

Tolerance as an Ideological Category

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The Culturalization of Politics

Why are so many problems today perceived as problems of intolerance, not as problems of inequality, exploitation, injustice? Why is the proposed remedy tolerance, not emancipation, political struggle, even armed struggle? The immediate answer is the liberal multiculturalist's basic ideological operation: the culturalization of politics. Political differences, differences conditioned by political inequality, economic exploitation, and so on, are naturalized and neutralized into cultural differences, different ways of life, which are something given, something that cannot be overcome, but must be merely tolerated. To this, of course, one should answer in Benjaminian terms: from culturalization of politics to politicization of culture. The cause of this culturalization is the retreat and failure of direct political solutions (the welfare state, socialist projects, and so on). Tolerance is their postpolitical ersatz.

The retreat from more substantive visions of justice heralded by the promulgation of tolerance today is part of a more general depoliticization of citizenship and power and retreat from political life itself. The cultivation of tolerance as a political end implicitly constitutes a rejection of politics as a domain in which conflict can be productively articulated and addressed, a domain in which citizens can be transformed by their participation.¹

Perhaps nothing expresses better the inconsistency of the postpolitical liberal project than its implicit paradoxical identification of culture and nature, the two traditional opposites: culture itself is naturalized, posited as something given. (The idea of culture as second nature is, of course, an old one.) It was Samuel Huntington who proposed the most successful formula of this culturalization of politics by locating the main source of to-

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1. Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, N.J., 2006), p. 89; hereafter abbreviated RA.

day's conflicts in the "clash of civilizations," what one is tempted to call the Huntington's disease of our time. As he put it, since the end of the cold war, the "Iron Curtain of ideology" has been replaced by the "Velvet Curtain of culture."² Huntington's dark vision of the clash of civilizations may appear to be the very opposite of Francis Fukuyama's bright prospect of the end of history in the guise of a worldwide liberal democracy; what can be more different from Fukuyama's pseudo-Hegelian idea of the end of history (the final formula of the best possible social order was found in capitalist liberal democracy, there is now no space for further conceptual progress, there are just empirical obstacles to be overcome) than Huntington's clash of civilizations as the main political struggle in the twenty-first century?³ The clash of civilizations *is* politics at the end of history.

Contemporary liberalism forms a complex network of ideologies and practices, both institutional and noninstitutional; however, underlying this multiplicity is a basic opposition on which the entire liberal vision relies: the opposition between those who are ruled by culture, totally determined by the lifeworld into which they were born, and those who merely enjoy their culture, who are elevated above it, free to choose it. This brings us to the next paradox. The ultimate source of barbarism is culture itself—one's direct identification with a particular culture, which renders one intolerant towards other cultures. This basic opposition is thus related to the opposition between collective and individual. Culture is by definition collective and particular, parochial, exclusive of other cultures, while—next paradox—it is the individual who is universal, the site of universality, insofar as he or she extricates and elevates him- or herself above his or her particular culture. Since, however, every individual has to be somehow particularized, has to dwell in a particular lifeworld, the individual must be resolved into universal and particular, public and private, where *private* covers both the safe haven of family and the nonstate public sphere of civil society (the economy). In liberalism, culture survives, but privatized—as way of life, a set of beliefs and practices, not the public network of norms and rules. Culture is thus literally transubstantiated.

2. Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72 (Summer 1993): 31.

3. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992; New York, 2006).

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The same sets of beliefs and practices change from the binding power of a collective into an expression of personal and private idiosyncrasies.

Insofar as culture itself is the source of barbarism and intolerance, the inevitable conclusion is that the only way to overcome intolerance and violence is to extricate the core of the subject's being, its universal essence, from culture; in its core, the subject has to be *kulturlos*. (This, incidentally, gives a new twist to the infamous Nazi refrain "when I hear the word *culture*, I reach for my gun"—not "when I hear the word *civilization*.") Wendy Brown problematizes this liberal notion on a multitude of levels. First of all, this subject is not truly universal, *kulturlos*. Since, in our societies, a sexualized division of labor still predominates that confers a male twist on basic liberal categories (autonomy, public activity, competition) and relegates women to the private sphere of family solidarity, liberalism itself, in its opposition of private and public, harbors male dominance. Furthermore, it is only modern Western capitalist culture for which autonomy and individual freedom have a higher status than collective solidarity, connection, responsibility for dependent others, and the duty to respect the customs of one's community. Again, liberalism itself privileges a certain culture, the modern Western one. Brown's second line of attack concerns the freedom of choice. Here, also, liberalism shows a strong bias. It shows intolerance when individuals of other cultures are not given freedom of choice (clitoridectomy, child brideship, infanticide, polygamy, family rape); however, it ignores the tremendous pressure that, for example, compels women in our liberal society to undergo plastic surgery, cosmetic implants, and Botox injections in order to remain competitive on the sex market. Finally, there are all the self-referential paradoxes centered on the impasse of tolerating intolerance. Liberalist multiculturalism preaches tolerance between cultures while making it clear that true tolerance is fully possible only in individualist Western culture and thus legitimating even military interventions as an extreme mode of fighting the other's intolerance. For example, some U.S. feminists supported the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq as a form of helping the women in these countries. This may be a self-referential paradox, but Brown tries to get too much mileage out of it. A radical liberal would simply assume it without any inconsistency. If I believe in individual choice and tolerance of different cultures, of course this obliges me to be intolerant towards cultures that prevent choice and tolerance. Brown makes the question easy here by focusing on today's anti-Islamism—but what about, say, the struggle against Nazism? Is it not also a paradox that the allied bloc fought a brutal war against fascism on behalf of tolerance and peace? So what?

There are limits to tolerance, and to be tolerant towards intolerance means simply to support (“tolerate”) intolerance.

When seen in Brown’s framework, the liberal idea of free choice—if the subject wants it, he or she can opt for the parochial way of the tradition into which he or she was born, but he or she has to be presented with alternatives and then make a free choice of it—always gets caught in a deadlock. While Amish adolescents are formally given a free choice, the conditions they find themselves in while they are making the choice make the choice unfree. In order for them to have an effectively free choice, they would have to be properly informed of all the options, educated in them. But the only way to do this would be to extract them from their embeddedness in the Amish community—to effectively change them into mainstream U.S. citizens. This also clearly demonstrates the limitations of the predominant liberal attitude towards Muslim women wearing veils; they can do it if it is their free choice and not an option imposed on them by their husbands or family. But the moment women wear veils as the result of their free individual choice (say, in order to realize their own spirituality), the meaning of wearing them changes completely; it is no longer a sign of their belonging to the Muslim community but an expression of their idiosyncratic individuality. The difference is the same as the one between a Chinese farmer eating Chinese food because his village has been doing it from time immemorial and a citizen of a Western megalopolis deciding to go and have dinner at a local Chinese restaurant. The lesson of all this is that a choice is always a metachoice, a choice of the modality of the choice itself; it is only the woman who does not choose to wear a veil who effectively chooses a choice. This is why, in our secular societies of choice, people who maintain a substantial religious belonging are in a subordinate position. Even if they are allowed to maintain their belief, this belief is tolerated as their idiosyncratic personal choice or opinion; the moment they present it publicly as what it is for them (a matter of substantial belonging), they are accused of fundamentalism. This is why the display of religious symbols and prayer in public schools are such sensitive topics; their advocates open themselves to the reproach of blurring the line of separation between private and public, of staining the neutral frame of the public space. What this means is that the subject of free choice (in the Western tolerant, multicultural sense) can only emerge as the result of an extremely violent process of being torn out of one’s particular lifeworld, of being cut off from one’s roots.

The philosophical underpinning of this ideology of the universal liberal subject and, for this reason, the main philosophical target of Brown’s critique of liberalism is the Cartesian subject, especially in its Kantian ver-

sion—the subject that is capable of detaching itself from its particular cultural and social roots, asserting its full autonomy and universality. “Rational argument and criticism, indeed the rationality of criticism, are not simply the sign but also the basis of the moral autonomy of persons, an autonomy that presupposes independence from others, independence from authority in general, *and* the independence of reason itself” (RA, p. 152). The grounding experience of Descartes’s position of universal doubt is precisely a multicultural experience of how one’s own tradition is no better than what appears as the eccentric traditions of others:

But, having learned, in college, that one could not imagine anything so strange and so little credible that it had not been said by one of the philosophers; and, having recognized since then, in traveling, that all those who have sentiments very contrary to ours are not, for that reason, barbarians or savages, but that many of them make use of reason as much as or more than we do.⁴

The main feature of the cogito is its insubstantial character: “It cannot be spoken of positively; no sooner than it is, its function is lost.”⁵ The cogito is not a substantial entity but a pure structural function, an empty place. As such, it can only emerge in the interstices of substantial communal systems. The link between the emergence of the cogito and the disintegration and loss of substantial communal identities is thus inherent, and this holds even more for Spinoza than for Descartes. Spinoza criticized the Cartesian cogito as a positive ontological entity, but implicitly he fully endorsed it as the position of the enunciated, the one that speaks from radical self doubt. Even more than Descartes Spinoza spoke from an interstice of social spaces, neither a Jew nor a Christian.

Spinoza is a philosopher as such, with his subjective stance of a double outcast (excommunicated from the very community of the outcasts of Western civilization), which is why one should use him as a template to discover the traces of a similar displacement, a communal out-of-jointness, in all other great philosophers, up to Nietzsche, who was ashamed of the Germans and proudly emphasized his alleged Polish roots. For a philosopher, ethnic roots, national identity, and so on are simply not categories of truth. Or, to put it in precise Kantian terms, when we reflect upon our ethnic roots, we engage in a private use of reason, constrained by contingent dogmatic presuppositions; that is, we act as “immature” indi-

4. René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Conducting One’s Reason Well and of Seeking the Truth in the Sciences*, trans. and ed. George Heffernan (Notre Dame, Ind., 1994), p. 33.

5. Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, trans. Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), p. 134.

viduals, not as free human beings who dwell in the dimension of the universality of reason. The opposition between Kant and Rorty with regard to this distinction of public and private is rarely noted but nonetheless crucial. They each sharply distinguish between the two domains, but with an opposite sense. For Rorty, the great contemporary liberal if there is one, *private* indicates the space of our idiosyncrasies where creativity and wild imagination rule and moral considerations are (almost) suspended, while *public* indicates the space of social interaction where we should obey the rules so that we do not hurt others; in other words, the private is the space of irony while the public is the space of solidarity. For Kant, however, the public space of the world-civil-society designates the paradox of the universal singularity, of a singular subject who, in a kind of short circuit, bypassing the mediation of the particular, directly participates in the universal. This is what Kant, in the famous passage of his "What Is Enlightenment?" means by *public* as opposed to *private*. *Private* is not individual, as opposed to one's communal ties, but the very communal-institutional order of one's particular identification, while *public* is the transnational universality of the exercise of one's reason. The paradox of the underlying formula "Think freely, but obey!" (which, of course, poses a series of problems of its own, since it also relies on the distinction between the performative level of social authority and the level of free thinking whose performativity is suspended) is thus that one participates in the universal dimension of the public sphere precisely as a singular individual extracted from or even opposed to one's substantial communal identification; one is truly universal only as radically singular, in the interstices of communal identities. It is Kant who should be read here as the critic of Rorty. In his vision of the public space of the unconstrained free exercise of reason, he asserts the dimension of emancipatory universality outside the confines of one's social identity, of one's position within the order of (social) being—the dimension missing in Rorty.

The Effective Universality

It is here that we encounter Brown's fateful limitation. First, she ignores the tremendously liberating aspect of experiencing one's own cultural background as contingent. There is an authentic core to political liberalism. Let us not forget that liberalism emerged in Europe after the catastrophe of the Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants; it was an answer to the pressing question, How could people who differ in their fundamental religious allegiances coexist? It demands from citizens more than a condescending tolerance of diverging religions, more than tolerance as a temporary compromise. It demands that we respect other reli-

gions not *in spite of* our innermost religious convictions but *on account of* them; respect for others is a proof of true belief. This attitude is best expressed by Abu Hanifa, the great eighth-century Muslim intellectual: “Difference of opinion in the community is a token of Divine mercy.”⁶ Moreover, it demands that this list of different positions include atheists.

It is only within this ideological space that one can experience one’s identity as something contingent and discursively constructed; to cut a long story short, philosophically, there is no Judith Butler (with her theory of gender identity as performatively enacted) without the Cartesian subject. This is also why her analysis, her image of Western liberalism, is fatefully distorted; it is suspicious how obsessively, almost desperately, she tries to characterize liberal multiculturalist tolerance as essentialist, as relying on an essentialist notion that our socio-symbolic identity is determined by our stable natural-cultural essence. But, whatever one can accuse liberal multiculturalism of, one should at least admit that it is profoundly antiessentialist. It is its barbarian other that is perceived as essentialist and thereby false, like fundamentalism, which naturalizes or essentializes historically conditioned contingent traits. One can thus claim that Brown remains within the horizon of tolerant liberalism, raising it to a self-reflexive level; what she wants is a liberalism (multiculturalism) that would expose to critique also its own norms and procedures, becoming aware of its own intolerant eurocentric bias:

The alternative is not abandoning or rejecting liberalism but rather using the occasion to open liberal regimes to reflection on the false conceits of their cultural and religious secularism, and to the possibility of being transformed by their encounter with what liberalism has conveniently taken to be its constitutive outside and its hostile Other. . . . These deconstructive moves bear the possibility of conceiving and nourishing a liberalism more self-conscious of and receptive to its own always already present hybridity, its potentially rich failure to hive off organicism from individuality and culture from political principles, law, or policy. This would be a liberalism potentially more modest, more restrained in its imperial and colonial impulses, but also one more capable of the multicultural justice to which it aspires. [RA, pp. 174–75]

However, one can argue that Brown fails to apply the self-reflexive move that she demands of liberal multiculturalism to her own edifice. While she

6. Quoted in Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Islam* (London, 2004), p. 77.

convincingly demonstrates the very procedure by means of which liberal multiculturalist discourse presents itself as universal, neutral with regard to all particular cultural roots, she continues to rely on categories that remain Eurocentric, as is her basic opposition of contingentism and essentialism. To modern Europeans, other civilizations are caught in their specific culture while they themselves are flexible, constantly changing their presuppositions. The move from sex as essentialist identity to sex as a contingent discursive construct is the move from traditionalism to modernity. Brown repeatedly criticizes the “liberal conceit” that, while traditional individuals are determined by their cultures, modern liberal subjects are above it, able to step in and out of different particular cultures—which means exactly that they are no longer essentialists.

Or, to make the same point in a more direct way: the self-reflexive sensitivity to one’s own limitation can only emerge against the background of the notions of autonomy and rationality promoted by liberalism. That is to say, Brown posits herself within the tradition of the critique of ideology, of mere formal freedom, which grew out of the very same liberal matrix she is criticizing. One can, of course, argue that, in a way, the Western situation is even worse than nonliberal cultures because in it oppression itself is obliterated, masked as a free choice (“Why do you complain? You chose to do it”), and Brown is right in depicting how our freedom of choice often functions as a mere formal gesture of consenting to one’s oppression and exploitation. However, the lesson of Hegel here is that form matters, that form has an autonomy and efficiency of its own. So when we compare a Third World woman forced to undergo clitoridectomy or promised in marriage when a small child with the First World woman free to choose painful cosmetic surgery, the form of freedom matters—it opens up a space for critical reflection.

What is conspicuously missing from Brown’s account is the obverse of the dismissal of other cultures as intolerant, barbarian, and so on: the all-too-slick admission of their superiority. Is not one of the *topoi* of Western liberalism the elevation of the other as leading a life more harmonious and organic, less competitive, aiming at cooperation rather than domination, and so on? Linked to this is another operation: the blindness to oppression on behalf of the respect for the other’s culture. Even freedom of choice is here often evoked in a perverted way. Those people have chosen their way of life, widow burning included, and, deplorable and repulsive as it appears to us, we should respect this choice.

This brings us to Brown’s next limitation. Her critique of liberalism remains at the standard Marxist level of denouncing false universality, of showing how a position that presents itself as neutral or universal effec-

tively privileges a certain (heterosexual, male, Christian) culture. More precisely, she remains within the standard postmodern, antiessentialist position, a kind of political version of Foucault's notion of sex as generated by the multitude of the practices of sexuality. "Man," the bearer of human rights, is generated by a set of political practices that materialize citizenship; human rights are as such a false ideological universality that masks and legitimizes a concrete politics of Western imperialism and domination, legitimizing military interventions and neocolonialism. Is this analysis enough?

The Marxist symptomatic reading can convincingly demonstrate the particular content that gives a specifically bourgeois ideological spin to the notion of human rights: universal human rights as effectively the rights of white male private owners to exchange freely on the market, exploit workers and women, and exert political domination. This identification of the particular content that hegemonizes the universal form is, however, only half of the story; its other, crucial half consists in asking a much more difficult supplementary question, that of the emergence of the very form of universality. How, in what specific historical conditions, does the abstraction of universality itself become a fact of (social) life? In what conditions do individuals experience themselves as subjects of universal human rights? Therein resides the point of Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism. In a society in which commodity exchange predominates, individuals themselves, in their daily lives, relate to themselves, as well as to the objects they encounter, as to contingent embodiments of abstract universal notions. What I am, my concrete social or cultural background, is experienced as contingent because what ultimately defines me is the abstract universal capacity to think or work. Any object that can satisfy my desire is experienced as contingent because my desire is conceived as an abstract formal capacity, indifferent to the multitude of particular objects that may—but never fully do—satisfy it. The modern notion of profession, for example, implies that I experience myself as an individual who is not directly born into his social role. What I will become depends on the interplay between contingent social circumstances and my free choice; in this sense, today's individual has a profession of an electrician or professor or waiter while it is meaningless to claim that a medieval serf was a peasant by profession. The crucial point here is, again, that in certain specific social conditions (of commodity exchange and global market economy) abstraction becomes a direct feature of actual social life, the way concrete individuals behave and relate to their fate and to their social surroundings. Marx shares here Hegel's insight into how universality becomes for-itself only insofar as individuals no longer fully identify the kernel of their being

with their particular social situation, only insofar as they experience themselves as forever out of joint with regard to this situation. The concrete, effective existence of universality is the individual without a proper place in the global edifice; in a given social structure, universality becomes for-itself only in those individuals who lack a proper place in it. The mode of appearance of an abstract universality, its entrance into actual existence, is thus an extremely violent move, disrupting the preceding texture of social life.

It is not enough to make the old Marxist point about the gap between the ideological appearance of the universal legal form and the particular interests that effectively sustain it; at this level, the counterargument (made, among others, by Claude Lefort and Jacques Rancière)⁷—that the form, precisely, is never a mere form, but involves a dynamics of its own that has traces in the materiality of social life—is fully valid. It can be seen in how bourgeois formal freedom set in motion the process of very material political demands and practices, from trade unions to feminism. Rancière's basic emphasis is on the radical ambiguity of the Marxist notion of the gap between formal democracy (the rights of man, political freedom) and the economic reality of exploitation and domination. One can read this gap between the appearance of equality and freedom and the social reality of economic and cultural differences in two ways. There is the standard symptomatic way: the forms of universal rights, equality, freedom, and democracy are necessary but illusory forms of expression of their concrete social content, the universe of exploitation and class domination. And there is a much more subversive reading, of a tension in which the appearance of *egaliberté* is precisely not a mere appearance but evinces an effectivity of its own, which allows it to set in motion the process of the rearticulation of actual socioeconomic relations by way of their progressive politicization. Why shouldn't women also vote? Why shouldn't conditions at the work place also be of public political concern? One is tempted to use here the old Lévi-Straussian term of *symbolic efficiency*; the appearance of *egaliberté* is a symbolic fiction and, as such, possesses actual efficiency of its own. One should resist the properly cynical temptation of reducing it to a mere illusion that conceals a different actuality. (Therein resides the hypocrisy of the standard Stalinist mockery of the "merely formal" bourgeois freedom; if it is merely formal and doesn't disturb the

7. See Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, trans. John B. Thompson, Alan Sheridan, and Terry Karten, ed. Thompson (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), and Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London, 2007).

true relations of power, why, then, doesn't the Stalinist regime allow it? What is it so afraid of?)

The key moment of any theoretical (and ethical, and political, and—as Badiou demonstrated—even aesthetic) struggle is the rise of universality out of the particular lifeworld. The commonplace according to which we are all irreducibly grounded in a particular (contingent) lifeworld, so that all universality is irreducibly colored by (embedded in) a particular lifeworld, should be turned around; the authentic moment of discovery, the breakthrough, occurs when a properly universal dimension explodes from within a particular context and becomes for-itself, directly experienced as such (as universal). This universality-for-itself is not simply external to (or above) the particular context. It is inscribed into it, it perturbs and affects it from within, so that the identity of the particular is split into its particular and its universal aspect. Did Marx, already, not point out how the true challenge with Homer is not to explain the roots of his epics in early Greek society but to account for the fact that, although clearly rooted in their historical context, they were able to transcend their historical origin and speak to all epochs? Perhaps the most elementary hermeneutic test of the greatness of a work of art is its ability to survive being torn out of its original context. In the case of a truly great work of art, each epoch reinvents or rediscovers its own figure of this work, so that there is a romantic Shakespeare, a realist Shakespeare, and so on. Take Wagner's *Parsifal*. A lot of historicist work has been done recently trying to bring out the true contextual meaning of the Wagnerian figures and topics—the pale Hagen is really a masturbating Jew; Amfortas's wound is really syphilis. The idea is that Wagner mobilizes historical codes known to everyone in his epoch. When a person stumbles, sings in cracking high tones, makes nervous gestures, everyone knows this is a Jew, so Mime from *Siegfried* is a caricature of a Jew. The fear of syphilis as the illness in the groin one gets from having intercourse with an impure woman was an obsession in the second half of the nineteenth century, so it was clear to everyone that Amfortas really contracted syphilis from Kundry. However, the first problem here is that, even if accurate, such insights do not contribute much to a pertinent understanding of the work in question. One often hears that, in order to understand a work of art, one needs to know its historical context. Against this historicist commonplace one should affirm that too much historical context can blur the proper contact with a work of art. In order to properly grasp *Parsifal* one should abstract from such historical trivia, decontextualize the work, tear it out from the context in which it was originally embedded. There is more truth in *Parsifal*'s formal structure, which allows for different historical contextualizations, than in its original context.

It was Nietzsche, the great critic of Wagner, who was nonetheless the first to perform such a decontextualization, proposing a new figure of Wagner: no longer Wagner as the poet of Teutonic mythology, of bombastic heroic grandeur, but the “miniaturist” Wagner, the Wagner of hysterical femininity, of delicate passages, of bourgeois family decadence. Along the same lines, Nietzsche was repeatedly reinvented throughout the twentieth century, from the conservative-heroic proto-Fascist Nietzsche to the French Nietzsche and the cultural studies Nietzsche. Convincing historical analysis can easily show how Nietzsche’s theory was embedded in his particular political experience (the revolt of the slaves was for him exemplified by the Paris Commune), but this in no way contradicts the fact that there is more truth in the decontextualized French Nietzsche of Deleuze and Foucault than in this historically accurate Nietzsche. The argument is here not simply pragmatic. The point to be made is not that Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche, although historically inaccurate, is more productive; it is rather that the tension between the basic universal frame of Nietzsche’s thought and its particular historical contextualization is inscribed into the very edifice of Nietzsche’s thought, is part of its very identity, in the same way that the tension between the universal form of human rights and their true meaning at the historical moment of their inception is part of their identity.

The standard Marxist hermeneutics that unearths the particular bias of abstract universality should thus be supplemented by its opposite—by the (properly Hegelian) procedure that uncovers the universality of what presents itself as a particular position. Recall again Marx’s analysis of how, in the French revolution of 1848, the conservative-republican Party of Order functioned as the coalition of the two branches of royalism (Orleanists and legitimists) in the “anonymous kingdom of the Republic.”⁸ The parliamentary deputies of the Party of Order perceived their republicanism as a mockery; in parliamentary debates, they constantly generated royalist slips of the tongue and ridiculed the republic to let it be known that their true aim was to restore the kingdom. But they were unaware that they themselves were duped about the true social impact of their rule. They were effectively establishing the conditions of the bourgeois republican order that they so despised (for instance, by guaranteeing the safety of private property). So it is not that they were royalists just wearing a republican mask; although they experienced themselves as such, their very inner royalist conviction was the deceptive front masking their true social role. In short, far from being the hidden truth of their public republicanism, their

8. Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France (1848–1850)*, trans. pub. (New York, 1964), p. 95.

sincere royalism was the fantasmatic support of their actual republicanism; it was what provided the passion to their activity.

And is this not the lesson of Hegel's "cunning of reason"—that particularity can mask universality? G. K. Chesterton wrote apropos of Nietzsche that he "denied egoism simply by preaching it. . . . To preach anything is to give it away. First, the egoist calls life a war without mercy, and then he takes the greatest possible trouble to drill his enemies in war. To preach egoism is to practice altruism."⁹ The medium is here not the message; quite the opposite. The very medium we use—universal intersubjective language—undermines the message. So, again, it is not only that we should denounce the particular position of enunciation that sustains the universal enunciated content (the white, male, wealthy subject who proclaims the universality of human rights); it is much more important to unearth the universality that sustains (and potentially undermines) particular claims. The supreme case, noted by Bertrand Russell, is of course the solipsist trying to convince others that he alone really exists. (Does the same hold for tolerance or intolerance? Not quite, although there is a similar catch in preaching tolerance. It presupposes its presupposition, the subject deeply bothered by the neighbor, and thus reasserts it.)

In the same way, the French royalists were victims of the cunning of reason, blind to the universal (capitalist-republican) interest served by the pursuit of their particular royalist goals. They were like Hegel's valet de chambre who doesn't see the universal dimension, so there are no heroes for him. More generally, an individual capitalist thinks he is active for his own profit, ignoring how he is serving the expanded reproduction of universal capital. It is not only that every universality is haunted by a particular content that taints it; it is that every particular position is haunted by its implicit universality, which undermines it. Capitalism is not just universal in-itself, it is universal for-itself, as the tremendous actual corrosive power that undermines all particular lifeworlds, cultures, traditions, cutting across them, catching them in its vortex. It is meaningless to ask the question, Is this universality true or a mask of particular interests? This universality is directly actual as universality, as a negative force mediating and destroying all particular content.

In this precise sense, Brown's ironic rejection of liberalism's claim of *kulturlos* universality misses the (Marxist) point. Capitalism (whose ideology liberalism is) effectively is universal, no longer rooted in a particular culture or world. This is why, as I have written, Badiou recently claimed that our time is devoid of world:

9. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; San Francisco, 1995), p. 38.

the universality of capitalism resides in the fact that capitalism is not a name for a *civilization*, for a specific cultural-symbolic world, but the name for a truly neutral economico-symbolic machine which operates with Asian values as well as with others, so that Europe's worldwide triumph is its defeat, self-obliteration. The critics of 'Eurocentrism' who endeavor to unearth the secret European bias of capitalism fall short here: the problem with capitalism is not its secret Eurocentric bias, but the fact that it *really is universal*, a neutral matrix of social relations.¹⁰

A possible argument against capitalist universality is that, within each civilization, the same capitalist mechanisms are symbolized, integrated into the concrete social whole, in a different way (they certainly affect a Protestant society differently than a Muslim one). So while capitalism certainly is composed of a set of transcultural features, it nonetheless functions within each society as a particular subsystem integrated each time into a specific, overdetermined articulation, that is, into the texture of social-symbolic relations. It is like the use of the same words by different social groups; although we all talk about *computers* or *virtual reality*, the scope of meaning of these terms is not the same in a San Francisco hacker community and in a small working-class town in economic depression. Precisely for this reason, the capitalist matrix of social relations is real; it is that which, in all possible symbolic universes, functions in the same transsymbolic way. Even if it doesn't mean the same thing to individuals in different communities, even if it doesn't inscribe itself into the totality of their lifeworlds in the same way, it generates the same formal set of social relations, pursuing its circular movement of self-reproduction. In the U.S. or in China, in Peru or in Saudi Arabia, the same profit-oriented matrix is at work.

The same logic holds for the emancipatory struggle. The particular culture that tries desperately to defend its identity has to repress the universal dimension active at its very heart, that is, the gap between the particular (its identity) and the universal, which destabilizes it from within. This is why the "leave us our culture" argument fails. Within every particular culture, individuals do suffer, women do protest when forced to undergo clitoridectomy, and these protests against the parochial constraints of one's culture are formulated from the standpoint of universality. Actual universality is not the deep feeling that, above all differences, different civilizations share the same basic values; actual universality appears (actualizes

10. Slavoj Žižek, "Concesso non Dato," in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, ed. Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos, and Matthew Sharpe (London, 2005), p. 241.

itself) as the experience of negativity, of the inadequacy-to-itself of a particular identity. The formula of revolutionary solidarity is not *let us tolerate our differences*, it is not a pact of civilizations, but a pact of struggles that cut across civilizations, a pact between what, in each civilization, undermines its identity from within, fights against its oppressive kernel. What unites us is the same struggle. A better formula would thus be: in spite of our differences, we can identify the basic antagonism of the antagonistic struggle in which we are both caught; so let us share our intolerance and join forces in the same struggle. In other words, in the emancipatory struggle, it is not the cultures in their identity that join hands; it is the repressed, the exploited and suffering, the parts of no-part of every culture that come together in a shared struggle.

Such universality remains concrete in the precise sense that, once formulated, its persistence is not guaranteed; every historical epoch has to find its own specific way to accomplish the breakthrough to universality (and there are epochs that fail in this endeavor and remain blind to the universal dimension of a work in question, just as most of both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were blind to Shakespeare). This universality, which emerges out of a violent breakthrough, is not the awareness of the universal as the neutral frame that unites us all (“in spite of our differences, we are basically all human”); it is the universality that becomes for-itself in the violent experience of the subject who becomes aware that he is not fully himself (he does not coincide with his particular form of existence), that he is marked by a profound split. Universality becomes for-itself in the particular element that is thwarted in its endeavor to reach its identity. The conservative critique of democracy is fully aware of this paradox when it points out how the democratic idea (each individual has the right to participate in social life independently of the particular place he occupies within the social edifice) potentially undermines social stability, how it involves individuals who are by definition self-alienated, out of joint, unreconciled, unable to recognize themselves (their proper place) in the global organic social order.

People often addressed to Primo Levi the question, Do you consider yourself primarily a Jew or a human? Levi himself often oscillated between these two choices. The obvious solution—precisely as a Jew he was human, for one is human, one participates in universal humanity, through one’s very particular ethnic identification—falls flat here. The only consistent solution is not to say that Levi was a human who happened to be a Jew but that he was human (he participated for himself in the universal function of humanity) precisely and only insofar as he was unable to or was uneasy at

fully identifying with his Jewishness, insofar as being a Jew was for him a problem, not a fact, not a safe haven to which he could withdraw.

Acheronta movebo

The particular ethnic substance, our lifeworld, which resists universality, is made of habits. What are habits? Every legal order (or every order of explicit normativity) has to rely on a complex network of informal rules that tell us how we are to relate to the explicit norms, how to apply them—to what extent we are to take them literally; how and when are we allowed, solicited even, to disregard them. This is the domain of habit. To know the habits of a society is to know the metarules 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 that is offered; when we are effectively obliged to do something but have to pretend that we are doing it as a free choice (as 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 reject this offer and enthusiastically say Yes. With repressive and regulative discourses about sex, the situation is the opposite one: the explicit No effectively functions as the implicit injunction, Do it, but in a discreet way!

One of the strategies of totalitarian regimes is to have legal regulations (criminal laws) so severe that, if taken literally, everyone is guilty of something and then to withdraw from their full enforcement. In this way, the regime can appear merciful (“You see, if we wanted, we could have all of you arrested and condemned, but do not be afraid, we are lenient”) and at the same time wield a permanent threat to discipline its subjects (“Do not play too much with us, remember that at any moment we can. . .”). In the former Yugoslavia, there was the infamous article 133 of the penal code, which could always be invoked to prosecute writers and journalists; it made into a crime any text that presented falsely the achievements of the socialist revolution or that might arouse tension and discontent among the public for the way it dealt with political, social, or other topics. This last category is obviously not only infinitely plastic but also conveniently self-referential. Does the very fact that you are accused by those in power not in itself equal the fact that you aroused tension and discontent among the public? In those years, I remember asking a Slovene politician how he justified this article; he just smiled and, with a wink, told me, “Well, we have to have some tool to discipline at our will those who annoy us.” This overlap of potential total incrimination (whatever you are doing may be a

crime) and mercy (the fact that you are allowed to lead your life in peace is not proof or consequence of your innocence but a proof of the mercy and benevolence, of the understanding of the realities of life, of those in power) is yet another proof that totalitarian regimes are by definition regimes of mercy, of toleration toward violations of the law since, due to the framing of social life, violating the law (bribing, cheating, and so forth) is a condition of survival.

The problem during the chaotic post-Soviet years of Yeltsin rule in Russia could be located at this level. Although the legal rules were known (and largely the same as under the Soviet Union), what disintegrated was the complex network of implicit, unwritten rules that had sustained the entire social edifice. If, in the Soviet Union, you wanted to get better hospital treatment or a new apartment, if you had a complaint against the authorities, if you were summoned to court, if you wanted your child to be accepted to a top school, if you needed raw materials delivered on time by the state contractors to your factory, everyone knew what you really had to do, whom to address, whom to bribe, what you could do and what you could not do. After the collapse of Soviet power, one of the most frustrating aspects of the daily existence of ordinary people was that these unwritten rules largely got blurred; people simply did not know what to do, how to react, how to relate to explicit legal regulations, what to ignore, where bribery worked. One of the functions of organized crime was to provide a kind of ersatz legality; if you owned a small business and a customer owed you money, you turned to your mafia protector, who dealt with the problem, since the state legal system was inefficient. Stabilization under the Putin reign mostly amounted to the newly established transparency of these unwritten rules. Now, again, people mostly know how to act and react in the complex cobweb of social interactions.

This, also, is why the most elementary level of symbolic exchange is so-called empty gestures, offers made and meant to be rejected. It was Brecht who gave a poignant expression to this feature in his pedagogical plays, exemplarily in *Jasager*, in which the young boy is asked to accord freely with what will in any case be his fate (to be thrown into the valley); as his teacher explains it to him, it is customary to ask the victim if he agrees with his fate, but it is also customary for the victim to say yes. Belonging to a society involves a paradoxical point at which each of us is ordered to embrace freely, as the result of our choice, what is anyway imposed on us (we all must love our country and our parents). This paradox of willing (choosing freely) what is in any case necessary, of pretending (maintaining the appearance) that there is a free choice although effectively there isn't one, is strictly codependent with the notion of an empty symbolic gesture.

And is there not something similar in our everyday mores? In today's Japan, workers have the right to forty vacation days every year, but they are expected not to use this right to its full extent (the implicit rule is not to use more than half of the days). In John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, after the little boy Owen accidentally kills John's (his best friend, the narrator's) mother, he is, of course, terribly upset, so, to show how sorry he is, he discretely delivers to John a gift of the complete collection of color photos of baseball stars, his most precious possession; however, Dan, John's delicate stepfather, tells him that the proper thing to do is to return the gift. Let us imagine a more down-to-earth situation. When, after being engaged in a fierce competition for a job promotion with my closest friend, I win, the proper thing for me to do is to offer to retract, so that he will get the promotion, and the proper thing for him to do is to reject my offer. This way, perhaps, our friendship can be saved. What we have here is symbolic exchange at its purest—a gesture made to be rejected. The magic of symbolic exchange is that, although at the end we are where we were at the beginning, there is a distinct gain for both parties in their pact of solidarity. There is a similar logic at work in the process of apologizing. If I hurt someone with a rude remark, the proper thing for me to do is to offer him a sincere apology, and the proper thing for him to do is to say something like, "Thanks, I appreciate it, but I wasn't offended, I knew you didn't mean it, so you really owe me no apology!" The point is, of course, that although the final result is that no apology is needed, one has to go through the entire process of offering it. "You owe me no apology" can only be said after I do offer an apology, so that although formally nothing happens—the offer of apology is proclaimed unnecessary—there is a gain to the friendship at the end of the process.

Of course, the problem is what if the person to whom the offer is made actually accepts it? What if, upon being beaten in the competition, I accept my friend's offer to get the promotion instead of him? What if Russia really started to act as a great power? A situation like this is properly catastrophic; it causes the disintegration of the semblance (of freedom) that pertains to social order, which equals the disintegration of the social substance itself. In this precise sense, revolutionary-egalitarian figures from Robespierre to John Brown are figures without habits; they refuse to take into account the habits that qualify the functioning of a universal rule. If all men are equal then all men are equal and are to be effectively treated as such; if blacks are also human they should be immediately treated as such.

On a less radical level, in the early 1980s, a half-dissident weekly student newspaper in the former Yugoslavia wanted to protest the fake "free" elections. Aware of the limitations of the slogan Speak Truth to Power ("The

trouble with this slogan is that it ignores the fact that power will not listen, and that the people already know the truth, as they make clear in their jokes”),¹¹ instead of directly denouncing the elections as unfree they decided to treat them as if they were really free, as if their result really was undecided. So, on the eve of the elections, they printed an extra edition of the journal with the large headline “Latest Election Results: It Looks Like Communists Will Remain in Power!” This simple intervention broke the unwritten habit (we all know that elections are not free, we just do not talk publicly about it). By treating the elections as free, they reminded the people publicly of their unfreedom.

In the second season of the TV series *Nip/Tuck*, Sean learns that the true father of his adolescent son Matt is Christian, his business partner. His first reaction is an angry outburst; then, in the aftermath of a failed operation to separate Siamese twins, he again accepts Christian as a partner, with a big speech at the operating table: “I will never forgive you for what you did. But Matt is too precious, the best result of our partnership, so we should not lose this.” This message is all too obvious. A much more elegant solution would have been for Sean just to say, “I will never forgive you for what you did,” the subjective position of this statement already being that of acceptance; this is how one talks to someone whom one has already decided to reaccept. Sean says too much. Why does he go on? This is the interesting question. Is the U.S. public too stupid? No. So why then? Would a mere sign of true reacceptance have been too much, too intense, so it must be watered down by overexplicit platitudes? Perhaps, *Nip/Tuck* being an American series, this excess can be accounted for in terms of the difference between Europe and the U.S. In Europe the ground floor of a building is counted as zero, so that the floor above it is the first floor, while in the U.S., the first floor is on street level. In short, Americans think that one is already a stand-in for zero while Europeans are aware that, prior to counting, there has to be a ground of tradition, a ground that is always-already given and, as such, cannot be counted, while the U.S., a land with no premodern historical tradition proper, lacks such a ground. Things begin there directly with self-legislated freedom, the past erased (transposed onto Europe).¹² This lack of ground has to be supplemented by

11. Moustapha Safouan, *Why Are the Arabs Not Free?: The Politics of Writing* (Oxford, 2007), p. 44.

12. Perhaps this feature accounts for another weird phenomenon: in (almost) all American hotels housed in buildings of more than twelve floors, there is no thirteenth floor (to avoid bad luck, of course). That is, one jumps directly from the twelfth floor to the fourteenth floor. For a European, such a procedure is meaningless. Whom are we trying to fool? Does God not know that what we designated as the fourteenth floor is really the thirteenth? Americans can play this

excessive saying. Sean cannot rely on the symbolic ground that would guarantee that Christian will get the message without him explicitly stating it.

Habits are thus the very stuff our identities are made of; in them, we enact and thus define what we effectively are as social beings, often in contrast with our perception of what we are. In their very transparency, habits are the medium of social violence. Back in 1937, George Orwell exposed the ambiguity of the predominant leftist attitude towards class difference:

We all rail against class-distinctions, but very few people seriously want to abolish them. Here you come upon the important fact that every revolutionary opinion draws part of its strength from a secret conviction that nothing can be changed. . . . So long as it is merely a question of ameliorating the worker's lot, every decent person is agreed. . . . But unfortunately you get no further by merely wishing class-distinctions away. More exactly, it *is* necessary to wish them away, but your wish has no efficacy unless you grasp what it involves. The fact that has got to be faced is that to abolish class-distinctions means abolishing a part of yourself. Here am I, a typical member of the middle class. It is easy for me to say that I want to get rid of class-distinctions, but nearly everything I think and do is a result of class-distinctions. . . . I have got to alter myself so completely that at the end I should hardly be recognisable as the same person.¹³

Orwell's point is that radicals invoke the need for revolutionary change as a kind of superstitious token that achieves its opposite, that is, prevents change from really occurring. Today's academic leftist who criticizes capitalist cultural imperialism is in reality horrified at the idea that his field of study might break down. There is, however, a limit to this theory. Orwell's insight holds only for a certain kind of bourgeois leftist; there are leftists who do have the courage of their convictions, who do not only want "revolution without revolution," as Robespierre put it—Jacobins and Bolsheviks, among others. The starting point of these true revolutionaries can be the very position of the bourgeois leftists; in the middle of their pseudo-radical posturing, they get caught in their own game and are ready to put in question their subjective position. It is difficult to imagine a more trenchant political example of the weight of Lacan's distinction between the

game precisely because their God is just an extension of their individual egos rather than a true ground of being.

13. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London, 1937), pp. 189–90, 192, 193.

subject of the enunciated and the subject of the enunciation. First, in a direct negation, the subject wants to change the world without endangering the subjective position from which he is ready to enforce the change; then, in the negation of negation, the subject enacting the change is ready to pay the subjective price for it, to change himself or, as Gandhi supposedly said, to be himself the change he wants to see in the world. It is thus clear from Orwell's perspective that in our ideological everyday our predominant attitude is that of an ironic distance towards our true beliefs:

the left-wing opinions of the average "intellectual" are mainly spurious. From pure imitativeness he jeers at things which in fact he believes in. As one example out of many, take the public-school code of honour, with its "team spirit" and "Don't hit a man when he's down," and all the rest of that familiar bunkum. Who has not laughed at it? Who, calling himself an "intellectual," would dare *not* to laugh at it? But it is a bit different when you meet somebody who laughs at it *from the outside*; just as we spend our lives in abusing England but grow very angry when we hear a foreigner saying exactly the same things. . . . It is only when you meet someone of a different culture from yourself that you begin to realise what your own beliefs really are.¹⁴

There is nothing inner in this true ideological identity of mine; my innermost beliefs are all out there, embodied in practices that reach even to the immediate materiality of my body. My notions— notions of good and evil, of pleasant and unpleasant, of funny and serious, of ugly and beautiful— are essentially *middle-class* notions and so are my taste in books and food and clothes, my sense of honor, my table manners, my turns of speech, my accent, even the characteristic movements of my body. One should definitely add to this series smell. Perhaps the key difference between the lower popular class and the middle class concerns the way they relate to smell. For the middle class, lower classes smell; their members do not wash regularly— or, to quote the apocryphal answer of a middle-class Parisian as to why he prefers to ride the first-class cars in the metro: "I wouldn't mind riding with workers in the second class; it is only that they smell!" This brings us to one of the possible definitions of what *neighbor* means today: a neighbor is the one who by definition smells. This is why today deodorants and soaps are crucial; they make neighbors at least minimally tolerable. I am ready to love my neighbors, provided they don't smell too bad. According to a recent report, scientists in a laboratory in Venezuela added

14. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

a further element to this series. Through genetic manipulations, they succeeded in growing beans that, upon consumption, do not generate the bad-smelling and socially embarrassing winds. So, after decaf coffee, fat-free cakes, diet cola, and alcohol-free beer, we now get wind-free beans.¹⁵ Lacan supplemented Freud's list of partial objects (breast, feces, penis) with two further objects: voice and gaze. Perhaps we should add another object to this series: smell.

We reach thereby the heart of darkness of habits. Recall the numerous cases of pedophilia that shattered the Catholic Church. When its representatives insist that these cases, deplorable as they are, are the church's internal problem and display great reluctance to collaborate with police in their investigation, they are, in a way, right; the pedophilia of Catholic priests is not something that concerns merely the persons who, for accidental reasons of private history with no relation to the church as an institution, happened to choose the profession of a priest. It is a phenomenon that concerns the Catholic Church as such, that is inscribed into its very functioning as a socio-symbolic institution. It does not concern the private unconscious of individuals but the unconscious of the institution itself. It is not something that happens because the institution has to accommodate itself to the pathological realities of libidinal life in order to survive but something that the institution itself needs in order to reproduce itself. One can well imagine a priest who isn't a pedophile but, after years of service, gets involved in pedophilia because the very logic of the institution seduces him into it. Such an *institutional unconscious* designates the obscene disavowed underside that, precisely as disavowed, sustains the public institution. (In the army, this underside consists of the obscene sexualized rituals that sustain group solidarity.) In other words, it is not simply that, for conformist reasons, the church tries to hush up the embarrassing pedophilic scandals; in defending itself, the church defends its innermost obscene secret. What this means is that identifying oneself with this secret side is constitutive of the very identity of a Catholic priest. If a priest seriously (not just rhetorically) denounces these scandals, he thereby excludes himself from the ecclesiastic community; he is no longer one of us (in exactly the same way a citizen of a town in the South of the U.S. in the 1920s, if he denounced the Ku Klux Klan to the police, excluded himself from his community, that is, betrayed its fundamental solidarity). Consequently, the answer to the church's reluctance should be not only that we

15. Although, even in this regard, the benevolent welfare state endeavors to balance the annoyance of the bad-smelling neighbor with health concerns; a couple of years ago, the Dutch health ministry advised the citizens to break wind at least fifteen times per day in order to avoid unhealthy tensions and pressures in the body.

are dealing with criminal cases and that the church, if it does not fully participate in the investigation, is an accomplice after the fact but that the church as such, as an institution, should be investigated with regard to the way it systematically creates the conditions for such crimes.

This obscene underground of habits is very difficult to change, which is why the motto of every radical emancipatory politics is the same as the quote from Virgil that Freud chose as the exergue for his *The Interpretation of Dreams*. *Acheronta movebo*: dare to move the underground! It is only in this way that the opposition between liberalism and its postcolonial, supposedly radical, critique can be overcome—through hard work on our own ideological underground. Only in this way can a universality emerge that is not ideological but a presupposition of every emancipatory struggle.

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