

under American guidance that effectively pulls the strings. Furthermore, the silent pact with Russia that held until now is broken: in the terms of this pact, Russia was publicly treated as a superpower, allowed to maintain the appearance of being one, on the condition that it did not act as one. Now, Russia's humiliation is public, and any pretence of dignity is unmasked: Russia can only openly resist or openly comply with Western pressure. The further logical result of this new situation will be, of course, the renewed rise of anti-Western resistance from Eastern Europe to the Third World, with the sad consequence that criminal figures like Milošević will be elevated into model fighters against the New World Order.

So the lesson is that the alternative between the New World Order and the neo-racist nationalism opposing it is a false one: these are the two sides of the same coin – the New World Order itself breeds the monstrosities that it fights. This is why protests against the bombing from the reformed Communist parties all around Europe, including the PDS, are totally misdirected: these false protesters against the NATO bombing of Serbia are like the caricaturized pseudo-leftists who oppose the trial of a drug dealer, claiming that his crime is the result of the social pathology of the capitalist system. The way to fight the capitalist New World Order is not by supporting local proto-fascist resistances to it, but to focus on the only serious question today: how to build *transnational* political movements and institutions strong enough seriously to constrain the unlimited rule of Capital, and to render visible and politically relevant the fact that local fundamentalist resistances against the New World Order, from Milošević to Le Pen and the extreme Right in Europe, are part of it?

#### Notes

Various versions of this paper were circulating until it was finally published in *New Left Review*, 234, 1999, pp.76–82. This text dates from 7 April 1999, and contains several passages that, interestingly, were omitted from the official *NLR* version. [eds]

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### Welcome to the desert of the Real (reflections on 11 September 2001)

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#### Seizing the Real

Alain Badiou identified the 'passion for the Real [*la passion du réel*]'<sup>1</sup> as the key feature of the twentieth century: in contrast to the utopian or 'scientific' projects and ideals, and plans about the future, of the nineteenth century, this century aimed at delivering the thing itself, at directly realizing the longed-for New Order. The ultimate and defining experience of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality – the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off deceptive layers of reality. Already in the trenches of World War I, Carl Jünger was celebrating face-to-face combat as the authentic intersubjective encounter: authenticity resides in the act of violent transgression, from the Lacanian Real – the Thing confronted by Antigone when she violates the order of the city – to Bataille's excess.

As Badiou demonstrated apropos of the Stalinist show trials, this violent effort to distil the pure Real from elusive reality necessarily ends up in its opposite, in the obsession with pure appearance: in the Stalinist universe, the passion for the Real (the ruthless enforcement of socialist development) thus culminates in ritualistic stagings of a theatrical spectacle in the truth of which no one believes. The key to this reversal resides in the impossibility ultimately to draw a clear distinction between deceptive reality and some firm positive kernel of the Real: every positive bit of reality is *a priori* suspicious, because (as we know from Lacan) the Real Thing is ultimately another name for the Void. The pursuit of the Real thus equals total annihilation, a (self-)destructive fury within which the only way to trace the distinction between the

semblance and the Real is, precisely, to *stage* it as a fake spectacle. The fundamental illusion here is that, once the violent work of purification is done, the New Man will emerge *ex nihilo*, freed from the filth of past corruption. Within this horizon, 'really-existing men' are reduced to the stock of raw material which can be ruthlessly exploited for the construction of the New – the Stalinist revolutionary definition of man is thus a circular one: 'man is what is to be crushed, stamped on, mercilessly worked over, in order to produce a new man.' We have here the tension between the series of 'ordinary' elements ('ordinary' men as the 'material' of history) and the exceptional 'empty' element (the socialist 'New Man', which at first is nothing but an empty place to be filled up with positive content through revolutionary turmoil). In a revolution, there is no *a priori* positive determination of this New Man: a revolution is not legitimized by the positive notion of what constitutes Man's essence, 'alienated' in present conditions and to be realized through the revolutionary process – the only legitimization of a revolution is negative, a will to break with the past. One should formulate things here in a very precise way: the reason why the Stalinist fury of purification was so destructive resides in the very fact that it was sustained by the belief that, after the destructive work of purification was accomplished, *something will remain*, the sublime 'indivisible remainder', the paragon of the New. It is in order to conceal the fact that there is nothing beyond this purification, in a strictly perverse way, that the revolutionary has to cling to violence as the only index of his authenticity, and it is at this level that critics of Stalinism as a rule misperceive the cause of the Communist's attachment to the Party. When, say, in 1939–41, pro-Soviet Communists twice had to change their Party line overnight (after the Soviet–German pact, it was imperialism, not fascism, that was elevated to the role of the primary enemy; from 22 June 1941, when Germany attacked the Soviet Union, it was again the popular front against the fascist beast), the brutality of the imposed changes of position was what attracted them. Along the same lines, the purges themselves exerted an uncanny fascination, especially on intellectuals: their 'irrational' cruelty served as a kind of ontological proof, bearing witness to the fact that we are dealing with the Real, not just with empty plans – the Party is ruthlessly brutal, so it must mean business . . .

So, if the passion for the Real ends up with the pure semblance of political theatre, then, in an exact inversion, the 'postmodern' passion of the semblance of the Last Men ends up with a kind of Real. Recall the

phenomena, strictly correlative to the virtualization of our environment, of 'cutters' (mostly women who experience an irresistible urge to cut themselves with razors or otherwise hurt themselves): they stand for a desperate strategy to return to the Real of the body. As such, cutting is to be contrasted with standard tattooing, which guarantees the subject's inclusion in the (virtual) symbolic order – with cutters, the problem is the opposite one, namely, the assertion of reality itself. Far from being suicidal, far from signalling a desire for self-annihilation, cutting is a radical attempt to (re)gain a stronghold in reality, or (another aspect of the same phenomenon) firmly to ground our ego in bodily reality, against the unbearable anxiety of perceiving oneself as non-existent. The standard report of cutters is that, after seeing the warm red blood flowing out of their self-inflicted wound, they feel alive again, firmly rooted in reality. So although, of course, cutting is a pathological phenomenon, it is nonetheless a pathological attempt to regain some kind of normalcy, to avoid a total psychotic breakdown. On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol, etc. Virtual Reality simply *generalizes* this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides *reality itself* deprived of the resisting hard kernel of the Real – in the same way that decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like the real coffee without being the real thing, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so. However, at the end of this process of virtualization, the inevitable Benthamian conclusion awaits us: reality is its own best semblance.

And was the collapse of the World Trade Center, apropos of Hollywood's catastrophe movies, not like snuff pornography versus ordinary sadomasochistic porn films? Herein resides the element of truth in Karl-Heinz Stockhausen's provocative statement that the planes hitting the WTC towers was the ultimate work of art: one can effectively perceive the collapse of the WTC towers as the climactic conclusion of twentieth century art's 'passion for the real' – the terrorists themselves did not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but *for the spectacular effect of it*. The authentic twentieth-century passion to penetrate the Real Thing (ultimately, the destructive Void) through the cobweb of semblances that constitute our reality thus culminates in the thrill of the Real as the ultimate 'effect', sought after from digitalized special effects through reality television and amateur pornography up to snuff films (which, in their very attempt to deliver the 'real thing', are perhaps the

ultimate truth of Virtual Reality). There is an intimate connection between the virtualization of reality and the emergence of an infinite and infinitized bodily pain, much stronger than the usual one: do the combination of biogenetics and Virtual Reality not open up new 'enhanced' possibilities of *torture*, unheard-of horizons for extending our ability to endure pain (through widening our sensory capacity to sustain pain, through the invention of new ways to inflict it)? Perhaps, the ultimate Sadean image of an 'undead' victim of torture who can sustain endless pain without having at his/her disposal the escape into death also waits to become reality.

The ultimate American paranoid fantasy is that of an individual living in an idyllic Californian town, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he lives in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he lives in a real world, while everyone around him is effectively an actor or extra in a gigantic show. The most recent example of this is Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), with Jim Carrey playing a small-town clerk who gradually discovers the truth that he is the hero of a television show which airs 24 hours a day: his hometown is constructed inside a gigantic studio, with cameras following him permanently. Among its predecessors, it is worth mentioning Philip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint* (1959), in which a hero living a modest daily life in a small Californian town of the late 1950s gradually discovers that the whole town is a fake staged to keep him satisfied. The underlying experience of *Time Out of Joint* and *The Truman Show* is that late capitalist consumerist Californian paradise is, in its very hyper-reality, in a way *unreal*, substanceless, deprived of material inertia. And the same 'derealization' of the horror went on after the WTC attacks: while the number of 6,000 victims is repeated constantly, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see – no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people ... in clear contrast to the reporting of Third World catastrophes, in which the whole point is to produce a scoop of some gruesome detail: Somalis dying of hunger, raped Bosnian women, men with their throats slit. These shots are always accompanied with the advance warning that 'you may find some of the images disturbing ...' – a warning that we *never* heard in the reports of the WTC collapse. Is this not yet another proof of how, even in these tragic moments, the distance which separates Us from Them, our reality from their reality, is maintained? The real horror always happens *there*, not *here*.<sup>2</sup>

So, it is not only that Hollywood stages a semblance of real life deprived of the weight and inertia of materiality – in late capitalist consumerist society, '*real social life*' itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbours behaving in 'real' life as stage actors and extras. Again, the ultimate truth of the capitalist (utilitarian) de-spiritualized universe is the de-materialization of 'real life' itself, its reversal into a spectral show. Among others, Christopher Isherwood gave expression to this unreality of American daily life, exemplified in the motel room: 'American motels are unreal! ... They are deliberately designed to be unreal ... The Europeans hate us because we've retired to live inside our advertisements, like hermits going into caves to contemplate.' Peter Sloterdijk's notion of the 'sphere' – a gigantic metal sphere that envelops and isolates the entire city – is here literally realized. Years ago, a series of science-fiction films like *Zardoz* or *Logan's Run* forecast today's postmodern predicament by extending this fantasy to the community itself: an isolated group living an aseptic life in a secluded area longs for the experience of the real world of material decay. Is the endlessly repeated shot of the plane approaching and hitting the second WTC tower not the real-life version of the famous scene from Hitchcock's *Birds*, superbly analysed by Raymond Bellour, in which Melanie approaches the Bodega Bay pier after crossing the bay on the small boat? When, while approaching the wharf, she waves to her (future) lover, a single bird (first perceived as an undistinguished dark blot) unexpectedly enters the frame from the upper right and hits her head.<sup>3</sup> Was the plane that hit the WTC tower not the ultimate Hitchcockian blot, the anamorphic stain which denaturalized the idyllic, well-known New York landscape?

The Wachowski brothers' hit, *The Matrix* (1999), brought this logic to its climax: the material reality we all experience and see around us is a virtual one, generated and coordinated by a gigantic mega-computer to which we are all attached; when the hero (played by Keanu Reeves) awakens into 'real reality', he sees a desolate landscape littered with burnt-out ruins – what remained of Chicago after a global war. The resistance leader, Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), utters the ironic greeting: 'Welcome to the desert of the real.' Was it not something of a similar order that took place in New York on 11 September? Its citizens were introduced to the 'desert of the real' – to us, corrupted by Hollywood, the landscape and the shots we saw of the collapsing towers could not but remind us of the most breathtaking scenes from those great catastrophe films.

When we hear how the attacks were totally unexpected, how the unimaginable 'Impossible' happened, one should recall the other defining catastrophe from the beginning of the twentieth century, the *Titanic*: it was also a shock, but the space for it had already been prepared by ideological fantasizing, since the *Titanic* was the symbol of the might of nineteenth-century industrial civilization. Does the same not also hold for these attacks? Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with talk about the terrorist threat; this threat was also obviously libidinally invested – just recall the series of movies from *Escape from New York* to *Independence Day*. Therein resides the rationale for the often-mentioned association of the attacks with Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable that happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, *America got what it fantasized about* – and this was the greatest surprise.

One should therefore invert the standard reading, according to which the events of 11 September were the intrusion of the Real that shattered our illusory sphere: quite the contrary, it is prior to the WTC collapse that we lived in our reality, perceiving Third World horrors as something that are not effectively part of our social reality, as something that exists (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (television) screen – and what happened on 11 September is that *this fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality*. It is not that reality entered our imaginary domain: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e., the symbolic coordinates that determine what we experience as reality). The fact that, after 11 September, the premières of a number of 'blockbusters' containing scenes that bore resemblances to the attacks (large buildings on fire or under siege, terrorist activities, etc.) were postponed (in some cases, the films were even shelved), is thus to be read as *the 'repression' of the fantasmatic background* responsible for the impact of the WTC collapse. The point, of course, is not to play a pseudo-postmodern game of reducing 11 September to just another media spectacle, reading it as a catastrophic version of snuff films; the question we should have asked ourselves when we stared at the television screens on 11 September is simply: *haven't we already seen this same thing over and over again?*

#### The symbolism of a catastrophe

It is precisely now, when we are dealing with the raw Real of a catastrophe, that we should bear in mind the ideological and fantasmatic

coordinates which determine its perception. If there is any symbolism in the collapse of the WTC towers, it is not so much the old-fashioned notion of the 'centre of financial capitalism', but rather the notion that the two WTC towers stood for the centre of *virtual* capitalism, of financial speculations disconnected from the sphere of material production. The shattering impact of the attacks can be accounted for only against the background of the borderline that today separates the digitalized First World from the Third World 'desert of the Real'. It is the awareness that we live in an insulated artificial universe which generates the notion that some ominous agent is threatening us all the time with total destruction.

Consequently, is Osama bin Laden, the suspected mastermind behind the attacks, not the real-life counterpart of Ernst Stavro Blofeld, the master-criminal in most of the James Bond films, involved in the acts of global destruction? What one should recall here is that the *only* place in Hollywood films where we see the production process in all its material intensity is when Bond penetrates the master-criminal's secret domain and locates there a site of intense labour (distilling and packaging drugs, constructing a rocket that will destroy New York, etc.). When the master-criminal, after capturing Bond, takes him on a tour of his illegal factory, is this not the closest Hollywood comes to the socialist-realist proud presentation of factory production? And the function of Bond's intervention, of course, is spectacularly to destroy this site of production (usually punctuated by an enormous explosion), allowing us to return to the daily semblance of our existence in a world with a 'disappearing working class'. Is it not that, in the destruction of the WTC towers, this violence directed at the threatening Outside turned back on us?

#### A distilled version of our own essence

The safe sphere in which Americans live is experienced as under threat from the Outside of terrorist attackers who are ruthlessly self-sacrificing *and* cowards, cunningly intelligent *and* primitive barbarians. The letters of deceased attackers are quoted as 'chilling documents' – why? Are they not exactly what one would expect from dedicated fighters on a suicide mission? If one takes away references to the Koran, how do they differ from, say, CIA special manuals? Were the CIA manuals for the Nicaraguan contras, with their detailed descriptions of how to perturb

daily life, up to how to clog toilet water, not of the same order – if anything, were they not *more* cowardly? When, on 25 September 2001, the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar appealed to Americans to exercise their own judgement when responding to the devastating attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon rather than blindly following their government's policy to attack his country ('You accept everything your government says, whether it is true or false. . . . Don't you have your own thinking? . . . So it will be better for you to use your sense and understanding . . .'), were these statements, taken in a literal-abstract, decontextualized sense, not quite appropriate? Today, more than ever, one should bear in mind that the large majority of Arabs are not fanaticized dark crowds, but scared, uncertain, aware of their fragile status – witness the anxiety the attacks caused in Egypt.

Whenever we encounter such a purely evil Outside, we should gather the courage to endorse the Hegelian lesson: in this pure Outside, we should recognize the distilled version of our own essence. For the last five centuries, the (relative) prosperity and peace of the 'civilized' West was bought by exporting ruthless violence and destruction to this 'barbarian' Outside: this narrative stretches from the conquest of the Americas to the slaughter in the Congo. Cruel and indifferent as it may sound, we should also, now more than ever, bear in mind that the actual effect of these terrorist attacks is much more symbolic than real: in Africa, *every single day* more people die of AIDS than all the victims of the WTC collapse, and the death toll there can be easily reduced at a relatively low cost. The United States simply got a taste of what goes on around the world on a daily basis, from Sarajevo to Grozny, from Rwanda and the Congo to Sierra Leone. If one adds to the situation in New York gangs of rapists and a dozen or so snipers blindly targeting people walking along the streets, one gets an idea of what Sarajevo was like a decade ago.

#### The falsity of 'reality television'

When, days after 11 September 2001, our gaze was transfixed by images of the plane hitting one of the WTC towers, we were all forced to experience precisely what the 'compulsion to repeat' and *jouissance* beyond the pleasure principle are: we wanted to see it again and again, the same shots were repeated *ad nauseam*, and the uncanny satisfaction

we got from them was *jouissance* at its purest. It is when we watched the two towers collapsing on the television screen that it became possible to experience the falsity of 'reality television shows': even if these shows are 'for real', people still *act* in them – they simply *play themselves*. The standard disclaimer in a novel ('the characters in this text are fictional; any resemblance to actual individuals is purely accidental') holds for participants in reality soaps as well: what we see there are fictional characters, even if they play themselves 'in reality'. Of course, the 'return to the Real' can be given different twists: one already hears some conservatives claim that what made us so vulnerable is our very openness – with the inevitable conclusion lurking in the background that, if we are to protect our 'way of life', we will have to sacrifice some of our freedoms which were exploited by the enemies of freedom. This logic should be rejected *tout court*: is it not a fact that our First World 'open' countries are the most controlled countries in the entire history of humanity? In the United Kingdom, all public spaces, from buses to shopping malls, are constantly videotaped, not to mention the almost total control of all forms of digital communication.

#### An impotent passage à l'acte

Following 11 September, rightist commentators like George Will immediately proclaimed the end of America's 'holiday from history' – the impact of reality shattering the isolated tower of liberal tolerance and the cultural studies focus on textuality. Now, we are forced to strike back, to deal with real enemies in the real world . . . But *whom* to strike? Whatever the response, it will never hit the *correct* target, bringing us full satisfaction. The ridiculousness of America retaliating against Afghanistan cannot but strike the eye: if the so-called 'only remaining superpower' destroys one of the world's poorest countries, in which peasants barely survive on barren hills, will this not be the ultimate case of an impotent *passage à l'acte*? Afghanistan is otherwise an ideal target: a country *already* reduced to rubble, with no infrastructure, repeatedly destroyed by war over the last two decades . . . one cannot avoid the conclusion that the choice of Afghanistan was also determined by economic considerations: is it not the best procedure to act out one's anger at a country for whom no one cares and where there is nothing to destroy? Unfortunately, the choice of Afghanistan recalls the anecdote

about the madman who searches for a lost key beneath a street light; when asked why he is searching there when he lost the key in a dark corner, he answers: 'But it is easier to search under a strong light!' Is not the ultimate irony that the whole of Kabul already looks like downtown Manhattan after 11 September?

To succumb to the urge to act now means precisely to *avoid* confronting the true dimension of what occurred on 11 September – it represents an act whose true aim is to lull us into the secure conviction that nothing has *really* changed. The real long-term threat is the prospect of further acts of mass terror in comparison to which the memory of the WTC collapse will pale, acts less spectacular, but much more horrifying. What about bacteriological warfare, the use of lethal gas, the prospect of DNA terrorism (the development of poisons that will only affect people who share a determinate gene)? In contrast to Marx who relied on the notion of fetish as a solid object whose stable presence obfuscates its social mediation, one should assert that fetishism reaches its acme precisely when the fetish itself is 'dematerialized', turned into a fluid, 'immaterial', virtual entity; money fetishism will culminate with its passage to electronic form, when the last traces of its materiality disappear – it is only at this stage that it will assume the form of an indestructible spectral presence: I owe you \$1,000, and no matter how many material notes I burn, I will still owe you \$1,000; the debt is inscribed somewhere in virtual digital space. Does the same not hold for warfare? Far from pointing towards the nature of warfare in the twenty-first century, the collapse of the WTC towers was rather the last spectacular cry of twentieth-century warfare. What awaits us is something far more uncanny: the spectre of an 'immaterial' war in which the attack is invisible – viruses, poisons that can be both everywhere and nowhere. At the level of visible material reality, nothing happens, no big explosions, and yet the known universe begins to collapse, life itself disintegrates. We are entering a new era of paranoiac warfare in which the greatest task will be to identify the enemy and its weapons. Instead of a hasty *passage à l'acte*, one should confront these difficult questions: What will 'war' mean in the twenty-first century? Who will 'they' be, if they are, clearly, neither states nor criminal gangs? One cannot resist the temptation to recall here the Freudian opposition of public Law and its obscene superego double: along the same lines, are 'international terrorist organizations' not the obscene double of large multinational corporations – the ultimate rhizomatic machine, all-present, and yet

with no clear territorial base? Are they not the form in which nationalist and/or religious 'fundamentalism' accommodated itself to global capitalism? Do they not embody the ultimate contradiction, with their particular/exclusive content and their global dynamic functioning?

### The 'clash of civilizations'

There is a partial truth to the notion of a 'clash of civilizations' attested here – witness the surprise of the average American: 'How is it possible that these people display such disregard for their own lives?' Is the obverse of this surprise not the rather sad fact that we, in First World countries, find it more and more difficult even to imagine a public or universal Cause for which one would be prepared to sacrifice one's own life? When, after the attacks, even the Taliban foreign minister said that he could 'feel the pain' of the American children, did he not thereby confirm the hegemonic, ideological role of this trademark phrase of Bill Clinton? It effectively appears as if the split between First and Third World runs more and more along the lines of the opposition between leading a long satisfying life full of material and cultural wealth, and dedicating one's life to some transcendent Cause. Two philosophical references immediately impose themselves apropos of this ideological antagonism between Western consumerism and Muslim radicalism: Hegel and Nietzsche. Is this antagonism not the one between what Nietzsche called 'passive' and 'active' nihilism? We in the West are the Nietzschean Last Men, immersed in stupid daily pleasures, while the Muslim radicals are ready to risk everything, engaged in the struggle up to the point of their own self-destruction. (One cannot but note the significant role played by the stock exchange in the attacks: the ultimate proof of their traumatic impact was that the New York Stock Exchange was closed for four days, and its opening the following Monday was presented as a sign that things are beginning to return to normal.) Furthermore, if one perceives this opposition through the lens of the Hegelian struggle between Master and Servant, one cannot avoid noting the paradox: although we in the West are perceived as exploiting masters, we are the ones who occupy the position of the Servant who, because he clings to life and its pleasures, is unable to risk his life (recall Colin Powell's notion of a high-tech war with no human casualties), while the poor Muslim radicals are the Master, prepared to risk everything . . .

However, this notion of the 'clash of civilizations' must be thoroughly rejected: what we are witnessing today is rather clashes *within* each civilization. A brief look at the comparative history of Islam and Christianity tells us that the 'human rights record' of Islam (to use this anachronistic term) is much better than that of Christianity: in past centuries, Islam was significantly more tolerant towards other religions than Christianity. *Now* is the time to remember that it was also through the Arabs that, in the Middle Ages, Western Europe regained access to its ancient Greek legacy. While I am in no way excusing today's acts of terrorism, these facts nonetheless clearly demonstrate that we are not dealing with a feature inscribed into Islam 'as such', but with the outcome of modern socio-political conditions.

On closer inspection, what *is* this 'clash of civilizations' effectively about? Are all real-life 'clashes' not clearly related to global capitalism? The target of Muslim 'fundamentalism' is not just global capitalism's corrosive effect on social life, but *also* the corrupted 'traditionalist' régimes in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, etc. The most horrifying slaughters (those in Rwanda, the Congo and Sierra Leone) not only took place – and are taking place – within the *same* 'civilization', but they are also clearly related to the interplay of global economic interests. Even in the few cases that would vaguely fit the definition of a 'clash of civilizations' (Bosnia and Kosovo, southern Sudan, etc.), the shadow of other interests is easily discernible.

### *L'Amérique profonde*

The very feature attributed to the Other is already present in the very heart of the United States. Take, for instance, murderous fanaticism. There are today in America itself more than two million Right-populist 'fundamentalists' who practise a terrorism of their own, legitimized by (their understanding of) Christianity. Since America is in a way 'harbouring' them, shouldn't the United States Army have punished the Americans themselves after the Oklahoma City bombing? And what about the way Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson reacted to the attacks, perceiving them as a sign that God has removed his protection from the United States because of the sinful lives of Americans, placing the blame squarely on hedonist materialism, liberalism and rampant sexuality, claiming that America got what it deserved? The fact that the very same

condemnation of 'liberal' America issued from the heart of *l'Amérique profonde* as that from the Muslim Other should make one pause to consider. And what about America as a safe haven? When a New Yorker commented on how, after 11 September, one can no longer walk the city streets safely, the irony was that, well before the attacks, the streets of New York were well known for the dangers of being attacked or, at least, mugged – if anything, the attacks gave rise to a new sense of solidarity; recall the scenes of young African-Americans helping an old Jewish gentleman to cross the street, scenes unimaginable a couple of days previously.

### Bad omens

Now, in the days immediately following the attacks, it is as if we dwell in a unique time between a traumatic event and its symbolic impact, like in that brief moment after we are deeply cut, before the full extent of the pain strikes us – it remains uncertain how events will be symbolized, what their symbolic efficiency will be, what acts they will be evoked to justify. If nothing else, one can clearly sense yet again the limitation of our democracy: decisions are being made that will affect the fate of us all, and we just wait, aware of being utterly powerless. But even here, in these moments of heightened tension, this association is not automatic. We are already seeing the first bad omens: the irruption, like a sudden resurrection, in public discourse of the old Cold War term 'free world' – the struggle is now between the 'free world' and the forces of darkness and terror. The question to be asked here, of course, is: who then belongs to the *unfree world*? Are, say, China or Egypt part of this free world? The actual message is, in fact, that the old division between Western liberal-democratic countries and all the others is once again enforced.

### A new Berufsverbot

On 12 September 2001, I received a message from a journal that was just about to publish a long text of mine on Lenin, informing me that they decided to postpone its publication – they considered it inopportune to publish a text on Lenin immediately after the attacks. Does this not point towards the ominous ideological rearticulations that will follow, with a

new *Berufsverbot* (prohibition to employ radicals) much stronger and more widespread than the one in Germany in the 1970s? These days, one often hears the sentiment that the struggle today is for democracy – true, but not quite in the way this phrase is usually intended. Already, some leftist friends of mine have told me that, in these difficult times, it is better to keep one's head down and not push ahead with our agenda. Against this temptation to weather the crisis, one should insist that *now* is the time for the Left to provide a better analysis – otherwise, it concedes in advance its political *and* ethical defeat in the face of acts of quite genuine, ordinary, popular heroism (like the passengers who, as a model of a rational ethical act, overtook the kidnappers and provoked the premature crash of one of the planes: if one is condemned to die soon, one should gather the strength and die in such a way as to prevent the deaths of others).

#### This very innocence is not innocent

When, in the aftermath of 11 September, Americans *en masse* re-discovered their American pride, displaying flags and singing together in public, one should emphasize more than ever that there is nothing 'innocent' about this rediscovery of American innocence, this getting rid of the sense of historical guilt or irony which prevented many of them from fully assuming being American. What this gesture amounted to was 'objectively' to assume the burden of all that being 'American' represented in the past – an exemplary case of ideological interpellation, of fully assuming one's symbolic mandate, which comes about after the perplexity caused by some historical trauma. In the traumatic aftermath of 11 September, when the old security seemed momentarily shattered, what could be a more 'natural' gesture than to take refuge in the innocence of a firm ideological identification?<sup>4</sup> However, it is precisely such moments of transparent innocence, of a 'return to basics', when the gesture of identification seems 'natural', that are, from the standpoint of the critique of ideology, most obscure – they are even, in a certain way, *obscurity itself*. Let us recall another such transparent moment, the endlessly repeated footage from Beijing's Avenue of Eternal Peace at the height of the 'struggles' in 1989: a young man standing on his own in front of an advancing tank, courageously trying to prevent its forward movement:

The representation is so powerful that it demolishes all other understandings. This street scene, this time and this event, have come to constitute the compass point for virtually all Western journeys into the interior of the contemporary political and cultural life of China.<sup>5</sup>

Again, this very moment of supposed transparent clarity (things are rendered at their most naked: a single man against the brute force of the State) is, for our Western gaze, sustained by a cobweb of ideological assumptions, embodying a series of oppositions: individual versus State, peaceful resistance versus State violence, man versus machine, the inner force of a tiny individual versus the impotence of the powerful machine ... These assumptions, against the background of which the scene exerted its full impact, these 'mediations' that sustain the scene's immediate effect, are *not* present for a Chinese observer, since the above-mentioned oppositions are inherent to the European ideological legacy. And the same ideological background overdetermines, say, our perception of the horrifying images of tiny individuals jumping from the burning WTC tower to their certain death.

#### What happened on 11 September?

So what about the phrase which now reverberates everywhere: 'Nothing will be the same after 11 September'? Significantly, this phrase is never further elaborated – it is merely a hollow attempt to say something 'deep' without really knowing what to say. So, should our first reaction not be: *Really?* Rather, is it not that the only thing that effectively changed was that America was forced to realize the kind of world to which it belongs? On the other hand, such changes in perception are never without consequences, because the way we perceive our situation determines the way we act in it. Recall the process of collapse of a political régime – for instance, the collapse of the Communist régimes in Eastern Europe in 1990: at a certain moment, people all of a sudden became aware that the game is over, that Communism is lost. The break was purely symbolic, nothing changed 'in reality' – and, nonetheless, from this moment on, the final collapse of the régime was just a question of days. What if something of the same order *did in fact* occur on 11 September?

We don't yet know what consequences this event will have in the economy, ideology, politics, war, etc., but one thing is certain: the



United States, which, until now, perceived itself as an island exempted from this kind of violence, witnessing such violence only through the safe medium of the television screen, is now directly involved. So the alternative is: will Americans decide further to fortify their 'sphere', or will they risk stepping out of it? Either: America will persist in, strengthen even, the deeply *immoral* attitude of, 'Why should this happen to us? Things like this don't happen *here!*', leading to more aggressiveness toward the threatening Outside – in short, to a paranoid acting out; or, America will finally risk stepping through the fantasmatic screen separating it from the Outside, accepting its arrival into the 'real world', making the long-overdue move from, 'A thing like this should not happen *here!*', to 'A thing like this should not happen *anywhere!*' Therein resides the true lesson of the attacks: the only way to ensure that it will not happen *here* again is to prevent it from going on *anywhere else*. In short, America should learn humbly to accept its own vulnerability as part of this world, enacting the punishment of those responsible as a sad duty, not an exhilarating retaliation.

#### Resisting the double blackmail

The WTC attacks confront us again with the necessity of resisting the temptation of a double blackmail. If one simply, only and unconditionally condemns the attacks, one cannot but appear to endorse the blatantly ideological position of American innocence under threat from Third World Evil; if one draws attention to the deeper socio-political causes of Arab extremism, one cannot but appear to blame the victims who ultimately got what they deserved ... Consequently, the only solution is to reject this very opposition and to adopt both positions simultaneously, which can only be done if one resorts to the dialectical category of *totality*: there is no choice between these two positions, each is one-sided and false. Far from offering a case apropos of which one can adopt a clear ethical stance, we encounter here *the limit of moral reasoning*: from the moral standpoint, the victims are innocent, the act was an abominable crime; however, *this very innocence is not innocent* – to adopt such an 'innocent' position in today's global capitalist universe is itself a false abstraction. The same goes for the more overtly ideological clash of interpretations: one can claim that 11 September was an attack on what is worth fighting for in democratic freedom – the decadent

Western way of life condemned by Muslim and other fundamentalists is the universe of women's rights and multiculturalist tolerance; however, one can also claim that it was an attack on the very centre and symbol of global financial capitalism. This, of course, in no way entails the compromise of shared guilt (terrorists are to blame, but, partially, Americans are also responsible ...) – the point is, rather, that the two sides are not really opposed, that they belong to the same field. The fact that global capitalism is a totality means that it is the dialectical unity of itself and its other, of the forces which resist it on 'fundamentalist' ideological grounds.

Consequently, of the two possible interpretations that emerged from 11 September, *both are worse*, as Stalin would have put it. The American patriotic narrative – innocence under siege, the surge of patriotic pride – is, of course, vain; however, is the leftist narrative (with its *Schadenfreude*: the United States got what they deserved, what they had been for decades doing to others) really any better? The predominant reaction of European, but also American, leftists was nothing less than scandalous: all imaginable stupidities were said and written, up to the 'feminist' point that the WTC towers were two phallic symbols, waiting to be destroyed ('castrated'). Was there not something petty and miserable in the purely mathematical version, analogous to the contentions of holocaust revisionism (what are the 6,000 dead when compared to the millions in Rwanda, Congo, etc.)? And what about the fact that the CIA (co-)created the Taliban and bin Laden, financing and helping them to fight the Soviet forces in Afghanistan? Why was this fact cited as an argument *against* attacking them? Would it not be much more logical to claim that it is precisely their duty to destroy the monster they created? The moment one thinks in terms of the qualification, 'Yes, 11 September was a tragedy, but one should not be in full solidarity with the victims because this would mean supporting American imperialism', the ethical catastrophe has already occurred: the only appropriate stance is *unconditional solidarity with all victims*. The ethical stance proper is here replaced with the moralizing mathematics of guilt and horror which misses the key point: the terrifying death of each individual is absolute and incomparable. In short, let us attempt a simple mental experiment: if you detect in yourself any restraint towards fully empathizing with the victims of the WTC collapse, if you feel the urge to qualify your empathy with, 'Yes, but what about the millions who suffer in Africa ...', you are not demonstrating your Third World sympathy, but merely the *mauvaise*

*foi* which bears witness to your implicitly patronizing racist attitude towards Third World victims. (More precisely, the problem with such comparative statements is that they are necessary and inadmissible: one *has* to make them, one *has* to make the point that much worse horrors are taking place around the world on a daily basis – but one has to do so without getting entangled in the obscene mathematics of guilt.)

### 'Collateral damage'

It must be said that, within the scope of these two extremes (the violent retaliatory act versus the new reflection about the global situation and America's role within it), the reaction of the Western powers until now has been surprisingly considerate. (No wonder it caused the violent anti-American outburst of Ariel Sharon!) Perhaps the greatest irony of the situation is that the primary 'collateral damage' of the Western reaction is the focus on the plight of Afghani refugees, and, more generally, on the catastrophic food and health situation in Afghanistan, so that, sometimes, military action against the Taliban is almost presented as a means to guarantee safe delivery of humanitarian aid – as Tony Blair said, perhaps we will have to bomb the Taliban in order to secure the food transportation and distribution. Although, of course, such large-scale publicized humanitarian actions are in themselves ideologically charged, involving the debilitating degradation of the Afghani people to helpless victims, and reducing the Taliban to a parasite terrorizing them, it is significant to acknowledge that the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan presents a much larger catastrophe than the WTC attacks.

### The stupidity of the Left

Another way in which the Left miserably failed is that, in the weeks following the attacks, it reverted to the old mantra, 'Give peace a chance! War does not stop violence!' – a true case of hysterical precipitation, reacting to something that would not even occur in the expected form. Instead of a concrete analysis of the new complex situation after 11 September, of the chances provided to the Left to propose its own interpretation of the events, we got the stupid ritualistic chant, 'No war!', which fails to address even the elementary fact, *de facto* acknowledged by

the United States government itself (through its postponing of retaliatory action), that this is not a war like others, that the bombing of Afghanistan is not a solution. A sad situation, in which George W. Bush showed more power of reflection than the majority of the Left!

### 'Small nationalism'

It is no wonder that anti-Americanism was most discernible in 'big' European nations, especially France and Germany: it functions as part of their resistance to globalization. One often hears the complaint that the recent trends of globalization threaten the sovereignty of Nation-States; here, however, one should qualify this statement: *which* states are most exposed to this threat? It is not the small states, but the second-rung (former) world powers, countries like the United Kingdom, Germany and France: what they fear is that, once fully immersed in the newly emerging global Empire, they will be reduced to the same level as, say, Austria, Belgium or even Luxemburg. The refusal of 'americanization' in France, shared by many leftists and rightist nationalists, is thus ultimately the refusal to accept the fact that France itself is losing its hegemonic role in Europe. The results of this refusal are often comical – at a recent philosophical colloquium, a French leftist philosopher complained how, apart from him, there are now practically no French philosophers in France: Derrida has sold out to American deconstructionism, academia is overwhelmed by Anglo-Saxon cognitivism ... A simple mental experiment is indicative here: let us imagine someone from Serbia claiming that he is the only remaining truly Serb philosopher – he would have been immediately denounced and ridiculed as a nationalist. The levelling of importance between larger and smaller Nation-States should thus be counted among the beneficial effects of globalization: beneath the contemptuous derision of new Eastern European post-Communist states, it is easy to discern the contours of the wounded narcissism of those 'great nations' of old Europe. Here, a good dose of Lenin's sensitivity for the small nations (recall his insistence that, in the relationship between large and small nations, one should always allow for a greater degree of 'small' nationalism) would be helpful.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the same matrix was reproduced within ex-Yugoslavia: not only for the Serbs, but even for the majority of Western powers, Serbia was self-evidently perceived as the only ethnic group with enough

substance to form its own state. Throughout the 1990s, even the radical democratic critics of Milošević who rejected Serb nationalism acted on the presupposition that, among ex-Yugoslav republics, it was only Serbia that had democratic potential: after overthrowing Milošević, Serbia alone could turn into a thriving democratic state, while other ex-Yugoslav nations were too 'provincial' to sustain democratic autonomy ... does this not echo Friedrich Engels' well-known scathing remarks about how small Balkan nations are politically reactionary because their very existence is a reaction, a survival of the past?

### Evil resides in the innocent gaze

America's 'holiday from history' was a fake: its peace was paid for by the catastrophes occurring elsewhere. These days, the predominant point of view is that of an innocent gaze confronting an unspeakable Evil which struck from the Outside – and, again, apropos of this gaze, one should gather the strength to bring Hegel's well-known dictum to bear on the situation: that the Evil resides (also) in the innocent gaze which perceives Evil all around itself.<sup>7</sup> There is thus an element of truth even in the most restrictive Moral Majority vision of a depraved America dedicated to mindless pleasures, in the conservative horror at this netherworld of sexploitation and pathological violence: what they don't get is simply the Hegelian speculative identity between this netherworld and their own position of fake purity – the fact that so many fundamentalist preachers turned out to be secret sexual perverts is more than a contingent empirical fact. When Jimmy Swaggart infamously claimed that his frequent visits to prostitutes supplied additional strength to his preaching (he knew through intimate struggle what he was preaching against), although undoubtedly hypocritical at the immediate subjective level, his claim was nonetheless *objectively true*.

### 'Infinite justice'

Can one imagine a greater irony than the fact that the initial codename for the first of the United States Army's operations against terrorism was 'Infinite Justice' (later changed in response to the reproach from

American Islamic clerics that only God can exert infinite justice)? Taken seriously, this name is profoundly ambiguous: either it means that the Americans have the right ruthlessly to destroy not only all terrorists but also all who provided them with material, moral and ideological support (and this process will be by definition endless in the precise sense of Hegelian 'bad infinity' – the work will never really be accomplished because there will always remain some other terrorist threat ...); or it means that the justice exerted must be truly infinite in the strict Hegelian sense, i.e., that, in relating to others, it has to relate to itself – in short, that it has to ask the question of how we ourselves, who enforce justice, are involved in what we are fighting against. When, on 22 September 2001, Jacques Derrida received the Theodor Adorno award, he made reference in his speech to the WTC attacks: 'My unconditional compassion, addressed to the victims of September 11, does not prevent me from saying it loudly: with regard to this crime, I do not believe that anyone is politically guiltless.' This self-relating, this inclusion of oneself in the picture, is the only true 'infinite justice'.

### 'Love thy neighbour'

In his 2000 electoral campaign, President Bush named the most important person in his life as being Jesus Christ. Now he has a unique chance to prove that he was serious: for him, as for all Americans today, 'Love thy neighbour!' means 'Love the Muslims!', or *it means nothing at all*.

### Notes

Like Chapter 14, 'Against the double blackmail', and Chapter 16, 'The Iraq War – where is the true danger?', this text passed through multiple versions – from its hurried initial electronic circulations in September 2001, to the more polished version published in the spring of 2002 (*South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, 2002, pp. 385–9), before reaching its final, book-length version, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, London and New York, Verso, 2002. This chapter dates from 7 October 2001, and constitutes a kind of 'prolegomena towards a response to 11 September'. We have supplied all sub-headings to impose some order on the otherwise random sequence of the text. [eds]

- 1 Alain Badiou, *Le siècle*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2005, p. 54. [eds]
- 2 In another case of ideological censorship: when the firemen's widows were interviewed by CNN, most of them gave the expected performance: tears, prayers ... all except one of them who, without a tear, said that she does not pray for her deceased husband, because she knows that prayer will not get him back. When asked if she dreams of revenge, she calmly said that that would be the true betrayal of her husband: if he were to survive, he would insist that the worst thing to do is to succumb to the urge to retaliate ... Needless to say that this fragment was only shown once and then disappeared from further repetitions of the same block.
- 3 Raymond Bellour, 'The obvious and the code', in *The Analysis of Film*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000, pp. 69–76.
- 4 See my critical elaboration of Althusser's notion of interpellation in *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, London and New York, Verso, 1994, pp. 57–62.
- 5 Michael Dutton, *Streetlife China*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 17.
- 6 See, for instance, V. I. Lenin, 'The Socialist Revolution and the right of nations to self-determination', in *Selected Works, Volume 1*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1968, pp. 158, 163–5. [eds]
- 7 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 401–2. [eds]

## 16

### The Iraq War – where is the true danger?

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#### The borrowed kettle

We all remember the old joke about the borrowed kettle that Freud tells in order to render the strange logic of dreams:

A. borrowed a copper kettle from B. and after he had returned it was sued by B. because the kettle now had a big hole in it which made it unusable. His defence was: 'First, I never borrowed a kettle from B. at all; secondly, the kettle had a hole in it already when I got it from him; and thirdly, I gave him back the kettle undamaged.'<sup>1</sup>

For Freud, such an enumeration of inconsistent arguments confirms *per negationem* what it endeavours to deny – that I returned a broken kettle to you ... Do we not encounter the same inconsistency when high United States officials try to justify the attack on Iraq? (1) There is a link between Saddam's régime and al-Quaida, so Saddam should be punished as part of the retaliation for 11 September; (2) even if there is no link between the Iraqi régime and al-Quaida, they are united in their hatred of the United States – Saddam's régime is thus extremely dangerous, a threat not only to the United States, but also to its neighbours and the Iraqi people; (3) the change of régime in Iraq will create the conditions for the resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The problem is that there are *too many* reasons for the attack. Furthermore, one is almost tempted to claim that, within the space of this reference to the Freudian logic of dreams, Iraqi oil acts as the famous 'umbilical cord' of the series of justification(s) – almost tempted, because it would perhaps be more reasonable to claim that there are also three *real* reasons for the attack: (1) control of the Iraqi oil reserves; (2) the urge brutally to assert and