

Some Politically Incorrect Reflections on Violence in France & Related Matters •

1. Violence, Irrational and Rational

Two parallels are often evoked apropos the recent violent outbursts in France: the New Orleans looting after Katrina hurricane and May 68. In spite of significant differences, lessons can be drawn from both parallels. With regard to New Orleans, the Paris fires had a sobering effect on those European intellectuals who used New Orleans to emphasize the advantage of the European welfare state model over the US wild capitalism - now we know it can happen here also. Those who attributed the New Orleans violence to the lack of European-style solidarity are no less wrong than the US free-market liberals who now gleefully returned the blow and pointed out how the very rigidity of state interventions which limit market competition and its dynamics prevented the economic rise of the marginalized immigrants in France (in contrast to the US where many immigrant groups are among the most successful). On the other hand, what strikes the eye with regard to May 68 is the total absence of any positive utopian prospect among the protesters: if May 68 was a revolt with a utopian vision, the recent revolt was just an outburst with no pretense to any kind of positive vision - if the commonplace that "we live in a post-ideological era" has any sense, it is here. Is this sad fact that the opposition to the system cannot articulate itself in the guise of a realistic alternative, or at least a meaningful utopian project, but only as a meaningless outburst, not the strongest indictment of our predicament? Where is here the celebrated freedom of choice, when the only choice is the one between playing by the rules and (self-)destructive violence, a violence which is almost exclusively directed against one's own - the cars burned and the schools torched were not from rich neighborhoods, but were part of the hard-won acquisitions of the very strata from which protesters originate.

The first conclusion to be drawn is thus that both conservative and liberal reactions to the unrests clearly fail. The conservatives emphasize the Clash of Civilizations and, predictably, Law and Order: immigrants should not abuse our hospitality, they are our guests, so they should respect our customs, our society has the right to safeguard its unique culture and way of life; plus there is no excuse for crimes and violent behavior, what the young immigrants need is not more social help, but discipline and hard work... Leftist liberals, no less predictably, stuck to their old mantra about neglected social programs and integration-efforts which are depriving the younger generation of immigrants of any clear economic and social prospect, thus leaving them violent outbursts as they only way to articulate their dissatisfaction... As Stalin would have put it, it is meaningless to debate which reaction is worse: they are BOTH worse, inclusive of the warning, formulated by both sides, about the real danger of these outbursts residing in the easily predictable racist REACTION of the French populist crowd to them.

So what can a philosopher do here? One should bear in mind that the philosopher's task is not to propose solutions, but to reformulate the problem itself, to shift the ideological framework within which we hitherto perceived the problem. Perhaps, a good point to start with would be to put the recent outbursts into the series they build with two other

types of violence that the liberal majority today perceives as a threat to our way of life: (1) direct "terrorist" attacks (of suicide bombers); (2) Rightist Populist violence; (3) suburban juvenile "irrational" outbursts. A liberal today worries about these three disturbances of his daily life: terrorist attacks, juvenile violence, Rightwing Populist pressures.

The first step in the analysis is to confront each of these modes with its counter-violence: the counter-pole to "terrorist" attacks is the US military neo-colonial world-policing; the counter-pole to Rightist Populist violence is the Welfare State control and regulation; the counter-pole to the juvenile outbursts is the anonymous violence of the capitalist system. In all three cases, violence and counter-violence are caught in a deadly vicious cycle, each generating the very opposite it tries to combat. Furthermore, what all three modes share, in spite of their fundamental differences, is the logic of a blind *passage à l'acte*: in all three cases, violence is an implicit admission of impotence.

A standard Hollywood action film is always a lesson in it. Towards the end of Andrew Davis's *The Fugitive*, the innocent-persecuted doctor (Harrison Ford) confronts at a large medical convention his colleague (Jeroem Kraabe), accusing him that he falsified medical data on behalf of a large pharmaceutical company. At this precise point, when one would expect that the shift would focus on the company - the corporate capital - as the true culprit, Kraabe interrupts his talk, invited Ford to step aside, and then, outside the convention hall, they engage in a passionate violent fight, beating each other till their faces are red of blood. The scene is telltale in its openly ridiculous character, as if, in order to get out of the ideological mess of playing with anti-capitalism, one has to do a move which renders directly palpable the cracks in the narrative. Another aspect is here the transformation of the bad guy into a vicious, sneering, pathological character, as if psychological depravity (which accompanies the dazzling spectacle of the fight) should replace the anonymous non-psychological drive of the capital: the much more appropriate gesture would have been to present the corrupted colleague as a psychologically sincere and privately honest doctor who, because of the financial difficulties of the hospital in which he works, was lured into swallowing the bait of the pharmaceutical company.

The Fugitive thus provides a clear version of the violent *passage à l'acte* serving as a lure, a vehicle of ideological displacement. A step further from this zero-level of violence is found in Paul Schrader's and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, in the final outburst of Travis (Robert de Niro) against the pimps who control the young girl he wants to save (Jodie Foster). Crucial is the implicit suicidal dimension of this *passage à l'acte*: when Travis prepares for his attack, he practices in front of the mirror the drawing of the gun; in what is the best-known scene of the film, he addresses his own image in the mirror with the aggressive-condescending "You talkin' to me?". In a textbook illustration of Lacan's notion of the "mirror stage," aggressivity is here clearly aimed at oneself, at one's own mirror image. This suicidal dimension reemerges at the end of the slaughter scene when Travis, heavily wounded and leaning at the wall, mimics with the forefinger of his right hand a gun aimed at his blood-stained forehead and mockingly triggers it, as if saying "The true aim of my outburst was myself." The paradox of Travis is that he perceives HIMSELF as part of the degenerate dirt of the city life he wants to eradicate, so

that, as Brecht put it apropos of revolutionary violence in his *The Measure Taken*, he wants to be the last piece of dirt with whose removal the room will be clean.

Far from signaling an imperial arrogance, such "irrational" outbursts of violence - one of the key topics of American culture and ideology - rather stand for an implicit admission of impotence: their very violence, display of destructive power, is to be conceived as the mode of appearance of its very opposite - if anything, they are exemplary cases of the impotent *passage à l'acte*. As such, these outbursts enable us to discern the hidden obverse of the much-praised American individualism and self-reliance: the secret awareness that we are all helplessly thrown around by forces out of our control. There is a wonderful early short story by Patricia Highsmith, "Button," about a middle-class New Yorker who lives with a mongoloid 9-years old son who babbles meaningless sounds all the time and smiles, while saliva is running out of his open mouth; one late evening, unable to endure the situation, he decides to take a walk on the lone Manhattan streets where he stumbles upon a destitute homeless beggar who pleadingly extends his hand towards him; in an act of inexplicable fury, the hero beats the beggar to death and tears off from his jacket a button. Afterwards, he returns home a changed man, enduring his family nightmare without any traumas, capable of even a kind smile towards his mongoloid son; he keeps this button all the time in the pocket of his trousers - a remainder that, once at least, he did strike back against his miserable destiny.

Highsmith is at her best when even such a violent outburst fails, as in what is arguably her single greatest achievement, *Those Who Walk Away*: in it, she took crime fiction, the most "narrative" genre of them all, and imbued it with the inertia of the real, the lack of resolution, the dragging-on of the "empty time," which characterize the stupid factuality of life. In Rome, Ed Coleman tries to murder Ray Garrett, a failed painter and gallery-owner in his late 20s, his son-in-law whom he blames for the recent suicide of his only child, Peggy, Ray's wife. Rather than flee, Ray follows Ed to Venice, where Ed is wintering with Inez, his girlfriend. What follows is Highsmith's paradigmatic agony of the symbiotic relationship of two men who are inextricably linked to each other in their very hatred. Ray himself is haunted by a sense of guilt for his wife's death, so he exposes himself to Ed's violent intentions. Echoing his death wish, he accepts a lift from Ed in a motor-boat; in the middle of the lagoon, Ed pushes Ray overboard. Ray pretends he is actually dead and assumes a false name and another identity, thus experiencing both exhilarating freedom and overwhelming emptiness. He roams like a living dead through the cold streets of wintry Venice when... We have here a crime novel with no murder, just failed attempts at it: there is no clear resolution at the novel's end - except, perhaps, the resigned acceptance of both Ray and Ed that they are condemned to haunt each other to the end.

Today, with the global American ideological offensive, the fundamental insight of movies like John Ford's *Searchers* and *Taxi Driver* is more relevant than ever: we witness the resurgence of the figure of the "quiet American," a naïve benevolent agent who sincerely wants to bring to the Vietnamese democracy and Western freedom - it is just that his intentions totally misfire, or, as Graham Greene put it: "I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused." Freud was thus right in his prescient

analysis of Woodrow Wilson, the US president who exemplifies American humanitarian interventionist attitude: the underlying dimension of aggressivity could not escape him.

The key event of John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* (1934) occurs at a Christmas dinner party at the Lantenengo Country Club, where the novel's tragic hero, 29 year-old Julian English, a wealthy and popular car dealership owner, throws a drink in the face of Harry Reilly, the richest man in town. Because of this, he becomes embroiled in the middle a serious social scandal, and it seems nothing will right it - the novel ends with Julian's pitiful suicide in a car. As Julian claims in the ensuing conflict over the drink throwing, he did not do it because Harry is the richest man in town, nor because he is a social climber, and certainly not because he is Catholic - and yet all these reasons do play a part in his violent passage a l'acte. In the ensuing flashback, Julian remembers the times when his youth gang would play Ku Klux Klan, after having seen 'Birth of a Nation', their distrust of Jews, etc. In Hollywood of the last two decades, there are numerous examples of such impotent "strikings out," from Russell Banks' *Affliction* to John Sayles' *The Lone Star*.

The Lone Star provides a unique insight into the twists of the "Oedipal" dynamics. In a small Texas border town, a long dead body is discovered, the body of Wade, a cruel and utterly corrupted sheriff who mysteriously disappeared decades ago. The present sheriff who pursues the investigation is the son of the sheriff who replaced Wade and is celebrated by the city as a hero who brought order and prosperity to it; however, since Wade disappeared just after a public conflict with the sheriff who replaced him, all signs seem to indicate that Wade was killed by his successor. Driven by a properly Oedipal hatred, the present sheriff thus tries to undermine the myth of his father by way of demonstrating that his rule was based on murder. Here, we encounter the first surprise: we are dealing with three, not two, generations. Wade (superbly played by Kris Kristofferson) is a kind of Freudian "primordial father," an obscene and cruel master of the city who violates every law, simply shooting people who do not pay him; the hero's father crime should thus be a law-founding crime, the excess - the illegal killing of a corrupted master - which enabled the rule of law. However, what we learn at the film's end is that the crime was not committed by the hero's father: while innocent of the murder of Wade, he brought corruption to a more "civilized" level, replacing the outright brutal corruption of his "larger-than-life" predecessor with a corruption entwined with business interests (just "fixing" things here and there, etc.). And it is in these replacement of the big "ethical" founding crime with small corruption that resides the finesse of the film: the hero who wanted to unearth the big secret of his father's founding crime, learns that, far from being a heroic figure whose illegal violence grounded the rule of law, his father was just a successful opportunist like others... Consequently, the final message of the film is "Forget the Alamo!" (the film's last words of dialogue): let us abandon the search for big founding events and let bygones be bygones. The key to the film's underlying libidinal economy resides in the duality between the hero's father (the law-and-order figure) and Wade, the obscene primordial father, the libidinal focus of the film, the figure of excessive enjoyment whose murder is the film's central event - and does the

hero's obsession with unmasking the guilt of his father not betray his deep solidarity with the obscene figure of Wade?

Clint Eastwood's *Mystic River* stands out here because of the unique twist it gives to such violent *passages à l'acte*. When they were kids growing up together in a rough section of Boston, Jimmy Markum (Sean Penn), Dave Boyle (Tim Robbins) and Sean Devine (Kevin Bacon) spent their days playing stickball on the street. Nothing much out of the ordinary ever happened, until a moment's decision drastically altered the course of each of their lives forever. This primordial, »founding,« act of violence that sets in motion the cycle is the kidnapping and serial raping of the adolescent Dave, accomplished by the local policeman on behalf of a priest - two persons standing for the two key state apparatuses, police and church, the repressive one and the ideological one, "the Army and the Church" mentioned by Freud in his *Crowd Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Today, twenty-five years later, the three find themselves thrust back together by another tragic event: the murder of Jimmy's 19-year-old daughter. Now a cop, Sean is assigned to the case, while, in the wake of the sudden and terrible loss of his child, Jimmy's mind becomes consumed with revenge. Caught up in the maelstrom is Dave, now a lost and broken man fighting to keep his demons at bay. As the investigation creeps closer to home, Dave's wife Celeste becomes consumed by suspicion and fear, and finally tells about it to Jimmy. As the frustrated acting out, twice a murder occurs: Dave kills a man engaged in homosexual activity with a boy in a car; Jimmy kills Dave, convinced that he murdered his daughter. Immediately afterwards, Jimmy is informed by Sean that the police found the true killer - he killed a wrong man, his close friend.

The movie ends with a weird scene of family redemption: Jimmy's wife, Annabeth, draws her family tight together in order to weather the storm. In a long pathetic speech, she restores Jimmy's self-confidence by praising him as the strong and reliable head of the family, always ready to do the necessary tough things to protect the family haven. Although this symbolic reconciliation, this *Aufhebung* of the catastrophe of killing the wrong man, superficially succeeds (the last scene of the film shows Penn's family watching the Irish parade, restored as a "normal" family), it is arguably the strongest indictment of the redemptive power of family ties: the lesson of the film is not that "family ties heal all wounds," that family is a safe haven enabling us to survive the most horrendous traumas, but, quite the opposite, that family is a monstrous ideological machine making us blind for the most horrendous crimes we commit. Far from bringing any catharsis, the ending is thus an absolute anti-catharsis, leaving us, spectators, with the bitter taste that nothing was really resolved, that we are witnessing an obscene travesty of the ethical core of family. (The only similar scene that comes to mind is the finale of John Ford's *Fort Apache*, in which John Wayne praises to the gathered journalists the noble heroism of Henry Fonda, a cruel general who died in a meaningless attack on the Indians.) And, perhaps, this is all we can do today, in our dark era: to render visible the failure of all attempts at redemption, the obscene travesty of every gesture of reconciling us with the violence we are forced to commit. Perhaps, Job is the proper hero today: the one who refuses to find any deeper meaning in the suffering he encounters.

As to the "terrorist" fundamentalists' attacks, the first thing that strikes the eye [1](#) is the inadequacy of the idea, developed most systematically by Donald Davidson, that human acts are rationally-intentional, accountable in the terms of beliefs and desires of the agent. [2](#) This approach exemplifies the racist bias of the theories of "rationality": although their aim is to understand the Other from within, they end up attributing to the Other the most ridiculous beliefs (up to the infamous 400 virgins awaiting the believer in Paradise as the "rational" explanation of why he is ready to blow himself up), i.e., they makes the other ridiculously weird in the very effort of trying to make him "like us." Here is a passage from one of the propaganda texts distributed by North Korea during the Korean war:

"Hero Kang Ho-yung was seriously wounded in both arms and both legs in the Kamak Hill Battle, so he rolled into the midst of the enemy with a hand grenade in his mouth and wiped them out, shouting: 'My arms and legs were broken. But on the contrary my retaliatory spirit against you scoundrels became a thousand times stronger. I will show the unbending fighting will of a member of the Workers' Party of Korea and unflinching will firmly pledged to the Party and the Leader!'" [3](#)

It is easy to laugh at the ridiculously non-realistic character of this description: how could the poor Kang talk if he was holding the grenade with his mouth? And how is it that, in the midst of a fierce battle, there was time for such a long declamatory proclamation? However, what if the mistake is to read this passage as a realistic description, thus imputing to Koreans ridiculous beliefs? In other words, what if the mistake is the same one as that of the anthropologists who impute to "primitive" aborigines celebrating the eagle as their ancestor the belief that they are really descended from the eagle? Why not read this passage - which effectively sounds operatic in its pathos - in the way similar to listening to Act III of Wagner's *Tristan*, where the mortally wounded Tristan is singing his (extremely demanding) dying chant for almost an hour - who of us is ready to impute to Wagner the belief that this is possible?

The fundamentalist Islamic terror is NOT grounded in the terrorists' conviction of their superiority and in their desire to safeguard their cultural-religious identity from the onslaught of the global consumerist civilization: the problem with fundamentalists is not that we consider them inferior to us, but, rather, that **THEY THEMSELVES** secretly consider themselves inferior (like, obviously, Hitler himself felt towards Jews) - which is why our condescending Politically Correct assurances that we feel no superiority towards them only makes them more furious and feeds their resentment. The problem is not cultural difference (their effort to preserve their identity), but the opposite fact that the fundamentalists are already like us, that they secretly already internalized our standards and measure themselves by them. (This clearly goes for Dalai Lama who justifies the Tibetan Buddhism in WESTERN terms of the pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of pain.) Paradoxically, what the fundamentalists really lack is precisely a dosage of "true" "racist" conviction into one's own superiority.

The perplexing fact about the "terrorist" attacks is that they do not fit our standard opposition of Evil as egotism, as disregard for the common Good, and Good as the spirit

of (and actual readiness for) the sacrifice for some higher Cause: terrorists cannot but appear as something akin to Milton's Satan with his "Evil, be thou my Good": while they pursue (what appears to us) evil goals with evil means, the very FORM of their activity meets the highest standard of the Good. The resolution of this enigma is easy, known already to Rousseau: egotism (the concern for one's well-being) is NOT opposed to common good, since altruistic norms can easily be deduced from egotist concerns. <4 Individualism versus communitarianism, utilitarianism versus universal normativism, are FALSE oppositions, since the two opposed options amount to the same as to their result. The critics who complain how, in today's hedonistic-egotistic society, true values are lacking, totally miss the point: the true opposite of egotist self-love is not altruism, concern for common Good, but envy, resentment, which makes me act AGAINST my own interests. Freud already knew it: death-drive is opposed to pleasure principle as well as to reality principle, i.e., the true "Evil" (= death drive) involves self-sabotage, it makes us act AGAINST our own interests. (Dupuy is here wrong in his characterization of the Lacanian psychoanalysis as part of the ongoing "mechanization of the mind" - psychoanalysis, on the contrary, REINTRODUCES notions of Evil and responsibility into our ethical vocabulary; "death-drive" is the name for what DISTURBS the homeostatic mechanism of rational pleasure-seeking, the weird reversal where I sabotage my own interests. If THIS is the true evil, then not only of today's secular pragmatic ethical theories, but even the "mechanization of the mind" in cognitive sciences, are to be conceived not as in itself "evil," but as a defense against Evil.

The problem with human desire is that, as Lacan put it, it is always "desire of the Other" in both *genitivus subjectivus* and *genitivus objectivus*: desire for the Other, desire to be desired by the Other, and, especially, desire for what the Other desires - envy and resentment are thus a constitutive component of human desire, as already Saint Augustin knew it so well - recall the passage from his *Confessions*, often quoted by Lacan, the scene of a baby jealous for his brother sucking the mother's breast ("I myself have seen and known an infant to be jealous though it could not speak. It became pale, and cast bitter looks on its foster-brother.")

Based on this insight, Dupuy proposes a convincing critique of John Rawls theory of justice: in the Rawls' model of a just society, social inequalities are tolerated only insofar as they are based on natural inequalities, which are considered contingent, not merits. 5 What Rawls doesn't see is how such a society would create conditions for an uncontrolled explosion of resentment: in it, I would know that my lower status is fully "justified," and would thus be deprived of excusing my failure as the result of social injustice. Rawls thus proposes a terrifying model of a society in which hierarchy is directly legitimized in natural properties, thereby missing the simple lesson of an anecdote about a Slovene peasant who is given a choice by a good witch: she will either give him one cow, and to his neighbor two cows, or take from him one cow, and from his neighbor two cows - the peasant immediately chooses the second option. (In a more morbid version, the witch tells him: "I will do to you whatever you want, but I warn you, I will do it to your neighbor twice!" The peasant, with a cunning smile, asks her: "Take one of my eyes!")

Friedrich Hayek [6](#) knew that it is much easier to accept inequalities if one can claim that they result from an impersonal blind force, so the good thing about "irrationality" of the market success or failure in capitalism (recall the old motif of market as the modern version of the imponderable Fate) is that it allows me precisely to perceive my failure (or success) as "undeserved", contingent... The fact that capitalism is not "just" is thus a key feature that makes it palpable to the majority (I can accept much more easily my failure if I know that it is not due to my inferior qualities, but to chance).

What Nietzsche and Freud share is the idea that justice as equality is founded on envy - on the envy of the Other who has what we do not have, and who enjoys it; the demand for justice is thus ultimately the demand that the excessive enjoyment of the Other should be curtailed, so that everyone's access to *jouissance* should be equal. The necessary outcome of this demand, of course, is asceticism: since it is not possible to impose equal *jouissance*, what one CAN impose is only the equally shared PROHIBITION. However, one should not forget that today, in our allegedly permissive society, this asceticism assumes precisely the form of its opposite, of the GENERALIZED superego injunction "Enjoy!". We are all under the spell of this injunction, with the outcome that our enjoyment is more hindered than ever - recall the yuppie who combines Narcissistic "Self-Fulfillment" with utter ascetic discipline of jogging, eating health food, etc. This, perhaps, is what Nietzsche had in mind with his notion of the Last Man - it is only today that we can really discern the contours of the Last Man, in the guise of the hedonistic asceticism of yuppies. Nietzsche thus does not simply urge life-assertion against asceticism: he is well aware how a certain asceticism is the obverse of the decadent excessive sensuality - therein resides his criticism of Wagner's *Parsifal*, and, more generally, of the late Romantic decadence oscillating between damp sensuality and obscure spiritualism.

So what IS envy? Recall again the Augustinian scene of a sibling envying his brother who is sucking the mother's breast: the subject does not envy the Other's possession of the prized object as such, but rather the way the Other is able to ENJOY this object - which is why it is not enough for him simply to steal and thus gain possession of the object: his true aim is to destroy the Other's ability/capacity to enjoy the object. As such, envy is to be located into the triad of envy, thrift and melancholy, the three forms of not being able to enjoy the object (and, of course, reflexively enjoying this very impossibility). In contrast to the subject of envy, who envies the other's possession and/or *jouissance* of the object, the miser possesses the object, but cannot enjoy/consume it - his satisfaction derives from just possessing it, elevating it into a sacred, untouchable/prohibited, entity which should under no conditions be consumed (recall the proverbial figure of the lone miser who, upon returning home, safely locks the doors, opens up his chest and then takes the secret peek at his prized object, observing it in awe); this very hindrance that prevents the consummation of the object guarantees its status of the object of desire. The melancholic subject, like the miser, possesses the object, but loses the cause that made him desire it: this figure, most tragic of them all, has free access to all he wants, but finds no satisfaction in it.

This excess of envy is the base of Rousseau's well-known, but nonetheless not fully exploited, distinction between egotism, *amour-de-soi* (which natural), and *amour-propre*, the perverted preferring of oneself to others in which I focus not on achieving the goal, but on destroying the obstacle to it:

"The primitive passions, which all directly tend towards our happiness, make us deal only with objects which relate to them, and whose principle is only *amour de soi*, are all in their essence lovable and tender; however, when, diverted from their objects by obstacles, they are more occupied with the obstacle they try to get rid of, than with the object they try to reach, they change their nature and become irascible and hateful. This is how *amour de soi*, which is a noble and absolute feeling, becomes *amour-propre*, that is to say, a relative feeling by means of which one compares oneself, a feeling which demands preferences, whose enjoyment is purely negative and which does not strive to find satisfaction in our own well-being, but only in the misfortune of others." (Rousseau, *Juge de Jean-Jacques*, first dialogue)

For Rousseau, an evil person is NOT an egotist, "thinking only about his own interests": a true egotist is all too busy with taking care of his own good to have time to cause misfortunes to others, while the primary vice of a bad person is precisely that he is more occupied with others than with himself. Rousseau describes here a precise libidinal mechanism: the inversion which generates the shift of the libidinal investment from the object to the obstacle itself. This is why egalitarianism itself should never be accepted at its face value: the notion (and practice) of egalitarian justice, insofar as it is sustained by envy, relies on the inversion of the standard renunciation accomplished to benefit others: "I am ready to renounce it, so that others will (also) NOT (be able to) have it!" Far from being opposed to the spirit of sacrifice, Evil is thus the very spirit of sacrifice, ready to ignore one's own well-being - if, through my sacrifice, I can deprive the Other of his *jouissance*... Is this sad fact that the opposition to the system cannot articulate itself in the guise of a realistic alternative, or at least a meaningful utopian project, but only as a meaningless outburst, not the strongest indictment of our predicament? Where is here the celebrated freedom of choice, when the only choice is the one between playing by the rules and (self-)destructive violence, a violence which is almost exclusively directed against one's own - the cars burned and the schools torched were not from rich neighborhoods, but were part of the hard-won acquisitions of the very strata from which protesters originate.

Which is why the notion of evaluation is crucial for the functioning of a democratic society: if, at the level of their symbolic identity, all subjects are equal, if, here, *un sujet vaut l'autre*, if they can be indefinitely substituted to each other, since each of them is reduced to an empty punctual place (\$), to a "man without qualities-properties" (to recall the title of Robert Musil's *magnum opus*) - if, consequently, every reference to their properly symbolic mandate is prohibited, how then, are they to be distributed within the social edifice, how can their occupation be legitimized? The answer is, of course, evaluation: one has to evaluate - as objectively as possible, and through all possible means, from quantified testing of their abilities to more "personalized" in-depth

interviews - their potentials. The underlying ideal notion is to produce their characterization deprived of all traces of symbolic identities. ⁷ Here the standard Leftist critics who denounce the hidden cultural bias of evaluations and tests miss the point: the problem with evaluation, with its total objectivation of criteria, is not that it is unjust, but precisely that it IS just.

What this means is that the "deconstructionist" / "risk society" commonplace according to which the contemporary individual experiences himself as thoroughly denaturalized, that he experiences even his most "natural" features (from his ethnic identity to his sexual preferences) as something chosen, historically contingent, to be learned, is profoundly deceiving: what we are effectively witnessing today is the opposite process of an unheard-of re-naturalization: all big "public issues" are (re)translated into questions about the regulation and stances towards intimate "natural"/"personal" idiosyncrasies. This is also why, at a more general level, the pseudo-naturalized ethnico-religious conflicts are the form of struggle which fits global capitalism: in our age of »post-politics,« when politics proper is progressively replaced by expert social administration, the only remaining legitimate source of conflicts are cultural (religious) or natural (ethnic) tensions. - And "evaluation" is precisely the regulation of social promotion that fits this massive renaturalization. So, perhaps, the time has come to reassert, as the truth of evaluation, the perverted logic to which Marx refers ironically in his description of commodity fetishism, when he quotes Dogberry's advice to Seacoal from Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (Act 3, Scene 3) which concludes Chapter 1 of *Das Capital*: "To be a well-favored man is the gift of fortune; but reading and writing comes by nature." Today, in our times of evaluation, to be a computer expert or a successful manager is a gift of nature, while to have a beautiful lips or eyes is a fact of culture...

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Notes:

- ¹. Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Avions-nous oublié le ma? Penser la politique après le 11 septembre*, Paris: Bayard 2002.
- ². Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1980.
- ³. Quoted in Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*, New York: Thomas Dunne Books 2004, p. 85.
- ⁴. Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, New York: Basic Books 1984.
- ⁵. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1971 (revised edition 1999).
- ⁶. Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994.
- ⁷. Jacques-Alain Miller, Jean-Claude Milner, *Voulez-vous être évalué?*, Paris: Grasset 2004.