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Waiting for the Barbarians

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The barbarians do not come from a distant and backward periphery of commodity abundance, but from its very heart. Anyone who has known how to preserve their feelings intact, and has 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 infancy by this apparatus of pauperization; they are as far from nature as they are from reason, and by virtue of this trait we recognize barbarism. These cripples of perception, mutilated by the machinery of consumption, invalids of the war of commerce, show off their stigmata like medals, their weaknesses like a uniform, their insensitivity like a flag. What thus exudes from 14 or 15 year old adolescents, moving in a gang through a subway in Paris, often recalls what used to be quite specifically a trait of uniformed virility (soldiers, athletes, militants of totalitarian movements): it smells like an old-fashioned lynching. Hardened by contact with their technological surroundings, calloused by the orders they are always receiving, 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 the emancipated, on the model of those heroes of

our time who are the hardest among the hard: the masters of the economic war, either police or gangsters, bosses 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 exists; 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 biased interpretations, and finally whitewashed up to the point of losing all meaning. It will therefore be objected that the brutality of juvenile behavior is only a new, much maligned form of the old generation gap; and even that it is often enough the expression of class hatred, undoubtedly with little consciousness of its reasons, but that it nonetheless possesses many good ones, which can be discovered 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 withdrawal 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 ("man, you are the youth") disappeared, along with the consciousness of the passage of the time of a life which this wisdom preserved after its fashion: one must be capable at any age of whatever is required, through opportunities which must be seized and "blows" which must be dealt, the social demand of creative participation in the dynamism of the economy. There is no way for individuality or individual chronology to subsist in the face of this demand: a child will speak like a wise old man about his parents' wages and of their conjugal relations, an old man will play like a child with his electronic rattles. And what we call the

this way, by virtue of the spectacle's mirror effect, those who "love to hate" as much as the modern barbarians are quite ready to love being hated under that name, and to identify themselves with its prefabricated image. "They have the hate", according to an expression whose flavor does not fortuitously evoke contamination by a disease.

"third age" reveals itself, by its attire and by its routine, precisely as the road to an endless youth, to a time of leisure vaguely subjected to 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 fattened on the same images and truly rabid in its mimicry is surprisingly homogenous, massified and conformist, there most certainly exist among the poorest people 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 desires, and particularly no one among the poorest people, to take any kind of responsibility for the world's catastrophic course. Everyone, rich or poor, wants to take the shortest road to the same satisfactions, acknowledged as such by one and all: this short cut is just more violent among the poor. The rift within society which opened up in 1968 concerning an idea of happiness, and concerning the idea of a desirable life, did not survive 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, simultaneously desirous of the objects on display and acting on the cue of the propaganda of the market, the rioters began the critique of and prepared themselves to rule over this material abundance, in order to reorient it in its entirety. Otherwise, if one is content to repeat this analysis (as has been done, for example, with a dusty lyricism and watered-down rhetoric, by a

“Chicago Surrealist Group” after the 1992 Los Angeles riots), it is always at the price of denying 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 themselves have some use for the rioters, and would allow them to find along the road of putting the whole American Way of Life into question “that they were searching for that which is not on the market, precisely that which the market 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 equip this desolation. “The Watts youth without a capitalist future”, who had chosen “another quality of the present”, have settled for the use of drugs in order to confer intensity upon an empty present, and have found by the same road a capitalist future in their trafficking. It is 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 underprivileged, limit themselves to the adoption of one of the prefabricated identities available on the market in order to be everything which that borrowed personality permits and imposes upon them. The only luxury is that of rapidly circulating among these representations, 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.

In the article in the *Situationist International* about the Watts riots, which was in other respects quite lucid, after the evocation of a possible revolutionary unification around the black revolt as a revolt against the commodity, we read that “the other pole of the present alternative, when resignation cannot continue” was “a series of mutual exterminations.” 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

circumstances: “But meanwhile what are we going to do without the barbarians? Those people were like a solution.” It is therefore in order to conceal its real disaster and to exorcise the specter of an interminable decline if left to its own devices that a society searches for enemies to fight, objects of hatred and terror; just as in 1984, where the obligatory expression of hatred for the enemy Goldstein serves at the same time as a pressure release valve for hatred of Big Brother, the fabrication of a fearful and hateful “barbarism” is all the more effective the more it derives from a very real and well-founded fear which operates to the benefit of conformism and submission. The “*banlieues*”, as the media use the term to in fact designate the entirety of urbanized territory (the old historical centers, principally destined for commercial use and tourism, already preserve nothing 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 suddenly realize they are sitting down. Like so many other “problems”, this one is spoken of not in order to resolve it (how could this be done?) but in order to manage it, as they say: in good French, to let it rot, they will help it with all the immense means available to this end. It is this kind of modern management that is meant by the term, “Los Angeles Syndrome”. When the police and their media spokespersons speak of the “Los Angeles Syndrome”, they are not so much expressing what they are trying to obtain as what they are trying to avoid, less what they want than what they fear: which is to say that they are describing the way they want those situations which they cannot avoid to turn out. And it is well-known how modern domination, which has not without reason been defined as spectacular, has appropriated the techniques of the entertainment industry on a grand scale, and has for some time been capable of manipulating mimetic impulses and causing those feelings that it wants to arouse to have the appearance of having always existed, anticipating the spectators’ own imitation, on the model of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In

by means of a disaster which is confusedly perceived by everyone as irreversible, we have been freed from both the responsibility of having to maintain the existing world as well as 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 principal characteristic of mass man is not brutality or mental backwardness, but isolation and the absence of normal social relations,” etc.), and how it formed from this social atomization what she calls “the provisional alliance between the populace and the elite.” Today we are witnessing the reconstruction of such an 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 effectiveness. And mafia-style solidarity is the only kind which is worth anything when all the other kinds have disappeared. The “unlimited loyalty, unconditional and unalterable” which totalitarian movements demanded of their members, and which could be obtained from isolated individuals lacking any other social connections, who have no sense of their own usefulness except insofar as they belong to the party, a loyalty emptied of all ideology, is rediscovered in the total fidelity of the gangs described, for instance, by Kody Scott (*Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member*). To get a sense of just how far matters have deteriorated during the last 20 years, one need only compare Scott’s testimony with that of James Carr (*Bad*). While the latter apprehends 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 Constantin Cavafys, “Waiting for the Barbarians,” we find two verses which are quite apposite in these

sophisms, which are as ingenious at going to any lengths to display those facts which are in accordance with what they want to believe, as they are in rejecting them as mere appearances when they contradict our 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 adults between the ages of 15 and 24 year of age; 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 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 of “the reconstruction of the American family, to make sure that our children understand the value of life, their own and that of others.” It is a little late in the day for that, when that which once constituted the value of life is as ruined as the family, whether American or any other kind; but it is also too late, and no less so, to see any kind of emancipation or progress in this disintegration of the family unit, which directly throws atomized individuals into the brutality of a desolate life, to the desperate rivalry of those who belong to nothing and to whom nothing belongs. (It should be pointed out 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 “successful small business”).

A sociologist worried about humanitarian education and socialization will usually allege extenuating circumstances: of course these ignorant young people are not very refined, but the “public safety” propaganda is quite exaggerated and, besides, what opportunity have they been given to be well-educated, brave 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, one must not only denounce police violence (“repression”) but all the mistreatment which technological domination inflicts upon na-

ture and human nature. It is therefore necessary to stop believing that something like a civilized society still exists which has not provided the barbarian youth with the opportunity to be integrated into society. It is necessary, above all, to understand how the disinherited became effectively disinherited, and more cruelly than in other times, having been expropriated of their reason, imprisoned in their “new language” as much as in their ghettos, unable to base their right to inherit the world upon their ability to reconstruct it. And, finally, rather than shedding crocodile tears about the “excluded” and the other “useless people of the world”, it would be fitting to seriously examine in what sense the world of wage labor and the commodity is useful for anyone who does not benefit from it, and if it is possible to include oneself in it without renouncing one’s humanity. All of this is evidently too much for the sociologists, however leftist they might be: after all, these people have the function not of criticizing society but of providing arguments and justifications to the plethora of personnel charged with supervising misery, those who call themselves “social workers”. It is therefore logical that their efforts are directed above all towards the satisfaction of the demands of “identity politics”, which offer the choice of a role from the dollar store of imitation memberships, the little shop of illusions where everything is found, from the Malcolm X baseball cap to the Moslem tunic.

Less worried, because it is free of any practical relation to reality, the extreme left contents itself with the inversion of the terms of police propaganda: where the latter sees barbarians coming from an underworld foreign to civilized values, 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 ghettos replacing the steppes. The only point these apologetics 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 worthy because of its intentions. But if we abandon the heaven of good intentions—leftism lives on good in-

tentions, its own and those which it imputes to its negative heroes—and put our feet back on the ground, the problem is not that these barbarians reject, although very badly, the new world of generalized brutality; but rather that, to the contrary, they have adapted quite well to it, faster than many others who are still full of conciliatory fictions. One can thus effectively call them barbarians. Where could they have been civilized, and how? Watching their fathers’ pornographic videos? Submerging themselves in the ectoplasmic universe of digital simulations? Imitating the conduct of brutal vendettas? All around them, both at the summit of the social hierarchy as well as its abysses, they see that a species of nihilist consciousness of historical collapse prevails, on the model of “after us, the flood”.

It is, after all, the very definition of civilization to carry on with things which have vanished like the ozone layer, cracked like the sarcophagus of Chernobyl, and dissolved like nitrates in the aquifer. All enterprises with a pretension to permanency having become laughingstocks, the world now belongs to those who love speed, without any scruples or precautions of any kind, scorning not only all universal human interests but also all individual integrity. This worldly love possesses exactly that quality which allows for its precocious, instantaneous character destined for immediate volatilization and thus to a simple, empty intensity: “Time has no respect for what is done without it”. Drug use is simultaneously the simplest expression and the logical complement of this concept, with its power of breaking time down into a succession of disconnected instants. (Baudelaire pointed out, and only in regard to hashish, that a government interested in corrupting its subjects would only have to encourage its use.) The sole clinical context of what has become, in these conditions of generalized brutality, something we no longer dare to call eroticism—the atrophy of sensuality and the hysterical search for always more violent stimulations—alone suffices to prove that society’s disease has reached its final stage. Everything takes place, therefore, as if,