TOLERANCE AS AN IDEOLOGICAL CATEGORY

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The Culturalization of Politics

Why are today so many problems 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, etc., are
naturalized/neutralized into "cultural" differences,
different "ways of life," which are something given,
something that cannot be overcome, but 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,
failure, of direct political solutions (Welfare State,
socialist projects, etc.). Tolerance is their post-
political *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
post-political 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, of course,
Samuel Huntington who proposed the most successful formula
of this "culturalization of politics" by locating the main
source of today's conflicts into the "clash of
civilizations," what one is tempted to call the
Huntington's disease of our time – as he put it, after 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been replaced by the "velvet curtain of culture."[2]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 world-wide 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[3]), than Huntington's »clash of civilizations« as the main political struggle in the XXIst century? *The »clash of civilizations« IS politics at the »end of history.«*

Contemporary liberalism forms a complex network of ideologies, institutional and non-institutional practices; 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 life-world into which they were born, and those who merely "enjoy" their culture, who are elevated above it, free to choose their culture. 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. The basic opposition is thus related to the opposite 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 s/he extricates itself from and elevates itself above its particular culture. Since, however, every individual has to be somehow "particularized," it has to dwell in a particular life-world, the only way to resolve this deadlock is to split the individual into universal and particular, public and private (where "private" covers both the "safe haven" of family *and* the non-state public sphere of civil society (economy)). In liberalism, culture survives, but as privatized: as way of life, a set of beliefs and practices, not the public network of norms and rules. Culture is thus literally transubstantiated: 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 subject's being, its universal essence, from culture: in its core, the subject has to be *kulturlos*.

(This, incidentally, gives a new twist to Joseph Goebbels's infamous formula "when I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun" – but not when I hear the word civilization.) Wendy Brown problematizes this liberal notion on a multitude of levels:

    * First, it is not truly universal, *kulturlos*. Since, in our societies, a sexualized division of labor still predominates which confers a male twist on basic liberal categories (autonomy, public activity, competition), and relegates women to the private sphere of family solidarity, etc., liberalism itself, in its opposition of private and public, harbors male dominance. Furthermore, it is only the modern Western capitalist culture for which autonomy, individual freedom, etc., stand higher than collective solidarity, connection, responsibility for dependent others, 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 (cliterodectomy, child brideship, infanticide, polygamy, family rape…); however, it ignores the tremendous pressure which, for example, compels women in our liberal society to undergo plastic surgery, cosmetic implants, Botox injections, etc., in order to remain competitive on the sex market.

    * Finally, there are all the self-referring 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 the individualist Western culture, and thus legitimizes even military interventions as an extreme mode of fighting the other's intolerance – some US feminists supported the US occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq as a form of helping the women in these countries… However, Brown tries to get too much mileage from this self-referential paradox which a radical liberal would simply assume without any inconsistency: if I believe in individual choice and tolerance of different cultures, OF COURSE this obliges me to be "intolerant" towards cultures which prevent choice and tolerance. Brown makes it easy here with focusing on today's anti-Islamism – but what about, say, the struggle against Nazism? Is it not also a "paradox" that the allied block 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.

The liberal idea of a "free choice" – if the subject wants
it, s/he can opt for the parochial way of the tradition
into which s/he was born, but s/he has to be presented with
alternatives and then make a free choice of it - always
gets caught in a deadlock: while the Amish adolescents are
formally given a free choice, the conditions they found
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 on all
the options, educated in them – however, the only way to do
this would be to extract them from their embeddedness in
the Amish community, i.e., to effectively render them
"English." This also clearly demonstrates the limitations
of the predominant liberal attitude towards the Muslim
women wearing a veil: they can do it if it is their free
choice and not an option imposed on them by their husbands
or family. However, the moment women wear a choice as the
result of their free individual choice (say, in order to
realize their own spirituality), the meaning of wearing a
veil 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 is doing it from times immemorial,
and a citizen of a Western megalopolis deciding to go and
have a diner at a local Chinese restaurant. The lesson of
all this is that a choice is always a meta-choice, a choice
of the modality of the choice itself: it is only the woman
who does not choose to wear a veil that 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/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 a sensitive
topic: 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 life-world, 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 version: the subject which is conceived as capable of stepping outside its particular cultural/social roots and 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."[4] The grounding experience of Descartes' position of universal doubt is precisely a "multicultural" experience of how one's own tradition is no better than what appears to us the "eccentric" traditions of others:

"/…/ I had been taught, even in my College days, that there is nothing imaginable so strange or so little credible that it has not been maintained by one philosopher or other, and I further recognized in the course of my travels that all those whose sentiments are very contrary to ours are yet not necessarily barbarians or savages, but may be possessed of reason in as great or even a greater degree than ourselves."[5]

The main feature of *cogito* is its insubstantial character: "It cannot be spoken of positively; no sooner than it is, its function is lost."[6] *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 emergency of *cogito* and the disintegration and loss of substantial communal identities is thus inherent, and this holds even more for Spinoza than for Descartes: although Spinoza criticized the Cartesian *cogito*, he criticized it as a positive ontological entity – but he implicitly fully endorsed as the "position of enunciated," the one which speaks from radical self-doubting, since, even more than Descartes, Spinoza spoke from the interstice of the social space(s), neither a Jew nor a Christian.

Spinoza effectively 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

paradigm enabling us to discover the traces of a similar
displacement, communal »out of joint,« with regard to all
other great philosophers, up to Nietzsche who was ashamed
of Germans and proudly emphasized his alleged Polish roots.
For a philosopher, ethnic roots, national identity, etc.,
are simply *not a category of truth*, or, to put it in
precise Kantian terms, when we reflect upon out ethnic
roots, we engage in a *private use of reason*, constrained by
contingent dogmatic presuppositions, i.e., we act as
»immature« individuals, 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 both sharply distinguish between
the two domains, but in the opposite sense. For Rorty, the
great contemporary liberal if there ever was one, private
is the space of our idiosyncrasies where creativity and
wild imagination rule, and moral considerations are
(almost) suspended, while public is 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, by-passing 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 trans-national
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 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 tremendous liberating aspect of experiencing one's own cultural background as contingent. There is an authentic core of political liberalism: let us not forget that liberalism emerged in Europe after the catastrophy of 30-years war between Catholics and Protestants; it was an answer to the pressing question: how could people who differ in their fundamental religious allegiances co-exist? 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 religions 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 8th century Muslim intellectual: "Difference of opinion in the community is a token of Divine mercy."[7] Moreover, it demands that this list of different positions includes 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 (her theory of gender identity as performatively enacted, etc.) without the Cartesian subject. Second, this is why also her analysis, her image of Western liberalism, is fatefully distorted: it is suspicious how obsessively, desperately almost, she tries to characterize liberal multiculturalist tolerance as "essentialist," as relying on "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 anti-"essentialist": it is its barbarian Other which is perceived as "essentialist" *and thereby "false,"* i.e., fundamentalism "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) which would expose to critique also its own norms and procedures, becoming aware of its own "intolerant" Eurocentric bias – here are the last lines of the book:

"/…/ 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."[8]

However, one can argue that Brown fails to apply the self-
reflexive move that she demands of liberal multiculturalism
on her own edifice: while she convincingly demonstrates how
the very procedure by means of which the liberal multi-
culturalist discourse presents itself as universal, neutral
with regard to all particular cultural roots, she continues
to rely on categories which remain "Eurocentric," as is her
basic opposition of contingentialism and essentialism: to
modern Europeans, other civilizations are caught in their
specific culture, while modern Europeans 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 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, because, in it, oppression itself is obliterated,
masked as a free choice ("What 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 is here that form matters, that form has an autonomy and efficiency of its own. So when we compare a Third World woman forced to undergo cliterodectomy or promised to 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, etc. – 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, organic, less competitive, aiming at cooperation, not domination, etc? Linked to this is another operation: blindness for oppression on behalf of the "respect" for other's culture. Even freedom of choice is here often evoked in a perverted way: those people have chosen their way of life, inclusive of burning the widows, 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 the false universality, of showing how a position that presents itself as neutral-universal effectively privileges a certain (heterosexual, male, Christian…) culture. More precisely, she remains within the standard "postmodern," "anti-essentialist" 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 which materialize citizenship; "human rights" are as such a false ideological universality which masks and legitimizes a concrete politics of Western imperialism and domination, legitimizing military interventions and neocolonialism… - is, however, this enough?

The Marxist symptomal reading can convincingly demonstrate the particular content that gives the specific bourgeois ideological spin to the notion of human rights: "universal human rights are effectively the rights of the white male private owners to exchange freely on the market, exploit workers and women, as well as 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 abstract 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, since what ultimately defines me is the "abstract" universal capacity to think and/or to work. Or, any object that can satisfy my desire is experienced as contingent, since my desire is conceived as an "abstract" formal capacity, indifferent towards the multitude of particular objects that may - but never fully do - satisfy it. Say, the modern notion of "profession" 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 the 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 condition (of commodity exchange and global market economy), "abstraction" becomes a direct feature of the 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 the 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 entering into actual existence, is thus an extremely violent move of 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 counter-argument (made, among others, by Claude Lefort[9] and Jacques Ranciere[10]) that the form, precisely, is never a "mere" form, but involves the dynamics of its own which lets its traces in the materiality of social life, is fully valid (the bourgeois "formal freedom" set in motion the process of very "material" political demands and practices, from trade unions to feminism). Ranciere's basic emphasis is on the radical ambiguity of the Marxist notion of the "gap" between formal democracy (the rights of man, political freedom, etc.) and the economic reality of exploitation and domination. One can read this gap between the "appearance" of equality-freedom and the social reality of economic, cultural, etc. differences either in the standard "symptomatic" way (the form of universal rights, equality, freedom and democracy is just a necessary, but illusory form of expression of its concrete social content, the universe of exploitation and class domination), or in the much more subversive sense of a tension in which the "appearance" of *egaliberte*, precisely, is 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 socio-economic relations by way of their progressive "politicization" (Why shouldn't women also vote? Why shouldn't conditions at the working place also be of public political concern? etc.) One is tempted to use here the old Levi-Straussian term of "symbolic efficiency": the appearance of *egaliberte* is a symbolic fiction which, 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 mocking of the "merely formal" bourgeois freedom: if it is merely formal and doesn't disturb the true relations of power, why, then, doesn't the Stalinist regime allow it? Why is it so afraid of it?)

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 life-world*. The commonplace according to which we are all irreducibly grounded in a particular (contingent) life-world, so that all universality is irreducibly colored by (embedded in) a particular life-world, 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 already Marx not point out how the true problem with Homer is not to explain the roots of his epics in the 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/rediscovers its own figure of this work, like there is a romantic Shakespeare, a realist Shakespeare, etc. Take Wagner's *Parsifal*: a lot of historicist work was done recently trying to bring out the contextual »true meaning« of the Wagnerian figures and topics: the pale Hagen is really a masturbating Jew; Amfortas' wound is really syphillis… The idea is that Wagner is mobilizing historical codes known to everyone in his epoch: when a person stumbles, sings in cracking high tones, makes nervous gestures, etc., »everyone knew« this is a Jew, so Mime from *Siegfried* is a caricature of a Jew; the fear of syphillis as the illness in the groin one gets from having intercourse with an »impure« woman was an obsession in the second half of the 19th century, so it was »clear to everyone« that Amfortas really contracted syphillis 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 of a 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, one should *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 de-contextualization, 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 hystericized femininity, of delicate

passages, of bourgeois family decadence. Along the same lines, Nietzsche was repeatedly reinvented throughout the XXth century, from the conservative-heroic proto-Fascist Nietzsche up 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); however, 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. And 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 of unearthing the particular bias of abstract universality should thus be supplemented by its opposite: by the (properly Hegelian) procedure which 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."[11] The parliamentary deputies of the Party of Order perceived their republicanism as a mockery: in parliamentary debates, they all the time generated royalist slips of tongue and ridiculed the Republic to let it be known that their true aim was to restore the kingdom. What they were not aware of is that they themselves were duped as to the true social impact of their rule. What they were effectively doing was to establish the conditions of bourgeois republican order that they despised so much (by for instance guaranteeing the safety of private property). So it is not that they were royalists who were just wearing a republican mask: although they experienced themselves as such, it was their very "inner" royalist conviction which was the deceptive front masking their true social role. In short, far from being the hidden truth of their public republicanism, their 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": 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."[12] The medium is here not the message, quite the opposite: the very medium that we use – the universal intersubjectivity of 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 universality of human rights, etc.) – much more important is to unearth the universality that sustains (and potentially undermines) my particular claim. The supreme case, noted by Bertrand Russell, is here 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 (presup)poses 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 for the universal (capitalist-republican) interest served by their pursuing of their particular royalist goals. They were like Hegel's *valet de chambre* who doesn't see the universal dimension, so that 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 the 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 which undermines all particular life-worlds, cultures, traditions, cutting across them, catching them in its vortex. In it meaningless to ask here the question "is this universality true or a mask of particular interests?" – this universality is directly actual as universality, as the negative force of 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 Badiou recently claimed that our time is *devoid of world*: 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 cutting of the umbilical link to Europe. 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.

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 (it certainly affects differently a Protestant society than a Muslim one). So while capitalism certainly is a set of features which are trans-cultural, functioning in different societies, they nonetheless function within each society as a particular sub-system which is integrated into an each time specific over-determined articulation, i.e., texture of social-symbolic relations. It is like the use of 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 or in a working class small town in economic depression… The answer to this is that, 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 trans-symbolic way. Even if it doesn't "mean the same" to individuals in different communities, even if it doesn't inscribe itself into the totality of their life-world in the same way, it generates the same formal set of social relations, pursuing its circular movement of self-reproduction: in the US 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 which tries desperately to defend its identity has to repress the universal dimension which is 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 cliterodectomy, 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, etc.; *actual universality »appears« (actualizes 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 which 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 o 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 which join hands, it is the repressed, the exploited and suffering, the 'parts of no-part' of every culture which 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 which fail in this endeavor and remain blind for the universal dimension of a work in question, like most of the 17th and 18th centuries were blind for Shakespeare). This universality which emerges/explodes out of a violent breakthrough is not the awareness of the universal as the neutral frame which unites us all ("in spite of our differences, we are basically all human…"); it is the universality which becomes for-itself in the violent experience of the subject who becomes aware that he is not fully himself (coinciding with his particular form of existence), that he is marked by a profound split. Universality becomes for-itself in the particular element which is thwarted in its endeavor to reach its identity – 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, of how it involves individuals who are by

definition self-alienated, out-of-joint, not-reconciled, unable to recognize themselves (their proper place) in the global organic social order.

One often addressed at Primo Levi the question: does he consider himself primarily a Jew or a human? Levi himself often oscillated between these two choices. The obvious solution – precisely as a Jew, he was human, i.e., 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 not able 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 can withdraw.*

Acheronta movebo

The particular ethnic substance, our "life-world," 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 which tells us how are we to relate to the explicit norms, how are we to apply them: to what extent are we to take them literally, how and when are we allowed, solicited even, to disregard them, etc. – and this is the domain of habit. To know the habits of a society is *to know the meta-rules of how to apply its explicit norms*: when to use them or not use them; when to violate them; when not to use a choice which is offered; when we are effectively obliged to do something, but have to pretend that we are doing it as a free choice (like in the case of potlatch). Recall the polite offer-meant-to-be-refused: it is a "habit" to refuse such an offer, and anyone who accepts such an offer commits a vulgar blunder. The same goes for many political situations in which a choice is given *on condition that we make the right choice*: we are solemnly reminded that we can say no – but we are expected to we reject this offer and enthusiastically say yes. With many sexual prohibitions, the situation is the opposite one: the explicit "no" effectively functions as the implicit injunction "do it, but in a discreet way!".

One of the strategies of "totalitarian" regimes is to have legal regulations (criminal laws) so severe that, if taken literally, EVEREYONE 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 ex-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 presents falsely the achievements of the socialist revolution or that *may arouse the tension and discontent among the public* for the way it deals with political, social, or other topics… this last category is obviously not only infinitely plastic, but also conveniently self-relating: does the very fact that you are accused by those in power not in itself equal the fact that you "*aroused the tension and discontent among the public*"? In those years, I remember asking a Slovene politician how does he justify 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 overlapping of potential total culpabilization (whatever you are doing MAY be a crime) and mercy (the fact that you are allowed to lead your life in peace is not a 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) – yet another proof that "totalitarian" regimes are by definition regimes of mercy, of tolerating violations of the law, since, the way they frame social life, violating the law (bribing, cheating…) is a condition of survival.

The problem during the chaotic post-Soviet years of the 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 which sustained the entire social edifice. Say, if, in the Soviet Union, you wanted to get a better hospital treatment, a new apartment, if you had a complain against authorities, if you were summoned to a court, if you wanted your child to be accepted in a top school, if a factory manager needed raw materials not delivered on time by the state-contractors, etc.etc., everyone knew what you really had to do, whom to address, whom to bribe, what you can do and what you cannot do. After the collapse of the 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 are you to relate to explicit legal regulations,

what can you ignore, where does bribery work, etc. (One of
the functions of the 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.) The stabilization under the Putin reign
mostly amounts to the newly-established transparency of
these unwritten rules: now, again, people mostly know how
to act in 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 or meant to be rejected. It was Brecht who gave a
poignant expression to this feature in his learning 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 or 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, a gesture - an offer - which is meant to be
rejected.

And is not something similar part of our everyday
mores? In today's Japan, workers have the right to a 40
days holiday every year – however, they are expected not to
use this right in its full extent (the implicit rule is not
to use more than half of it). In John Irving's *A Prayer for
Owen Meany*, after the little boy Owen accidentally kills
John's (his best friend's, 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 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 at the end of the process
(perhaps, even, the friendship is saved).

Of course, the problem is: what if the person to whom
the offer to be rejected 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, the dissolution of the social
link. In this precise sense, revolutionary-egalitarian
figures from Robespierre to John Brown are (potentially, at
least) *figures without habits*: they refuse to take into
account the habits that qualify the functioning of a
universal rule. If all men are equal, than 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 early 1980s, a half-
dissident student weekly newspaper in ex-Yugoslavia wanted
to protest the fake "free" elections; aware of the
limitations of the 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."[13]), instead of
directly denouncing the elections as un-free, they decided
to treat them as if they are really free, as if their
result really was undecided, so, on the elections eve, they
printed an extra-edition of the journal with large
headline: "Latest election results: it looks that
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 way of treating elections as free, it reminded the people publicly of their non-freedom.

In the second season of the TV-series *Nip-Tuck*, Sean learns that the true father of his adolescent son Matt is Christian, his partner. His first reaction is an angry outburst; then, in the aftermath of a failed operation to separate Siamese twins, he again accepts Chris 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 obvious, 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 being already that of acceptance – this is how one talks to someone whom one already decided to re-accept. So the problem is that Sean SAYS TOO MUCH – why does he go on? This is the interesting question. Is the US public too stupid? No. So why then? What if just a sign of true re-acceptance would have been too much, too intense, so the explicit platitudes are here to water it down? Perhaps, *Nip-Tuck* being an American series, this excess can be accounted for in the terms of the difference between Europe and the US. In Europe, the ground floor in a building is counted as 0, so that the floor about it is the "first floor," while in the US, the "first floor" is on the street level. In short, Americans start to count with 1, while Europeans know that 1 is already a stand-in for 0. Or, to put it in more historical turns: Europeans are aware that, prior to start counting, there has to be a "ground" of tradition, a ground which is always-already given and, as such, cannot be counted, while the US, a land with no pre-modern historical tradition proper, lacks such a "ground" – things begin there directly with the self-legislated freedom, the past is erased (transposed on to Europe).[14] This lack of ground thus has to be supplemented by excessive saying – Sean cannot rely on the symbolic ground that would guarantee that Christian will get the message without 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, they are the medium of social violence. Back in 1937, George Orwell[15] deployed the ambiguity of the predominant Leftist attitude towards the 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 recognizable as the same person."

Orwell's point is that radicals invoke the need for revolutionary change as a kind of superstitious token that should achieve the opposite, i.e., PREVENT the change from really occurring – a today's academic Leftist who criticizes the capitalist cultural imperialism is in reality horrified at the idea that his field of study would really break down. There is, however, a limit to this strategy: Orwell's insight holds only for a certain kind of "bourgeois" Leftists; 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; what happens is that, in the middle of their pseudo-radical posturing, they get caught into 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 "subject of the enunciated" and the "subject of the enunciation": first, in a direct negation, you start by wanting to "change the world" without endangering the subjective position from which you are 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, to quote Gandhi's nice formula, to BE himself the change he wants to see in the world. – It is thus clear to Orwell 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 honor, 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 realize what your own beliefs
really are."

There is nothing "inner" in this true ideological identity
of mine – my innermost beliefs are all "out there,"
embodied in practices which reach up 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;
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 lower popular class and 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 proverbial answer of a middle-class Parisian 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 a 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 a further element to these series: through genetic
manipulations, they succeeded in growing beans which, 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…[16] Lacan supplemented Freud's list of partial objects
(breast, faeces, 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 numerous cases of pedophilia that shatter the Catholic Church: when its representatives insists that these cases, deplorable as they are, are 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, because of accidental reasons of private history with no relation to the Church as an institution, happened to chose 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 "straight" (not pedophiliac) priest who, 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 of fragging etc. which sustain the 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 a key constituent of the very identity of a Christian 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 US in the 1920s, if he denounced Ku Klux Klan to the police, excluded himself from his community, i.e., betrayed its fundamental solidarity). Consequently, the answer to the Church's reluctance should be not only that we are dealing with criminal cases and that, if Church does not fully participate in their investigation, it is an accomplice after the fact; moreover, Church AS SUCH, as an institution, should be investigated with regard to the way it systematically creates conditions for such crimes.

This obscene underground of habits is what is really 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 *Interpretations of Dreams*: *Acheronta movebo* – dare to move the underground!

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[1] Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006, p. 89.

[2] See Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1998.

[3] See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press 2006 (reprint edition).

[4] Brown, op.cit., p. 152.

[5] Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press 1994, p. 33.

[6] Kojin Karatani's *Transcritique. On Kant and Marx*, Cambridge: MIT Press 2003, p. 134.

[7] Quoted from Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Islam*, London: New Internationalist and Verso Books 2004, p. 77.

[8] Brown, op.cit., pp. 174-175.

[9] See Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, Cambridge: MIT Press 1986.

[10] See Jacques Ranciere, *Hatred of Democracy*, London: Verso Books 2007.

[11] See Karl Marx, "Class Struggles in France," op.cit., p. 95.

[12] G.K.Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1995, p. 38.

[13] Moustapha Safouan, *Why Are the Arabs Not Free: the Politics of Writing* (unpublished manuscript).

[14] Perhaps, this feature accounts for another weird phenomenon: in (almost) all American hotels housed in buildings of more than 12 floors, there is no 13th floor (to avoid bad luck, of course), i.e., one jumps directly from 12th floor to 14th floor. For a European, such a procedure is meaningless: whom are we trying to fool? As if God doesn't know that what we designated as 14th floor is really the 13th floor? Americans can play this game precisely because their God is just a prolongation of our individual egos, not perceived as a true ground of being.

[15] See George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937).

[16] Although, even here, 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 advices the citizens to break wind at least 15 times per day, in order to avoid unhealthy tensions and pressures in the body…