

Caught in Another's Dream in Bosnia

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APROPOS OF THE French Revolution, Kant wrote that its world-historical significance is not to be sought in what actually happened on the streets of Paris, but in the enthusiasm that this endeavor to realize freedom aroused in the eyes of its observers, the educated, enlightened public.

It may well be true that what actually took place in Paris was horrifying, that the most repulsive passions were let loose, yet the reverberations of these events within the enlightened public all around Europe bear witness not only to the possibility of freedom, but to the very actualization of freedom. The same step -- the shift from the event's immediate reality to its inscription into the Other epitomized by passive observers -- was to be repeated during the violent anti-immigrant outbursts in the summer of 1992 in Rostock and other cities in former East Germany. The true meaning of these events is to be sought in the fact that the neo-Nazi pogroms met with the approval or at least the "understanding" of the silent majority of observers; even some top Social Democratic politicians used them as an argument for reconsidering German liberal immigrant laws. This shift in the *Zeitgeist* is where real danger lurks: it prepares the ground for the possible hegemony of an ideology which perceives the presence of "aliens" as a threat to national identity, as the principal cause of antagonisms that divide the political body.

What we must be particularly attentive to is the difference between this "postmodern" racism which now rages around Europe and the traditional form of racism. The old racism was

direct and raw -- "they" (Jews, Blacks, Arabs, Eastern Europeans) are lazy, violent, plotting, eroding our national substance -- whereas the new racism is "reflected," which is why it can well assume the form of its opposite, of the fight against racism. Etienne Balibar hit the mark by baptizing it "metaracism." That is to say, how does a "postmodernist" racist react to the outbursts in Rostock? He or she begins by expressing horror and repulsion at the neo-Nazi violence, yet is quick to add that these events, deplorable as they are, must be seen in their context: they are actually a perverted, distorted expression and effect of a true problem, namely that in the contemporary Babylon the experience of belonging to a well-defined ethnic community, which gives meaning to the individual's life, is losing ground ... in short, the true culprits are cosmopolitan universalists who, in the name of "Multiculturalism," mix races and thereby set in motion natural self-defense mechanisms. Apartheid is thus legitimized as the ultimate form of anti-racism, as an endeavor to prevent racial tensions and conflicts. What we have here is a palpable example of what Lacan has in mind when he insists that "there is no metalanguage": the distance between metaracism and racism is void, metaracism is racism pure and simple, all the more dangerous for posing as its opposite and advocating racist measures as the very form of fighting racism.

At a different level, we encounter the same paradox in the way Western media report on the recent war in Bosnia. The first thing that strikes the eye is the contrast to the reporting on the 1991 Gulf War where we had the standard ideological personification: instead of providing information on social, political, religious, and like trends and antagonisms in Iraq, the media ultimately reduced the conflict to a quarrel with Saddam Hussein, Evil personified, the outlaw who excluded himself from the civilized international community -- even more than military destruction, the true aim was presented as psychological, as the humiliation of Saddam who was to "lose face." In the case of the Bosnian war, however, notwithstanding isolated cases of the demonization of the Serbian president, Milosevic, the predominant attitude is that of a quasi-anthropological observer. The media outdo one another in giving us lessons on the ethnic and religious background of the conflict: centuries-old traumas are being replayed and acted out, so that, in order to understand

the roots of the conflict, one has to know not only the history of Yugoslavia, but the entire history of the Balkans from the medieval times. In this conflict, it is therefore not possible simply to take sides, one can only patiently try to grasp the background of this savage spectacle, alien to our civilized system of values. Yet this opposite procedure involves an ideological mystification even more cunning than the demonization of Saddam Hussein. The comfortable attitude of a distant observer, the evocation of the allegedly intricate context of religious and ethnic struggles in Balkan countries, is here to enable the West to shed its responsibility toward the Balkan countries, that is, to avoid the bitter truth that, far from presenting the case of an eccentric ethnic conflict, the Bosnian war is a direct result of the failure of the West to grasp the political dynamic of the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The logic is therefore ultimately the same as that of metaracism: what we have is the actual bias, the support of "ethnic cleansing," under the guise of its opposite, the distance of an impartial observer.

RECENT EVENTS IN former Yugoslavia exemplify perfectly the properly dialectical reversal in which something that, within a given set of circumstances, appeared as the most backward element, a remnant of the past, suddenly emerges as the premonition of what lies ahead. The outbursts of Balkan nationalism were first dismissed as the convulsions of the dying Communist totalitarianism disguised in new nationalist clothes, as a ridiculous anachronism that properly belongs to the nineteenth-century age of nation-states, not to our present era of multinationals and world-integration. But suddenly it became clear that the ethnic conflicts of former Yugoslavia are the first clear taste of the twenty-first century, the prototype of the post-Cold War armed conflicts.

Hegel said that the moment of victory of a political force is the very moment of its splitting. The recent deadlocks of the triumphant liberal-democratic "new world order" seem to endorse fully this view: today's world is more and more marked by the frontier separating its "inside" from its "outside" -- the frontier

between those who succeeded in remaining "within" (the "developed," those to whom the rules of human rights, social security, and so forth, apply), and the others, the excluded (apropos of whom the main concern of the "developed" is to contain their explosive potential, even if the price to be paid is the neglect of elementary democratic principles). This opposition, not the one between capitalism and socialism, is what defines the world today: the socialist bloc was the true "third way," a desperate attempt at modernization outside the constraints of capitalism. What is effectively at stake in the present crisis of post-socialist states is precisely the struggle for one's place, now that the illusion of the "third way" has evaporated: who will be admitted "inside," integrated into the developed capitalist order, and who will remain excluded from it?

This antagonistic splitting opens up the field for Khmer Rouge, Sendero Luminoso, and other similar movements which seem to personify "radical Evil" in today's politics: if -- to use the Hegelian opposition of negative and infinite judgment -- "fundamentalism" functions as a kind of "negative judgment" on liberal capitalism, as an inherent negation of the universalist claim of liberal capitalism, then movements like Sendero Luminoso enact an "infinite judgment" on it. In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel conceives the "rabble" (*Poebel*) as a necessary product of the modern society: a non-integrated segment within the legal order, prevented from participating in its benefits, and for this very reason delivered from responsibilities toward it -- a necessary surplus excluded from the closed-circuit of the social edifice.

It seems as if it is only today, with the advent of late capitalism, that this notion of "rabble" has achieved its adequate realization in social reality, with the political forces which paradoxically unite the most radical indigenous anti-modernism (the refusal of everything that defined modernity: market, money, individualism) with the eminently modern project of effacing the entire symbolic tradition and of beginning from a zero-point (in the case of Khmer Rouge, the abolition of the entire system of education and the physical liquidation of intellectuals). In what, precisely, does the "shining path" of the Senderistas consist? In the idea to reinscribe socialism within the framework of a return

to the ancient Inca empire (Khmer Rouge also conceived their regime as the return to the lost grandeur of the old Khmer kingdom). The result of this desperate endeavor to surmount the antagonism between tradition and modernity is a double negation. A radically anti-capitalist movement (the refusal of integration within the world market) is coupled with a systematic dissolution of all traditional hierarchical social links, beginning with the family. At the level of "micro-power," the regime of the Khmer Rouge functioned as the dictatorship of adolescents provoked into denouncing their parents, that is to say, as an "anti-oedipal" regime in its purest form. The truth articulated in an inverted form in the paradox of this double negation is that capitalism cannot reproduce itself without the support of precapitalist forms of social linkage.

In other words, far from presenting a case of exotic barbarism, the "radical Evil" of the Khmer Rouge and the Senderistas is conceivable only against the background of the constitutive antagonism of today's capitalism. There is more than a contingent idiosyncrasy in the fact that, in both cases, the leaders of the movements are intellectuals, well-skilled in the subtleties of Western culture (prior to becoming a revolutionary, Pol Pot was a professor at a French lycée in Phnom Penh, known for his subtle readings of Rimbaud and Mallarmé; Abimael Guzman, the "Presidente Gonzalo," the leader of the Senderistas, is a philosophy professor whose preferred authors are Hegel and Heidegger and whose doctoral thesis was on Kant's theory of space). For that reason, it is too simple to conceive these movements as the last embodiment of the millenarian radicalism which structures the social space as the exclusive antagonism between "us" and "them," allowing for no possible forms of mediation. They rather present a desperate attempt to break out of the constitutive imbalance of capitalism, without seeking support in some previous tradition supposed to enable us to master this imbalance (the Islamic fundamentalism which remains within this logic is for that reason ultimately a perverted instrument of modernization). In other words, behind Sendero Luminoso's endeavor to erase the entire tradition and to begin from the zero-point in an act of creative sublimation, there is the correct insight into the complementary relationship of modernity and tradition: any true return to tradition is today a priori

impossible, its role is simply to serve as a shock-absorber for the process of modernization. The Khmer Rouge and the Senderistas as the "infinite judgment" on late capitalism are therefore, in Hegel's terms, an integral part of its notion: if one wants to understand capitalism as a world-system, one must take into account its inherent negation, the "fundamentalism," as well as its absolute negation, the infinite judgment on it.

In Europe, former Yugoslavia is the exemplary case of this split inherent in capitalism as world-system: every actor in the blood-play of its disintegration endeavors to legitimize its place "inside" by presenting itself as the last bastion of European civilization (the current ideological designation for the capitalist "inside") in the face of oriental barbarism. For the right-wing nationalist Austrian, this imaginary frontier is Karavanke, the mountain chain between Austria and Slovenia: beyond it, the rule of the Slavic horde begins. For the nationalist Slovenes, this frontier is the river Kolpa, separating Slovenia from Croatia: we are Mitteleuropa, while the Croats are already Balkan, involved in the irrational ethnic feuds which really do not concern us -- we are on their side we sympathize with them, yet in the same way one sympathizes with a third-world victim of aggression. For the Croats, the crucial frontier, of course, is the one between them and the Serbs, that is, between the Western Catholic civilization and the Eastern Orthodox collective spirit which cannot grasp the values of Western individualism. The Serbs, finally, conceive themselves as the last line of defense of Christian Europe against the fundamentalist danger embodied in the Muslim Bosnians and Albanians.

It should be clear now who, within the space of former Yugoslavia, effectively behaves in the civilized "European" way -- those at the very bottom of this ladder, excluded from all -- Muslim Bosnians and Albanians. And today, they are paying the price for it. Slovenia and Croatia moved fast and aggressively against the will of the West: they proclaimed independence, and attained their goal, including being recognized by the West, whereas Alija Izetbegovic, the Bosnian president, behaved as the model pupil of the West: he followed Western suggestions closely and proceeded with extreme caution, always ready to give

another chance to any formula of a "new Yugoslavia," abstained from "provoking the Serbs" even when the Yugoslav Army was already fortifying artillery-sites on the mountains around Sarajevo -- all in exchange for Western assurances that they would keep in check the Serbs and prevent the Yugoslav Army from attacking non-Serbs in Bosnia. He was paid for trusting the West and for playing its "civilized" game by the total destruction of his country: when Western promises proved void and the Army did attack, the West quickly threw up its hands and assumed the convenient posture of a distant observer, appalled at the outburst of primitive Balkan passions.

What is, then, the status of these notorious Balkan "archaic ethnic passions"? There is a well-known story about an anthropological expedition trying to contact a wild tribe in the New Zealand jungle who allegedly danced a terrible war dance in grotesque death-masks. When they reached the tribe in the evening, they asked them to dance for them, and the dance performed the next morning did in fact match the description. Satisfied, the expedition returned to civilization and wrote a much-praised report on the savage rites of the primitives. However, shortly after, when another expedition arrived at the place of this tribe and learned to speak their language properly, it was shown that this terrible dance did not exist in itself at all: in their discussions with the first group of explorers, the aborigines somehow guessed what the strangers wanted and quickly, in the night following their arrival, invented it especially for them, to satisfy their demand. In short, the explorers received back from the aborigines their own message in its inverted, true form.

Therein consists the lure to be dispelled if one is to understand what the Yugoslav crisis is about. There is nothing autochthonous in its "ethnic conflicts"; the gaze of the West was from the very beginning included—Lord Carrington and James Baker, Lord Owen and Cyrus Vance and Warren Christopher, among others, are today's version of the expedition to the New Zealand tribe: they act and react in exactly the same way, overlooking the entire spectacle; "old hatreds suddenly erupting in their primordial cruelty" is a dance staged for their eyes, a dance for which the West is thoroughly responsible.

SO WHY DOES the West accept this narrative of the "outburst of ethnic passions"? Recently, the world-famous Austrian writer Peter Handke expressed doubts about Slovene independence, claiming that the notion of an independent state is something imposed on Slovenes from the outside, not part of the inherent logic of their national development. Handke's mother was Slovene and, within his artistic universe, Slovenia functions as a mythical point of reference, a kind of maternal paradise, a country where words still directly refer to objects, somehow miraculously by-passing commodification, where people are still organically rooted in their landscape. What ultimately bothers him is, therefore, simply the fact that the actual Slovenia does not want to behave according to his private myth, and thus disturbs the balance of his artistic universe.

If an artist proceeds like this, the affair is still manageable -- Handke himself entitled his recent booklet on Slovenia *Dreamer's Farewell to the Fairy-Land*. Problems begin when the same logic takes over in politics where, for a long time past, "Balkan" is one of the privileged sites of phantasmic investments. Gilles Deleuze said somewhere: *si vous êtes pris dans le rêve de l'autre, vous êtes foutu* -- if you are caught in another's dream, you are lost. In former Yugoslavia, we are lost not because of our primitive dreams and myths preventing us from speaking the enlightened language of Europe, but because we pay in flesh the price for being the stuff the Other's dreams are made of. The fantasy which has organized the perception of former Yugoslavia is that of "Balkan" as the Other of the West: the place of savage ethnic conflicts long overcome by the civilized Europe, the place where nothing is forgotten and nothing learned, where old traumas are being replayed again and again, where symbolic links are simultaneously devalued (dozens of cease-fires broken) and over-valued (primitive warrior's notions of honor and pride). Against this background, a multitude of myths flourished. For the "democratic left," Tito's Yugoslavia was the mirage of the "third way" of self-management beyond capitalism and state-socialism; for the cultured literati it was the exotic land of refreshing folkloric diversity (the films of Makavejev and Kusturica); for Milan Kundera, the place where the idyll of Mitteleuropa meets

oriental barbarism; for the Western Realpolitiker of the late eighties, the disintegration of Yugoslavia functioned as a metaphor for what might arrive in the Soviet Union; for France and Great Britain, it resuscitated the phantom of the German fourth Reich perturbing the delicate balance of European politics; behind all of it lurked the primordial trauma of Sarajevo, of the Balkans as the gunpowder threatening to blow up all of Europe. Far from being the Other of Europe, former Yugoslavia was rather Europe itself in its Otherness, the screen onto which Europe projected its own repressed reverse.

Regarding this gaze of Europe on the Balkans, we recall Hegel's dictum that Evil does not reside in the object perceived as bad, but in the innocent gaze which perceives Evil all around. The principal obstacle to peace in former Yugoslavia is not "archaic ethnic passions," but the innocent gaze of Europe fascinated by the spectacle of these passions. Against today's journalistic commonplace about the Balkans as the madhouse of thriving nationalisms where rational rules of behavior are suspended, one must point out again and again that the moves of every political agent in former Yugoslavia, reprehensible as they may be, are totally rational within the goals they want to attain—the only exception, the only truly irrational factor in it, is the gaze of the West, babbling about archaic ethnic passions.

Old ethnic hatreds, of course, are far from being simply imagined: they are a historical legacy. Nevertheless, the key question is why they exploded at precisely this moment, not earlier or later. There is one simple answer to it: the political crisis in Serbia. The determining factor of the Yugoslav tragedy is the survival of the old power structure (the Communist bureaucracy, the Federal Army) in Serbia and Montenegro: it succeeded in prolonging its domination by putting on nationalist clothes. The moment a truly democratic overture was to take place in Serbia, the flames of "centennial passions" would extinguish themselves in a couple of weeks.

It may seem that now the Serbian game is over, that the West "finally got it" and put the blame on the true culprit. The true desire of the West is nevertheless discernible in innumerable

telltale details: the continuous compulsive search for stains also on the other side, with the aim to establish a kind of balance of guilt where "everybody is equally mad," where the equals sign is placed between the aggressor and its victim; the centering of attention on humanitarian problems (who will receive the flood of refugees?) which not only treats the conflict as if it were a kind of natural disaster, but also helps the Serbs in carrying out their program of "ethnic cleansing" in a more human way; the invention of ever new excuses against the military intervention (the Balkan countryside as the ideal ground for a prolonged guerrilla warfare); the ridiculous rejection of the desperate Bosnian plea to be allowed to buy arms and thus defend itself, characterized as "pouring oil on the flames." Suffice it to quote *Time*: "Western weaponry would probably not be useful to Bosnians without special training . . ." -- the blatant racism of it strikes the eye. How come Serbs in Bosnia can handle sophisticated weaponry, including MIG fighter planes? How come the same problem did not prevent the United States from arming anti-Communist rebels in Afghanistan?

All the talk about the need for more severe measures to stop the Serbian "ethnic cleansing" continues to serve the purpose of precisely putting off the actual implementation of these measures. Consequently, there is no need for psychoanalytic theories of the "death drive" to understand the atrocities actually going on in Bosnia; the proper object for a psychoanalytic approach is rather, the hysterical split that characterizes the attitude of the West, the uncanny antagonism between its "official" politics (preventing the Serbian "ethnic cleansing") and its "true desire" (to allow the Serbs to finish their work and then, after the fait accompli, to impose peace). In all probability, the West follows the geopolitical estimation according to which there will be no peace in the Balkans without a satisfied Serbia; the interests of all other parties can be sacrificed, only Serbia must be allowed to save face.

"Honorable exit for Serbia!" is the secret obsession of the West today. Meanwhile, all of Bosnia continues to linger on "between the two deaths": still alive, yet already written off, treated as a kind of political AIDS-patient, stigmatized as a mad place where

people kill each other for the sheer pleasure of doing it. Are we to blame them if, in the end, they will become "Muslim fundamentalists" and resort to desperate "terrorist" measures?