

The abyss repopulates itself

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“Tentacular and all-consuming, disfigured by pollution, the capital of misery absorbs entire cities as it spreads. Is the world’s largest megalopolis still governable? It is now a long time since the industrial dream turned into a nightmare.... Hundreds of thousands without homes live in the streets, sleeping wherever they can. They kill each other over any broken down shack, or any lean-to under a highway overpass.... Sao Paolo is not a Third World city. From many points of view it is even, with a rate of economic growth of between 4 and 6 percent, an exceptionally wealthy city that concentrates the country’s largest incomes. According to an official survey, ‘in the year 2000, the largest social group will be composed of 4 million adolescents from the poor neighborhoods, barely literate, malnourished and ill-adapted to the labor market’.”

Paris Match, February 20, 1997

I

To describe today’s world as a decomposing corpse is not just a facile rhetorical device. While it is an image, it is one that helps us *to imagine with precision*: by fixing it in one’s mind, one more accurately distinguishes what is before one’s eyes, and all kinds of phenomena, even the most troubling, become intelligible. Starting precisely with this universal feeling that it is now useless to try to obtain a more scientific and detailed understanding of the way world society functions. No one is interested in knowing exactly how it functions, except for those who are paid to provide theoretical simulations; first of all, because it no longer functions. One does not teach anatomy with carrion in a state of putrefaction that blurs the contours of the organs and mixes them all together. When the situation has reached this point, it seems that there are more important things to do: to get away from the corpse, to try to still find a little fresh air to breathe and recover one’s senses or, if not, as most of us have no other escape, to so effectively atrophy one’s perception of the foul odor so well, that one can, in the final analysis, adapt to it, perhaps even obtain some amusement and even feel a sense of fascination towards so many various and constantly changing corruptions, unusual fermentations and playful gurgles that swell the social corpse with their exuberance. An exuberance compared to which, what remains here and there of real life in customs seems to be such a tedious stability, that only conservatives and reactionaries terrorized by change could even consider defending it. And it is quite clear that no living organism can be as surprising, unexpected and *labyrinthine* as that which its own putrefaction can transform it into within a very short span of time.

It is also this very advanced corruption which, mixing everything together and disfiguring everything, causes the appearance in the newspapers of such suggestive *collages*, and *exquisite cadavers* allegorical of the end of civilization. When one reads that the leaders of the Chernobylized Ukraine have completed the destruction of the indigenous population by selling to the multinational pesticide producers the right to test, on millions of hectares, chemical compounds that are still illegal in less experimental countries, an adjacent news story informs us as follows: an American “research ecologist” is planning to disseminate his own program over the Internet, intended to cause the proliferation and diversification of cooperation and even a kind of sexual reproduction in a population that displays such behaviors as parasitism. He hopes that this experience, an electronic version of the diversification of species during the Cambrian period, will provoke the birth of unexpected life forms and will help us to penetrate the *mysteries of evolution*.

Another news story speaks of animals that are actually living in the wild, but which are riddled with electronic sensors, inserted into those put to work “for science”, but in reality to spy on what remains to be exploited of nature. And, on the same page of the newspaper, some Californians no less immersed in electronics now discover that they are “super-addicted”, trapped, wherever they may be, via the instantaneous means of communication, by seeing that no moment of their lives can now escape from economic exploitation.

In the same way, when one fine day we are told that we do not have to pay any attention to Orwell’s views, because he had been some kind of informer for the English secret services, a French newspaper that published the news under the title, “Orwell as Anticommunist Snitch”, in a display of utter thoughtlessness, published this story alongside another that announced that more than seven hundred thousand young people had taken to the streets in Berlin, “not to remake the world or to proclaim the insurrection”, it pointed out, but “simply to dance to the sound of techno music and to have as much fun as they can”. Thus, one sees simultaneously in action the *Ministry of Love* organizing under the name of “Love Parade” these electronic bacchanals of brutalization and the *Ministry of Truth*, which, by means of “declassified” archives, informs us that Orwell is no longer the virtuous enemy of bureaucratic totalitarianism who was worthy of respect right up until the day before, but a common snitch.

“Symptomatic”, to use a favorite word of Orwell; these calumnies are symptomatic of something that can be summarized as follows: the system of liberties based on the logic of the commodity can now do without any historical justification, including the reference to its Stalinist counterpart. This system is based on the ones that the totalitarianisms of this past century perfected and rests on their results with the same placid composure with which a gigantic statue of that *silicon man*, Michael Jackson, as part of a promotion for a concert whose spectators were promised that they would “go down in history”, temporarily rested on the same pedestal that, in the past, once hosted a statue of Stalin. As a German monthly magazine not at all prone to critical exaggeration pointed out with regard to the seven hundred thousand zombies massed together by the “Love Parade” in Berlin: “Techno is machine-music; the listener (the ‘raver’), a machine-man, a nervous system in motion, who allows himself to be dragged along by the music until his brain perceives a feeling of happiness in which only he believes. The aficionados of techno are the true monuments to German unification.” For these people, and for all those who *have taken their leave of history* and live in technological superstition (in a happiness in which only they believe), it is not even necessary to inculcate them with the dogma that any desire to “remake the world” inevitably amounts to an attempt to establish a totalitarian utopia, an attempt that can only result in chaos and violence: for they are ready to love this world that is coming apart at the seams *just as it is* and soon, perhaps, they will love it even more as it becomes even more chaotic and violent. For these atom-individuals, formed by the sensory isolation of industrial mass society, the essential thing is “to pulsate” and there is no lack of organizers to provide them with, besides *fun*, the collective surrogate roles and programmed demonstrations in which they can, in a totally spontaneous way, be the actors. “We are one big family” was the slogan chanted by the convulsionaries of Berlin, but behind this “sign of love on earth” we can discern compulsory uniformity and hatred of individual autonomy, just as these same features can be glimpsed behind the “citizens revolts”, whose generous enthusiasm consists above all in support for a prefabricated consensus.

In 1995, the English editor of *Animal Farm*, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the book’s publication, discovered an unpublished preface to the book. In this preface Orwell de-

scribed the difficulties he encountered in getting the book published, its rejection by four successive publishers, the pressure from the Ministry of Information and, more generally, the Stalinophile climate of censorship that prevailed among the English intellectuals of the time. But he also said that the prevailing orthodoxy could change and become—why not?—“anti-Stalinist”, without being any less suffocating for independent thought; the fact that the whole world repeats the same refrain is not made more agreeable by the fact that one agrees with it: the minds of the people are not thereby any less reduced to the state of “gramophones”. This is something that can be perfectly applied to the democratist unanimity of the moderns, to their teleguided indignation, to their way of expressing, *all together and on command*, their execration towards those who are presented to them as totalitarians, fanatics, or even racists, terrorists, or, in short, dangerous madmen opposed to all progress. French intellectuals like to make fun of American-style “political correctness”, which is a bit rustic and simple for their refined tastes. In reality, however, they practice a version of the same political correctness adapted to local cultural conventions, more hypocritical but faithful to the essence of the phenomenon, the purpose of which is to bring about a retroactive dissolution of history. In the United States a purge was carried out in the public libraries, directed against copies of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a book rendered suspect to anti-racists due to the fact that a negro appears within its pages (an escaped slave, it is true) who speaks like a negro and not like a militant multiculturalist university student of color. In France we do not experience exactly this kind of purge, but these days a dictionary cannot include in its definition the insulting connotation of the word, *Jew*, as synonymous with avarice, without being exposed to the fury of the anti-racists. And returning to Orwell, the journalist who repeated, in the pages of *Le Monde*, the slanders against the English author, at the same time distinguished himself as a respectful interviewer of Régis Debray, the inventor of that mediology that, as everyone knows, bowdlerizes the critical concept of the spectacle by stigmatizing it as idealist and unscientific (since “man needs the spectacle to gain access to the truth”), which, nonetheless, does not lead him to diminish the vigilance that periodically impels him, in the name of the “unique nature of the Shoah”, to hurl the accusation of denialism against anyone who dares to consider the extermination of the Jews of Europe—whose new name of Shoah henceforth situates it in a *consolatory* uniqueness with respect to the rest of contemporary history—as something that might perhaps have an explanation, certain causes, or a relation to the existence of the State and classes or to that of industrial society.

The avalanche of falsifications-revelations that presently organizes the confusion that prevails with respect to any issue rapidly drags down with it the will to reestablish the corresponding facts, since in order to discover these facts it would be necessary that certain general historical truths that form the context of the events in question should still have currency; one notes, however, that they have been erased and, above all, together with the search for historical meaning itself, the interest in discovering the truth, which was its motivation, has also been erased. Thus, it is only by understanding the good reasons that Orwell had after the war to consider Stalinism as the *main enemy* (which requires not only some knowledge, but also a certain acquaintance with historical struggles), that one becomes capable of expressing an informed judgment concerning the way he fought it. It is undoubtedly much easier to wait to be informed of the historical truth at the moment when it is established by recently declassified archives. One will thus be able to learn that the wretched bureaucrat London, who used to be considered to be so important, before he was a Stalinist who had fallen from grace, had been a Stalinist in power, that is, a cop. And

since the archives reveal such evidence, one will also have to admit that they express the truth about all the rest.

The abolition of history is a kind of horrible freedom for those who have effectively liberated themselves from any debts with respect to the past as well as any responsibilities with respect to the future: the moderns love this freedom, composed of irresponsibility and openness (openness to everything that domination wants to make of them), more than the very apple of their eye, whose extinction they have meekly entrusted to their TV screens. Anyone who criticizes the emptiness of this freedom, by recalling, for example, the existence of history in the form of numerous and terrible debts that are now coming due at this end of the century, as if they comprised the bill that had to be paid for misusing the world, will be accused of harboring a fascistoid nostalgia for a pre-technological harmony, or of displaying tendencies toward religious fundamentalism when not apocalyptic fanaticism. The intellectuals distinguish themselves from everyone else due to the fact that, for them, this abolition of history, which for the great mass of people constitutes only a major lightening of their burden, also implies *work*: the work of erasing the traces of real conflicts that have taken place and possible alternatives that have been proposed, the work of replacing them with the false antagonisms retroactively required by the propaganda of the moment (and, in this respect, we can see the contribution made by leftism, which was their precursor both in re-writing the past as well as in manufacturing the false struggles of the present and has been so courageous in helping to knock down what was already collapsing). What these intellectual agents detest, then, in Orwell—and this was the case both when they praised him as a moralist of the same rank as Camus, which used to be fashionable, and when they slander him, as they are doing now—is the fact that he had always lucidly participated in the then-decisive conflict whose result would determine all the subsequent chances for freedom, without thereby sacrificing to any cause, or to any propaganda, his freedom to subject illusions and weaknesses to judgment, a judgment from which not even the best struggles were exempt. Thus, he never thought he was better than the struggles of his time, and he knew how to participate in them in order to make them better: this is why he is necessarily viewed with disdain by incompetents, moralists and esthetes. All of whom are legion, especially among the intellectuals.

II

In this same unpublished preface to *Animal Farm*, Orwell observes that the censorship to which he refers does not necessarily imply any kind of formal prohibitions and that freedom is, among other things, the freedom to tell people what they do not want to hear. One might think that today, with the unprecedented variety of information that is constantly paraded before everyone, people are ready to listen to anything, and are indifferent to matters of taste or interest. It would not take one long, however, to demonstrate that there are many things that people do not want to know about and that they contrive, when despite all their efforts such things are brought to their attention, to transform into mere hypotheses, which they take into consideration among many other hypotheses, in order to immunize themselves against the truth, and to accustom their minds to absorb it without reacting. A perfect example of this is provided by that newspaper story about a television broadcast in which a “movie preview” served to praise the activity of a multinational environmentalist group by showing what we could expect “in the year 2000

and shortly thereafter” if this group did not exist: “It is everything that everyone is afraid of. It more or less identifies the future with this avalanche of pigsties belching into the skies, greenish substances that escape through the sewers, nauseating sludge, unbreathable air and turbid waters.” (*Le Monde*, June 9–10, 1996). What is remarkable with regard to the question that concerns us is this: the images utilized were those of catastrophes *that had already taken place* and our telespectator drew the conclusion that this “inexorable degradation of the environment” might very well take place, *someday*.

This same newspaper article also spoke of “the intuition that all of us have of an irremediable loss of humanity in favor of a new kind of barbarism”. Since the recent upsurge in popularity, among the intellectuals and the world of the communications media, of the term barbarism, this word has been made to cover a chaotic and wide ranging array of facts and behaviors that obviously belie the ideal of social pacification of democracy based on the commodity. But where has anyone seen this ideal, we shall not say realized, but only defended, even if only as an ideal? In other words: where is it not completely subjected to ridicule? Already the local version that is proposed for us, the poor “European Union”, has to mobilize to control the flow of toxins that are being shipped from one place to another (it appears that the prion of the cows is even found in children’s biscuits). To speak of barbarism assumes the existence of a civilization that must be defended, and in order to establish the existence of the latter, there is nothing more effective than the presence of a barbarism that must be combated. Barbarism would thus be just outside our gates, but still outside them, because behind them we zealously guard, digitalized on our CD-ROMs, the treasures of civilization: the Alhambra and the works of Cezanne, the Paris Commune and the *Anatomy* of Vesalius.

Just as certain images that appear in dreams are the result of a compromise between the perception of a physical reality that tends to interrupt sleep and the desire to continue sleeping, so the idea of a civilization that must be defended, however much one may be prepared to admit that it is surrounded by dangers, is nonetheless quite consoling: this is the kind of tranquilizer sold monthly by the democrats of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, for example. Among the things that people do not want to hear, and that they do not want to see, when in reality they are displayed right before their eyes, are the following: the fact that all the technological improvements that have *simplified their lives* so much that almost nothing living remains of them, that they have fostered the emergence of something that is no longer a civilization, that barbarism arises, *like a natural phenomenon*, from this simplified, mechanized, soulless life, and that, of all the terrible results of this experience of dehumanization to which they have made such a major contribution, the most terrifying is their progeny, since the latter is what, in the final analysis, upholds all the rest. That is why, when the citizen-ecologist attempts to pose the most disturbing question by asking, “What kind of world shall we leave to our children?”, he avoids posing this other, really disturbing question: “To what kind of children shall we leave the world?”

There can be no doubt that no society in history has ever heaped so much praise on youth, as a model of behavior and as a way of life, and never has a society treated real young people so badly in reality, as this one. Chesterton claimed in *The Superstition of Divorce* that the profound meaning of the most advanced pedagogical theories of his time, according to which it was advisable to consider the child as a complete and autonomous individual, was the desire that “children shall have no childhood” (Hannah Arendt expressed this in her own way many years later). Mass society, by disposing, along with individuality, of the problem of its formation, finds itself in circumstances conducive to the realization of this program and, dialectically, to its perfection

with what has been called its “infantilism”, now that it operates in such a manner that adults do not have an adulthood. If consumers are treated like children, children can also be treated like real consumers (“influencers”, as advertisers know, of an increasingly larger share of the purchases of their parents). Well-intentioned people concerned with the “protection of childhood” seldom speak of the illnesses and the diverse pathologies that are provoked by a process of rearing that is too precociously oriented towards directed consumption. Furthermore, it is very rare for any of those who express so much concern about protecting their children to ask themselves why we have such an abundance of perverts and sadists precisely in the most modern, rational and civilized societies.

When it is said that young people have never been treated so badly, and not only in distant lands with whose misery we sympathize, but right here, in the metropolis of abundance, the usual response is to refer to the child labor of the 19th century or the teaching methods of the pre-war era. Like every image that assumes the form of a slogan that serves to justify progress, these permit one to say nothing about what progress has in reality brought, or to only say that things could be worse. In this case, it is more schooling that is erected as a postulate of happiness and achievement, disregarding the most obvious and indisputable facts, the least of which is the fact that these so-called higher studies, for which only a certain percentage of qualified applicants for the baccalaureate, administratively determined, is eligible, do not prepare anyone for anything that could merit the name of a trade. This is not an obstacle to the functioning of a modern economy, however, since everyone knows that almost the only available jobs are in that new kind of domestic labor, the “services”, which includes everything from pizza delivery to socio-cultural program director. And in any case, it hardly matters whether those who for the most part will be “educated at the video game console” should be left to marinate for a longer or shorter period of time in the murky juices of the national education system. Therefore, with respect to this maltreatment, this is the essential point: we are witnessing the emergence of the first generations that have been delivered over to digitalized life, with nothing or almost nothing that, in the realm of customs, could impede, even just a little, their complete adaptation to that kind of life.

Concerning these issues, it is often best to listen to the fanatics of alienation, who, in their own way, speak like authoritative experts. And this is how one of them expresses his views, one who has preserved from his Marxist past a tone of delight when speaking of the horrors that are overthrowing the “old world”, about the “vast, shady complicity on the part of a generation which is at last free from adult attention, but is no longer minded to grow up. An endless, purposeless adolescence...” (one will appreciate the very modern way of presenting a form of coercion and poverty—which deprives a person of all the means to become an adult—as choice and emancipation): “Moreover, this pre-reality-principle, infantile state coincides strangely with the world of virtual reality, our adult media world, the post-reality-principle world, in which the real and the virtual merge. This explains the spontaneous affinity of the entire younger generation with the new virtual technologies. The child has a special relationship with the instantaneous. Music, electronics, drugs—all these things are immediately familiar to him. Psychedelic isolation does not frighten him. Where real time is concerned, he is way ahead of the adult, who cannot but seem a retard to him, just as in the field of moral values, he cannot but seem a fossil.” (Jean Baudrillard, “The Dark Continent of Childhood”, *Libération*, October 16, 1995; English translation published in Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, tr. Chris Turner, Verso, London, 2002, pp. 103–104.)

Indeed, most adults, concerned about not being able to keep up with the rapid pace of change, feel amazed and vaguely ashamed in contemplating their children, who feel much more comfortable in the electronic maelstrom and its instantaneous life and who show themselves, as a result, to be models of adaptation and opportunist wisdom. Not only do adults have nothing to teach them, but adults are themselves the timid students of these pedagogues of modernity, and they envy their children for not feeling constrained by those old civilized reflections of morality or taste, which are nothing but so many stumbling blocks to enjoying the present without restraints. Everything would therefore be for the best in this best of all virtual worlds, if this happy adaptation to all the technologies of simulation did not have its counterpart, in the non-virtual reality, of a shocking inability to escape from the artificial universe of automatic sensations except by way of delirium or brutality. Now they have to chemically treat that category of children, when they too precociously present with the pathological symptoms common to the “adult media world”: “We are talking above all about children who demonstrate motor neuron hyperactivity, a sterile restlessness, an incoherent and disordered activity. These children also suffer from serious emotional fragility, impulsiveness, an inability to defer gratification, indifference towards instructions and directives, a lack of self-control and inhibitions” (“A Medication for ‘Hyperactive’ Children Triggers Controversy”, *Le Monde*, September 15, 1995).

A very modern imbecile would probably say concerning a clinical profile of these symptoms that it was probably invented by a repressive psychiatry, that one has to know how to recognize in these disordered impulses the blossoming of childhood creativity, etc. One might feel tempted to respond to such reassurances by pointing out that nothing really human has ever been achieved in history, even on an individual scale, without the ability to “defer gratification” (that is, to elaborate it, socialize it, *civilize it*, all at the same time); but since we are not writing a philosophy of history here, we need only point out that one of the fatal contradictions of commodity society as it approaches its end is the fact that it does not cease to stimulate impulses which, at the same time, it must repress in order to create an illusion of order, and that, by repressing these impulses, it obviously causes them to assume yet more brutal forms. In this way, humanity will continue to *degenerate by being hardened*, while charlatans want us to identify this process with desire, imagination, sensuousness, and all the rest, as if the faculties of the soul could exist unaltered under such conditions, always alert and never deteriorated or mutilated. The most libertarian ideology of progress can then fully enjoy its intimate rapport with the spirit of the times, with its false enthusiasms (“A new style is being born...”, “A mutation is being primed for explosion before our eyes...”) as well as its sordid ambitions: “Wouldn’t the sophistication of audiovisual techniques permit a large number of students to receive individually what schoolmasters used to repeat over and over until the students had it memorized (orthography, elementary grammar, vocabulary, chemical formulas, theorems, music theory, declination...)? Couldn’t one test the degree of assimilation and comprehension in the form of a game?” (Raoul Vaneigem, *Avertissement aux écoliers et lycéens*, 1995.) The merchants selling innovative “para-educational” products are evidently no less ludic and confident: “This will work because the parents have understood that their children experience educational multimedia as if it were a game” (*Le Monde*, October 15–16, 1995).

Precocious immersion in the fictitious world that is being organized by the “new virtual technologies” certainly constitutes a form of education, but education for what? We may plausibly deduce the answer from its main characteristics. It is a world of rapid and violent sensations in which *one is alone* and in which one experiences a feeling of omnipotence. In this sense, and

because of its habit-forming character, it is similar to drugs. The space and time of ordinary life are suspended, replaced by the instantaneity of transmission via the screen and its worldwide network: considered in this way, it belongs to the sphere of the game, but it is not a game, since it does not stand opposed to ordinary life as a higher freedom, not even one that is transient and limited, but rather as a more complete form of submission, a test whose purpose is to measure one's capacity for adaptation to the purely artificial and technology-saturated environment that will soon be the only environment one knows (this aspect is also present right from the origins, which were military, of this virtual reality: flight simulators, etc.). Some of its other features seem to evoke the world of dreams, but in these cases it is the desire for submission that we can discern. It is, above all, a world in which time is reversible and the past can always be erased, in which, therefore, indifference towards truth and falsehood, reality and fiction, as well as any notion of good and evil, is the rule: it is undoubtedly by virtue of this quality that its most *educational* features are revealed. This indifference does not have to be inculcated in reluctant brains; to the contrary, the latter are in this respect already sufficiently prepared by everything that they could have learned up until this point; the new machinery only further reinforces and, as it does so, renders irreversible what had been initially instilled in our customs by previous machines, which were only supposed to make life easier for us instead of replacing it. In the end, however, the loss of consciousness was still incomplete and the experience of the creation of a totalitarian or "post-historical" man had to be further elaborated "to enter the third millennium", and to make that "mythical leap in time" to which we are beckoned by the millenarianism of the State.

In order to proscribe even the least hint of a truthful notion concerning the actual miserable condition of young people, an effort is therefore underway to obtain a consensus of censorship that unites: 1) the representatives of the commodity, their various propagandists and all those whom they corrupt by making them participate in their profits: those who are the most malleable and manipulable of consumers, those best adapted to the world of its baubles, because they have never known anything else, the young people whom they hold up as an example to the rest of the population; 2) the parents, who have done nothing but transmit to their children their own acceptance of the happiness based on the commodity and who see how this acceptance has been turned against them, magnified by all its pathological consequences, in the form of these mutants for whom their parents are nothing but "fossils" and "retards": in the case of the latter, the censorship functions in the almost psychoanalytic sense of the term, since it is the entire failure of their lives which seems to be represented precisely in that part of their lives in which they believed, dreaming of the domestic life of the happy family, they had preserved a meager portion of success; 3) the former leftists of every description who, although not for the reasons cited above, have every kind of affinity for modernization and strive to inspire futurist enthusiasm due to their fear of being taken for archaic, retrograde, or even crypto-Vichyites.

Thus, if so many people have allowed this juvenile orthodoxy to be imposed upon them, despite the fact that they had known many realities before they were liquidated or turned into commodities—and therefore despite the fact that they had to be capable of *judging* the race towards decomposition, its champions and its youthful aficionados—this is because they privately approve of the scorn directed at them by the representatives of the commodity and the managers of falsification, which is based on this simple calculation: twenty years from now, those who had known life *as it was lived before* will be dead and those who will then be young people and adults will not have known anything that could serve them as a vantage point from which to judge the substitutes imposed in every domain. In the past, one could have said that a generation was

made by its unique historical experience, for example, its shared view of what the world was like before the Second World War. Today, each generation (or each half generation or quarter generation; the cycle of replacing things is now shorter than the cycle of replacing the human material) is marked by a moment of consumption, a stage of technology, cretinizing and universal fashions: more than anything else, each generation is the contemporary of certain industrial products and it is by way of the evocation of their memories as telespectators that its members will recognize that each of them has experienced youth in common with the others. The last generation, in the properly historical sense of the term, thus includes all those who, having been witnesses in their youth of the sinking of the world into falsification—in France during the sixties up until the beginning of the seventies—preferred to adapt themselves and most even preferred to become enthusiastic supporters of this development. Thus, despite the fact that they knew a different reality that they now cravenly want to forget, which is why they are forced to conceal from themselves the historical stakes of that decisive epoch, they have no other recourse than to show themselves to be especially vindictive in their amnesia, identification with modernization, and hatred of any criticism.

III

For those who lived “when the big door swung on its hinges” (evoking Fargue, Bernanos: “we are in the shadows of this world, the door has not yet closed behind us”) and had a presentment of this oncoming imprisonment within the sterilized world of technological simplification, it was certainly a difficult task to draw up a precise balance sheet of the spiritual degradation that this implied. Some, however, have distinguished certain essential features, like Bernanos, precisely, or Lewis Mumford in the chapter on “post-historic man” in his book, *The Transformations of Man*, or even Adorno, who for his part noted that “technification” eroded the “kernel of experience” of pre-utilitarian behaviors, that is, the very basis of all capacity to pass judgment on it: “One cannot account for the newest human types without an understanding of the things in the environs which they continually encounter, all the way into their most secret innervations.... In the movements which machines demand from their operators, lies already that which is violent, crashing, propulsively unceasing in Fascist mistreatment.” These observations on the propagation of brutality due to the demands of mechanized life had wide-ranging implications; and we *have now realized them*. It has been fifteen years since another reliable witness was capable of issuing this warning, in an Italian city devastated by the proliferation of automobiles: “Nothing more effectively transmits the feeling of the criminal environment and the spiritual desert than this vast pileup of metallic shells inhabited by human faces, condemned to the torture that what used to be called a *street* has been transformed into. Every car is a projectile that has been fired, therefore, it is a permanent war, stupid and without purpose.”

To speak of war is no exaggeration, if one considers the millions of deaths already caused by automobile traffic and the devastations that it has wrought: cities and rural areas mutilated, landscapes laid waste, etc. Furthermore, this war has always produced a human type that is so representative that, for those who do not have a good idea of what the term *totalitarian man* designates, they only need to look at it to understand. An example of what humanity becomes under the impact of the organizational restrictions of industrial society, the motorist is no less exemplary in this respect when he exercises his last civilized ambition to play his role as *lubricant*

of *technology* as well as possible and drives in a civil, and perhaps even environmentally-friendly manner, if he has a “clean fuel” car, through the completely accessible desert that has been made to bloom for him: in any case, he will always be the *vandal* that the projectile he drives commands him to be. And when, after so many “secret innervations” that are, quite logically, the counterpart of his participation in the anonymous power that crushes him along with everyone else, he finds it most stimulating to directly assert his degenerated humanity and unleash his pent-up violence in accordance with the examples of the movie performances that are offered for the admiration of the multitudes, he then shows just how pointless it is to try to distinguish, when speaking of totalitarian man, between the zealous civil servant who is “following orders” and the sadistic thug who is also following orders, but with more cruelty. The one is just the horrible revenge of the other against his own cowardice and it is precisely the alliance of submission and aggression, conformism and irresponsibility, which defines the totalitarian mentality. On the other hand, one can also discern in the motorist the prototype of the *internaut*, the even more degraded man who has renounced the material world in favor of a circulation reduced to signs, who does not even have to physically move about. Doesn’t the motorist essentially drive through an informational landscape (with regard to traffic signs, advertising, tourism, and culture)? And doesn’t he learn how to *navigate* through all this information when he sees announced on the side of the road: “The most precious commodity is you”, while listening to the radio announce that, after fifty years of chemical warfare against life on earth, the sperm count of the average consumer has declined by 50%?

A combatant of the freedom to circulate trapped within his metallic integument, the motorist is therefore on the front line of the never ending, grueling struggle for a life freed of all effort. But this struggle causes mayhem everywhere: in reality there is no other mayhem than this. “The worst are the baling machines that literally swallow the victim”, one may read in a newspaper concerning the new types of work accidents in industrial agriculture. After having swallowed the hedgerows, the country lanes, the small farms, the villages, the knowledge and the entire tangible reality of the countryside and therefore all tangible and intelligible reality, mechanization is swallowing this harried worker that used to be the peasant. The devouring of humanity by the technological carapace that was supposed to protect it from the misadventures of the natural world evokes the ancient Chimera that is depicted on the cover of the first issue of *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*. There is, however, something even more horrible than this image in which, after all, victim and executioner are still separate: the idea that the interpenetration of man and his mechanical prostheses, in favor of which he has abdicated his faculties, has reached the point where they are so intertwined that they will never be able to be integrally restored. And one can immediately propose a case of this kind, even if it were only in considering what could happen to the sense of hearing under the impact of the mass music that promises a liberating paroxysm based on auditory shocks that are even more powerful than those of the noise of industry—and only satisfies this desire so as to immediately frustrate it.

All the tortures and all the torments inflicted by industrial labor are concentrated and endure in its products, in those objects that are so banal that one cannot even distinguish between them, but which, suffused with malignity, disseminate their evil throughout the organs of those who use them, hardening their hearts and their flesh. Twenty year old workers, authentic galley slaves in an “industrial polygon” on an island off the coast of Singapore (“with its high fences, its trenches and its surveillance cameras”), go blind within two or three years assembling remote control devices; meanwhile, far away, those who do not know about these extinguished eyes,

inattentively manipulating the remote and sheltered from that unknown suffering, these other slaves endeavor to bring down the curtains on their own eyesight before their TV screens, while all around them the light is fading and the night of reason is falling. From each technological object evils are thus propagated that medical science sometimes deigns to recognize and classify in its terminology of pathological conditions; so we have been informed that the use of cell-phones will probably increase one's chance of developing Alzheimer's Disease, that the damage inflicted by microwave ovens is not restricted to lowering the quality of the foods cooked in them, or that plastic bottles surreptitiously leak toxic substances that are now slated for further study. In any case, for a healthy humanity it would have sufficed to judge the whole affair from an *esthetic* point of view in order to reject with loathing its fraudulent benefits, and to perceive that it is leading to the loss of the right rhythm of life on earth, without which nothing good can exist. It seems that certain natives in New Guinea ate the brains of their dead with the same result, but who would have thought that it would have occurred to civilized people to feed their cows with ground-up sheep carcasses or to inject extracts from the pituitary glands of cadavers into children, so that the experts are now confronted by the mystery of "prion diseases"? Where is the mystery here? It is very simple to understand that nothing is done without consequences, that one cannot infuse death into life with impunity and that where the sense of proportion has been lost, other standards are restored by a system of equilibrating forces and the *lex talionis*.

Domination is speaking to us more and more often with a brutal frankness, as if it was addressing those who, having once been *burned*, are twice shy; but it speaks as if it were talking to children, and it employs the humorous tone of that commercial for a vitamin-fortified beverage that depicts a kind of massacre of the oranges inspired by horror movies of the "Texas Chain Saw Massacre" type, before declaring, in conclusion, this truth: "You Drink It, You Are Accomplices!" In reality, who, in one way or another, has not been *swept away*, who has not been, at one time or another, temporarily, but not without lasting effects, *possessed* by the barbaric power of technology, tempted, for example, while driving their car, to run over pedestrians that get in their way? With all the electronic gadgets that are routinely used without a second thought, we become accustomed to that functional coldness that strikes us when we go to a hospital; all you need to do is to press a button to immediately obtain satisfaction without effort and one becomes impatient whenever one does not get immediate and automatic results; one loses the touch for handling things, just as one loses the ability to handle relations with one's own kind, and the utilitarian brutality that is on the rise is made to pass for emancipation, access to an independence liberated of all conventions, etc.

As for what is happening to ordinary language under these circumstances, we need not dwell upon this, since it has long been established that "all individual or national degradation is immediately revealed by a strictly proportionate degradation in language", which may be confirmed every day by listening to our contemporaries.

IV

The barbarians do not come from a distant and backward periphery of commodity abundance, but from its very heart. Those who have been able to some extent to keep their sensibilities intact, and have striven to reduce their relations with the technologies of alienated life to a minimum, can be persuaded of this by going among those who have been formed and deformed since in-

fancy by this apparatus of impoverishment; they are as far removed from nature as they are from reason, and by virtue of this hallmark we recognize barbarism. These perceptual cripples, mutilated by the machinery of consumption, invalids of the war of commerce, flaunt their defects like medals, their weaknesses like a uniform, their insensitivity like a flag. What thus radiates from 14- or 15-year old adolescents, roving in gangs through the Paris subways, often recalls what used to be quite specifically a trait of uniformed virility (soldiers, athletes, militants of totalitarian movements): let's just say it smells like an old-fashioned lynching. Hardened by contact with their technological surroundings, calloused by the orders they are always receiving from them, those who have grown up under the blows and shocks of industrially produced "strong sensations" strive to display a yet greater hardness, the hardness of people without scruples, on the model of those heroes of our time who are the hardest among the hard: economic warlords, indistinctly police or gangsters, captains of industry or of mafias. Contemplating these militants of market totalitarianism and its aimless dynamism, one recalls what Chesterton said about the Nietzschean slogan, "Be hard": that it really means, "Be dead".

Perhaps these observations, which will be judged to be quite exaggerated, are surprising because an almost complete censorship concerning this topic prevails; a kind of censorship which in this case does not mean that the facts are always concealed or denied, but that, once they are admitted, they are always dressed up, adapted to reassuring interpretations, and finally white-washed up to the point of losing all meaning. It will therefore be objected that the brutality of juvenile behavior is only a new form of the old generation gap; and even that it is quite frequently the expression of class hatred, undoubtedly with little consciousness of its reasons, but that it nonetheless possesses many good ones in the no less ancient conflict between the poor and the rich. The first of these objections is the weakest: to maintain that there is a conflict between generations implies that generations exist, which is belied by the leveling of all kinds of experience and behavior. Just yesterday, it seems, the mass society ruled by the bureaucratic machine tolerated a relative deviation from the norm among its youth, rather like a test period which would permit the selection of the most gifted opportunists. Later, this scrap of sordid bourgeois wisdom ("We were all young once") disappeared, along with the consciousness of the passage of the time of life which this wisdom preserved after its fashion: one must be capable at any age of whatever is required by the social demand of creative participation in the dynamism of the economy, considering all the opportunities that arise and all the ways there are to get rich. There is no way for individuality or even any individual chronology to subsist in the face of this demand: a child will speak like a wise old man about his parents' income and of their conjugal relations; an old man will play like a child with his electronic rattles. And what we call "old age" is revealed to be, by virtue of its attire and its routine, precisely the road to an endless youth, to a free time that is indistinctly enslaved by all the products of the entertainment industry.

The second objection deserves a somewhat more lengthy refutation because, despite the fact that this youth, which is everywhere nourished on the same images and is truly rabid in its mimicry, is surprisingly homogenous, massified and conformist, it is also true that among the poorest people there are some kinds of behavior which resemble the old illegalism of the dangerous classes. But the fact that they are crimes in the sight of the law still does not make these gestures subversive: they are ruthless in the sense of a ruthless capitalism, rather than wild like a wildcat strike. Leftists have wanted to believe for twenty years that the proletarian youth retains some kind of revolutionary essence, always spontaneously subversive, always on the verge of self-organization to transform society. In reality, no one wants, and particularly no one among

the poorest people, to assume the least responsibility for the world's catastrophic course. Everyone, rich or poor, wants to *take a shortcut* to the same satisfactions, acknowledged as such by one and all: this shortcut is just more violent among the poor. The rift that opened up within society in 1968 concerning an idea of happiness, and concerning the idea of a desirable life, did not last long and disappeared under the public relations onslaught of "lifestyle liberation". And we cannot content ourselves by repeating, as if nothing had happened since then, on the occasion of every riot or looting spree, the analysis of the Watts riots published by the situationists in 1966 ("The Decline and Fall of the Spectacular-Commodity Economy"), according to which, by wanting to *immediately* possess all the objects on display and interpreting the propaganda of the market literally, the looters were initiating the critique of and preparing themselves to rule over this material abundance, in order to reorient it in its entirety. Or, one may content oneself with repeating this analysis (as was done, for example, with bombastic lyricism and disjointed rhetoric, by a "Chicago Surrealist Group" after the 1992 Los Angeles riots), but at the price of disregarding that which constitutes its rational and historical essence: the hypothesis that these riots, which rediscovered through pillage and the *potlatch* of destruction the use value of commodities, would have some use for the rioters, insofar as they would help make it possible for them, on their journey along the road of putting the whole American Way of Life into question, to join "those who seek what is not on the market, what in fact the market specifically eliminates". The distance to be traveled on this road, which was a long one even then, has become longer still or, rather, the road has almost been effaced by those who rig this desolation. "The Watts youth, having no future in market terms", who had "grasped another *quality* of the present", have turned to the use of drugs in order to confer intensity upon an empty present, and incidentally along the way also found a capitalist future in trafficking in them. It is therefore impossible to speak without imposture in terms of *classes*, when it is *individuals* who have disappeared, which is to say that everyone, and particularly everyone among the poorest sectors of the population, limit themselves to the adoption of one of the prefabricated identities available on the market in order to instantly be everything which that borrowed personality permits and imposes upon them. The only luxury is that of rapidly circulating among these roles, and of frequently changing them; drugs appear as the spiritualized essence of this instantaneous access to being, reduced to the impact, to the "flash" of pure change.

The article in the *Situationist International* about the Watts riots, after evoking the possibility of revolutionary unification around the black revolt as a revolt against the commodity, lucidly observed that "[m]utual slaughter is the other possible outcome of the present situation, once resignation is no longer viable". Unfortunately, it is this "other possible outcome" which has prevailed, and not just in Los Angeles. No sentimental objection can stand up to this fact. In this regard, there is more truth in certain statistics than there is in pseudo-dialectical sophisms, whose practitioners are just as ingenious at going to any lengths to emphasize the facts when they support their beliefs, as they are in rejecting them as mere appearances when they contradict their beliefs. Here is what some recent statistics, among so many others, have to say about crime in the United States: homicide is the second-leading cause of death for Americans between the ages of 15 and 24 years of age and the third-leading cause of death for children between the ages of 4 and 14; the average age of those arrested for murder has fallen from 32 in 1965 to 27 today; the number of murders committed by youth gangs has more than quadrupled between 1980 and 1993. And to complete the picture, the suicide rate among children has tripled since the 1950s. The remedy proposed by alarmed commentators consists in "rebuilding the American

family, ensuring that our children understand the value of life, their own and that of others.” It is a little late for that, when that which once constituted the value of life is just as devastated as the family, whether the American one or any other kind; but it is also too late to see any kind of emancipation or progress in this disintegration of the family unit, which directly plunges atomized individuals into the brutality of a desolate life among the desperate masses of those who belong to nothing and to whom nothing belongs. (It will be observed that in these conditions, family ties can only survive by putting themselves at the service of the market, and by adopting the economic model of the “dynamic small business”).

Any sociologist concerned about humanitarian education and socialization will normally allege extenuating circumstances: of course these ignorant young people are not very refined, but the “public safety” propaganda is over-exaggerated and, besides, what opportunity have they been given to be good, well-educated men and workers anyway? Leftist humanitarianism, as always, just as it does not attack what it wants to attack, does not defend what it tries to defend. If it means to say that the violence of disinherited youth must not make us forget the violence they have suffered, then one must not only denounce police violence (“repression”) but all the mistreatment which technological domination inflicts upon nature and human nature. In that case, it is necessary to stop believing in the existence of anything like a civilized society that has failed to provide the youth with the opportunity to be socialized. It is necessary, above all, to understand in what respect the disinherited are really disinherited, and more cruelly than in other times, having been expropriated of their reason, and imprisoned in their “neo-language” as much as in their ghettos, without even being capable of founding their right to inherit the world upon their ability to reconstruct it. So rather than shedding crocodile tears about the “marginalized” and the other “useless people of the world”, it would be advisable to seriously examine the question of whether the world of wage labor and the commodity can be of any use for anyone who does not profit from it, and if it is possible to become integrated into it without renouncing one’s humanity. All of this is too much for the sociologists, even the leftist ones: after all, these people have the function not of criticizing society but of providing arguments and justifications to the swarms of personnel charged with the management of poverty, the so-called “social workers”. It is therefore logical that their efforts are directed above all towards the satisfaction of the alleged demands of “identity politics”, which offer the choice of a role from the dime store of the mimicry of belonging, the little shop of illusions where you can find anything, from the Malcolm X baseball cap to the Islamist tunic.

Less disconcerted, because it is free of any practical relation to reality, the extreme left contents itself with inverting the terms of police propaganda: where the latter sees barbarians coming from an underworld foreign to the values of civilized society, the extreme left speaks of savages, foreign to the world of the commodity and committed to its destruction. It is the “revolution of the Cossacks”, with the suburbs replacing the steppes. The most that apologetics of this kind are willing to concede is that this rejection on the part of the contemporary savages is only slightly conscious, in any case very poorly reasoned, although present as an intention. But if we abandon the heaven of good intentions—leftism lives on good intentions, its own and those which it imputes to its negative heroes—and come back to earth, the problem is not that these barbarians reject, although very clumsily, the new world of generalized brutality; but rather that, very much to the contrary, they have adapted very well to it, more rapidly than many others who still cling to reassuring fictions. One can thus effectively call them barbarians. Where could they have had an opportunity to be civilized, and how? Watching their parents’ pornographic

videos? Submerging themselves in the ectoplasmic universe of digital simulations? Imitating the behavior of the celebrities of brutality? When, all around them, both at the summit of the social hierarchy as well as in its abysses, they see that a kind of nihilist consciousness of ongoing historical collapse prevails, on the model of “after us, the flood”?

For it is the very idea of the continuity of civilization that has volatilized just like the ozone layer, cracked like the sarcophagus of Chernobyl, and dissolved like nitrates in an aquifer. All enterprises with a pretension to permanency having become laughingstocks, the world now belongs to those who maximize their enjoyment of it as urgently as possible, without any scruples or precautions of any kind, scorning not only any general human interest but also any individual integrity. The main attribute of this kind of enjoyment of the world is the one that makes possible its hasty and instantaneous character, directed towards immediate volatilization and, as a result, to mere intensity without any content: “Time does not respect what is done without it” [*Le temps ne respecte pas ce qui se fait sans lui*]. Drug use is simultaneously its simplest expression and logical complement, with its power of breaking time down into a succession of disconnected instants. (Baudelaire said, and he was only referring to hashish, that a government interested in corrupting its subjects would only have to encourage its use.) The extraordinary clinical profile of what has become, in these conditions of generalized brutality, something that no one would dare call eroticism—the atrophy of sensuality and the anxious search for increasingly more violent stimulations—is itself enough to make it clear that this social disease has reached its final stage. Everything takes place, then, as if, thanks to a disaster which is vaguely perceived by everyone as irreversible, those at the top have been freed from the responsibility of having to maintain the existing world, and those at the bottom have been freed from the responsibility of having to transform it. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt describes how mass society creates the human material for totalitarian movements (“the chief characteristic of the mass man is not brutality or backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships...”, etc.), and how it formed from this social atomization what she calls “[t]he temporary alliance between the elite and the mob.” Today we are witnessing the reconstitution of a similar alliance, without the “revolutionary” dynamic of totalitarianism—the energy which it had recuperated from the workers movement—but with a more complete nihilism, in the various mafias. The ways corrupt elites and inner city gangs settle their feuds amidst the prevailing decomposition are marked by the same barbarous effectiveness. Mafia-style solidarity is the only kind which is worth anything when all the other kinds have disappeared. The “unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty” which totalitarian movements demanded of their members, and which they were able to obtain from isolated individuals lacking any other social ties, who only feel useful by belonging to the party, this loyalty, freed from all ideology, we once again discover in the oath of total loyalty to the gang described, for instance, by Kody Scott (*Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member*). To get a sense of just how much worse things have gotten during the last 20 years, one need only compare Scott’s testimony with that of James Carr (*Bad*). While the latter embraces the modern social critique and is almost immediately mysteriously assassinated, the former, assisted by our epoch, or rather without any of its assistance, escapes the delirium of the gangs only to join that of the “Black Muslims” and the other African identity groups.

At the end of a poem by Constantine Cavafy, “Waiting for the Barbarians,” we find two verses which are quite evocative in this respect: “And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians?/They were, those people, a kind of solution.” This is why, in order to conceal from itself its real disaster and to exorcise the specter of an interminable decline, a society finds enemies

to fight, objects of hatred and terror. And just as in 1984, where the obligatory expression of hatred for the enemy Goldstein serves at the same time as a pressure valve for hatred of Big Brother, the fabrication of a fearful and odious “barbarism” is all the more effective the more it takes advantage of a very real and well-founded fear whose effect is to enhance conformism and submission. The “suburbs”, as the media use the term to in fact designate the entirety of urbanized territory (the old historical city centers, basically dedicated to shopping and tourism, now possess almost no trace of the happy confusion which is proper for a city), have thus become, with their barbarian youth, the “problem” which providentially sums up all the others: “a time bomb” placed under the seats of those who, for just that reason, can thus believe *that they have good seats*. Like so many other “problems”, this one is spoken of not in order to resolve it (how could it be resolved?) but in order to *manage it*, as they say: in other words, in order to let it rot, they are trying with all the immense means at their disposal to help achieve this end. It is this kind of modern management that is meant when you hear the name of the city, “Los Angeles”. When the police and their media spokespersons speak of the “Los Angeles Syndrome”, they are at the very least expressing what they are trying to obtain as much as what they are trying to avoid, what they want and what they fear: which is to say that they are describing the way they want something that cannot be prevented to turn out. And everyone knows how modern domination, which has not in vain been defined as *spectacular*, has appropriated the techniques of the entertainment industry on a grand scale, and has for some time been skilled in the manipulation of mimetic impulses by causing those feelings that it wants to arouse to have the appearance of having always existed and anticipating the spectators’ imitation of them, in the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this way, by virtue of the mirror effect that is inherent to the spectacle, those whom “one loves to hate” as modern barbarians are all-too-ready to love being hated under that name, and to identify themselves with its prefabricated image. They “have the hate” [*J’ai la haine*], according to an expression that does not fortuitously evoke infection by a disease.

V

In 1908 Jack London described in *The Iron Heel* what he pictured could happen in the near future, in a capitalism ruled by an oligarchy that had successfully freed itself of all the hindrances imposed by the old bourgeois democratic legality. Since the 1920s, this book has been read as a premonition of fascism, and not without reason, since fascism was then utilizing all the methods described by London: provocations, manipulations, assassinations, mass terror, etc. London’s hypothesis, however, has not ceased to be relevant despite the end of the fascist *state of emergency*. Quite to the contrary, it has been seen since then how the employment of certain fascist methods can be combined with the preservation of democratic forms. More importantly, however, there is an aspect of oligarchic domination described by London that did not exist in fascism—which, to the contrary, sought to impose the appearance of social unity—and which is of such crucial importance today: the expulsion beyond the pale of society of large masses of the population, those who are literally left to *rot* in material and psychological poverty. These “people of the abyss”, who are piling up in the ghettos of the American cities and in the shantytowns of the Third World, but also in the French “suburbs”, have up until now, in conformance with London’s vision of the future, been condemned to sporadic and desperate revolts, while the oligarchy, for

its part, “out of confusion brought order” and “out of the very chaos wrought its own foundation and structure”.

In the words of London, “[t]he horrid picture of anarchy was held always before [the] eyes” of both the privileged and the subject populations “until they [became] obsessed by this cultivated fear”. However, whereas in *The Iron Heel* it was only the members of the oligarchy who, as a result of this subterfuge, “believed that they alone maintained civilization”, in today’s reality the frontier between hierarchs and subjects is much more fluid and unstable than in London’s depiction: this frontier is constantly being redrawn by way of multiple mechanisms of cooptation, selection and exclusion; thus, almost everyone must be convinced that they have to be afraid, above all, of the unleashing of the “abysmal beast”. The spectacular function fulfilled by the terrorism attributed to the left during the seventies and the eighties, performing the role that was previously played, on a larger scale and for a much longer period of time, by the terrorism of the totalitarian bureaucratic enemy, now comes to France in the form of “Islamic terrorism”, that perfect representative of barbarism, whose repulsive intolerance arouses the reprobation of all the democrats, including the most sensitive ones: “In confronting the problem of the suburbs and increasing violence, the enforcement of the law is essential. The law is in itself a form of resistance against violence.” (Alain Finkielkraut, *Le Monde*, November 21, 1995.)

Thus, with an erudite tone, the moralists and philosophers, those salaried employees of the “State of Right”, make a show of reasoning as if we were still living in a bourgeois and enlightened Europe that was offering the world, as a model, the system of rights and duties of a parliamentary democracy. President General Zeroual showed that he was *much more realistic* when he responded to the French leaders who were attempting to give him lessons about how to run an election, that he did not have anything to learn from them in the matter of political strategy. For their local traditions, inherited from a past state splendor, have proven to be poor preparation for these French leaders for the kind of adventurism that they need now, so that it was rather they who had to learn from someone like Zeroual, about the way he had managed to stay afloat amidst all the blood and filth. There can be no doubt that *they are learning, however*, whether from Zeroual or from others, like those Spanish socialists, godfathers of an anti-Basque death squad; one of these socialists laconically summed up what now remains of rights and the separation of powers by declaring: “Montesquieu is dead.” In reality, any Asian ideologue of accelerated industrial development can prove, with evidence in hand, that such development has no need at all of the forms of political democracy that accompanied Europe’s “economic take-off”: now the commodity flies on its own power, without the need for that crutch, and China will be entirely devastated without ever having known “political liberties”. When one sees how these liberties served the Europe that gave birth to them, one could almost say that it is no great loss.

Currently, domination is not forced to regularly employ “emergency measures” of the kind described by London, in response to a revolutionary threat, in the sense of the existence of an organized social movement that presents a challenge for the control of society. What is spurring it on towards a rapid transformation, without anyone being able to exactly predict the form that it will adopt, and even if it can somehow be stabilized, is instead the objectivity of a catastrophe that is itself a revolutionary fact, and one that is much more dangerous than anything that the ruling classes of the past had to confront (in this society nothing works without the help of increasingly more expensive prostheses that are pregnant with disasters: even the species’ ability to reproduce without resort to laboratory manipulations has been diminished). Evidently, to speak in this manner of “domination” seems to be a reference to a kind of unified directorate, capable of

determining a strategy to be implemented by an army of executors. Everything indicates, however, that confusion, instability, and fragmentation have not spared the leaders, whether they are representatives of the commodity, statesmen, or both simultaneously: the means of degradation also affect those who wield them. With the decline of the institutions and customs of bourgeois society, poisoned by its own spectacular drugs, we see the emergence almost everywhere (and even more rapidly where the capitalist class has never been bourgeois, but only bureaucratic) of a kind of neo-feudalism, whose basis is found in the “people of the abyss” (gangsters and “clients” of all kinds) and at whose summit are the mafioso elites of corruption.

This is not to suggest that one cannot legitimately speak of domination, as one can include under this rubric all those who benefit, in one way or another, from commodity tyranny, and those who serve it, extend it and justify it: some poison, others treat the victims; some commit massacres, others loot; some destroy, others rebuild what was destroyed. And although there are certain gradations and preeminences among them, all of them utilize the same human material that is provided to them by the globalized economy. Obviously, all of them debase themselves by serving a master of this kind and, for most of them, the profit is largely illusory, “since no one can say that they are their own masters”. But for those who derive some advantage from tyranny it is of little importance whether their condition is viewed as miserable by those for whom freedom is still useful: they can conceive of no other condition and derive from it their reason to live. What is new is that this reason does not have much to do with the old systems of justification or legitimation and reduces almost all of them to *the game of power*, the last value of life in a society without a future.

Since the era when *The Communist Manifesto* proclaimed that “the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society”, this *permanent revolution* has proceeded so far in its transformation of the general conditions in which domination has to be exercised, that the old owning class has been transformed into something that is just as new as those conditions: the bourgeoisie, as Baudelaire depicted it, has perished where he thought it existed. “Is it necessary to say that the little that will remain of politics will consist of a painful thrashing about in the arms of general animality and that the rulers will be forced, in order to preserve their rule and to create the illusion of order, to resort to means that will make our present-day humanity, as hardened as it is, tremble with fear?” (*Fusées*) The networks of the commodity oligarchy that are thoroughly implanted in the state apparatus and “economic institutions”, legal or illegal, do not need any special precognition, or accurate “social indicators” to foresee the coming of unprecedented disturbances, the accumulation of social hatred, and the irreversible escalation of bloody transformations. Even the least intelligent of the low level agents of “economic activity” has had to admit that the latter has a *bad side*: he sees unemployment expanding, violence increasing, and diseases spreading, in short, he sees that insecurity is undermining all the established satisfactions and guarantees; he discovers the kind of world he is living in and where it is heading. No one hides it from him, to the contrary, it is openly displayed to him: this constantly increasing disorder is being constantly paraded right before his eyes, like a *memento mori* in which, like a “modern style” allegory, the entire planet adopts the face of death.

Since domination is no longer in any position to announce its imminent victory over the *bad side* of the commodity economy, and is not even in a position to oppose to this *bad side* a *good side* that would justify everything, at least the latter is no longer the main purpose of its propaganda. To the contrary, domination increasingly tends to justify everything with reference to

the existence of this *bad side*, frightening everyone with the threat of the dissolution of society into barbarism and each individual with descent into the social abyss. The epoch of submission represented by the ideal of the Welfare State has now come to an end: capitalist profits have been restored everywhere to the detriment of the protection that the modern state once assured and, above all, promised, in exchange for servitude. (This is what an American magazine dared to call “the end of the good life”.) But the demand for protection is always present and is all the more powerfully expressed insofar as economic violence is exercised from now on without the existence, as means to cushion the blow—unlike the epoch of the first “savage capitalism”—of either the enormous pre-capitalist experience in the domain of customs and social relations, or, in the still natural world, those seemingly inexhaustible resources of freely available wealth that used to serve humanity as an emergency reserve and, both in the strict meaning of the term as well as figuratively, as an *immune defense* against the commodity. Thus, we are witnessing the appearance of all kinds of strange “protectors” cynically preying on desperation and fear; we are referring to both religions as well as the new “warlords” who are imposing their protection amidst chaos: we must recall that this function not only lies at the origins of feudalism, but also underpins the origins of the various mafias. And amidst this fragmentation of protection in which businesses are organized like gangs, religions are organized like intelligence agencies, and gangs are organized like militias, the state becomes just one protector *among others*, and, furthermore, one that is less effective than others. A good example of this is provided by the way the American state has disinvested, both in the financial sense of the word as well as with regard its the military and police connotations, in what were already no longer real cities, in favor, on the one hand, of gangs who assumed responsibility for the management of day to day survival, based on the drug economy, in the inner cities abandoned by the white employees, and on the other hand, in favor of the new “gated communities” reserved for the whites, so that they can live guarded from the chaos (forty million Americans already live in these fortresses, which have their own police, special laws, and their “homeowners’ dues”). These monstrosities that epitomize the collapse of urban civilization, a collapse which now calls to mind other periods of decline (“In other times, the dead abandoned the city which was full of life; now we, the living, are burying the city”, as Palladius observed during the last days of antiquity), these unforeseeable metastases of the illnesses that proliferated in the old society, in which the precipitous mobilization of defense mechanisms always leads to new evils; it is these horrors of a generalized every-man-for-himself attitude which allow us to speak—despite the inevitable inaccuracy that is entailed when one describes an unprecedented present condition with the help of terms from the past—of “neo-feudalism”, for example, or of “warlords”. Regardless, however, of the imprecision of the terms used, one thing is clear: if capitalism displays all the signs of having returned to its infancy, that is, to the blood and the filth of its origins, this must not be confused with a process of rejuvenation, just as one cannot confuse the puerile facial expressions of an old man with the energy of youth.

For the project of domestication via fear there is no lack of shocking realities that can be transformed into images, or of shocking images that can be used to manufacture reality. Thus, we see the spread, day after day, of mysterious epidemics that are making deadly comebacks, in an unpredictable world in which the truth has no value and is absolutely useless. Tired of beliefs and, ultimately, of their own incredulity, men hounded by fear who feel that they are the playthings of obscure processes surrender themselves, in order to satisfy their need to believe in the existence of a coherent explanation of this incomprehensible world, to the strangest and most irrational interpretations: revisionism of every sort, paranoid fictions and apocalyptic rev-

elations. Just like that new type of television series, which is very popular among the young telespectators, which depicts a nightmare world in which there is nothing but manipulations, decoys, and secret conspiracies, in which the occult forces installed at the heart of the state are constantly weaving conspiracies to prevent any truths from being revealed, truths that are, in effect, sensational truths, because they generally refer to the machinations of extraterrestrials. The purpose of this kind of modern media version of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is not so much to designate an enemy and those responsible for the plot as to affirm that the enemy is everywhere: it does not involve, at least for now, *mobilizing* for pogroms or another *Krystallnacht*, but rather *immobilizing* people in enervation, and in resignation before the impossibility of recognizing, communicating and establishing any truth at all. The deliberate extravagances of these products of the dream factory converted into a nightmare factory are no more intended to convince anyone than are the extravagances of propaganda in general. Their purpose is to put the finishing touches on the destruction of common sense, and to isolate people in a terrified scepticism: *Trust no one*; the message could not be more explicit. Concerning what was at that time merely a simple individual defect, Vauvenargues made the following observation that may be applied to the mass psychology of the era of suspicion: “Excessive *distrust* is not less hurtful than its opposite. Most men become useless to him who is unwilling to *risk* being deceived.”

Such sinister fictions can only be viewed as if they were documentaries, because all of reality is now perceived as a sinister fiction. For those who have lost “the whole domain of communal relations that impart sense to common sense” it is impossible to reasonably distinguish, in the midst of the surge of contradictory information, between what is plausible and implausible, what is essential and what is accessory, what is accidental and what is necessary. The abdication of judgment, considered to be useless in the face of the dismal arbitrariness of the technological *fatum*, discovers in this idea that *the truth is out there* [the Spanish translation literally says, “*the truth is somewhere else*”—Tr. note] the pretext to renounce the liberties whose risks one no longer wants to assume, beginning with the freedom to seek truths with which one would have to do something. The suspicion of generalized manipulation is then a last refuge, a comfortable way of not confronting the total irrationality of the decline by attributing to it a secret rationality. We have seen this take place when the usual corruption of the food industry attains the status of news: to maintain that all of this was nothing but a media decoy intended to terrify the population, or, in its more prosaic form, a plot by the French food industry against its English competitors, allows one to childishly deny the shocking reality and to armor oneself in the assurance that one will not let oneself be taken for a fool. The anxiety-filled world of paranoid fiction thus serves as a protection against the anxiety of the insane real world, but it also expresses, whether with grotesque fantasies for the use of the masses or rather more sophisticated scenarios for a pseudo-elite of initiates, the quest for a more effective protection, and submission in advance to the authority that will guarantee it, the illusion of being coopted, in short, the desire *to be in on the secret*. The popularity of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was already due not only to the repulsiveness of but also to fascination with the techniques of world conspiracy that they depicted and which the Nazis endeavored to put into practice.

In the most recent of these end-of-the-world TV series (*Millennium*), a secret organization leads the struggle against an international of psychopaths united to exterminate humanity, and when the hero declares, “all of this violence the newspapers report cannot be the result of chance”, the journalist from *Libération* who reviewed the series qualified this declaration as “a personal and paranoid view of our times”. For the mental health of a journalist consists in not seeing

anything but a form of chance in the fact that the world is collapsing in this manner. Speaking of violence reported by the newspapers, however, let us consider Los Angeles, its gangs and the need for their existence. When the Attorney General of California proclaims that the Cripps and the Bloods have replaced communism as the greatest domestic subversive threat, it is easy enough to denounce (in the manner of the environmentalist-leftist sociologist Mike Davis in his book, *City of Quartz*) the “security” propaganda that manipulates the fears of the middle class by brandishing the specter of a general uprising of those who have been allowed to sink into poverty, etc. (A typical sentence: “This very real epidemic of youth violence, with its deep roots (as we shall see) in exploding youth poverty, has been inflated by law enforcement agencies and the media into something quite phantasmagoric.”) And when it is reported in the media that the CIA, in order to finance its activities in Nicaragua, supplied crack to these same gangs in Los Angeles for ten years, it is quite normal to think, especially if one had imagined this to be the case even before the appearance of any press revelations of this kind, that the unspoken benefit of this operation was not just financial, but that it also involved helping the black youth to precipitate their own self-destruction. Such half-truths sometimes become lies when they are utilized to conceal the fact that the youth recruited and fanaticized by the gangs are in the vanguard of regression towards a world in which the putrescence of all the old forms of life in society can only be forestalled by way of the establishment of the most brutal coercive measures. Not only does the openly nihilist violence of these *storm troops* of barbarism pose no threat to domination, not only does it serve domination as a stalking horse to justify its own violence, but it is also a model of adaptation to the new conditions in which survival will increasingly entail extermination and a precarious security will only be purchased at the price of renouncing all individual autonomy.

Similarly, with respect to the recent incidents in France, attributed to Islamists, one can, easily enough, parade one’s noble humanist soul by denouncing the “devastating identification” of Islamism with the futureless youth of the cities as the pretext for an intensification of repression, etc. If one wanted to be a little more discriminating, one could also claim, without any further qualifications, since the *Paris Match* itself has reported this, that “it has been confirmed that Algerian secret agents are capable of provoking crimes and attacks in the name of the G.I.A.,” that what is actually taking place is an instance of secret deals between the French state and the Algerian state, a type of pressure enforced by the latter on the former in order to obtain stronger support for the war against the Islamists. (It is known that the French authorities once relied on the Islamists to control the youth in the cities, a job that used to be performed by the Stalinists.) But these denunciations of state repression and manipulations stop where the real historical problem begins to be posed, that is, when we must consider the shocking susceptibility of the youth of the abyss to every kind of manipulation, and its avid desire to adapt to the illusory models manufactured by its enemies: one speaks of repression in order not to speak of decomposition. The most that anyone wants to concede is, as a pamphlet distributed after the first wave of attacks in the summer of 1995 said, that “those who have been passed over by life, penned up in an existence limited to the walls of a city, some youths believed they found in Islam ... an identity” and that “some of them”, therefore, “could have been manipulated by the bombers”. What no one wants by any means to lucidly articulate is the way that the immense majority of these young people, outside of any particular manipulation, is in a way *self-manipulated*, conditioned and directed by the “identities” that have been fabricated for it and which it embraces with so much enthusiasm. To address this question, one would have to be prepared to see how, due to their

atomization, individuals exposed to the need to adapt from one day to another, subjected to the alternation between a sudden shock and a sudden forgetting, lose, together with the ability to have a *continuous* experience of time, the ability to offer the least resistance to the mechanisms of depersonalization that are crushing them. And, in this sense, it hardly matters that the representations that they latch onto, in order to provide themselves with borrowed personalities, are those of the ghetto-rebel youth, which are just as disingenuous and as false as all the others.

It is understandable that leftism would prefer to speak of other matters. This is, for example, how the anonymous preface to a recent edition of *The Poverty of Student Life* magisterially opposes the lucidity of the “hooligans of the cities” to the last illusions of those who think that, as a result of their studies, they can escape marginalization: “The children of the cities, those Palestinians of the triumphant spectacle, know well that they have neither anything to lose or anything to expect from the world as it is. With one stroke, they affirm themselves as enemies of the state, the economy and wage labor: they regularly combat the forces of *order*, they refuse to work and they steal all the commodities that they need. They did not choose their condition and it is logical that they do not like it. But those who have put them there are going to understand, and now they are beginning to understand.” This “flattering language” repeats the situationist themes with such anachronistic aplomb that one may be completely certain that the author has refrained from going to the cities so that his peers in radicality will recognize him as “an enemy of the state, the economy and wage labor”. Only in this exercise of the arts of the preface does he, nonetheless, come to be recognized as one who is well-versed in the “Palestinian question” although rather in the form of a lapse of memory: for the destiny of those whom he calls “Palestinians of the triumphant spectacle” is indeed similar enough to that of the Palestinians of Palestine, locked up in their Bantustans under the vigilance of their own gang leaders; but this is what should prevent him from so glibly claiming that within a very short time their masters will understand and even that they have already begun to do so.

“It is not with street revolts that one can regenerate a broken down world that has lost its way.” This reflection, which inspired Nodier with a precocious historical disillusionment, has today been transformed into a practical truth that must be formulated in a yet more precise manner: the “street revolts” and other outbreaks of unconscious violence only serve those who want to prolong the decline of a broken down world that has lost its way. Proof of this lies in the way that the defenders of the “social” and “national” state against the globalized economy openly hoped to benefit from the disorders of this type and invoked, clumsily enough (although other provocateurs were capable of exercising more tact), “the duty to rebel” and “the right to riot” (Ignacio Ramonet, “Régimes globalitaires”, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 1997).

VI

The contribution made by leftism to the most modern kind of alienation has generally been perceived by way of the quite picturesque anecdotes of certain personal careers, but more with respect to renunciation than loyalty, although this renunciation of certain superficial aspects of the leftist ideology has only been comfortable and fruitful due to their loyalty to a deeper content. For if one leaves aside the revolutionary disguises that leftism took from the museum of history, this content was clearly adaptation to the accelerated pace of universal transformation, the adjustment of false consciousness to these new conditions in which it had to learn to live under the

impacts of mass industrial production. And the more “spontaneous” this leftism was, the more it agitated for the subordination of consciousness to immediate sensations and, by helping to discredit the mediations by way of which individuals are constituted, it prepared them for the type of reflex reactions that the unleashing of the economic machinery would require of them. “To live without dead time, and to enjoy without restraints”; this is something that today sounds like the slogan of a *panic-stricken* hedonism, the same one that we are seeing deployed everywhere, now that the catastrophe is no longer just anticipated.

The principal feature, and the one that determined all the others, by which leftism prefigured what would become, thirty years later, the prevailing mentality among the new generations, inculcated everywhere and socially validated, is therefore precisely the same one that has been recognized as a characteristic of the totalitarian mentality: *the capacity for adaptation as a consequence of the loss of the continuous experience of time*. The ability to live in a fictitious world, in which nothing assures the primacy of the truth over the lie, obviously derives from the disintegration of lived time into a cloud of instants: the person who lives in this discontinuous time feels liberated from all responsibility to the truth, but also of any interest in seeing to it that the truth prevails. If one loses the sense of truth, everything is permitted, and this is what can be confirmed. This kind of liberty has led to the spontaneously conformist and very modern character of those very numerous youths for whom it suffices to abandon themselves to their own reactions and obey without hesitation the demands of the moment in order to commit the abject deeds that their proper integration into the operation of the social machinery requires of them. The tendency to live in a personal time that is a succession of present moments without either memory of the past or real concern for the future, while somewhat attenuated in the case of the bureaucratic sects by the necessities of their kind of politics, is on the other hand given full reign in the most modern factions in which the deprivation of any temporal horizon was acclaimed as a radical freedom: “And above all this law: ‘Act as if the future never has to exist.’” (Raoul Vaneigem, *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations*.) [American translator’s note: I was unable to locate this quotation in the English translation, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.]

The disintegration of lived time, evidently, is determined, more than by anything else, by the threshold that has been crossed in the increase of the organic composition of capital, to utilize the terms of Marx: it is the entire life of individuals, and not only “living labor”, which is being crushed by the mechanical velocity of “dead labor”. The acceleration of industrial productivity has been so dizzying that the rate at which things are replaced and the material world is transformed no longer has any connection with the rhythms of human life, with its all too sluggish flow. (The velocity of circulation of information in the networks of the megamachine shows each person just how slow and how tedious a thing the human brain actually is.) It was necessary, however, to implement a propaganda campaign for adaptation to these new conditions in which men are nothing but the parasites of the machines that assure the functioning of the social organization. There can be no doubt that leftism performed the tasks of this propaganda in a totally unconscious way, without knowing what it was really doing: it believed in its poor dream of a pure revolution, total and instantaneous, which would be realized, so to speak, independently of individuals and of any effort on their part to recreate themselves along with their world. (And this was precisely what was occurring.) This provides yet more convincing proof of their spontaneous affinities with the process of eradication of the old human qualities that allowed for individual autonomy. Furthermore, these affinities have become fully conscious in the furiously modernist posterity of leftism, which is devoted to the pleasures permitted by mass

leisure with genuine satisfaction and in which the residual “anti-authoritarian” ideology serves the purpose of eulogizing the decomposition of customs in all their aspects.

To get a fair appreciation of the part played by leftism in the creation of the *new man* and in the expropriation of the inner life, we need only recall that it has been characterized by its denigration of those human qualities and forms of consciousness linked to the feeling of a cumulative continuity in time (memory, persistence, loyalty, responsibility, etc.); by its praise, through its advertising-style jargon of “passions” and “supersessions”, for the new capacities permitted and required by a consciousness surrendered to the immediate (individualism, hedonism, the spirit of opportunism); and, finally, by its elaboration of the compensatory mechanisms with which this amorphous time created additional needs (from the narcissism of ‘subjectivity’ to the vacant intensity of the ‘game’ and the ‘festival’). Because social and historical time has been sequestered by the machines that store the past and the future in their memory banks and prospective scenarios, what remains to man is to enjoy his irresponsibility and his superfluity in the present moment, in a way that is similar to what one could experience by destroying oneself more expeditiously under the influence of those drugs that leftism has never ceased to praise. Empty freedom, demanded with such a great display of enthusiastic slogans, is precisely what remains to individuals when they have definitively escaped from the production of the conditions of their existence: gleaning the scraps of time that have fallen from the megamachine. This freedom is realized in anomie and the electronic vacuity of the multitudes of the abyss, those for whom death means nothing, and life even less, those who have nothing to lose, but have nothing to gain either, except “one final, awful glut of vengeance”. (Jack London).

The true vanguard of adaptation, leftism (especially where it was least bound to the old political lie) therefore praised almost all the simulations that are now the common currency of alienated behaviors. In the name of the struggle against routine and boredom it discredited all sustained effort, all the necessarily patient appropriation of real abilities: subjective excellence had to be, like the revolution, instantaneous. In the name of the critique of a dead past and its heavy weight on the present, it attacked all tradition and even all transmission of historical experience. In the name of the revolt against conventions it installed brutality and contempt in human relations. In the name of freedom of behavior, it rid itself of all responsibility, and of all consistency and continuity in ideas. In the name of rejecting authority, it refused all precise knowledge and even all objective truth: what could be more authoritarian, after all, than the truth?; and what could be more free and varied than the illusions and lies that erase the fixed and exact borders between the true and the false? In brief, it worked to liquidate all those components of human character that, by structuring the world of each person, helped him to defend himself from commodity propaganda and hallucinations.

Thus, this clinically hysterical simulation of life (according to Gabel’s formula: “the ordinary liar is outside of life because he lies; the hysterical liar lies because he is outside of life”), due to his anxious search for immediate pleasure, obviously can only become the slave of all the high-tech paraphernalia that is at least a little more efficacious than the magic of leftist slogans when it comes to delivering on the promise of a life that is finally liberated from the effort to live. The usual career of the former leftist, who exchanged revolutionary instantaneity (“We want it all and we want it now”) for commodity instantaneity, is recapitulated, in an accelerated way, by each hedonist consumer, who affirms the autonomy and uniqueness of his pleasure only to abandon it by means of a boundless surrender to the *stimuli* of mechanized life, to its “ready to live” sensations, to its frenetic distractions, etc. And since such an unconscious and vacant

subjectivity can only feel that it exists by constantly increasing the intensity and the velocity of the shocks it receives, hedonist consumption turns as a result of its own inertia towards that destructive unleashing to which, for its part, leftism aspired, perceiving it as the very epitome of emancipation. Those who are imprisoned within the temporal cage of the present moment, isolated from both the past and the future, can now only find a way to assert their humanity by burning down their prison. Thus, by helping to accelerate the destruction of the world by adding their own precipitous rush towards the abdication of their autonomy, individuals adjust their nervous systems to the pace of history and adapt in advance to the unfolding catastrophe.

When it is manifested in aggressive and delirious forms, this nihilism is condemned by the defenders of machine civilization as if it were essentially different from the nihilism that, propagated by the media of instantaneity themselves, is manifested in the somewhat different form, which is then valued very highly, of docile support for good causes and the collective enthusiasms promoted by moralism and political correctness. But the Days of Love and the Days of Rage mobilize the same multitudes of malleable individuals, ready for every simplified, mass produced emotion that promises a positive integration in the collectivity. The militantism of brutality and the militantism of tolerance are simply two forms of adaptation by way of the sacrifice of the ego: not only are they not mutually exclusive, but they go hand in hand, and are often found in the same individuals, alternating with each other. It is just that brutality has just as little to do with strength as sentimentality does with humanity.

Modern domination, which needs interchangeable servants, has destroyed precisely—and perhaps this is its main achievement—the general conditions, the social and family environment, and the necessary human relations for the cultivation of an autonomous personality. (Those for whom “their trade was their hands”, as they used to say, were less interchangeable than those who only have a screen in front of their eyes.) For their histrionics and many other traits, these characters emptied of anything that could have given them consistency evoke the diverse forms of deconstruction of the personality that, in other times, were described by psychiatry. Without pausing to examine the psychopathological considerations that would be necessary to account for the way yesterday’s illness has become today’s normality (Gabel’s *False Consciousness* may be profitably consulted with respect to this question), it is easy to understand that beings that are so inconsistent and so much in need of a borrowed personality should necessarily be, even much more so than the militants of the past (“one only needs to speak their language to infiltrate their ranks”), the docile instruments of every manipulation that may be considered useful, of every “Love Parade” and, when it should be necessary, of every *cultural revolution*.

Those who are morally outraged by the images of poverty and massacres that are offered for their contemplation, despite the fact that their feeling of horror is real, and not just feigned, will soon be made to understand just how obscene it is to add rhetoric to impotence; for what else are they seeking besides the narcissistic satisfaction of feeling like sane and civilized people, and of displaying their good will and concealing from themselves the anxiety of being trapped in this *real* nightmare of the end of the world? In the same way, the masses herded together by the promoters of this or that Platonic good cause are concerned above all with *admiring themselves* for being gathered together amidst the euphoria of a generous unanimity in which they are so peaceful, and which has *no consequence*, for which they do not have to take the slightest risk. In this sense, there is very little difference between the good intentions of humanitarian, democratist and anti-racist propaganda, and the calls for murder issued by the stars of simulated violence, just as there is little that really distinguishes, with regard to consciousness, the masses of rioters in the

night from those who meet for other kinds of “urban trances”, in which they become intoxicated with mimetic identification while throbbing under the blows of the music of the masses.

When they speak to us of the suburbs as a “laboratory of the future”, they mean that it is with *human material* of this kind that domination is prepared to pursue its career. And since the machinery of the universal and exclusive commodity relation will throw ever more numerous surplus masses into the abyss, the mindless neo-harmony of the “Love Parades” certainly has less of a future than the barbarism of mutual extermination. It is not in a novel by Jack London, but in testimony regarding contemporary Algeria where one can read the following: “It is the realm of confusion. No one knows who is who anymore; one no longer knows who does what.... There are also self-defense committees, local mafias that have their own militias, real military units, false policemen, false Islamists. Usually one does not know who one is dealing with.... They privatized this war, which has become for many people a way to earn a living. The state gives money and arms to defend one part of the territory. Warlords arise. They recruit men in their own families and have no other concern than to expand their territories.... People take the side of those who give them something to eat.” (*Le Monde*, January 19–20, 1997.)

VII

The abyss, then, repopulates itself: in a distant cloud of smoke like that shown on the television news, entire countries are swept into it by the modernization that demands an economic flight forward. Right here, it is driving masses of stupefied people, with an ever diminishing display of concern, to join all those who are already rotting in the abyss. In western Europe the rebound effects of the decomposition that is imposed on the entire planet, and of the planned destruction of all material and mental independence with respect to commodity relations, have only recently begun to be felt. The waves of refugees, however, who are attempting to cross the borders of this very relative European refuge, herald the news: the outbreak of a kind of worldwide civil war, without precise fronts or defined theaters, which is inexorably approaching, from the east, and from the south. Naïve protestors are disturbed to see how France is betraying its historical traditions, closing its borders to foreigners, etc. Their protests can be all the more virtuous insofar as they absolutely ignore the real world and do not concern themselves for even one second with what the practical results of the principles they invoke would be (since, after all, it is not the abolition of the state that they are advocating). In any case, the problem of knowing whether or not one has to defend Europe or France, as if it were a besieged fortress, will be elucidated quite differently, as is usual with regard to this kind of false problem: this fortress has already been conquered *from within*, sacked by the same accelerated course of events before which everyone is powerless, but which everyone senses to be disastrous.

As it says in the *Observations on the Paralysis of December 1995*, what that aborted protest left in its wake is the general feeling that there will be no “solution of the crisis” and that from now on only calamities are to be expected from the functioning of the planetary economy; a feeling, although vague and incomplete, that has been expressed accurately enough in the book by Viviane Forrester, *The Economic Horror*. (A typical sentence from this book: “In such a context, the homeless, the excluded, the entire disparate mass of those shunted aside are perhaps the embryonic form of the crowds that might constitute our future societies if the present patterns are carried on.”) But if there are many people who have become disillusioned with the promises of industrial

society (automation has not abolished work, it has transformed it into an envied privilege), not many are disillusioned with industrial society itself. They merely want to fix the organizational constraints that currently exist, moderate them, and maybe even humanize them. They know everything or almost everything about the inevitable consequences of economic modernization and they call for “respect”, honest leaders, etc. One is frightened with terrible possible outcomes (“Yes, we are in a democracy. Yet a threat is on the verge of utterance; it is already almost being whispered: ‘Superfluous’”, the author worries) in order to finally be soothed, and made to feel as if one is ensconced in peace and democracy, *because* this dictatorship towards which we are heading is not like any form of dictatorship ever known up until now and catalogued as such by the democrats. In any case, the content and purpose of industrial production, the parasitic life that it makes us lead, and the system of needs that it defines are never attacked; the only thing that is deplored is the fact that cybernetics has not led to the expected emancipation: “Inscribed in our habits, its consequences should have been most beneficial to all, almost miraculous. They have been disastrous.” And since it is not this mode of production, with the technologies that it has developed to serve it, which is to blame, it must be the “new masters of the world” who are responsible for our misfortunes: these stateless predators (or “transnationals”), cynical and parasitic, are described as if they were the only ones who live without any care for the future and are indifferent to anything that does not serve their immediate satisfaction, as if somewhere, in who knows what population that is deeply entrenched in its traditions, honesty, foresight, decency and moderation have been preserved intact, beyond the reach of commodity nihilism.

These moralizing denunciations of the economic horror are for the most part aimed at the white collar employees threatened by the acceleration of modernization, that salaried middle class that dreamed of being bourgeois and woke up proletarianized (and even lumpenproletarianized). Its fears and its false consciousness, however, are shared by all those who have something to lose from the weakening of the old nation-state whose organization is in the hands of those powers that control the world market: workers in previously protected industrial sectors, public servants, various administrators of the system of social guarantees that has now been sent to the scrap-heap. All of these people form part of the potential mass base for a kind of nation-state front, an informal “party of December” which combines every kind of stale leftover in an anti-globalization ideological sauce: republicans of the Chevènement-Séguin-Pasqua variety, Stalinist debris, statist ecologists, left-humanitarians hoping for a militant experience and even neo-fascists looking for a “social project”. This party of stabilization maintains only a vague appearance of existing in order to provide a safety valve for recriminations against the excesses of the supporters of accelerated growth: its reason for existence is to engage in futile protest that it knows in advance will be defeated, because it has *nothing* to oppose to the technological and social modernization imposed by the needs of the unified economy. (Besides, every single one of these so-called enemies of the unification of the world, even the most leftist among them, is filled with enthusiasm for the possibilities of tele-democracy offered by the “net”.) Such a representation of dissent serves above all to integrate protest in pseudo-struggles that continuously remain focused on the main theme and *demand* the capitalist conditions of the previous stage, which propaganda designates by the name of the Welfare State. This representation is only capable of assuming any consistency, as a political substitute, in case of serious disorders, but then it would merely exhibit its complete inability to *restore* anything. In reality, the historical role of this nation-state faction of domination, and its only future, consists in preparing the population—since, in the last analysis, everyone is resigned to what is admitted to be inevitable—for more profound kinds of

dependence and submission. Thus, what lies behind all of this, of all these “struggles” for public service and civic values, is the *plea*, presented to the administered society, that the latter should free us from the disorders that the law of the market, according to which “the state costs too much”, is spreading throughout the world. And how will this be achieved, if not by means of more coercion, the only means capable of holding together these conglomerations of insanities that civilized human societies have become? What will protect us, after all, from Algerian- or Albanian-style chaos? Certainly not the stability of the financial institutions, the rationality of our leaders, the civility of the led, etc.

Mixed together, however, with these fears and this demand for protection, there is also the scarcely secret desire that finally something would happen that will clarify and simplify, once and for all, even if it should lead to brutality and poverty, this incomprehensible world in which the avalanche of events in their inextricable confusion is proceeding more rapidly than any reaction or thought. The idea of a finally total catastrophe, of a “great implosion”, is the refuge of the hope that a decisive, irrevocable event, which one can only hope will happen, will lead us out of the decomposition of everything, of its unforeseeable combinations, and of its omnipresent and unendurable effects: the hope that each person *will have no other choice* than to exercise self-determination, and reinvent life on the basis of primary, elementary needs that will then assume the highest priority. To hope that the fact of crossing a threshold of degradation of life will break the collective support for and dependence on domination, forcing men to be autonomous, is to ignore the fact that merely perceiving that one has crossed a threshold, not to speak of seeing it as an obligation to become free, would require that people have not been corrupted by everything that led to this situation; it reflects a desire not to recognize that habituation to catastrophic conditions is a process, one that began some time ago, that allows one, in a way, *by its own inertia*, when one crosses a threshold somewhat brutally in the midst of deterioration, to accommodate oneself for good or for ill to this situation (which has been seen perfectly after Chernobyl, that is, by virtue of the fact that we have not seen anything). And even a sudden and complete collapse of the conditions of survival—what emancipatory effect could this have? The violent ruptures in the daily routine that will undoubtedly take place in the near future, will instead drive consciousness towards the available forms of protection, whether of the state or other kinds. Not only can we not expect a *good catastrophe* that would enlighten the people regarding the reality of the world in which they live (these are approximately the same words Orwell used), but all the evidence leads us to fear that, faced with the unprecedented calamities that will be unleashed, panic will reinforce collective identifications and bonds based on false consciousness. We are already seeing how this need for protection is resuscitating old models of social bonds and belonging, of clans, races, or religions: the ghosts of all the alienations of the past return to haunt the world society that had once prided itself on having overcome them thanks to the universalism of the commodity. In reality the internal collapse of men conditioned by industrial mass society has assumed such proportions that one can no longer entertain serious hypotheses concerning their future reactions: a consciousness, or a neo-consciousness perhaps, deprived of the dimension of time (without thereby ceasing to consider itself as normal, since it is adapted to the thousand marvels of its imposed life and, somehow, to it, everything has a reason), is by nature *unpredictable*. One cannot reason concerning irrationality. To hope for a catastrophe, a liberating internal collapse of the technological system, is nothing but the inverted reflection of the hope that counts on this same technological system to positively create the preconditions for emancipation: both cases dissimulate the fact that, under the impact of technological condi-

tioning, it is precisely the individuals who would have known how to use this possibility or this occasion who have disappeared; thus, one is spared the effort of being one of these individuals. Those who want freedom without effort, show that they do not deserve freedom.

The latest news, of an eventual “cloning” of humans, *threatens* to transform our societies into totalitarian anthills. It is doubtful that such methods will have to be resorted to in order to obtain this interesting result, which is, for domination, the constitution of a homogenized mass of stereotyped anthropoids. As for the problem that is posed to the ethics committees with respect to maintaining an inviolate border between animal and man, it is already being solved by way of a bestialization of humanity that owes nothing to manipulations carried out in cloistered laboratories, but is instead entirely due to the conditioning that is taking place right out in the open for all to see. The humanization that had been begun was left unfinished and its fragile achievements are being dismantled: man was precisely that being that had no limits, who was capable of freely reaching his own culminating form, “like a painter or a sculptor” and, therefore, also of degenerating towards inferior forms, worthy of the beasts. According to Chesterton, what motivated the popular hostility of his time towards Darwinism was less a refusal to admit our simian origins than a presentiment concerning what such a theory of evolution presaged about our simian *future*: the idea that man is infinitely malleable and adaptable really provides reasons to be afraid when the masters of society are the ones that take advantage of these traits.

To console us, we are told that it is thanks to technology that man has been humanized and that, with his nuclear power plants, his computers that store universal history, and his genetic manipulations, he is simply continuing his humanization. From a false premise (as Mumford, and, in his own way, Lotus de Paini, have demonstrated), one leaps to an absurd conclusion, a conclusion that would not be any less absurd even if the initial assertion were to be perfectly correct. After all, what would you think of someone who said: “Mister such and such has built a house with two floors, a spacious dwelling for him and his family. But he was not content with two floors, he built another forty or four hundred or four thousand and did not think about stopping there. What can you say about this? He provided a shelter for his family and *continues to do so*.” The insane tower of Mister such and such is condemned to collapse on its inhabitants at any moment, each additional floor increases the danger, but he still talks of a *shelter*. This is precisely the nature of the discourse of the apologists for infinite technological development, with this aggravating circumstance, that this discourse is founded on a pile of rubble: the house, transformed into an insane tower, *has already collapsed*. And everything that was gloomy about this shelter, the dark realities upon which collective identifications and social blackmail were based, all the parts of barbarism buried under the edifice of civilization, all of this is once again emerging from the basements and foundations and is now coming to light.

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Jaime Semprun
The abyss repopulates itself
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