

Repeating Lenin

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Lenin's Choice

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The first public reaction to the idea of reactualizing [Lenin](#) is, of course, an outburst of sarcastic laughter: [Marx](#) is OK, even on Wall Street, there are people who love him today — Marx the poet of commodities, who provided perfect descriptions of the capitalist dynamics, Marx of the Cultural Studies, who portrayed the alienation and reification of our daily lives -, but Lenin, no, you can't be serious! The working class movement, revolutionary Party, and similar zombie-concepts? Doesn't Lenin stand precisely for the FAILURE to put Marxism into practice, for the big catastrophe which left its mark on the entire XXth century world politics, for the Real Socialist experiment which culminated in an economically inefficient dictatorship? So, in the contemporary academic politics, the idea to deal with Lenin is accompanied by two qualifications: yes, why not, we live in a liberal democracy, there is freedom of thought... however, one should treat Lenin in an “objective critical and scientific way,” not in an attitude of nostalgic idolatry, and, furthermore, from the perspective firmly rooted in the democratic political order, within the horizon of human rights — therein resides the lesson painfully learned through the experience of the XXth century totalitarianisms.

What are we to say to this? Again, the problem resides in the implicit qualifications which can be easily discerned by the “concrete analysis of the concrete situation,” as Lenin himself would have put it. “Fidelity to the democratic consensus” means the acceptance of the present liberal-parliamentary consensus, which precludes any serious questioning of how this liberal-democratic order is complicit in the phenomena it officially condemns, and, of course, any serious attempt to imagine a society whose socio-political order would be different. In short, it means: say and write whatever you want — on condition that what you do, does not effectively question or disturb the predominant political consensus. So everything is allowed, solicited even, as a critical topic: the prospects of a global ecological catastrophe, violations of human rights, sexism, homophobia, antifeminism, the growing violence not only in the far-away countries, but also in our megalopolises, the gap between the First and the Third World, between the rich and the poor, the shattering impact of the

digitalization of our daily lives... there is nothing easier today than to get international, state or corporate funds for a multidisciplinary research into how to fight the new forms of ethnic, religious or sexist violence. The problem is that all this occurs against the background of a fundamental Denkverbot, the prohibition to think. Today's liberal-democratic hegemony is sustained by a kind of unwritten Denkverbot similar to the infamous *Berufsverbot* in Germany of the late 60s — the moment one shows a minimal sign of engaging in political projects that aim to seriously challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately: “Benevolent as it is, this will necessarily end in a new Gulag!” The ideological function of the constant reference to the holocaust, gulag and the more recent Third World catastrophes is thus to serve as the support of this Denkverbot by constantly reminding us how things may have been much worse: “Just look around and see for yourself what will happen if we follow your radical notions!” And it is exactly the same thing that the demand for “scientific objectivity” means: the moment one seriously questions the existing liberal consensus, one is accused of abandoning scientific objectivity for the outdated ideological positions. This is the point on which one cannot and should not concede: today, the actual freedom of thought means the freedom to question the predominant liberal-democratic “post-ideological” consensus — or it means nothing.

[Habermas](#) designated the present era as that of the *neue Undurchsichtigkeit* — the new opacity.¹ More than ever, our daily experience is mystifying: modernization generates new obscurantisms, the reduction of freedom is presented to us as the arrival of new freedoms. In these circumstances, one should be especially careful not to confuse the ruling ideology with ideology which SEEMS to dominate. More than ever, one should bear in mind [Walter Benjamin's](#) reminder that it is not enough to ask how a certain theory (or art) declares itself to stay with regard to social struggles — one should also ask how it effectively functions IN these very struggles. In sex, the effectively hegemonic attitude is not patriarchal repression, but free promiscuity; in art, provocations in the style of the notorious “Sensation” exhibitions ARE the norm, the example of the art fully integrated into the establishment.

One is therefore tempted to turn around [Marx's thesis 11](#): the first task today is precisely NOT to succumb to the temptation to act, to directly intervene and change things (which then inevitably ends in a cul de sac of debilitating impossibility: “what can one do against the global capital?”), but to question the hegemonic ideological coordinates. If, today, one follows a direct call to act, this act will not be performed in an empty space — it will be an act WITHIN the hegemonic ideological coordinates: those who “really want to do something to help people” get involved in (undoubtedly honorable) exploits like *Medecins sans frontiere*, Greenpeace, feminist and anti-racist campaigns, which are all not only tolerated, but even supported by the media, even if they seemingly enter the economic territory (say, denouncing and boycotting companies which do not respect ecological conditions or which use child labor) — they are tolerated and supported as long as they do not get too close to a certain limit. This kind of activity provides the perfect example of

interpassivity²: of doing things not to achieve something, but to PREVENT from something really happening, really changing. All the frenetic humanitarian, politically correct, etc., activity fits the formula of “Let’s go on changing something all the time so that, globally, things will remain the same!”

Let us take two predominant topics of today’s American radical academia: postcolonial and queer (gay) studies. The problem of postcolonialism is undoubtedly crucial; however, “postcolonial studies” tend to translate it into the multiculturalist problematic of the colonized minorities’ “right to narrate” their victimizing experience, of the power mechanisms which repress “otherness,” so that, at the end of the day, we learn that the root of the postcolonial exploitation is our intolerance towards the Other, and, furthermore, that this intolerance itself is rooted in our intolerance towards the “Stranger in Ourselves,” in our inability to confront what we repressed in and of ourselves — the politico-economic struggle is thus imperceptibly transformed into a pseudo-psychoanalytic drama of the subject unable to confront its inner traumas... The true corruption of the American academia is not primarily financial, it is not only that they are able to buy many European critical intellectuals (myself included — up to a point), but conceptual: notions of the “European” critical theory are imperceptibly translated into the benign universe of the Cultural Studies chic.

My personal experience is that practically all of the “radical” academics silently count on the long-term stability of the American capitalist model, with the secure tenured position as their ultimate professional goal (a surprising number of them even play on the stock market). If there is a thing they are genuinely horrified of, it is a radical shattering of the (relatively) safe life environment of the “symbolic classes” in the developed Western societies. Their excessive Politically Correct zeal when dealing with sexism, racism, Third World sweatshops, etc., is thus ultimately a defense against their own innermost identification, a kind of compulsive ritual whose hidden logic is: “Let’s talk as much as possible about the necessity of a radical change to make it sure that nothing will really change!” Symptomatic is here the journal *October*: when you ask one of the editors to what the title refers, they will half-confidentially signal that it is, of course, THAT *October* — in this way, one can indulge in the jargonistic analyses of the modern art, with the hidden assurance that one is somehow retaining the link with the radical revolutionary past... With regard to this radical chic, the first gesture towards the Third Way ideologists and practitioners should be that of praise: they at least play their game in a straight way, and are honest in their acceptance of the global capitalist coordinates, in contrast to the pseudo-radical academic Leftists who adopt towards the Third Way the attitude of utter disdain, while their own radicality ultimately amounts to an empty gesture which obliges no one to anything determinate.

It is true that, today, it is the radical populist Right which is usually breaking the (still)

predominant liberal-democratic consensus, gradually rendering acceptable the hitherto excluded topics (the partial justification of Fascism, the need to constrain abstract citizenship on behalf of ethnic identity, etc.). However, the hegemonic liberal democracy is using this fact to blackmail the Left radicals: “we shouldn’t play with fire: against the new Rightist onslaught, one should more than ever insist on the democratic consensus — any criticism of it willingly or unwillingly helps the new Right!” This is the key line of separation: one should reject this blackmail, taking the risk of disturbing the liberal consensus, up to questioning the very notion of democracy.

So how are we to respond to the eternal dilemma of the radical Left: should one strategical support center-Left figures like Bill Clinton against the conservatives, or should one adopt the stance of “it doesn’t matter, we shouldn’t get involved in these fights — in a way, it is even better if the Right is directly in power, since, in this way, it will be easier for the people to see the truth of the situation”? The answer is the variation of old Stalin’s answer to the question “Which deviation is worse, the Rightist or the Leftist one?": THEY ARE BOTH WORSE. What one should do is to adopt the stance of the proper dialectical paradox: in principle, of course, one should be indifferent towards the struggle between the liberal and conservative pole of today’s official politics — however, one can only afford to be indifferent if the liberal option is in power. Otherwise, the price to be paid may appear much too high — recall the catastrophic consequences of the decision of the [German Communist Party in the early 30s NOT to focus on the struggle against the Nazis](#), with the justification that the Nazi dictatorship is the last desperate stage of the capitalist domination, which will open eyes to the working class, shattering their belief in the “bourgeois” democratic institutions. Along these lines, Claude Lefort himself, whom no one can accuse of communist sympathies, recently made a crucial point in his answer to Francois Furet: today’s liberal consensus is the result of 150 years of the Leftist workers’ struggle and pressure upon the State, it incorporated demands which were 100 or even less years ago dismissed by liberals as horror.³ As a proof, one should just look at the list of the demands at the end of the Communist Manifesto: apart from 2 or 3 of them (which, of course, are the key one), all others are today part of the consensus (at least the disintegrating Welfare State one): the universal vote, the right to free education, universal healthcare and care for the retired, limitation of child labor...

Interpretation versus Formalization

So where are we to begin? In the present climate of the New Age obscurantism, it may appear attractive to reassert the lesson of Lenin’s *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*: in today’s popular reading of quantum physics, as in Lenin’s times, the doxa is that science itself finally overcame materialism — matter is supposed to “disappear,” to dissolve in the immaterial waves of energy fields.⁴ It is also true (as Lucio Colletti emphasized), that

Lenin's distinction between the philosophical and the scientific notion of matter, according to which, since the philosophical notion of matter as reality existing independently of mind precludes any intervention of philosophy into sciences, the very notion of "dialectics in/of nature" is thoroughly undermined. However... the "however" concerns the fact that, in [*Materialism and Empirio-criticism*](#), there is NO PLACE FOR [DIALECTICS](#), FOR [HEGEL](#). What are Lenin's basic theses? The rejection to reduce knowledge to [phenomenalist](#) or [pragmatic](#) instrumentalism (i.e., the assertion that, in scientific knowledge, we get to know the way things exist independently of our minds — the infamous "theory of reflection"), coupled with the insistence of the precarious nature of our knowledge (which is always limited, relative, and "reflects" external reality only in the infinite process of approximation). Does this not sound familiar? Is this, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of analytical philosophy, not the basic position of [Karl Popper](#), the archetypal anti-Hegelian? In his short article "*Lenin and Popper*,"⁵ Colletti recalls how, in a private letter from 1970, first published in *Die Zeit*, Popper effectively wrote: "Lenin's book on empirio-criticism is, in my opinion, truly excellent."⁶

This hard materialist core of *Empirio-criticism* persists in the [*Philosophical Notebooks*](#) from 1915, in spite of Lenin's rediscovery of Hegel — why? In his Notebooks, Lenin is struggling with the same problem as [Adorno](#) in his "negative dialectics": how to combine Hegel's legacy of the critique of every immediacy, of the subjective mediation of all given objectivity, with the minimum of materialism that Adorno calls the "predominance of the objective" (this is the reason why Lenin still clings to the "[theory of reflection](#)" according to which the human thought mirrors objective reality).⁷ However, both Adorno and Lenin take here the wrong path: the way to assert materialism is not by way of clinging to the minimum of objective reality OUTSIDE the thought's subjective mediation, but by insisting on the absolute INHERENCE of the external obstacle which prevents thought from attaining full identity with itself. The moment we concede on this point and externalize the obstacle, we regress to the pseudo-problematic of the thought asymptotically approaching the ever-elusive "objective reality," never being able to grasp it in its infinite complexity.⁸ The problem with Lenin's "theory of reflection" resides in its implicit idealism: its very compulsive insistence on the independent existence of the material reality outside consciousness is to be read as a symptomatic displacement, destined to conceal the key fact that the consciousness itself is implicitly posited as EXTERNAL to the reality it "reflects." The very metaphor of the infinite approaching to the way things really are, to the objective truth, betrays this idealism: what this metaphor leaves out of consideration is the fact that the partiality (distortion) of the "subjective reflection" occurs precisely because the subject is INCLUDED in the process it reflects — only a consciousness observing the universe from without would see the whole of reality "the way it really is."⁹

This, of course, in no way entails that the tracing of the difference between idealism and materialism is today not more crucial than ever: one should only proceed in a truly Leninist

way, discerning — through the “concrete analysis of concrete circumstances” — WHERE this line of separation runs. One is thus tempted to claim that, even WITHIN the field of religion, the singular point of the emergence of materialism is signalled by Christ’s words on the cross “Father, why have you forsaken me?” — in this moment of total abandonment, the subject experiences and fully assumes the inexistence of the big Other. More generally, the line of division is that between the “idealist” Socratic-Gnostic tradition claiming that the truth is within us, just to be (re)discovered through an inner journey, and the Judeo-Christian “materialist” notion that truth can only emerge from an EXTERNAL traumatic encounter which shatters the subject’s balance. “Truth” requires an effort in which we have to fight our “spontaneous” tendency.

And what if we were to connect this notion of the truth emerging from an external encounter with the (in)famous Lenin’s notion, from [What Is to Be Done?](#), of how the working class cannot achieve its adequate class consciousness “spontaneously,” through its own “organic” development, i.e. of how this truth has to be introduced into it from outside (by the Party intellectuals)? In [quoting Kautsky at this place](#), Lenin makes a significant change in his paraphrase: while Kautsky speaks of how the non-working-class intellectuals, who are OUTSIDE THE CLASS STRUGGLE, should introduce SCIENCE (providing objective knowledge of history) to the working class, Lenin speaks of CONSCIOUSNESS which should be introduced from outside by intellectuals who are outside the ECONOMIC struggle, NOT outside the class struggle! Here is the passage from Kautsky which Lenin quotes approvingly —

“/.../ socialism and class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other; each arises under different conditions. /.../ The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the bourgeois intelligentsia /.../ Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without and not something that arose within it spontaneously.”¹⁰

— and here is [Lenin’s paraphrase of it](#):

“/.../ all worship of the spontaneity of the working-class movement, all belittling of the role of ‘the conscious element,’ of the role of Social-Democracy, means, quite independently of whether he who belittles that role desires it or not, a strengthening of the influence of bourgeois ideology upon workers. /.../ the only choice is — either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course /.../ the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology /.../ for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade-unionism.”¹¹

It may SOUND the same, but it’s NOT: in [Kautsky](#), there is no space for politics proper, just the combination of the social (working class and its struggle, from which intellectuals are implicitly EXCLUDED) and the pure neutral classless, asubjective, knowledge of these intellectuals. In Lenin, on the contrary, “intellectuals” themselves are caught in the conflict of IDEOLOGIES (i.e. the ideological class struggle) which is unsurpassable. (It was already Marx who made this point, from his youth when he dreamt of the unity of German

Idealist philosophy and the French revolutionary masses, to his insistence, in late years, that the leadership of the International should under no conditions be left to the English workers: although the most numerous and best organized, they — in contrast to German workers — lack theoretical stringency.)

The key question thus concerns the exact STATUS of this externality: is it simply the externality of an impartial “objective” scientist who, after studying history and establishing that, in the long run, the working class has a great future ahead, decides to join the winning side? So when Lenin says “The theory of Marx is all-powerful, because it is true,” everything depends on how we understand “truth” here: is it a neutral “objective knowledge,” or the truth of an engaged subject? Lenin’s wager — today, in our era of postmodern relativism, more actual than ever — is that universal truth and partisanship, the gesture of taking sides, are not only not mutually exclusive, but condition each other: in a concrete situation, its UNIVERSAL truth can only be articulated from a thoroughly PARTISAN position — truth is by definition one-sided. (This, of course, goes against the predominant doxa of compromise, of finding a middle path among the multitude of conflicting interests.) Why not, then, shamelessly and courageously ENDORSE the boring standard reproach according to which, Marxism is a “secularized religion,” with Lenin as the Messiah, etc.? Yes, assuming the proletarian standpoint IS EXACTLY like making a leap of faith and assuming a full subjective engagement for its Cause; yes, the “truth” of Marxism is perceptible only to those who accomplish this leap, NOT to any neutral observers. What the EXTERNALITY means here is that this truth is nonetheless UNIVERSAL, not just the “point-of-view” of a particular historical subject: “external” intellectuals are needed because the working class cannot immediately perceive ITS OWN PLACE within the social totality which enables it to accomplish its “mission” — this insight has to be mediated through an external element.

And why not link these two externalities (that of the traumatic experience of the divine Real, and that of the Party) to the third one, that of the ANALYST in the psychoanalytic cure? In all three cases, we are dealing with the same impossibility which bears witness to a materialist obstacle: it is not possible for the believer to “discover God in himself,” through self-immersion, by spontaneously realizing its own Self — God must intervene from outside, disturbing our balance; it is not possible for the working class to actualize spontaneously its historical mission — the Party must intervene from outside, shaking it out of its self-indulgent spontaneity; it is not possible for the patient/analyst to analyze himself — in contrast to the Gnostic self-immersion, in psychoanalysis, there is no self-analysis proper, analysis is only possible if a foreign kernel which gives body to the object-cause of the subject’s desire. Why, then, this impossibility? Precisely because neither of the three subjects (believer, proletarian, analyst) is a self-centered agent of self-mediation, but a decentered agent struggling with a foreign kernel. God, Analyst, Party — the three forms of the “subject supposed to know,” of the transferential object, which is why, in all three

cases, one hears the claim “God/Analyst/ the Party is always right”; and, as it was clear already to [Kierkegaard](#), the truth of this statement is always its negative — MAN is always wrong. This external element does not stand for objective knowledge, i.e. its externality is strictly INTERNAL: the need for the Party stems from the fact that the working class is never “fully itself.”

In his [Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right](#), Marx already deploys something like the logic of hegemony: the emergence of a “universal class,” a particular class which imposes itself as universal, engendering global enthusiasm, standing for society AS SUCH against the *ancien regime*, anti-social crime AS SUCH (like bourgeoisie in the French revolution). After follows the disillusion so sarcastically described by Marx: the day after, the gap between universal and particular becomes visible again, capitalist vulgar profit as the actuality of universal freedom, etc. — For Marx, of course, the only universal class whose singularity (exclusion from society of property) guarantees its ACTUAL universality, is the proletariat. This is what Ernesto Laclau rejects in his logic of hegemony: for Laclau, the short-circuit between the Universal and the Particular is ALWAYS illusory, temporary, a kind of “transcendental paralogism.”¹² However, is Marx's proletariat really the negative of positive full essential humanity, or “only” the gap of universality AS SUCH, irrecoverable in any positivity?¹³ In Alain Badiou's terms, proletariat is not another PARTICULAR class, but a SINGULARITY of the social structure, and AS SUCH the universal class, the non-class among the classes.

What is crucial here is the properly temporal-dialectical tension between the [Universal](#) and the [Particular](#). When Marx says that, in Germany, because of the compromised pettiness of the bourgeoisie, it is too late for the partial bourgeois emancipation, and that, because of it, in Germany, the condition of every particular emancipation is the UNIVERSAL emancipation, one way to read this is to see in it the assertion of the universal “normal” paradigm and its exception: in the “normal” case, partial (false) bourgeois emancipation will be followed by the universal emancipation through the proletarian revolution, while in Germany, the “normal” order gets mixed up. There is, however, another, much more radical way to read it: the very German exception, the inability of its bourgeoisie to achieve partial emancipation, opens up the space for the possible UNIVERSAL emancipation. The dimension of universality thus emerges (only) where the “normal” order enchainning the succession of the particulars is perturbed. Because of this, there is no “normal” revolution, EACH revolutionary explosion is grounded in an exception, in a short-circuit of “too late” and “too early.” The French Revolution occurred because France was not able to follow the “normal” English path of capitalist development; the very “normal” English path resulted in the “unnatural” division of labor between the capitalists who hold socio-economic power and the aristocracy to which was left the political power.

One can also make the same point in the terms of the opposition between interpretation and formalization¹⁴: the external agent (Party, God, Analyst) is NOT the one who “understands us better than ourselves,” who can provide the true interpretation of what our acts and statements mean; it rather stands for the FORM of our activity. Say, Marx’s deployment of the commodity form in the Chapter 1 of Capital is NOT a “narrative,” a *Vorstellung*, but a *Darstellung*, the deployment of the inner structure of the universe of merchandises — the narrative is, on the contrary, the story of the “primitive accumulation,” the myth capitalism proposes about its own origins. (Along the same lines, Hegel’s *Phenomenology* — contrary to Rorty’s reading — does not propose a large narrative, but the FORM of subjectivity; as Hegel himself emphasizes in the Foreword, it focuses on the “formal aspect /das Formelle/.¹⁵ This is how one should approach the absence of large all-encompassing narratives today — recall Fredric Jameson’s supple description of the deadlock of the dialogue between the Western New Left and the Eastern European dissidents, of the absence of any common language between them:

“To put it briefly, the East wishes to talk in terms of power and oppression; the West in terms of culture and commodification. There are really no common denominators in this initial struggle for discursive rules, and what we end up with is the inevitable comedy of each side muttering irrelevant replies in its own favorite language.”¹⁶

Jameson at the same time insists that Marxism still provides the universal meta-language enabling us to situate and relate all other partial narrativizations/interpretations — is he simply inconsistent? Are there two Jamesons: one, postmodern, the theorist of the irreducible multiplicity of the narratives, the other, the more traditional partisan of the Marxist universal hermeneutics? The only way to save Jameson from this predicament is to insist that Marxism is here not the all-encompassing interpretive horizon, but the matrix which enables us to account for (to generate) the multiplicity of narratives and/or interpretations. It is also here that one should introduce the key dialectical distinction between the FOUNDING figure of a movement and the later figure who FORMALIZED this movement: ultimately, it was Lenin who effectively “formalized” Marx by way of defining the Party as the political form of its historical intervention, in the same way that St. Paul “formalized” Christ and Lacan “formalized” Freud.¹⁷

This formalization is strictly correlative to focusing on the Real of an antagonism: “class struggle” is not the last horizon of meaning, the last signified of all social phenomena, but the formal generative matrix of the different ideological horizons of understanding. That is to say, one should not confuse this properly dialectical notion of Form with the liberal-multiculturalist notion of Form as the neutral framework of the multitude of “narratives” — not only literature, but also politics, religion, science, they are all different narratives, stories we are telling ourselves about ourselves, and the ultimate goal of ethics is to guarantee the neutral space in which this multitude of narratives can peacefully coexist, in which everyone, from ethnic to sexual minorities, will have the right and possibility to tell his

story. The properly dialectical notion of Form signals precisely the IMPOSSIBILITY of this liberal notion of Form: Form has nothing to do with “[formalism](#),” with the idea of a neutral Form, independent of its contingent particular content; it rather stands for the traumatic kernel of the Real, for the antagonism, which “colors” the entire field in question. In this precise sense, class struggle is the Form of the Social: every social phenomenon is overdetermined by it, which means that it is not possible to remain neutral towards it.

Of Apes and Men

Lenin’s legacy to be reinvented today is the politics of truth. We live in the “[postmodern](#)” era in which truth-claims as such are dismissed as an expression of hidden power-mechanisms — as the reborn pseudo-Nietzscheans like to emphasize, truth is a lie which is most efficient in asserting our will to power. The very question, apropos of some statement, “Is it true?”, is supplanted by the question “Under what power conditions can this statement be uttered?”. What we get instead of the universal truth is the multitude of perspectives, or, as it is fashionable to put it today, of “narratives” — not only literature, but also politics, religion, science, they are all different narratives, stories we are telling ourselves about ourselves, and the ultimate goal of [ethics](#) is to guarantee the neutral space in which this multitude of narratives can peacefully coexist, in which everyone, from ethnic to sexual minorities, will have the right and possibility to tell his story. THE two philosophers of today’s global capitalism are the two great Left-liberal “progressives,” Richard Rorty and Peter Singer — honest in their consequent stance. Rorty defines the basic coordinates: the fundamental dimension of a human being is the ability to suffer, to experience pain and humiliation — consequently, since humans are symbolic animals, the fundamental right is the right to narrate one’s experience of suffering and humiliation.¹⁸ Singer then provides the Darwinian background.¹⁹

Singer — usually designated as a “social Darwinist with a collectivist socialist face” — starts innocently enough, trying to argue that people will be happier if they lead lives committed to ethics: a life spent trying to help others and reduce suffering is really the most moral and fulfilling one. He radicalizes and actualizes [Jeremiah Bentham](#), the father of [Utilitarianism](#): the ultimate ethical criterion is not the dignity (rationality, soul) of man, but the ability to SUFFER, to experience pain, which man shares with animals. With inexorable radicality, Singer levels the animal/human divide: better kill an old suffering woman than healthy animals... Look an orangutan straight in the eye and what do you see? A none-too-distant cousin — a creature worthy of all the legal rights and privileges that humans enjoy. One should thus extend aspects of equality — the right to life, the protection of individual liberties, the prohibition of torture — at least to the nonhuman great apes (chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas).

Singer argues that “speciesism” (privileging the human species) is no different from racism: our perception of a difference between humans and (other) animals is no less illogical and unethical than our one-time perception of an ethical difference between, say, men and women, or blacks and whites. Intelligence is no basis for determining ethical stature: the lives of humans are not worth more than the lives of animals simply because they display more intelligence (if intelligence were a standard of judgment, Singer points out, we could perform medical experiments on the mentally retarded with moral impunity). Ultimately, all things being equal, an animal has as much interest in living as a human. Therefore, all things being equal, medical experimentation on animals is immoral: those who advocate such experiments claim that sacrificing the lives of 20 animals will save millions of human lives — however, what about sacrificing 20 humans to save millions of animals? As Singer’s critics like to point out, the horrifying extension of this principle is that the interests of 20 people outweighs the interests of one, which gives the green light to all sorts of human rights abuses.

Consequently, Singer argues that we can no longer rely on traditional ethics for answers to the dilemmas which our constellation imposes on ourselves; he proposes a new ethics meant to protect the quality, not the sanctity, of human life. As sharp boundaries disappear between life and death, between humans and animals, this new ethics casts doubt on the morality of animal research, while offering a sympathetic assessment of infanticide. When a baby is born with severe defects of the sort that always used to kill babies, are doctors and parents now morally obligated to use the latest technologies, regardless of cost? NO. When a pregnant woman loses all brain function, should doctors use new procedures to keep her body living until the baby can be born? NO. Can a doctor ethically help terminally ill patients to kill themselves? YES.

The first thing to discern here is the hidden [utopian](#) dimension of such a survivalist stance. The easiest way to detect ideological surplus-enjoyment in an ideological formation is to read it as a dream and analyze the displacement at work in it. Freud reports of a dream of one of his patients which consists of a simple scene: the patient is at a funeral of one of his relatives. The key to the dream (which repeats a real-life event from the previous day) is that, at this funeral, the patient unexpectedly encountered a woman, his old love towards whom he still felt very deeply — far from being a masochistic dream, this dream thus simply articulates the patient’s joy at meeting again his old love. Is the mechanism of displacement at work in this dream not strictly homologous to the one elaborated by Fredric Jameson apropos of a science-fiction film which takes place in California in near future, after a mysterious virus has very quickly killed a great majority of the population? When the film’s heroes wander in the empty shopping malls, with all the merchandises intact at their disposal, is this libidinal gain of having access to the material goods without the alienating market machinery not the true point of the film occluded by the displacement of the official focus of the narrative on the catastrophe caused by the virus? At an even more elementary

level, is not one of the commonplaces of the sci-fi theory that the true point of the novels or movies about a global catastrophe resides in the sudden reassertion of social solidarity and the spirit of collaboration among the survivors? It is as if, in our society, global catastrophe is the price one has to pay for gaining access to solidary collaboration...

When my son was a small boy, his most cherished personal possession was a special large “survival knife” whose handle contained a compass, a sack of powder to disinfect water, a fishing hook and line, and other similar items — totally useless in our social reality, but perfectly fitting the survivalist fantasy of finding oneself alone in wild nature. It is this same fantasy which, perhaps, give the clue to the success of Joshua Piven’s and David Borgenicht’s surprise best-seller *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*.²⁰ Suffice it to mention two supreme examples from it: What to do if an alligator has its jaws closed on your limb? (Answer: you should tap or punch it on the snout, because alligators automatically react to it by opening their mouths.) What to do if you confront a lion which threatens to attack you? (Answer: try to make yourself appear bigger than you are by opening your coat wide.) The joke of the book thus consists in the discord between its enunciated content and its position of enunciation: the situations it describes are effectively serious and the solutions correct — the only problem is WHY IS THE AUTHOR TELLING US ALL THIS? WHO NEEDS THIS ADVICE?

The underlying irony is that, in our individualistic competitive society, the most useless advice concerns survival in extreme physical situations — what one effectively needs is the very opposite, the Dale Carnegie type of books which tell us how to win over (manipulate) other people: the situations rendered in *The Worst-Case Scenario* lack any symbolic dimension, they reduce us to pure survival machines. In short, *The Worst-Case Scenario* became a best-seller for the very same reason Sebastian Junger’s *The Perfect Storm*, the story (and the movie) about the struggle for survival of a fishing vessel caught in the “storm of the century” east of the Canadian coast in 1991, became one: they both stage the fantasy of the pure encounter with a natural threat in which the socio-symbolic dimension is suspended. In a way, *The Perfect Storm* even provides the secret utopian background of *The Worst-Case Scenario*: it is only in such extreme situations that an authentic intersubjective community, held together by solidarity, can emerge. Let us not forget that *The Perfect Storm* is ultimately the book about the solidarity of a small working class collective! The humorous appeal of *The Worst-Case Scenario* can thus be read as bearing witness to our utter alienation from nature, exemplified by the shortage of contact with “real life” dangers.

We all know the standard pragmatic-utilitarian criticism of the abstract humanist education: who needs philosophy, Latin quotes, classic literature — one should rather learn how to act and produce in real life... well, in *The Worst-Case Scenario*, we get such real life lessons, with the result that they uncannily resemble the useless classic humanist education.

Recall the proverbial scenes of the drilling of young pupils, boring them to death by making them mechanically repeat some formulas (like the declination of the Latin verbs) — the Worst-Case Scenario counterpoint to it would have been the scene of forcing the small children in the elementary school to learn by heart the answers to the predicaments this book describes by repeating them mechanically after the teacher: “When the alligator bites your leg, you punch him on the nose with your hand! When the lion confronts you, you open your coat wide!”[21](#)

So, back to Singer, one cannot dismiss him as a monstrous exaggeration — what Adorno said about psychoanalysis (its truth resides in its very exaggerations)[22](#) fully holds for Singer: he is so traumatic and intolerable because his scandalous “exaggerations” directly renders visible the truth of the so-called postmodern ethics. Is effectively not the ultimate horizon of the postmodern “identity politics” Darwinian — defending the right of some particular species of the humankind within the panoply of their proliferating multitude (gays with AIDS, black single mothers...)? The very opposition between “conservative” and “progressive” politics can be conceived of in the terms of Darwinism: ultimately, conservatives defend the right of those with might (their very success proves that they won in the struggle for survival), while progressives advocate the protection of endangered human species, i.e., of those losing the struggle for survival.[23](#)

[One of the divisions in the chapter on Reason in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*](#) speaks about “das geistige Tierreich” (the spiritual animal kingdom): the social world which lacks any spiritual substance, so that, in it, individuals effectively interact as “intelligent animals.” They use reason, but only in order to assert their individual interests, to manipulate others into serving their own pleasures.[24](#) Is not a world in which the highest rights are human rights precisely such a “spiritual animal kingdom,” a universe? There is, however, a price to be paid for such liberation — in such a universe, human rights ultimately function as ANIMAL rights. This, then, is the ultimate truth of Singer: our universe of human right is the universe of animal rights.

The obvious counterargument is here: so what? Why should we not reduce humankind to its proper place, that of one of the animal species? What gets lost in this reduction? Jacques-Alain Miller, the main pupil of Jacques Lacan, once commented an uncanny laboratory experiment with rats[25](#): in a labyrinthine set-up, a desired object (a piece of good food or a sexual partner) is first made easily accessible to a rat; then, the set-up is changed in such a way that the rat sees and thereby knows where the desired object is, but cannot gain access to it; in exchange for it, as a kind of consolation prize, a series of similar objects of inferior value is made easily accessible — how does the rat react to it? For some time, it tries to find its way to the “true” object; then, upon ascertaining that this object is definitely out of reach, the rat will renounce it and put up with some of the inferior substitute objects — in short, it will act as a “rational” subject of utilitarianism.

It is only now, however, that the true experiment begins: the scientists performed a surgical operation on the rat, messing about with its brain, doing things to it with laser beams about which, as Miller put it delicately, it is better to know nothing. So what happened when the operated rat was again let loose in the labyrinth, the one in which the “true” object is inaccessible? The rat insisted: it never became fully reconciled with the loss of the “true” object and resigned itself to one of the inferior substitutes, but repeatedly returned to it, attempted to reach it. In short, the rat in a sense was humanized; it assumed the tragic “human” relationship towards the unattainable absolute object which, on account of its very inaccessibility, forever captivates our desire. On the other hand, it is this very “conservative” fixation that pushes man to continuing renovation, since he never can fully integrate this excess into his life process. So we can see why did Freud use the term *Todestrieb*: the lesson of psychoanalysis is that humans are not simply alive; on the top of it, they are possessed by a strange drive to enjoy life in excess of the ordinary run of things — and “death” stands simply and precisely for the dimension beyond ordinary biological life.

This, then, is what gets lost in Singer’s “*geistige Tierreich*”: the Thing, something to which we are unconditionally attached irrespective of its positive qualities. In Singer’s universe, there is a place for mad cows, but no place for an Indian sacred cow. In other words, what gets lost here is simply the dimension of truth — NOT “objective truth” as the notion of reality from a point of view which somehow floats above the multitude of particular narratives, but truth as the Singular Universal.” When Lenin said “The theory of Marx is all-powerful, because it is true,” everything depends on how we understand “truth” here: is it a neutral “objective knowledge,” or the truth of an engaged subject? Lenin’s wager — today, in our era of postmodern relativism, more actual than ever — is that universal truth and partisanship, the gesture of taking sides, are not only not mutually exclusive, but condition each other: in a concrete situation, its UNIVERSAL truth can only be articulated from a thoroughly PARTISAN position — truth is by definition one-sided. This, of course, goes against the predominant doxa of compromise, of finding a middle path among the multitude of conflicting interests. If one does not specify the CRITERIA of the different, alternate, narrativization, then this endeavor courts the danger of endorsing, in the Politically Correct mood, ridiculous “narratives” like those about the supremacy of some aboriginal holistic wisdom, of dismissing science as just another narrative on a par with premodern superstitions. The Leninist narrative to the postmodern multiculturalist “right to narrate” should thus be an unashamed assertion of the right to truth. When, in the debacle of 1914, all European Social Democratic parties (with the honorable exception of the Russian Bolsheviks and the Serb Social Democrats) succumbed to the war fervor and voted for the military credits, Lenin’s thorough rejection of the “patriotic line,” in its very isolation from the predominant mood, designated the singular emergence of the truth of the entire situation.

In a closer analysis, one should exhibit how the cultural relativism of the “right-to-

narrate” orientation contains its own apparent opposite, the fixation on the Real of some trauma which resists its narrativization. This properly dialectical tension sustains today’s the academic “holocaust industry.” My own ultimate experience of the holocaust-industry police occurred in 1997 at a round table in the Centre Pompidou in Paris: I was viciously attacked for an intervention in which (among other things) I claimed, against the neoconservatives deploring the decline of faith today, that the basic need of a normal human being is not to believe himself, but to have another subject who will believe for him, at his place — the reaction of one of the distinguished participants was that, by claiming this, I am ultimately endorsing the holocaust revisionism, justifying the claim that, since everything is a discursive construct, this includes also the holocaust, so it is meaningless to search for what really happened there... Apart from displaying a hypocritical paranoia, my critic was doubly wrong: first, the holocaust revisionists (to my knowledge) NEVER argue in the terms of the postmodern discursive [constructionism](#), but in the terms of very [empirical](#) factual analysis: their claims range from the “fact” that there is no written document in which Hitler would have ordered the holocaust, to the weird mathematics of “taking into account the number of gas ovens in Auschwitz, it was not possible to burn so many corpses.” Furthermore, not only is the postmodern logic of “everything is a discursive construction, there are no direct firm facts” NEVER used to deflate the holocaust; in a paradox worth noting, it is precisely the postmodern discursive constructionists (like [Lyotard](#)) who tend to elevate the holocaust into the supreme ineffable [metaphysical](#) Evil — the holocaust serves them as the untouchable-sacred [Real](#), as the [negative](#) of the contingent language games.[26](#)

The problem with those who perceive every comparison between the holocaust and other concentration camps and mass political crimes as an inadmissible [relativization](#) of the holocaust, is that they miss the point and display their own doubt: yes, the holocaust WAS unique, but the only way to establish this uniqueness is to compare it with other similar phenomena and thus demonstrate the limit of this comparison. If one does not risk this comparison, of one prohibits it, one gets caught in the [Wittgensteinian](#) paradox of prohibiting to speak about that about which we cannot speak: if we stick to the prohibition of the comparison, the gnawing suspicion emerges that, if we were to be allowed to compare the holocaust with other similar crimes, it would be deprived of its uniqueness...

Lenin As a Listener of Schubert

So how can the reference to Lenin deliver us from this stuff predicament? Some [libertarian](#) Leftists want to redeem — partially, at least — Lenin by opposing the “bad” Jacobin-elitist Lenin of *What Is To Be Done?*, relying on the Party as the professional intellectual elite which enlightens the working class from OUTSIDE, and the “good” Lenin of *State and Revolution*, who envisioned the prospect of abolishing the [State](#), of the broad

masses directly taking into their hands the administration of the public affairs. However, this opposition has its limits: the key premise of *State and Revolution* is that one cannot fully “[democratize](#)” the State, that State “as such,” in its very notion, is a dictatorship of one class over another; the logical conclusion from this premise is that, insofar as we still dwell within the domain of the State, we are legitimized to exercise full violent terror, since, within this domain, every democracy is a fake. So, since state is an instrument of oppression, it is not worth trying to improve its apparatuses, the protection of the legal order, elections, laws guaranteeing personal freedoms... — all this becomes irrelevant. The moment of truth in this reproach is that one cannot separate the unique constellation which enabled the revolutionary takeover in October 1917 from its later “[Stalinist](#)” turn: the very constellation that rendered the revolution possible (peasants’ dissatisfaction, a well-organized revolutionary elite, etc.) led to the “Stalinist” turn in its aftermath — therein resides the proper Leninist tragedy. [Rosa Luxemburg](#)’s famous alternative “[socialism or barbarism](#)” ended up as the ultimate [infinite judgement](#), asserting the speculative identity of the two opposed terms: the “really existing” socialism WAS barbarism.[27](#)

In the diaries of [Georgi Dimitroff](#), which were recently published in German,[28](#) we get a unique glimpse into how Stalin was fully aware what brought him to power, giving an unexpected twist to his well-known slogan that “people (cadres) are our greatest wealth.” When, at a diner in November 1937, Dimitroff praises the “great luck” of the international workers, that they had such a genius as their leader, Stalin, Stalin answers:

“... I do not agree with him. He even expressed himself in a non-Marxist way. Decisive are the middle cadres.”(7.11.37)

He puts it in an even clearer way a paragraph earlier:

“Why did we win over Trotsky and others? It is well known that, after Lenin, Trotsky was the most popular in our land. But we had the support of the middle cadres, and they explained our grasp of the situation to the masses ... Trotsky did not pay any attention to these cadres.”

Here Stalin spells out the secret of his rise to power: as a rather anonymous General Secretary, he nominated tens of thousands of cadres who owed their rise to him... This is why Stalin did not yet want [Lenin dead in the early 1922](#), rejecting his demand to be given poison to end his life after the debilitating stroke: if Lenin were to die already in early 1922, the question of succession would not yet be resolved in Stalin’s favor, since Stalin as the general secretary did not yet penetrate enough the Party apparatus with his appointees — he needed another year or two, so that, when Lenin effectively dies, he could count on the support of thousands of mid-level cadres nominated by him to win over the big old names of the Bolshevik “aristocracy.”

Here are some details of the daily life of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1917 and the following years, which, in their very triviality, render palpable the gap from the Stalinist

nomenklatura. When, in the evening of 24 October 1917, Lenin left his flat for the Smolny Institute to coordinate the revolutionary takeover, he took a tram and asked the conductress if there was any fighting going on in the center that day. In the years after the October Revolution, Lenin was mostly driving around in a car only with his faithful driver and bodyguard Gil; a couple of times they were shot at, stopped by the police and arrested (the policemen did not recognize Lenin), once, after visiting a school in suburbs, even robbed of the car and their guns by bandits posing as police, and then compelled to walk to the nearest police station. When, on 30 August 1918, Lenin was shot, this occurred while he got in a conversation with a couple of complaining women in front of a factory he just visited; the bleeding Lenin was driven by Gil to Kremlin, where there were no doctors, so his wife [Nadezhda Krupskaya](#) suggested someone should run out to the nearest grocer's shop for a lemon... The standard meal in the Kremlin *kantina* in 1918 was buckwheat porridge and thin vegetable soup. So much about the privileges of *nomenklatura*!

Lenin's slanderers like to evoke his famous paranoiac reaction at listening to Beethoven's *appassionata* (he first started to cry, then claimed that a revolutionary cannot afford to let himself go to such sentiments, because they make him too weak, wanting to pat the enemies instead of mercilessly fighting them) as the proof of his cold self-control and cruelty — however, even at its own terms, is this accident effectively an argument AGAINST Lenin? Does it not rather bear witness to an extreme sensitivity for music that needs to be kept in check in order to continue the political struggle? Who of today's cynical politicians still displays even a trace of such a sensitivity? Is not Lenin here at the very opposite of the high-ranked Nazis who, without any difficulty, combined such a sensitivity with the extreme cruelty in taking political decisions (suffice it to recall Heydrich, the holocaust architect, who, after a hard day's work, always found time to play with his comrades Beethoven's string quartets) — is not the proof of Lenin's humanity that, in contrast to this supreme barbarism, which resides in the very unproblematic unity of high culture and political barbarism, he was still extremely sensitive to the irreducible antagonism between art in power struggle?

Furthermore, one is tempted to develop a Leninist theory of this high-cultured barbarism. Hans Hotter's outstanding 1942 recording of Schubert's *Winterreise* seems to call for an intentionally anachronistic reading: it is easy to imagine German officers and soldiers listening to this recording in the Stalingrad trenches in the cold Winter of 42/43. Does the topic of *Winterreise* not evoke a unique consonance with the historical moment? Was not the whole campaign to Stalingrad a gigantic *Winterreise*, where each German soldier can say for himself the very first lines of the cycle:

"I came here a stranger,
As a stranger I depart"?

Do the following lines not render their basic experience:

“Now the world is so gloomy,
The road shrouded in snow.
I cannot choose the time
To begin my journey,
Must find my own way
In this darkness.”

Here we have the endless meaningless march:

“It burns under both my feet,
Even though I walk on ice and snow;
I don’t want to catch my breath
Until I can no longer see the spires.”

The dream of returning home in the Spring:

“I dreamed of many-colored flowers,
The way they bloom in May;
I dreamed of green meadows,
Of merry bird calls.”

The nervous waiting for the post:

“From the highroad a posthorn sounds.
Why do you leap so high, my heart?”

The shock of the morning artillery attack:

“The cloud tatters flutter
Around in weary strife.
And fiery red flames
Dart around among them.”

Utterly exhausted, the soldiers are refused even the solace of death:

“I’m tired enough to drop, have taken mortal hurt.
Oh, merciless inn, you turn me away?
Well, onward then, still further, my loyal walking staff!”

What can one do in such a desperate situation, but to go on with heroic persistence, closing one’s ears to the complaint of the heart, assuming the heavy burden of fate in a world deserted by Gods?

“If the snow flies in my face,
I shake it off again.
When my heart speaks in my breast,
I sing loudly and gaily.
I don’t hear what it says to me,
I have no ears to listen;
I don’t feel when it laments,
Complaining is for fools.

Happy through the world along
Facing wind and weather!
If there's no God upon the earth,
Then we ourselves are Gods!"

The obvious counter-argument is that all this is merely a superficial parallel: even if there is an echo of the atmosphere and emotions, they are in each case embedded in an entirely different context: in Schubert, the narrator wanders around in Winter because the beloved has dropped him, while the German soldiers were on the way to Stalingrad because of Hitler's military plans. However, it is precisely in this displacement that the elementary ideological operation consists: the way for a German soldier to be able to endure his situation was to avoid the reference to concrete social circumstances which would become visible through reflection (what the hell were they doing in Russia? what destruction did they bring to this country? what about killing the Jews?), and, instead, to indulge in the Romantic bemoaning of one's miserable fate, as if the large historical catastrophe just materializes the trauma of a rejected lover. Is this not the supreme proof of the emotional abstraction, of [Hegel's idea that emotions are ABSTRACT](#), an escape from the concrete socio-political network accessible only to THINKING.

And one is tempted to make here a Leninist step further: in our reading of the *Winterreise*, we did not just link Schubert to a contingent later historical catastrophe, we did not just try to imagine how this song-cycle resonated to the embattled German soldiers in Stalingrad. What if the link to this catastrophe enables us to read what was wrong in the Schubertian Romantic position itself? What if the position of the Romantic tragic hero, narcissistically focused on his own suffering and despair, elevating them into a source of perverted pleasure, is already in itself a fake one, an ideological screen masking the true trauma of the larger historical reality? One should thus accomplish the properly Hegelian gesture of projecting the split between the authentic original and its later reading colored by contingent circumstances back into the authentic original itself: what at first appears the secondary distortion, a reading twisted by the contingent external circumstances, tells us something about what the authentic original itself not only represses, leaves out, but had the function to repress. Therein resides the Leninist answer to the famous passage from the [Introduction to the Grundrisse manuscript](#), in which Marx mentions how easy it is to explain Homer's poetry from its unique historical context — it is much more difficult to explain its universal appeal, i.e. why it continues to give us artistic pleasure long after its historical context disappeared²⁹: this universal appeal is based in its very ideological function of enabling us to abstract from our concrete ideologico-political constellation by way of taking refuge in the “universal” (emotional) content. So, far from signalling some kind of trans-ideological heritage of the humankind, the universal attraction of Homer relies on the universalizing gesture of ideology.

“Entre nous: If they kill me...”

In what, then, resides Lenin’s greatness? Recall Lenin’s shock when, in the Fall of 1914, the Social Democratic parties adopted the “[patriotic line](#)” — Lenin even thought that the issue of *Vorwärts*, the daily newspaper of the German Social Democracy, which reported how Social Democrats in Reichstag voted for the military credits, was a forgery of the Russian secret police destined to deceive the Russian workers. In that era of the military conflict that cut in half the European continent, how difficult it was to reject the notion that one should take sides in this conflict, and to fight against the “patriotic fervor” in one’s own country! How many great minds (inclusive of [Freud](#)) succumbed to the nationalist temptation, even if only for a couple of weeks! This shock of 1914 was — in Badiou’s terms — a *desastre*, a catastrophe in which an entire world disappeared: not only the idyllic bourgeois faith in progress, but ALSO the socialist movement which accompanied it. Lenin himself (the Lenin of *What Is to Be Done?*) lost the ground under his feet — there is, in his desperate reaction, no satisfaction, no “I told you so!” THIS the moment of *Verzweiflung*, THIS catastrophe opened up the site for the Leninist event, for breaking the evolutionary historicism of the Second International — and only Lenin was the one at the level of this opening, the one to articulate the Truth of THIS catastrophe.³⁰ Through this moment of despair, the Lenin who, through reading Hegel, was able to detect the unique chance for revolution, was born. His *State and Revolution* is strictly correlative to this shattering experience — Lenin’s full subjective engagement in it is clear from this famous letter to [Kamenev](#) from July 1917:

“*Entre nous*: If they kill me, I ask you to publish my notebook “Marxism & the State” (stuck in Stockholm). It is bound in a blue cover. It is a collection of all the quotations from Marx & Engels, likewise from Kautsky against Pannekoek. There is a series of remarks & notes, formulations. I think with a week’s work it could be published. I consider it imp. for not only Plekhanov but also Kautsky got it wrong. Condition: all this is *entre nous*.”³¹

The existential engagement is here extreme, and the kernel of the Leninist “utopia” arises out of the ashes of the catastrophe of 1914, in his settling of the accounts with the [Second International](#) orthodoxy: the radical imperative to smash the bourgeois state, which means the state AS SUCH, and to invent a new communal social form without a standing army, police or [bureaucracy](#), in which all could take part in the administration of the social matters. This was for Lenin no theoretical project for some distant future — in October 1917, Lenin claimed that “we can at once set in motion a state apparatus constituting of ten if not twenty million people.”³² This urge of the moment is the true utopia. One cannot overestimate the explosive potential of *The State and Revolution* — in this book, “the vocabulary and grammar of the Western tradition of politics was abruptly dispensed with.”³³ What then followed can be called, borrowing the title of [Althusser](#)’s text on [Machiavelli](#), *la solitude de Lenine*: the time when he basically stood alone, struggling

against the current in his own party. When, in his “[April Theses](#)” from 1917, Lenin discerned the *Augenblick*, the unique chance for a revolution, his proposals were first met with stupor or contempt by a large majority of his party colleagues. Within the Bolshevik party, no prominent leader supported his call to revolution, and *Pravda* took the extraordinary step of dissociating the party, and the editorial board as a whole, from Lenin’s “April Theses” — far from being an opportunist flattering and exploiting the prevailing mood of the populace, Lenin’s views were highly idiosyncratic. Bogdanov characterized “April Theses” as “the delirium of a madman,”³⁴ and Nadezhda Krupskaya herself concluded that “I am afraid it looks as if Lenin has gone crazy.”³⁵

“Lenin” is not the nostalgic name for old dogmatic certainty; quite on the contrary, to put it in Kierkegaard’s terms, THE Lenin which we want to retrieve is the Lenin-in-becoming, the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which old coordinates proved useless, and who was thus compelled to REINVENT Marxism — recall his acerbic remark apropos of some new problem: “About this, Marx and Engels said not a word.” The idea is not to return to Lenin, but to REPEAT him in the Kierkegaardian sense: to retrieve the same impulse in today’s constellation. The return to Lenin aims neither at nostalgically reenacting the “good old revolutionary times,” nor at the opportunistic-pragmatic adjustment of the old program to “new conditions,” but at repeating, in the present world-wide conditions, the Leninist gesture of reinventing the revolutionary project in the conditions of [imperialism](#) and colonialism, more precisely: after the politico-ideological collapse of the long era of progressivism in the catastrophe of 1914. Eric Hobsbawm defined the CONCEPT of the XXth century as the time between 1914, the end of the long peaceful expansion of capitalism, and 1990, the emergence of the new form of global capitalism after the collapse of the Really Existing Socialism. What Lenin did for 1914, we should do for 1990. “Lenin” stands for the compelling [FREEDOM](#) to suspend the stale existing (post)ideological coordinates, the debilitating *Denkverbot* in which we live — it simply means that we are allowed to think again.

One of the standard accusations against Lenin is that, insensible for the universal human dimension, he perceived all social events through the lenses of the class struggle, of “us against them.” However, are Lenin’s appeals against the patriotic fervor during the World War I not an exemplary case of practicing what Alain Badiou³⁶ calls the universal function of “humanity,” which has nothing whatsoever to do with so-called “[humanism](#).” This “humanity” is neither a notional abstraction, nor the pathetic imaginary assertion of the all-encompassing brotherhood, but a universal function which actualizes itself in unique ecstatic experiences, like those of the soldiers from the opposite trenches starting to fraternize. In Jaroslav Hasek’s legendary comical novel *The Good Soldier Schwejk*, the adventures of an ordinary Czech soldier who undermines the ruling order by simply following orders too literally, Schwejk finds himself at the frontline trenches in Galicia, where the Austrian army is confronting the Russians. When Austrian soldiers start to shoot,

the desperate Schwejk runs into the no-man's-land in front of their trenches, waving desperately his hands and shouting: "Don't shoot! There are men on the other side!" This is what Lenin was aiming at in his call to the tired peasants and other working masses in the Summer of 1917 to stop fighting, dismissed as part of a ruthless strategy to win popular support and thus gain power, even if it meant the military defeat of one's own country (recall the standard argument that, when, in the Spring of 1917, Lenin was allowed by the German state to pass on a sealed train through Germany on his way from Switzerland to Sweden, Finland and then Russia, he was de facto functioning as a German agent).

There is a long literary tradition of elevating the face to face encounter with an enemy soldier as THE authentic war experience (see the writings of Ernst Juenger, who celebrated such encounters in his memoirs of the trench attacks in World War I): soldiers often fantasize about killing the enemy soldier in a face to face confrontation, looking him into the eyes before stabbing him. The singular experience of humanity occurs when the mystique of such a face to face encounter is rendered meaningless. The same sublime moment of solidarity took place in the battle for Stalingrad, when, on New Year's Eve of December 31 1942, Russian actors and musicians visited the besieged city to entertain the troops; the violinist Mikhail Goldstein went to the trenches to perform a one-man concert for the soldiers:

"The melodies he created drifted out through loudspeakers to the German trenches and the shooting suddenly ceased. In the eerie quiet, the music flowed from Goldstein's dipping bow.

When he finished, a hushed silence hung over the Russian soldiers. From another loudspeaker, in German territory, a voice broke the spell. In halting Russian it pleaded: 'Play some more Bach. We won't shoot.'

Goldstein picked up his violin and started a lively Bach gavotte."[37](#)

This same experience of humanity, of the meaninglessness of the conflict we are engaged in, can also take a much more mundane shape, that of a simple exchange of gazes which tells everything. During one of the anti-apartheid demonstrations in the old South Africa, when a troop of white policemen was dispersing and pursuing black demonstrators, a policeman was running after a black lady, a rubber truncheon in his hand. Unexpectedly, the lady lost one of her shoes; automatically obeying his "good manners," the policeman picked up the shoes and gave it to her; at this moment, they exchanged glances and both became aware of the inanity of their situation — after such a gesture of politeness, i.e. after handling her the lost shoe and waiting for her to put it on again, it was simply IMPOSSIBLE for him to continue to run after her and to hit her with the truncheon; so, after politely nodding at her, the policeman turned around and walked away... The moral of this story is NOT that the policeman suddenly discovered his innate goodness, i.e. we are NOT dealing here with the case of natural goodness winning over the racist ideological training; on the contrary, in all probability, the policeman was — as to his psychological

stance — a standard racist. What triumphed here was simply his “superficial” training in politeness.

When the policeman stretched his hand in order to pass the shoe, this gesture was more than a moment of physical contact. The white policeman and the black lady literally lived in two different socio-symbolic universes with no direct communication possible: for each of the two, the barrier which separated the two universes was for a brief moment suspended, and it was as if a hand from another, spectral, universe reached into one’s ordinary reality. The situation is similar to the scene in one of the early Joan Crawford films (*Possessed* from 1930), in which she plays a poor small town girl who, on her way home, has to stop before the rails since a train is passing slowly through the small town; through the wagon’s windows, she observes the wealthy life going on inside (a cook preparing an exquisite meal, a couple dancing...). It is as if she found herself in a cinema theatre, a spectator confronted with scenes of the life she longs for, scenes which are close, but nonetheless simultaneously somewhat ethereal, spectral, threatening to dissolve at any moment. And then, a true miracle occurs — when the train stops for a brief moment, an elder kind gentleman is standing on the observation platform immediately in front of the girl, with his hand holding a glass with a drink stretching outwards, from the fantasmatic reality of the train to the everyday reality of the girl, and engages in a friendly conversation with her — a magical moments when the dream itself seems to intervene into our daily reality... The effect of this last shot resides in the way everyday reality itself — the scene of a train passing by an ordinary working girl — acquires the magic dimension of the poor girl encountering her dream. And it is against the background of this scene that one should interpret the eerie event which took place on the evening of November 7, 1942, when, in his special train rolling through Thuringia, Hitler was discussing the day’s major news with several aides in the dining car; since allied air raids had damaged the tracks, the train frequently slowed its passage:

“While dinner was served on exquisite china, the train stopped once more at a siding. A few feet away, a hospital train marked time, and from their tiered cots, wounded soldiers peered into the blazing light of the dining room where Hitler was immersed in conversation. Suddenly he looked up at the awed faces staring in at him. In great anger he ordered the curtains drawn, plunging his wounded warriors back into the darkness of their own bleak world.”[38](#)

The miracle of this scene is redoubled: on each side, they experienced what they saw through the window-frame as a fantasmatic apparition: for Hitler, it was a nightmarish view of the results of his military adventure; for the soldiers, it was the unexpected encounter with the Leader himself. The true miracle would have been here if a hand were to stretch through the window — say, Hitler reaching over to a wounded soldier. But, of course, it was precisely such an encounter, such an intrusion into his reality, that Hitler dreaded, so, instead of stretching his hand, he in panic ordered the curtains drawn.

A Cyberspace Lenin?

So what are we to say to the standard reproach of “extremism”? Lenin’s critique of the [“Leftism as the Child Illness of the Communism”](#) is more than actual in the last decades, in which Left often succumbed to the terrorist temptation. Political “extremism” or “excessive radicalism” should always be read as a phenomenon of ideologico-political displacement: as an index of its opposite, of a limitation, of a refusal effectively to “go to the end.” What was the Jacobin’s recourse to radical “terror” if not a kind of hysterical acting out bearing witness to their inability to disturb the very fundamentals of economic order (private property, etc.)? And does the same not go even for the so-called “excesses” of Political Correctness? Do they also not display the retreat from disturbing the effective (economic etc.) causes of racism and sexism? Perhaps, then, the time has come to render problematic the standard topos, shared by practically all the “postmodern” Leftists, according to which political [“totalitarianism”](#) somehow results from the predominance of material production and technology over the intersubjective communication and/or symbolic practice, as if the root of the political terror resides in the fact that the “principle” of instrumental reason, of the technological exploitation of nature, is extended also to society, so that people are treated as raw stuff to be transformed into a New Man. What if it is the exact opposite which holds? What if political “terror” signals precisely that the sphere of (material) production is denied in its autonomy and subordinated to political logic? Is it not that all political “terror,” from Jacobins to [Maoist Cultural Revolution](#), presupposes the foreclosure of production proper, its reduction to the terrain of political battle?

Recall Badiou’s exalted defense of Terror in the French Revolution, in which he quotes the justification of the guillotine for Lavoisier: *“La republique n’a pas de besoin de savants.* [The Republic has no need for scientists.]” Badiou’s thesis is that the truth of this statement emerges if we cut it short, depriving it of its caveat: *“La republique n’a pas de besoins.* [The Republic has no needs.]” The Republic gives body to the purely political logic of equality and freedom which should follow its path with no consideration for the “servicing of goods” destined to satisfy the needs of the individuals.³⁹ In the revolutionary process proper, freedom becomes an end-in-itself, caught in its own paroxysm — this suspension of the importance of the sphere of economy, of the (material) production, brings Badiou close to Hannah Arendt for whom, in a strict homology to Badiou, freedom is opposed to the domain of the provision of services and goods, of the maintenance of households and the exercise of administration, which do not belong to politics proper: the only place for freedom is the communal political space. In this precise sense, Badiou’s (and Sylvain Lazarus’⁴⁰) plea for the reappraisal of Lenin is more ambiguous than it may appear: what it effectively amounts to is nothing less than the abandonment of Marx’s key insight into how the political struggle is a spectacle which, in order to be deciphered, has to be referred to the sphere of economics (“if Marxism had any analytical value for political

theory, was it not in the insistence that the problem of freedom was contained in the social relations implicitly declared ‘unpolitical’ — that is, naturalized — in liberal discourse”[41](#)). No wonder that the Lenin Badiou and Lazarus prefer is the Lenin of *What Is to Be Done?*, the Lenin who (in his thesis that the socialist-revolutionary consciousness has to be brought from without to the working class) breaks with Marx’s alleged “economism” and asserts the autonomy of the Political, NOT the Lenin of *The State and Revolution*, fascinated by the modern centralized industry, imagining the (depoliticized) ways to reorganize economy and the state apparatus.

What all the new French (or French oriented) theories of the political, from Balibar through Ranciere and Badiou to Laclau and Mouffe, aim at is — to put it in the traditional philosophical terms — the reduction of the sphere of economy (of the [material production](#)) to an “ontic” sphere deprived of the “[ontological](#)” dignity. Within this horizon, there is simply no place for the Marxian “[critique](#) of political economy”: the structure of the universe of [commodities](#) and capital in Marx’s *Capital* is NOT just that of a limited empirical sphere, but a kind of socio-transcendental *a priori*, the matrix which generates the totality of social and political relations. The relationship between [economy](#) and [politics](#) is ultimately that of the well-known visual paradox of the “two faces or a vase”: one either sees the two faces or a vase, never both of them — one has to make a choice.[42](#) In the same way, one either focuses on the political, and the domain of economy is reduced to the empirical “servicing of goods,” or one focuses on economy, and politics is reduced to a theatre of [appearances](#), to a passing phenomenon which will disappear with the arrival of the developed Communist (or technocratic) society, in which, as already Engels put it, the “administration of people” will vanish in the “administration of things.”[43](#)

The root of this notion of pure “politics,” radically autonomous with regard to history, society, economy, State, even Party, is Badiou’s opposition between Being and Event — it is here that Badiou remains “idealist.” From the materialist standpoint, an Event emerges “out of nowhere” within a specific constellation of Being — the space of an Event is the minimal “empty” distance between two beings, the “other” dimension which shines through this gap.[44](#) So when Badiou and Lazarus insist on the strict frontier between the Political and the Social (the domain of State, historicism...), they concede too much — namely, that SOCIETY EXISTS. They do not get the lesson, articulated by Laclau, that “society doesn’t exist,” that society is not a positive field, since the gap of the Political is inscribed into its very foundations (Marx’s name for the political which traverses the entire social body is “class struggle”).

Consequently, Lenin the ultimate political strategist should in no way be separated from Lenin the “technocrat” dreaming about the scientific reorganization of production. The greatness of Lenin is that, although he lacked the proper conceptual apparatus to think these two levels together, he was aware of the urgency to do it — an impossible, yet necessary,

task.⁴⁵ What we are dealing with here is another version of the Lacanian “il n'y a pas de rapport...”: if, for Lacan, there is no sexual relationship, then, for Marxism proper, there is no relationship between economy and politics, no “meta-language” enabling us to grasp from the same neutral standpoint the two levels, although — or, rather, BECAUSE — these two levels are inextricably intertwined. The “political” class struggle takes place in the very midst of economy (recall that the very last paragraph of *Capital III*, where the texts abruptly stops, tackles the class struggle), while, at the same time, the domain of economy serves as the key enabling us to decode political struggles. No wonder that the structure of this impossible relationship is that of the Moebius band: first, we have to progress from the political spectacle to its economic infrastructure; then, in the second step, we have to confront the irreducible dimension of the political struggle in the very heart of the economy.

Here, Lenin’s stance against economism as well as against pure politics is crucial today, apropos of the split attitude towards economy in (what remains of) the radical circles: on the one hand, the above-mentioned pure “politicians” who abandon economy as the site of struggle and intervention; on the other hand, the economists, fascinated by the functioning of today’s global economy, who preclude any possibility of a political intervention proper. Today, more than ever, we should here return to Lenin: yes, economy is the key domain, the battle will be decided there, one has to break the spell of the global capitalism — BUT the intervention should be properly POLITICAL, not economic. The battle to be fought is thus a twofold one: first, yes, anti-capitalism. However, anti-capitalism without problematizing the capitalism’s POLITICAL form (liberal parliamentary democracy) is not sufficient, no matter how “radical” it is. Perhaps THE lure today is the belief that one can undermine capitalism without effectively problematizing the liberal-democratic legacy which — as some Leftists claim — although engendered by capitalism, acquired autonomy and can serve to criticize capitalism. This lure is strictly correlative to its apparent opposite, to the pseudo-Deleuzian love-hate fascinating/fascinated poetic depiction of Capital as a rhizomatic monstre/vampire which deterritorializes and swallows all, indomitable, dynamic, ever raising from the dead, each crisis making it stronger, Dionysos-Phoenix reborn... It is in this poetic (anti)capitalist reference to Marx that Marx is really dead: appropriated when deprived of his political sting.

Marx was fascinated by the revolutionary “deterritorializing” impact of capitalism which, in its inexorable dynamics, undermines all stable traditional forms of human interaction; what he reapproached capitalism with is that its “deterritorialization” was not thorough enough, that it generated new “reterritorializations” — the ultimate obstacle to capitalism is capitalism itself, i.e. capitalism unleashes a dynamics it is no longer be able to contain. Far from being outdated, this claim seems to gain actuality with today’s growing deadlocks of globalization in which the inherently antagonistic nature of capitalism belies its worldwide triumph. However, the problem is: is it still possible to imagine Communism (or another form of post-capitalist society) as a formation which sets free the deterritorializing dynamics

of capitalism, liberating it of its inherent constraints? Marx's fundamental vision was that a new, higher social order (Communism) is possible, an order that would not only maintain, but even raise to a higher degree and effectively fully release the potential of the self-increasing spiral of productivity which, in capitalism, on account of its inherent obstacle/contradiction, is again and again thwarted by socially destructive economic crises. What Marx overlooked is that, to put it in the standard Derridean terms, this inherent obstacle/antagonism as the "condition of impossibility" of the full deployment of the productive forces is simultaneously its "condition of possibility": if we abolish the obstacle, the inherent contradiction of capitalism, we do not get the fully unleashed drive to productivity finally delivered of its impediment, but we lose precisely this productivity that seemed to be generated and simultaneously thwarted by capitalism — if we take away the obstacle, the very potential thwarted by this obstacle dissipates... therein would reside a possible Lacanian critique of Marx, focusing on the ambiguous overlapping between surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment.[46](#)

While this constant self-propelling revolutionizing still holds for the high Stalinism with its total productive mobilization, the "stagnant" late Real Socialism legitimizes itself (between the lines, at least) as a society in which one can live peacefully, avoiding the capitalist competitive stress. This was the last line of defense when, from the late 60s onwards, after the fall of [Khrushchev](#) (the last enthusiast who, during his visit to the US, prophesied that "your grandchildren will be Communists"), it became clear that the Real Socialism was losing the competitive edge in its war with capitalism. So the stagnant late Real Socialism in a way already WAS "socialism with a human face": silently abandoning great historical tasks, it provided the security of the everyday life going on in a benevolent boredom. Today's nostalgia for the defunct Socialism mostly consists in such a conservative nostalgia for the self-satisfied constrained way of life; even the nostalgic anti-capitalist artists from Peter Handke to Joseph Beuys celebrate this aspect of Socialism: the absence of stressful mobilization and frantic [commodification](#). Of course, this unexpected shift tells us something about the deficiency of the original Marxist project itself: it points towards the limitation of its goal of unleashed productive mobilization.

Capitalism is not just a historical epoch among others — in a way, the once fashionable and today forgotten [Francis Fukuyama](#) WAS right, global capitalism IS "the end of history." A certain excess which was as it were kept under check in previous history, perceived as a localizable perversion, as an excess, a deviation, is in capitalism elevated into the very principle of social life, in the speculative movement of money begetting more money, of a system which can survive only by constantly revolutionizing its own conditions, that is to say, in which the thing can only survive as its own excess, constantly exceeding its own "normal" constraints. Let us take the case of consumption: before modernity, we were dealing with the direct opposition between moderate consumption and its excess (gluttony, etc.); with capitalism, the excess (the consumption of "useless things")

becomes THE RULE, i.e. the elementary form of buying is the act of buying things we “do NOT really need.” And, perhaps, it is only today, in the global capitalism in its “postindustrial” digitalized form, that, to put it in Hegelian terms, the really-existing capitalism is reaching the level of its notion: perhaps, one should follow again Marx’s old anti-evolutionist motto (incidentally, taken verbatim from Hegel) that the anatomy of man provides the key for the anatomy of a monkey, i.e. that, in order to deploy the inherent notional structure of a social formation, one must start with its most developed form. Marx located the elementary capitalist antagonism in the opposition between use- and exchange-value: in capitalism, the potentials of this opposition are fully realized, the domain of exchange-values is acquires autonomy, is transformed into the spectre of self-propelling speculative capital which needs the productive capacities and needs of actual people only as its dispensable temporal embodiment. Marx derived the very notion of economic crisis from this gap: a crisis occurs when reality catches up with the illusory self-generating mirage of money begetting more money — this speculative madness cannot go on indefinitely, it has to explode in ever stronger crises. The ultimate root of the crisis is for him the gap between use and exchange value: the logic of exchange value follows its own path, its own mad dance, irrespective of the real needs of real people. It may appear that this analysis is more than actual today, when the tension between the virtual universe and the real is reaching almost palpably unbearable proportions: on the one hand, we have crazy solipsistic speculations about futures, mergers, etc., following their own inherent logic; on the other hand, reality is catching up in the guise of ecological catastrophes, poverty, the Third World collapse of social life, the Mad Cow Disease. This is why cyber-capitalists can appear as the paradigmatic capitalists today, this is why Bill Gates can dream of the cyberspace as providing the frame for what he calls “frictionless capitalism.” What we have here is an ideological short-circuit between the two version of the gap between reality and virtuality: the gap between real production and virtual spectral domain of the Capital, and the gap between experiential reality and virtual reality of cyberspace. It effectively seems that the cyberspace gap between my fascinating screen persona and the miserable flesh which is “me” off the screen translates into the immediate experience the gap between the Real of the speculative circulation of the capital and the drab reality of impoverished masses... However, is this — this recourse to “reality” which will sooner or later catch up with the virtual game — really the only way to operationalize a critique of capitalism? What if the problem of capitalism is not this solipsistic mad dance, but precisely the opposite: that it continues to disavow its gap with “reality,” that it presents itself as serving real needs of real people? The originality of Marx is that he played on both cards simultaneously: the origin of capitalist crises is the gap between use- and exchange-value, AND capitalism constrains the free deployment of productivity.

What all this means is that the urgent task of the economic analysis today is, again, to REPEAT Marx’s “critique of political economy” without succumbing to the temptation of the multitude of the ideologies of “postindustrial” societies. The key change concerns the

status of [private property](#): the ultimate element of power and control is no longer the last link in the chain of investments, the firm or individual who “really owns” the [means of production](#). The ideal capitalist today functions in a wholly different way: investing borrowed money, “really owning” nothing, even indebted, but nonetheless controlling things. A corporation is owned by another corporation, which is again borrowing money from banks, which may ultimately manipulate money owned by ordinary people like ourselves. With Bill Gates, the “private property of the means of production” becomes meaningless, at least in the standard meaning of the term. The paradox of this virtualization of capitalism is ultimately the same as that of the electron in the elementary particle physics. The mass of each element in our reality is composed of its mass at rest plus the surplus provided by the acceleration of its movement; however, an electron’s mass at rest is zero, its mass consists only of the surplus generated by the acceleration of its movement, as if we are dealing with a nothing which acquires some deceptive substance only by magically spinning itself into an excess of itself. Does today’s virtual capitalist not function in a homologous way — his “net value” is zero, he directly operates just with the surplus, borrowing from the future?[47](#)

So where is Lenin in all this? According to the predominant doxa, in the years after the October Revolution, Lenin’s decline of faith in the creative capacities of the masses led him to emphasize the role of [science](#) and the scientists, to rely on the authority of the expert: he hailed

“the beginning of that very happy time when politics will recede into the background, /.../ and engineers and agronomists will do most of the talking.”[48](#)

Technocratic post-politics? Lenin’s ideas about how the road to socialism runs through the terrain of monopoly capitalism may appear dangerously naive today:

“Capitalism has created an accounting apparatus in the shape of the banks, syndicates, postal service, consumers’ societies, and office employees unions. Without big banks socialism would be impossible. /.../ our task is here merely to lop off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus, to make it even bigger, even more democratic, even more comprehensive. /.../ This will be country-wide book-keeping, country-wide accounting of the production and distribution of goods, this will be, so to speak, something in the nature of the skeleton of socialist society.”[49](#)

Is this not the most radical expression of Marx’s notion of the general intellect regulating all social life in a transparent way, of the post-political world in which [“administration of people” is supplanted by the “administration of things”](#)? It is, of course, easy to play against this quote the tune of the “critique on instrumental reason” and “administered world *verwaltete Welt*”: the “totalitarian” potentials are inscribed in this very form of total social control. It is easy to remark sarcastically how, in the Stalinist epoch, the apparatus of social administration effectively became “even bigger.” Furthermore, is this postpolitical vision not the very opposite of the Maoist notion of the eternity of the class struggle (“everything

is political”)?

Are, however, things really so unambiguous? What if one replaces the (obviously dated) example of the central bank with the World Wide Web, today's perfect candidate for the General Intellect? Dorothy Sayers claimed that Aristotele's *Poetics* effectively is the theory of the detective novels *avant la lettre* — since the poor Aristotle didn't yet know of the detective novel, he had to refer to the only examples at his disposal, the tragedies... Along the same lines, Lenin was effectively developing the theory of a role of World Wide Web, but, since WWW was unknown to him, he had to refer to the unfortunate central banks. Consequently, can one also say that “without the World Wide Web socialism would be impossible. /.../ our task is here merely to lop off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus, to make it even bigger, even more democratic, even more comprehensive”? In these conditions, one is tempted to resuscitate the old, opprobrious and half-forgotten, Marxian dialectics of the [productive forces](#) and the [relations of production](#): it is already a commonplace to claim that, ironically, it was this very dialectics which buried the Really Existing Socialism: Socialism was not able to sustain the passage from industrial to postindustrial economy. However, does capitalism really provide the “natural” frame of the relations of production for the digital universe? Is there not in the World Wide Web an explosive potential also for capitalism itself? Is not the lesson of the *Microsoft* monopoly precisely the Leninist one: instead of fighting its monopoly through the state apparatus (recall the court-ordered split of the Microsoft Corporation), would it not be more “logical” just to SOCIALIZE it, rendering it freely accessible?[50](#)

So what about the basic reproach according to which, Lenin is irrelevant for us today because he remained stuck within the horizon of the industrial mass production (recall his celebration of [Fordism](#))? The first thing to do here is to ask the elementary question: what is a factory? Leslie Kaplan's essay-poem *L'exces-usine*,[51](#) with its description of the “Hell” of the factory life, renders palpable the dimension overlooked in the standard Marxist depictions of the workers' “[alienation](#).” Kaplan opposes the self-enclosed universe of the factory to the open environment of the previous work-process: the factory space is a timeless space in which fiction and reality ultimately coincide, i.e. the very reality of this space functions as the fantasmatic space cut off from its environs. What is lacking in this space is the full “background noise” which provides the life-world context to human individuals: in a factory, as Kaplan puts it, instead of the rich tapestry of the background-environment, there is only a whiteness — in short, it is as if, when we are in a factory, we enter an artificial universe which is deprived of the substantial wealth of the real-life texture. In this space, (historical-narrative) memory itself is threatened: workers are cut off their ancestral roots, and this also affects their utopian potentials themselves: reduced to robots endlessly repeating the same [mechanical](#) gestures, they lose the very capacity to dream, to devise projects of alternate reality. What they experience is no longer the nostalgia for a determinate past (say, of their previous more “organic” farmers' lives), but, as Kaplan puts

it perspicuously, the “absolute nostalgia” for an empty Otherness whose sole positive content is, again, the factory life itself — say, the empty corridors of a factory.

So, within these coordinates, what does the passage from the factory production to the “postindustrial” production in which workers are again isolated and can even work at home, behind their computer screen, mean? The disabling alternative of today’s Marxism is: what to do apropos of the growing importance of the “[immaterial production](#)” today (cyber-workers)? Do we insist that only those involved in “real” material production are the working class, or do we accomplish the fateful step of accepting that the “symbolic workers” are the (true) proletarians today? One should resist this step, because it obfuscates the DIVISION between [immaterial and material production](#), the SPLIT in the working class between (as a rule geographically separated) cyber-workers and material workers (programmers in the US or India, the sweat shops in China or Indonesia). Perhaps, it is the figure of the UNEMPLOYED (JOBLESS) who stands for the pure proletarian today: the unemployed substantial determination remains that of a worker, but they are prevented from actualizing it OR to renounce it, so they remain suspended in the potentiality of workers who cannot work. Perhaps, we are today in a sense “all jobless”: jobs tend to be more and more based on [short term contracts](#), so that the jobless state is the rule, the zero-level, and the temporary job the exception.

The key antagonism of the so-called new (digital) industries is thus: how to maintain the form of (private) property, within which only the logic of [profit](#) can be maintained (see also the Napster problem, the free circulation of music). And do the legal complications in biogenetics not point in the same direction? The key element of the new international trade agreements is the “protection of [intellectual property](#)”: whenever, in a merger, a big First World company takes over a [Third World](#) company, the first thing they do is close down the research department. Phenomena emerge here which bring the notion of property to extraordinary dialectical paradoxes: in India, the local communities suddenly discover that medical practices and materials they are using for centuries are now owned by American companies, so they should be bought from them; with the biogenetic companies patenting genes, we are all discovering that parts of ourselves, our genetic components, are already copyrighted, owned by others...

However, the outcome of this crisis of the private property of the means of production is by no means guaranteed — it is HERE that one should take into account the ultimate paradox of the Stalinist society: against the capitalism which is the [class](#) society, but in principle [egalitarian](#), without direct [hierarchical](#) divisions, the “mature” Stalinism is a classless society articulated in precisely defined hierarchical groups (top *nomenklatura*, technical intelligence, army...). What this means is that, already for Stalinism, the classic Marxist notion of the class struggle is no longer adequate to describe its hierarchy and domination: in the Soviet Union from the late 20s onwards, the key social division was not

defined by property, but by the direct access to power mechanisms and to the privileged material and cultural conditions of life (food, accommodation, healthcare, freedom of travel, education). And, perhaps, the ultimate irony of history will be that, in the same way Lenin's vision of the "central bank Socialism" can be properly read only retroactively, from today's World Wide Web, the Soviet Union provided the first model of the developed "post-property" society, of the true "late capitalism" in which the ruling class will be defined by the direct access to the (informational, administrative) means of social power and control and to other material and social privileges: the point will no longer be to own companies, but directly to run them, to have the right to use a private jet, to have access to top health care, etc. — privileges which will be acquired not by property, but by other (educational, managerial, etc.) mechanisms.

Today, we already can discern the signs of a kind of general unease — recall the series of events usually listed under the name of "Seattle." The 10 years honeymoon of the triumphant global capitalism is over, the long-overdue "seven years itch" is here — witness the panicky reactions of the big media, which — from the Time magazine to CNN — all of a sudden started to warn about the Marxists manipulating the crowd of the "honest" protesters. The problem is now the strictly Leninist one — how to ACTUALIZE the media's accusations: how to invent the organizational structure which will confer on this unrest the FORM of the universal political demand. Otherwise, the momentum will be lost, and what will remain is the marginal disturbance, perhaps organized as a new Greenpeace, with certain efficiency, but also strictly limited goals, marketing strategy, etc. In other words, the key "Leninist" lesson today is: politics without the organizational FORM of the [party](#) is politics without politics, so the answer to those who want just the (quite adequately named) "[New SOCIAL Movements](#)" is the same as the answer of the Jacobins to the Girondin compromisers: "You want revolution without a revolution!" Today's blockade is that there are two ways open for the socio-political engagement: either play the game of the system, engage in the "long march through the institutions," or get active in new social movements, from feminism through ecology to anti-racism. And, again, the limit of these movements is that they are not POLITICAL in the sense of the Universal Singular: they are "one issue movements" which lack the dimension of the universality, i.e. they do not relate to the social TOTALITY.

Here, Lenin's reproach to liberals is crucial: they only EXPLOIT the working classes' discontent to strengthen their position vis-a-vis the conservatives, instead of identifying with it to the end.⁵² Is this also not the case with today's Left liberals? They like to evoke racism, ecology, workers' grievances, etc., to score points over the conservatives WITHOUT ENDANGERING THE SYSTEM. Recall how, in Seattle, Bill Clinton himself deftly referred to the protesters on the streets outside, reminding the gathered leaders inside the guarded palaces that they should listen to the message of the demonstrators (the message which, of course, Clinton interpreted, depriving it of its subversive sting attributed

to the dangerous extremists introducing chaos and violence into the majority of peaceful protesters). It's the same with all New Social Movements, up to the Zapatistas in Chiapas: the systemic politics is always ready to "listen to their demands," depriving them of their proper political sting. The system is by definition ecumenical, open, tolerant, ready to "listen" to all — even if one insist on one's demands, they are deprived of their universal political sting by the very form of negotiation. The true Third Way we have to look for is this third way between the institutionalized parliamentary politics and the new social movements.

The ultimate answer to the reproach that the radical Left proposals are utopian should thus be that, today, the true utopia is the belief that the present liberal-democratic capitalist consensus could go on indefinitely, without radical changes. We are thus back at the old '68 motto "*Soyons realistes, demandons l'impossible!*": in order to be truly a "realist," one must consider breaking out of the constraints of what appears "possible" (or, as we usually put it, "feasible").

The Leninist Utopia

Which, then, is the criterion of the political act? Success as such clearly doesn't count, even if we define it in the dialectical way of [Merleau-Ponty](#), as the wager that future will retroactively redeem our present horrible acts (this is how, in his *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty provided one of the more intelligent justifications of the Stalinist terror: retroactively, it will become justified if its final outcome will be true freedom)⁵³; neither does the reference to some abstract-universal ethical norms. The only criteria is the absolutely INHERENT one: that of the ENACTED UTOPIA. In a proper revolutionary breakthrough, the utopian future is neither simply fully realized, present, nor simply evoked as a distant promise which justified present violence — it is rather as if, in a unique suspension of temporality, in the short-circuit between the present and the future, we are — as if by Grace — for a brief time allowed to act AS IF the utopian future is (not yet fully here, but) already at hand, just there to be grabbed. Revolution is not experienced as a present hardship we have to endure for the happiness and freedom of the future generations, but as the present hardship over which this future happiness and freedom already cast their shadow — in it, we ALREADY ARE FREE WHILE FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM, we ALREADY ARE HAPPY WHILE FIGHTING FOR HAPPINESS, no matter how difficult the circumstances. Revolution is not a Merleau-Pontyan wager, an act suspended in the *futur anterieur*, to be legitimized or delegitimized by the long term outcome of the present acts; it is as it were ITS OWN ONTOLOGICAL PROOF, an immediate index of its own truth.

Let us recall the staged performance of "[Storming the Winter Palace](#)" in Petrograd, on

the third anniversary of the October Revolution, on 7 November 1920. Tens of thousands of workers, soldiers, students and artists worked round the clock, living on kasha (the tasteless wheat porridge), tea and frozen apples, and preparing the performance at the very place where the event “really took place” three years earlier; their work was coordinated by the Army officers, as well as by the avant-garde artists, musicians and directors, from Malevich to Meyerhold. Although this was acting and not “reality,” the soldiers and sailors were playing themselves — many of them not only actually participated in the event of 1917, but were also simultaneously involved in the real battles of the Civil War that were raging in the near vicinity of Petrograd, a city under siege and suffering from severe shortages of food. A contemporary commented on the performance: “The future historian will record how, throughout one of the bloodiest and most brutal revolutions, all of Russia was acting”[54](#); and the formalist theoretician Viktor Shklovski noted that “some kind of elemental process is taking place where the living fabric of life is being transformed into the theatrical.”[55](#) We all remember the infamous self-celebratory First of May parades that were one of the supreme signs of recognition of the Stalinist regimes — if one needs a proof of how Leninism functioned in an entirely different way, are such performances not the supreme proof that the October Revolution was definitely NOT a simple coup d'etat by the small group of Bolsheviks, but an event which unleashed a tremendous emancipatory potential?

The archetypal Eisensteinian cinematic scene rendering the exuberant orgy of revolutionary destructive violence (what Eisenstein himself called “a veritable bacchanalia of destruction”) belongs to the same series: when, in October, the victorious revolutionaries penetrate the wine cellars of the Winter Palace, they indulge there in the ecstatic orgy of smashing thousands of the expensive wine bottles; in *Behzin Meadow*, after the village Pioneers discovers the body of the young Pavlik, brutally murdered by his own father, they force their way into the local church and desecrate it, robbing it of its relics, squabbling over an icon, sacrilegiously trying on vestments, heretically laughing at the statuary... In this suspension of the goal-oriented instrumental activity, we effectively get a kind of Batailleian “unrestrained expenditure” — the pious desire to deprive the revolution of this excess is simply the desire to have a revolution without revolution. It is against this background that one should approach the delicate issue of revolutionary violence which is an authentic act of liberation, not just a blind passage à l'acte.[56](#)

And did we not get exactly the same scene in the Great Cultural Revolution in China, with the thousands of Red Guardists ecstatically destroying old historical monuments, smashing old vases, desecrating old paintings, chirping off old walls?[57](#) In spite of (or, rather, because of) all its horrors, the Great Cultural Revolution undoubtedly did contain elements of such an enacted utopia. At its very end, before the agitation was blocked by Mao himself (since he already achieved his goal of re-establishing his full power and getting rid of the top *nomenklatura* competition), there was the “Shanghai Commune”: one

million workers who simply took the official slogans seriously, demanding the abolition of the State and even the Party itself, and the direct communal organization of society. It is significant that it was at this very point that Mao ordered the restoration of order. The (often noted) parallel between Mao and Lacan is fully justified here: the dissolution of the *École Freudienne de Paris* in 1979 was Lacan's "Great Cultural Revolution," mobilizing his young followers (who, incidentally, mostly were ex-Maoists from 1968!) in order to get rid of the inner circle of his "mandarins." In both cases, the paradox is that of a leader who triggers an uncontrolled upheaval, while trying to exert full personal power — the paradoxical overlapping of extreme dictatorship and extreme emancipation of the masses.

It is at this precise point concerning political terror that one can locate the gap that separates Leninism from Stalinism⁵⁸: in Lenin's times, terror was openly admitted ([Trotsky](#) sometimes even boasted in an almost cocky way about the non-democratic nature of the Bolshevik regime and the terror it used), while in Stalin's times, the symbolic status of the terror thoroughly changed: terror turned into the publicly non-acknowledged obscene shadowy supplement of the public official discourse. It is significant that the climax of terror (1936/37) took place after the new constitution was accepted in 1935 — this constitution was supposed to end the state of emergency and to mark the return of the things to normal: the suspension of the civil rights of the whole strata of population (kulaks, ex-capitalists) was recalled, the right to vote was now universal, etc. etc. The key idea of this constitution was that now, after the stabilization of the Socialist order and the annihilation of the enemy classes, the Soviet Union is no longer a class society: the subject of the State is no longer the working class (workers and peasants), but the [people](#). However, this does NOT mean that the Stalinist constitution was a simple hypocrisy concealing the social reality — the possibility of terror is inscribed into its very core: since the class war is now proclaimed over and the Soviet Union is conceived of as the classless country of the People, those who (are still presumed to) oppose the regime are no longer mere class enemies in a conflict that tears apart the social body, but enemies of the people, insects, worthless scum, which is to be excluded from humanity itself.

This repression of the regime's own excess was strictly correlative to something homologous to the invention of the liberal psychological individual not take place in the Soviet Union in the late 20s and early 30s. The Russian avant-garde art of the early 20s (futurism, constructivism) not only zealously endorsed industrialization, it even endeavored to reinvent a new industrial man — no longer the old man of sentimental passions and roots in traditions, but the new man who gladly accepts his role as a bolt or screw in the gigantic coordinated industrial Machine. As such, it was subversive in its very "ultra-orthodoxy," i.e. in its over-identification with the core of the official ideology: the image of man that we get in Eisenstein, Meyerhold, constructivist paintings, etc., emphasizes the beauty of his/her mechanical movements, his/her thorough depsychologization. What was perceived in the West as the ultimate nightmare of liberal individualism, as the ideological counterpoint to

the “[Taylorization](#),” to the Fordist ribbon-work, was in Russia hailed as the utopian prospect of liberation: recall how Meyerhold violently asserted the “[behaviorist](#)” approach to acting — no longer emphatic familiarization with the person the actor is playing, but the ruthless bodily training aimed at the cold bodily discipline, at the ability of the actor to perform the series of mechanized movements...[59](#) THIS is what was unbearable to AND IN the official Stalinist ideology, so that the Stalinist “[socialist realism](#)” effectively WAS an attempt to reassert a “Socialism with a human face,” i.e. to reinscribe the process of industrialization into the constraints of the traditional psychological individual: in the Socialist Realist texts, paintings and films, individuals are no longer rendered as parts of the global Machine, but as warm passionate persons.

In a recent pamphlet against the “excesses” of May '68 and, more generally, the “sexual liberation” of the 60s, *The Independent* brought back to memory what the radicals of '68 thought about the child sex. A quarter of a century ago, Daniel Cohn-Bendit wrote about his experience in a kindergarten: “My constant flirt with all the children soon took on erotic characteristics. I could really feel how from the age of five the small girls had already learned to make passes at me. /.../ Several times a few children opened the flies of my trousers and started to stroke me. /.../ When they insisted, I then stroked them.” [Shulamith Firestone](#) went even further, expressing her hopes that, in a world “without the incest taboo /.../ relations with children would include as much genital sex as they were capable of — probably considerably more than we now believe.”[60](#) When confronted with these statements, Cohn-Bendit played them down, claiming that “this did not really happen, I only wanted to provoke people. When one reads it today, it is unacceptable.”[61](#) However, the question still hovers: how, at that time, was it possible to provoke people, presenting them sexual games with pre-school children as something appealing, while today, the same “provocation” would immediately give rise to an outburst of moral disgust? After all, child sexual harassment is one of THE notions of Evil today. Without directly taking sides in this debate, one should read it as a sign of the change in our mores from the utopian energies of the 60s and early 70s to the contemporary stale Political Correctness, in which every authentic encounter with another human being is denounced as a victimizing experience. What we are unable even to conjecture today is the idea of REVOLUTION, be it sexual or social. Perhaps, in today’s stale times of the proliferating pleas for tolerance, one should take the risk of recalling the liberating dimension of such “excesses.”

Perhaps the most succinct definition of ideology was produced by Christopher Hitchens, when he tackled the difficult question of what the North Koreans effectively think about their “Beloved Leader” Kim Jong Il: “mass delusion is the only thing that keeps a people sane.”[62](#) This paradox points towards the [fetishistic](#) split in the very heart of an effectively functioning [ideology](#): individuals transpose their belief onto the big Other (embodied in the collective), which thus believes in their place — individuals thus remain sane qua individuals, maintaining the distance towards the “big Other” of the official discourse. It is

not only the direct identification with the ideological “delusion” which would render individuals insane, but also the suspension of their (disavowed, displaced) belief. In other words, if individuals were to be deprived of this belief (projected onto the “big Other”), they would have to jump in and themselves directly assume the belief. (Perhaps, this explains the paradox that many a cynic turns into a sincere believer at the very point of the disintegration of the “official” belief.) This is what Lacan aimed at in his claim that the true formula of materialism is not “[God doesn’t exist](#),” but “God is unconscious” — suffice it to recall what, in a letter to Max Brod, Milena Jesenska wrote about Kafka:

“Above all, things like money, stock-exchange, the foreign currency administration, type-writer, are for him thoroughly mystical (what they effectively are, only not for us, the others).”[63](#)

One should read this statement against the background of [Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism](#): the fetishist illusion resides in our real social life, not in our perception of it — a bourgeois subject knows very well that there is nothing magic about [money](#), that money is just an object which stands for a set of social relations, but he nevertheless ACTS in real life as if he were to believe that money is a magic thing. This, then, gives us a precise insight into Kafka’s universe: Kafka was able to experience directly these fantasmatic beliefs we, “normal” people, disavow — Kafka’s “magic” is what Marx liked to refer to as the “theological freakishness” of commodities.

This definition of ideology points out the way to answer the boring standard reproach against the application of psychoanalysis to social-ideological processes: is it “legitimate” to expand the use of the notions which were originally deployed for the treatment of individuals, to collective entities and to speak, say, of religion as a “collective compulsive neurosis”? The focus of psychoanalysis is entirely different: the Social, the field of social practices and socially held beliefs, is not simply at a different level from the individual experience, but something to which the individual him/herself has to relate, which the individual him/herself has to experience as an order which is minimally “[reified](#),” externalized. The problem is therefore not “how to jump from the individual to the social level?”; the problem is: how should the decentered socio-symbolic order of institutionalized practices beliefs be structured, if the subject is to retain his/her “sanity,” his/her “normal” functioning? Which delusions should be deposited there so that individuals can remain sane? Recall the proverbial egotist, cynically dismissing the public system of moral norms: as a rule, such a subject can only function if this system is “out there,” publicly recognized, i.e. in order to be a private cynic, he has to presuppose the existence of naive other(s) who “really believe.” This is how a true “cultural revolution” should be conducted: not by directly targeting individuals, endeavouring to “re-educate” them, to “change their reactionary attitudes,” but by depriving individuals of the support in the “big Other,” in the institutional symbolic order.

When, on the weekend of March 6-7 2001, the Taliban forces in Afghanistan proceeded to destroy all “idols,” especially the two gigantic Buddha statues carved into the stone at Bamiyan, we got the usual spectacle of all the “civilized” nations unanimously condemning the “barbarism” of this act. All the known actors were here: from the UNICEF expressing concern about the desecration of an important part of the heritage of humanity, and the New York Metropolitan Museum offering to buy the statues, up to the Islamic states representatives and clerics eager to denounce the destruction as contrary to the spirit of Islam. This kind of protest means strictly NOTHING — it just contributes to the aseptic liberal (multi)cultural consensus. Instead of hypocritically bemoaning this destruction, one should rather ask the question: where do WE stand with regard to faith? Perhaps, therein resides the truly traumatic dimension of the destruction in Afghanistan: we have here people who REALLY BELIEVE. After the Taliban government made public its intention to destroy all statues, most of the Western media first thought that this is a bluff, part of the strategy to blackmail the Western powers into recognizing the Taliban regime and pouring the money into Afghanistan, if they do not execute the announced measure — now we know they meant it. And it is also not appropriate to compare this destruction with, say, the demolition of mosques by the Serbs and Croats in Bosnia a couple of years ago: this destruction was not a religious act, but a way to strike at the ethnic enemy. Even when, in European history, Catholics burned Protestant churches and books, they were trying to annihilate another religious sect. In today’s Afghanistan, on the contrary, there are no non-Muslims, no people to whom the Buddha statues are sacred objects, so their destruction is a pure act of annihilation with no roots in any actual ideologico-political struggles.

In the time of the Chinese Great Cultural Revolution, the Red Guard gangs were heinously destroying hundreds of monasteries with thousands of statues and other priceless historical artefacts, their frenetic activity displaying a desperate endeavor to cut off links with the reactionary ideological past. Recently, the Chinese strategy underwent a shift of accent: more than on sheer military coercion, they now rely on ethnic and economic colonization, rapidly transforming Lhasa into a Chinese version of the capitalist Wild West, where karaoke bars intermingle with the Disney-like “Buddhist theme parks” for the Western tourists. [64](#) What goes on beneath the media image of the brutal Chinese soldiers and policemen terrorizing the Buddhist monks conceals is thus the much more effective American-style socioeconomic transformation: in a decade or two, Tibetans will be reduced to the status of the native Americans in the USA. Tibetan Buddhism survived the brutal Red Army onslaught — will it survive the much more artful economic colonization which, instead of directly attacking the material manifestations of a belief, undermines its very base, so that, even if Buddhism survives, it is deprived of its substance, turned into a simulacrum of itself? So when the Taliban minister of culture said “We are destroying just stones!”, he was in a way right: for a true Buddhist, the enlightenment/liberation of one single individual means more than all the statues! The true problem is that the Western economic-cultural colonization is doing more to undermine the life style within which Buddhism can thrive

than all the Red Guards and Taliban militias combined: when Red Guards or the Taliban militias attack, it is still the direct violence and destruction and the struggle with one unconditional faith against another faith.

The problem with the Taliban regime is elsewhere. The Taliban state of Afghanistan is the prototypic postmodern state, an exemplary part of the contemporary global constellation, if there ever was one. First, its very emergence is the final result of the failure of the Soviet attempt, in the 70s and 80s, to impose [modernization](#) on Afghanistan: the Taliban movement itself arose out of the religious groups financed by CIA through Pakistan to fight the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Secondly, if one is to believe the media, the whole economy of Afghanistan relies on opium: more than two thirds of the world opium crop comes from Afghanistan, and the Taliban government simply takes the 20% tax on the farmers' income. The third feature: the Taliban government does not properly administer social affairs, it just rules. It is more or less totally indifferent towards of the well-being of its subjects, relying on the foreign aid or simply ignoring their plight. "Servicing the goods," guaranteeing the well-being of the population, is simply not on their agenda — their sole preoccupation is the imposition of the strict religious order: while economy is more or less left to itself, the government takes care that all men have beards, that there are no TV sets and VCRs, that women are fully covered in public...

Far from being a traditional Islamic regime, the Taliban rule is thus thoroughly mediated by the process of modernization: relying on the (paradigmatically modern) split between economy and life-world, it combines the inclusion into the global market (the opium sales) with the ideological autarchy. So, paradoxically, we have here a twisted version of the unconditional Moral Majority rule which turns around the Western liberal state: instead of a state which limits itself to guaranteeing the material and institutional conditions for the well-being, while allowing individuals to pursue their own private life-styles, the Taliban state is interested **ONLY** in the life-style, leaving economy to itself, either to persist at a meager self-subsistence level or to export opium. In short, the Taliban state is ultimately nothing but a more radical and brutal version of the Singapore model of capitalism-cum-Asiatic-values?

Return versus Repetition

The entire history of the Soviet Union can be comprehended as homologous to Freud's famous image of Rome, a city whose history is deposited in its present in the guise of the different layers of the archaeological remainders, each new level covering up the preceding none, like (another model) the seven layers of Troy, so that history, in its regress towards ever older epoches, proceeds like the archaeologist, discovering new layers by probing deeper and deeper into the ground. Was the (official ideological) history of the Soviet Union not the same accumulation of exclusions, of turning persons into non-persons, of

retroactive rewriting of history? Quite logically, the “destalinization” was signalled by the opposite process of “rehabilitation,” of admitting “errors” in the past politics of the Party. The gradual “rehabilitation” of the demonized ex-leaders of the Bolsheviks can thus serve as perhaps the most sensitive index of how far (and in what direction) the “destalinization” of the Soviet Union was going. The first to be rehabilitated were the high military leaders shot in 1937 (Tukhachevsky and others); the last to be rehabilitated, already in the [Gorbachev](#) era, just before the collapse of the Communist regime, was [Bukharin](#) — this last rehabilitation, of course, was a clear sign of the turn towards capitalism: the Bukharin which was rehabilitated was the one who, in the 20s, advocated the pact between workers and peasants (owners of their land), launching the famous slogan “Get rich!” and opposed forced collectivization. Significantly, however, one figure was NEVER rehabilitated, excluded by the Communists as well as by the anti-Communist Russian nationalists: Trotsky, the “wandering Jew” of the Revolution, the true anti-Stalin, the arch-enemy, opposing “permanent revolution” to the idea of “[building socialism in one country.](#)” One is tempted to risk here the parallel with Freud’s distinction between primordial (founding) and secondary repression in the Unconscious: Trotsky’s exclusion amounted to something like the “primordial repression” of the Soviet State, to something which cannot ever be readmitted through “rehabilitation,” since the entire Order relied on this negative gesture of exclusion. (It is fashionable to claim that the irony of Stalin’s politics from 1928 onwards was that it effectively WAS a kind of “[permanent revolution,](#)” a permanent state of emergency in which revolution repeatedly devoured its own children — however, this claim is misleading: the Stalinist terror is the paradoxical result of the attempt to STABILIZE the Soviet Union into a state like other, with firm boundaries and institutions, i.e. terror was a gesture of panic, a defense reaction against the threat to this State stability.) So Trotsky is the one for whom there is a place neither in the pre-1990 nor in the post-1990 capitalist universe in which even the Communist nostalgics don’t know what to do with Trotsky’s permanent revolution — perhaps, the signifier “Trotsky” is the most appropriate designation of that which is worth redeeming in the Leninist legacy.

The problem with those few remaining orthodox “Leninists” who behave as if one can simply recycle the old Leninism, continuing to speak on class struggle, on the betrayal by the corrupted leaders of the working masses revolutionary impulses, etc., is that it is not quite clear from which subjective position of enunciation they speak: they either engage themselves in passionate discussions about the past (demonstrating with admirable erudition how and where the anti-Communist “leninologists” falsify Lenin, etc.), in which case they avoid the question of why (apart from a purely historical interest) does this matter at all today, or, the closer they get to contemporary politics, the closer they are to adopting some purely jargonistic pose which threatens no one. When, in the last months of 2001, the Milosevic regime in Serbia was finally toppled, I was asked the same question from my radical friends from the West: “What about the coal miners whose strike led to the disruption of the electricity supply and thus effectively brought Milosevic down? Was that

not a genuine workers' movement, which was then manipulated by the politicians, who were nationalist or corrupted by the CIA?" The same symptomatic point emerges apropos of every new social upheaval (like the disintegration of the Real Socialism 10 years ago): in each of these cases, they identify some working class movement which allegedly displayed a true revolutionary or, at least, Socialist potential, but was first exploited and then betrayed by the procapitalist and/or nationalist forces. This way, one can continue to dream that Revolution is round the corner: all we need is the authentic leadership which would be able to organize the workers' revolutionary potentials. If one is to believe them, Solidarnosc was originally a worker's democratic-socialist movement, later "betrayed" by being its leadership which was corrupted by the Church and the CIA... This mysterious working class whose revolutionary thrust is repeatedly thwarted by the treacherous nationalist and/or liberal politicians is one of the two fetishes of most of the remaining Trotskyites — the singular point of disavowal which enables them to sustain their overall interpretation of the state of things. This fetishist fixation on the old Marxist-Leninist frame is the exact opposite of the fashionable talk about "new paradigms," about how we should leave behind the old "zombie-concepts" like working class, etc. — the two complementary ways to avoid the effort to THINK the New which effectively is emerging today. The first thing to do here is to cancel this disavowal by fully admitting that this "authentic" [working class](#) simply does not exist. (The other fetish is their belief that things took a bad turn in the Soviet Union only because Lenin did not succeed in joining forces with Trotsky in his effort to depose Stalin.) And if we add to this position four further ones, we get a pretty full picture of the sad predicament of today's Left: the acceptance of the Cultural Wars (feminist, gay, anti-racist, etc., multiculturalist struggles) as the [dominant terrain](#) of the emancipatory politics; the purely defensive stance of protecting the achievements of the Welfare State; the naive belief in cybercommunism (the idea that the new media are directly creating conditions for a new authentic community); and, finally, the Third Way, the capitulation itself. The reference to Lenin should serve as the signifier of the effort to break the vicious circle of these false options.

John Berger recently made a salient point apropos of a French publicity poster of the internet investment brokers' company Selftrade: under the image of a hammer and sickle cast in solid gold and embedded with diamonds, the caption reads "And if the stock market profited everybody?" The strategy of this poster is obvious: today, the stock market fulfills the egalitarian Communist criteria, everybody can participate in it. Berger indulges in a simple mental experiment: "Imagine a communications campaign today using an image of a swastika cast in solid gold and embedded with diamonds! It would of course not work. Why? The Swastika addressed potential victors not the defeated. It invoked domination not justice."⁶⁵ In contrast to it, the Hammer and Sickle invoked the hope that "history would eventually be on the side of those struggling for fraternal justice."⁶⁶ The irony is thus that, at the very moment when this hope is officially proclaimed dead by the hegemonic ideology of the "end of ideologies," a paradigmatically "postindustrial" enterprise (is there anything

more “postindustrial” than dealing with stocks on the internet?) has to mobilize this dormant hope in order to get its message through.[67](#) “Repeating Lenin” means giving new life to this hope which continues to still haunt us.

Consequently, to REPEAT Lenin does NOT mean a RETURN to Lenin — to repeat Lenin is to accept that “Lenin is dead,” that his particular solution failed, even failed monstrously, but that there was a utopian spark in it worth saving. [68](#) To repeat Lenin means that one has to distinguish between what Lenin effectively did and the field of possibilities that he opened up, the tension in Lenin between what he effectively did and another dimension, what was “in Lenin more than Lenin himself.” To repeat Lenin is to repeat not what Lenin DID, but what he FAILED TO DO, his MISSED opportunities. Today, Lenin appears as a figure from a different time-zone: it’s not that his notions of the centralized Party, etc., seem to pose a “totalitarian threat” — it’s rather that they seem to belong to a different epoch to which we can no longer properly relate. However, instead of reading this fact as the proof that Lenin is outdated, one should, perhaps, risk the opposite conjecture: what if this impenetrability of Lenin is a sign that there is something wrong with OUR epoch? What if the fact that we experience Lenin as irrelevant, “out of sync” with our postmodern times, impart the much more unsettling message that our time itself is “out of sync,” that a certain historical dimension is disappearing from it?[69](#) If, to some people, such an assertion appears dangerously close to the infamous Hegel’s quip, when his deduction why there should be only eight planets circulating around the Sun was proven wrong by the discovery of the ninth planet (Pluto): “So much worse for the facts!”, then we should be ready to fully assume this paradox.

How did the ideology of Enlightenment evolve in the 18th century France? First, there was the epoch of salons, in which philosophers were trying to shock their benefactors, the generous Counts and Countesses, even Kings and Emperatrices (Holbach Frederick the Great, [Diderot](#) Catherine the Great), with their “radical” ideas on equality, the origin of power, the nature of men, etc. — all of this remaining a kind of intellectual game. At this stage, the idea that someone could take these ideas literally, as the blueprint for a radical socio-political transformation, would probably shock the ideologists themselves who were either part of the entourage of an enlightened nobleman or lone pathetic figures like [Rousseau](#) — their reaction would have been that of Ivan Karamazov, disgusted upon learning that his bastard half-brother and servant acted on his nihilistic ruminations, killing his father. This passage from intellectual game to an idea which effectively “[seizes the masses](#)” is the moment of truth — in it, the intellectual gets back his own message in its inverted/true form. In France, we pass from the gentle reflections of Rousseau to the Jacobin Terror; within the history of Marxism, it is only with Lenin that this passage occurs, that the games are REALLY over. And it is up to us to repeat this same passage and accomplish the fateful step from the ludic “postmodern” radicalism to the domain in which the games are over.

There is an old joke about socialism as the synthesis of the highest achievements of the entire hitherto human history: from the prehistoric societies, it took primitivism, from the Ancient world slavery, from medieval society brutal domination, from capitalism exploitation, and from socialism the name...[70](#) Does something similar not hold about our attempt to repeat Lenin's gesture? From the conservative cultural criticism, it takes the idea that today's democracy is no longer the place where crucial decisions are made; from cyberspace ideologists the idea that the global digital network offers a new space of communal life; etc.etc., and from Lenin more or less just the name itself... However, this very fact could be turned in an argument FOR the "return to Lenin": the extent to which the SIGNIFIER "Lenin" retains its subversive edge is easily demonstrated — say, when one makes the "Leninist" point that today's democracy is exhausted, that the key decisions are not taken there, one is directly accused of "totalitarianism"; when a similar point is made by sociologists or even Vaclav Havel, they are praised for the depth of their insight... THIS resistance is the answer to the question "Why Lenin?": it is the signifier "Lenin" which FORMALIZES this content found elsewhere, transforming a series of common notions into a truly subversive theoretical formation.



The greatness of Lenin is that he WASN'T AFRAID TO SUCCEED — in contrast to the negative pathos discernible from Rosa Luxemburg to Adorno, where the only authentic act is the true failure, the failure which brings to light the antagonism of the constellation (what, apropos of Beethoven, Adorno says about the two modes of the artistic failure — the unauthentic, due simply to the authors subjective deficiency, and the authentic, which brings to light the limitation of the very objective social constellation — bears also on his own politics[71](#)). In 1917, instead of waiting for the right moment of maturity, Lenin organized a preemptive strike; in 1920, finding himself in a position of the leader of the party of the working class with no working class (most of it being killed in the civil war), he went on organizing a state, i.e. he fully accepted the paradox of the party organizing-creating its base, its working class.

Nowhere is this greatness more palpable than in [Lenin's writings of 1917](#), which cover the span from his initial grasp of the unique revolutionary chance (first elaborated in the "Letters From Afar") to the "[Letter to Central Committee Members](#)," which finally convinced the Bolshevik majority that the moment to seize power has arrived. Everything is here, from "Lenin the ingenious revolutionary strategist" to "Lenin of the enacted utopia" (of the immediate abolishing of the state apparatuses). To refer to Kierkegaard, what we are allowed to perceive in these writings is Lenin-in-becoming: not yet "Lenin the Soviet institution," but Lenin thrown into an OPEN situation. Are we, within our late capitalist closure of the "end of history," still able to experience the shattering impact of such an

authentic historical openness?

Notes

1. See Juergen Habermas, *Die Neue Unuebersichtlichkeit*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1985.
2. As to this notion, see Chapter 3 of Slavoj Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London: Verso Books 1997.
3. See Claude Lefort, *La complication*, Paris: Fayard 1999.
4. For an Althusserian attempt to save Lenin's Empiriocriticism, see Dominique Lecourt, *Une crise et ses enjeux*, Paris: Maspero 1973.
5. First published in 1990, then reprinted in Colletti, *Fine della filosofia*, Roma: Ideazione 1996.
6. When, in a typical transferential pathos, Lenin repeats again and again how Marx and Engels always called their philosophy "dialectical materialism," it is easy for an anti-Leninist Marxologue to draw attention to the fact that Marx and Engels NOT EVEN ONCE used this term (it was [Georgi Plekhanov](#) who introduced it). This situation presented a nice deadlock to the Soviet editors of the collected works of Marx and Engels: in the Index, there HAD to be the entry "dialectical materialism," which they then filled in with references to the pages where Marx or Engels speak of dialectics, of the materialist concept of history... However, this is not the whole story: there is a truth-effect in this hallucinatory projection of a later concept back into Marx.
7. I owe this parallel to Eustache Kouvelakis, Paris (private conversation).
8. For a more detailed critique of Adorno's "predominance of the objective," see [Chapter 2 of Slavoj Zizek, On Belief](#), London: Routledge 2001.
9. In a passage of his NoteBooks, Lenin comes to the edge of this insight when he notes how the very "abstraction" of thought, its "failure" to immediately grasp the object in its infinite complexity, its distance from the object, its stepping-back from it, brings us CLOSER to the "notion" of what the object effectively is: the very "one-sided" reduction the object to some of its abstract properties in the concept, this apparent "limitation" of our knowledge (sustaining the dream of a total intuitive knowledge) IS the very essence of knowledge... He comes to the edge of all this, and then again regresses to the predominant evolutionary notion of the infinite approaching to reality.
10. Quoted from V.I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, New York: International Publishers

1999, p. 40.

11. Lenin, *op.cit.*, p. 40-41.

12. See Ernesto Laclau, "The Politics of Rhetoric," intervention at the conference *Culture and Materiality*, University of California, Davis, 23-25 April 1998. When today's postmodern political philosophers emphasize the paradox of democracy, how democracy is possible only against the background of its impossibility, do they not reproduce the paradoxes of the Kantian practical reason discerned long ago by Hegel?

13. See Eustache Kouvelakis's commentary to *L'Introduction a la Critique de la philosophie du droit de Hegel*, Paris: Ellipses 2000.

14. I owe this distinction to Alain Badiou (private conversation).

15. This should be the answer to Veit Harlan, the Nazi director who, around 1950, despaired about the fact that Jews in the US did not show any understanding for his defense for making *The Jew Sues*, claimed that no American Jew can really understand what was his situation in the Nazi Germany: far from justifying him, this obscene (factual) truth is the ultimate lie. — At a different level, there are in Palestine today two opposite narratives (the Jewish and the Palestinian one) with absolutely no common horizon, no "synthesis" in a larger meta-narrative; the solution thus cannot be found in any all-encompassing narrative.

16. Quoted from Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Cambridge (Ma): MIT Press 2000, p. 237.

17. This difference between interpretation and formalization is also crucial to introduce some (theoretical) order into the recent debates on the holocaust: although it is true that the holocaust cannot be adequately interpreted or narrated, in short: rendered meaningful, that all the attempts to do it fail and have to end in silence, it can and should be "formalized," situated in its structural conditions of possibility.

18. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989. — Along the similar lines, Habermas, Rorty's great opponent, elevates the rise of "public space" of civil society, the space of free discussion that mediates between private lives and political/state apparatuses in the Enlightenment era. The problem is that this space of enlightened public debate was always redoubled by the fear of the irrational/passionate crowd which can, through the contamination (what Spinoza called *imitatio affecti*), explode into murderous violence based on superstitions manipulated by priests or other ideologists. So the enlightened space of rational debate was always based on certain exclusions: on the exclusion of those who were NOT considered "rational" enough (lower classes, women, children, savages, criminals...) — they needed the pressure of "irrational" authority to be kept in check, i.e. for them, Voltaire's well-known motto "If there were no God, one

would have to invent him” fully holds.

19. See Peter Singer, *The Essential Singer: Writings on an Ethical Life*, New York: Ecco Press 2000.

20. See Joshua Piven and David Borgenicht, *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook* (New York: Chronicle Books 1999).

21. On account of its utter “realism,” *The Worst-Case Scenario* is a Western book par excellence; its Oriental counterpart is *chindogu*, arguably the finest spiritual achievement of Japan in the last decades, the art of inventing objects which are sublime in the strictest Kantian sense of the term — practically useless on account of their very excessive usefulness (say, glasses with electrically-run mini-windshields on them, so that your view will remain clear even if you have to walk in the rain without an umbrella; butter contained in a lipstick tube, so that you can carry it with you and spread it on the bread without a knife). That is to say, in order to be recognized, the *chindogu* objects have to meet two basic criteria: it should be possible to really construct them and they should work; simultaneously, they should not be “practical,” i.e. it should not be feasible to market them. The comparison between *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook* and *chindogu* offers us a unique insight into the difference between the Eastern and the Western sublime, an insight far superior to the New Age pseudo-philosophical treatises. In both cases, the effect of the Sublime resides in the way the uselessness of the product is the outcome of the extreme “realistic” and pragmatic approach itself. However, in the case of the West, we get simple, realistic advice for problems (situations) most of us will never encounter (who of us will really have to face alone a hungry lion?), while in the case of the East, we get unpractically complicated solutions for the problems all of us effectively encounter (who of us was not caught in the rain?). The Western sublime offers a practical solution for a problem which does not arise, while the Eastern sublime offers a useless solution for a real common problem. The underlying motto of the Eastern Sublime is “Why do it simply, when you can complicate it?” — is the principle of *chindogu* not discernible already in what appears to our Western eyes as the “impractical” clumsy form of the Japanese spoons? The underlying motto of the Western Sublime is, on the contrary, “If the problems do not fit our preferred way of solving them, let’s change problems, not the way we are used to solve them!” — is this principle not discernible in the sacred principle of Bureaucracy which has to invent problems in order to justify its existence which serves to solve them?

22. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, London: Verso Books 1996.

23. In an incident at the US academia, a couple of years ago, a lesbian feminist claimed that gays are today the privileged victims, so that the analysis of how the gays are underprivileged provides the key to understanding all other exclusions, repressions, violences, etc. (religious, ethnic, class...). What is problematic with this thesis is precisely its

implicit (or, in this case, explicit even) UNIVERSAL claim: it is making exemplary victims of those who are NOT that, of those who can be much easier than religious or ethnic Others (not to mention the socially — “class” — excluded) fully integrated into the public space, enjoying full rights. Here, one should approach the ambiguity of the connection between gay and class struggle. There is a long tradition of the Leftist gay bashing, whose traces are discernible up to Adorno — suffice it to mention Maxim Gorky’s infamous remark from his essay “Proletarian Humanism” (sic! — 1934): “Exterminate (sic!) homosexuals, and Fascism will disappear.”(Quoted from Siegfried Tornow, “Maennliche Homosexualitaet und Politik in Sowjet-Russland,” in *Homosexualitaet und Wissenschaft II*, Berlin: Verlag Rosa Winkel 1992, p. 281.) All of this cannot be reduced to opportunistically flirting with the traditional patriarchal sexual morality of the working classes, or with the Stalinist reaction against the liberating aspects of the first years after the October Revolution; one should remember that the above-quoted Gorky’s inciting statement, as well as Adorno’s reservations towards homosexuality (his conviction about the libidinal link between homosexuality and the spirit of military male-bonding), are all based on the same historical experience: that of the SA, the “revolutionary” paramilitary Nazi organization of street-fighting thugs, in which homosexuality abounded up to its head (Roehm). The first thing to note here is that it was already Hitler himself who purged the SA in order to make the Nazi regime publicly acceptable by way of cleansing it of its obscene-violent excess, and that he justified the slaughter of the SA leadership precisely by evoking their “sexual depravity”... In order to function as the support of a “totalitarian” community, homosexuality has to remain a publicly disavowed “dirty secret,” shared by those who are “in.” Does this mean that, when gays are persecuted, they deserve only a qualified support, a kind of “Yes, we know we should support you, but nonetheless... (you are partially responsible for the Nazi violence)”)? What one should only insist on is that the political overdetermination of homosexuality is far from simple, that the homosexual libidinal economy can be co-opted by different political orientations, and that it is HERE that one should avoid the “essentialist” mistake of dismissing the Rightist “militaristic” homosexuality as the secondary distortion of the “authentic” subversive homosexuality.

24. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977, p. 178.

25. See Jacques-Alain Miller, *Ce qui fait insigne* (unpublished seminar 1984-85, the lecture on December 3 1984).

26. This also enables us to answer Dominick la Capra’s reproach according to which, the Lacanian notion of lack conflates two levels that have to be kept apart: the purely formal “ontological” lack constitutive of the symbolic order as such, and the particular traumatic experiences (exemplarily: holocaust) which could also NOT have occurred — particular historical catastrophes like the holocaust thus seem to be “legitimized” as directly grounded

in the fundamental trauma that pertains to the very human existence. (See Dominick la Capra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 25, Number 4 (Summer 1999), p. 696-727.) This distinction between structural and contingent-historical trauma, convincing as it may appear, is doubly inadequate in its reliance on the Kantian distinction between the formal/structural a priori and the contingent/empirical a posteriori. First, EVERY trauma, trauma "as such," in its very concept, is experienced as something contingent, as an unexpected meaningless disturbance — trauma is by definition not "structural," but something which disturbs the structural order. Secondly, the holocaust was NOT simply a historical contingency, but something which, in its unique combination of the mythical sacrifice with technological instrumental efficiency, realized a certain destructive potential inscribed into the very logic of the so-called Western civilization. We cannot adopt towards it the neutral position of a safe distance, from which we dismiss the holocaust as an unfortunate accident: the holocaust is in a way the "symptom" of our civilization, the singular point in which the universal repressed truth about it emerges. To put it in somewhat pathetic terms, any account of the Western civilization which does not account for the holocaust thereby invalidates itself.

27. One possible counter-argument is here that the category of the tragic is not appropriate to analyze Stalinism: the problem is not that the original Marxist vision got subverted by its unintended consequences, it is this vision itself. If Lenin's and even Marx's project of Communism were to be fully realized as to their true core, things would have been MUCH WORSE than Stalinism — we would have a version of what Adorno and Horkheimer called "die verwaltete Welt (the administered society)," a totally self-transparent society run by the reified "general intellect" in which the last remainders of the human autonomy and freedom would have been obliterated... The way to answer this reproach is to draw the distinction between Marx's analysis of the capitalist dynamic and his positive vision of Communism, as well as between this vision and the actuality of the revolutionary turmoil: what if Marx's analysis of the capitalist dynamic is not dependent on his positive determinations of the Communist societies? And what if his theoretical expectations themselves were shattered by the actual revolutionary experience? (It is clear that Marx himself was surprised by the new political form of the Paris Commune.)

28. Georgi Dimitroff, *Tagebücher 1933-1943*, Berlin: Aufbau Verlag 2000.

29. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1972, p. 112.

30. This passage is indebted to conversations with Sebastian Budgen (London) and Eustache Kouvelakis.

31. V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress 1965, Volume 42, p. 67.

32. Quoted from Neil Harding, *Leninism*, Durham: Duke University Press 1996, p. 309.

33. Harding, op.cit., p. 152.

34. Quoted from Harding, op.cit., p. 87.

35. Ibid.

36. See Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, Paris: Editions du Seuil 1992.

37. William Craig, *Enemy At the Gates*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 2000, p. 307-308.

38. Craig, op.cit., p. 153.

39. See Alain Badiou, “L’Un se divise en Deux,” intervention at the symposium *The Retrieval of Lenin*, Essen, February 2-4 2001.

40. See Sylvain Lazarus, “La forme Parti,” intervention at the symposium *The Retrieval of Lenin*.

41. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995, p. 14.

42. See Fredric Jameson, “The Concept of Revisionism,” intervention at the symposium *The Retrieval of Lenin*, Essen, February 2-4 2001.

43. Is it not that the same “vase / two faces” paradox occurs in the case of the holocaust and gulag? We either elevate the holocaust into the ultimate crime, and the Stalinist terror is thereby half-redeemed, reduced to a minor role of an “ordinary” crime; or we focus on the gulag as the ultimate result of the logic of the modern revolutionary terror, and the holocaust is thereby at best reduced to another example of the same logic. Somehow, it doesn’t seem possible to deploy a truly “neutral” theory of totalitarianism, without giving a hidden preference either to the holocaust or to gulag.

44. For a more detailed elaboration of this point, see Chapter 2 of Slavoj Zizek, *On Belief*.

45. And the achievement of [Georg Lukacs](#)’ *History and Class Consciousness* is that it is one of the few works which succeed in bringing these two dimensions together: on the one hand, the topic of commodity fetishism and reification; on the other hand, the topic of the party and revolutionary strategy — the reason why this book is profoundly Leninist.

46. For a further development of this point, see Chapter 3 of Slavoj Zizek, *The Fragile Absolute*, London: Verso Books 2000. — It is often said that the ultimate product of capitalism are piles of trash — useless computers, cars, TVs and VCRs ...: places like the famous “resting place” of the hundreds of abandoned planes in the Mojave desert confront us with the obverse truth of the capitalist dynamics, its inert objectal remainder. And it is against this background that one should read the ecological dream-notion of the total

recycling (in which every remainder is used again) as the ultimate capitalist dream, even if it is coated in the terms of retaining the natural balance on the Planet Earth: the dream of the self-propelling circulation of the capital which would succeed in leaving behind no material leftover — the proof of how capitalism can appropriate ideologies which seem to oppose it.

47. Another figure of this inexplicable excess occurs in many cinema comedies in which the hero, stranded alone in a small town, is forced to take his expensive car to the local mechanic who, to the hero's horror, proceeds to take the whole car to pieces; when, a day or two later, the mechanic puts the car together again, to everyone's surprise, it runs perfectly, although there are always a piece or two standing aside, the remainders that the mechanic did not find the place for when putting the car together...

48. Quoted from Harding, *op.cit.*, p. 168.

49. Quoted from Harding, *op.cit.*, p. 146.

50. In this context, the myth to be debunked is that of the diminishing role of the state. What we are witnessing today is the shift in its functions: while partially withdrawing from its welfare functions, the state is strengthening its apparatuses in other domains of social regulation. In order to start a business now, one has to rely on the state to guarantee not only law and order, but the entire infrastructure (access to water and energy, means of transportation, ecological criteria, international regulations, etc.), in an incomparably larger extent than 100 years ago. The recent electricity supply debacle in California makes this point palpable: for a couple of weeks in January and February 2001, the privatization ("deregulation") of the electricity supply changed Southern California, one of the highly developed "postindustrial" landscapes in the entire world, into a Third World country with regular black-outs. Of course, the defenders of deregulation claimed that it was not thorough enough, thereby engaging in the old false syllogism of "my fiancée is never late for the appointment, because the moment she is late, she is no longer my fiancée": deregulation by definition works, so if it doesn't work, it wasn't truly a deregulation... Does the recent Mad Cow Disease panic (which probably presages dozens of similar phenomena which await us in the near future) also not point towards the need for a strict state and global institutionalized control of the agriculture?

51. See Leslie Kaplan, *L'excès-usine*, Paris: Hachette 1984.

52. I owe this point to Alan Shandro's intervention "Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony" at the symposium *The Retrieval of Lenin*.

53. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: the Communist Problem*, Oxford: Polity Press 2000.

54. Quoted from Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, p. 144.

55. Quoted from Susan Buck-Morss, *op.cit.*, p. 144.

56. With regard to this point, the crucial figure of the Soviet cinema is not Eisenstein, but Alexander Medvedkin, appropriately named by Christ Marker “the last Bolshevik” (see Marker’s outstanding documentary *The Last Bolshevik* from 1993). While wholeheartedly supportive of the official politics, inclusive of the forced collectivization, Medvedkin made films which staged this support in a way which retained the initial ludic utopian-subversive revolutionary impulse; say, in his *Happiness* from 1935, in order to combat religion, he shows a priest who imagines seeing the breasts of a nun through her habit — an unheard-of scene for the Soviet film of the 30s. Medvedkin thus enjoys the unique privilege of an enthusiastically orthodox Communist film-maker whose films were ALL prohibited or at least heavily censored.

57. Although it is also possible to argue that this violence effectively WAS an impotent passage a l'acte: an outburst which displayed the inability to break with the weight of the past symbolic tradition. In order to effectively get rid of the past, one does not need to physically smash the monuments — changing them into a part of the tourist industry is much more effective. Is this not what Tibetans are painfully discovering today? The true destruction of their culture will not occur through the Chinese destroying their monuments, but through the proliferation of the Buddhist Theme Parks in the downtown Lhasa.

58. One is tempted to question the very term “Leninism”: is it not that it was invented under Stalin? And does the same not go for Marxism (as a teaching) which was basically a Leninist invention, so that Marxism is a Leninist notion and Leninism a Stalinist one?

59. See Chapters 2 and 3 of Susan Buck-Morss’s outstanding *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*.

60. Both quotes from Maureen Freely, “Polymorphous sexuality in the Sixties,” *The Independent*, 29 January 2001, *The Monday Review*, p. 4.

61. Quoted from *Konkret*, Heft 3 (March 2001), p. 9.

62. Christopher Hitchens, “Visit To a Small Planet,” *Vanity Fair*, January 2001, p. 24.

63. Quoted from Jana Cerna, *Kafka’s Milena*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1993, p. 174.

64. One of the ultimate obscenities of the modern stance towards belief was formulated by the Chinese Communist Party: in the mid 90s, when the Chinese authorities claimed that THEIR Panchen Lama was the right one, not the one chosen and recognized by the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, they accused the Dalai Lama of not respecting the old Buddhist tradition, of giving preference to political considerations over the old religious rules. So we

had a Communist Party claiming that the birth of the child they identified as the Panchen Lama (who, as if by an accident, was born into a family of Communist cadres!) was accompanied by miraculous appearances on the sky, that, already when one year old, he displayed supernatural capacities.

65. John Berger, “The hammer and sickle,” in *Janus* 5 (2000), p. 16.

66. Berger, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

67. Or, to indulge in a similar mental experiment: in the last days of the Really Existing Socialism, the protesting crowds often sang the official songs, including national anthems, reminding the powers of their unfulfilled promises. What better thing for an East German crowd to do in 1989 than to simply sing the GDR national anthem? Because its words (“Deutschland einig Vaterland”) no longer fitted the emphasis on East Germans as a new Socialist nation, it was PROHIBITED to sing it in public from late 50s to 1989: at the official ceremonies, only the orchestral version was performed. (The GDR was thus a unique country in which singing the national anthem was a criminal act!). Can one imagine the same thing under Nazism?

68. One should, perhaps, rehabilitate Marx’s (implicit) distinction between the working class (an “objective” social category, the topic of sociological studies) and the proletariat (a certain SUBJECTIVE position — the class “for itself,” the embodiment of social negativity, to use the old rather unfortunate expression). Instead of searching for the disappearing working class, one should rather ask: who occupies, who is able to subjectivize, today its position as proletarian?

69. At a more general methodological level, one should also turn around the standard pseudo-Nietzschean view according to which, the past we construct in our historiography is a symptom, an articulation of our present problems: what if, on the contrary, we ourselves — our present — is a symptom of the unresolved deadlocks of the past?

70. For a detailed Lacanian reading of this joke, see Chapter 2 of Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, Durham: Duke University Press 1993.

71. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1993, p. 32.