Slavoj Žižek

Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism

Those who still remember the good old days of Socialist Realism, are well aware of the key role played by the notion of the 'typical': truly progressive literature should depict 'typical heroes in typical situations.' Writers who presented a bleak picture of Soviet reality were not simply accused of lying; the accusation was rather that they provided a distorted reflection of social reality by depicting the remainders of the decadent past, instead of focusing on the phenomena which were 'typical' in the sense of expressing the underlying historical tendency of the progress towards Communism. Ridiculous as this notion may sound, its grain of truth resides in the fact that each universal ideological notion is always hegemonized by some particular content which colours its very universality and accounts for its efficiency.

Why Is the Single Mother 'Typical'?

In the rejection of the social welfare system by the New Right in the US, for example, the universal notion of the welfare system as inefficient is sustained by the pseudo-concrete representation of the notorious African-American single mother, as if, in the last resort, social welfare is a programme for black single mothers—the particular case of the 'single black mother' is silently conceived as 'typical' of social welfare and of what is wrong with it. In the case of the anti-abortion campaign, the 'typical' case is the exact opposite: a sexually promiscuous professional woman who values her career over her 'natural' assignment of motherhood—although this characterization is in blatant contradiction to the fact that the great majority of abortions occur in lower-class families with a lot of children. This specific twist, a particular content which is promulgated as 'typical' of the universal notion, is the element of fantasy, of the phantasmatic background/support of the universal ideological notion. To put it in Kantian terms, it plays the role of 'transcendental schematism', translating the empty universal concept into a notion which directly relates and applies to our 'actual experience'. As such, this phantasmatic specification is by no means an insignificant illustration or exemplification: it is at this level that ideological battles are won or lost—the moment we perceive as 'typical' the case of abortion in a large lower-class family unable to cope with another child, the perspective changes radically.[1]

This example makes clear in what sense 'the universal results from a constitutive split in which the negation of a particular identity transforms this identity in the symbol of identity and fullness as such':[2] the Universal acquires concrete existence when some particular content starts to function as its stand-in. A couple of years ago, the English yellow press focused on single mothers as the source of all evils in modern society, from budget crises to juvenile delinquency. In this ideological space, the universality of 'modern social Evil' was operative only through the split of the figure of 'single mother' into itself in its particularity and itself as the stand-in for 'modern social Evil'. The fact that this link between the Universal and the particular content which functions as its stand-in is *contingent* means precisely that it is the outcome of a *political* struggle for ideological hegemony. However, the dialectic of this struggle is more complex than in its standard Marxist version—of particular interests assuming the form of universality: 'universal human rights are effectively the rights of white male property owners...' To work, the ruling ideology has to incorporate a series of features in which the exploited majority will be able to recognize its authentic longings. In other words, each hegemonic universality has to incorporate *at least two* particular contents, the authentic popular content as well as its distortion by the relations of domination and exploitation. Of course, fascist ideology 'manipulates' authentic popular longing for true community and social solidarity against fierce competition and exploitation; of course, it 'distorts' the expression of this longing in order to legitimize the continuation of the relations of social domination and exploitation. However,

---

[1] Another name for this short-circuit between the Universal and the Particular is, of course, 'suture': the operation of hegemony 'sutures' the empty Universal to a particular content.
[2] Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, Verso, London 1996, pp. 14–15.

in order to be able to achieve this distortion of authentic longing, it has first to incorporate it... Etienne Balibar was fully justified in reversing Marx's classic formula: the ruling ideas are precisely *not* directly the ideas of those who rule.[3] How did Christianity become the ruling ideology? By incorporating a series of crucial motifs and aspirations of the oppressed—truth is on the side of the suffering and humiliated, power corrupts, and so on—and rearticulating them in such a way that they became compatible with the existing relations of domination.

Desire and its Articulation

One is tempted to refer here to the Freudian distinction between the latent dream-thought and the unconscious desire expressed in a dream. The two are not the same: the unconscious desire articulates itself, inscribes itself, through the very 'perlaboration', translation, of the latent dream-thought into the explicit text of a dream. In a homologous way, there is nothing 'fascist' (or 'reactionary' and so forth) in the 'latent dream-thought' of fascist ideology (the longing for authentic community and social solidarity); what accounts for the properly fascist character of fascist ideology is the way this 'latent dream-thought' is transformed and elaborated by the ideological 'dream-work' into the explicit ideological text which continues to legitimize social relations of exploitation and domination. And is it not the same with today's right-wing populism? Are liberal critics not too quick in dismissing the very values populism refers to as inherently 'fundamentalist' or 'proto-fascist'?

Non-ideology—what Fredric Jameson calls the utopian moment present even in the most atrocious ideology—is thus absolutely indispensable: ideology is in a way *nothing but the form of appearance, the formal distortion/ displacement, of non-ideology*. To take the worst imaginable case, was Nazi anti-Semitism not grounded in the utopian longing for an authentic community life, in the fully justified rejection of the irrationality of capitalist exploitation? Our point, again, is that it is theoretically and politically wrong to denounce this longing as a 'totalitarian fantasy', that is, to search in it for the 'roots' of fascism—the standard mistake of the liberal-individualist critique of fascism: what makes it 'ideological' is its articulation, the way this longing is made to function as the legitimization of a very specific notion of what capitalist exploitation is (the result of Jewish influence, of the predominance of financial over 'productive' capital—only the latter tends towards a harmonious 'partnership' with workers) and of how we are to overcome it (by getting rid of the Jews).

The struggle for ideological and political hegemony is thus always the struggle for the appropriation of the terms which are 'spontaneously' experienced as 'apolitical', as transcending political boundaries. No wonder that the name of the strongest dissident movement in the Eastern European Communist countries was Solidarity: a signifier of the impossible fullness of society, if there ever was one. It was as if, in Poland in the 1980s, what Laclau calls the logic of equivalence was brought to an extreme: 'Communists in power' served as *the* embodiment of non-society, of decay and corruption, magically uniting everyone against themselves, including the

---

[3] See Etienne Balibar, *La crainte des masses*, Paris 1997.

disappointed 'honest Communists' themselves. Conservative nationalists accused the Communists of betraying Polish interests to the Soviet master; business-oriented individuals saw in them an obstacle to unbridled capitalist activity; for the Catholic Church, Communists were amoral atheists; for the farmers, they represented the force of violent modernization which threw rural life off the rails; for artists and intellectuals, Communism was synonymous with oppressive and stupid censorship; workers saw themselves not only exploited by the Party bureaucracy, but even further humiliated by the claims that this was done on their behalf; finally, old disillusioned leftists perceived the regime as the betrayal of 'true Socialism'. The impossible *political* alliance between all these divergent and potentially antagonistic positions was possible only under the banner of a signifier which stands, as it were, on the very border which separates the political from the pre-political, and 'Solidarity' was the perfect candidate: it is politically operative as designating the 'simple' and 'fundamental' unity of human beings which should link them beyond all political differences.[4]

Conservative Basic Instincts

What does all this tell us about Labour's recent electoral victory in the UK? It is not only that, in a model hegemonic operation, they reappropriated 'apolitical' notions like 'decency'; what they successfully focused on was the inherent obscenity of the Tory ideology. The Tories' explicit ideological statements were always supported by their shadowy double, by an obscene, publicly unacknowledged, between-the-lines message. When, for example, they launched their infamous 'back to basics' campaign, its obscene supplement was clearly indicated by Norman Tebbitt, 'never shy about exposing the dirty secrets of the Conservative unconscious':[5] 'Many traditional Labour voters realized that they shared our values—that man is not just a social but also a territorial animal; it must be part of our agenda to satisfy those basic instincts of tribalism and territoriality.'[6] This, then, is what 'back to basics' was really about: the reassertion of 'basic' egoistic, tribal, barbarian 'instincts' which lurk beneath the semblance of civilized bourgeois society. We all remember the (deservedly) famous scene from Paul Verhoeven's film *Basic Instinct* (1992) in which, in the course of a police investigation, Sharon Stone for a brief moment spreads her legs and reveals to the fascinated policemen what is (or is it?) a glimpse of her pubic hair. A statement like Tebbitt's is undoubtedly an ideological equivalent of this gesture, allowing a brief

---

[4] Now, when this magic moment of universal solidarity is over, the signifier which, in some post-Socialist countries, is emerging as the signifier of the 'absent fullness' of society, is *honesty*: it forms the focus of the spontaneous ideology of 'ordinary people' caught in the economic and social turbulence in which the hopes of a new fullness of Society that should follow the collapse of Socialism were cruelly betrayed, so that, in their eyes, 'old forces' (ex-Communists) and ex-dissidents who entered the ranks of power joined hands in exploiting them even more than before under the banner of democracy and freedom. The battle for hegemony, of course, is now focused on the particular content which will give a spin to this signifier: what does 'honesty' mean? And, again, it would be wrong to claim that the conflict is ultimately about the different meanings of the term 'honesty': what gets lost in this 'semantic clarification' is that each position claims that *their honesty is the only 'true' honesty*: the struggle is not simply a struggle among different particular contents, it is a struggle which splits from within the universal itself.
[5] Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy*, Oxford 1996, p. 149.
[6] Cited in ibid.

glance into the obscene intimacy of the Thatcherite ideological edifice. (Lady Thatcher herself was too 'dignified' to perform directly this ideological Sharon-Stone-gesture too often, so the poor Tebbitt had to act as her stand-in.) Against this background, the Labour emphasis on 'decency' was not a case of simple moralism—rather, its message was that they are *not* playing the same obscene game, that their statements do not contain, 'between the lines', the same obscene message.

In today's general ideological constellation, this gesture is more important than it may seem. When the Clinton administration resolved the deadlock of gays in the US Army with the compromise of 'Don't ask, don't tell!'—by which soldiers are not directly asked if they are gay, so they are also not compelled to lie and deny it, and although they are not formally allowed in the Army, they are tolerated as long as they keep their sexual orientation private and do not actively endeavour to engage others in it—this opportunist measure was deservedly criticized for endorsing homophobic attitudes. Although the direct prohibition of homosexuality is not to be enforced, its very existence as a virtual threat compelling gays to remain in the closet affects their actual social status. In other words, what this solution amounted to was an explicit elevation of hypocrisy into a social principle, like the attitude towards prostitution in traditional Catholic countries—if we pretend that gays in the Army do not exist, it is as if they effectively do not exist (for the big Other). Gays are to be tolerated, on condition that they accept the basic censorship concerning their identity…

While fully justified at its own level, the notion of censorship at work in this criticism, with its Foucauldian background of Power which, in the very act of censorship and other forms of exclusion, generates the excess it endeavours to contain and dominate, nonetheless seems to fall short at a crucial point: what it misses is the way in which censorship not only affects the status of the marginal or subversive force that the power discourse endeavours to dominate, but, at an even more radical level, splits from within the power discourse itself. One should ask here a naive, but nonetheless crucial question: why does the Army so strongly resist publicly accepting gays into its ranks? There is only one possible consistent answer: not because homosexuality poses a threat to the alleged 'phallic and patriarchal' libidinal economy of the Army community, but, on the contrary, because *the Army community itself relies on a thwarted/disavowed homosexuality as the key component of the soldiers' male-bonding.*

From my own experience, I remember how the old infamous Yugoslav People's Army was homophobic in the extreme—when someone was discovered to have homosexual inclinations, he was instantly turned into a pariah, before being formally dismissed from the Army—yet, at the same time, everyday army life was excessively permeated with an atmosphere of homosexual innuendo. Say, while soldiers were standing in line for their meal, a common vulgar joke was to stick a finger into the arse of the person ahead of you and then to withdraw it quickly, so that when the surprised victim turned around, he did not know who among the soldiers sharing a stupid obscene smile had done it. A predominant form of greeting a fellow soldier in my unit, instead of simply saying 'Hello!', was to say 'Smoke my prick!' ('Pusi kurac!' in Serbo-Croat); this formula

was so standardized that it had completely lost any obscene connotation and was pronounced in a totally neutral way, as a pure act of politeness.

Censorship, Power and Resistance

This fragile coexistence of extreme and violent homophobia with thwarted, that is, publicly unacknowledged, 'underground' homosexual libidinal economy, bears witness to the fact that the discourse of the military community can only operate by way of censoring its own libidinal foundation. At a slightly different level, the same goes for the practice of hazing—the ceremonial beating up and humiliating of US Marines by their elder peers, who stick medals directly onto their skin, and so on. When the public disclosure of these practices (somebody secretly shot them on video) caused such an outrage, what disturbed the public was not the practice of hazing itself (everybody was aware that things like this were going on), but the fact of it being rendered public. Outside the confines of military life, do we not encounter a strictly homologous self-censoring mechanism in conservative populism with its sexist and racist bias? In the election campaigns of Jesse Helms, the racist and sexist message is not publicly acknowledged—at the public level, it is sometimes even violently disavowed—but is instead articulated in a series of double-entendres and coded allusions. This kind of self-censorship is necessary if, in the present ideological conditions, Helms's discourse is to remain effective. If it were to articulate directly, in a public way, its racist bias, this would render it unacceptable in the hegemonic political discourse; if it were effectively to abandon the self-censored coded racist message, it would endanger the support of its targeted electoral body. Conservative populist political discourse thus offers an exemplary case of a power discourse whose efficiency depends on the mechanism of self-censorship: it relies on a mechanism which is effective only insofar as it remains censored. Against the image, all-present in cultural criticism, of a radical subversive discourse or practice 'censored' by the Power, one is even tempted to claim that today, more than ever, the mechanism of censorship intervenes predominantly to enhance the efficiency of the power discourse itself.

The temptation to be avoided here is the old leftist notion of 'better for us to deal with the enemy who openly admits his (racist, homophobic...) bias, than with the hypocritical attitude of publicly denouncing what one secretly and effectively endorses'. This notion fatefully underestimates the ideological and political significance of *maintaining appearances*: appearance is never 'merely an appearance', it profoundly affects the *actual* socio-symbolic position of those concerned. If racist attitudes were to be rendered acceptable in mainstream ideological and political discourse, this would radically shift the balance of the entire ideological hegemony. This, probably, is what Alain Badiou had in mind when he mockingly designated his work as a search for the 'good terror': today, in the face of the emergence of new racism and sexism, the strategy should be to *make such enunciations unutterable*, so that anyone relying on them automatically disqualifies himself—as, in our universe, those who approvingly refer to fascism. While one may be aware of the way in which authentic yearnings for, say, community, are turned by fascism, one should emphatically *not* discuss 'how many people really died in

Auschwitz', 'the good sides of slavery', 'the necessity of cutting back on worker's collective rights', and so on; the position should be here quite unabashedly 'dogmatic' and 'terrorist', that these are *not* objects of 'open, rational, democratic discussion'.

This inherent split and self-censorship of the power mechanism is to be opposed to the Foucauldian motif of the interconnection of Power and resistance. Our point is not only that resistance is immanent to Power, that power and counter-power generate each other; it is not only that Power itself generates the excess of resistance which it can no longer dominate; it is also not only that—in the case of sexuality—the disciplinary 'repression' of a libidinal investment eroticizes this gesture of repression itself, as in the case of the obsessional neurotic who gets libidinal satisfaction out of the very compulsive rituals destined to keep at bay the traumatic *jouissance*. This last point must be further radicalized: the Power edifice itself is split from within, that is, to reproduce itself and contain its Other, it has to rely on an inherent excess which grounds it. To put it in the Hegelian terms of speculative identity, Power is always-already its own transgression, if it is to function, it has to rely on a kind of obscene supplement—the gesture of self-censorship is co-substantial with the exercise of power. It is thus not enough to say that the 'repression' of some libidinal content retroactively eroticizes the very gesture of 'repression'—this 'eroticization' of power is not a secondary effect of its exertion on its object but its very disavowed foundation, its 'constitutive crime', its founding gesture which has to remain invisible if power is to function normally. What we get in the kind of military drill depicted in the first part of Kubrick's Vietnam film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), for example, is not a secondary eroticization of the disciplinary procedure which creates military subjects, but the constitutive obscene supplement of this procedure which renders it operative.

The Logic of Capital

So, back to the recent Labour victory, one can see how it not only involved a hegemonic reappropriation of a series of motifs which were usually inscribed into the Conservative field—family values, law and order, individual responsibility; the Labour ideological offensive also separated these motifs from the obscene phantasmatic subtext which sustained them in the Conservative field—in which 'toughness on crime' and 'individual responsibility' subtly referred to brutal egotism, to the disdain for victims, and other 'basic instincts'. The problem, however, is that the New Labour strategy involved its own 'message between the lines': we fully accept the logic of Capital, we will not mess about with it.

Today, financial crisis is a permanent state of things the reference to which legitimizes the demands to cut social spending, health care, support of culture and scientific research, in short, the dismantling of the welfare state. Is, however, this permanent crisis really an objective feature of our socio-economic life? Is it not rather one of the effects of the shift of balance in the 'class struggle' towards Capital, resulting from the growing role of new technologies as well as from the direct internationalization of Capital and the co-dependent diminished role of the Nation-State which was further able to impose certain minimal requirements

and limitations to exploitation? In other words, the crisis is an 'objective fact' if and only if one accepts in advance as an unquestionable premise the inherent logic of Capital—as more and more left-wing or liberal parties have done. We are thus witnessing the uncanny spectacle of social-democratic parties which came to power with the between-the-lines message to Capital 'we will do the necessary job for you in an even more efficient and painless way than the conservatives'. The problem, of course, is that, in today's global socio-political circumstances, it is practically impossible effectively to call into question the logic of Capital: even a modest social-democratic attempt to redistribute wealth beyond the limit acceptable to the Capital 'effectively' leads to economic crisis, inflation, a fall in revenues and so on. Nevertheless, one should always bear in mind how the connection between 'cause' (rising social expenditure) and 'effect' (economic crisis) is not a direct objective causal one: it is always-already embedded in a situation of social antagonism and struggle. The fact that, if one does not obey the limits set by Capital, a crisis 'really follows', in no way 'proves' that the necessity of these limits is an objective necessity of economic life. It should rather be conceived as a proof of the privileged position Capital holds in the economic and political *struggle*, as in the situation where a stronger partner threatens that if you do X, you will be punished by Y, and then, upon your doing X, Y effectively ensues.

An irony of history is that, in the Eastern European ex-Communist countries, the 'reformed' Communists were the first to learn this lesson. Why did many of them return to power via free elections? This very return offers the ultimate proof that these states have effectively entered capitalism. That is to say, what do ex-Communists stand for today? Due to their privileged links with the newly emerging capitalists—mostly members of the old *nomenklatura* 'privatizing' the companies they once ran—they are first and foremost the party of big capital; furthermore, to erase the traces of their brief, but nonetheless rather traumatic experience with politically active civil society, as a rule they ferociously advocate a withdrawal from ideology, a retreat from active engagement in civil society to passive, apolitical consumerism—the very two features which characterize contemporary capitalism. Dissidents are thus astonished to discover that they played the role of 'vanishing mediators' on the path from socialism to capitalism in which the same class as before rules under a new guise. It is therefore wrong to claim that the return of the ex-Communists to power signals how people are disappointed at capitalism and long for the old socialist security—rather, in a kind of Hegelian 'negation of negation', it is only with the return to power of ex-Communists that socialism was effectively negated; that is, what the political analysts (mis)perceive as the 'disappointment at capitalism' is effectively the disappointment at an ethico-political enthusiasm for which there is no place in 'normal' capitalism.[7]

---

[7] Retroactively, one thus becomes aware of how deeply the phenomenon of so-called 'dissidence' was embedded in the socialist ideological framework, of the extent to which 'dissidence', in its very utopian 'moralism' (preaching social solidarity, ethical responsibility, and so forth) provided the disavowed ethical core of socialism: perhaps, one day, historians will note that—in the same sense in which Hegel claimed that the true spiritual result of the Peloponnesian war, its spiritual End, is Thucydides's book about it—dissidence' was the true spiritual result of Really Existing Socialism.

At a somewhat different level, the same logic underlies the social impact of cyberspace: this impact does not derive directly from technology but relies on the network of social relations, that is, the predominant way digitalization affects our self-experience is mediated by the frame of the late capitalist globalized market economy. Bill Gates has commonly celebrated cyberspace as opening up the prospect of what he calls 'friction-free capitalism'—this expression renders perfectly the social fantasy which underlies the ideology of cyberspace capitalism, of a wholly transparent, ethereal medium of exchange in which the last trace of material inertia vanishes. The crucial point here is that the 'friction' we dispose of in the fantasy of 'friction-free capitalism', does not only refer to the reality of material obstacles which sustain any exchange process, but, above all, to the Real of traumatic social antagonisms, power relations, and so forth which brand the space of social exchange with a pathological twist. In his *Grundrisse* manuscripts, Marx pointed out how the very material disposition of a nineteenth-century industrial production site directly materializes the capitalist relationship of domination—the worker as a mere appendix subordinated to the machinery owned by the capitalist; mutatis mutandis, the same goes for cyberspace. In the social conditions of late capitalism, the very materiality of cyberspace automatically generates the illusory abstract space of 'friction-free' exchange in which the particularity of the participants' social position is obliterated.

The predominant 'spontaneous ideology of cyberspace' is so-called 'cyber-revolutionism' which relies on the notion of cyberspace—or the World Wide Web—as a self-evolving 'natural' organism.[8] Crucial here is the blurring of the distinction between 'culture' and 'nature': the obverse of the 'naturalization of culture' (market, society as living organism) is the 'culturalization of nature' (life itself is conceived as a set of self-reproducing data—'genes are memes').[9] This new notion of Life is thus neutral with respect to the distinction of natural and cultural or 'artificial' processes. The Earth (as Gaia) and the global market, they both appear as gigantic self-regulated living systems whose basic structure is defined in terms of the process of coding and decoding, of transmitting information. The idea of the World Wide Web as a living organism is often evoked in contexts which may seem liberating—say, against state censorship of the Internet. However, this very demonization of the state is thoroughly ambiguous, since it is predominantly appropriated by right-wing populist discourse and/or market liberalism: its main targets are the state interventions which try to maintain a kind of minimal social balance and security. The title of Michael Rothschild's book—*Bionomics: The Inevitability of Capitalism*—is indicative here.[10] So, while cyberspace ideologists can dream about the next evolutionary step in which we will no longer be mechanically interacting 'Cartesian' individuals, in which each 'person' will cut his or her substantial link to his individual body and conceive of itself as part of the new holistic Mind which lives and acts through him or her, what is obfuscated in such a direct 'naturalization' of the World Wide Web or market is the

[8] See Tiziana Terranova, 'Digital Darwin', *New Formations*, no. 29, Summer 1996.
[9] See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford 1989.
[10] Michael L. Rothschild, *Bionomics: The Inevitability of Capitalism*, Armonk, NY 1992.

set of power relations—of political decisions, of institutional conditions —which 'organisms' like the Internet (or the market or capitalism…) need in order to thrive.

Ideological Underground

What one should do is thus reassert the old Marxist critique of 'reification': today, emphasizing the depoliticized 'objective' economic logic against the allegedly 'outdated' forms of ideological passions is *the* predominant ideological form, since ideology is always self-referential, that is, it always defines itself through a distance towards an Other dismissed and denounced as 'ideological.'[11] Jacques Rancière gave a poignant expression to the 'bad surprise' which awaits today's postmodern ideologues of the 'end of politics': it is as if we are witnessing the ultimate confirmation of Freud's thesis, from *Civilization and its Discontents*, on how, after every assertion of Eros, Thanatos reasserts itself with a vengeance. At the very moment when, according to the official ideology, we are finally leaving behind the 'immature' political passions (the regime of the 'political'—class struggle and other 'out-dated' divisive antagonisms) for the 'mature' post-ideological pragmatic universe of rational administration and negotiated consensus, for the universe, free of utopian impulses, in which the dispassionate administration of social affairs goes hand in hand with aestheticized hedonism (the pluralism of 'ways of life')—at this very moment, the foreclosed political is celebrating a triumphant comeback in its most archaic form: of pure, undistilled racist hatred of the Other which renders the rational tolerant attitude utterly impotent.[12] In this precise sense, contemporary 'postmodern' racism is the *symptom* of multiculturalist late capitalism, bringing to light the inherent contradiction of the liberal-democratic ideological project. Liberal 'tolerance' condones the folklorist Other deprived of its substance—like the multitude of 'ethnic cuisines' in a contemporary megalopolis; however, any 'real' Other is instantly denounced for its 'fundamentalism', since the kernel of Otherness resides in the regulation of its *jouissance*: the 'real Other' is by definition 'patriarchal', 'violent', never the Other of ethereal wisdom and charming customs. One is tempted to reactualize here the old Marcusean notion of 'repressive tolerance', reconceiving it as the tolerance of the Other in its aseptic, benign form, which forecloses the dimension of the Real of the Other's *jouissance*.[13]

The same reference to *jouissance* enables us to cast a new light on the horrors of the Bosnian war, as they are reflected in Emir Kusturica's film, *Underground* (1995). The political meaning of this film does not reside primarily in its overt tendentiousness, in the way it takes sides in the post-Yugoslav conflict—heroic Serbs versus the treacherous, pro-Nazi Slovenes and Croats—but, rather, in its very 'depoliticized' aestheticist attitude. That is to say, when, in his conversations with the journalists of *Cahiers du cinéma*, Kusturica insisted that *Underground* is not a political

[11] See Slavoj Žižek, 'Introduction', in *Mapping Ideology*, Verso, London 1995.
[12] See Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, Verso, London 1995, p. 22.
[13] For a more detailed account of the role of *jouissance* in the process of ideological identification, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, Verso, London 1997, ch. 2.

film at all but a kind of liminal trance-like subjective experience, a 'deferred suicide', he thereby unknowingly put on the table his true political cards and indicated that *Underground* stages the 'apolitical' phantasmatic background of the post-Yugoslav ethnic cleansing and war cruelties. How? The predominant cliché about the Balkans is that the Balkan people are caught in the phantasmatic whirlpool of historical myth—Kusturica himself endorses this view: 'In this region, war is a natural phenomenon. It is like a natural catastrophe, like an earthquake which explodes from time to time. In my film, I tried to clarify the state of things in this chaotic part of the world. It seems that nobody is able to locate the roots of this terrible conflict.'[14] What we find here, of course, is an exemplary case of 'Balkanism', functioning in a similar way to Edward Said's concept of 'Orientalism': the Balkans as the timeless space onto which the West projects its phantasmatic content. Together with Milche Manchevski's *Before the Rain* (which almost won the Oscar for the best foreign film in 1995), *Underground* is thus the ultimate ideological product of Western liberal multiculturalism: what these two films offer to the Western liberal gaze is precisely what this gaze wants to see in the Balkan war—the spectacle of a timeless, incomprehensible, mythical cycle of passions, in contrast to decadent and anaemic Western life.[15]

The weak point of the universal multiculturalist gaze does not reside in its inability to 'throw out the dirty water without losing the baby': it is deeply wrong to assert that, when one throws out nationalist dirty water—'excessive' fanaticism—one should be careful not to lose the baby of 'healthy' national identity, so that one should trace the line of separation between the proper degree of 'healthy' nationalism which guarantees the necessary minimum of national identity, and 'excessive' nationalism. Such a common sense distinction *reproduces the very nationalist reasoning which aims to get rid of 'impure' excess*. One is therefore tempted to propose a homology with psychoanalytic treatment, whose aim is also not to get rid of the dirty water (symptoms, pathological tics) to keep the baby (the kernel of the healthy Ego) safe, but, rather, to throw out the baby (to suspend the patient's Ego) to confront the patient with his 'dirty water', with the symptoms and fantasies which structure his *jouissance*. In the matter of national identity, one should also endeavour to throw out the baby (the spiritual purity of national identity) to render visible the phantasmatic support which structures the *jouissance* in the national Thing. And the merit of *Underground* is that, unknowingly, it renders visible this dirty water.

The Time Machine

Underground brings to the light of day the obscene 'underground' of public, official discourse—represented in the film by the Titoist Communist regime. One should bear in mind that the 'underground' to which the film's title refers is not only the domain of 'deferred suicide', of the eternal orgy of drinking, singing and copulating, which takes places in the suspension of time and outside public space: it also stands for the 'under-

[14] 'Propos de Emir Kusturica, *Cahiers de cinéma*, no. 492, June 1995, p. 69.
[15] As to this Western perception of the Balkans as a fantasy-screen, see Renata Salecl, *The Spoils of Freedom*, London 1995.

ground' workshop in which the enslaved workers, isolated from the rest of the world, and thus misled into thinking that World War II is still going on, work day and night and produce arms sold by Marko, the hero of the film, their 'owner' and the big Manipulator, the only one who mediates between the 'underground' and the public world. Kusturica refers here to the old European fairy-tale motif of diligent dwarfs (usually controlled by an evil magician) who, during the night, while people are asleep, emerge from their hiding-place and accomplish their work (set the house in order, cook the meals), so that when, in the morning, people awaken, they find their work magically done. Kusturica's 'underground' is the last embodiment of this motif which is found from Richard Wagner's *Rhinegold* (the Nibelungs who work in their underground caves, driven by their cruel master, the dwarf Alberich) to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* in which the enslaved industrial workers live and work deep beneath the earth's surface to produce wealth for the ruling capitalists.

This schema of the 'underground' slaves, dominated by a manipulative evil Master, takes place against the background of the opposition between the two figures of the Master: on the one hand, the 'visible' public symbolic authority, on the other hand, the 'invisible' spectral apparition. When the subject is endowed with symbolic authority, he acts as an appendix to his symbolic title, that is, it is the 'big Other', the symbolic institution, who acts through him: suffice it to recall a judge who may be a miserable and corrupted person, but the moment he puts on his robe and other insignia, his words are those of Law itself. On the other hand, the 'invisible' Master—whose exemplary case is the anti-Semitic figure of the 'Jew' who, invisible to the public eye, pulls the strings of social life—is a kind of uncanny double of public authority: he has to act in shadow, invisible to the public eye, irradiating a phantom-like, spectral omnipotence.[16] Marko from Kusturica's *Underground* is to be located in this lineage of the evil magician who controls an invisible empire of enslaved workers: he is a kind of uncanny double of Tito as the public symbolic Master. The problem with *Underground* is that it falls into the cynical trap of presenting this obscene 'underground' from a benevolent distance. *Underground*, of course, is multi-layered and self-reflective, it plays with a multitude of clichés (the Serbian myth of a true man who, even when bombs fall around him, calmly continues his meal, and so on) which are 'not to be taken literally'—however, *it is precisely through such self-distance that 'postmodern' cynical ideology functions*. In a well-known and much-reprinted piece, 'Fourteen Theses on Fascism' (1995), Umberto Eco enumerated the series of features which define the kernel of the fascist attitude: dogmatic tenacity, the absence of humour, insensibility to rational argument... he couldn't have been more wrong. Today's neo-fascism is more and more 'postmodern', civilized, playful, involving ironic self-distance, *yet for all that no less fascist*.

So, in a way, Kusturica is right in his interview with *Cahiers du cinéma*: he *does* somehow 'clarify the state of things in this chaotic part of the world' by way of bringing to light its 'underground' phantasmatic support. He thereby unknowingly provides the libidinal economy of the ethnic

---

[16] See Slavoj Žižek, ''I Hear You with My Eyes'; or, The Invisible Master', in Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek, eds, *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, Durham, NC 1996.

slaughter in Bosnia: the pseudo-Bataillean trance of excessive expenditure, the continuous mad rhythm of drinking-eating-singing-fornicating. And, *therein consists the 'dream' of the ethnic cleansers, therein resides the answer to the question 'How were they able to do it?'* If the standard definition of war is that of 'a continuation of politics by other means', then the fact that Radovan Karadžić, the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, is a poet, is more than a gratuitous coincidence: ethnic cleansing in Bosnia was the 'continuation of (a kind of) *poetry* by other means.'

'Concrete' Versus 'Abstract' Universality

How, then, is this multiculturalist ideological poetry embedded in today's global capitalism? The problem which lurks beneath it is that of universalism. Etienne Balibar discerned three levels of universality in today's societies: the 'real' universality of the process of globalization and the supplementary process of 'internal exclusions' (the extent to which, now, the fate of each of us hinges on the intricate web of global market relations); the universality of the fiction which regulates ideological hegemony (Church or State as the universal 'imagined communities' which allow the subject to acquire a distance towards his immersion in his immediate social group—class, profession, sex, religion—and posit himself as a free subject); the universality of an Ideal, as exemplified by the revolutionary demand for *égaliberté* (equality-freedom) which remains an unconditional excess, setting in motion permanent insurrection against the existing order, and can thus never be 'gentrified', included in the existing order.[17]

The point, of course, is that the boundary between these three universals is never stable and fixed: *égaliberté* can serve as the hegemonic idea which enables us to identify with our particular social role (I am a poor artisan, but precisely as such, I participate in the life of my Nation-State as an equal and free citizen), or as the irreducible excess which destabilizes each fixed social order. What was in the Jacobin universe the destabilizing universality of the Ideal, setting in motion the incessant process of social transformation, became later the ideological fiction allowing each individual to identify with his specific place in the social space. In Hegelese, the alternative here is the following: is the universal 'abstract' (opposed to concrete content) or 'concrete' (in the sense that I experience my very particular mode of social life as the specific way of my participation in the universal social order)? Balibar's point, of course, is that the tension between the two is irreducible: the excess of abstract-negative-ideal universality, its unsettling-destabilizing force, can never be fully integrated into the harmonious whole of a 'concrete universality.'[18] However, there is another tension, the tension between the two modes of 'concrete universality' itself, which seems more crucial today. That is to say, the 'real' universality of today's globalization through the global market

---

[17] See Balibar, *La crainte des masses*, pp. 421–54.
[18] Here, the parallel is clear with Laclau's opposition between the logic of difference (society as a differential symbolic structure) and the logic of antagonism (society as 'impossible', thwarted by an antagonistic split). Today, the tension between the logic of difference and the logic of antagonism assumes the form of the tension between the liberal-democratic universe of negotiation and the 'fundamentalist' universe of struggle between Good and Evil.

involves its own hegemonic fiction (or even ideal) of multiculturalist tolerance, respect and protection of human rights, democracy, and so forth; it involves its own pseudo-Hegelian 'concrete universality' of a world order whose universal features of the world market, human rights and democracy, allow each specific 'life-style' to flourish in its particularity. So a tension inevitably emerges between this postmodern, post-nation-state, 'concrete universality', and the earlier 'concrete universality' of the Nation-State.

Hegel was the first to elaborate the properly modern paradox of *individualization through secondary identification*. At the beginning, the subject is immersed in the particular life-form into which he was born (family, local community); the only way for him to tear himself away from his primordial 'organic' community, to cut his links with it and to assert himself as an 'autonomous individual', is to shift his fundamental allegiance, to recognize the substance of his being in another, secondary community which is universal and, simultaneously, 'artificial', no longer 'spontaneous' but 'mediated', sustained by the activity of independent free subjects—nation versus local community; a profession in the modern sense (a job in a large anonymous company) versus the 'personalized' relationship between an apprentice and his master-artisan; the academic community of knowledge versus the traditional wisdom passed from generation to generation. In this shift from primary to secondary identification, primary identifications undergo a kind of transubstantiation: they start to function as the form of appearance of the universal secondary identification—say, precisely by being a good member of my family, I thereby contribute to the proper functioning of my Nation-State. The universal secondary identification remains 'abstract' insofar as it is directly opposed to the particular forms of primary identification, that is, insofar as it compels the subject to renounce his primary identifications; it becomes 'concrete' when it reintegrates primary identifications, transforming them into the modes of appearance of the secondary identification. This tension between 'abstract' and 'concrete' universality is clearly discernible in the precarious social status of the early Christian Church: on the one hand, there was the zealotry of the radical groups which saw no way to combine the true Christian attitude with the existing space of predominant social relations, and thus posed a serious threat to the social order; on the other hand, there were the attempts to reconcile Christianity with the existing structure of domination, so that participation in social life and occupying a place within a hierarchy were compatible with being a good Christian—indeed, accomplishing your determinate social role was not only seen as compatible with being a Christian, it was even perceived as a specific way to fulfil the universal duty of being a Christian.

In the modern era, the predominant social form of the 'concrete universal' is the Nation-State as the medium of our particular social identities: the determinate form of my social life (as, say, worker, professor, politician, farmer, lawyer) is the specific mode of my participation in the universal life of my Nation-State. With regard to this logic of transubstantiation which guarantees the ideological unity of a Nation-State, the United States of America plays a unique role of exception: the key element of the standard 'American Ideology' consists in the endeavour to

transubstantiate the very fidelity to one's particular ethnic roots into an expression of 'being American': in order to be 'a good American', one does not have to renounce one's ethnic roots—Italians, Germans, Blacks, Jews, Greeks, Koreans, they are 'all Americans', that is, the very particularity of their ethnic identity, the way they 'stick to it', makes them Americans. This transubstantiation by means of which the tension between my particular ethnic identity and my universal identity as a member of a Nation-State is surpassed, is threatened today: it is as if the positive charge of pathetic patriotic identification with the universal frame of the American Nation-State has been seriously eroded; 'Americanness', the fact of 'being American', less and less gives rise to the sublime effect of being part of a gigantic ideological project—'the American dream'—so that the American state is more and more experienced as a simple formal framework for the coexistence of the multiplicity of ethnic, religious or life-style communities.

Modernism in Reverse

This gradual collapse—or, rather, loss of substance—of the 'American dream' bears witness to the unexpected *reversal* of the passage from primary to secondary identification described by Hegel: in our 'postmodern' societies, the 'abstract' institution of secondary identification is increasingly experienced as an external, purely formal frame that is not really binding, so that one is more and more looking for support in 'primordial', usually smaller (ethnic, religious) forms of identification. Even when these forms of identification are more 'artificial' than national identification—as is the case with the gay community—they are more 'immediate' in the sense of seizing the individual directly and overwhelmingly, in his specific 'way of life', thereby restraining the 'abstract' freedom he possesses in his capacity as the citizen of a Nation-State. What we are dealing with today is thus a reverse process to that of the early modern constitution of a Nation: in contrast to the 'nationalization of the ethnic'—the de-ethnicization, the 'sublation' (*Aufhebung*) of the ethnic into the national—we are now dealing with the 'ethnicization of the national', with a renewed search for (or reconstitution of) 'ethnic roots'. The crucial point here, however, is that this 'regression' from secondary to 'primordial' forms of identification with 'organic' communities is already 'mediated': it is a *reaction* to the universal dimension of the world market—as such, it occurs on its terrain, against its background. For that reason, what we are dealing with in these phenomena is not a 'regression' but rather the form of appearance of its exact opposite: in a kind of 'negation of negation', *this very reassertion of 'primordial' identification signals that the loss of organic-substantial unity is fully consummated.*

To make this point clear, one should bear in mind what is perhaps the fundamental lesson of postmodern politics: far from being a 'natural' unity of social life, a balanced frame, a kind of Aristotelian *entelechia* towards which all previous development advances, the universal form of the Nation-State is rather a precarious, temporary balance between the relationship to a particular ethnic Thing (patriotism, *pro patria mori*, and so forth) and the (potentially) universal function of the market. On the one hand, it 'sublates' organic local forms of identification into the universal 'patriotic' identification; on the other hand, it posits itself as a

kind of pseudo-natural boundary of the market economy, delimiting 'internal' from 'external' commerce—economic activity is thus 'sublimated', raised to the level of the ethnic Thing, legitimated as a patriotic contribution to the nation's greatness. This balance is constantly threatened from both sides, from the side of previous 'organic' forms of particular identification which do not simply disappear but continue their subterranean life outside the universal public sphere, as well as from the side of the immanent logic of Capital whose 'transnational' nature is inherently indifferent to the boundaries of Nation-State. And today's new 'fundamentalist' ethnic identifications involve a kind of 'desublimation', a process of disintegration of this precarious unity of the 'national economy' into its two constituent parts, the transnational market function and the relationship to the ethnic Thing.[19] It is therefore only today, in contemporary 'fundamentalist' ethnic, religious, life-style communities, that the splitting between the abstract form of commerce and the relationship to the particular ethnic Thing, inaugurated by the Enlightenment project, is fully realized: today's postmodern ethnic or religious 'fundamentalism' and xenophobia are not only not 'regress-ive', but, on the contrary, offer the supreme proof of the final emancipation of the economic logic of market from the attachment to the ethnic Thing.[20] Therein resides the highest speculative effort of the dialectic of social life: not in describing the process of mediation of the primordial immediacy—say, the disintegration of organic community in 'alienated' individualist society—but in explaining how this very process of mediation characteristic of modernity can give birth to new forms of 'organic' immediacy. The standard story of the passage from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* should therefore be supplemented by an account of how this process of becoming-society of community gives rise to different forms of new, 'mediated' communities—say, the 'life-style communities'.

Multiculturalism

How, then, does the universe of Capital relate to the form of Nation-State in our era of global capitalism? Perhaps, this relationship is best designated as 'auto-colonization': with the direct multinational functioning of Capital, we are no longer dealing with the standard opposition between metropolis and colonized countries; a global company as it were cuts its umbilical cord with its mother-nation and treats its country of origins as simply another territory to be colonized. This is what disturbs

---

[19] One of the minor, yet tell-tale, events that bear witness to this 'withering-away' of the Nation-State is the slow spreading of the obscene institution of private prisons in the USA and other Western countries: the exercise of what should be the monopoly of the State (physical violence and coercion) becomes the object of a contract between the State and a private company which exerts coercion on individuals for the sake of profit—what we have here is simply the end of the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence which (according to Max Weber) defines the modern State.

[20] These three stages (pre-modern communities, the Nation-State and today's emerging transnational 'universal society') clearly fit the triad of traditionalism, modernism, and postmodernism, elaborated by Fredric Jameson: here also, the retro-phenomena that characterize postmodernism should not deceive us—it is only with postmodernism that the break with pre-modernity is fully consummated. The reference to Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, London 1993) in the title of this essay is thus deliberate.

so much the patriotically oriented right-wing populists, from Le Pen to Buchanan: the fact that the new multinationals have towards the French or American local population exactly the same attitude as towards the population of Mexico, Brazil or Taiwan. Is there not a kind of poetic justice in this self-referential turn? Today's global capitalism is thus again a kind of 'negation of negation', after national capitalism and its internationalist/colonialist phase. At the beginning (ideally, of course), there is capitalism within the confines of a Nation-State, with the accompanying international trade (exchange between sovereign Nation-States); what follows is the relationship of colonization in which the colonizing country subordinates and exploits (economically, politically, culturally) the colonized country; the final moment of this process is the paradox of colonization in which there are only colonies, no colonizing countries—the colonizing power is no longer a Nation-State but directly the global company. In the long term, we shall all not only wear Banana Republic shirts but also live in banana republics.

And, of course, the ideal form of ideology of this global capitalism is multiculturalism, the attitude which, from a kind of empty global position, treats *each* local culture the way the colonizer treats colonized people—as 'natives' whose mores are to be carefully studied and 'respected'. That is to say, the relationship between traditional imperialist colonialism and global capitalist self-colonization is exactly the same as the relationship between Western cultural imperialism and multiculturalism: in the same way that global capitalism involves the paradox of colonization without the colonizing Nation-State metropole, multiculturalism involves patronizing Eurocentrist distance and/or respect for local cultures without roots in one's own particular culture. In other words, multiculturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a 'racism with a distance'—it 'respects' the Other's identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed 'authentic' community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position. Multiculturalism is a racism which empties its own position of all positive content (the multiculturalist is not a direct racist, he doesn't oppose to the Other the *particular* values of his own culture), but nonetheless retains this position as the privileged *empty point of universality* from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures—the multiculturalist respect for the Other's specificity is the very form of asserting one's own superiority.

What about the rather obvious counter-argument that the multiculturalist's neutrality is false, since his position silently privileges Eurocentrist content? This line of reasoning is right, but for the wrong reason. The particular cultural background or roots which always support the universal multiculturalist position are not its 'truth', hidden beneath the mask of universality—'multiculturalist universalism is really Eurocentrist'—but rather the opposite: the stain of particular roots is the phantasmatic screen which conceals the fact that the subject is already thoroughly 'rootless', that his true position is the void of universality. Let me recall here my own paraphrase of de Quincey's witticism about the simple art of murder: how many people have began with an innocent group sex orgy and ended with sharing meals in a Chinese

restaurant![21] The point of this paraphrase is to reverse the standard relationship between the surface-pretext and the unacknowledged wish: sometimes, the most difficult thing is to accept the appearance at its surface value—we imagine multiple phantasmatic scenarios to cover it up with 'deeper meanings.' It may well be that my 'true desire' to be discerned behind my refusal to share a Chinese meal is my fascination with the fantasy of a group orgy, but the key point is that this fantasy which structures my desire is in itself already a defence against my 'oral' drive which goes its way with absolute coercion…

What we find here is the exact equivalent of Darian Leader's example of the man in a restaurant with his date, who, when asking the waiter for the table, says 'Bedroom for two, please!' instead of 'Table for two, please!' One should turn around the standard Freudian explanation ('Of course, his mind was already on the night of sex he planned after the meal!'): this intervention of the subterranean sexual fantasy is rather the screen which serves as the defence against the oral drive which effectively matters to him more than sex.[22] In his analysis of the French revolution of 1848 (in *The Class-Struggles in France*), Marx provides a similar example of such a double deception: the Party of Order which took over after the Revolution, publicly supported the Republic, yet secretly, it believed in Restoration—they used every opportunity to mock republican rituals and to signal in any way possible where 'their heart is'.[23] The paradox, however, was that the truth of their activity resided in the external form they privately mocked and despised: this republican form was not a mere semblance beneath which the royalist desire lurked—it was rather the secret clinging to Royalism which enabled them to fulfil their actual historical function, to implement the bourgeois republican law and order. Marx himself mentions how members of the Party of Order found immense pleasure in their occasional Royalist 'slips of the tongue' against the Republic—referring, for instance, to France as a Kingdom in their parliamentary debates: these slips of the tongue articulated their phantasmatic illusions which served as the screen enabling them to blind themselves for the social reality of what was going on *on the surface*.

The Machine in the Ghost

And, mutatis mutandis, the same goes for today's capitalist who still clings to some particular cultural heritage, identifying it as the secret source of his success—Japanese executives participating in tea ceremonies or obeying the bushido code—or for the inverse case of the Western journalist in search of the particular secret of the Japanese success: this very reference to a particular cultural formula is a screen for the universal anonymity of Capital. The true horror does not reside in the particular content hidden beneath the universality of global Capital, but rather in the fact that Capital is effectively an anonymous global machine blindly running its course, that there is effectively no particular Secret Agent who animates it. The horror is not the (particular living) ghost in

[21] Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, New York 1993, p. 1.
[22] See Darian Leader, *Why Do Women Write More Letters Than They Post?*, London 1996.
[23] Karl Marx, 'The Class Struggles in France: 1848 to 1850', in *Surveys from Exile. Political Writings: Volume 2*, London 1973.

the (dead universal) machine, but the (dead universal) machine in the very heart of each (particular living) ghost.

The conclusion to be drawn is thus that the problematic of multiculturalism—the hybrid coexistence of diverse cultural life-worlds—which imposes itself today is the form of appearance of its opposite, of the massive presence of capitalism as *universal* world system: it bears witness to the unprecedented homogenization of the contemporary world. It is effectively as if, since the horizon of social imagination no longer allows us to entertain the idea of an eventual demise of capitalism—since, as we might put it, everybody silently accepts that *capitalism is here to stay*—critical energy has found a substitute outlet in fighting for cultural differences which leave the basic homogeneity of the capitalist world-system intact. So we are fighting our PC battles for the rights of ethnic minorities, of gays and lesbians, of different life-styles, and so on, while capitalism pursues its triumphant march—and today's critical theory, in the guise of 'cultural studies', is doing the ultimate service to the unrestrained development of capitalism by actively participating in the ideological effort to render its massive presence invisible: in a typical postmodern 'cultural criticism', the very mention of capitalism as world system tends to give rise to the accusation of 'essentialism', 'fundamentalism' and other crimes.

The structure here is that of a *symptom*. When one is dealing with a universal structuring principle, one always automatically assumes that—in principle, precisely—it is possible to apply this principle to all its potential elements, and that the empirical non-realization of the principle is merely a matter of contingent circumstances. A symptom, however, is an element which—although the non-realization of the universal principle in it appears to hinge on contingent circumstances—*has* to remain an exception, that is, the point of suspension of the universal principle: if the universal principle were to apply also to this point, the universal system itself would disintegrate. As is well known, in the paragraphs on civil society in his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel demonstrated how the large class of 'rabble' (*Pöebel*) in modern civil society is not an accidental result of social mismanagement, inadequate government measures or economic bad luck: the inherent structural dynamics of civil society necessarily give rise to a class which is excluded from the benefits of civil society, a class deprived of elementary human rights and therefore also delivered of duties towards society, an element within civil society which negates its universal principle, a kind of 'un-Reason inherent to Reason itself'—in short, *its symptom*.

Do we not witness the same phenomenon today, and in even stronger shape, with the growth of an underclass excluded, sometimes for generations, from the benefits of affluent liberal-democratic society? Today's 'exceptions'—the homeless, the ghettoized, the permanently unemployed—are the symptom of the late capitalist universal system, a growing and permanent reminder of how the immanent logic of late capitalism works: the proper capitalist utopia is that, through appropriate measures (for progressive liberals, affirmative action; for conservatives, a return to self-reliance and family values), this 'exception' could be—in the long term and in principle, at least—abolished. And is not a

homologous utopia at work in the notion of a 'rainbow coalition': in the idea that, at some utopian future moment, all 'progressive' struggles—for gay and lesbian rights, for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, the ecological struggle, the feminist struggle, and so on—will be united in the common 'chain of equivalences'? Again, this necessity of failure is structural: the point is not simply that, because of the empirical complexity of the situation, all particular 'progressive' fights will never be united, that 'wrong' chains of equivalences will always occur—say, the enchainment of the fight for African-American ethnic identity with patriarchal and homophobic ideology—but rather that emergencies of 'wrong' enchainments are grounded in the very structuring principle of today's 'progressive' politics of establishing 'chains of equivalences': the very domain of the multitude of particular struggles with their continuously shifting displacements and condensations is sustained by the 'repression' of the key role of economic struggle—the leftist politics of the 'chains of equivalences' among the plurality of struggles is strictly correlative to the silent abandonment of the analysis of capitalism as a global economic system and to the acceptance of capitalist economic relations as the unquestionable framework.[24]

The falsity of elitist multiculturalist liberalism thus resides in the tension between content and form which characterized already the first great ideological project of tolerant universalism, that of freemasonry: the doctrine of freemasonry (the universal brotherhood of all men based on the light of Reason) clearly clashes with its form of expression and organization (a secret society with its rituals of initiation)—the very form of expression and articulation of freemasonry belies its positive doctrine. In a strictly homologous way, the contemporary 'politically correct' liberal attitude which perceives itself as surpassing the limitations of its ethnic identity ('citizen of the world' without anchors in any particular ethnic community), functions, *within its own society*, as a narrow elitist upper-middle-class circle clearly opposing itself to the majority of common people, despised for being caught in their narrow ethnic or community confines.

For a Leftist Suspension of the Law

How, then, do leftists who are aware of this falsity of multiculturalist postmodernism react to it? Their reaction assumes the form of what Hegel called the *infinite judgement*: the judgement which posits the speculative identity of two thoroughly incompatible terms—Hegel's best-known example is from the sub-chapter on phrenology in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*: 'the Spirit is a bone'. The infinite judgement which encapsulates this reaction is: 'Adorno (the most sophisticated 'elitist' critical theorist) is Buchanan (the lowest of American rightist populism).' That is to say, these critics of postmodern multiculturalist elitism—from Christopher Lasch to Paul Piccone—risk endorsing neo-conservative populism, with its notions of the reassertion of community, local democracy and active citizenship, as the only politically relevant answer to the all-pervasive predominance of 'instrumental Reason', of the bureaucratization and instrumentalization of our life-

---

[24] See Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*, Princeton 1995.

world.[25] Of course, it is easy to dismiss today's populism as a nostalgic reactive formation to the process of modernization, and as such inherently paranoiac, in search of an external cause of malignancy, of a secret agent who pulls the strings and is thus responsible for the woes of modernization—Jews, international capital, non-patriotic multiculturalist managers, state bureaucracy and so on; the problem is rather to conceive this new populism as a new form of 'false transparency' which, far from presenting a serious obstacle to the capitalist modernization, paves the way for it. In other words, far more interesting than bemoaning the disintegration of community life through the impact of new technologies is to analyze how technological progress itself gives rise to new communities which gradually 'naturalize' themselves—like virtual communities.

What these leftist advocates of populism fail to perceive is that today's populism, far from presenting a threat to global capitalism, remains its inherent product. Paradoxically, today's true conservatives are rather the leftist 'critical theorists' who reject liberal multiculturalism as well as fundamentalist populism, those who clearly perceive the complicity between global capitalism and ethnic fundamentalism. They point towards the third domain which belongs neither to global market-society nor to the new forms of ethnic fundamentalism: the domain of the *political*, the public space of civil society, of active responsible citizenship—the fight for human rights, ecology and so forth. However, the problem is that this very form of political space is more and more threatened by the onslaught of globalization; consequently, one cannot simply return to it or revitalize it. To avoid a misunderstanding: our point is not the old 'economic essentialist' one according to which, in the case of England today, the Labour victory really did not change anything—and as such is even more dangerous than continuing Tory rule, since it gave rise to the misleading impression that there was a change. There are a lot of things the Labour government can achieve; it can contribute a lot to the passage from traditional English parochial jingoism to a more 'enlightened' liberal democracy with a much stronger element of social solidarity (from health care to education), to the respect for human rights (in its diverse forms, from women's rights to the rights of ethnic groups); one should use the Labour victory as an incentive to revitalize the diverse forms of the struggle for *égaliberté*. (With the Socialist electoral victory in France, the situation is even more ambiguous, since Jospin's programme does contain some elements of a direct confrontation with the logic of capital.) Even when the change is not substantial but a mere semblance of a new beginning, the very fact that a situation is perceived by the majority of the population as a 'new beginning' opens up the space for important ideological and political rearticulations—as we have already seen, the fundamental lesson of the dialectic of ideology is that appearances *do* matter.

---

[25] See Paul Piccone, 'Postmodern Populism', *Telos*, no. 103, Spring 1995. Exemplary here is also the attempt by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese to oppose the upper-middle-class feminism interested in the problems of literary and cinema theory, lesbian rights, and so forth, a 'family feminism' which focuses on the actual concerns of ordinary working women and articulates concrete questions of how to survive within the family, with children and work. See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism is Not the Story of my Life*, New York 1996.

Nonetheless, the post-Nation-State logic of capital remains the Real which lurks in the background, while all three main leftist reactions to the process of globalization—liberal multiculturalism; the attempt to embrace populism by way of discerning, beneath its fundamentalist appearance, the resistance against 'instrumental reason'; the attempt to keep open the space of the political—seem inappropriate. Although the last approach is based on the correct insight about the complicity between multiculturalism and fundamentalism, it avoids the crucial question: *how are we to reinvent political space in today's conditions of globalization?* The politicization of the series of particular struggles which leaves intact the global process of capital is clearly not sufficient. What this means is that one should reject the opposition which, within the frame of late capitalist liberal democracy, imposes itself as the main axis of ideological struggle: the tension between 'open' post-ideological universalist liberal tolerance and the particularist 'new fundamentalisms'. Against the liberal centre which presents itself as neutral and post-ideological, relying on the rule of the Law, one should reassert the old leftist motif of the necessity to suspend the neutral space of Law.

Of course, both the Left and the Right involve their own mode of the suspension of the Law on behalf of some higher or more fundamental interest. The rightist suspension, from anti-Dreyfusards to Oliver North, acknowledges its violation of the letter of the Law, but justifies it via the reference to some higher national interest: it presents its violation as a painful self-sacrifice for the good of the Nation.[26] As to the leftist suspension, suffice it to mention two films, *Under Fire* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1983) and *Watch on the Rhine* (Herman Shumlin, 1943). The first takes place during the Nicaraguan revolution, when an American photojournalist faces a troublesome dilemma: just prior to the victory of the revolution, Somozistas kill a charismatic Sandinista leader, so the Sandinistas ask the journalist to fake a photograph of their dead leader, presenting him as alive and thus belying the Somozistas' claims about his death—in this way, he would contribute to a swift victory of the revolution and reduce bloodshed. Professional ethics, of course, strictly prohibit such an act, since it violates the unbiased objectivity of reporting and makes the journalist an instrument of the political fight; the journalist nevertheless chooses the 'leftist' option and fakes the picture. In *Watch on the Rhine*, based on a play by Lillian Hellmann, this dilemma is even more aggravated: in the late 1930s, a fugitive family of German political emigrants involved in the anti-Nazi struggle comes to stay with their distant relatives, an idyllic all-American small-town middle-class family; soon, however, the Germans face an unexpected threat in the guise of an acquaintance of the American family, a rightist who blackmails the emigrants and, via his contacts with the German embassy, endangers members of the underground in Germany itself. The father of the emigrant family decides to kill him and thereby puts the American family in a difficult moral dilemma: the empty moralizing solidarity with the victims of Nazism is over; now they have effectively to take sides and dirty their hands with covering up the killing. Here also, the family decides on the 'leftist' option. 'Left' is defined by this readiness

---

[26] The most concise formulation of the rightist suspension of public (legal) norms was provided by Eamon de Valera: 'The people has no right to do wrong.'

to suspend the abstract moral frame, or, to paraphrase Kierkegaard, to accomplish a *political suspension of the Ethical*.

The Universality to Come

The lesson of all this, which gained actuality in relation to the Western reaction to the Bosnian war, is that there is no way to avoid being partial, since neutrality involves taking sides—in the case of the Bosnian war, the 'balanced' talk about the Balkan ethnic 'tribal warfare' already endorses the Serbian standpoint: the humanitarian liberal equidistance can easily slip into or coincide with its opposite and effectively tolerate the most violent 'ethnic cleansing'. So, in short, the leftist does not simply violate the liberal's impartial neutrality; what he claims is that there is no such neutrality. The cliché of the liberal Centre, of course, is that both suspensions, the rightist and the leftist, ultimately amount to the same, to a totalitarian threat to the rule of Law. The entire consistency of the Left hinges on proving that, on the contrary, each of the two suspensions follows a different logic. While the Right legitimizes its suspension of the Ethical by its anti-universalist stance, by way of a reference to its particular (religious, patriotic) identity which overrules any universal moral or legal standards, the Left legitimizes its suspension of the Ethical precisely by means of a reference to the true Universality to come. Or, to put it in another way, the Left simultaneously accepts the antagonistic character of society (there is no neutral position, struggle is constitutive), *and* remains universalist (speaking on behalf of universal emancipation): in the leftist perspective, accepting the radically antagonistic—that is, *political*—character of social life, accepting the necessity of 'taking sides', is the only way to be effectively *universal*.

How are we to comprehend this paradox? It can only be conceived if *the antagonism is inherent to universality itself*, that is, if universality itself is split into the 'false' concrete universality which legitimizes the existing division of the Whole into functional parts, and the impossible/real demand of 'abstract' universality (Balibar's *égaliberté*). The leftist political gesture par excellence (in contrast to the rightist motif 'to each his or her own place') is thus to question the concrete existing universal order on behalf of its symptom, of the part which, although inherent to the existing universal order, has no 'proper place' within it (say, illegal immigrants or the homeless in our societies). This procedure of *identifying with the symptom* is the exact and necessary obverse of the standard critical and ideological move of recognizing a particular content behind some abstract universal notion ('the "man" of human rightly is effectively the white male owner'), of denouncing the neutral universality as false: in it, one pathetically asserts (and identifies with) *the point of inherent exception/exclusion, the 'abject', of the concrete positive order, as the only point of true universality*, as the point which belies the existing concrete universality. It is easy to show that, say, the subdivision of the people who live in a country into 'full' citizens and temporary immigrant workers privileges 'full' citizens and excludes immigrants from the public space proper—in the same way in which man and woman are not two species of a neutral universal genus of humanity, since the content of the genus as such involves some mode of 'repression' of the feminine; much more productive, theoretically as well as politically—since it opens up the way for the

'progressive' subverting of hegemony—is the opposite operation of *identifying universality with the point of exclusion*, in our case, of saying 'we are all immigrant workers.' In a hierarchically structured society, the measure of its true universality resides in the way its parts relate to those 'at the bottom', excluded by and from all others—in ex-Yugoslavia, for example, universality was represented by Albanian and Bosnian Muslims, looked down on by all other nations. The recent pathetic statement of solidarity 'Sarajevo is the capital of Europe' was also an exemplary case of such a notion of exception as embodying universality: the way the enlightened liberal Europe related to Sarajevo bore witness to the way it related to itself, to its universal notion.[27]

This assertion of the universality of antagonism in no way entails that 'in social life, there is no dialogue, only war'. Rightists speak of social (or sexual) *warfare*, while leftists speak of social (or class) *struggle*. There are two variations on Joseph Goebbels' infamous statement 'When I hear the word "culture", I reach for my pistol': 'When I hear the word "culture", I reach for my cheque-book', pronounced by the cynical cinema producer in Godard's *Mépris*, and the leftist Enlightened reversal, 'When I hear the word "gun", I reach for culture.' When today's neo-Nazi street-fighter hears the word 'Western Christian culture', he reaches for his gun in order to defend it from the Turks, Arabs, Jews, thereby destroying what he purports to defend. Liberal capitalism has no need for such direct violence: the market does the job of destroying culture far more smoothly and efficiently. In clear contrast to both these attitudes, the leftist Enlightenment is defined by the wager that culture can serve as an efficient answer to the gun: the outburst of raw violence is a kind of *passage à l'acte* rooted in the subject's ignorance—as such, it can be counteracted by the struggle whose main form is *reflective knowledge*.

---

[27] This, perhaps, is how one should read Rancière's notion of *singulier universel*: the assertion of the singular exception as the locus of universality which simultaneously affirms and subverts the universality in question. When we say, 'We are all citizens of Sarajevo', we are obviously making a 'false' nomination, a nomination which violates the proper geopolitical disposition; however, precisely as such, this violation gives word to the injustice of the existing geopolitical order. See Jacques Rancière, *La Mésentente*, Paris 1995.