

Welcome to the Desert of the Real*

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Alain Badiou identified as the key feature of the XXth century the "passion of the Real /la passion du réel/"¹: in contrast to the XIXth century of the utopian or "scientific" projects and ideals, plans about the future, the XXth century aimed at delivering the thing itself, at directly realizing the longer-for New Order. The ultimate and defining experience of the XXth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to the everyday social reality - the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceiving layers of reality. Already in the trenches of the World War I, Carl Schmitt was celebrating the face to face combat as the authentic intersubjective encounter: authenticity resides in the act of violent transgression, from the Lacanian Real - the Thing Antigone confronts when he violates the order of the City - to the Bataillean excess.

As Badiou demonstrated apropos of the Stalinist show trials, this violent effort to distill the pure Real from the elusive reality necessarily ends up in its opposite, in the obsession with pure appearance: in the Stalinist universe, the passion of the Real (ruthless enforcement of the 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 ultimate impossibility 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, since (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 in a fake spectacle. The fundamental illusion is here that, once the violent work of purification is done, the New Man will emerge ex nihilo, freed from the filth of the 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 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 is at first nothing but an empty place to be filled up with positive content through the 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 Man's essence, "alienated" in present conditions and to be realized through the revolutionary process, is - the only legitimization of a revolution is negative, a will to break with the Past. One should formulate here things in a very precise way: the reason why the Stalinist fury of purification is so destructive resides in the very fact that it is sustained by the belief that, after the destructive work of purification will be 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 that, in a strictly perverse way, the revolutionary has to cling to violence as the only index of his authenticity, and it is at this level that the critics of Stalinism as a rule misperceive the cause of the Communist's attachment to the Party. Say, when, in 1939-1941 pro-Soviet Communists twice had to change their Party line overnight (after the Soviet-German pact, it was imperialism, not, Fascism, which was elevated to the role of the main enemy; from June 22 1941, when Germany attacked 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 means business...

So, if the passion of the Real ends up with the pure semblance of the political theater,

then, in an exact inversion, the "postmodern" passion of the semblance of the Last Men ends up in a kind of Real. Recall the phenomenon of "cutters" (mostly women who experience an irresistible urge to cut themselves with razors or otherwise hurt themselves), strictly correlative to the virtualization of our environs: it stands for a desperate strategy to return to the real of the body. As such, cutting is to be contrasted with the standard tattoo inscriptions on the body, which guarantee the subject's inclusion in the (virtual) symbolic order - with the 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) to firmly ground our ego in our bodily reality, against the unbearable anxiety of perceiving oneself as non-existing. The standard report of cutters is that, after seeing the red warm blood flowing out of the 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 at regaining some kind of normalcy, at avoiding 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... Virtual Reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the resisting hard kernel of the Real - in the same way decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like the real coffee without being the real one, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being one. However, at the end of this process of virtualization, the inevitable Benthamian conclusion awaits us: reality is its own best semblance.

And was the bombing of the WTC with regard to the Hollywood catastrophe movies not like the snuff pornography versus ordinary sado-maso porno movies? This is 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 the XXth century art's "passion of the real" - the "terrorists" themselves did it not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but FOR

THE SPECTACULAR EFFECT OF IT. The authentic XXth century passion to penetrate the Real Thing (ultimately, the destructive Void) through the cobweb of semblances which constitute our reality thus culminates in the thrill of the Real as the ultimate "effect," sought after from digitalized special effects through reality TV and amateur pornography up to snuff movies. Snuff movies which deliver the "real thing" are perhaps the ultimate truth of virtual reality. There is an intimate connection between virtualization of reality and the emergence of an infinite and infinitized bodily pain, much stronger than the usual one: do biogenetics and Virtual Reality combined not open up new "enhanced" possibilities of TORTURE, new and unheard-of horizons of extending our ability to endure pain (through widening our sensory capacity to sustain pain, through inventing new forms of inflicting it)? Perhaps, the ultimate Sadean image on an "undead" victim of the 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 a small idyllic Californian city, 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 all people around him are effectively actors and extras in a gigantic show. The most recent example of this is Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), with Jim Carrey playing the small town clerk who gradually discovers the truth that he is the hero of a 24-hours permanent TV show: his hometown is constructed on a gigantic studio set, with cameras following him permanently. Among its predecessors, it is worth mentioning Philip Dick's *Time Out of Joint* (1959), in which a hero living a modest daily life in a small idyllic Californian city of the late 50s, gradually discovers that the whole town is a fake staged to keep him satisfied... The underlying experience of *Time Out of Joint* and of *The Truman Show* is that the late capitalist consumerist Californian paradise is, in its very hyper-reality, in a way IRREAL, substanceless, deprived of the material inertia. And the same "derealization" of the horror went on after the WTC bombings: while the number of 6000 victims is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see - no dismembered bodies, no blood,

no desperate faces of the dying people... in clear contrast to the reporting from the Third World catastrophies where the whole point was to produce a scoop of some gruesome detail: Somalis dying of hunger, raped Bosnian women, men with throats cut. These shots were always accompanied with the advance-warning that "some of the images you will see are extremely graphic and may hurt children" - a warning which we NEVER heard in the reports on the WTC collapse. Is this not yet another proof of how, even in this tragic moments, the distance which separates Us from Them, from their reality, is maintained: the real horror happens THERE, not HERE? /"2

So it is not only that Hollywood stages a semblance of real life deprived of the weight and inertia of materiality - in the late capitalist consumerist society, "real social life" itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbors behaving in "real" life as stage actors and extras... Again, the ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian de-spiritualized universe is the dematerialization of the "real life" itself, its reversal into a spectral show. Among others, Christopher Isherwood gave expression to this unreality of the 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" is here literally realized, as the gigantic metal sphere that envelopes and isolates the entire city. Years ago, a series of science-fiction films like *Zardoz* or *Logan's Run* forecasted today's postmodern predicament by extending this fantasy to the community itself: the 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 analyzed 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 above right and hits her head.³ Was the plane which hit the WTC tower not literally the ultimate Hitchcockian blot, the

anamorphic stain which denaturalized the idyllic well-known New York landscape?

The Wachowski brothers' hit *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 the "real reality," he sees a desolate landscape littered with burned ruins - what remained of Chicago after a global war. The resistance leader Morpheus utters the ironic greeting: "Welcome to the desert of the real." Was it not something of the similar order that took place in New York on September 11? 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 in the catastrophe big productions.

When we hear how the bombings were a totally unexpected shock, how the unimaginable Impossible happened, one should recall the other defining catastrophe from the beginning of the XXth century, that of *Titanic*: it was also a shock, but the space for it was already prepared in ideological fantasizing, since *Titanic* was the symbol of the might of the XIXth century industrial civilization. Does the same not hold also for these bombings? Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with the 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 of the often-mentioned association of the attacks with the Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which 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 turn around the standard reading according to which, the WTC explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory Sphere: quite on the contrary, it is prior to the WTC collapse than we lived in our reality, perceiving the Third World horrors as something which is not effectively part of our social reality, as something which exists (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen - and what happened on September 11 is that this screen fantasmatic apparition

entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e., the symbolic coordinates which determine what we experience as reality). The fact that, after September 11, the opening of many "of the blockbuster" movies with scenes which bear a resemblance to the WTC collapse (large buildings on fire or under attack, terrorist actions...) was postponed (or 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. Of course, the point is not to play a pseudo-postmodern game of reducing the WTC collapse to just another media spectacle, reading it as a catastrophe version of the snuff porno movies; the question we should have asked ourselves when we stared at the TV screens on September 11 is simply: WHERE DID WE ALREADY SEE THE SAME THING OVER AND OVER AGAIN?

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 "center of financial capitalism," but, rather, the notion that the two WTC towers stood for the center of the VIRTUAL capitalism, of financial speculations disconnected from the sphere of material production. The shattering impact of the bombings can only be accounted for only against the background of the borderline which 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.

Is, consequently, Osama Bin Laden, the suspected mastermind behind the bombings, 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 intensity is when James Bond penetrates the master-criminal's secret domain and locates there the site of intense labor (distilling and packaging the drugs, constructing a rocket

that will destroy New York...). When the master-criminal, after capturing Bond, usually takes him on a tour of his illegal factory, is this not the closest Hollywood comes to the socialist-realist proud presentation of the production in a factory? And the function of Bond's intervention, of course, is to explode in firecracks this site of production, allowing us to return to the daily semblance of our existence in a world with the "disappearing working class." Is it not that, in the exploding WTC towers, this violence directed at the threatening Outside turned back at us?

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 the deceased attackers are quoted as "chilling documents" - why? Are they not exactly what one would expect from dedicated fighters on a suicidal mission? If one takes away references to Koran, in what do they differ from, say, the CIA special manuals? Were the CIA manuals for the Nicaraguan contras with detailed descriptions on how to perturb the daily life, up to how to clog the water toilets, not of the same order - if anything, MORE cowardly? When, on September 25, 2001, the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar appealed to Americans to use their own judgement in responding to the devastating attacks on the World Trade Center and the 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 bombings 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 the export of ruthless violence and

destruction into the "barbarian" Outside: the long story from the conquest of America to the slaughter in Congo. Cruel and indifferent as it may sound, we should also, now more than ever, bear in mind that the actual effect of these bombings 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 their death could have been easily cut back with relatively small financial means. The US just got the taste of what goes on around the world on a daily basis, from Sarajevo to Grozny, from Ruanda and Congo to Sierra Leone. If one adds to the situation in New York rapist gangs and a dozen or so snipers blindly targeting people who walk along the streets, one gets an idea about what Sarajevo was a decade ago.

When, days after September 11 2001, our gaze was transfixed by the images of the plane hitting one of the WTC towers, all of us were forced to experience 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 it was jouissance at its purest. It is when we watched on TV screen the two WTC towers collapsing, that it became possible to experience the falsity of the "reality TV shows": even if these shows are "for real," people still act in them - they simply play themselves. The standard disclaimer in a novel ("characters in this text are a fiction, every resemblance with the real life characters is purely contingent") holds also for the participants of the reality soaps: what we see there are fictional characters, even if they play themselves for the real. 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 "misused" 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.

Along the same lines, Rightist commentators like George Will also immediately proclaimed the end of the American "holiday from history" - the impact of reality shattering the isolated tower of the liberal tolerant attitude and the Cultural Studies focus on textuality. Now, we are forced to strike back, to deal with real enemies in the real world... However, WHOM to strike? Whatever the response, it will never hit the RIGHT target, bringing us full satisfaction. The ridicule of America attacking Afghanistan cannot but strike the eye: if the greatest power in the world will destroy one of the poorest countries in which peasant barely survive on barren hills, will this not be the ultimate case of the impotent acting out? Afghanistan is otherwise an ideal target: a country ALREADY reduced to rubble, with no infrastructure, repeatedly destroyed by war for the last two decades... one cannot avoid the surmise that the choice of Afghanistan will be also determined by economic considerations: is it not the best procedure to act out one's anger at a country for which no one cares and where there is nothing to destroy? Unfortunately, the possible choice of Afghanistan recalls the anecdote about the madman who searches for the lost key beneath a street light; when asked why there when he lost the key in a dark corner backwards, he answers: "But it is easier to search under strong light!" Is not the ultimate irony that the whole of Kabul already looks like downtown Manhattan?

To succumb to the urge to act now and retaliate means precisely to avoid confronting the true dimensions of what occurred on September 11 - it means an act whose true aim is to lull us into the secure conviction that nothing has REALLY changed. The true long-term threat are 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, what about the use of lethal gas, what about the prospect of the DNA terrorism (developing poisons which will affect only people who share a determinate genome)? 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 the passage to its electronic form, when the last traces of its materiality will disappear - it is only at this stage that it will assume the form of an indestructible spectral presence: I owe you 1000 \$, and no matter how many material notes I burn, I still owe you 1000 \$, the debt is inscribed somewhere in the virtual digital space... Does the same not hold also for warfare? Far from pointing towards the XXIth century warfare, the WTC twin towers explosion and collapse in September 2001 were rather the last spectacular cry of the XXth century warfare. What awaits us is something much more uncanny: the specter of an "immaterial" war where the attack is invisible - viruses, poisons which can be anywhere and nowhere. At the level of visible material reality, nothing happens, no big explosions, and yet the known universe starts to collapse, life disintegrates... We are entering a new era of paranoiac warfare in which the biggest task will be to identify the enemy and his weapons. Instead of a quick acting out, one should confront these difficult questions: what will "war" mean in the XXIst century? Who will be "them," if they are, clearly, neither states nor criminal gangs? One cannot resist the temptation to recall here the Freudian opposition of the public Law and its obscene superego double: are, along the same line, the "international terrorist organizations" not the obscene double of the big multinational corporations - the ultimate rhizomatic machine, all-present, although 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 contrafiction, with their particular/exclusive content and their global dynamic functioning?

There is a partial truth in the notion of the "clash of civilizations" attested here - witness the surprise of the average American: "How is it possible that these people display and practice such a disregard for their own lives?" Is the obverse of this surprise not the rather sad fact that we, in the First World countries, find it more and more difficult even to imagine a public or universal Cause for which one would be ready to sacrifice one's life? When, after the bombings, even the Taliban foreign minister said that he can "feel the pain" of the American children, did he not thereby confirm the hegemonic ideological role of this Bill Clinton's

trademark phrase? It effectively appears as if the split between First World 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 this ideological antagonism between the Western consumerist way of life and the 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 their self-destruction. (One cannot but note the significant role of the stock exchange in the bombings: 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 the key sign of things returning to normal.) Furthermore, if one perceives this opposition through the lenses of the Hegelian struggle between Master and Servant, one cannot avoid noting the paradox: although we in the West are perceived as exploiting masters, it is us who occupy the position of the Servant who, since 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 Masters ready to risk their life...

However, this notion of the "clash of civilizations" has to be thoroughly rejected: what we are witnessing today are rather clashes WITHIN each civilization. Furthermore, 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 the past centuries, Islam was significantly more tolerant towards other religions than Christianity. NOW it is also the time to remember that it was through the Arabs that, in the Middle Ages, we in the Western Europe regained access to our Ancient Greek legacy. While in no way excusing today's horror acts, 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 a closer look, what IS this "clash of civilizations" effectively about? Are all real-life "clashes" not clearly related to global capitalism? The Muslim "fundamentalist" target is not only global capitalism's corroding impact on social life, but ALSO the corrupted "traditionalist" regimes in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, etc. The most horrifying slaughters (those in Ruanda, Kongo, and Sierra Leone) not only took place - and are taking place - within the SAME "civilization," but are also clearly related to the interplay of global economic interests. Even in the few cases which would vaguely fit the definition of the "clash of civilisations" (Bosnia and Kosovo, south of Sudan, etc.), the shadow of other interests is easily discernible.

Every feature attributed to the Other is already present in the very heart of the US: murderous fanaticism? There are today in the US itself more than two millions of the Rightist populist "fundamentalists" who also practice the terror of their own, legitimized by (their understanding of) Christianity. Since America is in a way "harboring" them, should the US Army have punished the US themselves after the Oklashoma bombing? And what about the way Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson reacted to the bombings, perceiving them as a sign that God lifted up its protection of the US because of the sinful lives of the Americans, putting the blame on hedonist materialism, liberalism, and rampant sexuality, and claiming that America got what it deserved? The fact that very same condemnation of the "liberal" America as the one from the Muslim Other came from the very heart of the Amerique profonde should give us as to think. America as a safe haven? When a New Yorker commented on how, after the bombings, one can no longer walk safely on the city's streets, the irony of it was that, well before the bombings, the streets of New York were well-known for the dangers of being attacked or, at least, mugged - if anything, the bombings gave rise to a new sense of solidarity, with the scenes of young African-Americans helping an old Jewish gentlemen to cross the street, scenes unimaginable a couple of days ago.

Now, in the days immediately following the bombings, it is as if we dwell in the unique time between a traumatic event and its symbolic impact, like in those brief moment after we are deeply cut, and before the full

extent of the pain strikes us - it is open how the events will be symbolized, what their symbolic efficiency will be, what acts they will be evoked to justify. If nothing else, one can clearly experience yet again the limitation of our democracy: decisions are being made which will affect the fate of all of us, and all of us just wait, aware that we are utterly powerless. Even here, in these moments of utmost tension, this link is not automatic but contingent. There are already the first bad omens, like the sudden resurrection, in the public discourse, of the old Cold war term "free world": the struggle is now the one between the "free world" and the forces of darkness and terror. The question to be asked here is, of course: who then belongs to the UNFREE world? Are, say, China or Egypt part of this free world? The actual message is, of course, that the old division between the Western liberal-democratic countries and all the others is again enforced.

The day after the bombing, I got a message from a journal which was just about to publish a longer text of mine on Lenin, telling me that they decided to postpone its publication - they considered inopportune to publish a text on Lenin immediately after the bombing. Does this not points towards the ominous ideological rearticulations which will follow, with a new Berufsverbot (prohibition to employ radicals) much stronger and more widespread than the one in the Germany of the 70s? These days, one often hears the phrase that the struggle is now the one for democracy - true, but not quite in the way this phrase is usually meant. Already, some Leftist friends of mine wrote me that, in these difficult moments, it is better to keep one's head down and not push forward with our agenda. Against this temptation to duck out the crisis, one should insist that NOW the Left should provide a better analysis - otherwise, it concedes in advance its political AND ethical defeat in the face of the acts of quite genuine ordinary people heroism (like the passengers who, in a model of rational ethical act, overtook the kidnappers and provokes the early crush of the plane: if one is condemned to die soon, one should gather the strength and die in such a way as to prevent other people dying).

When, in the aftermath of September 11, the Americans en masse rediscovered their American pride, displaying flags and

singing together in the public, one should emphasize more than ever that there is nothing "innocent" in this rediscovery of the American innocence, in getting rid of the sense of historical guilt or irony which prevented many of them to fully assume being American. What this gesture amounted to was to "objectively" assume the burden of all that being "American" stood for in the past - an exemplary case of ideological interpellation, of fully assuming one's symbolic mandate, which enters the stage after the perplexity caused by some historical trauma. In the traumatic aftermath of September 11, when the old security seemed momentarily shattered, what more "natural" gesture than to take refuge in the innocence of the firm ideological identification? 4 However, it is precisely such moments of transparent innocence, of "return to basics," when the gesture of identification seems "natural," that are, from the standpoint of the critique of ideology, the most obscure one's, even, in a certain way, obscurity itself. Let us recall another such innocently-transparent moment, the endlessly reproduced video-shot from Beijing's Avenue of Eternal Peace at the height of the "troubles" in 1989, of a tiny young man with a can who, alone, stands in front of an advancing gigantic tank, and courageously tries to prevent its advance, so that, when the tank tries to bypass him by turning right or left, the man also moves aside, again standing in its way:

"The representation is so powerful that it demolishes all other understandings. This streetscene, 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."⁵

And, again, this very moment of transparent clarity (things are rendered at their utmost naked: a single man against the raw force of the State) is, for our Western gaze, sustained by a cobweb of ideological implications, 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 implications, against the background of which the shot exerts its full direct impact, these "mediations" which sustain the shot's immediate impact, are NOT present for a Chinese observer, since the above-mentioned series of oppositions is inherent

to the European ideological legacy. And the same ideological background also overdetermines, say, our perception of the horrifying images of tiny individuals jumping from the burning WTC tower into certain death.

So what about the phrase which reverberates everywhere, "Nothing will be the same after September 11"? Significantly, this phrase is never further elaborated - it just an empty gesture of saying something "deep" without really knowing what we want to say. So our first reaction to it should be: Really? Is it, rather, not that the only thing that effectively changed was that America was forced to realize the kind of world it was part of? On the other hand, such changes in perception are never without consequences, since the way we perceive our situation determines the way we act in it. Recall the processes of collapse of a political regime, say, the collapse of the Communist regimes in the Eastern Europe in 1990: at a certain moment, people all of a sudden became aware that the game is over, that the Communists are lost. The break was purely symbolic, nothing changed "in reality" - and, nonetheless, from this moment on, the final collapse of the regime was just a question of days... What if something of the same order DID occur on September 11?

We don't yet know what consequences in economy, ideology, politics, war, this event will have, but one thing is sure: the US, which, till now, perceived itself as an island exempted from this kind of violence, witnessing this kind of things only from the safe distance of the TV screen, is now directly involved. So the alternative is: will Americans decide to fortify further their "sphere," or to 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 aggressivity towards the threatening Outside, in short: to a paranoiac acting out. Or America will finally risk stepping through the fantasmatic screen separating it from the Outside World, 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 bombings: the only way to ensure that it will not happen HERE again is to prevent it going on ANYWHERE

ELSE. In short, America should learn to humbly accept its own vulnerability as part of this world, enacting the punishment of those responsible as a sad duty, not as an exhilarating retaliation.

The WTC bombings again confront us with the necessity to resist the temptation of a double blackmail. If one simply, only and unconditionally condemns it, one cannot but appear to endorse the blatantly ideological position of the American innocence under attack by the Third World Evil; if one draws attention to the deeper socio-political causes of the Arab extremism, one cannot but appear to blame the victim which ultimately got what it deserved... The only consequent solution is here 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 one 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 in itself a false abstraction. The same goes for the more ideological clash of interpretations: one can claim that the attack on the WTC was an attack on what is worth fighting for in democratic freedoms - 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 center and symbol of global financial capitalism. This, of course, in no way entails the compromise notion of shared guilt (terrorists are to blame, but, partially, also Americans are also to blame...) - 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 of its other, of the forces which resist it on "fundamentalist" ideological grounds.

Consequently, of the two main stories which emerged after September 11, both are worse, as Stalin would have put it. The American patriotic narrative - the innocence under siege, the surge of patriotic pride - is, of course, vain; however, is the Leftist

narrative (with its Schadenfreude: the US got what they deserved, what they were 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 mathematics reminding one of the holocaust revisionism (what are the 6000 dead against millions in Ruanda, Kongo, etc.)? And what about the fact that CIA (co)created Taliban and Bin Laden, financing and helping them to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan? Why was this fact quoted as an argument AGAINST attacking them? Would it not be much more logical to claim that it is precisely their duty to get us rid of the monster they created? The moment one thinks in the terms of "yes, the WTC collapse was a tragedy, but one should not fully solidarize with the victims, since this would mean supporting US imperialism," the ethical catastrophe is already here: the only appropriate stance is the 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 make a simple mental experiment: if you detect in yourself any restraint to fully empathize 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 sympathize, but merely the mauvaise foi which bears witness to your implicit patronizing racist attitude towards the 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 taken place around the world on a daily basis - but one has to do it without getting involved in the obscene mathematics of guilt.)

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 in it), the reaction of the Western powers till now was surprisingly considerate (no wonder it caused the violent anti-American outburst of Ariel Sharon!). Perhaps the greatest

irony of the situation is that the main "collateral damage" of the Western reaction is the focus on the plight of the Afghani refugees, and, more generally, on the catastrophic food and health situation in Afghanistan, so that, sometimes, military action against Taliban is almost presented as a means to guarantee the safe delivery of the humanitarian aid - as Tony Blair said, perhaps, we will have to bomb 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 bombings.

Another way in which the Left miserably failed is that, in the weeks after the bombing, it reverted to the old mantra "Give peace a chance! War does not stop violence!" - a true case of hysterical precipitation, reacting to something which will not even happen in the expected form. Instead of the concrete analysis of the new complex situation after the bombings, of the chances it gives to the Left to propose its own interpretation of the events, we got the blind ritualistic chant "No war!", which fails to address even the elementary fact, de facto acknowledged by the US government itself (through its postponing of the 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 Bush showed more power of reflection than most of the Left!

No wonder that anti-Americanism was most discernible in "big" European nations, especially France and Germany: it is part of their resistance to globalization. One often hears the complaint that the recent trend of globalization threatens the sovereignty of the 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-rang (ex-)world powers, countries like United Kingdom, Germany and France: what they fear is that, once fully immersed in the newly emerging global Empire, they will be reduced at the same level as, say, Austria, Belgium or even Luxembourg. 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 is sold to American deconstructionism, the 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 weight between larger and smaller Nation-States should thus be counted among the beneficial effects of globalization: beneath the contemptuous deriding of the new Eastern European post-Communist states, it is easy to discern the contours of the wounded Narcissism of the European "great nations." 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 the "small" nationalism) would be helpful. Interestingly, the same matrix was reproduced within ex-Yugoslavia: not only for the Serbs, but even for the majority of the Western powers, Serbia was self-evidently perceived as the only ethnic group with enough substance to form its own state. Throughout the 90s, even the radical democratic critics of Milosevic who rejected Serb nationalism, acted on the presupposition that, among the ex-Yugoslav republics, it is only Serbia which has democratic potential: after overthrowing Milosevic, Serbia alone can turn into a thriving democratic state, while other ex-Yugoslav nations are too "provincial" to sustain their own democratic State... is this not the echo of Friedrich Engels' well-known scathing remarks about how the small Balkan nations are politically reactionary since their very existence is a reaction, a survival of the past?

America's "holiday from history" was a fake: America's peace was bought by the catastrophes going on elsewhere. These days, the predominant point of view is that of an innocent gaze confronting unspeakable Evil which stroke from the Outside - and, again, apropos this gaze, one should gather the strength and apply to it also Hegel's well-known dictum that the

Evil resides (also) in the innocent gaze itself which perceives Evil all around itself. There is thus an element of truth even in the most constricted Moral Majority vision of the depraved America dedicated to mindless pleasures, in the conservative horror at this netherworld of sexploitation and pathological violence: what they don't get is merely 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 the infamous Jimmy Swaggart claimed that the fact that he visited prostitutes only gave additional strength to his preaching (he knew from intimate struggle what he was preaching against), although undoubtedly hypocritical at the immediate subjective level, is nonetheless objectively true.

Can one imagine a greater irony than the fact that the first codename for the US operation against terrorists was "Infinite Justice" (later changed in response to the reproach of the American Islam clerics that only God can exert infinite justice)? Taken seriously, this name is profoundly ambiguous: either it means that the Americans have the right to ruthlessly destroy not only all terrorists but also all

who gave them material, moral, ideological etc. support (and this process will be by definition endless in the precise sense of the Hegelian "bad infinity" - the work will never be really accomplished, 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 exert justice are involved in what we are fighting against. When, on September 22 2001, Derrida received the Theodor Adorno award, he referred in his speech to the WTC bombings: "My unconditional compassion, addressed at the victims of the September 11, does not prevent me to say it loudly: with regard to this crime, I do not believe that anyone is politically guiltless." This self-relating, this inclusion of oneself into the picture, is the only true "infinite justice."

In the electoral campaign, President Bush named as the most important person in his life Jesus Christ. Now he has a unique chance to prove that he meant it seriously: for him, as for all Americans today, "Love thy neighbor!" means "Love the Muslims!" OR IT MEANS NOTHING AT ALL.

1. See Alain Badiou, *Le siecle*, forthcoming from Editions du Seuil, Paris.

2. Another case of ideological censorship: when fireworkers' widows were interviewed on 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 deceived 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... useless to add that this fragment was shown only once and then disappeared from the repetitions of the same block.

3. See Chapter III in Raymond Bellour, *The Analysis of Film*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2000.

4. I rely here on my critical elaboration of Althusser's notion of interpellation in chapter 3 of *Metastases of Enjoyment*, London: Verso Books 1995.

5. Michael Dutton, *Streetlife China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, p. 17.

*10/7/01 - Reflections on WTC - an earlier version of the book, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*.