Robespierre or the "Divine Violence" of Terror

By Slavoj Žižek

(2006)

When, in 1953, Chou En Lai, the Chinese Prime Minister, was in Geneva for the peace negotiations to end the Korean war, a French journalist asked him what does he think about the French Revolution; Chou replied: "It is still too early to tell." In a way, he was right: with the disintegration of the "people's democracies" in the late 1990s, the struggle for the historical place of the French Revolution flared up again. The liberal revisionists tried to impose the notion that the demise of Communism in 1989 occurred at exactly the right moment: it marked the end of the era which began in 1789, the final failure of the statist-revolutionary model which first entered the scene with the Jacobins.

Nowhere is the dictum "every history is a history of the present" more true than in the case of the French Revolution: its historiographic reception always closely mirrored the twists and turns of political struggles. The identifying mark of all kinds of conservatives is its flat rejection: the French Revolution was a catastrophe from its very beginning, the product of the godless modern mind, it is to be interpreted as God's punishment for the humanity's wicked ways, so its traces should be undone as thoroughly as possible. The typical liberal attitude is a differentiated one: its formula is "1789 without 1793." In short, what the sensitive liberals want is a decaffeinated revolution, a revolution which doesn't smell of a revolution. Francois Furet and others thus try to deprive the French Revolution of its status as the founding event of modern democracy, relegating it to a historical anomaly: there was a historical necessity to assert the modern principles of personal freedom, etc., but, as the English example demonstrates, the same could have been much more efficiently achieved in a more peaceful way ... Radicals are, on the contrary, possessed by what Alain Badiou called the "passion of the Real": if you say A—equality, human rights and freedoms—you should not shirk from its consequences and gather the courage to say B—the terror needed to really defend and assert the A. [1]

However, it is all too easy to say that today's Left should simply continue along this path. Something, some kind of historical cut, effectively took place in 1990: everyone, today's "radical Left" included, is somehow ashamed of the Jacobin legacy of revolutionary terror with its state-centralized character, so that the commonly accepted motto is that the Left, if it is to regain political efficiency, should thoroughly reinvent itself, finally abandoning the so-called "Jacobin paradigm." In our post-modern era of "emerging properties," chaotic interaction of multiple subjectivities, of free interaction instead of centralized hierarchy, of a multitude of opinions instead of one Truth, the Jacobin dictatorship is fundamentally "not for our taste" (free the term "taste" should be given all its historical weight, as the name for a basic ideological disposition). Can one imagine something more foreign to our universe of the freedom of opinions, of market competition, of nomadic pluralist interaction, etc., than Robespierre's politics of Truth (with a capital T, of course), whose proclaimed goal is "to return the destiny of liberty into the hands of the truth"? Such a Truth can only be enforced in a terrorist way:

If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, amid revolution it is at the same time virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is impotent. Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue. It is less a special principle than a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country's most pressing needs.
This Robespierre's line of argumentation reaches its climax in the paradoxical identification of the opposites: revolutionary terror "sublates" the opposition between punishment and clemency—the just and severe punishment of the enemies IS the highest form of clemency, so that, in it, rigor and charity coincide:

To punish the oppressors of humanity is clemency; to pardon them is barbarity. The rigor of tyrants has only rigor for a principle; the rigor of the republican government comes from charity.

What, then, should those who remain faithful to the legacy of the radical Left do with all these? Two things, at least. First, the terrorist past has to be accepted as OURS, even—or precisely because—it is critically rejected. The only alternative to the half-hearted defensive position of feeling guilty in front of our liberal or Rightist critics is: we have to do the critical job better than our opponents. This, however, is not the entire story: one should also not allow our opponents to determine the field and topic of the struggle. What this means is that the ruthless self-critique should go hand in hand with a fearless admission of what, to paraphrase Marx's judgment on Hegel's dialectics, one is tempted to call the "rational kernel" of the Jacobin Terror: "Materialist dialectics assumes, without particular joy, that, till now, no political subject was able to arrive at the eternity of the truth it was deploying without moments of terror. Since, as Saint-Just asked: "What do those who want neither Virtue nor Terror want?" His answer is well-known: they want corruption—another name for the subject's defeat. [2]

Or, as Saint-Just put it succinctly: "That which produces the general good is always terrible." [3] These words should not be interpreted as a warning against the temptation to impose violently the general good onto a society, but, on the contrary, as a bitter truth to be fully endorsed.—The further crucial point to bear in mind is that, for Robespierre, revolutionary terror is the very opposite of war: Robespierre was a pacifist, not out of hypocrisy or humanitarian sensitivity, but because he was well aware that war among nations as a rule serves as the means to obfuscate revolutionary struggle within each nation. Robespierre's speech "On war" is of special importance today: it shows him as a true pacifist who ruthlessly denounces the patriotic call to war, even if the war is formulated as the defense of the Revolution, as the attempt of those who want "revolution without revolution" to divert the radicalization of the revolutionary process. His stance is thus the exact opposite of those who need war to militarize social life and take dictatorial control over it. [4] Which is why Robespierre also denounced the temptation to export revolution to other countries, forcefully "liberating" them: "The French are not afflicted with a mania for rendering any nation happy and free against its will. All the kings could have vegetated or died unpunished on their blood-spattered thrones, if they had been able to respect the French people's independence."

The Jacobin revolutionary terror is sometimes (half)justified as the "founding crime" of the bourgeois universe of law and order, in which citizens are allowed to pursue in piece their interests, one should reject this claim on two accounts. Not only is it factually wrong (many conservatives were quite right to point out that one can achieve the

bourgeois law and order also without the terrorist excess, as was the case in Great Britain—although there is Cromwell...); much more important, the revolutionary Terror of 1792-1794 was not a case of what Walter Benjamin and others call state-founding violence, but a case of "divine violence." [5] Interpreters of Benjamin struggle with what could "divine violence" effectively mean—is it yet another Leftist dream of a "pure" event which never really takes place? One should recall here Friedrich Engels's reference to the Paris Commune as an example of the dictatorship of the proletariat:

Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. [6]

One should repeat this, mutatis mutandis, apropos divine violence: "Well and good, gentlemen critical theorists, do you want to know what this divine violence looks like? Look at the revolutionary Terror of 1992-1994. That was the Divine Violence." (And the series goes on: the Red Terror of 1919...) That is to say, one should fearlessly identify divine violence with positively existing historical phenomena, thus avoiding all obscurantist mystification. When those outside the structured social field strike "blindly," demanding AND enacting immediate justice/vengeance, this is "divine violence"—recall, a decade or so ago, the panic in Rio de Janeiro when crowds descended from *favelas* into the rich part of the city and started looting and burning supermarkets—THIS was "divine violence"... Like the biblical locusts, the divine punishment for men's sinful ways, it strikes out of nowhere, a means without end—or, as Robespierre put it in his speech in which he demanded the execution of Louis XVI: "Peoples do not judge in the same way as courts of law; they do not hand down sentences, they throw thunderbolts; they do not condemn kings, they drop them back into the void; and this justice is worth just as much as that of the courts."

The Benjaminian "divine violence" should be thus conceived as divine in the precise sense of the old Latin motto *vox populi, vox dei*: NOT in the perverse sense of "we are doing it as mere instruments of the People's Will," but as the heroic assumption of the solitude of sovereign decision. It is a decision (to kill, to risk or lose one's own life) made in the absolute solitude, with no cover in the big Other. If it is extra-moral, it is not "immoral," it does not give the agent the license to just kill with some kind of angelic innocence. The motto of divine violence is *fiat iustitia, pereat mundus*: it is JUSTICE, the point of non-distinction between justice and vengeance, in which "people" (the anonymous part of no-part) imposes its terror and makes other parts pay the price—the Judgment Day for the long history of oppression, exploitation, suffering—or, as Robespierre himself put it in a poignant way:

What do you want, you who would like truth to be powerless on the lips of representatives of the French people? Truth undoubtedly has its power, it has its anger, its own despotism; it has touching accents and terrible ones, that resound with force in pure hearts as in guilty consciences, and that untruth can no more imitate than Salome can imitate the thunderbolts of heaven; but accuse nature of it, accuse the people, which wants it and loves it.

And this is what Robespierre aims at in his famous accusation to the moderates that what they really want is a "revolution without a revolution": they want a revolution deprived of the excess in which democracy and terror coincide, a revolution respecting

social rules, subordinated to pre-existing norms, a revolution in which violence is deprived of the "divine" dimension and thus reduced to a strategic intervention serving precise and limited goals:

Citizens, did you want a revolution without a revolution? What is this spirit of persecution that has come to revise, so to speak, the one that broke our chains? But what sure judgement can one make of the effects that can follow these great commotions? Who can mark, after the event, the exact point at which the waves of popular insurrection should break? At that price, what people could ever have shaken off the yoke of despotism? For while it is true that a great nation cannot rise in a simultaneous movement, and that tyranny can only be hit by the portion of citizens that is closest to it, how would these ever dare to attack it if, after the victory, delegates from remote parts could hold them responsible for the duration or violence of the political torment that had saved the homeland? They ought to be regarded as justified by tacit proxy for the whole of society. The French, friends of liberty, meeting in Paris last August, acted in that role, in the name of all the departments. They should either be approved or repudiated entirely. To make them criminally responsible for a few apparent or real disorders, inseparable from so great a shock, would be to punish them for their devotion.

This authentic revolutionary logic can be discerned already at the level of rhetorical figures, where Robespierre likes to turn around the standard procedure of first evoking an apparently "realist" position and then displaying its illusory nature: he often starts with presenting a position or description of a situation as absurd exaggeration, fiction, and then goes on to remind us that what, in a first approach, cannot but appear as a fiction, is actually truth itself: "But what am I saying? What I have just presented as an absurd hypothesis is actually a very certain reality." It is this radical revolutionary stance which also enables Robespierre to denounce the "humanitarian" concern with victims of the revolutionary "divine violence": "A sensibility that wails almost exclusively over the enemies of liberty seems suspect to me. Stop shaking the tyrant's bloody robe in my face, or I will believe that you wish to put Rome in chains." The critical analysis and the acceptance of the historical legacy of the Jacobins overlap in the true question to be raised: does the (often deplorable) actuality of the revolutionary terror compel us to reject the very idea of Terror, or is there a way to REPEAT it in today's different historical constellation, to redeem its virtual content from its actualization? It CAN and SHOULD be done, and the most concise formula of repeating the event designated by the name "Robespierre" is: to pass from (Robespierre's) humanist terror to anti-humanist (or, rather, inhuman) terror.

In his *Le siècle*, Alain Badiou conceives as a sign of the political regression that occurred towards the end of the XXth century the shift from "humanism AND terror" to "humanism OR terror." In 1946, Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote *Humanism and Terror*, his defense of the Soviet Communism as involving a kind of Pascalean wager that announces the topic of what Bernard Williams later developed as "moral luck": the present terror will be retroactively justified if the society that will emerge from it will be truly human; today, such a conjunction of terror and humanism is properly unthinkable, the predominant liberal view replaces AND with OR: either humanism or terror... More precisely, there are four variations on this motif: humanism AND terror, humanism OR terror, each either in a "positive" or in a "negative" sense. "Humanism and terror" in a positive sense is what Merleau-Ponty elaborated, it sustains Stalinism (the forceful—"terrorist"—engendering of the New Man), and is already clearly discernible in the

French Revolution, in the guise of Robespierre's conjunction of virtue and terror. This conjunction can be negated in two ways. It can involve the choice "humanism OR terror," i.e., the liberal-humanist project in all its versions, from the dissident anti-Stalinist humanism up to today's neo-Habermasians (Luc Ferry & Alain Renault in France) and other defenders of human rights AGAINST (totalitarian, fundamentalist) terror. Or it can retain the conjunction "humanism AND terror," but in a negative mode: all those philosophical and ideological orientations, from Heidegger and conservative Christians to partisans of Oriental spirituality and Deep Ecology, who perceive terror as the truth—the ultimate consequence—of the humanist project itself, of its hubris.

There is, however, a fourth variation, usually left aside: the choice "humanism OR terror," but with TERROR, not humanism, as a positive term. This is a radical position difficult to sustain, but, perhaps, our only hope: it does not amount to the obscene madness of openly pursuing a "terrorist and inhuman politics", but something much more difficult to think. In today's "post-deconstructionist" thought (if one risks this ridiculous designation which cannot but sound as its own parody), the term "inhuman" gained a new weight, especially in the work of Agamben and Badiou. The best way to approach it is via Freud's reluctance to endorse the injunction "Love thy neighbor!"—the temptation to be resisted here is the ethical domestication of the neighbor—for example, what Emmanuel Levinas did with his notion of the neighbor as the abyssal point from which the call of ethical responsibility emanates. What Levinas thereby obfuscates is the monstrosity of the neighbor, monstrosity on account of which Lacan applies to the neighbor the term Thing (das Ding), used by Freud to designate the ultimate object of our desires in its unbearable intensity and impenetrability. One should hear in this term all the connotations of horror fiction: the neighbor is the (Evil) Thing which potentially lurks beneath every homely human face. Just think about Stephen King's Shining, in which the father, a modest failed writer, gradually turns into a killing beast who, with an evil grin, goes on to slaughter his entire family. In a properly dialectical paradox, what Levinas, with all his celebration of the Otherness, fails to take into account is not some underlying Sameness of all humans but the radically "inhuman" Otherness itself: the Otherness of a human being reduced to inhumanity, the Otherness exemplified by the terrifying figure of the Muselmann, the "living dead" in the concentration camps. At a different level, the same goes for Stalinist Communism. In the standard Stalinist narrative, even the concentration camps were a place of the fight against Fascism where imprisoned Communists were organizing networks of heroic resistance—in such a universe, of course, there is no place for the limit-experience of the Muselmann, of the living dead deprived of the capacity of human engagement—no wonder that Stalinist Communists were so eager to "normalize" the camps into just another site of the anti-Fascist struggle, dismissing Muselmann as simply those who were to weak to endure the struggle.

It is against this background that one can understand why Lacan speaks of the inhuman core of the neighbor. Back in the 1960s, the era of structuralism, Louis Althusser launched the notorious formula of "theoretical anti-humanism," allowing, demanding even, that it be supplemented by practical humanism. In our practice, we should act as humanists, respecting the others, treating them as free persons with full dignity, creators of their world. However, in theory, we should no less always bear in mind that humanism is an ideology, the way we spontaneously experience our predicament, and that the true knowledge of humans and their history should treat individuals not as autonomous subjects, but as elements in a structure which follows its own laws. In

contrast to Althusser, Lacan accomplishes the passage from theoretical to practical anti-humanism, i.e., to an ethics that goes beyond the dimension of what Nietzsche called "human, all too human," and confront the inhuman core of humanity. This does not mean only an ethics which no longer denies, but fearlessly takes into account, the latent monstrosity of being-human, the diabolic dimension which exploded in phenomena usually covered by the concept-name "Auschwitz"—an ethics that would be still possible after Auschwitz, to paraphrase Adorno. This inhuman dimension is for Lacan at the same time the ultimate support of ethics.

In philosophical terms, this "inhuman" dimension can be defined as that of a subject subtracted from all form of human "individuality" or "personality" (which is why, in today's popular culture, one of the exemplary figures of pure subject is a non-human—alien, cyborg—who displays more fidelity to the task, dignity and freedom than its human counterparts, from the Schwarzenegger-figure in *Terminator* to the Rutger-Hauer-android in *Blade Runner*). Recall Husserl's dark dream, from his Cartesian Meditations, of how the transcendental cogito would remain unaffected by a plague that would annihilate entire humanity: it is easy, apropos this example, to score cheap points about the self-destructive background of the transcendental subjectivity, and about how Husserl misses the paradox of what Foucault, in his *Let mots et les choses*, called the "transcendental-empirical doublet," of the link that forever attaches the transcendental ego to the empirical ego, so that the annihilation of the latter by definition leads to the disappearance of the first. However, what if, fully recognizing this dependence as a fact (and nothing more than this—a stupid fact of bein-g), one nonetheless insists on the truth of its negation, the truth of the assertion of the independence of the subject with regard to the empirical individuals qua living being? Is this independence not demonstrated in the ultimate gesture of risking one's life, on being ready to forsake one's being? It is against the background of this topic of sovereign acceptance of death that one should reread the rhetorical turn often referred to as the proof of Robespierre's "totalitarian" manipulation of his audience. [7] This turn took place in the midst of Robespierre's speech in the National Assembly on 11 Germinal Year II (31 March 1794); the previous night, Danton, Camille Desmoulins, and some others were arrested, so many members of the Assembly were understandably afraid that their turn will also come. Robespierre directly addresses the moment as pivotal: "Citizens, the moment has come to speak the truth." He then goes on to evoke the fear floating in the room:

One wants /*on veut*/ to make you fear abuses of power, of the national power you have exercised /.../ One wants to make us fear that the people will fall victim to the Committees /.../ One fears that the prisoners are being oppressed /.../

The opposition is here between the impersonal "one" (the instigators of fear are not personified) and the collective thus put under pressure, which almost imperceptibly shifts from the plural second-person "you /*vous*/" to first-person "us" (Robespierre gallantly includes himself into the collective). However, the final formulation introduces an ominous twist: it is no longer that "one wants to make you/us fear," but that "one fears," which means that the enemy stirring up fear is no longer outside "you/us," members of the Assembly, it is here, among us, among "you" addressed by Robespierre, corroding our unity from within. At this precise moment, Robespierre, in a true master's stroke, assumes full subjectivization—waiting a little bit for the ominous effect of his words to take place, he then continued in the first person singular:

I say that anyone who trembles at this moment is guilty; for innocence never fears public scrutiny.

What can be more "totalitarian" than this closed loop of "your very fear of being guilty makes you guilty"—a weird superego-twisted version of the well-known motto "the only thing to fear is fear itself"? One should nonetheless move beyond the quick dismissal of Robespierre's rhetorical strategy as the strategy of "terrorist culpabilization," and to discern its moment of truth: there are no innocent bystanders in the crucial moments of revolutionary decision, because, in such moments, innocence itself—exempting oneself from the decision, going on as if the struggle I am witnessing doesn't really concern me—IS the highest treason. That is to say, the fear of being accused of treason IS my treason, because, even if I "did not do anything against the revolution," this fear itself, the fact that it emerged in me, demonstrates that my subjective position is external to the revolution, that I experience "revolution" as an external force threatening me.

But what goes on in this unique speech is even more revealing: Robespierre directly addresses the touchy question that has to arise in the mind of his public—how can he himself be sure that he will not be the next in line to be accused? He is not the master exempted from the collective, the "I" outside "we"—after all, he was once very close to Danton, a powerful figure now under arrest, so what if, tomorrow, his proximity to Danton will be used against him? In short, how can Robespierre be sure that the process he unleashed will not swallow him? It is here that his position assumes the sublime greatness—he fully assumes the danger that the danger that now threatens Danton will tomorrow threaten him. The reason that he is so serene, that he is not afraid of this fate, is not that Danton was a traitor, while he, Robespierre, is pure, a direct embodiment of the people's Will; it is that he, Robespierre, IS NOT AFRAID TO DIE—his eventual death will be a mere accident which counts for nothing: What does danger matter to me? My life belongs to the Fatherland; my heart is free from fear; and if I were to die, I would do so without reproach and without ignominy. Consequently, insofar as the shift from "we" to "I" can effectively be determined as the moment when the democratic mask falls down and when Robespierre openly asserts himself as a Master (up to this point, we follow Lefort's analysis), the term Master has to be given here its full Hegelian weight: the Master is the figure of sovereignty, the one who is not afraid to die, who is ready to risk everything. In other words, the ultimate meaning of Robespierre's first-person singular ("I") is: I am not afraid to die. What authorizes him is just this, not any kind of direct access to the big Other, i.e., he doesn't claim that he has a direct access to the people's Will which speaks through him. This is how Yamamoto Jocho, a Zen priest, described the proper attitude of a warrior: "every day without fail one should consider himself as dead. There is a saying of the elders that goes, 'Step from under the eaves and you're a dead man. Leave the gate and the enemy is waiting.' This is not a matter of being careful. It is to consider oneself as dead beforehand." [8] This is why, according to Hillis Lory, many Japanese soldiers in WWII performed their own funerals before living for the battlefield:

Many of the soldiers in the present war are so determined to die on the battlefield that they conduct their own public funerals before leaving for the front. This holds no element of the ridiculous to the Japanese. Rather, it is admired as the spirit of the true samurai who enters the battle with no thought of return. [9]

This preemptive self-exclusion from the domain of the living, of course, turns the soldier into a properly sublime figure. Instead of dismissing this feature as part of the Fascist militarism, one should assert it as also constitutive of a radical revolutionary position: there is a straight line that runs from this acceptance of one's own disappearance to Mao Zedong's reaction to the atomic bomb threat from 1955:

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

There evidently is an "inhuman madness" in this argument: is the fact that the destruction of the planet Earth "would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole" not a rather poor solace for the extinguished humanity? The argument only works if, in a Kantian way, one presupposes a pure transcendental subject non-affected by this catastrophe—a subject which, although non-existing in reality, IS operative as a virtual point of reference. Every authentic revolutionary has to assume this attitude of thoroughly abstracting from, despising even, the imbecilic particularity of one's immediate existence, or, as Saint-Just formulated in an unsurpassable way this indifference towards what Benjamin called "bare life": "I despise the dust that forms me and speaks to you." [10] Che Guevara approached the same line of though when, in the midst of the unbearable tension of the Cuban missile crisis, he advocated a fearless approach of risking the new world war which would involve (at least) the total annihilation of the Cuban people—he praised the heroic readiness of the Cuban people to risk its disappearance.

Another "inhuman" dimension of the couple Virtue-Terror promoted by Robespierre is the rejection of habit (in the sense of the agency of realistic compromises). Every legal order (or every order of explicit normativity) has to rely on a complex "reflexive" network of informal rules which tells us how are we to relate to the explicit norms, how are we to apply them: to what extent are we to take them literally, how and when are we allowed, solicited even, to disregard them, etc.—and this is the domain of habit. To know the habits of a society is to know the meta-rules of how to apply its explicit norms: when to use them or not use them; when to violate them; when not to use a choice which is offered; when we are effectively obliged to do something, but have to pretend that we are doing it as a free choice (like in the case of potlatch). Recall the polite offer-meant-to-be-refused: it is a "habit" to refuse such an offer, and anyone who accepts such an offer commits a vulgar blunder. The same goes for many political situations in which a choice is given on condition that we make the right choice: we are solemnly reminded that we can say no—but we are expected to we reject this offer and enthusiastically say yes. With many sexual prohibitions, the situation is the opposite one: the explicit "no" effectively functions as the implicit injunction "do it, but in a discreet way!" Measured against this background, revolutionary-egalitarian figures from Robespierre to John Brown are (potentially, at least) figures without habits: they refuse to take into account the habits that qualify the functioning of a universal rule:
Such is the natural dominion of habit that we regard the most arbitrary conventions, sometimes indeed the most defective institutions, as absolute measures of truth or falsehood, justice or injustice. It does not even occur to us that most are inevitably still connected with the prejudices on which despotism fed us. We have been so long stooped under its yoke that we have some difficulty in raising ourselves to the eternal

principles of reason; anything that refers to the sacred source of all law seems to us to take on an illegal character, and the very order of nature seems to us a disorder. The majestic movements of a great people, the sublime fervors of virtue often appear to our timid eyes as something like an erupting volcano or the overthrow of political society; and it is certainly not the least of the troubles bothering us, this contradiction between the weakness of our morals, the depravity of our minds, and the purity of principle and energy of character demanded by the free government to which we have dared aspire.

To break the yoke of habits means: if all men are equal, than all men are to be effectively treated as equal; if blacks are also human, they should be immediately treated as such. Recall the early stages of the struggle against slavery in the US, which, even prior to the Civil War, culminated in the armed conflict between the gradualism of compassionate liberals and the unique figure of John Brown:

African Americans were caricatures of people, they were characterized as buffoons and minstrels, they were the butt-end of jokes in American society. And even the abolitionists, as antislavery as they were, the majority of them did not see African Americans as equals. The majority of them, and this was something that African Americans complained about all the time, were willing to work for the end of slavery in the South but they were not willing to work to end discrimination in the North. /.../ John Brown wasn't like that. For him, practicing egalitarianism was a first step toward ending slavery. And African Americans who came in contact with him knew this immediately. He made it very clear that he saw no difference, and he didn't make this clear by saying it, he made it clear by what he did. [11]

For this reason, John Brown is the KEY political figure in the history of US: in his fervently Christian "radical abolitionism," he came closest to introducing the Jacobin logic into the US political landscape: "John Brown considered himself a complete egalitarian. And it was very important for him to practice egalitarianism on every level. /.../ He made it very clear that he saw no difference, and he didn't make this clear by saying it, he made it clear by what he did." [12] Today even, long after slavery was abolished, Brown is the dividing figure in American collective memory; those whites who support Brown are all the more precious—among them, surprisingly, Henry David Thoreau, the great opponent of violence: against the standard dismissal of Brown as blood-thirsty, foolish and insane, Thoreau [13] painted a portrait of a peerless man whose embracement of a cause was unparalleled; he even goes as far as to liken Brown's execution (he states that he regards Brown as dead before his actual death) to Christ. Thoreau vents at the scores of those who have voiced their displeasure and scorn for John Brown: the same people can't relate to Brown because of their concrete stances and "dead" existences; they are truly not living, only a handful of men have lived.

It is, however, this very consequent egalitarianism which is simultaneously the limitations of the Jacobin politics. Recall Marx's fundamental insight about the "bourgeois" limitation of the logic of equality: the capitalist inequalities ("exploitations") are not the "unprincipled violations of the principle of equality," but are absolutely inherent to the logic of equality, they are the paradoxical result of its consequent realization. What we have in mind here is not only the old boring motif of how market exchange presupposes formally/legally equal subjects who meet and interact on the market; the crucial moment of Marx's critique of "bourgeois" socialists is that capitalist exploitation does not involve any kind of "unequal" exchange between the worker and the capitalist—this exchange is fully equal and "just," ideally (in principle), the worker

gets paid the full value of the commodity he is selling (his labour force). Of course, radical bourgeois revolutionaries are aware of this limitation; however, the way they try to amend it is through a direct "terrorist" imposition of more and more de facto equality (equal salaries, equal health service...), which can only be imposed through new forms of formal inequality (different sorts of preferential treatments of the under-privileged). In short, the axiom of "equality" means either not enough (it remains the abstract form of actual inequality) or too much (enforce "terrorist" equality)—it is a formalist notion in a strict dialectical sense, i.e., its limitation is precisely that its form is not concrete enough, but a mere neutral container of some content that eludes this form.

The problem here is not terror as such—our task today is precisely to reinvent emancipatory terror. The problem lies elsewhere: the egalitarian political "extremism" or "excessive radicalism" should always be read as a phenomenon of ideologico-political displacement: as an index of its opposite, of a limitation, of a refusal effectively to "go to the end." What was the Jacobin's recourse to radical "terror" if not a kind of hysterical acting out bearing witness to their inability to disturb the very fundamentals of economic order (private property, etc.)? And does the same not go even for the so-called "excesses" of Political Correctness? Do they also not display the retreat from disturbing the effective (economic etc.) causes of racism and sexism? Perhaps, then, the time has come to render problematic the standard tropes, shared by practically all the "postmodern" Leftists, according to which political "totalitarianism" somehow results from the predominance of material production and technology over the intersubjective communication and/or symbolic practice, as if the root of the political terror resides in the fact that the "principle" of instrumental reason, of the technological exploitation of nature, is extended also to society, so that people are treated as raw stuff to be transformed into a New Man. What if it is the exact opposite which holds? What if political "terror" signals precisely that the sphere of (material) production is denied in its autonomy and subordinated to political logic? Is it not that all political "terror," from Jacobins to Maoist Cultural Revolution, presupposes the foreclosure of production proper, its reduction to the terrain of political battle? In other words, what it effectively amounts to is nothing less than the abandonment of Marx's key insight into how the political struggle is a spectacle which, in order to be deciphered, has to be referred to the sphere of economics ("if Marxism had any analytical value for political theory, was it not in the insistence that the problem of freedom was contained in the social relations implicitly declared 'unpolitical'—that is, naturalized—in liberal discourse"). [14] As to philosophical roots of this limitation of egalitarian terror, it is relatively easy to discern the grounds of what when wrong with Jacobin terror in Rousseau who was ready to pursue to its "Stalinist" extreme the paradox of the universal will:

Apart from this primitive contract, the vote of the majority always binds all the rest. This follows from the contract itself. But it is asked how a man can be both free and forced to conform to wills that are not his own. How are the opponents at once free and subject to laws they have not agreed to?

I retort that the question is wrongly put. The citizen gives his consent to all the laws, including those which are passed in spite of his opposition, and even those which punish him when he dares to break any of them. The constant will of all the members of the State is the general will; by virtue of it they are citizens and free. When in the popular assembly a law is proposed, what the people is asked is not exactly whether it approves or rejects the proposal, but whether it is in conformity with the general will, which is their will. Each man, in giving his vote, states his opinion on that point; and the

general will is found by counting votes. When therefore the opinion that is contrary to my own prevails, this proves neither more nor less than that I was mistaken, and that what I thought to be the general will was not so. If my particular opinion had carried the day I should have achieved the opposite of what was my will; and it is in that case that I should not have been free."(The Social Contract, Book II, Chapter 2, "Voting")

The "totalitarian" catch here is the short-circuit between constative and performative: by reading the voting procedure not as a performative act of decision, but as a constative, as the act of expressing the opinion on (of guessing)what is the general will (which is thus substantialized into something that PRE-EXISTS voting), he avoids the deadlock of the rights of those who remain in the minority (they should obey the decision of the majority, because in the result of voting, they learn what the general will really is). In other words, those who remain in the minority are not simply a minority: in learning the result of the vote (which run against their individual vote), they do not simply learn that they are a minority—what they learn is that they were MISTAKEN about what is the general will.

The parallel between this substantialization of the general will and the religious notion of Predestination cannot but strike the eye: in the case of Predestination, fate is also substantialized into a decision that precedes the process, so that the stake of individuals' activities is not to performatively constitute their fate, but to discover (or guess) one's pre-existing fate. What is obfuscated in both cases is the dialectical reversal of contingency into necessity, i.e., the way the outcome of a contingent process is the appearance of necessity: things retroactively "will have been" necessary." This reversal was described by Jean-Pierre Dupuy:

The catastrophic event is inscribed into the future as a destiny, for sure, but also as a contingent accident: it could not have taken place, even if, in *futur antérieur*, it appears as necessary. /.../ if an outstanding event takes place, a catastrophe, for example, it could not not have taken place; nonetheless, insofar as it did not take place, it is not inevitable. It is thus the event's actualization—the fact that it takes place—which retroactively creates its necessity. [15]

Dupuy provides the example of the French presidential elections in May 1995; here is the January forecast of the main polling institute: "If, on next May 8, Ms Balladur will be elected, one can say that the presidential election was decided before it even took place." If—accidentally—an event takes place, it creates the preceding chain which makes it appear inevitable: THIS, not the common places on how the underlying necessity expresses itself in and through the accidental play of appearances, is in nuce the Hegelian dialectics of contingency and necessity. The same goes for October Revolution (once the Bolsheviks won and stabilized their hold on power, their victory appeared as an outcome and expression of a deeper historical necessity), and even of Bush's much contested first US presidential victory (after the contingent and contested Florida majority, his victory retroactively appears as an expression of a deeper US political trend). In this sense, although we are determined by destiny, we are nonetheless free to choose our destiny. This, according to Dupuy, is also how we should approach the ecological crisis: not to "realistically" appraise the possibilities of the catastrophe, but to accept it as Destiny in the precise Hegelian sense: like the election of Balladur, "if the catastrophe will happen, one can say that its occurrence was decided before it even took place." Destiny and free action (to block the "if") thus go hand in hand: freedom is at its most radical the freedom to change one's Destiny. [16] This brings us back to our

central question: how would a Jacobin politics which would take into account this retroactive-contingent rise of universality look? How are we to reinvent the Jacobin terror?

 [18]

We can see now why Lacan's motto *il n'y a pas de grand Autre* /there is no big Other/" brings us to the very core of the ethical problematic: what it excludes is precisely this "perspective of the Last Judgment," the idea that somewhere—even if as a thoroughly virtual point of reference, even if we concede that we cannot ever occupy its place and pass the actual judgment—there must be a standard which allows us to take measure of our acts and pronounce their "true meaning," their true ethical status. Even Jacques Derrida's notion of "deconstruction as justice" seems to rely on a utopian hope which sustains the specter of "infinite justice," forever postponed, always to come, but nonetheless here as the ultimate horizon of our activity. Lacan himself pointed the way out of this deadlock by referring to Kant's philosophy as the crucial antecedent of the psychoanalytic ethics. As such, Kantian ethics effectively harbors a "terrorist" potential—a feature which points in this direction would be Kant's well-known thesis that Reason without intuition is empty, while Intuition without reason is blind: is not its political counterpart Robespierre's dictum according to which, Virtue without Terror is impotent, while Terror without Virtue is lethal, striking blindly?

According to the standard critique, the limitation of the Kantian universalist ethic of the "categorical imperative" (the unconditional injunction to do our duty) resides in its formal indeterminacy: moral Law does not tell me what my duty is, it merely tells me that I should accomplish my duty, and so leaves the space open for the empty voluntarism (whatever I decide to be my duty is my duty). However, far from being a limitation, this very feature brings us to the core of the Kantian ethical autonomy: it is not possible to derive the concrete norms I have to follow in my specific situation from the moral Law itself—which means that the subject himself has to assume the responsibility of translating the abstract injunction of the moral Law into a series of concrete obligations. The full acceptance of this paradox compels us to reject any reference to duty as an excuse: "I know this is heavy and can be painful, but what can I do, this is my duty..," Kant's ethics of unconditional duty is often taken as justifying such an attitude—no wonder Adolf Eichmann himself referred to Kantian ethics when he tried to justify his role in planning and executing the holocaust: he was just doing his duty and obeying the Fuhrer's orders. However, the aim of Kant's emphasis on the subject's full moral autonomy and responsibility is precisely to prevent any such maneuver of putting the blame onto some figure of the big Other.

The standard motto of ethical rigor is: "There is no excuse for not accomplishing one's duty!" Although Kant's well-known maxim *Du kannst, denn du sollst!* ("You can, because you must!") seems to offer a new version of this motto, he implicitly complements it with its much more uncanny inversion: "There is no excuse for accomplishing one's duty!" The very reference to duty as the excuse to do my duty should be rejected as hypocritical. Recall the proverbial example of a severe sadistic teacher who subjects his pupils to merciless discipline and torture; his excuse to himself (and to others) is: "I myself find it hard to exert such pressure on the poor kids, but what can I do—it's my duty!" This is what psychoanalytic ethics thoroughly forbids: in it, I am fully responsible not only for doing my duty, but no less for determining what my duty is.

Along the same lines, in his writings of 1917, Lenin saves his utmost acerb irony for

those who engage in the endless search for some kind of "guarantee" for the revolution; this guarantee assumes two main forms: either the reified notion of social Necessity (one should not risk the revolution too early; one has to wait for the right moment, when the situation is "mature" with regard to the laws of historical development: "it is too early for the Socialist revolution, the working class is not yet mature") or the normative ("democratic") legitimacy ("the majority of the population is not on our side, so the revolution would not really be democratic")—as Lenin repeatedly puts, as if, before the revolutionary agent risks the seizure of the state power, it should get the permission from some figure of the big Other (organize a referendum which will ascertain that the majority supports the revolution). With Lenin, as with Lacan, the revolution *ne s'autorise que d'elle-même*: one should assume the revolutionary ACT not covered by the big Other—the fear of taking power "prematurely," the search for the guarantee, is the fear of the abyss of the act.

It is only such a radical stance that allows us to break with today's predominant mode of politics, the post-political biopolitcs, which is a politics of fear, formulated as a defense against a potential victimization or harassment. Therein resides the true line of separation between radical emancipatory politics and the predominant status quo politics: it is not the difference of two different positive visions, sets of axioms, but, rather, the difference between the politics based on a set of universal axioms and the politics which renounces the very constitutive dimension of the political, since it resorts to fear as its ultimate mobilizing principle: fear of immigrants, fear of crime, fear of godless sexual depravity, fear of the excessive State itself (with too high taxation), fear of ecological catastrophes—such a (post)politics always amounts to a frightening rallying of frightened men. This is why the big event not only in Europe in the early 2006 was that the anti-immigration politics "went mainstream": they finally cut the umbilical link that connected them to the far Right fringe parties. From France to Germany, from Austria to Holland, in the new spirit of pride at one's cultural and historical identity, the main parties now find it acceptable to stress that the immigrants are guests who have to accommodate themselves to the cultural values that define the host society—it is "our country, love it or leave it."

How are we to break out of this (post)politics of fear? The biopolitical administration of life is the true content of global liberal democracy, and this introduces the tension between democratic form and administrative-regulatory content. Which, then, would be the opposite of biopolitics? What if we take the risk of resuscitating the good old "dictatorship of the proletariat" as the only way to break biopolitics? This cannot but sound ridiculous today, it cannot but appear that these are two incompatible terms from different fields, with no shared space: the latest political power analysis versus the old discredited Communist mythology... And yet: this is the only true choice today. The term "proletarian dictatorship" continues to point towards the key problem.

A commonsense reproach arises here: why dictatorship? Why not true democracy or simply power of the proletariat? "Dictatorship" does not mean the opposite of democracy, but democracy's own underlying mode of functioning—from the very beginning, the thesis on "dictatorship of the proletariat" involved the presupposition that it is the opposite of other form(s) of dictatorship, since the entire field of state power is that of dictatorship. When Lenin designated liberal democracy as a form of bourgeois dictatorship, he did not imply a simplistic notion on how democracy is really manipulated, a mere façade, on how some secret clique is really in power and controls things, and that, if threatened to lose power in democratic elections, they will show their

true face and assume direct power. What he meant is that the very FORM of the bourgeois-democratic state, the sovereignty of its power in its ideologico-political presuppositions, embodies a "bourgeois" logic.

One should thus use the term "dictatorship" in the precise sense in which democracy also is a form of dictatorship, i.e., as a purely formal determination. One likes to point out how self-questioning is constitutive of democracy, how democracy always allows, solicits us even, to question its own features. However, this self-referentiality has to stop at some point: even the most "free" elections cannot put in question the legal procedures that legitimize and organize them, the state apparatuses that guarantee (per force, if necessary) the electoral process, etc. The State in its institutional aspect is a massive presence which cannot be accounted for in the terms of the representation of interests—the democratic illusion is that it can. Badiou conceptualized this excess as the excess of the State re-presentation over what it represents; one can also put it in Benjaminian terms: while democracy can more or less eliminate constituted violence, it still has to rely continuously on the constitutive violence.

Recall the lesson of the Hegelian "concrete universality"—imagine a philosophical debate between a hermeneutically, a deconstructionist and an analytic philosopher. What they sooner or later discover is that they do not simply occupy positions within a shared common space called "philosophy": what distinguishes them is the very notion of what philosophy as such is, i.e., an analytic philosopher perceives the global field of philosophy and the respective differences between the participants differently than a hermeneutically: what is different among them are differences themselves, which is what renders their true differences in a first approach invisible—the gradual classificatory logic of "this is what we share, and here our differences begin" breaks down. For today's cognitivist analytic philosopher, with the cognitivist turn, philosophy finally reached the maturity of a serious reasoning, leaving behind metaphysical speculations. For a hermeneutically, analytic philosophy is, on the contrary, the end of philosophy, the final loss of true philosophical stance, the transformation of philosophy into another positive science. So when the participants in the debate get struck by this more fundamental gap that separates them, they stumble upon the moment of "dictatorship." And, in a homologous way, the same goes for political democracy: its dictatorial dimension becomes palpable when the struggle turns into the struggle about the field of struggle itself.

So what about proletariat? Insofar as proletariat is, within a social edifice, its "out of joint" part, the element which, while formal part of this edifice, has no determinate place within it, the "part of no-part" which stands for universality, "dictatorship of the proletariat" means: the direct empowerment of universality, so that those who are "part of no-part" determine the tone. They are egalitarian-universalist for purely formal reasons: as part of no part, they lack the particular features that would legitimate their place within the social body—they belong to the set of society without belonging to any of its sub-sets; as such, their belonging is directly universal. Here, the logic of the representation of multiple particular interests and their mediation through compromises reaches its limit; every dictatorship breaks with this logic of representation (which is why the simplistic definition of Fascism as the dictatorship of financial capital is wrong: Marx already knew that Napoleon III, this proto-Fascist, broke with the logic of representation). One should thus thoroughly demystify the scare-crow of the "dictatorship of the proletariat": at its most basic, it stands for the tremulous moment when the complex web of representations is suspended due to the direct intrusion of

universality into the political field. With regard to French Revolution, it was, significantly, Danton, NOT Robespierre, who provided the most concise formula of the imperceptible shift from "dictatorship of the proletariat" to statist violence, or, in Benjamin's terms, from divine to mythic violence: "Let us be terrible so that the people will not have to be." [19] For Danton, the Jacobin the revolutionary state terror was a kind of pre-emptive action whose true aim was not revenge on the enemies but to prevent the direct "divine" violence of the sans-culottes, of the people themselves. In other words, let us do what the people demand us to do so that they will not do it themselves...

From Ancient Greece, we have a name for this intrusion: democracy. That is to say, what is democracy, at its most elementary? A phenomenon which, for the first time, appeared in Ancient Greece when the members of demos (those with no firmly determined place in the hierarchical social edifice) not only demanded that their voice be heard against those in power. They not only protested the wrong they suffered and wanted their voice be recognized and included in the public sphere, on an equal footing with the ruling oligarchy and aristocracy; even more, they, the excluded, those with no fixed place within the social edifice, presented themselves as the embodiment of the Whole of Society, of the true Universality: "we—the 'nothing', not counted in the order—are the people, we are All against others who stand only for their particular privileged interest." The political conflict proper designates the tension between the structured social body in which each part has its place, and "the part with no-part" which unsettles this order on account of the empty principle of universality, of what Etienne Balibar calls *égaliberté*, the principled equality of all men qua speaking beings—up to the *liumang*, "hoodlums," in today's China, those who are displaced and freely float, lacking their work-and-residence, but also cultural or sexual, identity and registration.

This identification of the part of society with no properly defined place within it (or resisting the allocated subordinated place within it) with the Whole is the elementary gesture of politicization, discernible in all great democratic events from the French Revolution (in which *le troisième état* proclaimed itself identical to the Nation as such, against aristocracy and clergy) to the demise of the East European Socialism (in which dissident "forums" proclaimed themselves representative of the entire society against the Party *nomenklatura*). In this precise sense, politics and democracy are synonymous: the basic aim of antidemocratic politics always and by definition is and was depoliticization, the demand that "things should return to normal," with each individual sticking to his or her particular job. And this brings us to the inevitable paradoxical conclusion: "dictatorship of the proletariat" is another name for the violence of the democratic explosion itself. "Dictatorship of the proletariat" is thus the zero-level at which the difference between legitimate and illegitimate state power is suspended, i.e., at which the state power AS SUCH is illegitimate. Saint-Just said in November 1792: "Every king is a rebel and a usurper." This phrase is a cornerstone of emancipatory politics: there is no "legitimate" king as opposed to the usurper, since being a king is in itself an usurpation, in the same sense that, for Proudhon, property as such is theft. What we have here is the Hegelian "negation of negation," the passage from the simple-direct negation ("this king is not a legitimate one, he is an usurper"), to the inherent self-negation ("authentic king" is an oxymoron, being a king IS usurpation). This is why, for Robespierre, the trial of the king is not a trial at all:

There is no trial to be held here. Louis is not a defendant. You are not judges. You are not, you cannot be anything but statesmen and representatives of the nation. You have

no sentence to pronounce for or against a man, but a measure of public salvation to implement, an act of national providence to perform. /.../ Louis was king, and the Republic is founded: the famous question you are considering is settled by those words alone. Louis was dethroned by his crimes; Louis denounced the French people as rebellious; to chastise it, he called on the arms of his fellow tyrants; victory and the people decided that he was the rebellious one: therefore Louis cannot be judged; either he is already condemned or the Republic is not acquitted. Proposing to put Louis on trial, in whatever way that could be done, would be to regress towards royal and constitutional despotism; it is a counter-revolutionary idea, for it means putting the revolution itself in contention. In fact, if Louis can still be put on trial, then he can be acquitted; he may be innocent; what am I saying! He is presumed to be so until he has been tried. But if Louis is acquitted, if Louis can be presumed innocent, what becomes of the revolution?

This strange coupling of democracy and dictatorship is grounded in the tension that pertains to the very notion of democracy. What Chantal Mouffe calls the "democratic paradox" almost symmetrically inverts the fundamental paradox of the authoritarian Fascism: if the wager of (institutionalized) democracy is to integrate the antagonistic struggle itself into the institutional/differential space, transforming it into regulated agonism, Fascism proceeds in the opposite direction. While Fascism, in its mode of activity, brings the antagonistic logic to its extreme (talking about the "struggle to death" between itself and its enemies, and always maintaining—if not realizing—a minimum of an extra-institutional threat of violence, of a "direct pressure of the people" by-passing the complex legal-institutional channels), it posits as its political goal precisely the opposite, an extremely ordered hierarchic social body (no wonder Fascism always relies on organicist-corporatist metaphors). This contrast can be nicely rendered in the terms of the Lacanian opposition between the "subject of enunciation" and the "subject of the enunciated (content)": while democracy admits antagonistic struggle as its goal (in Lacanese: as its enunciated, its content), its procedure is regulated-systemic; Fascism, on the contrary, tries to impose the goal of hierarchically structured harmony through the means of an unbridled antagonism.

In a homologous way, the ambiguity of the middle class, this contradiction embodied (as already Marx put it apropos Proudhon), is best exemplified by the way it relates to politics: on the one hand, the middle class is against politicization—they just want to sustain their way of life, to be left to work and lead their life in peace (which is why they tend to support the authoritarian coups which promise to put an end to the crazy political mobilization of society, so that everybody can return to his or her proper work). On the other hand, they—in the guise of the threatened patriotic hard-working moral majority—are the main instigators of the grass-root mass mobilization (in the guise of the Rightist populism—say, in France today, the only force truly disturbing the post-political technocratic-humanitarian administration is le Pen's National Front.

There are two elementary and irreducible sides to democracy: the violent egalitarian imposition of those who are "surnumerary," the "part of no part," those who, while formally included within the social edifice, have no determinate place within it; and the regulated (more or less) universal procedure of choosing those who will exert power. How do these to sides relate to each other? What if democracy in the second sense (the regulated procedure of registering the "people's voice") is ultimately a defense against itself, against democracy in the sense of the violent intrusion of the egalitarian logic that disturbs the hierarchic functioning of the social edifice, an attempt to re-functionalize

this excess, to make it a part of the normal running of the social edifice?

The problem is thus: how to regulate/institutionalize the very violent egalitarian democratic impulse, how to prevent it from being drowned in democracy in the second sense of the term (regulated procedure)? If there is no way to do it, then "authentic" democracy remains a momentary utopian outburst which, the proverbial morning after, has to be normalized. [20]

The Orwellian proposition "democracy is terror" is thus democracy's "infinite judgment," its highest speculative identity. This dimension gets lost in Claude Lefort's notion of democracy as involving the empty place of power, the constitutive gap between the place of power and the contingent agents who, for a limited period, can occupy that place. Paradoxically, the underlying premise of democracy is thus not only that there is no political agent which has a "natural" right to power, but, much more radically, that "people" themselves, the ultimate source of the sovereign power in democracy, doesn't exist as a substantial entity. In the Kantian way, the democratic notion of "people" is a negative concept, a concept whose function is merely to designate a certain limit: it prohibits any determinate agent to rule with full sovereignty. (The only moment when "people exists" are the democratic elections, which are precisely the moment of the disintegration of the entire social edifice—in elections, "people" are reduced to a mechanical collection of individuals.) The claim that people does exist is the basic axiom of "totalitarianism," and the mistake of "totalitarianism" is strictly homologous to the Kantian misuse ("paralogism") of political reason: "the People exists" through a determinate political agent which acts as if it directly embodies (not only re-presents) the People, its true Will (the totalitarian Party and its Leader), i.e., in the terms of transcendental critique, as a direct phenomenal embodiment of the noumenal People... The obvious link between this notion of democracy and Lacan's notion of the inconsistency of the big Other was elaborated by Jacques-Alain Miller, among others:

Is 'democracy' a master-signifier? Without any doubt. It is the master-signifier which says that there is no master-signifier, at least not a master-signifier which would stand alone, that every master-signifier has to insert itself wisely among others. Democracy is Lacan's big S of the barred A, which says: I am the signifier of the fact that Other has a hole, or that it doesn't exist. [21]

Of course, Miller is aware that EVERY master-signifier bears witness to the fact that there is no master-signifier, no Other of the Other, that there is a lack in the Other, etc.—the very gap between S1 and S2 occurs because of this lack (as with God in Spinoza, the Master-Signifier by definition fills in the gap in the series of "ordinary" signifiers). The difference is that, with democracy, this lack is directly inscribed into the social edifice, it is institutionalized in a set of procedures and regulations—no wonder, then, that Miller approvingly quotes Marcel Gauchet about how, in democracy, truth only offers itself "in division and decomposition" (and one cannot but note with irony how Stalin and Mao made the same claim, although with a "totalitarian" twist: in politics, truth only emerges through ruthless divisions of class struggle...).

It is easy to note how, from within this Kantian horizon of democracy, the "terrorist" aspect of democracy—the violent egalitarian imposition of those who are "surnumerary," the "part of no part"—can only appear as its "totalitarian" distortion, i.e., how, within this horizon, the line that separates the authentic democratic explosion

of revolutionary terror from the "totalitarian" Party-State regime (or, to put it in reactionary terms, the line that separates the "mob rule of the dispossessed" from the Party-State brutal oppression of the "mob") is obliterated. (One can, of course, argue that a direct "mob rule" is inherently unstable and that it turns necessarily into its opposite, a tyranny over the mo itself; however, this shift in no way changes the fact that, precisely, we are dealing with a shift, a radical turnaround.) Foucault dealt with this shift in his writings on the Iranian revolution, where he opposes the historical reality of a complex process of social, cultural, economic, political, etc., transformations to the magic event of the revolt which somehow suspends the cobweb of historical causality—it is irreducible to it:

The man in revolt is ultimately inexplicable. There must be an uprooting that interrupts the unfolding of history, and its long series of reasons why, for a man 'really' to prefer the risk of death over the certainty of having to obey. [22]

One should be aware of the Kantian connotation of these propositions: revolt is an act of freedom which momentarily suspends the nexus of historical causality, i.e., in revolt, the noumenal dimension transpires. The paradox, of course, is that this noumenal dimension coincides with its opposite, with the pure surface of a phenomenon: the noumenon not only appears, the noumenal is what is, in a phenomenon, irreducible to the causal network of reality that generated this phenomenon—in short, noumenon is phenomenon qua phenomenon. There is a clear link between this irreducible character of the phenomenon and Deleuze's notion of event as the flux of becoming, as a surface emergence that cannot be reduced to its "bodily" causes. His reply to the conservative critics who denounce the miserable and even terrifying actual results of a revolutionary upheaval is that they remain blind to the dimension of becoming:
It is fashionable these days to condemn the horrors of revolution. It's nothing new; English Romanticism is permeated by reflections on Cromwell very similar to present-day reflections on Stalin. They say revolutions turn out badly. But they're constantly confusing two different things, the way revolutions turn out historically and people's revolutionary becoming. These relate to two different sets of people. Men's only hope lies in a revolutionary becoming: the only way of casting off their shame or responding to what is intolerable. [23]

Deleuze refers here to revolutionary explosions in a way which is strictly parallel to Foucault's:

The Iranian movement did not experience the 'law' of revolutions that would, some say, make the tyranny that already secretly inhabited them reappear underneath the blind enthusiasm of the masses. What constituted the most internal and the most intensely lived part of the uprising touched, in an unmediated fashion, on an already overcrowded political chessboard, but such contact is not identity. The spirituality of those who were going to their deaths has no similarity whatsoever with the bloody government of a fundamentalist clergy. The Iranian clerics want to authenticate their regime through the significations that the uprising had. It is no different to discredit the fact of the uprising on the grounds that there is today a government of mullahs. In both cases, there is 'fear,' fear of what just happened last fall in Iran, something of which the world had not seen an example for a long time. [24]

Foucault is here effectively Deleuzian: what interests him are not the Iranian events at the level of actual social reality and its causal interactions, but the event-like surface, the

pure virtuality of the "spark of life" which only accounts for the uniqueness of the Event. What took place in Iran in the interstice of two epochs of social reality was not the explosion of the People as a substantial entity with a set of properties, but the event of becoming-People. The point is thus not the shift in relations of power and domination between actual socio-political agents, the redistribution of social control, etc., but the very fact of transcending—or, rather, momentarily canceling—this very domain, of the emergence of a totally different domain of "collective will" as a pure Sense-Event in which all differences are obliterated, rendered irrelevant. Such an event is not only new with regard to what was going on before, it is new "in itself" and thus forever remains new.

It is against this background that one can formulate a critique of Jacques Rancière's political aesthetics, of his idea of the aesthetic dimension of the proper political act: a democratic explosion reconfigures the established hierarchic "police" order of social space, it stages a spectacle of a different order, of a different *partage* of the public space. [25] In today's "society of spectacle," such an aesthetic reconfiguration lost its subversive dimension: it can all too easily be appropriated by the existing order. The true task are not momentary democratic explosions which undermine the established "police" order, but the dimension designated by Badiou as that of the "fidelity" to the Event: how to translate/inscribe the democratic explosion into the positive "police" order, how to impose on social reality a NEW lasting order. THIS is the properly "terrorist" dimension of every authentic democratic explosion: the brutal imposition of a new order. And this is why, while everybody loves democratic rebellions, the spectacular/carnivalesque explosions of the popular will, anxiety arises when this will wants to persist, to institutionalize itself—and the more "authentic" the rebellion is, the more "terrorist" is this institutionalization. It is at this level that one should search for the decisive moment of a revolutionary process: say, in the case of the October Revolution, not the explosion of 1917-1918, not even the civil war that followed, but the intense experimentations of the early 1920, the (desperate, often ridiculous) attempts to invent new rituals of daily life: with what to replace the pre-revolutionary procedures of marriage and funerals? How to organize the most common interaction in a factory, in an apartment block? It is at this level of what, as opposed to the "abstract terror" of the "big" political revolution, one is tempted to call the "concrete terror" of imposing a new order onto daily life, that the Jacobins and both the Soviet revolution and the Chinese revolution ultimately failed—not for the lack of attempts in this direction, for sure. Jacobins were at their best not in the theatrics of Terror, but in the utopian explosions of political imagination apropos the reorganization of daily life: everything was there, proposed in the course of the frantic activity condensed in a couple of years, from the self-organization of women to the communal homes in which the old will be able to spend their last years in peace and dignity. (So what about Robespierre's rather ridiculous attempt to impose a new civic religion celebrating a Supreme Being? Robespierre himself formulated succinctly the main reason for his opposition to atheism: "Atheism is aristocratic." [26] Atheism was for him the ideology of the cynical-hedonistic aristocrats who lost all sense of historical mission.)

The harsh consequence to be accepted here is that this excess of egalitarian democracy over the democratic procedure can only "institutionalize" itself in the guise of its opposite, as revolutionary-democratic terror. So, again, how to re-invent this terror for today? In his *Logiques des mondes*, Alain Badiou [27] elaborates the eternal Idea of the politics of revolutionary justice at work from the ancient Chinese "legists" through Jacobins to Lenin and Mao—it consists of four moments: voluntarism (the belief that

one can "move mountains," ignoring "objective" laws and obstacles), terror (a ruthless will to crush the enemy of the people), egalitarian justice (its immediate brutal imposition, with no understanding for the "complex circumstances" which allegedly compel us to proceed gradually), and, last but not least, trust in the people—suffice it to recall two examples here, Robespierre himself, his "a great truth" ("the characteristic of popular government is to be trustful towards the people and severe towards itself"), and Mao's critique of Stalin's Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR, where he qualifies Stalin's point of view as "almost altogether wrong. The basic error is mistrust of the peasants."). [28] And is the only appropriate way to counter the threat of ecological catastrophe that looms at our horizon not precisely the combination of these four moments? What is demanded is:

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

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

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

- and, last but not least, all this combined with the trust in the people (the wager that the large majority of the people support these severe measures, see them as their own, and are ready to participate in their enforcement). One should not be afraid to assert, as a combination of terror and trust in the people, the reactivation of one of the figures of all egalitarian-revolutionary terror, the "informer" who denounces the culprits to the authorities. (Already in the case of the Enron scandal, the Time magazine was right to celebrate the insiders who tipped-off the financial authorities as true public heroes.) [29]

Back in the early 17th century, after the establishment of the shogun regime, Japan made a unique collective decision to isolate itself from foreign culture and to pursue its own path of contained life of balanced reproduction, focused on cultural refinement, avoiding wild expansion. Was the ensuing period which lasted till the middle of the 19th century really just an isolationist dream from which Japan was cruelly awakened by Commodore Perry on the American warship? What if the dream is that we can go on indefinitely in our expansionism? What if we all need to repeat, *mutatis mutandis*, the Japanese decision, and collectively decide to intervene into our pseudo-natural development, to change its direction? The tragedy is that the very idea of such a collective decision is discredited today. Apropos of the disintegration of State Socialism two decades ago, one should not forget that, at approximately the same time, the Western Social Democratic welfare state ideology was also dealt a crucial blow, it also ceased to function as the imaginary able to arouse a collective passionate following. The notion that *the time of the welfare state has past* is today a piece of commonly accepted

wisdom. What these two defeated ideologies shared is the notion that humanity as a collective subject has the capacity to somehow limit impersonal and anonymous socio-historic development, to steer it in a desired direction.

Today, such a notion is quickly dismissed as "ideological" and/or "totalitarian": the social process is again perceived as dominated by an anonymous Fate beyond social control. The rise of global capitalism is presented to us as such a Fate, against which one cannot fight—one either adapts oneself to it, or one falls out of step with history and one is crushed. The only thing one can do is to make global capitalism as human as possible, to fight for "global capitalism with a human face" (this is what, ultimately, the Third Way is—or, rather, WAS—about). The sound barrier will have to be broken here, the risk will have to be taken to endorse again large collective decisions—this, perhaps, is the main legacy of Robespierre and his comrades to us today.

Moments before Robespierre's death, the executioner noticed that his head would not fit into the guillotine with the bandages applied to his jaw wounds, so he brutally ripped them off; from Robespierre's ruined throat emerged a ghastly piercing scream, only cut short as the blade fell upon his neck. The status of this last scream is legendary: it gave rise to a whole panoply of interpretations, mostly along the lines of the terrifying inhuman screech of the parasitic evil spirit which signals its impotent protest when it is losing possession of its host human body—as if, at this final moment, Robespierre humanized himself, discarding the persona of Revolutionary Virtue embodied and emerging as a miserable scared human being.

The popular image of Robespierre is that of a kind of Elephant Man inverted: while the latter had a terribly deformed body hiding a gentle and intelligent soul, Robespierre was a kind and polite person hiding ice-cold cruel determination signaled by his green eyes. As such, Robespierre serves perfectly today's anti-totalitarian liberals who no longer need to portray him as a cruel monster with a sneering evil smile, as it was the case by the 19th century reactionaries: everyone is ready to recognize his moral integrity and full devotion to the revolutionary Cause, since his very purity is the problem, the cause of all trouble, as is signalled by the title of the last biography of Robespierre, Ruth Scurr's *Fatal Purity*. [30] The titles of some of the reviews of the book are indicative: "Terror wears a sea-green coat," "The good terrorist," "Virtue's demon executioner," and, outdoing them all, Graham Robb's "Sea-green, mad as a fish" (in Telegraph, May 6 2006). And, so that no one misses the point, Antonia Fraser, in her review, draws "a chilling lesson for us today": Robespierre was personally honest and sincere, but "/t/he bloodlettings brought about by this 'sincere' man surely warn us that belief in your own righteousness to the exclusion of all else can be as dangerous as the more cynical motivation of a deliberate tyrant." [31] Happy us who live under cynical public-opinion manipulators, not under the sincere Muslim fundamentalists ready to fully engage themselves in their projects... what better proof of the ethico-political misery of our epoch whose ultimate mobilizing motif is the mistrust of virtue! Should we not affirm against such opportunist realism the simple faith in the eternal Idea of freedom which persists through all defeats, without which, as it was clear to Robespierre, a revolution "is just a noisy crime that destroys another crime," the faith most poignantly expressed in Robespierre's very last speech on the 8 Thermidor 1994, the day before his arrest and execution:

But there do exist, I can assure you, souls that are feeling and pure; it exists, that tender, imperious and irresistible passion, the torment and delight of magnanimous hearts; that

deep horror of tyranny, that compassionate zeal for the oppressed, that sacred love for the homeland, that even more sublime and holy love for humanity, without which a great revolution is just a noisy crime that destroys another crime; it does exist, that generous ambition to establish here on earth the world's first Republic.

Notes:

[1] For a balanced historical description of the Terror, see David Andress, *The Terror: Civil War in the French Revolution*, London: Little, Brown 2005.

[2] Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes*, Paris: Seuil 2006, p. 98.

[3] Louis-Antoine-Leon Saint-Just, *Oeuvres choisies*, Paris: Gallimard 1968, p. 330.

[4] And he was right: as we know today, in the last days of his freedom, king Louis XVI was negotiating with foreign power a plot to start a large war of France against European powers, where the king would pose himself as a patriot, leading the French army, and then negotiate with the powers of Europe a honourable peace for France, thus regaining his full authority—in short, the "gentle" Louis XVI was ready to plunge Europe in war to save his throne...

[5] See Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926*, Cambridge (Ma): Harvard University Press 1996.

[6] Friedrich Engels, "Introduction (1891) to Karl Marx, The Civil War in France", in *Marx/Engels/Lenin: On Historical Materialism*, New York: International Publishers 1974, p. 242.

[7] See the detailed analysis in Claude Lefort, "The Revolutionary Terror," in *Democracy and Political Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1988, p. 50-88.

[8] Quoted from Brian Daizen Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, London: Routledge 2003, p. 132.

[9] *Ibid*

[10] P.R.Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, New York: Atheneum 1965, p. 380.

[11] Margaret Washington, on https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/filmmore/reference/interview/washington05.html

[12] *Ibid*

[13] See Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays*, New York: Dover Publications 1993.

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

[15] Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Petite métaphysique des tsunami*, Paris: Seuil 2005, p. 19.

[16] What one should bear in mind is how Predestination is totally foreign to its Eastern counterpart, reincarnation. What they both share is the idea that my present state is predetermined—however, in the first case, it is by the inscrutable and contingent divine decision which precedes my existence and thus has nothing whatsoever to do with my acts, while, in the second case, it is by my own acts in my previous lives, which make my present predicament nonetheless dependent on me. What gets lost in the notion of reincarnation is the irreducible gap between virtue and grace, between my character and my fate, i.e., the utter contingency and externality of my fate with regard to my character.

[17] Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge 1992.

[18] The same goes for such a radical hedonist atheist like Marquis de Sade: perspicuous readers of his work (like Pierre Klossowski) guessed long ago that the compulsion to enjoy which drives the Sadean libertine implies a hidden reference to a hidden divinity, to what Lacan called the "Supreme-Being-of-Evil," an obscure God demanding to be fed with the suffering of the innocents.

[19] Quoted in Simon Schama, *Citizens*, New York: Viking Penguin 1989, p. 706-707.

[20] The trap to be avoided here is to oppose these two poles as the "good" one versus the "bad" one, i.e., to dismiss the institutionalized democratic procedure as the "ossification" of the primordial democratic experience. What truly matters is precisely the degree to which the democratic explosion succeeds in getting institutionalized, translated into social order. Not only are democratic explosions easily accessible for those in power, since "the day after" people awaken in the sober reality of power relations reinvigorated by the fresh democratic blood (which is why those in power love "explosions of creativity" like the French May '68); often, the "ossified" democratic procedure to which the majority continues to stick as to the "dead letter," is the only defense remaining against the onslaught of "totalitarian" crowd passions.

[21] Jacques-Alain Miller, *Le Neveau de Lacan*, Verdier 2003, p. 270.

[22] Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, Chicago:The University of Chicago Press 2005, p. 263.

[23] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, New York: Columbia University Press 1995,p. 171.

[24] Afary and Anderson, op.cit., p. 265.

[25] See Jacques Ranciére, *The Politics Of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, London: Continuum 2004.

[26] Maximilien Robespierre, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris: Ernest Leroux 1910-1967, Vol. 10, p. 195.

[27] See Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes* , "Introduction."

[28] The catch, of course, resides in the ambiguity of "people": are the people who are trusted the "empirical" individuals or THE People, on behalf of whom one can turn the terror on behalf of the people against people's enemies into the terror against individual

people themselves? Does the ecological challenge not offer a unique chance to re-invent this "eternal Idea"?

[29] However, the temptation to avoid unconditionally here is to perceive ecological catastrophies themselves as a kind of "divine violence" of nature, the justice/vengeance of nature—such a conclusion would have been an unacceptable obscurantist projection of meaning into nature.

[30] Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, London: Chatto & Windus 2006.

[31] Antonia Fraser, "Head of the revolution," *The Times*, April 22 2006, Books, p. 9.