatorship of the proletariat” only when the state itself is radically transformed, relying on new forms of the people’s participation, which is why there is more than hypocrisy in the fact that, at the highest point of Stalinism when the entire social edifice was shattered by purges, the new constitution proclaimed the end of the “class” character of the Soviet power (voting rights were restored to members of classes previously excluded) and that the Socialist regimes were called “people’s democracies”—a sure indication they were not “dictatorships of the proletariat.” Where democracy is not enough is with regard to the constitutive excess of representation over the represented.

Democracy presupposes a minimum of alienation: those who exert power can only be held responsible to the people if there is a minimal distance of re-presentation between them and the people. In “totalitarianism,” this distance is canceled, the leader is supposed to directly present the will of the people—and the result is, of course, that the (empirical) people are even more radically alienated in their leader: he directly *is* what they “really are,” their true identity, their true wishes and interests, as opposed to their confused “empirical” wishes and interests. In contrast to the authoritarian power alienated from its subjects, the people, here the “empirical” people, are alienated *from themselves*.

This, of course, in no way implies a simple plea for democracy and rejection of “totalitarianism”: there IS, on the contrary, a moment of truth in “totalitarianism.” Hegel already pointed out how political

representation does not mean that people already know in advance what they want and then charge their representatives with advocating their interests—they only know it “in itself”; it is their representative who formulates their interests and goals for them, making them “for-itself.” The “totalitarian” logic thus makes explicit, posits “as such,” a split that always already cuts from within the represented “people.”

One should not be afraid here to draw a radical conclusion concerning the figure of the leader: democracy as a rule cannot reach beyond the pragmatic utilitarian inertia, it cannot suspend the logic of “servicing the goods”; consequently, in the same way, there is no self-analysis; since the analytic change can only occur through the transferential relationship to the external figure of the analyst, a leader is necessary to trigger the enthusiasm for a cause, to bring about the radical change in the subjective position of his followers, to “transubstantiate” their identity.

What this means is that the ultimate question of power is not “is it democratically legitimized or not” but *what is the specific character (the “social content”) of the “totalitarian excess” that pertains to sovereign power as such, independently of its democratic or nondemocratic character?* It is at this level that the concept of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” functions: in it the “totalitarian excess” of power is on the side of the “part of no-part,” not on the side of the hierarchical social order—to put it bluntly, ultimately, they are in power in the full sovereign sense of the term, i.e., it is not only that their representatives temporarily occupy the empty place of power, but, much more radically, they “twist” the very space of state re-presentation in their direction. One can argue that Chavez and Morales are coming close to what could be today’s form of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”: although interacting with many agents and movements, drawing on their support, his government obviously has a privileged link with the dispossessed of the *favelas*—he is ultimately *their* president, *they* are the hegemonic force behind his rule, and although Chavez still respects the demo-

cratic electoral rule, it is clear that his fundamental commitment and source of legitimization is not there, but in the privileged relationship with the dispossessed of the *favelas*. This is the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in the form of “democracy.”

A convincing story can be told about the hypocrisy of the Western left, which to a large extent ignores the phenomenal liberal “renaissance” that is going on in Iran’s civil society: since the Western intellectual references of this “renaissance” are figures like Habermas, Arendt, and Rorty, even Giddens, not the usual gang of anti-imperialist “radicals,” the left makes no fuss when leading figures of this movement lose their jobs and are arrested, etc. With their advocacy of the “boring topics” of division of powers, of democratic legitimization, of the legal defense of human rights, etc., they are viewed with suspicion—they do not appear “anti-imperialist” and anti-American enough. However, one should nonetheless raise the more fundamental question: is bringing Western liberal democracy the true solution for getting rid of the religious-fundamentalist regimes, or are these regimes rather a *symptom* of liberal democracy itself? What to do in cases like that of Algeria or the Palestinian territories, where a “free” democratic election brings “fundamentalists” to power?

When Rosa Luxembourgh wrote that “dictatorship consists in the *way in which* democracy is *used* and not in its *abolition*,” her point was not that democracy is an empty frame that can be used by different political agents (Hitler also came to power through—more or less—free democratic elections), but that there is a “class bias” inscribed into this very empty (procedural) frame. That is why when radical leftists came to power through elections, their *signe de reconnaissance* is that they move to “change the rules,” to transform not only electoral and other state mechanisms but also the entire logic of the political space (relying directly on the power of the mobilized movements; imposing different forms of local self-organization; etc.) to guarantee the hegemony of their base, they are guided by the right intuition about the “class bias” of the democratic form.