KEY IDEAS

ROUTLEDGE

NIHILISM

Bülent Diken

NIHILISM

Most significant problems of contemporary life have their origins in nihilism and its paradoxical logic, which is simultaneously destructive to, and constitutive of, society. Yet, in social theory, nihilism is a surprisingly under-researched topic.

This book develops a systematic account of nihilism in its four main forms: escapism, radical nihilism, passive nihilism and 'perfect nihilism.' It focuses especially on the disjunctive synthesis between passive nihilism (the negation of the will) and radical nihilism (the will to negation), between the hedonism/disorientation that characterizes the contemporary post-political culture and the emerging forms of despair and violence as a reaction to it.

The book deals with nihilism at three levels. First, it addresses the genealogy and consequences of nihilism, which is followed by an excursus through film analysis. Then it focuses on the 'social,' relating nihilism to capitalism, post-politics and terrorism. Another excursus fleshes out the theoretical arguments by analyzing Houellebecq's fiction. Finally, the possibilities of overcoming nihilism are considered by emphasizing the significance of concepts such as event, agonism and antagonism in this context.

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KEY IDEAS

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Nihilism
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To my father Ertan Diken.

Contents

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Bülent Diken
Lancaster, June 2008

INTRODUCTION

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

> I repeat, moderate your demands, don't demand all that is 'great and beautiful' of me, and we shall live in peace and harmony, you'll see.
>
> (Dostoevsky 2004: 647)

This is how the devil speaks toward the end of *Brothers Karamazov*, announcing the ludicrousness of sublimation, of 'all that is great and beautiful', in modern times, and demanding moderation. A banal, normalized devil that no longer speaks the language of evil, a devil without evil. This paradoxical, mediocre devil was the nightmare through which the nineteenth century dreamed of the times to come, a future that promotes passivity, a 'dampening of the feeling of life, mechanical activity, modest pleasures . . .' (Nietzsche 1996: 114). Fast forward two centuries: are we not caught up in the same nightmare, too? Indeed, ours is a society that has turned moderation into an even more straightforward injunction. Hence our obsession with 'a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol . . .' (Žižek 2002: 10). We should not, in this context, forget the recent breakthrough in 'gene silencing' technology: the tearless onion. Thanks to New Zealand's crop and food research institute, which

has developed it after six years' hard work – from now on we won't be crying on touching an onion! – as a senior scientist from the institute puts it, 'we'll have nice, sweet aromas instead of bitter, pungent ones' (quoted in McMahon 2008). Perhaps one day we can go to saunas without sweating? Make omelets without breaking eggs?

> And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration, that is, as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound holistic approach to reality, while practices like wife beating remain out of sight . . .)?
>
> (Žižek 2002: 10–1)

In the era of 'decaffeinated' reality, in which antagonism, conflict and struggle are 'gene-silenced', even radical thought risks losing its 'malignant' substance. Thus, a post-structuralism without cruelty, or a Marxism without revolution and so on, is no longer exceptional but part of normality at today's universities. After all, social and cultural displacement is often based on the assimilation and accommodation of critique by power, which paradoxically confronts critical forces with the danger of becoming 'decaffeinated', that is, ineffective or dysfunctional (see Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

Then, the question is this: how did we arrive at this point? What is wrong with a devil without evil? And most importantly, what is the remedy, what is to be done, confronted with the injunction 'Moderate'!? Perhaps our common sense would regard decaffeinated coffee more 'healthy' than the normal one, pacifism better than antagonism and the lack of pain preferable to pain. But 'to the answer already contained in a question . . . one should respond with questions from another answer' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 110). This book does this by using the concept of nihilism, which is, due to its distance to common sense, perhaps the most misunderstood concept in history.

In its origin, nihilism is an inability to accept pain, conflict, and antagonism. But since these are parts of life, the search for a pain-free life amounts to the denial of the world as it is. As such, in its origin, nihilism is the invention of another illusory world in which pain, conflict, and

antagonism cease to exist, a transcendent heaven, which is why Nietzsche calls the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christendom and Islam, 'nihilistic religions' (Nietzsche 1967: 95). A nihilism, which negates *this* life, *this* world, by juxtaposing it to a heavenly, 'true' one tries to justify these illusions as reason, truth, supreme values and so on. In this sense, nihilism is a 'philosophy of illusion' (Hass 1982: 16). Significantly, however, despite its genealogical tie with monotheistic religions, nihilism cannot be reduced to them. For instance, it does not disappear with modernity or secularization; the end of religious belief is not, automatically, the end of nihilism. After all, it is possible to despise the church but to 'love its poison', its escapism (Nietzsche 1996: 22). In this sense:

> Nihilism is a historical movement, and not just any view or doctrine advocated by someone or other. Nihilism moves history after the manner of a fundamental ongoing event that is scarcely recognized in the destining of the Western peoples. Hence nihilism is also not simply one historical phenomenon among others. . . . Nihilism, thought in its essence, is, rather, the fundamental movement of the history of the West.
>
> (Heidegger 1977: 62)

With modernity, or with the 'death of God', the originary, religious nihilism divides itself into two: 'radical' and 'passive' nihilism. The first insists on transcendence by taking the negation of *this* world to its logical extreme, the annihilation of the actual world; the second, becoming content with the actual world, gives up its 'malignant' properties: passions and values. On one hand, values that cannot find a world; on the other, a world without values. There is therefore a strange symmetry between the two nihilisms – between willing nothingness and the annihilation of will. Thus, the injunction for moderation is never alone; it is only a part of our contemporary predicament: the 'decaffeinated' reality of passive nihilism is paradoxically accompanied in our culture with a 'passion for the real', a carving for passion and excitement (see Badiou 2007). The imperative 'Moderate'! goes hand in hand with another one, a desire for excitement, to feel life as vibrantly as possible; the 'sedating tranquilizer' joins the 'stimulant' (Zupančič 2003: 66–7). An oscillation between hedonistic passivity and extremist passions: two opposite tendencies juxtaposed to each other in the same social space, connected and disconnected at once,

paradoxically united in a non-dialectical, 'disjunctive synthesis' – a synthesis whose binary poles are mutually exclusive but nevertheless presuppose – feed upon each other and are interlocked within the same classificatory scheme, that is, 'relate' to each other in the very exercise of a nonrelation, turning 'nonrelation' into a deeper relation (see Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 75–83; Badiou 2000: 22). And significantly, located in such a disjunctive synthesis, Dostoevsky's moderate, banal devil becomes even more disturbing, even more insulting:

> Indeed you're angry with me that I have not appeared to you in some sort of red glow, 'in thunder and lightning', with scorched wings, but have presented myself in such a modest form. You're insulted, first, in your aesthetic feelings, and, second, in your pride: 'how could such a banal devil come to such a great man'?
>
> (Dostoevsky 2004: 647)

The 'great man' the devil addresses with humiliating irony, is Ivan, a nineteenth-century radical nihilist with a passion for the real (d)evil. Ivan desires breaking free from a society which he despises, but he does not know how to, except for violent denial and impotent acts. Yet, he is sure of one thing: he wills nothing rather than the tranquillizing, passive existence that the modern society offers. Touching the void, the 'nothing', becomes a promise of reality. Destruction as a near-life experience. As such, Ivan is also the prototype of the 'radical loser' to come:

> The newspapers run stories on him every week: the father of two who killed his wife, his small children and finally himself. Unthinkable! A headline in the local section: A Family Tragedy. Or the man who suddenly barricades himself in his apartment, taking the landlord, who wanted money from him, as his hostage. When the police finally gets to the scene, he starts shooting. He is then said to have 'run amok', a word borrowed from the Malayan. He kills an officer before collapsing in the shower of bullets. What triggered this explosion remains unclear. His wife's nagging perhaps, noisy neighbours, an argument at the pub, or the bank cancelling his loan. A disparaging remark from a superior is enough to make the man climb a tower and start firing at anything that moves outside the supermarket, not in spite of but precisely because of the fact that this massacre will accelerate his own end.
>
> (Enzensberger 2005: 5)

What all these instances share at the level of affect is a tendency for spite, a willingness to harm oneself in order to harm the other. In the primordial scene, which Girard (1986) describes, the society is constituted on the basis of the lynching mob, whose mimetic desire, whose envy and egoism, culminates in sacrificing the scapegoat. With spite, though, we confront the opposite situation in which the mimetic desire does not establish but rather destroys the 'society'. Here everybody, and not only the scapegoat, is threatened with destruction. Significantly in this respect, contemporary society systematically produces 'losers' while, at the same time, depicting this condition as a fate, as one's own fault. But what if the loser does not accept his condition as fate, radicalizing his resentment into spiteful acts? Such a 'radical loser' is unable to create a way out of the dilemma, the impossible space in-between resigning to his fate – it is my fault – and holding others responsible for his lack of power; 'the only way out of the dilemma is to fuse destruction and self-destruction, aggression and auto-aggression' (Enzensberger 2005: 10). The point at which self-destruction and destruction merge is also a point at which the radical loser comes as close as possible to the feeling of power, both over himself and others.

Yet, despite its ever-present and escalating political, social and spatial significance, spite is a surprisingly absent topic in social analysis. As I argue in the following, the radical nihilism of spiteful actions is intertwined with the passive nihilism of the contemporary post-political society. When antagonism is foreclosed in the politics of consensus, spite often becomes the only 'political' (re)action, which, as a form of symbolic exchange, uncannily combines political impotence and enjoyment in passivity – two experiences that are closely related to the increasing transformation of politics into post-politics and biopolitics and of the 'social' into simulacra – into a 'society of spectacle'.

How, then, is anti-nihilism possible? What is crucial in this respect is that the antagonism between nihilism and anti-nihilism is not one between two sets of values. As Nietzsche has shown what is really at stake here is of a practical nature, the principle according to which values are produced. Anti-nihilism is really about a re-evaluation or 'transvaluation' of existing values. It can only emerge by deconstructing dominant values and creating new ones, but doing so without recourse to religious, passive or radical nihilism. And crucially this 'deconstruction' involves violence, the an*nihil*ation of existing nihilist dogmas, as well. In other words, anti-nihilism itself must, in a certain sense, become nihilistic: the 'hammer' is needed to destroy nihilistic 'idols'. All creativity necessitates destruction

in one way or another. Which is why anti-nihilism is for Nietzsche also a 'perfect nihilism', a nihilism that, paradoxically, turns back against itself, destroys and overcomes itself, to create immanent values, a new way of life. If thought emerges as a practical response to its epoch's problems, anti-nihilism is the pragmatic dimension of the concept of nihilism; it links with its own epoch (see Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 99). Then, it must be emphasized from the outset that nihilism is an ambivalent concept with more than one meaning. It is, in one guise, a promise of creative destruction. In another, it can work to the opposite end; turn to sheer destruction, annihilating the very context of creativity. The two-in-one nature of nihilism moves it, in a way, 'beyond good and evil'. Like the *pharmakon* in the classical Greek sense, nihilism is both poison and remedy at the same time, capable of doing the best and the worst (see Girard 1977: 100, 303). And as I will argue, this paradoxical, contradictory character is the strength, not weakness, of the concept of nihilism; it is what makes its numerous intimations and provocations as to the way the world is experienced possible. After all, concepts are tools to be able to think new possibilities and connections under contingent circumstances rather than the means of 'systematic' representations and static descriptions (see Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 28). What matters, therefore, is to 'dramatize' the inherited concepts in a productive way. One of the aims of this book, then, is to reactivate the concept of nihilism in our own time. Nevertheless, the problem at stake here is not only communication, e.g. a 'critical' discussion of nihilism as concept and social fact:

> To criticize is only to establish that a concept vanishes when it is thrust into a new milieu, losing some of its components, or acquiring others that transform it. But those who criticize without creating, those who are content to defend the vanished concept without being able to give it the forces it needs to return to life, are the plague of philosophy. All these debaters and communicators are inspired by *ressentiment*. They speak only of themselves when they set empty generalizations against one another. Philosophy has a horror of discussions. It always has something else to do. Debate is unbearable to it, but not because it is too sure of itself. On the contrary, it is its uncertainties that take it down other, more solitary paths.
>
> (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 28–9)

Thus, this book aims at addressing the socio-political significance of

nihilism by mapping its relation to contemporary society. It explicates the ontological, epistemological and critical implications of this intimate relationship through an engagement with the ways in which nihilism functions as a factor of social formation and destruction. Today, nihilism (and related affects such as cynicism, terror, cruelty and spite) continues to play a major role in relation to the 'social', often by negating its given order and thus serving as its positive condition of possibility. Nonetheless, social theory often understands such nihilist affects as anomalies, as exceptional situations in social life. As such, passive or destructive affects merely articulate an image of the social as if it is dissolved. The account offered here runs counter to this understanding of nihilism by showing that nihilism illustrates a paradoxical logic, which is simultaneously destructive to and constitutive of the social. Take the Parisian suburbs, where the activists set their own communities on fire as 'protest', or suicide bombers, who 'sacrifice' themselves to hit their targets, or the politics of security, which is willing to sacrifice democracy (civic rights) in the name of 'saving democracy'. In all these actual cases nihilism is a prime motive; indeed, in the contemporary society, the wilful disappearance (self-destruction) seems to become a technology, a dispositive of the self. To argue this, I employ a twin strategy: a conceptual approach that brings together the diverse literature on nihilism, while examples and excurses open up the theoretical claims and dramatize the more abstract and general diagnosis.

My conception of nihilism follows Spinoza and Nietzsche, whose works converge in a consistent anti-nihilism. Hence a few words on this convergence, which Nietzsche himself emphasizes (1959: 83–4). To begin with, both Spinoza and Nietzsche deny 'free will'. For Spinoza, will 'can only be called a necessary cause' (1993: 26, 74). Since there is a cause behind everything, will is caused too. Therefore, what seems to be contingent does so only because we do not have the knowledge of its 'essence', that is, the causal network behind it. Likewise, for Nietzsche, 'there is no will' in the sense of an uncaused cause (1967: 28, 401–2). The 'error of free will' is 'fabricated' by monotheistic religions to make humanity 'accountable' to a transcendent God (1969: 53). However, there is, in Nietzsche, a will that is not free: will to power, which is not a 'free' cause but the consequence of unconscious drives. Thus, just as Spinoza redefines will as conatus, as the most fundamental desire, the endeavour or power to persevere in existence, Nietzsche finds in will to power the supreme immanent principle of the world which he then juxtaposes to God's

transcendent judgment. In both conceptions, life expresses and seeks to expand itself, which in turn leads both thinkers to identify freedom with necessity. Thus, for Spinoza, freedom can only emerge from the understanding of necessity, that is, the causal network behind phenomena: amor fati or love of fate. And for Nietzsche freedom is the understanding of the eternal returned as fate.

Second, 'power' in Spinoza or Nietzsche does not primarily refer to physical force or political dominance. However, both agree that it is impossible not to be egoistic; conatus or will to power dictates that an organism strives to enhance its life conditions. Hence the relevant opposition is not that between egoism and altruism but between active emotions, such as joy and passive emotions such as sadness, between will and the lack of will.

Third, both Spinoza and Nietzsche deny the ordering of the world according to moral principles. Thus, just as Nietzsche finds the origin of nihilism in the life-negating and escapist illusions of monotheistic religions, Spinoza detects an intrinsic relationship between 'sadness', a feeling of impotence, and religious nihilism or 'superstition'. Superstition originates not from reason but from emotions. In this sense, originally, nihilism echoes the nature of human passions: sadness, fear, hope, anxiety and so on. Which is why 'only while under the dominion of fear men do fall a prey to superstition' (Spinoza 1951: 4). The elementary mystification of superstition consists in imagining God through human attributes, as an anthropomorphic entity (a despot, law-giver, merciful, just and so on), as a willing God in charge of judging what is happening in a passive nature (ibid. 81). But since it is impossible to be creative in a world in which everything is already created, what necessarily follows is sadness.

Fourth, both Spinoza and Nietzsche deny the theological notion of 'evil'. For Spinoza, good and evil are inadequate ideas that express no more than 'the emotion of pleasure or pain' (1993: 147). In nature, there is no good or evil. Similarly, Nietzsche insists that the distinction between good and evil always emerges on the basis of a reversal of values, of *ressentiment*; the weak can be 'good' only insofar as he can describe an external factor as 'evil'. However, that there is no good or evil does not mean that there can be no distinctions made. Even though there is no good or evil in nature, there are things that are good or bad for each being. Thus 'beyond good and evil' does not mean 'beyond good and bad' (see Nietzsche 1996: 37). Indeed, for both Spinoza and Nietzsche, the distinction between good

and bad provides the basis for a real ethical difference, which we must substitute for a false moral opposition (Deleuze 1992: 254).

And finally, both Spinoza and Nietzsche deny teleology: life, the world as it is, has neither an external cause nor a final purpose. Thus, Spinoza's 'God, or, Nature' does not act to achieve a goal, which would imply that he desires, that is, lacks something (see 1993: 34). Similarly, for Nietzsche, what seems to be ordered in nature is a non-teleological play of chaos. In 'Nature, or Chaos', there can be no eternal categories, absolute truths or timeless facts, and change cannot be reduced to one-directional evolution to progress. Nihilism, for instance, signifies a regress rather than progress.

However, even though the concept of nihilism is 'signed' by Spinoza and Nietzsche, the concept has mutated extensively while it moved through new times and spaces, entered new articulations with other conceptual personae and found new ways to persist in life. Hence in all poststructuralist philosophy, for instance, it is easy to notice a preoccupation with the problem of nihilism. I find, in this context, Deleuze's work particularly interesting because of its explicit affirmation of anti-nihilism and its emphasis on the virtual. So, this book is a social theoretical account of nihilism that 'thinks with' Spinoza, Nietzsche and Deleuze. But it wants something of its own as well. Thus, while I 'dramatize' the concept of nihilism, I do this in a sociological context, which, in turn, calls for the accentuation of some rather concealed aspects of nihilism. The most important among them is the disjunctive syntheses between different forms of nihilism. Indeed, as I argue in detail, contemporary society, both globally and locally, is obsessively preoccupied with conflicts between different nihilisms, especially between passive and radical nihilism. Yet, for all their violence, viewed under the perspective of anti-nihilism such conflicts necessarily are 'false antagonisms'. In spite of the tension produced by what is believed to be a radical difference among them, conflicting parties have more in common than their mutually segregative attitude would suggest. What are, then, the real antagonisms? This question, and the displacements intimated by it, are central to the book.

Chapter 1 takes the first step to answer this question through the genealogy of nihilism. It focuses on the origin of nihilism in *ressentiment*, cruelty and asceticism, discussing as examples Dostoevsky's, Lermontov's and Turgenev's nihilist anti-heroes. In its theoretical framing, the chapter draws on the Nietzschean-Deleuzean tradition. It initially differentiates between three forms of nihilism – religious, radical and passive – and then

turns to their interfaces and the different economies of desire and power that pertain to them. In this respect, the paradoxical outcome of asceticism, that is, the link between the invention of God and the death of God is emphasized. Then the uneasy relationship between radical and passive nihilism is introduced, arguing that even the most significant dystopias of our culture, such as Huxley's *Brave New World*, are indeed constructed alongside this disjunctive synthesis. However, the chapter maintains that the conflict between radical and passive nihilism is a false conflict because radical and passive nihilism are more complementary than antagonistic. To discuss the real antagonism, that between nihilism and anti-nihilism, the chapter turns to the fourth, paradoxical nihilism, 'perfect nihilism', which can only emerge as the deconstruction of existing values and the creation of new ones, but without falling back upon the previous three nihilisms.

Excursus 1 is designed as a case that exemplifies and supplements the main arguments of Chapter 1 in a contemporary context. It deals with cinema, focusing on a Turkish film, *Climates*, which dramatizes the fears and frustrations of a couple in the grip of nihilism. He is a cynic who lives in a world without value. She, on the other hand, has values and goals but they are not realizable: values without a world. Consequently, the couple is united in disunion, in a non-dialectical synthesis which oscillates between sensualist pleasures and suicidal passions. As such *Climates* offers another powerful dramatization of the disjunctive synthesis between radical and passive nihilism. But interestingly, it remains a nihilistic depiction of a nihilistic world, without any intimation of a non-nihilistic *climate*. In this respect, *Excursus 1* turns to a discussion of nihilism in the context of cinema. Significantly in this context, *Climates* is permeated with what Deleuze called 'time-images', cinematic images, which do not have a clear meaning within the context of the narrative, but which, for the same reason, enables an opening to the whole universe, to the virtual. However, the creation of time-image is not an end in itself; cinema must also enable movements from perception to thought and from thought to affect, without which it would be useless. And there is a third movement in which concept and image become identical, which Deleuze calls 'action-thought', and which has a central significance regarding the question of nihilism in the context of art.

Chapter 2 attempts at 'sociologizing' the concept of nihilism further by exploring the link between the four forms of nihilism and different historical social formations. Following Deleuze and Guattari's thesis that there

are three affects (cruelty, terror, and cynicism) corresponding to the three historical formations (primitive, despotic, and capitalist societies), the chapter discusses the links between each of these affects and nihilism. Then a fourth, paradoxical, social formation and a fourth affect are introduced through the conception of a radically nihilist 'society of spite', which cannot exist in actuality but, so it seems, has always been a decisive element in social production and anti-production. After all, every social formation, or every power relation, relates in one way or another to its own annihilation, its own ground zero. Traditionally, the 'social' is conceptualized in terms of solid 'regions' or structures (pure order), 'networks' (hybrid ordering) and 'flows' (hybrid, nomadic disorder). With 'society of spite', it is possible to imagine a fourth social topology (fire), in which everything (power, meaning, subjectivity) is taken to the extreme and disappears (in fatal strategies, simulacra, suicide, terrorism, and the politics of security). Against this background, the chapter turns to contemporary society and takes issue with the passive nihilism that pertains to today's capitalism and post-politics. Following this, the chapter claims that the disjunctive synthesis between passive and radical nihilism repeats itself today at an international scale as an 'antagonism' between capitalism/post-politics and terrorism. In this respect, the chapter takes a 'politicizing' stance against the moralization of politics since 9/11 through a discussion of terrorism, old and new, relating this discussion to the politics of security. The main argument here is that there is a mimetic relationship between terror and the war against terror, that the link between them is that of a disjunctive synthesis between radical and passive nihilisms. And, in the face of this twinning between enemies despite the absence of immediate resemblance, this self-contradictory, non-resolving duality, the real threat is Janus-faced: terrorism and the politics of security, which is, reducing all politics to a matter of security, fast becoming a new religion in the emerging control society.

To flesh out these arguments, in *Excursus 2* nihilism and contemporary society are approached through Michel Houellebecq's fiction, in which the most visible leitmotivs are *ressentiment* and spite, an explosive mixture that systematically evolves into a will to self-destruction and destruction of sociality. Indeed, having already sold more than Balzac, Houellebecq's books offer an interesting opportunity for diagnostic social theory. His is a passive nihilist world of total commodification, a meaningless and disappointing world in which life and art, body and image, are interchangeable categories. In *Platform*, for instance, sex tourism becomes a

market solution for passive nihilism, for the creation of a world of pleasure without desire. In this moderate 'universe of simple desires', obscenity results in the anti-production of desire. Likewise, all his novels include sustained acts of spite, of radical nihilism, against sociality and every form of bonding. Except, that is, capitalist exchange, which culminates in the gradual elevation of capitalism to the level of religion, or as Benjamin (1996) would put it, 'capitalism as religion'. And not surprisingly, in such an 'integral' world, what remains 'outside', even at an imaginary level, becomes the target of hatred; hence Houellebecq's islamophobia, his conception of 'stupid fucking Islam' as the other. If fiction often takes the form of revenge on the real world, Houellebecq's is an extreme case in which all values, people and places are mercilessly attacked. Hence *Platform* ends with a terrorist attack on a tourist camp in Thailand. In *The Possibility of an Island* we witness 'without regret the disappearance of the species' in a post-apocalyptic, pro-fascist world. Similarly, *Lanzarote*'s is literally a post-volcanic, 'burned-out' social topology.

Chapter 3 confronts the consequences of the previous discussions and asks whether it is possible to imagine a non-nihilistic society. To do this, it turns to Spinoza and Nietzsche, more specifically to their understanding of 'city', the political culture of which is based on agonism. What makes the often aestheticized Greek polis interesting in this context is its readiness to accept conflict as part of life, that is, as an ontological given and its affirmation of agonism as a common good. What is critical in such a city is the capacity to transform negativity into affirmation, to sublimate passive emotions into agonism and contest. Significantly in this context, the desire for self-preservation, Spinoza's conatus, must be distinguished from egoism. Since conatus cannot turn to self-destruction, a destructive relation between bodies can only emerge from an external source, from the society. There is, indeed, at this point, a parallel between the writers of the crowd such as Le Bon, Canetti and Spinoza: the crowd makes the individual transgress his conatus. In Spinoza, however, the crowd, or the multitude, is an ambivalent phenomenon. The multitude is basically a creative and positive force. Yet, what is crucial here is that in the face of such ambivalence, sheer tolerance for the other is not enough to establish a political ground. What nihilism lacks is not only respect for the other but also the ability for enmity, the capacity to live with antagonism. In this context, the chapter discusses Connolly's 'agonistic respect', a concept that seeks to combine tolerance with the possibility of conflict, juxtaposing it to Negri's political philosophy that affirms the politics of event in a more

straightforward manner. While Connolly has a tendency for 'transmuting' antagonisms into the language of 'agonistic respect', Negri condenses all agonisms into one fundamental antagonism: that of between transcendence and immanence, or, between nihilist negation and anti-nihilist affirmation. To be able to deal with this polarization productively, the chapter elaborates on the concept of 'event' in terms of the processes of virtualization and actualization, emphasizing the mediation between the actual and the virtual. To end with, the chapter returns to the relationship between democracy and the city and considers democracy as an event, as 'democracy to come'.

Afterword concludes the book with a discussion of radical social change and the risk of pseudo-transvaluation in this context. For overcoming nihilism is a complicated matter; anti-nihilist attempts always run the risk of establishing new idols, new illusions. Yet, this does not mean that a world totally devoid of illusions is the best possible world. As Nietzsche insisted, illusions are necessary to live. Only, illusions must not, as nihilism does, be treated as truths. In this sense, values are necessary illusions or fictions to live, to interpret life. Illusion is a challenge to the actual reality. After all, a world without illusion would be a hyper-real world devoid of a virtual dimension. Next, this parallel between illusion, value and the virtual is emphasized regarding the relationship between knowledge and truth, arguing that a critique of nihilism opposes the denigration of knowledge as much as the reduction of truth to knowledge. And finally, I argue that the four nihilisms discussed in the book lead to four different attitudes toward illusions.

1

THE UNCANNY GUEST

> In every age the wisest have passed the identical judgment on life: *it is worthless*. Even Socrates said as he died: 'To live – that means to be a long time sick'.
>
> (Nietzsche 1969: 29)

Socrates judged life as an illness from which one can recover only by dying. What is significant in this claim, however, is not its truth value. Discussing whether life is an illness or not presupposes that one can judge life from an external point of view while one is alive. 'One would have to be situated *outside* life . . . to be permitted to touch on the problem of the *value* of life at all: sufficient reason for understanding that this problem is for us an inaccessible problem' (Nietzsche 1969: 45). Therefore, Socrates' judgment reveals another, more significant problem, the problem of negating life, or of nihilism. Socrates is the first exponent of a long tradition of thought that stands in a negative relation to life. He turned reason, will to truth, into a weapon, a new *agon*, with which he criticized the dominant decadent values of his time. However, by elevating reason to the level of a supreme value, he also undermined the very agonistic instincts of his contemporaries in Greece (ibid. 32). In postulating rationality as the supreme principle of the world, he destabilized the ground on which values are created, that is, life.

Thus, with Socrates, reason became an instrument of judging life from an external point of view. Later, especially with Plato, this reason posited a true, transcendent world, in relation to which the existing world is not more than a distorted, perverted copy. A world, in which humanity is ensnared by simulacra, unaware of the possibilities of flight to a higher realm, that of the Ideas. Dialectic reason is a desire for eternal values, an ideal of elevating oneself above particular perspectives, an ambition of unmasking the rational coherence of the world. This will to truth is, according to Nietzsche, essentially an escapist will, a desire to flee a world that does not obey the dictates of reason and thus hides a powerlessness: an inability to create new values that are in accordance with *this* world. As such, Socrates and Plato mark the beginning of an end, of the birth of nihilism as negation of life, a process popularized and turned into a mass movement by monotheistic religions.

THE FIRST MAN

> Human history would be a much too stupid affair were it not for the intelligence introduced by the powerless.
>
> (Nietzsche 1996: 19)

In its origin, then, nihilism is a failure to accept the world as it is, resenting the fact that the world is devoid of a goal, unity or meaning. Further, an escapist attempt to be able to endure the meaninglessness, the chaos of the world, by trying to endow it with meaning, by imposing an illusionary totality upon it. 'Some sort of unity, some form of "monism:" this faith suffices to give man a deep feeling of standing in the context of, and being dependent on, some whole that is infinitely superior to him and he sees himself as a mode of the deity' (Nietzsche 1967: 12). As such, the origin of nihilism is the invention of a transcendent God, a supra-sensory realm beyond earthly life, a realm that contains a goal for the earthly life as well as determining it 'from above' and 'from without' (see Heidegger 1977: 64).

Characteristically, this form of nihilism – 'negative' or 'religious' nihilism – posits some values superior to life and negates life in the name of those 'higher values', values that are a condition of all other values: 'If moral value is the highest value, then the value of anything else, for example art, lies in the contribution it makes to moral ends' (Reginster 2006: 35; see also Nietzsche 1967: 382). However, since the existing

world cannot accommodate these higher values, nihilistic religions need a transcendent authority, the divine intervention of a God, to be able to realize the higher values. In this, life here and now is devalued or negated and reduced to an ephemeral stage, a bridge to a more real existence. Thus the religious nihilist treats life 'as a mistake . . . which one *should* rectify' (Nietzsche 1996: 96). Two concepts, *ressentiment* and ascetism, are crucial to understand such an evaluation of life.

Ressentiment emerges as a kind of passivity or impotence. In Nietzsche, the most essential socio-psychological differentiation is that between active and reactive (or passive) forces, and following this, the superiority of the active forces to the reactive ones, of the 'noble' to the 'base', of the 'strong' to the 'weak'. Every person contains in himself a relation between active and reactive forces. Whereas in the 'active type' reactive forces are 'being acted' by active ones, that is, active forces prevail, in the 'passive type', or, in the man of *ressentiment*, reactive forces escape the action of the active forces, that is, reactive forces prevail. Consequently, as a principle, the man of *ressentiment* is one who does not act (Deleuze 1983: 111). Crucially, however, this distinction should not be understood in quantitative but qualitative terms: the 'weak' is not necessarily the least strong but, as Deleuze puts it with an allusion to Spinoza, that which is 'separated from what it can do', or, that which cannot exert its will to power. In other words, the weak is not defined by not being triumphant. The weak can, in fact, triumph, which is of crucial significance for any discussion of nihilism. How does this process occur?

In Nietzsche, consciousness is reactive in the sense that it reacts to excitements without recording them; thanks to forgetting, for instance, we can react to new stimuli. In *ressentiment*, this process is blocked because the memory replaces new excitements; reaction takes the place of action (ibid. 112). In other words, the man of *ressentiment* does not, cannot, forget. If not taking one's enemies, misfortunes or accidents too seriously is a sign of a surplus of power, remembering is a sign of weakness. What defines the man of *ressentiment* is this weakness, 'his *technique for remembering things*' (Nietzsche 1996: 42). His consciousness is overrun by memory, and he reacts only to his memory, and what is remembered is of course 'only that which hurts' (Deleuze 1983: 114). However, he cannot act but instead feels; reaction becomes something felt. And because of this incapacity for action, coupled with the incapacity to forget, he is 'never through with anything' (ibid. 113). A classical depiction of such a dyspeptic personality is found in Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*.

Here is, for instance, how the Underground Man, who 'will forget nothing' (Dostoevsky 1992: 7), describes his relation to another man whom he hates:

> I was standing by the billiard-table and in my ignorance blocking up the way, and he wanted to pass; he took me by the shoulders and without a word – without a warning or explanation – moving me from where I was standing to another spot and passed by as though he had not noticed me. I could have forgiven blows, but I could not forgive his having moved me without noticing me.
>
> Devil knows what I would have given for a real regular quarrel – a more decent, a more literary one, so to speak. I had been treated like a fly. This officer was over six foot, while I was a spindly little fellow. But the quarrel was in my hands. I had only to protest and I certainly would have been thrown out of the window. But I changed my mind and preferred to beat a resentful retreat. [. . .] I have never been a coward at heart, though I have always been a coward in action.
>
> (Dostoevsky 1992: 34)

The Underground Man's paradoxical weakness lies in his knowing that he is spiteful while he cannot act out of spite. His revenge is postponed. *Ressentiment* can only arise if powerful emotions such as anger, hate, spite, envy, etc. cannot find an outlet because of physical or mental weakness or fear and therefore must be suppressed (Scheler 1998: 31). And when one is denied true action, imagining revenge becomes the only compensation. Revenge, that is, does not depend on a specific object but can remain imaginary or symbolic. Thus, the man of *ressentiment* constantly dreams of a future retaliation, that he 'will "have it better" one day' (Nietzsche 1996: 32). Waiting, and waiting, the man of *ressentiment* becomes full of hatred and in this process his weakness finds its expression in the replacement of aggression with imputation of wrongs, delegation of responsibilities to others and perpetual accusation (Deleuze 1983: 118). Such accusation of others is indispensable to *ressentiment*. This often amounts to an inability to admire others, incapacity to love, 'a secret, spiteful, vulgar and perhaps unacknowledged instinct to belittle man' (Nietzsche 1996: 11). Thus, according to the Underground Man, 'men of action are active just because they are stupid and limited' (Dostoevsky 1992: 11). What the man of *ressentiment* cannot reach up to is bad per definition.

Thus *ressentiment* needs a hostile, opposing world; the enemy of *ressentiment* can only be an 'evil enemy', because the man of *ressentiment* 'profits' from others' actions (see Nietzsche 1996: 24–5; Deleuze 1983: 119). For this reason, one cannot assume, as Scheler (1998: 33) does, that in a more egalitarian social structure, in which the 'discrepancy' between equality de jure and equality de facto, between individuals' or groups' formal status and factual power, is lessened, there would automatically be less *ressentiment*. The paradox here is that in such an ideal environment the man of *ressentiment* would be deprived of his 'evil enemy', the hostile world, which he can accuse for his impotence and failures. In a system strictly characterized by merit, for instance, it would be impossible for the Underground Man to perceive his failure as contingent, or undeserved (see Žižek 2008a: 76).

Only in so far as he can depict an external factor, others as evil, the man of *ressentiment* can be good; thus his fundamental formula: 'You are evil, therefore I am good', a formula based on an inversion of the master's discourse: 'I am good, therefore you are evil'. The strong one, on the other hand, does not need a hostile world and thus does not need to depict the other as evil a priori (Deleuze 1983: 119). Significantly, however, precisely because of this inversion, *ressentiment* cannot be reduced to a desire for revenge; what is crucial is the means of revenge: that reactive forces escape the action of active forces gives revenge a means: 'a means of reversing the normal relation of active and reactive forces which is why *ressentiment* itself is always a revolt. *Ressentiment* is the triumph of the weak *as* the weak, the revolt of the slaves and their victory *as* slaves' (ibid. 116–17).

There are several illusions at work in this process. First, the man of *ressentiment* builds upon a fiction, the fiction of a force that can be separated from what it can do. The illusion at work here is that a force can refrain from causing effects, from exerting itself (e.g. a bird of prey that does not prey on lambs). Following this, second, the man of *ressentiment* projects the force (that is separated from its effect) into a subject that is presumably free, not to manifest its force, the consequence of which is to sterilize force, that is, to make it appear as the act of a subject. The emotions of revenge and hatred exploit this illusion of the subject and 'maintain no belief with greater intensity than that *the strong may freely choose to be weak* and the bird of prey to be lamb – and so they win the right to blame the bird of prey for simply being a bird of prey' (Nietzsche 1996: 30). In other words, reactive forces prevail not by forming a greater force than the active forces but by separating them from what they can do. And finally,

in a moment of moralizing, the man of *ressentiment* reverses the values and derives a morality in which the weak is depicted as superior: the lamb is good because it is eaten. Because the forces are projected onto subjects, the subjects take the blame. Thus the weak can also seem as if he has a force which he does not use, because he is 'good' (see Deleuze 1983: 122–4). Thanks to this self-deception of powerlessness, the weakness of the weak can appear as 'a free achievement, something willed, chosen, a *deed*, a *merit*' (Nietzsche 1996: 30). And herein lies the creativity of *ressentiment*, a creativity that consists in translating impotence into 'goodness', fear into 'humility', submission into 'obedience' (ibid. 14).

In short, then, reactive forces can seem superior through falsification (force separated from what it can), depreciation (accusation) and negation (reversal of values) (Deleuze 1983: 125). But if the man of *ressentiment* is passive, how can action result from *ressentiment?* In other words, how can the man of *ressentiment* attain a will? In this context the figure of the priest, one of the main protagonists in the history of nihilism, is crucial. According to Nietzsche, the 'noble' class is not monolithic. That is, it contains competing subgroups, the most important of which are the 'warriors' and the 'priests'. The 'priests' are those defeated by the powerful 'warriors' and thus develop a sense of impotence (see Nietzsche 1996: 16–22). However, this impotence is repressed and is turned into *ressentiment*. Concomitantly, their hatred, lust for power and feelings of revenge become 'more dangerous' (ibid. 18). The recognition of his weakness to realize his values does not result in the priest's reconciliation with his situation but, on the contrary, feeds his will to power (see Reginster 2006: 253–4). And in the crowd of the men of *ressentiment* he finds what he needs: the reactive forces.

> He insures the triumph of reactive forces, he needs this triumph, but he pursues an aim that is not identical to theirs. His will is will to power, his will to power is nihilism. We rediscover the fundamental proposition that nihilism, the power of denial, needs reactive forces, but also its opposite: it is nihilism, the power of denial, that leads reactive forces to triumph.
>
> (Deleuze 1983: 126)

Since the man of *ressentiment* is not able to act, he finds in the priest, in his will to power, a means by which he can raise himself from the impotent state of *ressentiment*. The priest, in turn, finds in the *ressentiment* of the

masses the means by which he can negate the existing, sensual world in the name of a true, other world. In this sense, the priest is the figure who gives the raw material of *ressentiment* a form and sediments the desire for revenge further by reversing values (ibid.). He preaches that 'the miserable alone are the good; the poor, the powerless, the low alone are the good. The suffering, the deprived, the sick, the ugly are the only pious ones, the only blessed, for them alone is there salvation' (Nietzsche 1996: 19). Hence the other, heavenly world as a utopia, a happier world, in which the powerful cannot exert their force on the weak, a world in which suffering ceases to exist, a world tailored to the abilities of the weak. Above all, a world which promises immortality. And hence the birth of Adam, or the 'first man', with his immortal soul.

This is, needless to say, a painful process. Ascetism is basically the process in which pain is produced and, at the same time, interiorized as feelings of guilt, fear and punishment (Nietzsche 1996: 116–9; Deleuze 1983: 129). Thus, with ascetism, suffering is lived as a state of (self) punishment. Indeed, before the intervention of the priest, in primitive societies, for instance, pain had merely an external meaning; it meant giving pleasure to someone who inflicts pain and enjoys others' pain as a spectacle. As such, there is a fundamental link between cruelty and enjoyment. To clarify this link, the notion of punishment can be useful. In Nietzsche, punishment is basically a compensation, similar to the repayment of a debt. In this respect, punishing the offender, that is, inflicting pain on him, functions as a compensation for the damage done to the offended, the assumption being that damage has an equivalent, that it can be paid off, through this suffering. In this sense the relationship between damage and pain mirrors the contractual link between the creditor and the debtor (Nietzsche 1996: 45). Yet the compensation is not, cannot be, a direct one. Instead, 'a sort of *pleasure* is conceded to the creditor as a form of repayment and recompense – the pleasure of being able to vent his power without a second thought on someone who is powerless, the pleasure of violation' (ibid. 46). This 'pleasure of violation' makes cruelty a gratifying, carnivalesque activity, which is why it has been an indispensable part of festivals. 'No festivity without cruelty: such is the lesson of the earliest, longest period in the history of mankind – and even in punishment there is so much that is festive!' (ibid. 48).

If cruelty consists of inflicting pain on the other, ascetism is the voluntary infliction of pain on oneself. It is 'cruelty turned inwards against itself' (Nietzsche 1996: 118). What the priest achieved is, in other words,

to give an internal meaning to cruelty, a process through which pain ceases to be evaluated from an active standpoint but becomes a matter of passion, of a 'desire to anaesthetize pain through feeling' (ibid. 105). As such, as an inward suffering, pain is a reaction: the priest's intervention consists in changing the direction of *ressentiment* in the sense that the man of *ressentiment* no longer says 'it is your fault' but 'it is my fault' (Deleuze 1983: 132). Importantly in this respect, by channeling *ressentiment* into bad conscience (ascetism), the priest can keep the mass away from becoming a destructive mob, or, defend the men of *ressentiment*:

> against the baseness, spite, malice. . . . He engages his cunning in a tough and secret struggle against the anarchy of the herd, the continual threat of disintegration, the herd in which that most dangerous explosive substance, *ressentiment*, is piled ever higher. To discharge this explosive in such a way as to avoid blowing up either the herd or the shepherd is his greatest master-stroke, and also his greatest usefulness.
>
> (Nietzsche 1996: 105)

Then, whereas cruelty requires an external 'enemy', the ascetic finds it inside, the 'enemy within'. Hence the role of sin in nihilistic religions: 'you are alone to blame for yourself' (Deleuze 1983: 131). Ascetism makes it possible to experience suffering as self-punishment. Crucially, however contrary to the common belief, this suffering does not bring with it the renunciation of enjoyment as such; rather, it involves a specific mode of articulation of enjoyment, a 'surplus enjoyment' (see Zupančič 2003: 47). In other words, enjoyment and the renunciation of it are not opposing but complementary flows; the ascetic ideal can posit enjoyment of pain as an intense experience and turn it into a law (ibid. 51). Paradoxically, therefore, in his struggle for mastery over life, the ascetic 'derives enjoyment from this suffering' (Nietzsche 1996: 97).

> I got to the point of feeling a sort of secret, abnormal, despicable enjoyment in returning home to my corner on some disgusting Petersburg night, acutely conscious that that day I had committed a loathsome action again, that what was done could never be undone, and secretly, inwardly gnawing, gnawing at myself for it, tearing and consuming myself till at last the bitterness turned into a shameful

> accursed sweetness, and at last – into positive real enjoyment! Yes, into enjoyment, into enjoyment! I insist upon that.
>
> (Dostoevsky 1992: 4)

The self-violation, voluntary dividing of the soul against itself, is as pleasurable as it is horrible. It results in an increase in the feeling of power, this time in the form of self-mastery, self-denial and self-sacrifice instead of power over the other (Nietzsche 1996: 67–8). In other words, there is a fundamental search for the feeling of power in ascetism, too. Just as cruelty extracts pleasure from the suffering of the other, asceticism obtains pleasure from harming oneself. And because the ascetic derives pleasure from denouncing pleasure, his desire is paradoxically invested in *this* world (Nietzsche 1996: 99). Here we encounter the immoral core of religious nihilism. If life is will to power, there can be no inherently moral phenomenon but only a moral evaluation of certain phenomena as moral from a certain perspective; morality is necessarily a perspective that coincides with the moralist's conditions of life and his judgments as to these conditions (see Nietzsche 1967: 148–9). In other words, the essence of religious or negative nihilism lies in its being a perspective. The ascetic ideal is basically a will to power. What drives the ascetic is an active force, even though this force is made latent through force (see Nietzsche 1996: 67, 119). Let us, at this point, ask what happens when 'God is dead'.

THE LAST MAN

> Where is God gone? [. . .] I mean to tell you! *We have killed him*, – you and I! We are all his murderers!
>
> (Nietzsche 1960: 167)

The meaning of the death of God in Nietzsche is that the supra-sensual world the nihilist regards as the 'true' world loses its effective power, beliefs become unbelievable, and, together with the idea of God, the supra-sensory meaning and ground of reality are lost. Which is why Nietzsche also defines nihilism as the condition in which the 'highest values', defined by religious nihilism, devaluate themselves (Nietzsche 1967: 9). It is crucial, however, that God did not die a natural death – 'we' have killed him. The answer to the question of who this 'we' is takes us to another nihilism: passive nihilism, which emerges when the man of

ressentiment turns against God – kills him – and takes his place. He no longer believes in values that belong to a supra-sensual world, that are superior to life. But *this* life, significantly, remains a reactive life devoid of will. It is essential in this context to bear in mind that the originary nihilism, despite its aversion to life and revolt against its preconditions, is still a will (see ibid. 136). Whereas the ascetic suffers because of his will, the passive nihilist avoids suffering through the 'narcotization' of the will. His is a reactionary life, in which happiness is separated from action and reduced to passivity, to something that 'appears essentially as narcotic, anesthetic, calm, peace' (Nietzsche 1996: 23–4). The consequence is the 'last man': 'the one who prefers a nothingness of will, who prefers to fade away passively, rather than a will to nothingness' (Deleuze 1983: 174). The last man denies religion, the higher values, and preserves *this* world as a 'world without values':

> Previously life was depreciated from the height of higher values, it was denied in the name of these values. Here, on the contrary, only life remains, but it is still a depreciated life which now continues in a world without values, stripped of meaning and purpose, sliding over further towards its nothingness. Previously essence was opposed to appearance, life was turned into an appearance. Now essence is denied but appearance is retained: everything is merely appearance.
>
> (ibid. 148)

Passive nihilism is the result of a 'slave revolt', a process in which the resentful herd grows intolerant and wants to rule alone. A consequence of the breakdown of the alliance between the priest and the man of *ressentiment*. The triumph of the man of *ressentiment* over God by using God's own weapons (*ressentiment* and ascetism), a final way of avoiding suffering (ibid. 147–9). Significantly, Nietzsche (1967: 9) mentions passive nihilism as a 'normal condition', implying that, with passive nihilism, the experience of the loss of truth, value and meaning no longer generates a crisis but is now accepted as a matter of fact. In a sense, passive nihilism is becoming the rule of exception or the 'banalisation of nihilism' (Carr 1992). One no longer tries to find a telos in the world and concludes that such an attempt is the cause rather than merely a consequence of the disappointment, of meaninglessness. Hence the culture of banal nihilism takes the form of a disbelief in any metaphysical world. In this, the virtual, the metaphysical, collapses into the actual. The given reality

becomes the only reality; devoid of aim, unity and truth, and the world 'looks *valueless*' (Nietzsche 1967: 12–3). Thus, the protagonist of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, Pechorin, speaks in the following way:

> In the first flush of youth I was a dreamer; I liked to indulge by turns the images – now gloomy, now cheerful – that my restless and greedy imagination drew me. But with what did it leave me? Only with tiredness, like after a nocturnal struggle with a ghost, and a dim recollection filled with regrets. In that vain struggle I exhausted both my spiritual fire and the constancy of will essential for real life; I entered into that life having already lived it through mentally, and I began to feel bored and soiled, like a man reading a bad imitation of a book long familiar to him.
>
> (Lermontov 2005: 142–3)

Pechorin is 'incapable of noble impulses' (ibid. 114). His life, devoid of any expectation from the future, is a life at ground zero, a life reduced to bare life. In this 'nonsensical' world without values, symbolic exchange becomes impossible: 'great sacrifices', even for one's own happiness, are no longer possible. This is a world, in which scepticism, going 'indifferently from doubt to doubt' is the only option (ibid. 142). Pechorin's passive nihilism designates a constellation in which nothing is held absolute and everything is subjected to critique. His rule is 'to reject nothing definitively' and to put faith in nothing. Consequently, even though *A Hero of Our Time* is full of action (duels, romances, spiteful intrigues and so on), nothing really happens in the book. In the midst of actions devoid of meaning, Pechorin's life only leads to pragmatic negotiations and strategic compromises, to 'business as usual', in which significant events are foreclosed. Casting 'metaphysics aside' (ibid. 143), he comes to discard all will and all hope for another, better world and his world loses its virtual dimension.

It is the original, negative nihilism itself that allows for the formation of passive nihilism; the normalization of nihilism is a paradoxical process initiated by negative nihilism. Indeed, if the passive nihilist murdered God and took his place as a new authority (scientific reason, utilitarianism, the logic of businesses and so on), this could only happen on the basis of the aspirations of the original negative nihilism. What, in other words, defeated the God of the Christian ascetic was ultimately his own higher values, his own morality, especially its emphasis on truth. It is, for

instance, this will to truth that was later overtaken by scientific ideals (see Nietzsche 1996: 134–5).

> Science today has simply *no* belief in itself, let alone an ideal *above* it – and where it survives at all as passion, love, glowing intensity, *suffering*, it constitutes not the opposite of the ascetic ideal but rather *its most recent and most refined form*.
>
> (ibid. 124)

Even when one dispenses completely with the ascetic ideal, as is the case with atheism for instance, its most decisive 'remnant', its will to truth, may survive (ibid. 134). In a sense, therefore, the secret of nihilism lies in its form. A telling example might be the contemporary atheist critique of religion launched in several best-selling books such as *The God Delusion* (Dawkins 2006) and *God is Not Great* (Hitchens 2007). The common denominator of these books is the juxtaposition of science and religion, supplanted with the argument that the latter is a source of violence and, with time, will be made redundant by the progress of science. Apart from its disbelief in metaphysics and its ambition to reduce all belief to scientific knowledge, there are two central problems in this Whig approach that are relevant in the context of nihilism. First, as Gray (2008) notes, demonizing religion might mirror religion itself. Thus, the 'evangelical atheism' repeats monotheistic religions in its universalism, in its belief that the arrow of history moves towards more progress, and thus more secularism and more liberty. Yet, as against this Darwinian scenario, the history of nihilism demonstrates that the human condition does not evolve according to an ethos of progress which brings with it more and more perfection; rather, nihilism is a history in which, for instance, the weak survive and dominate the strong, or negation of life through *ressentiment* and ascetism triumphs against the affirmation of life (see Nietzsche 1969: 75–6).

Secondly, an atheism that embraces modernity by an uncritical enthusiasm is blind to the intimate link between modernity, violence and science. 'Evangelical atheism' stresses the liberating effects of modernity on the subject but bypasses completely the modernity of rationalization, bureaucratization, universalism and ethnocentrism. That is, the 'other' side of modernity, which assumed the directional and irreversible character of its project and which 'hardly ever questioned the superiority of modernity in the sense of subordinating, marginalizing, evicting or

annihilating its alternatives' (Bauman 1987: 115–6). Indeed, is it not a nihilistic denial par excellence to sever the link between modernity and the Holocaust, which brought non-religious (bio-political) power, science and destruction together in an extreme form? The Holocaust was not a symptom of any kind of deficit of modernity; on the contrary, what happened was a consequence of modernity itself and its ambitions of ordering, which it sought to establish through science (Bauman 1989). What made the camps disturbing was their politicization of life and death through a scientific rationality. They were, in Arendt's (1973) words, 'experimental laboratories' in which the limits of de-humanization were tested. In February 1940, for instance, a secret meeting took place in Berlin, a meeting in which three doctors, Hevelemann, Bahnen and Brack, discussed the measures to authorize the 'elimination of life unworthy of being lived'. This was the birth of the euthanasia programme planned for the *Gnadentod*, the 'mercy killing' of, for instance, the mentally ill (Agamben 1998: 140).

Against this background, an atheism that juxtaposes modern secularism and religion is not an antithesis of religious nihilism but might remain its continuation, a consequence of the will to truth 'which finally forbids itself the lie of belief in God' (Nietzsche 1996: 134). It is in this context that Turgenev's (1996: 23) definition of nihilism in *Fathers and Sons* is illuminating: the nihilist is a person 'who treats things solely from the critical point of view . . . who declines to bow to authority, or to accept any principle on trust, however sanctified it may be'. The passive nihilist, indeed, is a sceptic. As Carr points out, there is a striking similarity between this definition of nihilism and what Kant defined as Enlightenment:

> Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapare aude! 'Have courage to use your own reason!' – that is the motto of enlightenment.
>
> (Kant quoted in Carr 1992: 148)

The ideal of pure reason is a continuation of the ascetic search for truth. One could perhaps say that, even though the ascetic ideal has been unsuccessful in finding the transcendent truth, it has, by giving form to an

unconditional will to truth, 'eventually led its advocates to discredit the ideas of God and another, metaphysical world' (Reginster 2006: 261). Paradoxically, the logical consequence of the will to truth becomes the negation of the truth.

THE TWELFTH MAN

> I am a sick man . . . I am a spiteful man.
>
> (Dostoevsky 1992: 1)

In a well-known joke, a genie appears one day to twelve black men who are standing together. He says to them that he is a genie who grants wishes and that each of them can make a wish, but they should choose carefully because they have only one wish. The first man says he wants to be white. The genie makes him white. The second one says the same and the genie makes him white also. This continues until the twelfth man. 'Now, what will your wish be?' The twelfth man looks at the others and then the genie and says 'Make them all black again'.

The paradoxical logic of the twelfth man here builds upon spite, upon his willingness to harm himself to be able to harm the others. Turning sacrifice, renunciation of enjoyment, into enjoyment through the logic of surplus enjoyment, he seeks a kind of 'equality' in destruction. For him, 'justice' can only emerge as a demand for the curtailment of the other's enjoyment. And 'the necessary outcome of this demand, of course, is asceticism. Since it is not possible to impose equal jouissance, what is imposed instead to be equally shared is *prohibition*' (Žižek 2008a: 76). Herein lies the difference between theft and spite, between self-interested, 'egoistic' response to the problem of justice and disinterested malice, too. Spite is not egoistical. 'Man can, consciously, act against his own interests' (Dostoevsky 1992: 14). Crucially, however, the Underground Man is 'disinterested' only insofar as we refer to values held in common. For he renounces all values in the name of a higher, supreme value, which this world cannot accommodate and which forces him into the labyrinth of spite:

> it seems there must really exist something that is dearer to almost every man than his greatest advantages, or (to be illogical) there is a most advantageous advantage . . . for the sake of which a man if necessary is ready to act in opposition to all laws; that is, in opposition to reason,

> honour, peace, prosperity – in fact, in opposition to all those excellent and useful things if only he can attain that fundamental, most advantageous advantage. . . .
>
> (Dostoevsky 1992: 15)

In this sense, spite is not a passive feeling but an active will invested in *this* world (see Nietzsche 1996: 67, 119). Concomitantly, pain and suffering are necessary to the spiteful actor in order to construct his subjectivity. This paradoxical subject is Nietzsche's radical (or 'suicidal') nihilist, who emerges with the death of God – when the ascetic can no longer mediate between this and the other, transcendent or 'true' world, that is, realizes that his 'supreme values' are not realizable in this world. The raw material of such nihilism is, in a nutshell, despair: 'a nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be' (Nietzsche 1967: 318). If the supreme values cannot find a place in this world one can just as well destroy it. Thus, the radical nihilist denies political authority and wills the total collapse of the socio-symbolic order (see Colas 1997). When society is devalued as imperfect and inadequate, it can be sacrificed in the name of truth, by acting out spite as a 'passion for the real' that transcends the symbolic order (see Badiou 2007). As such, the actual (city, society) is no longer seen as a precondition for the virtual (or the transcendent) but is destroyed in its name.

> Nihilism does not only contemplate the 'in vain!' nor is it merely the belief that everything deserves to perish: one helps to destroy. [. . .] The reduction to nothing by judgment is seconded by the reduction to nothing by hand.
>
> (Nietzsche 1967: 18)

The paradoxical outcome of which is a *fanatic profanation*, an iconoclastic destruction, of the existing world (see Colas 1997: 5–6). Thus, fanaticism, an early excess of Protestantism in the form of Iconoclastic movement, is a useful example. Fanaticism is basically an attempt at devaluing and ultimately destroying the society, the 'city', in the name of the 'City of God'. Certain of his beliefs, the fanatic seeks to become the instrument of an absolute authority, of a transcendent master, be it God or a King or a Chief, to make the existing world/society fit into their ideals. For this aim, he is also ready to sacrifice, to erase himself as a subject; concomitantly, his ego is 'swallowed up in the truth' he loves, while those who reject his

truth are doomed to destruction (ibid.). In short, then, as Zupančič (2003: 66) remarks, with the death of God, or, with the repudiation of truth, the ascetic ideal confronts us with two options, not one:

> either we persist, up to the end, with the 'rather nothing than . . .' (whereby we link the imperative of the Real to some [self-] destructive *passage à l'acte*), or we take one step in the direction of purifying our ascetism by renouncing Nothingness itself (as the only and the last Real that is left), thereby renouncing the constitutive element of the will as such.
>
> (Zupančič 2003: 66)

Insofar as spite is a form of nihilism, 'radical nihilism', a situation of having values without a world, it has a shared genealogy with other forms of nihilism. Thus, Nietzsche's full definition of a nihilist reads like this: 'A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist' (Nietzsche 1967: 318). If supreme values are themselves devalued while, at the same time, *this* world is preserved, we encounter the situation described by the second part of the definition: passive nihilism, or, a 'world without values' (Deleuze 1983: 148). If, on the other hand, one, despite realizing that one's supreme values are not realizable, still desperately clings to them, we confront the situation of the radical nihilist: values without a world. Which is to say that insofar as nihilism in its origin is a 'philosophy of illusion', an inability to accept the world as it is, radical and passive nihilisms are what follows when the illusion fades away – when God dies.

In other words, there are two consequences of the death of God – disorientation (passive nihilism) and despair (radical nihilism). Disorientation, because if the highest values disappear, 'then nothing more remains to which man can cling and by which he can orient himself' (Heidegger 1977: 61). Passive nihilism results from the gradual devaluation of highest values, which ends in a world without values. Despair, on the other hand, emerges as an insight that the ideal world cannot be realized within this world (ibid. 66). According to passive nihilism (disorientation), what is wrong is our values, not the world itself; according to radical nihilism (despair), the problem is not rooted in our values but rather in the world as it is (see Reginster 2006: 34).

In this way, the relationship between radical nihilism and passive nihilism constitutes a disjunctive synthesis in which will is captured in an

oscillation between willing nothingness and not willing at all, between spite and passivity. In this sense one can speak of a twinning, a non-dialectical synthesis between the two forms of nihilism, which are both opposed to each other and bound together in a radical ambivalence. The death of God means the division of the originary (religious) nihilism into two (radical and passive) nihilisms, which, like non-identical twins, reveal a contradictory, non-resolving duality in disparity.

THE OVERMAN

> Look in the mirror: do you see Lenina Crowne looking back at you, or do you see John Savage?
>
> (Atwood 2007)

Indeed, what is most disturbing in Huxley's *Brave New World* is the non-dialectical togetherness of two existential strategies: Lenina Crowne's cheerful but idiotically hollow, 'happy' but lifeless hedonism and John Savage's wilful but blind, truth-seeking but deeply ascetic fanaticism. *Brave New World* is a world in which happiness is reduced to consumerism, politics to securitized conformism and the question of the soul to genetic modification; a completely actualized world – 'everybody is happy now' – in which the virtual, the 'open', is foreclosed. It's all in the genes! Pain is extinguished, meaning is eradicated and conflict is eliminated. Change is no longer desirable or possible. 'There is no alternative.' Yet for all that it is a suffocating, sterile world. And the only alternative set against this 'civilization' in the book is the fanatic, John. More human but also more out of place than the brave new sensualists, he is the only figure with a real body; yet his soul is more important to him than his body and consequently, he values the other, 'true' world more than *this* one. Hence the false choice: between a world without values (Lenina) vis-à-vis values without a world (John Savage).

But so far there is nothing original in Huxley's early 20th Century dystopia. The disjunctive synthesis at work here is very much a 19th Century construction – in almost every single Dostoevsky novel, for instance, one encounters the tension between the sensualist and the suicidal nihilist. Recall Dostoevsky's devil without evil, or the Underground Man's spiteful musings on the Crystal Palace, the 'idle dream' of consumerism, confronting its promise of 'ready-made', passive happiness with his explosive *ressentiment* (Dostoevsky 1998: 17, 23–5; see also

Wyman 2007: 125). However, to go beyond this we look to Nietzsche, whose diagnosis of nihilism also involves, as I discussed, both passive/hedonistic nihilism (of Lenina) and radical/suicidal nihilism (of John). But he does not stop here. And the question that takes us beyond it is how to break free from this nihilist deadlock. Or, how is anti-nihilism possible?

To reiterate, the opposition between nihilism and anti-nihilism is not one between two sets of values; what is really at stake is the principle according to which values are produced and thus what anti-nihilism necessitates is a re-evaluation, a transvaluation of existing values. In this perspective, the existential background of our values can only be life. Whether it is Spinoza's conatus or Nietzsche's will to power, life forces us to set values. Our values are the ways in which life interprets, or expresses, itself. In other words, what holds the world together is not a transcendent judgment, be it God or rationality, but immanent will. Since without life nothing would be possible, one must view values from the perspective of life, of immanence. If all life is interpretative, if to live is to interpret, the relevant question regarding values concerns not their validity but their life conditions (Hass 1982: 44). The choice is, therefore, not between value and non-value; rather, the crucial question is the value of values, their relation to life, whether they are affirming or negating in relation to life (ibid. 66). That is, insofar as nihilism means that the link between man and this world, or nature, is broken, the problem of thinking in the face of nihilism is to re-establish this link. 'Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible which can only be restored within a faith' (Deleuze 1989: 172). The missing link can only be re-established if new values, new beliefs that are not transcendent (negative nihilism), that cannot be reduced to knowledge (passive nihilism), or that do not lead to naked destruction of the actual (radical nihilism), can be created.

And herein lies the most significant polarity in the context of nihilism, 'the whole, the genuine antagonism', between metaphysics of a 'true world' and materialism of 'this world', between transcendence and immanence (see Nietzsche 1969: 206). Consequently, the crucial question is whether thinking and action are oriented toward transcendence or immanence. From a transcendent perspective, there is a hidden dimension outside life, the given world, which is the basis of all values. The plane of transcendence is essentially a theological plane, the domain of the priests. Immanence, on the other hand, is the domain of philosophy. 'Whenever there is transcendence, vertical Being, imperial State in the

sky or on earth, there is religion; and there is philosophy whenever there is immanence' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 43). In an immanent perspective, there will be nothing beyond, no 'supplementary dimension'. 'Immanence is immanent only to itself and consequently captures everything, absorbs All-One, and leaves nothing remaining to which it could be immanent' (ibid. 45). Thus the essential gesture of anti-nihilism is to propose returning to nature, the earth, as the source of values and belief.

> The Superman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: The Superman *shall be* the meaning of the earth. I entreat you, my brothers, *remain true to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of superterrestrial hopes! [. . .] To blaspheme the earth is now the most dreadful offence . . .
>
> (Nietzsche 1961: 42)

The idea of immanence enables a fourth kind of nihilism, the 'perfect nihilism' of the overman, a nihilism that seeks its own limits, turns against itself and destroys itself, to create immanent values. Which is why, as already mentioned, nihilism is a paradoxical, ambivalent concept, both disease and cure. Anti-nihilism is perfect nihilism. The 'return' here, however, should not be understood as a romanticized 'going-back' to an idealized nature (*à la* Rousseau) or falling back upon a Darwinian struggle. Rather, it designates for Nietzsche a 'going-up', a kind of self-overcoming, a practical activity that does not separate reason, affect and will from one another (ibid. 101–2):

> A spirit thus emancipated stands in the midst of the universe with a joyful and trustful fatalism, in the faith that only what is separate and individual may be rejected, that in the totality everything is redeemed and affirmed – *he no longer denies*. . . . But such a faith is the highest of all faiths: I have baptised it with the name *Dionysus*.
>
> (Nietzsche 1969b: 103)

Insofar as nihilism is a flight from the world as it is, anti-nihilism demands accepting the existing world as a fate, a 'fatalism', which synthesises Spinoza's amor fati (love of fate) with creative re-evaluation of all values. Freedom from nihilism, in other words, demands the knowledge of the determinism that pertains to nature, the affirmation of life as it is, saying 'yes' to life. In this sense affirmation is what completes nihilism.

And since denying passions is denying life, the anti-nihilist question regarding passions is: 'How can one spiritualize, beautify, deify a desire?' (Nietzsche 1969: 42). 'Dionysus' is the sublimation of passions, of will to power, in creativity, in opposition to their nihilistic denial. The Dionysian joy is related to affirming life as it is, as becoming: 'to realize in oneself the eternal joy of becoming – that joy which also encompasses joy in destruction' (ibid. 110).

This link between affirmation and destruction is crucial to understand the overman as an anti-nihilistic figure. What is significant in this respect is the relation between will to power on the one hand and negation and affirmation on the other. Insofar as nihilism is the negation of life, this negation, as mentioned before, is still based on a will, which, at its extreme, in radical nihilism, takes the form of a will to nothingness. Yet, the will to negate and ultimately the will to nothingness is only one side of the will to power. Its other side is affirmation. If negation eliminates what is affirmative in the will by creating life-denying values, affirmation is what pushes out the negative and creates new values:

> Nihilism expresses the quality of the negative as *ratio cognoscendi* of the will to power; but it cannot be brought to completion without transmuting itself into the opposite quality, into affirmation as *ratio essendi* of this same will. A Dionysian transmutation of pain into joy, which Dionysus announces in reply to Ariadne in a suitably mysterious way 'Must we not first of all hate ourselves if we have to love ourselves?'
>
> (Deleuze 1983: 173)

The active dissolution of the self and the disappearance of meaning, is the opportunity for another self, another meaning. Thus, the anti-nihilist is the one who wills overcoming oneself, one 'who wants to perish' (Nietzsche 1961: 44). 'To perish' is an act of affirmation, a response to the reactionary forces that overcomes them. Insofar as 'man' is a nihilist 'man is something that should be overcome' (ibid. 41). The overman is the one who can overcome his own nihilism. When negation gets rid of the reactive forces that characterize it, nihilism is completed, that is, it passes into the service of life (Deleuze 1983: 175). In this sense, anti-nihilism is an act of self-cancellation which is in accordance with a natural morality: 'the law of life, the law of necessary "self-overcoming" which is the essence of life' (Nietzsche 1996: 135). Insofar as life is change, the overman is 'the meaning of life' (Nietzsche 1961: 49). The 'overman' is, in other words,

becoming as opposed to being, 'a bridge' and not an end in itself (ibid. 44). And becoming is, in opposition to the world of transcendence, in which everything is already created, creation. It is to be able to create himself that the overman must lose his identity (as man), has to 'perish'. His virtue is his 'will to downfall' (ibid.).

Significantly, in this sense all creativity, all freedom, necessitates violence. Hence Nietzsche's spiritualization of war: 'The free man is a *warrior*. – How is freedom measured . . .? By the resistance which has to be overcome . . .' (Nietzsche 1969: 92). Freedom from nihilism is measured by the resistance of nihilism it has to overcome. Insofar as violence, the 'hammer', is needed to destroy nihilistic 'idols' and to build up new, anti-nihilistic values, the anti-nihilist is an 'annihilator' and anti-nihilism is an event, a 'catastrophe' (Nietzsche quoted in White 1990: 5). 'Every event is like death' (Deleuze 1990: 152). Crucially, then, with the active destruction of the perfect nihilist, death divides into two: there is, first, the death that comes from without, violent and inevitable.

> Simultaneously, however, death has quite another face hidden among the individuating factors which dissolve self: here it is like a 'death instinct', an internal power which frees the individuating elements from the form of the I or the matter of the self in which they are imprisoned. It would be wrong to confuse the two faces of death, as though the death instinct were reduced to a tendency towards increasing entropy or a return to inanimate matter. Every death is double, and represents the cancellation of large differences in extension as well as the liberation and swarming of little differences in intensity.
>
> (Deleuze 1994: 259)

If active destruction is necessary for anti-nihilism to convert the will to nothingness into affirmation, to create through de-subjectivation, this does not mean a total de-subjectivation, e.g. suicide, which would be 'an attempt to make the two incommensurable faces coincide or correspond' (ibid.). The two sides, however, never meet. Creative destruction is not the erasure of the self or the other. Therefore, we must avoid an abstract opposition between nihilism and anti-nihilism on the basis of (self) destruction. Destruction is necessary for the creation of immanent values. However, destruction can always result in over-violent de-stratification, in a radical nihilist annihilation, or it can be followed by the creation of new transcendent values. Following this, the problem confronting

anti-nihilism is to distinguish creative destruction from its doubles (the radical, negative and passive nihilist forms of destruction). The test of anti-nihilism: not only the denunciation of false values and their annihilation but also innovating re-creations through the construction of a plane of immanence.

EXCURSUS 1: *CLIMATES* OF NIHILISM

> There was an earthquake but I couldn't catch where – I wonder if it was here in Turkey.
>
> (İsa in *Climates*)

Is Turkey going to become a European Union member? Or is it going to remain in-between the West and the East, between secularism and fundamentalist Islam? Indeed, in its permanent suspension between the two horizons, being both attracted to and repelled by the West, life in today's Turkey is perhaps a good metaphor for the global *Unsicherheit* attached to liquid modernity in which there is nothing, no secure guide, that automatically leads the majority of people from one extreme to another, e.g. from collapsing into nihilism to a meaningful life (see Bauman 1999, 2000). *Climates*, a film by Nuri Bilge Ceylan (2006), dramatizes the suspended lives of the two members of the Turkish petty bourgeoisie, İsa and Bahar, focusing on their fears and frustrations in the grip of nihilism.

İsa is a university lecturer in art history with an interest in ancient architecture. He is in his late forties, but he is somewhat infantilized: hence his passivity and indecisiveness regarding all significant decisions in his life. Consequently, he is a person who cannot change his life. At

times his passivity borders on impotence; he is unable to finish his dissertation for Associate Professorship. But in general the root of his passivity is his weakness and taciturnity, which make him a self-absorbed, egocentric and unlikeable character. He is not attentive, almost blind towards others, including Bahar his partner. His most important characteristic, however, seems to be his remarkable lack of values, his 'casual attitude towards truth' (French 2007). Having 'little passion for anything' (Crust 2006), İsa lives in a world without values. Thus, even when Bahar asks him to tell the truth – 'just one thing' – at a crucial point in the film, he lies. He is cynical.

Bahar is an Art Director on TV. She is a symmetrical figure in relation to İsa: when he is indecisive, she is; when he is decisive, she is not. In contrast to İsa, she is a passionate, more sensitive, thus more vulnerable person. Most significantly, she knows what she wants and strives after what she values. Yet, she realizes that her values and goals are not realizable. That is, whereas İsa lives in a world without values, she has some values without a world. Consequently, in as much as İsa is disorientated, Bahar is in despair. Thus, the relationship between İsa and Bahar is an impossible one: they are united in disunion, in a non-dialectical, disjunctive synthesis, in which they oscillate between hedonistic passivity and suicidal passions, a paradoxical synthesis that pushes their relationship towards ruination. Hence the film opens in ancient Greek ruins in Kaş, South Turkey.

SUMMER

In this opening shot, İsa is taking pictures of ancient ruins, while Bahar watches him at a distance. During a long sequence, we see Bahar's face wearing a series of different expressions from affection to anxiety and it is possible to register disillusionment, *ressentiment*, anger, regret and despair in it (Wood 2006). At one point, İsa asks her if she is bored, though without showing a sign of sincerity. The answer to a redundant question becomes an unconvincing 'no'. Hereby, a significant aspect of suspension is introduced: boredom.

Boredom continues to make its presence felt when they visit two friends, Arif and his wife Semra. The four are sitting at a table beneath a white globe light – it is evening and crickets can be heard in the background. Semra goes off to make coffee. Arif and İsa are talking like old friends – Bahar is sullen and silent. When addressed she is indifferent and

responds sharply to İsa's suggestion that she should put her jacket on. İsa seems embarrassed in front of his friend. Arif mentions that İsa seems fed up – İsa gestures with his hand and eyes towards Bahar. Throughout the entire scene Bahar looks at neither one of them, except momentarily when she is responding to their questions. Bahar and İsa begin to bicker, Arif tries to ease the tension, but İsa gradually becomes angry with Bahar: 'Can't we go anywhere without you making problems?' She answers spitefully: 'Don't worry, they will enjoy our misery.' After which İsa and Arif begin a trivial conversation to appease the situation. Bahar does not join in, but begins laughing at something that has amused her, but is unbeknown to the others. Dogs can be heard barking in the distance.

Already at this point it becomes clear that the film is about relationships. It is signalled that the distance between İsa and Bahar is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to overcome, a relationship full of sighs, sobs and fierce fighting; separate in togetherness and together in separateness. Yet, what is more important than İsa's and Bahar's individual identities is the character of the paradoxical relation between them. In this sense, *Climates* is a film obsessed with relations in an axiomatic sense, that is, as relations exterior to their terms (see Deleuze 2006: 271). This emphasis on the axiomatic becomes much clearer in the following beach scene.

This scene opens with a close-up of Bahar sleeping, in the distance İsa appears, coming from the sea. İsa kisses her and tells her he loves her and begins, playfully, to cover her with sand. Then, we watch as he pushes sand over her smiling face. She wakes up – it was all a nightmare. In reality İsa is reading beside her. He asks her, 'What's up? You're covered in sweat'. She replies that she must have fallen asleep. He tells her that she shouldn't be sleeping in the sun, that it's dangerous, and then returns to his book. Again, the atmosphere between them is stifled and distant – when one looks at the other, the other is turned away. Bahar goes to sit closer to the shoreline. This shot is an interesting one: İsa with his book in the foreground, Bahar sitting in the middle distance, apparently watching the passing of a white-sailed boat across the horizon. This boat is the third point of the triangle – symbolic of the ideal. İsa, absorbed in his book, is indifferent to it; Bahar is the only one who looks towards it. It should be an idyllic, innocent scene, the sun is glistening on the sea, the sky is blue, etc. But this idyllic space turns out to be a space full of anxiety, a void. Now, in its emptiness, the beach appears as a liminal space of exception, of mutual exclusion. Thus, there is a deep sense of loneliness and dis-

engagement in it. And uncannily, like a Hopper painting, this loneliness does not only come from the picture itself, but also from the viewer's reaction. Thus, in the picture, the scene and the off-scene, inside and outside, come to coincide. The off-scene object, the viewer's own experience, the fear of loneliness, is directly incorporated in the scene.

When İsa pulls away from his book it is to rehearse telling Bahar that they should go different ways. Whilst he is rehearsing, we see Bahar beside him – even at this point he is not connecting directly to her. He is now saying, unconvincingly: '. . . but don't misunderstand me . . . we'd still be friends . . . we'd still go out together . . . This would be better for you as well', and so on. Bahar replies resolutely that she doesn't mind, that they 'don't have to be friends', adding that he does not need to worry about her.

As Tuttle (2006) remarks, what is most interesting in this shot is its static perspective – the camera does not move to show the scene from different angles, we don't see their faces, and most significantly, there is no attempt at depicting him, her and the boat alone. They are all parts of, and relate to one another in the same socio-symbolic space. In other words, what matters here is not the single identities but the axiomatic relation between them and it is in this symbolic space that İsa (world without values), Bahar (values without a world) and the boat (idealism) are interlinked and nurture/destroy one another in a disjunctive synthesis. As such, both İsa and Bahar are nihilists in Nietzsche's sense: 'A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist' (Nietzsche 1967: 318).

The first part of the definition explains Bahar's position: she realizes that her values are not realizable in *this* world which she devalues as a world that 'ought not to be'. Thus her will becomes a will to nothingness, to destruction. Significantly, however, her spiteful behaviour is as pleasurable as it is horrible, because hers is a specific articulation of enjoyment that transgresses the Freudian dialectic between the 'reality principle' and the 'pleasure principle', a process in which the renunciation of enjoyment produces a surplus enjoyment. In İsa's case 'the world as it ought to be' does not exist. Bahar's negative nihilism is still a will, albeit a will to nothingness, which devalues *this* world in the name of higher values that belong to the other, 'true' world (the boat, happiness, the truth, the good): she prefers nothingness rather than not willing at all. If, instead, those ideals are themselves devalued while, at the same time, *this* world is preserved, we encounter İsa's passive nihilism: a world without values, a

bare life, a reactive life devoid of will. If Bahar opposes essence to life, İsa turns life into appearance. He tries to avoid suffering through the 'narcotization' of the will.

Let us, at this point, return to the image of the boat as a mediator between İsa and Bahar. Since, in its origin, that is, before it appears as radical or passive nihilism, nihilism is a feeling of powerlessness or an inability to accept the existing world as it is, one could say that Bahar's and İsa's (radical and passive) nihilisms are what follows when the illusion fades away. Thus, we have a triangular relation: an idealistic/religious nihilism, a radical nihilism and passive nihilism. Hence the significance of the boat in the scene, signifying a platonic idea of ascent from the given, of an escape, especially because of the deliberately kitsch-like symbolic organization of the shot. The boat is where Bahar would rather like to be – for her 'life is elsewhere' (see Kundera 1996), which is also why she turns her back to İsa, who is impotent to take any action in the situation, and looks towards the boat. She is his object of desire, but she desires something else – the boat. Yet the boat is as far away from her as she is separated from İsa. And a tension builds up: is she going to sail away from him as the boat moves further away?

After the beach, we see the couple returning to Kaş, along the quiet coastal road on a motorbike. And then again the beautiful landscape surrounding the couple, the consumer paradise, is at odds with what is really happening between them. The tension continues to build up. The camera follows the couple from behind and at some distance as they drive. From the front the camera closes in on the faces of the couple and then, finally, the focus is on Bahar's face alone. At this point, the sound of the motorbike begins to diminish and we are left with the claustrophobic, exaggerated sounds of the wind and the slow motion blinking and movement of Bahar's eyes as she contemplates the side of İsa's face, which the frame of the film has now widened to include. The scene is suspended from real time. Suddenly, Bahar's hands enter the frame and cover İsa's eyes. Now İsa's metaphorical blindness towards his surroundings coincides with literal blindness. We return to the normal speed and motorbike sounds of real time as the vehicle skids and they fall off the motorbike. They remain alive. A tussle follows. İsa threatens Bahar: 'If you are so keen to die . . . Shall I throw you out!' In a violent act, he gestures towards throwing her down the cliff, to the sea. Bahar is also frightened and walks off leaving İsa behind trying to fix the motorbike. But before that, İsa shouts behind Bahar: 'Come

back!' And again, in the background, we see a boat, but this time it is smaller, less utopic or idyllic, and most importantly, it moves in the opposite direction of the first boat – suggesting that the 'ideal' is lost (God is dead).

After the motorbike scene, the disjunctive synthesis mentioned above dissolves into a straightforward disjunction. We meet them the following day in a bus terminal, where Bahar is about to take her bus to Istanbul. İsa says 'I will call you when you get back to Istanbul'; Bahar answers 'Don't call.'

AUTUMN

Next, we meet İsa back in a rainy, damp and rather depressive Istanbul with all the characteristics of a big city – impersonal relations, calculated distances, false intimacies and role playing. In a bookstore, he bumps into Serap, his ex, and Güven, her partner. 'How nice to see you together!' Güven suggests they go for a drink, but İsa says he can't, 'but let's be in touch'. 'Ok.' 'Don't forget though.' 'You never call either.' 'Neither do you.' It is as if they congratulate each other on their non-commitments: 'We're both as bad as each other.'

Later, knowing that Güven will be away on a business trip on that night, İsa waits outside Serap's apartment. She sees him stalking her, goes inside. There is a dog barking outside. She hesitates about locking the door but leaves it unlocked. With the same air of slowness/hesitation she turns on the light and starts to take off her coat. The frame of the scene is as if we are watching her directly, she appears to turn towards the camera and walk towards it, then we see her step into the frame from the side of the camera and we realize that we have been watching her through a mirror – she looks at herself in the mirror. İsa opens the door and enters – they look at each other, conversation is minimal. As if almost automatically they are slipping back into an affair. Dogs continue barking outside, a telephone rings.

In the conversation, she laughs, he does not understand why and we see a trace of anger on his face. He complains that the nuts are stale. She replies, 'don't eat them then'. He throws her a nut. One he throws for himself falls on the floor and rolls by her foot. He goes to sit by her, picking up the nut – he cleans it and tries to make her eat the nut, she refuses, he persists and she knocks it out of her hand. He climbs on top of her, she appears to resist, he tears her clothes, she tries to pull away,

hitting him. Reminiscent of *Last Tango in Paris*, this is a scene characterized by violent passions and berserk, brutal sex. 'She struggles, he overpowers her: there are many moments when it looks more like a rape than an act of love. However, 'tough cookie' that she is, she surrenders and perhaps even enjoys it' (Wood 2006). During intercourse, he picks up the nut from the floor and makes her eat it, that is, he realizes his desire, as the scene fades to the sound of a sewing machine. The sound of the sexual intercourse coincides with that of sewing and at this point the scene cuts to İsa's mother sewing his trousers. The hedonist's utilitarianism: desire and need, the lover and the mother, coincide. Next time İsa meets Serap, however, the situation changes; even though Serap is willing for more, he opts out.

What is most significant in the 'autumn' scenes of *Climates* is İsa's transformations. Indeed, only in the above-depicted sex scene, that is, only in a spectacle of violence, is his passion aroused. This happens in a Sadistic manner, which is also why the scene borders on that of a rape although the image is kept open so that the viewer cannot be fully certain. The director (who is also the script writer) says about this violent encounter that İsa 'needs some violence to get rid of the violence inside him . . . There is something he cannot handle in his soul and in order to get rid of that he pushes himself into violence, hoping that with the violence another violence can go away' (Ceylan quoted in Milk, 2006). However, the question remains: what is, in the first place, the source of that 'other' violence? And even more significantly, why can İsa, the passive nihilist, only express his passion in the form of violence? Baudrillard's analysis of contemporary nihilism is illuminating in this context.

According to Baudrillard, today's nihilism is one of transparency, a nihilism that is a major source of indifference (1994: 159, 163). Thus the 'transpolitical' order of the contemporary society is characterized by the disappearance, of the real, of meaning, of the individual, of the social and so on (Baudrillard 1990: 7, 50). When everything becomes political, politics disappear; when everything becomes sexual, sex disappears; when everything is social, the social disappears . . . As is the case with pornography, extreme visibility leads to the loss of the invisible (seduction). In this respect, one could argue that İsa desires seduction more than anything else: 'He wants what he does not have, but only to feel victorious for having obtained it – the act of winning the game (as it were) is what satisfies his desire. Seducing an ex-girlfriend on *his* terms (in an

uncomfortably aggressive sex scene) brings greater pleasure than the sex itself' (Filmbrain 2006).

However, there is more to the scene than seduction as such. Whereas previous forms of nihilism addressed the destruction of the imaginary (e.g. the moral, philosophical illusions) or the destruction of the symbolic order (e.g. meaning or ideology), today's nihilism is realized through simulation. Thus, for the contemporary passive nihilist 'the apocalypse is finished' (Baudrillard 1994: 160). This is also a good description of İsa, in so far as his is a world that has lost illusions – a world without values, utopias, ideals, a melancholic world in ruins, his only object of fascination. In İsa's case, therefore, the very proliferation of neutrality and indifference is itself a source of an affect, of a fascination:

> Now fascination (in contrast to seduction, which was attached to appearances, and to dialectical reason, which was attached to meaning) is a nihilist passion par excellence, it is the passion proper to the mode of disappearance. We are fascinated by all forms of disappearance, of our disappearance.
>
> (ibid.)

Yet, that İsa is a 'passive nihilist' does not necessarily make him a peaceful person: rather, his passivity provokes a 'fatal' violence, which is not 'a clash between antagonistic passions, but the product of listless and indifferent forces' (Baudrillard 1993a: 76). When life is disenchanted, it becomes an object of perverse desire, invested in the hope that the real will return when the veil of simulacrum is lifted from everyday existence. Hence his violent encounter with Serap can be read as an exercise in 'fatal strategies' rather than seduction, as a traumatic intervention of the 'real' into the symbolic with the aim of 'purifying' his soul.

Significantly, we met this form of blind violence in *Climates* first in the motorbike scene, a scene that does not produce difference (in the sense of antagonism, dialectic) but rather a disjunctive synthesis. Now, in the 'rape' scene, the same 'synthesis' is repeated, but this time within İsa. In both cases, 'fatal strategies' have the power to at least partially efface the power they are confronted with, threatening that order with a potential reversal. 'Only this reversibility without a counterpart is an event today, on the nihilistic and disaffected stage of the political' (Baudrillard 1994: 163). But where does this power originate?

Fatal strategies are objective, that is, they are not subjective strategies

based on purposeful, rational, desiring, or causal acts. The object is, in this sense, what can escape desire (the order of the subject) and belongs to the order of fatality, which is precisely its power. Hence 'there are only two things: there is desire, or there is destiny' (Baudrillard, 1993b: 52). In this respect the dialogues between the two men, İsa and his architect colleague, are especially interesting. For instance, at one point his colleague tells İsa how his wife 'became meek as a lamb' when he 'acted' (when his wife demanded something, he 'just left'). Yet, in another dialogue that follows shortly, we watch the same man afraid of being late home, or going on holiday on his own in the fear of feeling lonely. Likewise, İsa, who tells his colleague of his plans for going on holiday – that he needs some 'decent weather' – ends up in the snowy landscape of Agri in search of Bahar in the opposite side of the country. These scenes clearly contrast two strategies; while İsa's (and his colleague's) is a subjective strategy, Bahar's is objective in the most radical sense, that is, total, suicidal de-subjectivation. She is the one who chooses the fatal, pushing the world around her towards its destruction. Even in minor incidents she prefers disappearance (hence, after the motorbike 'accident', for instance, she walks away while İsa shouts behind her 'come back'). In such cases, Bahar's behaviour is clearly determined by a will to transcend, even destroy, a given situation, which is marked by her despair. Which is also to say that the object is not passive; indeed, it exists in a passionate form and even can take the form of revenge (ibid. 51). Following this, the difference between a subjective, 'banal' strategy and an objective strategy boils down to this: 'in the first the subject believes himself to be cleverer than the object; in the second, the object is always supposed to be cleverer, more cynical and more inspired than the subject' (ibid. 39).

Even more significantly yet is the specific use of a certain object, what Deleuze has called 'time-image'. *Climates* is a film on affects and there is a constant focus on intensities rather than well-defined emotions. Thus we often see abrupt transitions between different moods, which create a sustained sense of suspense. Love and hatred are inseparable, disgust mixes with longing, forgiveness borders on *ressentiment*, anger results in the laceration of souls. As different affections follow one another, the moods constantly change and we keep entering different 'microclimates' (Morris 2007). It is significant in this context that *Climates* makes use of dialogue only minimally, for, as the director puts it, 'in real life we always lie, so dialogue doesn't carry much information' (Ceylan in Film Fresh 2007). Consequently, instead of expressing feelings through dialogue,

Climates reveals them by creating cinematic atmospheres. In this, the audience is invited to watch the film as if they were observing strangers in a café, trying to figure out what they are up to (see the director's remarks on this in Tutlle 2007).

In other words, *Climates* is not an action movie; it is not about images of movement as such but about images of time. According to Deleuze, since the end of the World War II, it is possible to detect a different configuration of time and space in cinema. The movement image, that has been the predominant cinematic style until this period, allowed time to proceed only in accordance with 'action' in terms of a rational chain of causes and affects which are explicit in the narrative of the film. Images are articulated within the narrative to produce meaning within this chain of causality. This temporality was determined by what Deleuze calls 'sensory-motor link' defining the relationship between the character and the situation through a logic of linear interactions based on causality (see Deleuze 1986: 155). What is crucial in this context is the role of chronological time and progression in the narrative of the film so that even momentary disruptions (e.g. flashbacks) do not break up the causal chain.

In *Climates*, however, some images do not have a clear meaning within the context of an action. They do not necessarily serve the purpose of carrying the narrative to an end by organizing the link between actions and reactions. Indeed, as a commentator put it, in *Climates*, 'the time is out of joint and . . . vision breaks down the world and puts it back together, even though what the film shows seems to be all simple and immediately understandable things' (Fujiwara 2007). For instance, in a single shot 'implants of faraway sounds are grafted, such as the howl of a dog, the monotonous sound of a pigeon, or the unexpected flight of a bee in the nothingness of an archaeological site, or the "adventures" of a nut on the floor, or the smokestack of a ship on the Bosporus or the sounds of a storm. Suddenly, a human gaze comes up from the corner of the frame, invading, inundating, almost in a close-up, which protractedly and inscrutably looks at the viewer/lens' (Haritos 2006).

On such occasions, the objects the images refer to get an independent, material existence in themselves, while, at the same time, there emerges an ambivalent, indefinite and contingent quality related to the image/object. And because such an image cannot be attached to a definite meaning, it gains a suspended quality, which opens it up to different associations (Suner 2005: 125). Such images can escape the system of

interpretations precisely because they become slippery objects that tear the viewer from the chronology of the film and refer her back into her past.

It is such an image that breaks itself free from sensory-motor links that Deleuze calls 'time-image': imaginative, purely optical or sound situations freed from the constraints of progressive narration. Indeed, contemporary life is saturated with situations which we don't know how to react to and with spaces we cannot describe (Deleuze 1989: xi). Significantly, 'any spaces whatever' are spaces devoid of value – the spaces of nihilism, in which the link between man and nature is broken (see ibid. 169–72). In a similar way, with time-image, we no longer understand an act in a context but are able to perceive movement as it is caused by time itself, as a direct image of time:

> movement is no longer simply aberrant, aberration is now valid in itself and designates time as its direct cause. 'Time is out of joint': it is off the hinges assigned to it by the behaviour in the world, but also by movements of the world. It is no longer time that depends on movement; it is aberrant movement that depends on time.
>
> (ibid. 41)

Crucially, everything remains real in the time-image, which is also why it has the quality of an object, but there exists no longer a motor extension between the action and the reality of the setting; rather, there is established 'a dreamlike connection through the intermediary of the liberated sense organs' (ibid. 4). But how do they 'liberate' the sense organs? Such images act as stimuli for thought, because, by disrupting the chronological understanding of events, that is, by disrupting the perspective of the actual narrative by difference, their intervention enables the viewer to see time as a virtual whole. In the words of *Climates*' director:

> I try to recapture those moments in life where you suddenly feel that connection to a wider universe. Sound too is very important to the way I create a particular atmosphere, more so than music. The sound, for instance, of dogs barking in the distance at night creates lots of feelings for the viewer.
>
> (Ceylan in Dawson 2007)

This 'connection to a wider universe' is of course an attempt at opening

the present to the Virtual, being to becoming. In this sense, *Climates* does not only 'represent' a narrative; rather, provoking a machinic, spiritual response from the audiences, endeavours at opening its narrative up to the virtual. In this, reality (the actual) no longer comes 'before' the image (the virtual); rather, they co-exist. In a sense, therefore, the lives of the characters depicted in *Climates* are, simultaneously actual and virtual. Their actuality (in the narrative) and the virtual links established by the time-images exist side by side. What makes the film interesting is therefore not only its 'actualized' structures, its narrative, but also its virtual potentialities, not only the meaning produced at the level of the narrative but also the sense produced at the level of impersonal, auto-poietic processes through which virtual intensities can gain resonance (see Deleuze 1990: 19, 187).

However, this is not the whole story. If the time-image opens up the actual to the virtual, this is not a static relationship based on captivity. Rather, because it produces sense, the time-image ideally allows for creativity. In other words, with the time-image 'we are not just within time, caught up in its flow; we can distance ourselves from immediate and automatic response because we can perceive that world *as* this or that. It is the virtual that opens the power of human decision or freedom' (Colebrook 2002: 167). What can we say about *Climates* in this context? That is, what does it offer regarding 'freedom' or 'thinking'? Let us move on to the final part of the film to deal with these questions.

WINTER

In the third and final part (or season) of *Climates* we find İsa longing for some 'decent weather', preparing to go on holiday and thus looking at pictures of beaches (which are, in contrast to the earlier beach scene of the film, full of life and 'touching' among people). Bahar, in the meanwhile, has 'disappeared' into oblivion, a provincial city (Ağrı in East Turkey) after the breakup of the relationship, for the production of a TV film, a revenge melodrama. Before going on holiday, İsa learns that Bahar is far away, which turns her into an object of desire again. After all, 'she has left everything behind her to go there, which is something he could never do' (Ceylan in Jafaar 2007). İsa changes his mind and decides to go to Ağrı.

He arrives in a landscape that constitutes a stark contrast to the previous scenes in the film dominated by sun and beach shots and the damp of Istanbul: a landscape of cold cruelty. Reminiscent of cowboy films, we see

İsa walking alone in the middle of a main road, which is not windy but snowy instead. There are cows and shepherds as well as cars on the road. İsa buys Bahar a present, a music box. Then we see Bahar again in a small café; she looks fine and well. When she sees İsa standing in the street, she steps out. 'Not for nothing is the setting reminiscent of a frontier town; the scene plays out in a way that subtly alludes to a showdown in a western movie. The former lovers stand several meters apart on the street, sizing each other up in stone-faced silence. The tension is practically palpable. Someone is about to get hurt' (Kirkegaard 2006). Then they go to a café together. She finds the present 'nice', yet forgets it on the table on her leaving after replying to İsa's 'will I see you tonight?' with an 'I guess not'. İsa feels abandoned.

Next day İsa goes to Bahar's workplace. He finds her in a van, crying. İsa comes to join her, telling her that he has changed. 'I'm a different person now – I've really changed, honestly.' He suggests that she quit her job and return to Istanbul with him tomorrow. She keeps crying, he is passive, impotent, saying and doing nothing. And then again: 'I swear, I really feel capable of changing. I have already changed a lot. I feel like I am ready to start a new life, to leave Istanbul and move somewhere else. I feel ready to give up material things, earthly pleasures.' They make no eye contact, Bahar especially looks away from him. They are constantly interrupted by people entering the van. 'I don't want anything more for myself, I am done with all that. I know I can make you happy.' Finally she looks at him and tells him that she wants to ask him something and that he must answer honestly. 'Ask me whatever you want', he tells her. 'Did you see Serap again after we broke up?' Unflinchingly he replies, 'No, of course I didn't.'

She looks at him briefly, as if considering what he has said, she seems to be focusing on something as if steeling herself for whatever comes next – she asks one of her colleagues if they are ready to go yet and tells İsa that she is sorry but it's too late. He gets up to leave. As he is closing the door behind him, he looks at her to see that she is laughing.

Later, on the same day, İsa is in bed when there is a knock at his hotel room door, it is Bahar. She enters, nothing is said, she sits and lies on the bed, still in her coat, her presence seems awkward – they appear to embrace briefly. He smokes a cigarette, they are still fully clothed. She sleeps next to him, he appears bored, he checks his watch. The next morning, İsa is sitting in the blue light of the window, Bahar stirs from sleep, they exchange good mornings and she joins him by the window. He

tells her that she forgot to take her music box present 'I was going to give it to you in the van, but . . .' he breaks off. She tells him happily of the beautiful dream she has had – 'I could fly'.

Bahar narrates her dream in detail with a touching openness. He responds by asking her what time she needs to be on the set. Her mood changes, she looks disappointed and unhappy. He adds that she doesn't want to be late. In response she watches him, as if measuring something up – him/her thoughts? – as he nonchalantly yawns and stares out of the window. 'At nine,' she responds to his previous question. 'Let's get going, then I'll buy you a good breakfast. I can go from there to the airport.' The camera moves from one to the other, it is clear that nothing has changed.

As the scene fades we can hear the sound of a woman crying, the image cuts to a woman by a grave – it is snowing. A man with a gun comes up behind her. It is a scene from a revenge melodrama that Bahar and her colleagues are filming. They have to cut the scene because there is the sound of an airplane flying above. Its sound grows louder as we focus in on Bahar – the conversation of the others is drowned out. Bahar looks up to see the faint image of the airplane carrying İsa away through the falling snow. In the final moment of the film, we are left with the image of a village under heavy falling snow and the sound of birds singing and dogs barking.

SPRING?

This is a rather disappointing ending – not only from the point of view of Bahar but also considering the fact that the nihilism depicted in the film does not provoke any creative acts and thoughts. It is thought provoking in this context that Ceylan often quotes Chekhov as his greatest inspiration, especially regarding the depictions of any space whatever type of locations and the impossibility of bonding in nihilistic circumstances.

However, in spite of similarities in interests and in perspective, the inability to break open the nihilist lock with reference to its narrative is striking in the film. In this respect it is useful to compare the narrative of the film to the stories of Chekhov. For example, in one short story, entitled *Concerning Love* – a story, which the end of the film brings to mind as well – Chekhov writes of Alyokhin's love for Anna. Alyokhin is a character much like İsa, in that he is enclosed in the circumstances of his own set world, 'like a squirrel in a cage' (Chekhov 1982: 153). Having

fallen into a mutual love and regard with Anna and having the real possibility of attaining happiness with her, he shows himself unable to take a step towards her, unable to act on the basis of his will. Instead, he lets her go in the final scene of their relationship. Rather than inventing a line of flight out of his boring existence (his 'cage'), he remains within his anaesthetized life, devoid of will.

Yet unlike in *Climates*, where we are left without any possibility of a positive change, *Concerning Love* signals the possibility of change, of another life. What is different in Chekhov is precisely this, that the characters (and the reader) undergo a shift in thinking, they come to regard their lives in a new light. Thus, in this story, Alyokhin confronts himself, his lack of will and his inertia generated by nihilistic limitations. He reaches the point of a more active/creative thought: 'I understood that with love, if you start theorizing about it, you must have a nobler, more meaningful starting point than mere happiness or unhappiness, sin or virtue, as they are commonly understood' (ibid.). That is, Alyokhin realizes that in order to attain real happiness it is necessary to go 'beyond good and evil', that is, to act. But for İsa, his nihilistic constraints prevent him from this Chekhovian leap from affection to thinking, from passivity to activity.

Ceylan says in an interview, with reference to İsa: 'I think man, at a certain age especially, wonders about himself. He wants to know himself better; he's not content so he throws himself on certain circumstances and people and tries to understand from this crash who he is' (quoted in Milk 2006). However, İsa's lack of will precludes such 'understanding' for it is only on the basis of will that the self can decide on its destiny, change or overcome itself, or, to use the phrase Nietzsche borrows from Pindar, one can 'become what one is' (see Nietzsche 1979: 64–8).

In Nietzsche, 'becoming what one is' means becoming what one wills oneself to be. Since the world of being is really a world of becoming (since the self is not an unchanging category) one can strive to enlarge one's perspective and assume the responsibility for oneself, own oneself, which is also the definition of freedom: perceiving the necessity in things (see Nietzsche 1960: 213). In this sense, one can *will* overcoming nihilism, a will which is lacking in İsa. The only time İsa wills change is when he tells Bahar that he wants to change through ascetism, through 'giving up earthly pleasures', by becoming another person. This is what Kojève formulates as the Christian ideal: 'Become what thou are not' (see Rosen 1995: 12). Interestingly, 'İsa' means Jesus in Turkish. Also in a

broader sense, throughout the film the idea of change is constantly linked to idealism (hence the boat is an indispensible image in *Climates*).

Yet, 'becoming what you are' is not related to a transcendent but to an immanent process of overcoming. Indeed, the capacity of overcoming is what differentiates humans from animals. The animal is a closed, 'complete' being in the sense that it cannot relate to the Open, to the virtual domain. Therefore it does not have the capacity to create new values; 'their very specificity makes it impossible for them to overcome what they represent' (Rosen 1995: 26). The animal is 'closed' in the sense that it cannot differ from itself. In this context it is interesting that *Climates* makes use of many animal images (dogs, birds, bees . . .) which (especially in the 'rape' scene) signal a close proximity between the human and the animal. Therefore, the themes of loneliness and boredom, two central themes in the film, could be illuminating to reflect upon. The characters in the film are constantly held in suspense; they are lonely together and together in loneliness, a state of affairs which often borders on boredom, a fundamental human condition. The characters are bored, the outer life is indifferent to them, and more significantly, they are not capable of acting to free themselves from a life which they don't want to live. It is here worth noting the weakness of the chronological dimension in *Climates*, in which most scenes seem to depict an eternal now. And herein lies the characters' proximity to animals: 'the man who becomes bored finds himself in the "closest proximity" . . . to animal captivation. Both are, in their most proper gesture, open to closeness; they are totally delivered over to something that obstinately refuses itself' (Agamben 2004: 65).

However, this 'proximity' is also a potentiality for the human for distancing itself from the animal, for overcoming himself (that is the animal he is), by relating himself to the Open (see ibid.). Animal is defined by the impossibility of such breaking down its immediate relation to its environment. Human, in turn, is human because it can non-relate itself to itself, affirming its will and 'becoming who one is'. In this respect, not only İsa but also Bahar seem to be caught up in the nihilist lock in a way reminiscent of animal captivation. It is astonishing in this respect that no review of *Climates* depicts Bahar in a negative light; most are focused on İsa's narcissism and, without paying attention to her reactive nihilism and its intrinsic link to İsa's cynicism, romanticize her (see, for instance, Wood 2006 and Morris 2007). However, it is significant that Bahar reduces what İsa lacks, the will, to a will to nothingness.

Consequently, the pessimism in *Climates* ceases to become a pessimism

of the will, to find a line of flight in spite of numerous references to the nature, animality, escapism and nihilist destruction. The narrative fails to affect in any way the three forms of nihilism sedimented in the film: idealist escapism (becoming what one is not), negative nihilism (spite, suicide) and passive nihilism (hedonism of 'earthly pleasures').

Art can both duplicate, defend and sediment old values (e.g. nihilism) or revaluate them to create (e.g. anti-nihilistic) values. In the first case, art is for the sake of art; in the second, art is for life. In the first case, art remains content with the interplay of affects; in the other, it addresses will. In the first, art becomes an ersatz transcendence, art as a sign of the beyond, 'a sensual symbol for the supra-sensual', idealized world (Hass 1982: 118). In the latter, art becomes a perspective that can say 'yes', affirm life. Lacking such a will, *Climates* only establishes an aesthetic relation to the world. After all, one can recognize nihilism in art in its replacement of the sensual world with aesthetic experiences and in its reduction of 'beauty' to affects. In this sense, *Climates* is not only a film about nihilism, but also a nihilist film. One can only become what one is through will, not through affects.

One should not reduce a film to its narrative, though. After all, cinematic images have a power that goes beyond that of the narrative and the movement-images related to it. Yet, in the context of *Climates*, a similar case can be made at the level of the cinematic images. The first point to make is that the creation of time-image is not, does not need to be, an end in itself in cinema. If the time-image 'disturbs' the constellation of the actual world through a shock, this shock gives birth to thought, to thinking. Deleuze (1989: 156) calls this automatic thought, which 'arouses the thinker in you' without being related to or caused by the representational aspects of a film, 'spiritual automaton'. What does cinema force us to think, then? It forces us to think the Open, the virtual 'whole'. Yet, since cinema itself is part of this whole, it is impossible for it to think the whole from a partial perspective. In other words, cinema forces us to think what is impossible, that is, a nothingness: the inexistence of the virtual (which is real but not actual), the impossible virtual, the unthinkable in thought (see Deleuze 1989: 156–7, 168).

Deleuze mentions three senses of the 'shock' generated by the spiritual automaton. First, there is the movement from image to thought, from perception to thought, in which the cinematic images impose a shock effect on thought and forces it to think the impossible (1989: 156–63). Second, there is a movement that goes back from the concept to the affect,

from thought to image, which gives reason a passion, an 'emotional intelligence', without which cinema would be useless. And there is a third movement in which concept and image become identical. This is what Deleuze calls 'action-thought', which 'indicates the relation between man and the world, between man and nature, the sensory-motor unity, but by raising it to a supreme power' (ibid. 161).

The crucial point here is that the 'shock' is not a dialectical shock that unites and separates two attributes (mind/body, image/extension, thought/action) precisely because the spiritual automaton does not designate merely an abstract, logical possibility of deducing thoughts from one another but 'the circuit into which they enter with the movement-image' (ibid. 156). Rather, it is a non-dialectical shock (or what Deleuze calls 'nooshock'), which draws from this relationship a pure thought 'without body or image' (ibid. 169). Which is why the 'supreme power' above is the power of monism; mind and body, thought and action, belong to the same substance. Hence, when the time-image suspends/disturbs the actual world by confronting the thought with its own impossibility, there opens up a possibility for thought to draw from this impossibility 'a higher power of birth', a possibility of re-achieving a sensory-motor unity. In other words, the most significant aspect of the time-image is not merely revealing the nihilistic lock, the broken link between man and nature (as in *Climates*), but, through thought, to re-establish the link. After all, the condition for the sensory-motor break is exactly the break in the link between man and nature:

> The sensory-motor break makes man a seer who finds himself struck by something intolerable in the world, and confronted by something unthinkable in thought. Between the two, thought undergoes a strange fossilization, which is as it were its powerlessness to function, to be, its dispossession of itself and the world. For it is not in the name of a better or truer world that thought captures the intolerable in this world, but, on the contrary, it is because this world is intolerable that it can no longer think a world or think itself.
>
> (Deleuze 1989: 169–70)

If the spiritual automaton is the psychic situation of the nihilist, 'who sees better and further than he can react, that is, think', what is, then, the way out? It is to believe not in a transcendent world but in a link between man and *this* world, a belief which makes the 'unthought' the power of thought (ibid. 170).

In this sense *Climates* falls short of dealing with nihilism at the level of cinematic images as well as in its narrative. Its time-images do not stimulate thinking in the sense that the represented (the three nihilisms) remains unaffected by them. Rather, the film takes nihilism as given, without being able to detect any crack, any line of flight, in the world it depicts. We are in *Climates* within 'the cinema of the seer', within a nihilistic portrayal of nihilism from inside, on the basis of highly formalized time-images that do not become politicized. Therefore, *Climates* is trapped within the triangle it depicts: the idea of transcendence, despair and of disorientation.

Yet there is the fourth type of nihilism (or a fourth season or climate following the summer in Kaş, the autumn in Istanbul and the winter in Ağrı) that totally escapes the horizon of *Climates*: Nietzsche's 'perfect nihilism', which involves taking nihilism to its limits, rather than trying to oppose it with the illusion of transcendence, e.g. religion, and creating immanent values. As Deleuze says, if the link between man and the world is broken, this link should become an object of belief. The 'impossible' can only be reinstated by belief – that is, creating new values which belong to *this* world. 'Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link' (Deleuze 1989: 172).

Since from an immanent perspective the existential background of values is life, any perspective (including the cinematic one) is not only about perceiving the given, pure contemplation, but an enlargement of the horizon, the overcoming of the narrowness inherent in the given (Hass 1982: 44, 50). What is significant regarding *Climates* in this context is that interpretation, the ability to construct a perspective, to re-establish the link between man and nature, requires a subjectivity that can valuate as well as perceive things in a contemplative manner. That is, interpretation is an ability to find meaning or values (see ibid. 197). It is because they are not able to (or lack the will power to) give life meaning that İsa and Bahar say *no* to life in their different but equally life-negating ways. In this, they either devalue this world (Bahar) or devalue values (Isa).

> The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema: it is the world which looks to us like a bad film.
>
> (Deleuze 1989: 171).

2

NIHILISM AND THE 'SOCIAL'

CAPITALISM, POST-POLITICS AND TERROR

> Moral evaluation is an exegesis, a way of interpreting. [. . .] Who interprets? – Our affects.
>
> (Nietzsche 1967: 148)

How, then, does nihilism relate to the 'social' and its affective structures? To make a case, I take my point of departure in the three historical social formations discussed by Deleuze and Guattari (1983) in *Anti-Oedipus*: primitive, despotic, capitalist societies. These formations are linked to three distinct affects: cruelty, terror and cynicism, which all have specific and decisive relations to nihilism. Crucially, however, these three social formations are not mutually exclusive but, following a serial logic, can re-enter one another, or, repeat themselves in one another (for instance, despotic tendencies can be present in a capitalist social formation). Against this background, the chapter relates nihilism to contemporary society by focusing on its two significant aspects: capitalism and post-politics. Then I discuss a contemporary problem, the 'antagonism' between the war against terror and terror, as a biopolitical version of the disjunctive synthesis between passive nihilism and radical nihilism.

THREE SOCIAL FORMATIONS, THREE AFFECTS

Ideal typically, the primitive society is a society of flows, a society that exists as a nomadic space of connections. Yet, what is at issue here is not a chaos or complete lack of organization. The primitive society is not, in other words, the ground zero of sociality, for instance a 'state of nature', which precedes the 'social'. It is, like all other societies, a segmented society. But its segmentation is a flexible one. Thus, even though oppositions such as man/woman, ruler/ruled, adult/child, and so on are powerful, they never become a self-sufficient mode of organization or resonate in a single centre, for instance in a state formation (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 208–12). Even though patterns of circulation produce differences in rank and prestige, these are subject to constant change, without forming a closed system of exchange or a hierarchy in which one group is permanently elevated above others (Holland 1999: 71). In this sense primitive society is a society without a state and an exchange economy.

The main affect that pertains to the primitive social formation is cruelty: through 'coding', that is, through rituals of cruelty (tattooing, incising, excising, mutilating, initiating . . .), the primitive society inscribes qualities on the bodies of its members and thus creates a collective memory that regulates the flow of bodies. But this process of inscription is not directed at whole persons or their privatized organs; rather, rituals of cruelty deal with organs as collective investments which belong to the group (ibid. 142). And because these 'impersonal' organs relate the flows of bodies to the earth, all social production in primitive society is believed to emanate from the earth:

> For it is a founding act – that the organs be hewn into the socius, and that the flows run over its surface – through which man ceases to be a biological organism and becomes a full body, and earth, to which his organs become attached, where they are attracted, repelled, miraculated, following the requirements of a socius.
>
> (ibid. 144–5)

Concomitantly, debt emerges as a result of coding, as a mobile, reciprocal and finite debt. But this debt, punishment, does not cause *ressentiment*, that is, it does not lead to a desire for revenge, because the rituals of cruelty address a non-exchangist power, an autonomous gaze that extracts pleasure from the event of coding (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 191). This

autonomous gaze derives from the pain of the individual a surplus value that establishes the social order.

The despotic social formation comes with the foundation of the State. The State imposes on the primitive society a new alliance system based on the despotic will, a will withdrawn from life and the earth, which makes it possible 'to judge life and to survey the earth from above: a first principle of paranoiac knowledge' (ibid. 194). 'Paranoiac' because, to survive, the despot has to create an empty space around himself. Since danger is everywhere, he constantly remains alert and thus afraid.

> He can only calm his fears by making an example of someone. He will order an execution for its own sake, the victim's guilt being almost irrelevant. [. . .] For, from every execution for which he is responsible, some strength accrues to him. It is the strength of *survival* which he gains from it. His victims need not actually have challenged him, but they might have, and his transforms them – perhaps only retrospectively – into enemies who have fought against him. He condemns them; they are struck down and he survives them. The right to pronounce sentence of death becomes in his hands a weapon like any other, only far more effective. Many . . . rulers have set great store on this heaping up of victims round them, where they can actually see them all the time. . . .
>
> (Canetti 1962: 232–3)

The despot's power over life and death takes the place of primitive inscription. And with the despot as the new fetishlike figure that appears to be the cause of all social production, the whole social machine changes. The despot replaces the earth as the 'body without organs' of the social: everything seems to be owed to the despot. The despotic machine, the State, with its hierarchic structure that has the despot as its apex, substitutes the primitive, territorial machine. The objects, the organs, the persons and the groups of primitive society are 'over-coded' by the transcendent figure of the despot, who appropriates all surplus value. Now the subjects are ruled by the threat of death, by terror, the main affect that pertains to the despotic society. And punishment ceases to be a festive occasion, becoming the vengeance of the despot:

> a terror without precedent, in comparison with which the ancient system of cruelty, the forms of primitive regimentation and punishment

> are nothing. A concerted destruction of all the primitive codings, or worse yet, their derisory preservation, their reduction to the condition of secondary parts in the new machine, and the new apparatus of repression. All that constituted the essential element of the primitive inscription machine – the blocks of mobile, open, finite debts . . . – finds itself taken into an immense machinery *that renders the debt infinite* . . .
>
> (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 192)

Debt becomes an infinite debt to the despot, a debt of existence, which assumes a juridical form, the law (ibid. 213). And since the will of the despot's pacified subjects is repressed, *ressentiment* is born. Hence, within the matrix of terror, there is a direct correspondence between the limitless vengeance of the despots and the never ending *ressentiment* of the subjects (ibid. 215). In the end, every despotic gesture, every command, produces *ressentiment*:

> Every command consists of *momentum* and *sting*. The momentum forces the recipient to act, and to act in accordance with the content of the command; the sting remains behind in him. When a command functions normally and as one expects, there is nothing to be seen of the sting; it is hidden and unsuspected and may only reveal its existence by some faint, scarcely perceptible recalcitrance before the command is obeyed. But the sting sinks deep into the person who has carried out the command and remains in him unchanged. In the whole psychological structure of man there is nothing less subject to change.
>
> (Canetti 1962: 305)

The despot, or the sovereign, uses terror to manufacture fear as a political asset. He teaches his subjects to fear by reducing them to naked bodies, confronting them with the possibility of death. What is decisive here is the parallel between the despotic rule and the idea of transcendence. Every despotic formation contains within itself an element of theocratic origin that generates the 'divine right' of kings (Balibar 1998: 48). Thus, in contrast to the primitive system of cruelty, which expresses finite relations between bodies and the forces that affect them, the despotic doctrine of infinite debt establishes a relationship between the immortal soul and transcendent judgments. In this sense there is a fundamental opposition

between the system of cruelty and the doctrine of judgment (see Deleuze 1998: 128).

In capitalism, the debt remains infinite, but it is no longer a debt to the despot. Rather, the new fetish object, that is, the new body without organs of the 'social', is capital. Now everything seems to emanate from capital. Unlike primitive and despotic societies, capitalism operates according to the logic of deterritorialized flows, of 'de-coding' rather than coding or over-coding: meaning no longer emerges as a relation between bodies and territories as in the primitive society or as a relation between signifiers as in the despotic society. This, however, does not mean that capitalism can do without (re)territorializations. The State, for instance, operates as an instance of territorialization, or 'capturing', which opens up new fields for capitalist penetrations. That is, in capitalism, the State is immanent to capital and serves as a model of its realization. Thus capitalism can be actualized differently in different state forms (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 368, 454; Massumi 1992: 133).

Being itself born out of the conjunction of two flows, money-capital and labour, capitalism is a system that creates hybrid orders, networks, by conjoining flows (see Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 33). The logic of this operation is 'axiomatic' in the sense that capitalist relations make no reference to value. A capitalist exchange is per definition independent of the values of the seller and the buyer. In this sense the world of capitalism is essentially a world without value, a world without affect. Capitalism is the age of cynicism. However, this cynicism is coupled with 'a strange piety', which refers to a link between immanent capital and transcendence, a 'spiritualized *Urstaat*', enabling the illusion that all production in a capitalist society emanates from 'God-capital' (ibid. 225). What we have here is a false piety in the sense that the axiomatic logic of capital does not really need it (see Holland 1999: 80). As Weber put it, even though the Protestant ethic originally provided capitalism with a religious basis, with a 'spirit', the pact between capitalism and Protestantism has later weakened to the point that 'victorious capitalism . . . needs its support no longer' (2003: 181–2).

However, this cynicism must not be confused with 'false consciousness'. The cynic is aware of the distance between the ideological mask, 'piety', and the social reality, the cynicism of the capitalist axiomatic; but he insists upon the mask. It is in this gap that cynicism, the lack of affect, paradoxically becomes an affect; not as a direct position of immorality but rather as a morality that serves immorality (see Žižek 1989: 29–30). For

instance, although ethics and businesses are two antithetical discourses, ethics can turn into a beneficial industry for 'ethical businesses'. To put it in the marketing jargon, it might be 'good business . . . to be good' (see Harkin 2006). Morality, that is, can be put into the service of businesses, of its axiomatic and thus immoral logic.

In this sense, the most significant characteristic of capital is its 'schizophrenia', its ability to constantly renew itself. Capital has no necessary external limit; its only limit is internal, capital itself (see Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 230–1). Thus, it can assimilate critique and resistance, and deviate from itself, undergoing mutations. In other words, due to its cynical modus operandi, the essence of capital is its lack of essence. It can thrive on anything, including ethics, even turning anti-capitalism into a commodity. For instance, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue, today's capitalism has paradoxically found new forms of justification in the discourse of a radical enemy, in the post-structuralist critique. Thus the 'new spirit of capitalism' justifies itself with reference to a nomadic rhetoric that seeks to combine creativity and productivity with the logic of marketing.

THE FOURTH AFFECT – AND AN IMPOSSIBLE FORMATION

We can, at this point, link the three social formations and their dominant affective structures to three forms of nihilism. First, cynicism is basically a passive nihilist affect. Second, terror and originary or negative nihilism are essentially the same gestures. It is 'judgment' (God, the despot, the State) that stratifies, makes us into an organism, an organized identity. And against 'judgment', cruelty signifies a de-stratification, disorganization, or, becoming a 'body without organs' (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 40, 149–68, 336, 411). Cruelty is an undoing of transcendence and judgment. Thus there is a third link between cruelty and anti-nihilism or 'perfect nihilism'. Insofar as its organization limits an actual being, becoming is cruelty; it involves a 'war machine' that aims at 'counter-actualization' (see Deleuze 1994). Indeed, in one way or another, all cultural creativity is based on cruelty: 'Almost everything we call "higher culture" is based on the spiritualisation and intensification of *cruelty*' (Nietzsche 1972: 140).

I want to add to this scheme a fourth affect, spite, or 'radical nihilism', which corresponds to a fourth, paradoxical social 'formation' that cannot exist in actuality but nevertheless persists as a constant threat of

deformation. The following diagram (based on Albertsen and Diken 2006: 239) illustrates the relationship between these four social formations and the corresponding nihilist affects:

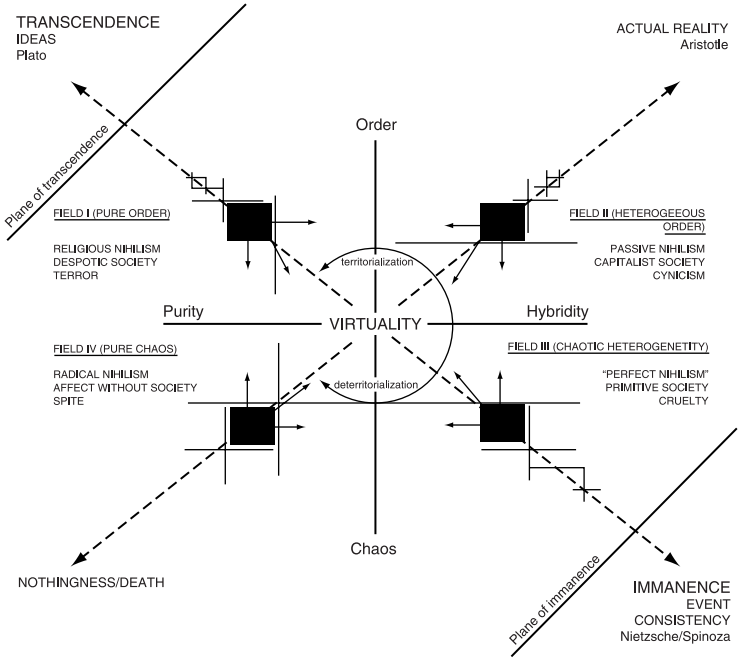

Figure 2.1 Nihilist affects and social formations in a dynamic relationship.

The point of departure here is the three social formations: primitive, despotic and capitalist societies. The diagram is based on two orthogonal axes: a vertical continuum between order and chaos and a horizontal continuum between purity and heterogeneity. As such, it constructs a perspective on the 'social' by illustrating a dynamic field of forces. The diagram assumes an a priori understanding of the 'social' as hybrids of human and non-human elements. The two poles of nature and society, which modernity has sought to purify, do not pre-exist as 'pure' entities; they rather involve the heterogeneous proliferation of hybrids (see Latour 1993: 51). This idea serves as the horizontal axis of the diagram, where

the relationship between purity and heterogeneity is that of a continuum, a process of hybridization or purification. The same logic applies to the second axis, that of order and chaos: the relationship between them is not given in advance but must be thought of as a process, as stabilization or destabilization. 'Chaos' is what disorganizes any consistency in infinity; concomitantly, order is 'systematic consistency' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 42). The relationship between order and chaos is, again, characterized as a continuum, as that which has attained a 'certain consistency without losing the diversity of different motions' (ibid. 42). This relational thinking allows for a differentiation between order and purity on the one hand and between heterogeneity and chaos on the other: order is not identical to purity, just as heterogeneity is not identical to chaos. Consequently, we have four 'ideal-typical' vanishing points: pure order, ordered heterogeneity, chaotic heterogeneity and pure chaos. These correspond, ideal typically, to our four social formations and four affects: despotic society/terror, capitalist society/cynicism, primitive society/cruelty and an impossible 'formation' with its affect, spite.

Regarding the despotic society, in Field I in the diagram we are dealing with a rigidly stratified, hierarchic formation which emphasizes ordered and stable aspects of the 'social'. In contrast, capitalism, Field II, incorporates hybridity into the 'social' by combining different flows; a case of heterogeneous ordering. The primitive society, Field III, is an essentially heterogeneous and inconsistent, nomadic formation, which exists only in the state of metamorphoses. And the fourth field, the 'society of spite', on which mainstream social theory is usually blind or silent, can relate the 'social' to spite understood as a tendency of destruction, of 'pure chaos'. The 'social', then, is constituted by differentiated strata as well as networks, flows and suicidal tendencies. The 'social' is a dissipative assemblage. As such, the 'society of spite' serves as an image of a society that cannot exist and spite (radical or suicidal nihilism) as an image of the (self)destruction of the 'social'. Spite, in short, is an affect without society.

What is significant here is how these four formations relate to and differ from each other. If the basic movement made visible by the diagram pertains to the two poles of territorialization and deterritorialization, territorialization is the stabilizing movement (from the 'society of spite' to nomadic, further to capitalist, and finally to the despotic society) and the destabilizing movements the other way around signify deterritorialization as a limit to clean-cut distinctions between territories. Following this, the different (de)territorializations introducing (dis)continuity into the 'social'

generate different types of relations. Thus, one can imagine *mutually supportive* relations among the different formations, where each plays the role of the 'parasite' (Serres 1980) in its relation to the others in that they derive meaning from each other. Or, there can emerge *conflictual* relations where they seek to stratify, dominate or over-code, or simply ward off one another. Third, there are *parallel* relations, since each formation constitutes itself as a series that is heterogeneously organized by difference. Such movements, finally, open up the social world to the virtual, to the domain of real but not actualized potentialities in relation to which the 'social' can perform itself (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 94).

So far this style of thinking allows for making two points regarding nihilism. First, the most significant contradiction in this framework is between immanence and transcendence, between cruelty (anti-nihilism) and terror (negative or religious nihilism). It is also this antagonism that is displaced onto the disjunctive synthesis of passive and radical nihilisms, e.g. of cynicism and spite. Second, and related to the first, there is a crucial difference between cruelty and spite, or, between counter-actualization as a moment of *becoming* (e.g. the dissolution of the self and the other) and the sheer *destruction* of the actual, of the self and the other.

Thus the critique of nihilism blatantly distances itself from a (passive) nihilist elimination of cruelty. Cruelty is not evil but a tool to impose form on chaos. Even thinking, in Foucault's words, involves an instinctive violence, 'something of the murderous' (quoted in Miller 1993: 218). And most importantly, cruelty is indispensable to overcome nihilism. In this sense, cruelty is a passion for a 'new earth', for a socius to come, which both recalls the socius of the primitive society, the 'old' earth, and perfects its war-machines (see Holland 1999: 115). Crucially, however, such cruelty is not reducible to the violence of radical nihilism. To deterritorialize is not the complete destruction of actual territory. Relating to non-organic life, to the body without organs, is not suicide. Subtraction is not the spiteful renunciation of the world. And 'war machine', or 'combat', is not war:

> Whenever someone wants to make us renounce combat, what he is offering us is a 'nothingness of the will' . . . But neither is a combat a 'will to nothingness'. Combat is not war. War is only combat-against, a will to destruction, a judgment of God that turns destruction into something 'just'. The judgment of God is on the side of war, and not combat.
> (Deleuze 1998: 133)

So, it is not enough to oppose the strata (organization) and cruelty to one another. Cruelty is a line of flight; it is neither good nor bad in itself. And as a line of flight, cruelty has its own dangers. It can, for instance, become an instrument of re-stratification, which is the case with religious, negative nihilism. Therefore it seems that whenever it is in the service of an organization, institution, interpretation, etc., cruelty becomes assimilated into terror. A second danger, less obvious yet more interesting, is what Deleuze and Guattari call 'micro-fascism', or, radical nihilism, through which cruelty turns to self-destruction and becomes a line of death (see 1987: 214–30). Therefore a crucial question for anti-nihilism is whether it is not necessary to avoid the complete destruction of the actual, whether it is not 'necessary to retain a minimum of strata, a minimum of forms and functions, a minimal subject from which to extract materials, affects, and assemblages'? (ibid. 270). Then, extinction is the blind spot of cruelty, a point at which creation stops being creative and collapses into pure destruction (see Halward 2006: 84). For this reason, what is essential is to preserve the link between the actual and the virtual, for it is not possible to come into contact with the virtual without the actual. 'Only the actual can counter-actualize' (ibid. 87). Hence the disjunctive symmetry between passive and radical nihilism: if passive nihilism is a denial of the virtual, radical nihilism is anti-actualization, an assault on the actual.

Thus, the relationship of the actual and the virtual is essential for productive cruelty. Life in general and social life in particular is never fully actualized. Existing, actual reality and virtual events, that is, incorporeal affects or entities which are not actual but nevertheless real, exist side by side (Deleuze 1990: 4). What constitutes an identity is not only its actualized structures but also its virtual potentialities which are significant without becoming actualized. Therefore, what is significant for creative cruelty is the interactive surface between the actual reality and the virtual as a field in which virtual intensities gain resonance, surface effects cast out individuations anew. This surface, which both joins and separates the actual and the virtual, is the source of all cruelty, all events, the impersonal and auto-poietic, machinic processes. It is in this sense that cruelty is becoming, a deviation from oneself, thus a tendency towards the virtual. Its task is, in Deleuze and Guattari's words (1994: 33), to 'extract an event' from the actual.

There remains a problem though: the diagram reconstructs a Nietzschean/Deleuzian ontology of social formations following the idea that the dimensions of order-chaos and purity-heterogeneity are

significant epistemological tools. This may seem a limitation to the diagram, and it is, but within these limits the diagram can claim a validity insofar as it can contain itself within itself, that is, 're-enter' itself as a function of itself (Spencer-Brown 1969), or, repeat itself within its different fields like a fractal structure in which one can recognize the same pattern in the overall system as well as in its parts (Borch 2000: 112; see also Kauffman 1987: 63–5). In other words, the dimensions of order and chaos, purity and hybridity, can be found not only among but also within the fields. (De)territorializations take place not only among but also within the single formations. Hence each formation contains forces that push it in the direction of the others, while, at the same time, each formation also pulls itself towards purification. This is also the reason why the four formations are not mutually exclusive but, following a serial logic (e.g. 1, 1+2, 1+2+3, . . .), repeat themselves in one another. In this sense, one no longer has to follow the succession of primitive, despotic, capitalist societies but comes face to face with coexisting formations (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 310–1). Any social formation, any sociality, contains within itself all the four tendencies that are actualized in varying degrees.

For instance, primitive societies in fact did have formations of power and relations of exchange; even though they tried to ward if off, they contained a tendency towards and thus 'anticipated' state formation and capitalist exchange (ibid. 431). In this sense, primitive society is a society bent on a preventive struggle, a nomadic war, against state formation as well as economic exchange (ibid. 358–9). Yet, 'war' here must not be misunderstood: for the primitive social formation war is not an aim in itself but rather a supplement. The primary object of 'war' in this sense is the prevention of, the constitution of the line of flight from the tendencies that can lead to state formation and exchange. War is simply an exteriority, a condition of non-integration, 'a social state that wards off the State' (ibid. 417). First in despotic societies war becomes an end in itself.

Similarly, the despotic formation had lines of flight, tendencies pushing it in other directions. Although the State reigns over what it is capable of capturing and interiorizing, it 'has always been in a relation with an outside and is inconceivable independent of that relationship' (ibid. 360). Through a state of exception, for instance, during which the law suspends itself and 'abandons' its subjects to a state of nature, the inside and the outside become indistinguishable (see Agamben 1998). The state of exception thus creates a movement from Field I towards Field IV. Taken to an extreme, this movement is also the blind spot of the despot in

the sense that his paranoiac fear constantly pushes him towards total destruction: 'The anxiety of command increases in him until it results in catastrophe. But before catastrophe overtakes *him* it will have engulfed innumerable others' (Canetti 1962: 469–70). In a similar way, it is possible to find a movement from Field I towards Field III. Significantly in this context, the 'outside' of the State is not only the domain of inter-state politics but also the 'nomadic' war machines, that is, those who refuse to integrate into the stratified structure of the state. Although the State constantly engages with 'capturing', its nomadic 'exteriority' remains within Field I as an internal tendency which impels it towards Field III (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 40–1, 54, 502). Likewise, regarding the movement from Field I towards Field II, we can note that, even though it has its roots in the despotic regime, the Oedipus complex (bad conscience) becomes a significant first in the capitalist social formation 'putting despotism in the service of the new class relations' (ibid. 218).

Also within capitalist social formation, tendencies toward other formations constantly coexist. As I illustrate in the following, the capitalist society does not imply a transition to a 'pure' mode of domination but must be thought of in terms of the general heterogeneity of all social formations (see ibid. 436–7). For instance, verticality (hierarchy, stratification, sovereignty) does not only pertain to traditional society but is a constitutive element of the differentiated, modern, capitalist society as well; modern society is also characterized by relations of domination, or, its differentiation is a differentiation between dominators and the dominated (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 106; Bohn 1991: 129). What is necessary to note at this stage is that, because different social formations re-enter one another, one can observe a range homologies, that is, similarities in differences and differences in similarities, between them and in their relations to nihilism, which is also why the antagonisms that characterize a single formation are always 'over-determined' by the fundamental antagonism between transcendence/nihilism and immanence/anti-nihilism, between Field I and Field III.

Let us now turn to the contemporary society and ask how nihilism operates in it. I want to do deal with this in three steps: first, by discussing nihilism in relation to capitalism, then in relation to today's dominant form of politics, post-politics, and, finally, by focusing on the disjunctive synthesis between post-politics and contemporary terrorism, linking this to a discussion of sovereignty, or, biopolitics.

CAPITALISM AND NIHILISM

A significant link between capitalism and nihilism emerges by virtue of money, which, as a general equivalent of value, has a 'capacity to reduce the highest as well as the lowest values equally to one value form and thereby to place them on the same level, regardless of their diverse kinds and amounts' (Simmel 1978: 255). With the money economy, with money's cynicism, the differences between values tend to disappear. Money reduces all quality to quantity. Indeed, this nihilistic levelling runs even deeper than an indifference to the possibility of different evaluations. The ultimate consequence of cynicism is what Simmel called the blasé attitude, the point at which value differences are completely lost and money makes difficult the 'existence of values as such' (ibid.). The blasé individual experiences both the value of the distinctions between things and things themselves as 'meaningless' (Simmel 1971: 330). And this experience of everything as being equally valueless borders on passive nihilism, on a 'lack of will' (see Simmel 1978: 256). Whereas the cynic can initially find excitement in the reduction of everything and everybody to something purchasable, taken to its logical extreme, the same picture paradoxically destroys desire. And not surprisingly, out of this feeling of meaninglessness and passivity, there emerges the craving for 'excitement, for extreme impressions' (ibid. 257), reminiscent of the disjunctive synthesis of passive and radical nihilism:

> This search for stimuli originates in the money economy with the fading of all specific values into a mere mediating value. We have here one of those interesting cases in which the disease determines its own form of the cure. A money culture signifies such an enslavement of life in its means, that release from its weariness is also evidently sought in a mere means which conceals its final significance – in the fact of 'stimulation' as such.
>
> (ibid.)

In today's capitalism, this relationship between cynicism and the money economy is being reshaped due to the processes of de-materialization. With electronic money, for instance, money turns into a spectral entity (see Žižek 1997: 102). However, this does not weaken the hold of fetishism. When it is de-coupled from its material stand-in, the spectral presence of the fetish becomes more pervasive. Abstract money becomes an

all-powerful frame that fully dominates social life, a source of systemic violence that has a tremendous effect on social reality but cannot be located within it. What Žižek calls 'capital as Real' is interesting in this context (1999a: 276). With reference to our diagram, the 'Real' signifies an undifferentiated chaos that cannot be symbolized. Symbolization requires the presence of the Real as a sublimated fetish object within the socio-symbolic order. But when the Real lacks such mediation, encounters with capital, with its indifference to social reality, become much more traumatic (ibid. 287). When 'capital as Real' only has a spectral relation to the socio-symbolic order, its effects become even more devastating. Thus, 'capital as Real' is a prime source of insecurity, uncertainty and unsafety in today's liquid modernity, a major 'risk' that is unpredictable and uncontrollable by social agents (see Bauman 2000: 135). Consequently, confronted with it, many people no longer feel that they have control over social development – they experience social change as something that 'happens to' them.

> The sudden upheavals and downfalls in collective fortunes today acquire an eerie likeness to natural catastrophes, though even this comparison looks increasingly like an understatement: as it happens, we have these we have these days better means to anticipate the imminent earthquake or approaching hurricane than to predict the next stock-exchange crash. . . .
>
> (Bauman 1999: 170)

Capital as the harbinger of pure chaos. Regarding this dimension of abstract capital, the danger is not really forgetting that there are real people and social relations behind the logic of capital. Such an explanation based on the framework of commodity fetishism (Field II) misses the point that the 'abstraction' at work here is not only a misperception of a social reality but is Real (Field IV). The difference between 'reality' and the 'Real' is that the former is constructed by the symbolic order (language), whereas the latter connotes what cannot be said in language, or symbolized. Since it is not a product of language, the Real does not exist – existence is a product of the symbolic order – but 'ex-ists' (see Fink 1995: 25). Consequently, the real danger is overlooking the Real, which would amount to a kind of social fetishism (Žižek 2000: 15). Capital's indifference to social reality is the source of a complex, systemic violence that cannot be attributed to concrete individuals and their intentions.

The same real abstraction sets into motion a radical process of de-sublimation, through which commodities are separated from their material stand-ins and function as the direct embodiment of a fetish object devoid of any substance. Diet coke, for instance, like decaffeinated coffee or tearless onions, signifies a nothingness of the will, a passive nihilism that seeks 'moderation'. At the same time, however, with diet coke, one comes to will nothing, 'drink nothing in the guise of something' (ibid. 23). In a sense, therefore, moderation comes to coincide with its extreme opposite, a will to nothingness. Thus, with diet coke, 'we drink the Nothingness itself, the pure semblance of a property that is in effect merely an envelope of a void' (ibid.). And strangely, this process of abstraction, through which commodity radically destroys its relationship to use value, is paralleled by the reverse case of commodity fetishism: waste, or, the de-sublimated object devoid of its fetish-value. As such, waste is a sign of the growing significance of de-sublimation in contemporary capitalism, in which commodities end as waste faster and faster (see ibid. 40–41 and Miller 1999: 19). With coke, then, we get a will to Nothing as pure fetish value completely de-coupled from use value; and with waste, we get objects that are totally deprived of their sublime potential: two symmetrical versions of willing nothing.

One could, with Baudrillard, argue that this total emancipation of fetish value from use value is the ecstasy of the commodity form, a movement (from Field II to Field IV) through which the commodity disappears into the simulacra, the unmediated, undifferentiated chaos, by multiplying itself infinitely 'in order at every moment to make up for a reality that is absent' (Baudrillard 2005b: 224). Just as capital as Real is the ecstasy of capital, a tendency of disappearance that is internal to the logic of capital. Indeed, one wonders whether what seems to be an external limit to the logic of capital is not really, in certain cases at least, an internal limit in this sense. The climate crisis, for instance: is the destruction of the planet an external limit to capital accumulation or is it an exemplary case of the ecstasy of capital? Can one not, because this destruction also implies self-destruction, claim that the climate crisis is the expression of a spiteful tendency of capitalism, a radical nihilist gesture of (self)destruction, which ultimately can break up the link between humans and the earth? After all, one possible bleak scenario after a climate crisis is a Hobbesian world characterized by the war of all against all especially for control over water, oil and gas, a barbaric world in which any systemic equilibrium is tremendously difficult to imagine (see Urry 2008). Moreover, if

(self)destruction is an internal, not external, limit to capital, all attempts to 'moderate' its circulation 'attest to nothing but a naïve or grotesque moralism' (Baudrillard 2005b: 223).

Thus, the fundamental antagonism is not between commodity fetishism (passive nihilism) and the ecstasy of capital as real (radical nihilism) but rather the antagonism between Field I and Field III in our diagram. Here, the antagonism between transcendence and immanence, between nihilist negation and anti-nihilist affirmation, re-enters the capitalist society as an antagonism between 'dead labour' and 'living labour'. In Marx, the law of value functions as an abstract law that governs the relations of equivalence among commodities, that is, as a transcendent moment within the immanent relations of equivalence. The paradox here consists in the movement through which the abstract value becomes totally value-free, or, 'valueless': abstract capital that seeks out further capital accumulation whenever, wherever, regardless of whatever. Ultimately, therefore, the concept of value can say nothing on value, or rather, nothing other than surplus value. In this sense, the capitalist concept of value is nihilistic: capital as an abstract entity that, instead of relating itself to an exteriority, relates itself only to itself, or, 're-enters' itself.

As such, the law of value is what allows capital to capture the creativity of the living labour, to reduce all value to exchange value, and thus to subjugate the singularities of the living labour to an order of measurement (see Negri 1999). Hence the 'strange piety' that accompanies the capitalist cynicism, the illusion that all production derives from capital, the illusion of 'God-capital'. An illusion, because in reality it is living labour that sets capital in motion, not the other way around. That is, the 'immoral' core of 'God-capital' is its investment in living labour. Hence Marx's metaphor of capital as a 'vampire-like' entity bent on the exploitation of life, on 'sucking living labour' (Marx 1918: 216). Because it does not have an essence, a life, capital needs the life blood of labour. Essentially, however, living labour is 'beyond measure' in the sense that it has a virtual dimension, an excess in relation to actual relations of power and domination. Its productive excess is a constituent power of self-valourisation that demonstrates a creative capacity not only to destroy the transcendent values (the law of value) but also to create new values; in other words, the multitude is the 'ontological basis of transvaluation' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 359). If capitalism historically relies on expropriation and privatization of what is common, of the creativity of living labour, its power as potentiality delineates an immanent critique of capitalism (Negri 1999:

20–2). Hence, from an anti-nihilistic perspective, the most fundamental antagonism in capitalist social formation is that between living labour (immanence) and the law of value (transcendence).

We find a sociological version of this antagonism in late Simmel, who, following Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, detects a general conflict in all culture, a contradiction between 'life' and 'form', between an essential flux of life and the relatively stable sociological forms life takes. The formal structure of all sociality is a continuum between two limits; human life oscillates between life and form. Indeed, 'the whole history of culture is the working out of this contradiction' (Simmel 1971: 375). On the one hand, life can only 'express itself' in a form, be it artistic, religious, or scientific (ibid. 375). Forms provide the flux of life with a relative stability by objectifying, or, stratifying life. On the other hand, however, once created, forms acquire a relatively permanent character and tend to take on a casual power of their own, becoming independent, fixed constraints on the individual.

> Insofar as life . . . ceaselessly creates such forms which become self-enclosed and demand permanence, these forms are inseparable from life; without them it cannot be itself. Left to itself, however, life steams on without interruption; its restless rhythm opposes the fixed duration of any particular form. Each cultural form, once it is created, is gnawed at varying rates by the forces of life.
>
> (ibid. 375–6)

Form is antithetical to life, for it objectifies it; life needs form. Yet, even though it needs forms, life cannot be contained in forms; it exceeds or transcends form. The flow of life denies permanent structures. And this 'tragic' conflict between life and form never reaches in Simmel a dialectic synthesis, a unity. Indeed, he deals with this conflict as a disjunctive synthesis, as a dualism without synthesis:

> the essence of life as the transcendence of itself. In *one* act, it creates something more than the vital system itself – individual structure – and then breaks through this product of a blockage in that stream, lets the stream surge out over the bounds and submerge itself again in the ongoing flux. We are not divided into life free from limits and form made secure by them. We do not live partly in continuity, partly in individuality, the two asserting themselves against each other. Rather

> the fundamental character of life resides precisely in that internally unified function which I, albeit symbolically and inadequately, have termed the transcendence of itself. This function actualises as *one* life what is then split through feelings, destinies, and conceptualisation into the dualism of continuous life flux and individual closed form.
>
> (ibid. 367–8)

Life is the 'absolute unity' of life and form, a unity on the basis of the self-transcendence of life, its self-overcoming. So, life is both 'more-than-life', life that needs actual form, and 'more-life', the creative self-overcoming of life that can destroy its own actual forms (ibid. 368–9). Thus, for Simmel, as for Nietzsche, what defines a human being is its capacity of overcoming itself. Although each human being is constituted within determinate actual boundaries, without which life would be devoid of meaning and depth, these limits can be overcome, while, at the same time, each overcoming creates new boundaries (ibid. 354). Therefore, the essence of humanity is best expressed though a paradox: 'we are bounded in every direction, and we are bounded in no direction' (ibid. 354). 'Life' includes both the boundaries and transcending of the boundaries, both actual forms and lines of flight. And significantly, in this sense, '*transcendence is immanent in life*' (ibid. 363).

This idea of immanent transcendence has wide-ranging implications regarding nihilism. Above all, it signals an antidote against nihilist despair: even though God is dead, humans can create values in the form of immanent transcendences. To be sure, Simmel's aim is not to establish an ethics as such but the formal criteria for an ethics which is not life-negating, that is, an ethics without religion. In this, he opens up the possibility for an active nihilism which is not afraid of and thus does not automatically turn to the destruction of forms; since life without form is not possible, any consideration of life must include Apollonian *form*ation as well as Dionysian destruction of forms. Then, even if God is dead it is possible to create new values or new 'gods' that are immanent within the horizon of 'perfect nihilism'. In other words, in Simmel, the transvaluation of all values has a transcendent moment. His 'perfect nihilism' is ultimately about the overcoming of the distinction between immanence and transcendence by creating 'immanent transcendences'. A couple of examples might be illuminating at this point.

Bauman, for instance, one of Simmel's followers, provides a challenging account of morality as an immanent transcendence, as a source of ethical

evaluation, which does not need a transcendent God. Central to his approach is a distinction between ethics as a codex and ethics as ambivalence (see Bauman 1993: 8). In the primordial nihilistic myth it is held that the human beings, who have been expelled from the Garden of Eden, can only manage their lives if they have a codex to follow: 'morality as obedience to the Law and the recipe for a trouble-free life of conformity' (Bauman 1998: 13). As opposed to this, Bauman presents another, Levinasian scene where morality is not understood as the passive observance of a rule-set on the basis of heteronomous predefinitions of what is good or evil, but as facing and making choices as an active moral actor: 'morality as a cruel predicament, eternal uncertainty and perpetual agony' (ibid. 13). With no external authority to replace the moral actor's responsibility, the ethics presented in this version is a non-rational and personal matter. Whereas the former type of ethics seeks to establish a system, this ethics remains as an impulse. It is spontaneous and unregulated, bound up with the face-to-face relations of two persons *before* 'the social', the third party, intervenes. And this relationship cannot be subsumed in any system; it is 'the non-synthesizable par excellence' (Levinas 1985: 77). It comes before the Law and 'maintains its non-violent purity only before being determined as concepts and laws' (Derrida 1978: 111).

What ethics as codex represses is precisely the singularity of this ethical face-to-face relationship. The moral situation is an ambivalent one; one does not, and cannot, know the result of the face-to-face confrontation with the other's singularity. Thus it cannot be formulated as a rule-set or a law; the moral actor can never feel certain with respect to being moral. The moral self is born in this condition of uncertainty (see Bauman 1993: 92–4). 'But it must be understood that morality comes not as a secondary layer, above an abstract reflection on the totality and its dangers; morality has an independent and preliminary range. First philosophy is ethics' (Levinas 1985: 77). This thesis, that ethics comes before ontology, and thus before 'the social', must of course be understood not empirically (because empirically ontology precedes morality in that one is first involved before responding to the other morally), but philosophically, as an 'immanent transcendence' in Simmel's sense. We are not moral because we follow the laws of a transcendent God but because we respond to the other's face. And in this respect Levinasian ethics is closer to Nietzsche's perfect nihilism than to religious nihilism (see Critchley 2007: 23, 42).

If we now, by way of a second example, move from morality to politics, we can again find a rich repertoire of values in terms of immanent

transcendences. Boltanski and Thévenot's (1991) study of the historical forms of critique and justification provides a powerful attempt at mapping such values. Their main argument is that power constantly needs justification. Justification takes place in those 'critical moments' in which agents express discontent and develop critique by referring to different regimes of justification, each with their own criteria of validity and internal consistency. These regimes make it possible for situated actors to engage in disputes regarding values, to participate in criticism, and to justify themselves against criticism, while, importantly, violence is avoided. Several regimes of justification exist simultaneously. Boltanski and Thévenot register six of them in their 1991 study: the regimes of inspiration, opinion, domesticity, civility, market and industry. Later, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) add to the list a seventh, 'project regime'. Each of these regimes of justification assumes and engages a definition of 'common humanity' and a set of overarching values and principles in relation to the 'common good'. As such, they are 'transcendental stances' (Boltanski and Thévenot 2000: 365). And significantly, they have historical roots, that is, they are immanent transcendences, which can function as perspectives to resolve ethical and political problems without recourse to religious nihilism.

POST-POLITICS VERSUS TERROR

> Sociology was invented to forget politics.
>
> (Virilio in Lotringer and Virilio 1997: 17)

Let us now focus on contemporary politics and its link to nihilism. According to some influential mainstream social theorists such as Giddens and Beck, ours is a post-traditional society characterized by social and individual reflexivity. Individuals are liberated from traditional, collective ties and regulate their social conduct increasingly with reference to knowledge and information rather than (traditional or simple-modern) beliefs. Hence, despite their constant proliferation, today's traditions have to contemplate and defend themselves in an awareness that there exist other ways of being and acting (Giddens 1994: 83). That is, traditions, too, are becoming more and more reflexive. Conversely, in this perspective, if a belief insists on its own truth, then we are dealing with 'fundamentalism': a tradition that defends itself in the traditional way, a defence of tradition as such, a doctrinaire manner of refusing negotiation

to protect a principle (ibid. 85). It is an imperative of reflexive modernity that belief articulates itself in terms of knowledge and trust in expert systems.

Moreover, even though 'experts often disagree with one another' (ibid. 95), such disagreement does not take antagonistic forms. Reflexive modernity, Giddens claims, is 'Beyond Left and Right'. Similarly, for Beck, in reflexive modernity partisanship based on collective identities or beliefs is not possible; contemporary politics is an activity 'without enemies' (see Beck 1998: 150–1). So, following this logic, we end up with the following scenario: 'on one side, a multiplicity of "sub-political" struggles about a variety of "life issues" which can be dealt with through dialogue; on the other side, either the old-fashioned "traditionalists" or, more worryingly, the "fundamentalists" fighting a backward struggle against the forces of progress' (Mouffe 2005: 50). A scenario, in which passive nihilism, politics without belief, fights radical nihilism, belief without politics.

The passive nihilism of post-politics expresses itself as an inability to think of the antagonistic element in politics; hence the 'gene silencing' of politics, the emptying out of its constitutive dimension, 'the political'. In a sense, therefore, post-politics is a particular blindness towards what is really at stake in politics: 'the very configuration of power relations around which a given society is structured' (ibid. 21). However, this blindness is in itself constitutive; it is what constitutes post-politics as a form of politics, a politics in which already recognized groups compete and negotiate interests without challenging the hegemonic relations in a given political constellation. Politics as game playing without the possibility of changing the game, as a form of hyper-politics. Thus, in post-politics everything is politicized, can be discussed, but only in a non-committal way and as a non-conflict, by keeping absolute and irreversible choices at bay. However, when the simulacrum of pluralism becomes an end in itself, politics is delimited to the actual by preventing the disruptive ('revolutionary') events from occurring. That is, post-politics breaks up the link between the virtual (the political) and the actual (politics). Its passive nihilism consists in an impossibility of putting a distance to the actual reality, in the impossibility of sublimation in the sense of sustaining the gap between the actual and the virtual, reality and the Real, by maintaining a space for objects considered 'impossible', by giving 'value to what the reality principle does not value' (Zupančič 2003: 78).

And when the virtual collapses into the actual, politics disappears, the radical questioning of the social becomes impossible. Insofar as politics is

politicization, that is, insofar as politics involves 'the ongoing critique of reality' (Bauman 2002: 56), post-politics signifies the foreclosure of politics. As such, post-politics lays bare the 'totalitarian' aspect of capitalism (Hewitt 2006: 108). A 'totality', which designates the reduction of the social to a 'one dimensional society', a society without a virtual dimension, without the capacity to imagine social change (see Marcuse 1964). In this sense, post-politics brings with it an internal perversion of democracy, a 'post-democratic' politics that eliminates real dispute by assuming that everyone is already included in politics and that remaining problems can be dealt with through expert systems (Ranciere 1999: 116). And importantly, this 'nihilistic polishing off' of politics proper does away with political subjectivity in the sense of the 'naming' of 'a part of those who have no part, of a count of the uncounted' (ibid. 116, 121). Indeed,

> capitalist nihilism has arrived at a stage of the non-existence of any world. Yes, today there is no world, there is nothing but a group of singular disconnected situations. There is no world simply because the majority of the planet's inhabitants today do not receive even the gift of a name, of a simple name. When there was class society, proletarian parties (or those presumed to be such), the USSR, the national wars of liberation, etc., no matter which peasant in no matter what region – just as no matter which worker in no matter what town – could receive a political name. That is not to say that their material situation was better, certainly not, nor that that world was excellent. But symbolic positions existed, and that world was a world. Today, outside of the grand and petty bourgeoisie of the imperial cities, who proclaim themselves to be 'civilisation', you have nothing apart from the anonymous and excluded. 'Excluded' is the sole name for those who have no name, just as 'market' is the name of a world which is not a world. In terms of the real, outside of the unremitting undertakings of those who keep thought alive, including political thinking, within a few singular situations, you have nothing apart from the American Army.
>
> (Badiou 2003: 121)

Politicization requires the metaphoric universalization of particular demands, aiming at the restructuring of the social space rather than negotiation of particular interests, but in post-politics, particular demands remain particular, without being able to function as a metaphoric condensation of a general opposition to power (see Žižek 1999a: 204–8).

Despite its hegemony, however, the lack of antagonistic politics and subjectivities does not make post-politics a peaceful order. Rather, it seems as if the lack of antagonism in post-politics is countered with an excess of antagonism, a (self)destructive passion for the Real. Thus, today's dominant ideological space looks like a battleground between un-antagonistic politics and ultra-antagonistic fundamentalism: terrorism.

A crucial ideological operation of post-politics in this respect is its repression or the moral castigation of all violence as 'bad', which often takes the form of an obsession with particularized, subjective forms of violence performed by identifiable social agents, be it resentful revolts on metropolitan margins or fanatic outbursts, and which, in the same gesture, renders the systematic violence that post-political society itself generates invisible (see Žižek 2008a: 12, 174). In other words, post-politics does not really eliminate but expels violence from its system of values: just as all freedoms are today translated into the language of the market, 'so all forms of violence are reduced and muzzled to the exclusive advantage of the terrorist and police-style violence of the new world order' (Baudrillard 1998b: 65). But precisely as such post-politics brings with it a paradoxical violence, the violence of a society bent on neutralizing dissent, rooting out all radicalism, negativity and singularity, a violence that puts an end to the idea of violence as such and therefore can only be met by hatred (Baudrillard 2002: 92–3):

> a violence cut off from its object and turning back against that object itself – against the political and the social. It's no longer anarchistic or revolutionary . . . It's not interested in the system's internal contradictions; it targets the very principal of the social and the political. [. . .] It answers the systemic exclusion our society practices by even more exclusion, cutting itself off from the social world by indifference or hatred.
>
> (Baudrillard 1998b: 66)

Just as previous forms of violence mirrored the level of conflict, 'hate' mirrors the level of consensus; it produces no value, no object and no ends, and in this sense the violence of hatred is as hyper-real as the society that produces it (Baudrillard 2002: 92). Indeed, it is as if the culture of passive nihilism, its zeal for 'over-protection', leads to the loss of immunity; like redundant 'anti-bodies' that turn against the organism in which they live, hatred 'has something of self-aggression and auto-immune pathology

about it' (ibid. 93). Hate is today's radical nihilist 'fatal strategy' against passive nihilism; a desperate but intense, an intense but desperate strategy against the indifference which post-politics brings with it (ibid.).

This disjunctive synthesis is most visible today at the level of international politics, in the conflict between post-political capitalism and terrorism. Significantly in this respect, some previous forms of terror targeted capitalism itself. Ulrike Meinhof, for instance, argued that terror acts must provoke shocks, introduce a catastrophe into the functioning of the capitalist society so that people would 'act without being determined by the pressure of the system, without seeing themselves with the eyes of the media, without fear' (2001: 278). In this, however, she was, as with her terrorist comrades, spectacularly unsuccessful. Bin Laden, in contrast, achieved spectacular success by reversing the tables: being himself a capitalist, he has nothing against the system as such. In this sense both the American Empire and new terrorism belong to the same nihilistic world of capitalism:

> All the formal traits of the crime of New York indicate its nihilistic character; the sacralisation of death; the absolute indifference to the victims; the transformation of oneself and others into instruments . . . but nothing speaks louder than the silence, the terrible silence of the authors and planners of this crime. For with affirmative, liberating, non-nihilistic political violence not only responsibility is always claimed, but its essence is found in claiming responsibility . . . The act remains unnamed and anonymous just like the culprits. There lies the infallible sign of a type of fascist nihilism. Opposite it we find another nihilism for which an old name is appropriate, 'Capital'. *Das Kapital*: nihilist in its extensive form, the market having become worldwide; nihilist in its felicitation of the formalism of communication; and nihilist in its extreme political poverty, that is to say, in the absence of any project other than its perpetuation – the perpetuation of hegemony for the Americans and of vassalage, made as comfortable as possible, for the others.
>
> (Badiou 2003: 120)

Further, in contrast to Meinhof, Bin Laden is an 'insider'; he could use the most lethal weapon of the system, the media, against the system itself by creating a 'theatre of terror' with the whole world a captive audience (Burke 2004). Terror, after all, exists insofar as it can become a media

explosion (see Lotringer and Virilio 1997: 174). In a sense, therefore, with contemporary terror the real enemy is ourselves; our own fascination with terror. Thus, compared to Meinhof's strategy of sabotage, Bin Laden's is viral; it kills from inside, using radical nihilism as a strategy against passive nihilism, death through suicide attacks against 'life' on offer in Empire: 'Our men are eager to die just as the Americans are eager to live' (an Al-Qaeda statement, October 10, 2001).

Post-politics perceives dedication to a cause, to a belief, as a sign of a lack of reflexivity, as fundamentalism. As such it demonstrates an inability to act politically. Weakened by hedonism and consumerism, the 'last man' cannot imagine a political cause to fight for (Žižek 2002: 40–1). And if there is one thing that is repressed and banished from the culture of passive nihilism, it is death. Thus the new terror signifies the return of the repressed with a vengeance. What is really at stake in the 'antagonism' between terror and the war against terror is death as an event, as symbolic sacrifice (see Baudrillard 2003). Sacrificing the most sacred of the sacred, human life, the new terrorism articulates a deep-seated challenge to the passive nihilist consumer society, in which to die for a cause is unimaginable. This radical nihilism suspects that the real world is merely a semblance and thus tries to 'purify' it by purging the semblance. But 'at the end of its purification, the real, as total absence of reality, is the nothing' (Badiou 2007: 64). That is, the new terror expresses a radical nihilist passion that can find certainty only in Nothingness, in a spiteful destruction. Enter the dream of Dostoevsky's terrorist, Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*:

> The world was desolated by an unknown and terrible plague, which, coming from the interior of Asia, spread over all countries. . . . Parasites of a new character, microscopical beings fixed their home in the human body. But these animalcule were breathing creatures, endued with intellect and will. Persons affected immediately became mad. But, strange to say, the stricken were, at the same time, imbued with a strong sense of their own good judgment, never did they believe themselves so strongly endowed with wisdom and intellectual vigour or scientific conclusions and moral perception so correct as now. Whole villages and towns, the entire population became tainted, and lost their reason. They were incapable of understanding one another, because each believed himself the sole possessor of truth, and looking upon his unenlightened neighbours, beat his breast, threw up his arms and wept.

> They could not agree upon any point, knew not what to consider evil, what good, and they fell upon one another in anger and killed, they formed great armies, but, once in motion, they tore each other to pieces. [. . .] Everything perished. The pestilence raged more and more. Of the whole world only a few remained; these were the pure and elect, predestined to found a new race, to inaugurate the new life and purify the earth; but the chosen were not recognised. None knew their voices and heard their words.
>
> (Dostoevsky 1994: 429)

Raskolnikov's fantasy targeted bourgeois *ressentiment* and the banality that characterizes the modern society. He wanted to kill because he wanted to escape the fate of being an average person. However, unable to escape the terror of banality – the society – through terror, he is drowned in his own banality, his own *ressentiment*, which is what makes him a tragic figure: transgression ends up affirming the law (Gurbilek 2001: 76–93). There is, however, a significant difference between Raskolnikov's society and ours. Raskolnikov's was a society that feared the death of God. Thus, Dostoevsky himself warned on several occasions that 'without God . . . everything is permitted' (2004: 593). Terror, in this perspective, signified Godlessness. The contemporary society, in contrast, takes the death of God for granted. In turn:

> the lesson of today's terrorism is that if there *is* a God, then everything, even blowing up hundreds of innocent bystanders, is permitted to those who claim to act directly on behalf of God, as the instruments of his will, since, clearly, a direct link to God justifies our violation of any 'merely human' constraints and considerations. The 'godless' Stalinist communists are the ultimate proof of it: everything was permitted to them since they perceived themselves as direct instruments of their divinity, the Historical Necessity of Progress towards Communism. [. . .] The formula of the fundamentalist religious suspension of the ethical was proposed by Augustine, who wrote: 'Love God and do as you please'.
>
> (Žižek 2008a: 116)

There is, in this sense, an iconoclastic aspect to today's fundamentalist terror in that, even though it denounces idolatry (godless passive nihilism of the West), it idolizes a sacred text and elevates it above life itself. Thus

today's terrorist is 'ready to destroy the whole of creation to preserve the purity of an idea' (Eagleton 2003: 202–3, 207). In other words, today's terror repeats the spirit of iconoclastic fanaticism and its generalized spite. It, too, wants to see the too-earthly city falling to pieces, its iconic buildings coming tumbling down, and so forth.

But in what sense are today's fundamentalist terrorists religious? Is fundamentalism merely an extreme distortion of religious faith? Moreover, is there not a certain dose of fundamentalism or lack of reflexivity in all religions? Indeed, to imagine a religion that is not conservative, fundamentalist, dogmatist or orthodox is after all to imagine a 'decaffeinated' religion, a religion without religion. At this point, Kierkegaard, the philosopher of fundamentalism, might be helpful to clarify the difference. Abraham is Kierkegaard's hero of faith because his readiness to sacrifice his only son, as an act of madness, exemplifies the essence of faith and confirms the supremacy of God's authority. However, Abraham does not pretend to have understood God's will. God does not reason or negotiate with Abraham; he demands, Abraham obeys. His act of sacrifice 'bridges' the earthly and the divine, the actual and the virtual, but does so without annihilating the distance. In believing, I am certain that God exists. But although I know that God exists, he remains only partially known; uncertainty, too, is absolutely necessary. Kierkegaard's belief thus involves 'fear and trembling', without which the believers would be reduced to puppets in a mechanical universe (1962: 7, 111). Thus faith can 'bridge' the human and the divine only temporarily; it continuously needs to be reaffirmed (ibid. 51–62).

Today's fundamentalist terror, on the other hand, cancels this very distance between the divine and earthly realms. The fundamentalist terrorist is certain that he has direct access to God's will and perceives himself as the instrument of this willing God. Indeed, at this point, we come across a concealed complicity between passive nihilist cynicism and fundamentalist terror: both reduce metaphysical aspects of religion to quasi empirical statements, belief to knowledge – after all, the fundamentalist 'does not *believe*, he *knows* directly' (Žižek 2008b: 31). It is this reduction of belief to knowledge that justifies violence in his eyes. As a consequence of this certainty, the gap between the divine and the earthly is no longer mediated but viciously traversed; the human and divine are reduced to elements on the same continuum. Profanation becomes a paradoxical consequence of fanaticism. In this sense the new terrorism is the contemporary face of the iconoclastic desire for pan-destruction: a

conscious, resentful denunciation of the actual city in the name of the City of God. And significantly, as it destroys the actual city for the sake of the virtual one, fundamentalist terror moralizes politics and recasts political differences as absolute antagonisms in terms of Good and Evil, opening up a space for total (self)destruction. Spite.

Herein we approach the most problematical aspect of post-politics vis-à-vis fundamentalist terror: its own nihilistic tendency to moralize politics. There is therefore, as I argue in the rest of the chapter, a symptomatic link between fundamentalist terror and the post-political war against terror in that both push the political into the moral register (Mouffe 2005: 5). As is the case with fundamentalist terrorism, the war against terror, too, re-defines political categories in moral terms. Accordingly, the 'antagonism' between terror and the war against terror takes the shape of a de-politicized struggle between Good and Evil. However, when politics is colonized by theology, conflicts tend to assume the form of an absolute, moral antagonism. When politics is depoliticized, spite is politicized.

BIOPOLITICS AND (THE WAR AGAINST) TERROR

> The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception.
>
> (Schmitt 1985: 15)

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.
>
> (Benjamin 1992: 248–9)

The horizon of terror is the absolute fear of catastrophe: an enigmatic fear, a radical uncertainty, which ruptures and disturbs the usual flow of time, setting it out of joint. This is, for instance, how Albrecht Dürer's woodcut *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (from 1498) depicts the terror caused by the 'four horsemen': the Conqueror, arrow poised in his bow; to his right comes War wielding his sword above his head; then we have the portly figure of Famine, swinging the upturned scales of Justice; and slightly forward of the other three, we have the emaciated figure of Death, pitchfork in hand. The Four Horsemen surge forwards trampling people beneath them. And above them, peering through the clouds is a smiling

Angel, its right hand held as if in benediction. What Dürer conjures here is terror *in extremis*, terror as exception, coming from nowhere, with no reason and no warning. As an exceptional event it has no origin in the frame of the picture itself, yet precisely for this reason it shatters the frame, the everyday life of the people. From the point of view of the trampled people, the 'casualties', the terror depicted is a traumatic event that cannot be symbolized – hence it is sublimated in Dürer's print.

But let's imagine the picture once more, for what becomes interesting when we come to it with our modern eyes is what Dürer cannot imagine: the becoming rule of exception, of terror. Indeed, with the quick but decisive move from 9/11 to the politics of security, terror (and the war against terror) has become a factor of sociality, which sustains, rather than shatters, the 'business as usual'. Since 9/11 many commentators have pointed out that terror has social origins in globalization, in economic and social injustice, that global society itself produces terror. Equally significantly, however, today terror produces society. In the aftermath of 9/11 terror is no longer merely an 'exceptional' (real or imagined) catastrophe but seems to have become a dispositif, a technique of governance which imposes a particular conduct, a new model of truth and normality, on contemporary sociality by redefining power relations and by unmaking previous realities.

Thus, in the contemporary frame, the four horsemen are not the symbolic horsemen of the apocalypse, but the U.S. Army in Iraq. The Conqueror wields not a bow and arrow, but 'brings democracy'; War comes in the guise of Peace; Famine is packaged in humanitarian aid and 'infinite justice'; and Death is biopolitics. When the U.S. Army airplanes arrive at their destinations, nobody knows whether their cargo is aid or bombs: here the conqueror, the sovereign, delivers both, and at the same time, because in this frame, aid and war serve the same ends, with the result of a revamped, self-referential Orwellian language – 'peace is war' and 'war is peace'. Thus, as the unimaginable, for Dürer, becomes our reality, we bear witness to the real catastrophe – when terror as exception and terror as the rule become indistinct. Consequently, in the modern frame the social world is shattered as terror is deployed as technique. It is no longer an exceptional terror from the outside, it is terror within, terror which disrupts the dialectic of exception and the rule. The apocalypse that was unimaginable to Dürer is a world in which McDonald's can campaign against obesity, the politics of security can fight against terror, the war against terror can claim to bring democracy to the people it tramples, the

resentful 'victim' goes berserk and kills even more people than terrorists, and so on.

In *Society Must be Defended*, Foucault contrasts biopower, which he also calls 'the dispositif of security', to disciplinary power (2003a: 242–3). The 'life' relevant to 'biopolitics' is the life of populations, of man as a species. It is in relation to this 'life' that Foucault asks: 'how will the power to kill and the function of murder operate in this technology of power, which takes life as both its object and its objective' (ibid. 254)? How can death or killing contribute to life? It can, when one form of life is perceived as a threat to another (ibid. 256). Foucault's example is racism, but the war against terror could do equally well. He writes, when racism is inscribed in state power, its form changes; it becomes an instrument of biopolitics and turns into state racism (ibid. 254; Foucault 1980: 55). What is at stake here is defending society, the social body, against biological threats (2003a: 62). 'Society Must be Defended!' by the state, which now starts to act as if it were in a war against all that which threatens the population's biological well-being. The state exists to protect the race; to do this, it must kill the other. 'If you want to live, the other must die' (ibid. 255). Thus the enemy ceases to be a political adversary but becomes a biopolitical threat; killing is no longer perceived to be murder but turns into a cleansing activity:

> death now becomes . . . the moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on himself and retreats, so to speak, into his own privacy. Power no longer recognizes death. Power literally ignores death. (ibid. 248)

Concomitantly, the dispositif of security leads to the fragmentation of the (bio)political field by introducing a binary rift between 'us' and 'them', between those who deserve to live and those who are to die (ibid. 254–5; Foucault 2003b: 316–17). What is decisive here is that this biopolitical rift, the exception, is made possible by the law itself. In this sense Foucault's dispositif of security is similar to Schmitt's 'state of exception' in which the law suspends itself. That is, 'security' is essentially about legitimizing the state of exception, or, to normalize what is exceptional (see Diken and Laustsen 2005: 42–7 for an extended discussion). In this process the distinction between war and politics tends to disappear and war increasingly becomes a 'general matrix' for social relations (see Hardt and Negri 2004: 13).

So, we are witnessing in post-politics also the revival of sovereignty as a radical, ultra-political version of the disavowal of the political by depoliticizing conflicts via direct militarization of politics and sublimation of order as an absolute value in the Schmittian sense (see Žižek 1999b). What is foreclosed does not only return as naked violence, as hatred, but also as sovereign violence, or, state terror. Which is why it seems that, in today's society, 'older means of control, borrowed from the old sovereign societies . . . come back into play' (Deleuze 1995: 181–2). Terror, as already mentioned, is an invention of the State, and in this sense the greatest mystification of the 'war against terror' is bracketing state terror, the delimitation of the concept of terror to what 'terrorists' do. (Interestingly in this context, even Bin Laden himself is originally a creation of the CIA, an image that has fallen outside of American international politics; see Roy 2001.)

Seen in this perspective, sovereign exception or biopolitics is what sustains the disjunctive synthesis between post-politics and terror. After all, when politics is foreclosed, bare life becomes the main object of politics. Concomitantly, the only way to introduce passion into the world of passive nihilism, to mobilize the hedonist, becomes a politics of fear that targets bare life, or, biopolitics (Žižek 2008a: 34). Biopolitics and post-politics are thus complementary ideological operations in that while the 'citizen' is reduced to bare life, liberal 'tolerance' or 'respect' for the other can be cultivated as a virtue:

> Can there be a more emphatic contrast than the one between respect for the Other's vulnerability and the reduction of the Other to mere 'bare life' regulated by administrative knowledge? But what if these two stances none the less spring from a single root? What if they are two aspects of one and the same underlying attitude? [. . .] What these two poles share is precisely the underlying refusal of any higher causes, the notion that the ultimate goal of our lives is life itself. This is why there is no contradiction between the respect for the vulnerable Other and the readiness to justify torture, the extreme expression of treating people as *Homini sacer*.
>
> (ibid. 36)

Post-political 'respect' is possible only because it can enter into a disjunctive synthesis with terror, or rather, state-terror, which reduces life to bare life, to life without value. The increasing justification and

legitimization of torture in the aftermath of 9/11 is interesting in this respect. Traditionally, political terror aimed, through sabotage, at provoking state terror, hoping that through its escalation 'the enemy betrays himself, becomes visible' (Meinhof 2001: 279). Again, this strategy had dubious political success. And once more, with Bin Laden, the tables are reversed. Thus, only five days after 9/11, Dick Cheney explained to an NBC interviewer how the Bush administration would proceed to deal with terror attacks, blatantly declaring that the administration would 'work through, sort of, the dark side' (quoted in Conrad 2005). 'Dark side' meant the suspension of *habeas corpus* and of the international laws regulating the treatment of prisoners of war. That is, using torture (terror) to stop terror.

Operating through the 'dark side', in an illegal framework, is not new. There has, so to speak, always been a difference between the foreground (the legal façade) and background (the illegal 'dark side'). What is new is that the difference between the foreground and the background seems to have disappeared today, that the 'dark side' is legalized, or normalized, in the war against terror. After all, 'a state which has security as its sole task and source of legitimacy is a fragile organism; it can always be provoked by terrorism to become itself terrorist' (Agamben 2001). Security can easily turn into a perversion, that is, terror, and when the difference between State and terror disappears, they start to justify each other, terrorizing the political itself. In this sense, both terror and the politics of security tend to transcend politics in a 'dark' pact. The obscene/off-scene reality behind the politics of security is that 'security' brings with it more (state) terror. And in this sense obsession with security, that is, living in permanent fear, is the real victory of terrorism (Baudrillard 2003: 81). The ultimate catastrophe emerging from the war against terror is thus the disappearance of politics.

Bin Laden's terrorism has so far forced Western democracy to 'betray itself' but this did not, as Meinhof (2001: 279) envisaged, 'make the masses rise' and 'allow contradictions to escalate'. Contemporary terror is post-political in the sense that it is a product of indistinct forces rather than political antagonisms. Post-politics versus post-political terror. So, it seems, ours is a 'one-dimensional society' in which the distinctions have disappeared, the opposites are united in a nihilistic 'synthesis'. Thus, for all their mutual 'enmity', terror and the war against terror resemble unidentical twins: they simultaneously express convergence and divergence, similarity and difference, without, of course, perfect identity. Both depict a world of Either/Or and reduce politics to a clash between MacWorld and

Jihad. Both speak in absolutes. Both fetishize their own 'way of life' (religious orthodoxy, and security as a new religion). And finally, both have their own priests.

This mirroring reveals a disjunctive synthesis between fundamentalism and the politics of security in a society in which it is a 'moral duty' to wage war against fundamentalist terror, whose definition, however, remains obscenely indistinct. Thus, whereas religion once could 'explain' natural catastrophes with reference to a transcendent God's will or the devil's work, in today's society terror seems to function like a stand-in for what goes wrong. The 'terrorist' is the new 'devil', equally non-existent, equally functional. As such, politics of fear finds a materialized enemy in the terrorist to be able to de-politicize politics, to recast political problems as military necessities (see Bauman 1999: 5; 2004: 87). In this respect, even the apparently 'dysfunctional' aspects of the politics of security perform an indispensable function. Torture, an extreme actualization of state terror, is again a good example of such dysfunctional functionality. Thus CIA director Porter Goss can tell that torture 'doesn't work. There are better ways to deal with captives' (quoted in Klein 2005). What is, then, the use of torture, what is the reason for its increasing popularity? The answer comes from an unexpected source:

> Lynndie England, the fall girl for Abu Ghraib, was asked during her botched trial why she and her colleagues had forced naked prisoners into a human pyramid. 'As a way to control them', she replied. Exactly. As an interrogation tool, torture is a bust. But when it comes to social control, nothing works quite like torture.
>
> (Klein 2005)

Then, torture works not in spite of, but rather because of, its 'dysfunctional' aspect. Like all machinic assemblages, technologies of security work by 'breaking down' (see Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 8). Which also explains why the whole 'war against terror' increasingly resembles a comedy of (t)errors: no weapons of mass destruction are found; Bin Laden is not caught; Afghanistan seems to be more deserted than ever; democracy has not arrived in Iraq, and so on, but everything goes on and on. As Marx said, facts of great significance in world history occur twice; first as tragedy then as comedy (1934: 10). If 9/11 has the structure of a tragic event, the war against terror has the structure of a comedy, a non-event. It is so in at least three senses. Firstly, in contrast to tragedy, its narrative

structure is parasitic on the expectation of happy endings (democracy, reconciliation, etc.). Thus, secondly, and again in contrast to tragedy, which necessarily causes disharmony and disruption by 'changing everything', comedy builds upon harmony and consensus; it produces non-events within the confines of a given hegemonic discourse. And thirdly, the only subject position comedy allows for is that of 'types' whose actions are a direct outcome of their social positions rather than of individual ('tragic') choices. As Aristotle puts it, 'comedy is . . . an imitation of inferior people' (1996: 9).

It is striking, in this respect, to observe the parallel between the infantilized subject of security and the frightened subject of terror, the hostage. The hostage is an anonymous figure, a naked, formless body, which is absolutely convertible: anybody and everybody can be a hostage (Baudrillard 1990: 34–5). Likewise, the politics of security redefines the citizen as a fearful subject to be protected, like a child. Anybody and everybody must be protected. Consequently, both the enemy and the friend are de-subjectified; while the 'enemy' is reduced to an illegal combatant or a fundamentalist, the 'friend', the subject of security, becomes infantilized.

The threat is, therefore, Janus-faced: terrorism *and* the politics of security. Contemporary (war against) terror is part and parcel of the movement from politics to post-politics. And it is in this movement, which is also the movement of nihilism, that distinctions such as reality/representation, biology/politics, terror/war against terror tend to disappear today. After all, the 'cancelling out of differences' is a nihilistic principle par excellence (Deleuze 1984: 46). The power of nihilism is a power that pours everything into indifference (see Baudrillard 1994: 159, 163).

In a sense, then, it is deceptive to speak of a 'politics' of security because politics of security rejects the political nature of given questions. The antagonism, in other words, is not between those who say that the world today is more secure and those who say it is not. Rather, it is between those who would consider it a problem within the horizon of politics of security and those who would not. In other words, the antagonism is between security and asecurity, not between security and insecurity (Wæver 1997). Politics of security is, above all, about finding apolitical solutions to political problems. War, said Clausewitz, is the continuation of politics with other means; the war against terror, or the politics of security, seems to be the continuation of post-politics with other means.

Then, for all its violence, the antagonism between terror and

post-politics is a false one; what is suspended here is the real antagonism between nihilist and anti-nihilist politics, between Capital-god and living labour, between the nihilism of sovereign exception, of biopolitics, and life. *This* antagonism cannot be politicized by post-politics precisely because post-politics is itself grounded in the de-politicization of this antagonism.

EXCURSUS 2: HOUELLEBECQ'S SPITEFUL CARNIVAL

> He is French literature's ageing *enfant terrible*, a nihilistic provocateur who has never been afraid of a blazing row – whether it is appearing in court for inciting racial hatred, irking feminists, or raging against the publishing world.
>
> (Chrisafis 2008)

> Anything goes, you can do what you please as long as you're a fully recognised clown.
>
> (Céline; quoted in Bernstein 1992: 155)

No doubt that to his euphoric readers Michel Houellebecq is a prophetic writer, a visionary diagnostician of the contemporary ills, including the misery caused by commodification processes and the consequent breakdown of the social bonds. At the same time, however, many despise his sexism, racist jokes, perversions and fascistic tendencies. 'Like Céline, he's a right-wing misanthrope who has produced a genuinely perceptive and resonant picture of French society – obscenified and isolating' (Tait 2006). Houellebecq's secret is perhaps playing these two extremes against each other: a best-selling writer/star whom many love to hate. Thus, in his work, the object of desire and the abject fully coincide. Indeed, there is a

striking parallel between the spectacle of Houellebecq as an 'abject hero' (Bernstein 1992) and other contemporary spectacles such as the Big Brother TV Show that deliberately erase the distinctions between inside and outside, city and jungle, politics and biology, and so on. Thus, Houellebecq's characters often oscillate between an animal-like nakedness and humanness.

Significantly in our context, the most visible leitmotivs in his novels are anger, *ressentiment* and spite, an explosive mixture that systematically evolves into a will to (self)destruction. Fiction, of course, cannot be taken as a source of unmediated social commentary. Yet, considering that the social often reproduces itself as fiction, it is profoundly significant that in one way or another all Houellebecq's fiction is about sustained acts of spite against sociality and every form of bonding – except, that is, capitalist exchange. In his work, nihilism often combines political impotence and enjoyment in (self)destruction. And as such, Houellebecq offers an invaluable opportunity for diagnostic social theory to study contemporary nihilism, especially how anger ceases to find political expression in our society and thus often turns into spite.

Here I attempt at seeing the contemporary society through Houellebecq's perspective. Capitalism and sex are the key concepts in this context. Then I turn to the affective economy of *ressentiment* and spite in his work. Finally, I formulate a question to return in the rest of the book: is it possible to imagine a sociality, a 'city', without spite? Is it, above all, possible to distinguish anger and spite, to disrupt the seemingly automatic link between them that often results in contempt for anger as well as spite in today's post-political society?

GENERALIZED EXCHANGE

> As a purely arithmetical addition of value units, money can be characterized as absolutely formless. Formlessness and a purely quantitative character are one and the same. To the extent that things are considered only in terms of their quantity, their form is disregarded. This is most evident if they are weighed. Therefore, money as such is the most terrible destroyer of form.
>
> (Simmel 1978: 272)

Ours is, Houellebecq (1998) insists, a society in which all activity, all sociality, is subsumed under a system of generalized market transactions.

In such a society everything is exchangeable; one can pay for 'whatever' (which is the title of his first novel). And since capitalism is everywhere, bonding without the intervention of the market is impossible. There is, in other words, no outside: 'I associate very little with other human beings' (ibid. 14). Houellebecq's society is thus a collection of solitary individuals who do not relate to one another, a 'society of individuals' (see Bauman 2001).

Crucially, however, this cynical reduction of all sociality to capitalist exchange took place because of the 'multiplication of . . . degrees of freedom' (Houellebecq 1998: 38). That is, the erosion of the social, the 'discontent' with it, is caused by the excess of freedom. Hitherto the discussion of freedom was intrinsically associated with the intervention of authority figures that provided security and certainty in a trade-off with freedom. 'Discontent', described by Freud, for instance, was a discontent with symbolic authorities (the law, culture) that guaranteed security and certainty (reality) but restricted freedom (enjoyment). In Houellebecq's post-political society, a new form of discontent is emerging from within freedom itself: to choose reflexively, and to do so without a fundament or authority. As Bauman (1997: 1–4) argues, too much, not too little, freedom is the source of contemporary 'discontents of civilisation'.

Consequently, Houellebecq's is a smooth, flattened social universe without authority figures, a world populated by infantilized heroes who never grow up. *Platform*, for instance, opens with the death of the father, invoking Camus' stranger: 'Father died last year. I don't subscribe to the theory by which we only become *truly adult* when our parents die; we never become truly adult' (Houellebecq 2002: 3). But despite never becoming adults, people age, which is why in all Houellebecq's books ageing is the main source of scourge: 'in ageing one becomes less seductive, and on that account bitter. One is jealous of the young, and so one hates them' (1998: 113). Hence we meet in Houellebecq's sexual utopia, from which the old are excluded, only infantilized characters who won't grow up and who, as such, as half-formed beings, are perfect symbols of the central conflict in his books, that between civilization and barbarism, between modernity and 'a brutal regression, typical of modernity, to a stage preceding all civilisation' (2005: 153). No wonder that these characters often occupy a grey zone between society and the state of nature. After all, the 'childhood' of society is the state of nature. And the 'nature' that comes *after* 'society'

is the state of exception, a condition in which the 'citizen' is reduced to a member of an infantilized crowd (see Agamben 1998; Diken and Laustsen 2005). Thus, Houellebecq's anonymous protagonists are blasé loners in big cities, and they spend most of their time doing nothing or performing indifferent functions. They mimic a massified society that falls back upon nature. In *The Possibility of an Island*, for instance, protagonists are cyborgs who live in a post-apocalyptic future, in which surviving humans are depicted as 'savages' – 'slightly more intelligent monkeys, and, for this reason, more dangerous' (quoted in Tait 2006: 14). A genetically modified world in which humanity is a*ban*doned by society.

In this sense, in Houellebecq infantilization (of the human) is about regressive evolution: not a movement from the child to the adult, but from the adult to the child, from society, *bios*, to nature, *zoē*, a process in which the orangutan stems from humans.

> I am perfectly conscious of the regressive nature of my work; I know that it can be compared to the attitude of adolescents who, instead of confronting the problems of adolescence, dive headfirst into their stamp collection, their herbarium of whatever other glittering, limited, multicoloured little world they choose. . . . She was right: I am a tiny little invalid child, very sick, who cannot live.
>
> (Houellebecq 2005: 109–110)

It is well known that first in modernity childhood took the form of an exceptional period in individual chronology. In contrast to pre-modernity in which the child did not exist as a separate category, in modernity it emerged as a subject to be normalized and disciplined: the child-man is, per definition, de-socialized. To be a proper 'man' one should first be a proper 'child', that is, disciplined and normalized in a site of confinement. And then the child could develop, living a life on the move from one enclosed institution to another, each with its own disciplinary practices. This, however, has changed in Houellebecq's social topology, which resembles more Deleuze's 'control society' than Foucault's disciplinary society:

> In disciplinary societies you were always starting all over again (as you went from school to barracks, from barracks to factory), while in control societies you never finish anything – business, training, and military

> service being coexisting metastable states of a single modulation, a sort of universal transmutation.
>
> (Deleuze 1995: 179)

In Houellebecq, one's childhood 'never finishes'. Infantilization is the end of the divide between the child and the adult with the result that the child (the exception) and the adult (the rule) are indistinguishable and thus the imperatives that govern the (adult) life of Houellebecq's heroes are the same as those that govern the nursery: play, experiment, security/protection. Hence his is a universe of impulsive and instantaneous play, 'a universe of simple desires and moments of unlimited pleasure' (quoted in Brea 2005: 1). A life 'without expectation' (Houellebecq 2004: 71). Further, Houellebecq's is a liquid, informational society, in which everything is in formation, one 'never finishes anything', never bonds. Hence his direct spectacle of sexual acts merely as visible, material performances of the body. 'No seduction, no representation: merely the integral coding of the body in the visible, where it becomes in fact definitively real, even more real than it is really!' (Baudrillard 2005: 69). And finally, Houellebecq's is a society of fear, of scare mongering, in which one is continuously reminded of the need to be protected. 'Even when there is nothing left to expect from life, there is still something to fear' (Houellebecq 2004: 71). In contrast to dreams, one can't influence fears. Fear makes one sceptical, which is why weariness is an indispensible ingredient of all dystopias. Even when all feeling of sociality disappears, one still feels fear.

And the predominant fear in this post-political world, in which capitalism has become a 'natural habitat' (Houellebecq 2005: 137), is Islamic terror with its absolute passion to destroy a world in which its values have no place. The role of terror is most visible in *Platform*. Michel, its protagonist, is a middle aged, ugly, blasé, self-loathing, misogynist, misanthropic, destructive single man. He goes to a singles' holiday camp in Thailand. Here, together with casual sex with local prostitutes, he is attracted to Valerie, another single from his tour. But Valerie is killed in a terrorist attack by Islamic fundamentalists. 'Islam had wrecked my life . . . In the days that followed, I devoted myself to trying to feel hatred for Muslims' (Houellebecq 2002: 349). Terror is part and parcel of Houellebecq's post-Oedipal society, in which symbolic authorities collapse but this is not experienced as emancipation. Rather, Houellebecq's paradigmatic, infantilized subject resents the fall of the symbolic authorities, their lack of authority. The problem in such a society is not

transgression, to jump over one's shadow, but to have a shadow in the first place: 'how can you jump over your shadow when you no longer have one' (Baudrillard 1994: 144)? The problem is, in other words, that this society can accommodate its own transgression, turn perversion into a norm, exception into a rule:

> artistic recognition . . . went first of all . . . to productions that praised evil – or, at least, that challenged moral values conventionally described as 'traditional', in a sort of institutionalised anarchy. . . . The putting to death of morality had, on the whole, become a sort of ritual sacrifice necessary for the reassertion of the dominant values . . . – centred for some decades on competition, innovation and energy, more than on fidelity and duty. If the fluidification of forms of behaviour required by a developed economy was incompatible with a normative catalogue of restrained conduct, it was, however, perfectly suited to a perpetual celebration of the will and the ego. Any form of cruelty, cynical selfishness or violence was therefore welcome. . . .
>
> (Houellebecq 2005: 32).

Having definitively moved beyond moral values, we live today in the objective reality of a perverse society, in which excess sells and anarchy is institutionalized. Yet, paradoxically, this objectivity exchanged for moral values in Houellebecq is only a disenchanted successor of religion. In Houellebecq's fiction what were hitherto the characteristics of religion are applied to capitalism, to the 'sexual marketplace'. That is, the real function of much criticized cynicism in Houellebecq's work is to elevate capitalism to the level of religion, to depict 'capitalism as religion' (see Benjamin 1996: 288–91). Responding to the same fears, the same sufferings and the same strife as the religion, Houellebecq's marketplace is a pure cult religion, which works without a specific dogma and theology, and which celebrates permanent duration. Yet, it is a religion that creates guilt without atonement and entails endurance to the point at which God himself is included in the logic of capital. 'Capitalism is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction' (Benjamin 1996: 289).

SEXUAL CAPITAL

According to Houellebecq, sex represents a second type of differentiation parallel to wealth in contemporary society (1998: 99). In a society that functions according to the logic of businesses, what matters most is one's market value. 'When I need tight little asses to keep up my erection, then I'll pay. I'll pay the market price' (Houellebecq 2005: 57). In this respect, he gives a sarcastic twist to the *Communist Manifesto*:

> Just like unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of *absolute pauperisation*. Some men make love every day; others five or six times in their life, or never. Some make love with dozens of women; others with none. It's what's known as 'the law of the market'. In an economic system where unfair dismissal is prohibited, every person more or less manages to find their place. In a sexual system where adultery is prohibited, every person more or less manages to find their bed mate. In a totally liberal economic system, certain people accumulate considerable fortunes; others stagnate in unemployment in misery. In a totally liberal sexual system, certain people have a varied and exciting erotic life; others are reduced to masturbation and solitude. Economic liberalism is an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society. Sexual liberalism is likewise an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society.
>
> (Houellebecq 1998: 99)

Only sex tourism, that is, the market, can give the sexual paupers consumer satisfaction by making the two flows, those of the ugly rich and the beautiful poor, meet in a 'sexual social democracy' (Houellebecq 2001: 260, 265). This is also the only instance where Houellebecq can take sides with the old:

> Not only did the old not have the right to fuck . . . but they no longer had the right to rebel against a world that nevertheless crushed them unsparingly. . . . [R]ebellion was forbidden to them, rebellion too – like sexuality, like pleasure, like love – seemed reserved for the young. . . . I incited instead the old to rebel against the young. . . . Why for example should male and female adolescents, voracious and sheep-like con-

> sumers, always greedy for pocket money, not be *forced into* prostitution, the only means by which they could modestly reimburse the immense efforts and struggles that were made for their well-being? And why, at a time when contraception had been perfected, and the risk of genetic degeneration perfectly localised, should we maintain the absurd and humiliating taboo that is incest? Those are the real questions, the authentic moral issues!
>
> (Houellebecq 2005: 154–5)

Such passages are significant because in them Houellebecq's envy/hatred of the young evolves into a demand for 'justice' in the sexual market. As mentioned before, justice is basically a form of revenge, a relation between injury caused and pain suffered, between a creditor and a debtor. As such, justice makes one responsible for a debt and thus paves the way to Houellebecq's sexual utopia. However, in his permissive society, the outcome of the demand for justice cannot be based on the imposition of a shared prohibition on sexuality but rather on equal *jouissance*, which takes the form of the generalized superego injunction 'Enjoy'! (see Žižek 2008a: 76). It is precisely when the promise of enjoyment turns into an imperative to enjoy that sexuality (exception) becomes a rule and bare life is exposed in its banality.

Concomitantly, Houellebecq's approach to sexuality necessitates generalizing the exception or making transgression of the law itself a law. Therefore, in Houellebecq, transgression is elevated into a moral injunction, sexual enjoyment is rendered a duty, everything is over-sexualized, and all social relations are reduced to sexual relations. 'When physical love disappears, everything disappears' (Houellebecq 2005: 48). Hence Houellebecq's fascination with youth, beauty and strength, the three essentials of physical pleasure. 'And, with regard to physical love, I hardly had any illusions. Youth, beauty, strength: the criteria for physical love are exactly the same as those of Nazism' (ibid. 49). Is Houellebecq Nazist?

As Roberto Esposito (2008) argues, even though Nazism was militarily and politically defeated in the Second World War, it has in fact won a cultural victory in the sense that its emphasis on biopolitics, its focus on the body as a political category, has now become a commonplace in Western liberal culture. If 'man for Nazism is his body and only his body' (ibid. 13), man for Houellebecq is one who possesses his own body, can use it, buy and sell it, as if it were a commodity. This 'body' does not, as is the case with political Nazism, belong to the state but is the individual's

own property. In this sense, the body appears, through sexuality, as a biopolitical element in Houellebecq. This is visible, for instance, when he restages the *Communist Manifesto* as a spectacle of bare life. In this respect there is also an interesting parallel between Houellebecq and the Sadist tradition:

> Sade's modernity does not consist in his having foreseen the unpolitical primacy of sexuality in our unpolitical age. On the contrary, Sade is as contemporary as he is because of his incomparable presentation of the absolutely political (that is, 'biopolitical') meaning of sexuality and physiological life itself. Like the concentration camps of our century, the totalitarian character of the organization of life in Silling's castle – with its meticulous regulations that do not spare any aspect of physiological life (not even the digestive function, which is obsessively codified and publicized) – has its root in the fact that what is proposed here for the first time is a normal and collective (and hence political) organization of human life founded solely on bare life.
>
> (Agamben 1998: 135)

In Sade's work, the public and the private, bios and bare life, become interchangeable as the bed takes the place of the 'city', of politics. The significance of sex in Houellebecq, too, lies in this swap. In other words, it is when the 'city' is transformed into a hedonistic consumer product (e.g. the tourist camp in *Platform*), we encounter the Sadist face of Houellebecq's utopia. Like Sade, he prescribes everybody's search for unlimited enjoyment, a demand for sexual 'justice' through which everybody can have free access to everybody's body. And like Sade, he speaks from the position of a libertine and therefore can overlook the fact that his search for freedom necessitates a law to be transgressed. Thus, in Houellebecq, the law's (castrating) impact is never felt. Instead, we get an infantilized, smooth social space, in which the law ('sexual liberalism') does not constrain because transgression is its very principle.

In contrast to Sade, however, in Houellebecq the systematic obscenification produces a rift between desire and pleasure. Just as he reduces all flows to one, that of capital, he trims down all desire to pleasure. He sees desire as a banal ruse and, instead, seeks 'absolute simplicity' (Houellebecq 2005: 130). In this, he reduces life, now characterized by a pessimism of weakness, to bare life. Since suffering originates in unfulfilled desire, the function of pessimism in Houellebecq is an attempt at extinguishing one's

desire to be able to keep suffering at bay, a passive nihilist strategy, which functions as the phantasmatic backdrop of all Houellebecq's novels. Thus Houellebecq's characters satisfy each other in unusually impassionate ways. Therefore, perhaps, the key to understand Houellebecq's universe is bare repetition, that is, repetition without difference or consequence.

What seems shocking amidst this atmosphere of 'simplicity' is not that money buys some women but that 'there were some who *are not* available'. Hence Houellebecq's ironic demand for more social democracy, for more 'market regulation' (2005: 57). If in control society everything disappears into the market, the new 'nomads' are 'those who refuse to disappear' (see Deleuze 1995: 138). Thus they become objects of *ressentiment*. This is the role of 'stupid fucking Islam' in Houellebecq (2004: 57, 63).

> My last show was subtitled '100% hateful' – the inscription was emblazoned across the poster, in Eminem-style handwriting; it was in no way hyperbole. From the outset, I got to the subject of the conflict in the Middle East – which had already brought me a few significant media successes – in a manner which, wrote the *Le Monde* journalist, was 'singularly abrasive'. The first sketch, entitled 'The Battle of the Tiny Ones', portrayed Arabs – renamed 'Allah's vermin' – Jews – described as 'circumcised fleas'. . . . I then widened this to an attack on all forms of rebellion, of nationalist and revolutionary struggle, and in reality against political action itself. Of course, I was developing throughout the show a vein of *right-wing anarchy* along the lines of 'one dead combatant means one less cunt able to fight', which, from Céline to Audiard, had already contributed to the finest hours of French comedy . . .
>
> (Houellebecq 2005: 38)

Houellebecq writes that he 'discovered racism' when he was working on his first book about *HP Lovecraft*, a Hitler admirer from the early twentieth Century whose style celebrates radical nihilism and longs for a catastrophic disappearance of humanity (quoted in King 2005: 70). *The Possibility of an Island* showcases some of the results of this discovery. The main protagonist, Daniel, is introduced to a new, decaffeinated religion without a metaphysical core, a religion that imposes no constraints on pleasure and promises the prolongation of material life, immortality, through cloning. He decides to clone himself. Then the book turns into a succession of half-mourning, half-cynical stories that reflect on a passive

nihilist world devoted to hedonism in an eternal present. But everlasting bare life leads to a void. Devoid of values to interpret life, all Daniels are swallowed up in the nothingness of the will. They start to shoot humans because they want the disappearance of the species. A post-apocalyptic world, which is, the protagonists tell us, 'the result of the Eurabian civil war currently being gleefully predicted by Le Penistes and unhinged neo-cons' (Tait 2006: 14).

But in which sense is Houellebecq a racist? Does he not, even though he is a big producer of racist clichés on Islam, constantly erase his utterances so that it becomes impossible to distinguish irony and fascism, racism and freedom of speech? Houellebecq is a racist in a cynical way. Revisiting his Sadism could be explanatory in this respect.

Sadism is a way of being, that is, it cannot be explained by way of a dichotomy between normality and pathology, which is also what Houellebecq mocks in a culture in which perversion is the law. In Lacan's definition, the Sadist imagines himself as an object for the desire of the 'Other' (truth, Fuhrer, justice, etc.). That is, being unegoistical in orientation, the Sadist is like a slave who blindly follows his master's will (see Lacan 1990: 62; Žižek 1992: 220–1). It is only when it is practised in the name of a higher value or power, that is, in an unegoistical manner, that 'immorality' can become a value in itself. Yet, although a slave for the Other, the Sadist is also a master for the victim. It is this duality that characterizes Houellebecq's simultaneous relation to the superego figures (his 'right wing anarchism' that compels him to transgress the dictates of political correctness and scorn 'France's pseudo-democracy' (2005: 88)) and to the Muslim who is sublimated as an imaginary equivalent of *homo sacer*, about whom everything is permitted to say. What is most interesting in Houellebecq's fiction is thus the total coincidence of excessive, pure hatred of the Muslim, with his 'sexual liberalism', of a senseless and spiteful hatred of the Other with the post-political, 'tolerant' logic of control society in which nobody, no difference is excluded in principle, in which 'whatever' is exchangeable.

> The all-encompassing nature of the post-political Concrete Universality which accounts for everybody at the level of symbolic inclusion, this multiculturalist vision-and-practice of 'unity in difference' ('all equal, all different'), leaves open, as the only way to mark the Difference, the proto-sublimatory gesture of elevating a contingent Other (of race, sex, religion . . .) into the 'absolute Otherness' of the impossible Thing, the

> ultimate threat to our identity – this Thing which must be annihilated if we are to survive. Therein resides the properly Hegelian paradox: the final arrival of the truly rational 'concrete universality' – the abolition of antagonisms, the 'mature' universe of negotiated co-existence of different groups – coincides with its radical opposite, with thoroughly contingent outbursts of violence.
>
> (Žižek 2005: 1)

It is no surprise that the only legitimate conflict in Houellebecq's 'sexual liberalism', a liberalism obsessed with Manichean cultural/religious distinctions and with the 'clash' of civilizations, is cultural/ethnic conflict. But how can Houellebecq's anti-heroes experience racism and fascism merely as an external frame without constitutive effects on their being? How can they know and still do it? Cynicism, the reduction of ideology to merely an external phenomenon, is built upon a false premise that hides the fact that ideology is sustained by this very distance (see Sloterdijk 1988; Žižek 1991). Houellebecq knows very well that his hatred of Islam is a construction, that not all Muslims are terrorists or idiots and so on, but nevertheless arranges his writing according to this scheme. This is only possible because this 'ironic' stance sustains the Sadistic/libertarian scenario that is repeated in all his books. What is immoral in an ideology appears as its opposite, as an ironic mask. It is precisely through the (mis)conception of an 'I' outside the reach of ideology that the ideology is sustained. Essential to Houellebecq's success is thus his colourful exploitation of the fact that the dominant culture itself has endowed his 'provocative' position with the compensatory prestige of prophetic perversions denied to those seen as 'normal'.

FROM *RESSENTIMENT* TO SPITE – FIRE AS SOCIAL TOPOLOGY

> There is no monster hidden in the abyss, there is only fire.
>
> (Houellebecq 2005: 78)

Characteristically, in Houellebecq 'physical beauty plays . . . exactly the same role as nobility of blood in the Ancient Régime: for the young, beautiful and the strong the rest of the world is made up of "servants"' (Houellebecq 2005: 156). And of course the ugly 'slave' is resentful: 'You will never represent . . . a young girl's erotic dream. You have to resign yourself to the inevitable. . . . That's how it is' (Houellebecq 1998: 116).

> Yet that doesn't mean, however, that all possibility of revenge is closed to you. These women you desire so much, you too can possess them. You can even possess what is most precious about them. . . . It is not their beauty, I can tell you that much; it isn't their vagina either, nor even their love; because all these disappear with life itself. And from now on you can possess their life. Launch yourself on a career of murder this very evening; believe me, my friend, it's the only way still open to you. When you feel these women trembling at the end of your knife, and begging for their young lives, then will you truly be the master; then you will possess them body and soul.
>
> (Houellebecq 1998: 116–7)

In a society in which everyone is determined to seek pleasure, the lack of pleasure takes the form of *ressentiment* and a thirst for revenge. What is interesting here is the bio-political form *ressentiment* takes. There is, in this context, a direct link between bare life and Houellebecq's master/slave dialectic. It is against this background that becoming 'master' through revenge is the 'only way' left for the 'abject hero', even when this implies radically antisocial acts.

> Fiction often seems like a form of revenge on the world; Houellebecq's is an extreme case. Read alongside his biography, his novels turn out to be filled with highly specific attacks on jobs, places and people that have, in one way or another, pissed him off.
>
> (Tait 2006: 4)

As such, in Houellebecq, *ressentiment* ceases to remain a passive, powerless emotion but gains an astonishing potential for (fictive or real) violence. Thus, one of the central features of his characters is their sense of victimization and their compensatory urge to exert violence on others, which also explains their arrogant tendency constantly to switch from a resentful loser to a spiteful avenger and back again. But how can destructive desire emanate from the reactive forces of Houellebecq's man of *ressentiment?*

In Houellebecq the protagonists are denied true action and thus are busy imagining revenge as compensation. Their emotions such as anger, hate, envy, etc. cannot find an outlet. The feeling of such impotence and the awareness of it, perhaps the two most visible features of Houellebecq's characters, are, in other words, necessary conditions for *ressentiment*. Or, in Houellebecq's language: 'Have a good laugh, my little

cunts. Later I'll be the one on the podium and I'll give you all the finger' (2005: 80).

This does not, however, explain why there is so much aggression in Houellebecq's work. After all, often building upon imaginary revenge, *ressentiment* is not necessarily aggressive in practice. What is crucial here is to recall how *ressentiment* can transform itself into radical nihilism, an aggressive will to deny and destroy everything, including life. Significantly, therefore, although the movement of desire in Houellebecq often is restricted to a hedonistic pleasure principle in many instances, it is pitched beyond it, towards drive and its consummation in death. In this, the obliteration of desire, instead of its mastering, becomes a promise of freedom. Thus, through a continuous anti-production of desire and an exploration of literary forms that can depict 'indifference and nothingness' (1998: 40), his radical nihilism comes into sight as an alternative to, or rather as an extension of commodity fetishism. At this point, radical nihilism ceases to be an attribute of an external 'other', of Islamic terror, only; and the disjunctive synthesis of passive and radical nihilism becomes internalized in Houellebecq's protagonists themselves. Theirs is a radical nihilism that calls for a spiteful carnival aiming at the destruction of practically everything in search for a real outside, for 'the possibility of an island'. In this regard Houellebecq's work illustrates the difficulty of sublimation in a passive nihilist society. But what is at issue here is not only the difficulty of creating sublime art objects; an even more radical problem is that, in the contemporary society:

> the very fundamental matrix of sublimation, that of the central Void, the empty ('sacred') place of the Thing exempted from the circuit of everyday economy, which is then filled in by a positive object that is thereby 'elevated to the dignity of the Thing' (Lacan's definition of sublimation), seems to be increasingly under threat; what is threatened is the very gap between the empty Place and the (positive) element filling it in.
>
> (Žižek 2000: 26)

In the face of this difficulty, Houellebecq's strategy is either racism, that is, elevating Islam to the level of the sublime Evil, the Thing, or sustaining the void, the empty place of the sacred Thing, by turning everything into an abject, 'so it is as if, paradoxically, the only way to sustain the (Sacred) Place is to fill it up with trash, with an excremental abject' (Žižek 2000: 27). Seen in this way, one could say that Houellebecq is perhaps

trying to save the logic of sublimation. The problem, however, is that the collapse of the sublimated element, the abject, into the Void, that is, the destruction of the gap between the element and the void, brings with it a psychotic disintegration of the whole symbolic order into a post-Oedipal sociality of the infantilized, 'dangerous monkeys'. In other words, desperately searching for an island, an outside, Houellebecq heads toward a total anti-production: the disappearance of the self, of society, of politics, of laughter, of tears, and even of species.

> The usual contention is that hate is a hatred of the other – hence the illusion one is opposing it by preaching tolerance and respect for difference – but in fact hate (racism, etc.) is not so much a rejection of the other as a *fanatical desire for otherness*. It seeks despairingly to compensate for the loss of the other by the exorcizing of an artificial other, which may, as a result, be anyone whatever. In a lobotomized world, where conflicts are immediately contained, it seeks to resuscitate otherness – if only to destroy it. [. . .] This is a culture of *Ressentiment*, then, but one in which, behind the resentment of the other, one cannot but sense a resentment of self . . . which may extend as far as self-destruction.
>
> (Baudrillard 2002: 94)

Indeed, nothing obsesses Houellebecq more than destruction, a total rejection of the world as it is. Thus his novels instantiate many situations in which the self, the society, can seemingly never be reconstituted. No other civilization, no other society, Houellebecq (1998: 148) writes, has been capable of building up so much bitterness in its subjects. He doesn't 'like this world', the society in which he lives 'disgusts' him, and he finds 'no meaning' in it (ibid. 82). Consequently, he perceives no problem in destroying it, even though that implies his own destruction as well. Here everybody, not only the scapegoat (the Muslim?), is threatened with destruction. Undoing the social is 'the way forward' (Houellebecq 2005: 116). Hence the Houellebecqian anti-hero's destiny is 'to spread unhappiness around himself by making other people's existence as intolerable as his own' (ibid. 43).

In this way, in a peculiar disjunctive synthesis, violence and passivity together form a vicious cycle in Houellebecq, a 'synthesis', in which passive nihilism gives way to impotent outbursts of *passages of a l'acte* and thus mimics the very force it tries to ward off, the Islamic terror. As *ressentiment* is radicalized into spite, Houellebecq's anti-hero brings to

mind Enzensberger's 'radical loser' who can only imagine one solution to his problem: 'a worsening of the evil conditions under which he suffers' (Enzensberger 2005: 4–5). Not surprisingly, therefore, in Houellebecq fire is the symbol of spite and disappearance. Thus, *Platform* ends with a terrorist attack on a tourist camp in Thailand. In *The Possibility of an Island* we witness the disappearance of the species in a post-apocalyptic, pro-fascist world. Similarly, *Lanzarote*'s is literally a post-volcanic, 'burned-out' social topology.

> Before us, a plain of black rocks with razor-sharp edges stretched out about a kilometre; there was not a plant nor an insect anywhere. Immediately beyond, the horizon was obstructed by the red, in places almost purple, slopes of the volcanoes. The landscape had not been softened or sculpted by erosion; it was of an utter brutality.
>
> (Houellebecq 2004: 17)

'The social' is traditionally conceptualized in terms of solid 'regions' or structures (pure order), 'networks' (hybrid ordering) and 'flows' (hybrid, nomadic disorder). There emerges in Houellebecq, however, with spite, a fourth social topology, fire, in which everything (power, meaning, subjectivity) is taken to the extreme and disappears (in fatal strategies, simulacra, in terrorism, in the sexual market). Hence the intimate relation between fire and spite, and the ultimate meaning of disappearance in Houellebecq. Indeed, this desire for total destruction is the other side of his capitalist fantasy, his market utopia. After all, the reverse case of commodity fetishism is waste: the object devoid of its fetish-value, totally decommodified and de-sublimated. What makes Houellebecq postmodern is perhaps the realization that all consumption artefacts become obsolete before being used and end as waste, transforming the earth into a gigantic wasteland, which is a permanent feature of the capitalist drive (see Žižek 2000: 40–1).

If waste is a sign of the growing significance of desublimation in contemporary capitalism, Houellebecq's obsessive, antisocial spitefulness is in this sense capitalism's inherent fantasy, concealing the fact that capitalism without surplus-enjoyment (which necessitates sublimation) is impossible. When the object is delivered from the sublime *objet petit a*, it becomes waste. Waste produced by Houellebecq is thus, in a sense, the spiteful residue of capitalism itself. Therefore Houellebecq's nihilism is not subversive but supportive of capitalist desire. The paradox of his

fictive (self)destruction is that it makes an excess of (self) destruction. It invests destruction itself with desire. Houellebecq writes: 'Desire itself disappears; only bitterness, jealousy and fear remain' (Houellebecq 1998: 148). Yet 'it is only *this* desire, the very anti-desire, that is desire *par excellence*' (Žižek 2001: 41).

CARNIVALESQUE – AND BITTER

> Come on, it's December; enjoy the freedom our fathers decreed, and say what you like.
>
> (Horace 2005: 67)

It must be acknowledged that Houellebecq's texts are literary rather than literal or reliable statements of a world-view. He is the latest in a long tradition of misanthropic social satire in French literature that goes back beyond French literature to the Roman, particularly Juvenal, tradition. As Bernstein (1992) shows, the 'abject hero', the romanticized loser of modernity, is in fact a character that originated already in the carnival, in Saturnalian dialogues, in which the roles of the master and the slave are reversed. Crucially, the structure of the dialogues has a deeply bitter and negative strand that has survived throughout modern times. In contemporary culture the abject hero remains a central figure who refuses to conform to the society which he despises. In this sense, all Houellebecq's characters adopt the discourse of the abject hero, of the slave in the carnival. Thus Houellebecq himself is known as the *enfant terrible* of French literature, and in his paradoxical, 'permitted freedom', he can denigrate himself in order to be able to denigrate the society, his 'master', reversing all normative hierarchies. In this respect, it is easy to recognize in Houellebecq an echo of Horace's satires that address the carnival:

> All right, I admit I'm easily led by my belly, my nostrils twitch at a savoury smell, I'm weak, spineless – if you like, a glutton into the bargain, but you are exactly the same, if not worse.
>
> (Horace 2005: 67–8)

It is precisely in this sense Houellebecq's characters are always already prepared to debase themselves, to accept their misery, displaying a self-consciousness internal to the text: 'I am cynical, bitter . . .' (Houellebecq 2005: 22). In *The Possibility of an Island*, for instance, Daniel, the

protagonist who is a stand-up comedian, admits that he is cynical, that he is a 'clown'. One should not, however, be misled by this 'modesty' – for this move only serves the argument that the society that surrounds him is even more cynical. For instance, when he tells jokes like:

> 'Do you know what they call the fat stuff around the vagina'?
> 'No'
> 'The woman'
>
> (Houellebecq 2005: 11)

He is quick to add, however, sarcastically:

> Strangely, I managed to throw in that kind of thing, whilst still getting good reviews in Elle and Télérama.
>
> (ibid.)

So Daniel gets away with racism, cannibalism, paedophilia, parricide, scenes of torture and barbarism and fast capitalizes 'all the lucrative niches' in the artistic world (Houellebecq 2005: 110). In this, hatred specific to *ressentiment* disguises itself as modesty and declarations of inferiority (see Deleuze 1983: 117). Indeed, the man of *ressentiment* knows 'how to make himself provisionally small and submissive' (Nietzsche 1996: 24). I am cynical, but the society around me is more cynical; I am bad, but you are worse. However, one should not take this seriously for the buffoon himself does not take his misfortune seriously. His misfortune is what enables him to write 'like a complete bastard with impunity' (Houellebecq 2005: 11). Houellebecq's resentful figures excel in turning their misfortune into a source of surplus enjoyment. Blaming and accusing others, therefore, become characteristic of their discourse.

One of Houellebecq's characters who is based on a real person, the owner of a New Age holiday camp described in *Atomised*, successfully prosecuted Houellebecq for depicting the camp as 'a torrid den of anonymous sex'; as a result, Houellebecq changed the name of the holiday camp in later editions (Tait 2006: 3–4). Interestingly, the owner of the holiday camp complained: 'I got the impression that he saw himself as a redresser of wrongs, but one who loves to wallow in the muck, while saying: "Look, society is even more disgusting than I am" ' (quoted in ibid. 15).

But, why is Daniel, Houellebecq's stand-up comedian, never authentically funny? Why, on the contrary, like all other Houellebecq

characters, does he seem bookish, like a trivial robot? Indeed, what makes the misery of Houellebecq characters so brutal is a perverse self-awareness, self-consciousness, regarding their inauthenticity. And faced with the hopelessness of inauthenticity, the abject hero's 'most promising option is to pass himself off as a monster' (Bernstein 1992: 31). Both the abject hero and the monster are irreconcilable with society. However, Houellebecq's resentful abject heroes, who suffer from self-contempt as much as they loathe others, lack the single-mindedness of the monster. They can only become monsters in an indirect way, through mimicry. Yet:

> paradoxically, to desire such a voice oneself *is* genuinely monstrous, and to attempt to convince others of its truth is, in its very fraudulence, a distinctly mad existence. So the Abject Hero is again doomed to a double existence: parodying a role that is, in reality, already his own, and imitating a state that he already inhabits.
>
> (ibid.)

In terms of this paradoxical topology that brings together the monstrous and the carnival, it is crucial to return to the temporality of Houellebecq's novels. Traditionally, the temporality of the Saturnalian dialogue is characterized by a carnivalesque suspension, a kind of 'state of exception', which was followed by a return to normalcy (see ibid. 20). As such, the carnival does not threaten the established power; rather, it performs a transgression that does not suppress but suspends the rule. Transgression completes the rule by transcending it. However, in Houellebecq, the carnival becomes permanent, marking a paradoxical order based on transgression. That is, in Houellebecq it is always 'December' and thus there is no longer any belief or desire to return to 'normalcy'; what is presented is rather a social world subject to permanent transgression and inversion of all values.

This paradoxical order is what Agamben (1998) has called 'camp', the space in which order and disorder, inside and outside, politics and biopolitics, or, in short, exception and the rule, become indiscernible. Significantly in this respect, Houellebecq's characters all belong to an indistinct mass without specified forms of life, tastes and social (dis)positions. 'No social status, no relationship could any longer be considered certain' (Houellebecq 2004: 70). Indeed, his novels are populated by 'a homeless humanity', remarkable only in their 'nakedness' (Tygstrup 2005: 276). Thus, both in sex-tourism camps in Thailand and in Parisian nightclubs

he describes, we confront bodies abandoned to a kind of state of nature. Which is why the underlying matrix of Houellebecq's books, that is, the strange double economy of desire and disgust, of object and abject, or of transgression and confirmation, is significant. It is by oscillating between these two poles that his characters are reduced to naked bodies, an oscillation, which is reinforced through a double transgression of the art-life divide. Thus, similar to reality-TV productions, Houellebecq constantly edits life, deliberately confusing fictive and real figures. Most of his characters are people from real life who can recognize themselves in the books, while, at the same time, he quotes his fictive characters in the media (see Tygstrup 2005: 272). That is, his fictive persons (words without bodies) coincide with factual people denied a say about their representation in his books (bodies without words), a process in which 'society of spectacle' meets biopolitics.

ANGER OR SPITE

What is most thought-provoking in Houellebecq's work is the dampening or sterilization of life, the reduction of desire to mechanical pleasure-seeking, by means of which he can turn the direction of anger which he rightfully diagnoses in the contemporary society towards a spiteful spectacle of (self)destruction. In a sense, therefore, Houellebecq resembles Nietzsche's priest; he 'poisons the wound' which he detects (Nietzsche 1996: 105). He harnesses the anger and the thirst for revenge accumulated in the vast, indistinct mass who populate contemporary society. However, he presents spite as the only way to break free, the only means of change, imaginable in this society.

Thus, what is remarkably missing to the point of laziness in Houellebecq's work is any attempt at distinguishing anger and spite, which also empties out his work for any critical potential. Indeed, anger and critique are indeed closely related. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 36–8) point out, critique presupposes indignation, that is, experiences that prompt protest at the level of emotions. And in contemporary society there are a lot of good reasons to be angry. Thus anger can be, must be conceived of as an asset for social critique (see Schmidt 2006: 9). The problem of anger emerges only when it cannot articulate itself reflexively in terms of conflict, that is, when it cannot be translated into politics and thus turns to nihilistic destruction. In this sense spite is the disarticulation of anger. Anger always has a chance, though not a guarantee, to

become a social relation, to communicate while disagreeing. Spite, on the other hand, does not care about anything. Spite is anger that cannot find, does not want to find, political expression, and precisely therefore it is the transgression, and ultimately the disintegration, of the social (see Schmidt 2006: 99). Thus, Houellebecq's outbursts of radical nihilism are symptomatic if they are considered as part of an intensive, expansive subterranean current in contemporary society. Consider the 'burning Parisian suburbs':

> The fact that there was *no* programme behind the burning Paris suburbs is thus a fact to be interpreted. It tells us a great deal about our ideologico-political predicament. What kind of universe is it that we inhabit, which can celebrate itself as a society of choice, but in which the only option available to enforced democratic consensus is a blind acting out? [. . .] What does our celebrated freedom of choice serve, when the only choice is between playing by the rules and (self)-destructive violence? The protesters' violence was almost exclusively directed against their own. The cars burned and the schools torched were not those of richer neighbourhoods. They were part of the hard-won acquisitions of the very strata from which the protesters originated.
>
> (Žižek 2008a: 64–5)

When politics is foreclosed, spite often becomes the only 'political' (re)action. Is it, then, not possible to imagine a sociality without spite? What is crucial in this context is that sheer tolerance for the other is not enough to establish a political ground. As mentioned before, what spite lacks is not only respect for but also the capacity to antagonize the other. Therefore the lesson of Houellebecq is perhaps, above all, the necessity of inventing ways to (re)develop a culture of agonism to prevent anger from transforming into spite, which is also a question of grounding the 'city', politics, itself. It is, then, the ambivalence of anger: it can potentially thrive in agonistic respect as a political gesture, but it can easily turn into pure conflictuality, into a spiteful fundamentalism *à la* Houellebecq. In this sense, today's main political antagonism is not, as Žižek (2005) argues, in choosing between egoism and altruism. Altruism can border on fundamentalism and radical nihilism is not necessarily egoistical. Rather, the major conflict in a democracy that has become impotent seems to be between conatus and spite. If, as Spinoza and Nietzsche suggest, every organism seeks to augment its life conditions, if, in this sense, it is not

possible not to be egoist, spite is what causes the individual to transgress his conatus. Significantly, conatus can be socialized; the *polis*, the co-existence of the multitude of bodies, can increase one's own conatus. After all, 'there is . . . nothing more useful to man than man' (Spinoza 1993: 153). And it is only when the other is debased that spite can emerge as a strategy, and 'politics' disappears.

3

THE AGONISTIC CITY

> If we speak of *humanity*, it is on the basic assumption that it should be that which *separates* man from nature and is his mark of distinction. But in reality there is no such separation: 'natural' characteristics and those called specifically 'human' have grown together inextricably. Man, in his highest, finest powers, is all nature and carries nature's uncanny character in himself. Those capacities of his which are terrible and are viewed as inhuman are perhaps, indeed, the fertile soil from which alone all humanity, in feelings, deeds and works, can grow forth. Thus the Greeks, the most humane people of ancient time, have a trait of cruelty, of tiger-like pleasure in destruction, in them: a trait which . . . must strike fear into us when we approach them with the emasculated concept of modern humanity.
>
> (Nietzsche 2006: 95)

What is provoking in this depiction of the pre-Socratic Greek *polis* is Nietzsche's insistence on cruelty, violence and destruction as the 'fertile soil' that made the Greeks' accomplishments achievable. What lies behind the successes of the ancient city was its readiness to accept conflict as an ontological given, as part of life. 'Life' here, however, must not be understood merely as biological, bare life but as a struggle, a conflict between creation (Dionysus) and preservation (Apollo). Indeed, if life per

definition seeks out resistance, nihilism is an inability for enmity (see Nietzsche 1967: 704; Reginster 2006: 261). In other words, the ideal of a world without conflict is *the* problem of nihilism. Hence the question of how a non-nihilistic human association is possible is fundamentally linked with the question of conflict.

However, an interest in conflict as such is not enough for anti-nihilism. After all, *ressentiment* takes it for granted that there *is* a conflict between, for instance, the weak and the strong, but it does so only in a logic of reversal in which impotence becomes power, weakness is elevated to the position of good, good into evil, which is followed by the fantasy of revenge, of the will to annihilation and the annihilation of will. The paradox here is that the desire to destroy the nihilistic forces could itself be a potentially resentful temptation that plays into the hands of the opponent because only the decadent, the weak, can desire the total annihilation of antagonistic forces of life (Siemens 2001: 75–6; see also Ottman 1987: 223). Thus, what is critical to be able to escape the deadlock of revenge is to transform destruction into affirmation, to sublimate 'evil Eris' – the goddess of war and destruction – into the 'good Eris' of agonism and contest:

> The whole of Greek antiquity thinks about grudge and envy differently from us and agrees with Hesiod, who first portrays one Eris as wicked, in fact the one who leads men onto hostile struggle-to-the-death, and then praises the other Eris as good who, as jealousy, grudge and envy, goads men to action, not, however, the action of a struggle-to-the-death but the action of the *contest*. [. . .] Hellenic popular teaching commands that every talent must develop through a struggle. [. . .] But for the ancients, the aim of agonistic education was the well-being of the whole . . . society.
>
> (Nietzsche 2006: 97–8)

Nietzsche's *polis* regarded agonism as a decisive element of a politics that can accommodate 'cruelty'. It benefited from the contestation among a plurality of antagonists, each with their own values (perspectives), each developing themselves in a struggle through which passive emotions represented by 'evil Eris' (envy, hatred, lust and so on) and their destructive potentials are affirmed as the 'fertile soil' and transvaluated into active virtues (e.g. agonism, tolerance, et cetera). A political culture, in which the antagonists engaged in all areas of life in complex interactions that create 'a dynamic of limited aggression that precludes absolute destruction (death

or total negation) on one side, and absolute, conclusive victory (total affirmation) for any single contestant on the other' (Siemens 2001: 77). An agonistic city, which offers more than the acceptance of diversity and coexistence and calls for a real dialogue and beneficial anarchy vigilantly protected against segmentation into particularistic ethics and politics (see Sennett 1971). Such a city lacks a principle that can create a unity because conflict and contestation of values is immanent to it and, accordingly, the only shared perspective in it can be that there can be none, that is, identification can only be based on a 'shared process of contestation' (Owen 1995: 146). Agonism is a common good.

THE PASSIONATE CITY

Then, if all life seeks out antagonism, antagonism is also constitutive of the city. In other words, the transition from the state of nature to the city, from passion to reason, is not a pure break. Thus there is always a rem(a)inder of nature, a residue, a stain of traumatic irrationality at the very centre of the city (Žižek 1989: 43). This unassimilated rest is, in Spinoza's genesis of the city, for instance, passions. Even though the city is basically a reasonable form of human togetherness, passions thus remain significant elements of conduct in it. And because there are passions, social identities cannot be constituted independently from passion, or, antagonism.

Concomitantly, violence is an omnipresent potentiality in the city, a danger, which 'can never be eradicated' (Mouffe 2005: 12). Which is what passive nihilism in general and post-politics in particular cannot take into account. When the political is reduced to politics, the political becomes radicalized and any conflict takes the form of an absolute antagonism. Depoliticization of politics leads to the politicization of spite. Democratic politics, in contrast, aims at 'defusing' or 'sublimating' antagonism, that is, translating it into agonism, so that conflict does not destroy the political association (Mouffe 2005: 19–21). What is preserved in the translation is the agora. 'Agonism' thus designates an us/them relation in which the two sides of the relation are not illegitimate 'enemies' but 'adversaries' who share a common ground, even though they can acknowledge that 'there is no rational solution to their conflict' (ibid. 20). In short, then, because there are passions, there are antagonisms, and because there are antagonisms, there are passions in the city. Thus, even though reason is a potentially unifying factor, passions lead to dissention. And reason is, in itself, impotent to bond unreasonable subjects.

But does this fact, that there is a passive genesis, passions, as well as reason in the origin of the city, mean that the city is opposed to passions? This is indeed what Mouffe suggests on the basis of her clean-cut distinction between rationality and affect, between reason and emotions. Accordingly, in this perspective, values are irrational. And in a society characterized by a pluralism of values there will always be 'unavoidable value conflicts' (Mouffe 2000: 103). However, even though at an ontological level it is impossible, at an epistemological level (for instance in agonistic dialogue) antagonism can disappear on a rational basis. That is, due to a 'spiritualization of enmity', the adversaries 'can become bonded together . . . through an enhanced experience of the contestability problematic each pursues most fervently' (Connolly 1993b: 382). It is, at least theoretically, possible that value conflicts are not essentially unavoidable; one cannot rule out the epistemological possibility of what is ontologically (politically) impossible. Nevertheless, in Mouffe, the question of values is reduced to a matter of decision: when reason moves out of politics, one can only choose one's own values in the Schmittian sense. However, following Spinoza for instance, one could distinguish between active and passive emotions and emphasize that the 'joy' attained on the basis of active emotions is closely related to reason. Likewise, following Nietzsche, the distinction is not between rationality and affect but between active and passive will.

To explore this, the relationship between the two different but interrelated origins of the city, affects and reason, is helpful. Initially, the distinction between affect and reason is also a Spinozist distinction between two cities: the 'despotic city' founded on superstition, and the 'free city' founded on reason; transcendence versus immanence. In the first, superstition deceives the citizens and masks their fears with reference to transcendent authorities 'so that men may fight as bravely for slavery as for their safety, and count it not a shame but highest honour to risk their blood and their lives for the vainglory of a tyrant' (Spinoza 1951: 5). Concurrently, the speculative thought colonizes the domain of the law and opinion is treated as crime. The free city, on the other hand, is one in which everyone may worship as their conscience dictates and 'where freedom is esteemed before all things dear and precious' (ibid. 6).

On the basis of what, then, can a free city be established? Spinoza's answer is nature: the 'natural rights' of the individual which are co-extensive with citizens' desire and power. One's 'natural right' is everything in one's power, everything a body can do, and 'no one is bound to

live as another pleases' (ibid. 10). Significantly in this respect, one's power, its exercise, and right are, for Spinoza, one and the same thing, which 'is the very meaning of the word *law*: the law of nature is never a rule of duty, but the norm of a power' (Deleuze 1992: 258). In this sense, the law of nature refers to an initial desire to increase one's conatus rather than an end state. Here, reason is not privileged; both the reasonable and the unreasonable (that is, the person who is governed by passions) act with the prime motive of persevering in their being, their conatus. Following this, the state of nature is not a reasonable but indeed a pre-social condition. Reason becomes a motive force only afterwards, only in the city. Nobody is born reasonable. Or religious; in the state of nature no one can know of obedience to God (Deleuze 1992: 259). What is primary in the state of nature is not one's 'duties' but natural rights, that is, one's power. Hence in the state of nature 'men are naturally enemies' (Spinoza 1952: 296). That is, everyone decides on what is good or bad alone, without the interference of others. 'Thus defined, the state of nature itself shows us what makes it intolerable. . . . In the state of nature I live at the mercy of encounters' (Deleuze 1992: 260). The city is, precisely, the solution here: by organizing the encounters, it enables a body to increase its conatus through associations with other bodies that agree with itself.

> [T]here is therefore nothing more useful to man than man. Nothing . . . can be desired by men more excellent for their self-preservation that all with all should so agree that they compose the minds of all as it were into one mind, and the bodies of all as it were one body, and all endeavour at the same time as much as they can to preserve their being, and all seek at the same time what is useful to them in common. From which it follows that men who are governed by reason, that is, men who, under the guidance of reason, seek what is useful to them, desire nothing for themselves which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind, and therefore they are just, faithful and honorable.
>
> (Spinoza 1993: 153)

Hence there is an intimate relationship between reason and the city as 'a totality of compatible relations' (Deleuze 1992: 262). Crucially, however, this does not mean that the city is a reasonable association as such; it is not. What primarily forces the formation of the city is not reason but the fear generated by the state of nature and, concomitantly, the renunciation of natural rights (ibid. 265–6). Through a social contract, rights can

be delegated to the city, which, in turn, guarantees individuals' safety (Spinoza 1951: 10). However, who gains by the contract is not necessarily a third party, a sovereign Leviathan, but potentially everybody, the multitude. So, even though its origin is not reason, its pre-rational character does not stop the city from paving the way for reason; 'the City's own nature thus determines it to aim as far as possible for reason's ideal, to strive to make the sum of its laws conform to reason' (Deleuze 1992: 266–7). After all, the motivation behind the renunciation of natural rights is the individual's own interest, safety.

There is no necessary opposition between the city and reason. Spinoza's 'reason' only demands, as nature does, that everyone should seek to increase their conatus. As such, 'reason' is not an artificial order but refers to natural relations among citizens. Reason *is* nature. It does not contradict but rather raises natural rights 'to a power without which such rights would remain unreal and abstract' (ibid. 264). Thus there is no necessary opposition between reason and affects either; reason, the good city, is not an obstacle for passions. Significantly in this respect, renouncing one's natural rights does not mean renouncing perseverance in one's being. Rather, what the citizen renounces by committing himself to a collective, common affection is his personal affection. Thus, even though freedom to act is surrendered to the city, 'affections of reason', that is, freedom of thinking and speech, cannot and should not be surrendered. That remains an indispensable natural right, the compromise of which is precisely what introduces violence into the city (ibid. 268).

Let us, at this point, return to nihilism. Spinoza's immanent, anti-nihilist city built upon the 'affections of reason' is an ultimate negation of religious nihilism, or 'superstition', which emerges on the basis of passive emotions, especially fear. At the same time, Spinoza is aware that superstition can evolve into fanaticism, or, in our terminology, radical nihilism, which turns to a wholesale destruction of the city. His 'fanatic' is a person who, 'because he is attached to this or that religion, judges the laws of a dominion [city] worse than any possible evil' (Spinoza 1951: 304). Since the fanatic is an 'enemy' of the city, he 'may lawfully be coerced by force' (ibid. 304). So, for Spinoza, sovereignty, to be able to be sovereign, must be absolute. But how, then, can the freedom of thought and speech be articulated with absolute sovereignty? Does the city become 'totalitarian' by holding sovereignty absolute against the 'rebel' or the fanatical terrorist? Or, even worse, does 'peace' equal the absence of conflict? 'Is it then to servitude and barbarity, to the desert, that we must preserve the name of peace?

If one were to concur with this opinion, that would make peace the most wretched of all human conditions' (Spinoza quoted in Colas 1997: 201).

Indeed, the idea of 'peace' can be perverted into a totalitarian state in which not only agonism but all political acts become impossible. Thus, Spinoza's endeavour to deal with fanaticism must not be turned into an unambiguous rule in line with the preservation of the state; we must also ask whether the state itself conforms to the demands of reason for an illegitimate state legitimates revolution (see Balibar 1998: 27). In other words, the Spinozist position vis-à-vis radical nihilism (fanaticism) does not need to bring with it more totalitarianism (e.g. politics of security). On the contrary, it keeps intact the possibility of an opening – of Revolutions, which are 'by definition illegal and illegitimate – until they have succeeded'! (ibid. 35). After all, the revolutionary 'act' cannot be reduced to its social conditions and only retrospectively legitimizes itself. But before this, we need to discuss 'agonistic respect'.

AGONISTIC RESPECT

Connolly's work on pluralism is a significant attempt at linking passion and reason. To start with, he demarcates pluralism against relativism which would support no limit to tolerance. But since absolute tolerance is not possible, since not every kind of diversity can be accommodated within the same regime, it is 'necessary to set limits' (Connolly 2005: 43). But then how can tolerance flourish in a pluralist society? In this context Connolly proposes 'agonistic respect' as a principal political virtue, as a relation of negotiation between interdependent partisans who hold different beliefs (ibid. 81, 123).

> An ethos of agonistic respect grows out of mutual appreciation for the ubiquity of faith to life and the inability of contending parties, to date, to demonstrate the truth of one faith over other live candidates. It grows out of reciprocal appreciation for the element of contestability in these domains. The relation is agonistic in two senses: you *absorb the agony* of having elements of your own faith called into question by others, and you fold agonistic contestation of others into the respect that you convey toward them.
>
> (ibid. 123–4)

The practitioners of agonistic respect have positions in actual politics, in

the 'politics of being', but in a world characterized by increasing mobility, stratified codes of political and ethical conduct tend to turn into more 'oblique', more reticular '*connections* across multiple lines of difference' (ibid. 124). In such a pluralistic world, sheer tolerance for the other is not enough to establish a political ground. What today's fundamentalism, for instance, lacks is not only respect for but also the capacity to antagonize the other. Therefore it is necessary to invent ways to combine tolerance with the possibility of anger and conflict. Agonistic respect is tolerance in conflict or conflict in tolerance, a mechanism that can include anger in politics and hold spite at bay. However, agonistic respect cannot be taken for granted because it is not rooted in a habitus, in language, or in any other fundament; it must be created and protected. It is, in other words, a question of grounding the city, politics, itself.

Connolly exemplifies agonistic respect with a reflection on his own Spinozist background, by deliberately showing, so to speak, his own weaknesses to his adversaries. In this, he turns to Leo Strauss' critique of Spinoza, which addresses the relationship between reason and religious belief, concluding that Spinoza cannot provide an ultimate refutation of religious faith:

> The genuine refutation of orthodoxy would require the proof that the world and human life are perfectly intelligible without the assumption of a mysterious God . . . Spinoza's *Ethics* attempts to be that system but it does not succeed; the clear and distinct account of everything, which it presents remains fundamentally hypothetical. As a consequence its cognitive status is not different from that of the orthodox account. Certain it is that Spinoza cannot legitimately deny the possibility of revelation. But to grant that revelation is possible means to grant that the philosophical account and the philosophical way of life are not necessarily, not evidently, the true account and the right way of life; philosophy, the quest for evident and necessary knowledge, rests itself on univalent decision, on an act of will, just as faith. Hence the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism, between belief and unbelief, is ultimately not theoretical but moral.
>
> (Strauss quoted in ibid. 45)

Endorsing much of the above formulation, Connolly claims that the dispute (between religious belief and reason) is not really between 'belief and unbelief'. Rather, the dispute must be re-articulated as 'the difference

between a positive belief in transcendence of the world and a positive belief in the immanence of the world' (ibid. 46). The first holds the view that the world is created, the second believes that the world is a world of becoming, a world without an aim or purpose. Yet, he goes on to argue, this debate cannot be resolved:

> My view, to put it briefly, is that the most noble response is to seek to transmute cultural antagonisms between transcendence and immanence into debates marked by agonistic respect between the partisans, with each set acknowledging that its highest and most entrenched faith is legitimately contestable by the others.
>
> (ibid. 47)

This understanding of agonism, however, is prone to problems. For instance, even though such 'critical responsiveness' (ibid. 126) might be an estimable gesture, it is no guarantee that one's opponents will do the same. After all, why, in political situations characterized by antagonism, should one assume that one's opponents/enemies (e.g. fundamentalists) will refrain from using their force, from doing what they can do? Indeed, such an assumption is itself a moralizing, that is, nihilistic, tendency for it essentially reduces power to something that can be separated from what it can do (e.g. the assumption that a bird of prey can stop preying on lambs). Crucially in this respect, that 'the antagonism . . . between belief and unbelief is ultimately not theoretical but moral' (Connolly 2005: 47) does not mean that all values are moral values or that values and beliefs cannot be ranked. To decide on values is, precisely, an act of will and the question of will is always active or passive, not value or non-value, or, belief or unbelief. The question here is, in other words, whether agonistic politics should replace or rather supplement the fundamental antagonism between nihilism and anti-nihilism.

A related problem is idealism. Connolly operates with an ideal image of self-criticism and the possibility of self-reflexivity. But the question is how much self-reflexivity one can expect in antagonistic circumstances. Even if faith is contestable, what makes a fundamentalist a fundamentalist is precisely his refusal of such contestedness. Yet, paradoxically, Connolly seems to presuppose that the fundamentalist is not a fundamentalist. Notwithstanding the question of how efficient such a strategy is, it is inconsistent with a Nietzschean understanding of agonism. In this respect, Connolly's agonistic pluralism boils down to normative political

imagining, to a hidden idealism. Significantly in this context, Connolly's idealism is modelled on Gallie's discussion of 'essentially contested concepts' (see Albertsen 2006; Gallie 1964: 157–91; Connolly 1993 and Connolly 2002). Like Gallie, Connolly assumes that if all participants in a conceptual debate hold the view that what is under debate is essentially contested, this will in itself contribute to the quality and the communicative rationality of the debate, even if no agreement is reached (see Albertsen 2006 for an extended discussion). However, the problem with treating conflicts based on antagonism as though they were conflicts about essentially contested concepts involves a generalization of Galllie's discussion from epistemology to ontology, from a conceptual level to the level of political philosophy. In Gallie, essential contestedness refers to situations in which the parties in dialogue fundamentally agree that what is discussed (an essentially contested concept) is important. Connolly transfers this implicit condition (of conceptual discussion) to a normative condition of general political dialogue. In this movement, critical responsiveness tends to assume a non-perspectival common platform.

But the problem is that Gallie's essential contestedness is related to concepts, not to the political. In contrast, in the political field, essential contestedness draws on different resources (ontology, with no minimal consensus) than the conceptual (epistemology, with the possibility of minimal consensus). With such aestheticization of agonism, ontology collapses into epistemology. This aestheticizing gesture, which replaces ontology (*this* world) with an idealized concept that gets a transcendent status, has another nihilistic potential to the extent it gives confidence to a curious sentimentality that promotes affects/emotions rather than the will, respect rather than cruelty, concept rather than life: political agonism as an ersatz transfiguration. But despite the fact that it is profoundly related to affects, politics cannot be created through affects; the political is a will, not an emotion. It demands the interpretation of the world rather than fetishizing agonism.

Along the same lines, religion becomes a blind spot for agonistic politics. Indeed, although Connolly (1999) had argued that in liberal democracies there is an inbuilt contradiction between religion and politics, in *Pluralism*, religion moves from the domain of agonism to that of respect. Becoming elevated above demands for justification or truthfulness, faith attains an absolute, non-perspectival epistemological authority. And paradoxically, while others' religion becomes a blind spot for one's discourse, one's own belief is subjected to 'critical responsiveness' (see Connolly

2005: 22–3). Yet agonism is not reducible to respect for others' beliefs. In this context, despite that he is heavily influenced by Nietzsche, Connolly remains a harmony-seeking agonist and his theory a more antagonizing version of the Habermasian theory that blurs the line between agonism and liberal tolerance.

However, when 'respect' dominates agonism, politics necessarily becomes indexed to an artificial conflict between post-political 'tolerance', which demands 'respect' for otherness, and a fundamentalist 'dogmatism', which habitually accuses its opponents of 'blasphemy' (see Žižek 2008a: 110). The two terms, respect and blasphemy, are synthesized in the question: how to tolerate otherness while maintaining freedom of expression? The paradox here is that demanding respect for his otherness means for the fundamentalist to acknowledge in advance the framework of the post-political discourse of tolerance, while avoiding blasphemy for a non-religious person is impossible in practice. Consequently, the two 'worlds' can only be united in the form of a disjunctive synthesis that discloses a 'secret solidarity' between the two poles: 'the nightmarish prospect of a society regulated by a perverse pact between religious fundamentalists and the politically correct preachers of tolerance and respect for the other's beliefs, no matter how . . . superstitious this other is' (ibid. 110). Thus the only radical response to the twinning of tolerance and blasphemy, passive nihilism and radical nihilism, is to radically renounce their common root in the originary, religious nihilism, to return to an atheism *à la* Spinoza and Nietzsche.

> Isn't it time to restore the dignity of atheism, perhaps our only chance of peace? As a rule, where religiously inspired violence is concerned, we put the blame on violence itself: it is the violent or 'terrorist' political agent who misuses' a noble religion, so the goal becomes to retrieve the authentic core of a religion from its political instrumentalization. What, however, if one should take the risk of inverting this relationship? What if what appears as a moderating force, compelling us to control our violence, is its secret instigator? What if, then, instead of renouncing violence, one were to renounce religion, including its secular reverberations such as Stalinist communism with its reliance on the historical big Other, and to pursue violence on its own, assuming full responsibility for it, without any cover-up in some figure of the big Other?
>
> (ibid. 113–14)

Only a truly anti-nihilist politics that can look religious nihilism in the eye can transgress the deadlock of respect-blasphemy and avoid patronizing the other by respecting his illusions more than himself, without, at the same time, collapsing into a passive perspectivism devoid of any principle of selection or ranking. In this sense, agonistic respect risks bordering on liberal tolerance. Yet, what is really necessary is to deconstruct the false opposition between liberal tolerance and the fundamentalist backlash. What we should move towards is a political agonism that aims at keeping agonism and affects together not in an ideal communicative framework but in a radically political framework that, when necessary, can be as antagonistic as agonistic. A more radical (even if less politically correct) politics of event.

POLITICS OF EVENT

An event, an act, is what liberates time from its circular figure by throwing it 'out of joint' (see Deleuze 1994: 88). Since reality has both an actual and virtual component, the event cannot be reduced to causal relations between actual things. Its virtual indetermination is irreducible to actual relations. Therefore, an event relates to the actual world, 'happens to things', as something that does not belong to it (see Deleuze 1990: 24). What can a politics of event in this sense tell about nihilism? In this respect Negri's political philosophy might be interesting to think with. Indeed, whereas Connolly, for instance, wants to 'transmute' antagonisms into the language of 'agonistic respect', Negri undertakes the opposite gesture by condensing agonisms into one fundamental antagonism: that of between transcendence and immanence, or, between nihilist negation and anti-nihilist affirmation. Crucially in this context, living labour has a virtual dimension that exceeds the actual, 'dead labour'. Hence, for Negri, the difference between living and dead labour is structurally similar to the Spinozist difference between *potentia* (constituent power) and *potestas* (constituted power):

> The truth of constituent power is not what can be attributed to it, in any way what so ever, by the concept of sovereignty. It cannot be so, because constituent power is not only, obviously, an emanation of constituted power, but is not even the institution of constituted power. It is, rather, an act of choice, the precise determination that opens a horizon, the radical apparatus of something that does not yet exist, and whose

> conditions of existence imply that the creative act does not lose its characteristics in the act of creating. When constituent power sets in motion the constituent process, every determination is free and remains free. On the contrary, sovereignty presents itself as a fixing of constituent power, and therefore as its termination, as the exhaustion of the freedom that constituent power carries.
>
> (Negri 1999: 21–2)

Politics in this perspective is not a struggle for the control of the State but rather a struggle between the State and living labour, that is, life. Life is resistance to power. This antagonism cannot be reduced to an affirmation of the social against the State because, possessing no fixed identity, the multitude cannot form a society; it is a body without organs, an unorganized state of the social: 'pure potential, an unformed life force' (Hardt and Negri 2004: 192). The power of the multitude is 'the power to transform ourselves through historical action and to create a new world' (ibid. 159). A virtual potentiality (*potentia*), which cannot be contained within actualized dispositifs or strategies of power (*potestas*). If power functions by capturing singularities and locking them into identities, the multitude is the name of the refusal to disappear into the apparatuses of capture, an 'exodus' from obedience, from participation in measure: 'do not obey, that is be free; do not kill, that is generate; do not exploit, that is constitute the common' (Negri 2003: 258). That is, membership of multitude takes place not by adding but by subtracting. Non-integration, dis*organ*ization, is a precondition to become part of the multitude. The multitude is a line of flight, a 'war machine', defined by its exteriority to the State and the 'social' (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 149–66). Exodus in this sense is a creative event, a 'transvaluation' of values on the basis of constituent power.

For Negri, the substance of constituent power, of *potentia*, is time. An event 'situates itself in a radical manner on the edge of time, and only there' (Negri 2003: 235). The event is what calls the future into being. The politics of the multitude is given immediately, in the immediacy of event, as an opening to the immeasurable, the virtual. As such, an event is a strategic decision, *kairòs*: 'anticipating and constructing on the edge of time' (see Negri 2003: 142). So, the antagonism between capital and the multitude is fundamentally an antagonism between the chronological time (of measurement) and the virtual (immeasurable) time, the 'time for revolution'. In this sense, Negri's understanding of the event as

'being-to-come' is implanted in a Nietzschean-Deleuzian ontology of time, in repetition as eternal return:

> We produce something new only on condition that we repeat – once in the mode which constitutes the past, and once more in the present of the metamorphosis. Moreover, what is produced, the absolutely new itself, is in turn nothing but repetition: the third repetition, this time by excess, the repetition of the future as eternal return. [. . .] Eternal return . . . concerns . . . only the third time of the series. Only there is it determined. That is why it is properly called a belief of the future, a belief in the future.
>
> (Deleuze 1994: 90)

Repetition (event) requires both a forgetting of the past, a disconnection from the given, and, simultaneously a 'belief' in, a connection to the future. The fundamental antagonism mutates into one between the true event (belief in future) and nihilism, which is per definition an inability to confront an open future. However, 'eternal return' must not be understood in cyclical terms, as the return of the Same, for it is fundamentally opposed to the idea of status quo, of identity (the Same), which is why, when the dwarf says 'time itself is a circle', Zarathustra answers: 'do not treat this too lightly' (Nietzsche 1961: 178). What returns is difference, which forces us to think of the present as a passing moment, as becoming. In this sense being is not opposed to becoming – being *is* becoming. What exists, the present, is not only linked to the past but also to what is to come, to future. Eternal return is this synthesis of time, a synthesis that is also essential for anti-nihilism in the sense of 'completing' nihilism. 'Only the eternal return makes the nihilistic will whole and complete' (Deleuze 1983: 69). From the perspective of the multitude, this synthesis involves a transformation of negation (of the order of measurement or transcendence) into an affirmation of life, making negation a negation of negation itself so that the event expresses itself as a creative force of the multitude, as active destruction. 'Destruction becomes active to the extent that the negative is transmuted and converted into affirmative power: the "eternal joy of becoming" which is avowed in an instant' (ibid. 174).

Regarding this 'eternal . . . instant' of active destruction, Hardt and Negri affirm Benjamin's 'divine violence', linking it to the immediacy of constitutive power, *potentia* (1994: 290–5). The argument here is that with the disappearance of civic institutions licensed to use violence, such

as labour unions with their right to strike as a legitimate violence, militancy in contemporary society is confronted with a false choice between two remaining forms of activity: non-violence and terrorism. Yet, a choice between a passive nihilist fantasy of 'purity from violence', in which all forms of violence are considered inherently unjust, and suicidal strategies of terrorist nihilism is no choice at all. Since violence is part of life and the right, the just, and the good cannot be conceptualized independently of the exercise of power: this could only result in the negation of life and our power and indeed such *ressentiment* is 'precisely what links nonviolence with terrorism, casting it together with what it so adamantly tries to oppose' (Hardt and Negri 1994: 292). Consequently, the question is how to differentiate violence. Hence Benjamin's distinction between 'mythical' and 'divine' violence:

> If mythic violence is law-making, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood. [. . .] Mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake, divine violence is pure power over all life for the sake of the living.
>
> (Benjamin 1979: 150–1)

Mythical violence is a means to an end, a means of making or preserving a law. What Benjamin has in mind here is the violence of sovereignty in Schmitt's sense, that is, a violence linked to the state of exception, during which the law is suspended. Exception presupposes a 'normal' situation and aims at the preservation of this normality with extraordinary, that is, extra-legal means (see Schmitt 1985: 10). In contrast, 'divine violence' for Benjamin is a revolutionary violence. Seen in this perspective, Schmitt's exception is a reactionary attempt at avoiding a 'real' exception, a revolutionary event (see Žižek 2002: 108). And significantly, mythic violence targets the bare life of *homo sacer*, life without form and value (see Agamben 1998). Divine violence, on the other hand, belongs to the domain of life, of living labour, whose potentiality is precisely what is denied by bare life, expressing life in a 'nonmediate' way. Therefore Hardt and Negri identify divine violence as constituent power (1994: 294). Political creativity, the event, is immanent in the free praxis of the multitude and is not reducible to the actual structures of the constituted power. In this sense divine

violence is a 'sign', a sign of the virtual, the violence of the event. And as such, divine violence opposes the nihilism of the sovereign power by setting 'all life', life as virtual potentiality, as excess, up against the actual, 'bare' physicality of life. If bare life is the negative limit of sociality, its nihilistic, reactive moment, multitude signifies its potentiality (Hardt and Negri 2000: 366).

But is it possible to fully separate *potentia* from *potestas*, the revolutionary potential of the constituent power from sovereign power? Indeed, in Negri, the polarization of the two forms of power results in the equation of constitutive power (or divine violence) with the virtual, denying a mediation or dialectic between the actual and the virtual, which is, indeed, controversial in both Marxist and Spinozist perspectives. While Marx, for instance, operates with an antagonism between the law of value and living labour, he insists on mediation between the two: living labour is what creates the law of value, which, in turn, rules living labour. That is, the constituting is objectified through the constituted, the law of value. However, Negri's reading of Marx tends to see living labour *only* as an antagonism in relation to the law of value, while the antagonism is not external but immanent to living labour. In a similar way, in Spinoza, the virtual God as free cause (natura naturans), is not separated from the totality of existing things, the actual modes (natura naturata). While 'God is nature', the actual world 'cannot exist or be conceived without God' (Spinoza 1993: 25, 140). But Negri has a propensity to separate the two 'by privileging *potential* over *potestas* and neglecting [Spinoza's] considerable investment in and justifications for *potestas*' (Holland 1998: 14, n29).

A crucial question regarding the politics of event is therefore whether it is not 'necessary to retain a minimum of strata, a minimum of forms and functions, a minimal subject from which to extract materials, affects, and assemblages'? (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 270). Of course there can be no pre-existing objective (actual) criteria to account for the intervention of the event/act. Yet, despite the fact that it cannot be reduced to its actual circumstances, the event can only 'express' itself through the actual. The event or act is what makes it possible to touch the virtual from within the actual. There can be no virtualization without actualization; the event cannot take place *ex-nihilo*. Thus, politics of event rejects not the actual identity as such but its priority; the actual is 'a condition, but one to be minimized and one that must serve the push beyond representation and recognition' (Williams 2006: 190).

The problem here is that when the constitutive and the constituted are

placed at two different levels, it becomes difficult to see the mutual interdependency between immanence and transcendence. And one risks bordering on radical nihilism, a carnivalesque denunciation of the actual in the name of the virtual, a passion for the real, for purification. Therefore it is necessary to insist on the aporia of divine violence: as a strategic decision 'beyond measure', as a revolutionary act/event that intervenes into the course of time to change it, divine violence involves a radical contingency, an aporetic moment, precisely because it cannot provide a definitive 'measure' of necessary violence; thus, confronted with the question of how much killing is necessary or how much cruelty is productive, divine violence is compelled to answer 'more' (Dillon 2008). In the lack of a 'calculus', divine violence is potentially open to becoming spiteful. After all, it is impossible to draw an absolute line between creative cruelty and unproductive cruelty, or, spite. In this sense the aporia is inescapable.

But since there can be no abstract aporia, this aporia, too, must be lived out. At any rate, the violence inherent in the act/event involves the suspension of the existing order. The act consists in a contingent decision transcendental to the actual. Therefore, from the perspective of the actual, that is, from the perspective of the existing laws of the constituted order, the act is necessarily an excess that introduces an irrational, 'impossible' element into the heart of the actual order (Žižek 1992b: 44). First afterwards, when a new order is re-established, the act retroactively grounds itself and assumes a positive, determinate character. For this to happen, however, the initial cruelty is unavoidable. In other words, 'there is none the less something inherently "terroristic" in every authentic act, in its gesture of thoroughly redefining the "rules of the game," inclusive of the very basic self-identity of its perpetrator' (Žižek 1999a: 377–8). In this sense, as 'good terror', divine violence is deprived of 'any guarantee in the big Other' (ibid. 380).

A similar problem arises regarding the aporia of sovereign violence, this time as the inseparability of constituent and constituted power. As Agamben shows, the 'paradox of sovereignty' consists in the fact that power emerges as a potentiality (see 1998: 50). Power in this sense is a power not to pass from virtuality into actuality. Hence, ontologically, power is 'always double'; potentiality cannot be thought of independently of actuality (ibid. 47):

> Potentiality (in its double appearance as potentiality to and potentiality not to) is that through which Being founds itself *sovereignly*, which is to

> say, without anything preceding or determining it . . . other than its own ability not to be. And an act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself.
>
> (ibid. 46)

Therefore, at the limit, *potentia* and *potestas* enter into a zone of indistinction. It is not possible to imagine a constitutive power that can be fully separated from the constituted power. Or, the virtual cannot be thought of independently of the actual. Negri can be criticized in this respect for his clear-cut partition of the virtual and the actual, as a consequence of which the 'constitutive' starts to function as a transcendent category just as living labour tends to become a concept as transcendent as the law of value. Along the same lines, the second aporia has significant implications for the political act. For instance, if power is *not* to act, then the event must not be reduced to action as such. Rather, the act/event necessarily must assume a distance to, a suspension of the given through a kind of passivity, an exodus or withdrawal.

> The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to 'be active', to 'participate', to mask the nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, 'do something': academics participate in meaningless debates, and so on. The truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw. Those in power often prefer even a 'critical' participation, a 'dialogue', to make sure our ominous passivity is broken. [. . .] Sometimes, doing nothing is the most violent thing to do.
>
> (Žižek 2008a: 183)

'I WOULD PREFER NOT TO'

To link such 'passivity' to potentia, we can turn to Melville's *Bartleby*, a passive clerk in an attorney's office who answers his boss' demands systematically by saying 'I would prefer not to'. To be sure, such a politics of doing nothing can create powerful acts (see Agamben 1993: 35–8 and 1999b: 243–74; Baudrillard 2005: 90; Žižek 2008a: 182–3). But it can do it only if it can escape nihilism. Hence, despite the fact that every act has to rely on a form of passivity, a disconnection from the given relations of power, the relationship between activity and passivity must be qualified. For as soon as he says 'I would prefer not to' Bartleby ceases to be *able*

to do anything as well (see Deleuze 1998: 70). His formula thus signifies 'the growth of a nothingness of the will', that is, of passive nihilism, which tends to reduce him to bare life, to a 'being as being, and nothing more' (ibid. 71).

For this reason, Deleuze argues that Bartleby must be placed in the triad of Melville's famous characters: First, we have the demonic characters driven by a radical nihilism, a will to nothingness: Ahab, Claggart, Babo . . . Second, there are angelic, almost stupid characters, such as Bartleby, who prefer no will, a nothingness of the will. But significantly, there is a third type of paternal character on the side of authority, such as the attorney in *Bartleby*. These paternal figures, which symbolize the Law (originary nihilism), are charitable figures but they can neither stop the demonic acts (radical nihilism) nor save or connect to the withdrawn figures (passive nihilism). Most notably, these three types work together in the same context and point towards a fourth possibility:

> The mask of the charitable father figure must fall in order . . . for Ahab and Claggart to recognise Bartleby and Billy Budd, realizing through the violence of the former and the stupor of the latter the fruit with which they were laden: the fraternal relation pure and simple. Melville will never cease to elaborate on the radical opposition between fraternity and Christian 'charity' or paternal 'philanthropy'. To liberate man from the father function, to give birth to the new man . . . by constituting a society of brothers as a new universality.
>
> (ibid. 84)

In other words, what makes Bartleby interesting is not his passive nihilism as such but his role in the emergence of the fourth nihilism. Bartleby needs a 'political programme' to be able to find a space freed from the paternal function (ibid. 85). But to be able to do this, it is necessary to go beyond passive disobedience, to 'replace knowledge with belief, or rather with "confidence" – not belief in another world, but confidence in this one, and in man as much as in God' (ibid. 87), without falling back upon a spiteful position that shouts loud and clear 'that it is better to do nothing! Better conscious inertia! And so hurrah for the Underground!' (Dostoevsky 1998: 25). In this sense, too, the real problem of the act is the problem of nihilism; Bartleby must overcome passivity and despair:

> [Bartleby's] refusal certainly is the beginning of a liberatory politics, but

> it is only a beginning. The refusal in itself is empty. [. . .] In political terms, too, refusal in itself (of work, authority, and voluntary servitude) leads only to a kind of social suicide. As Spinoza says, if we simply cut the tyrannical head off the social body, we will be left with the deformed corpse of society. What we need is to create a new social body, which is a project that goes beyond refusal. Our lines of flight, our exodus must be constituent and create a real alternative. Beyond the simple refusal, or as part of that refusal, we need also to construct a new mode of life and above all a new community.
>
> (Hardt and Negri 2000: 204)

So, the fact that the event does not guarantee the factual truthfulness of a given action, that there is an aporia at the heart of the politics of event, does not mean that potentia and potestas can be reduced to the same level either. Such a levelling would be nihilism *par excellence*. But how, then, can we keep alive the tension between the actual and the virtual, between potentia and potestas? For this purpose, Deleuze's consideration of event as a 'problem' might be useful. A problem is what makes us think but does so independently of its solutions. Problem is 'the genesis of the act of thought' that cannot be reduced to its solutions (Deleuze 1994: 157). Each (actual) solution changes, displaces, enriches the (virtual) problem. Yet, for the same reason, a problem does not survive without its solutions; it can only 'persist' in the solutions (ibid. 163). In this sense the problem is at the same time transcendent, because it belongs to the domain of the virtual, and immanent, because it is embedded in actual relations defined by solutions. His example is capital, which acts as a virtual problem, as a social Idea, whose varieties are actualized or incarnated in concrete situations which characterize a determinate society:

> That is why 'the economic' is never given properly speaking, but rather designates a differential virtuality to be interpreted, always covered over by its forms of actualization; a theme or 'problematic' always covered over by its cases of solution. In short, the economic is the social dialectic itself – in other words, the totality of the problems posed to a given society, or the synthetic and problematizing field of that society. In all rigour, there are only economic social problems, even though the solutions may be juridical, political or ideological, and the problems may be expressed in these fields of resolvability.
>
> (ibid. 186)

If virtual events are rooted in the conditions of a problem/Idea and if actual events, on the other hand, are solutions through which the problem/Idea attains a clarity, then the event/act proceeds in two ways: first, it intervenes in the conditions of the problem, determining the tensions within it, specifying its links to other adjunct fields; and second, it condenses the singularities, actualizing a solution 'in a sublime occasion':

> Having an Idea is this as well. It is as though every Idea has two faces, which are like love and anger: love in the search for fragments, the progressive determination and linking of the ideal adjoint fields; anger in the condensation of singularities which, by dint of ideal events, defines the concentration of a 'revolutionary situation' and causes the Idea to explode into the actual. It is in this sense that Lenin had Ideas. (ibid. 190)

Following this, an event is about finding connections between Ideas and 'exploding' them into the virtual, about love (connection) and anger (disconnection). 'Anger' here necessarily has both a creative and a destructive dimension, the latter because it is selective as to what to affirm and actualize. Hence anger is, literally, dramatic: just as each repetition of a play enacts a new interpretation each time it is 'replayed', transforming the actor and the play, each actual/historical act is a dramatization that expresses an Idea in new ways (ibid. 10). Dramatization in this sense, as transformation through repetition, has no goal or final moment which brings it to an end; rather each repetition renews it – 'the play is the occurrence of movement as such' (Gadamer 1975: 103).

In fact, this anti-teleological aspect of dramatization is also essential to the politics of agonism understood as a repeatable practice, for 'agonal discourse is a radically impersonal, non-directional and repeatable medium of thought; something that only is insofar as it is becoming' (Siemens 2001: 80). Such dramatic agonism can supplement the antagonistic critique of nihilism without succumbing to the temptation of closure, e.g. into a purely antagonistic struggle which has no other aim than the annihilation of the adversary and which therefore risks losing the actual rather than enriching it. In this sense history is a theatre, in which repetition allows the 'actors' to produce radically new events (Deleuze 1994: 10). This production occurs in two ways: as virtualization (differentiation) and as actualization (differenciation). In the first, the event expresses virtual Ideas that transgress the domain of the actual identities; in

the second, 'solutions' explode into the actual as cruel, revolutionary interventions:

> Social problems can be grasped only by means of a 'rectification' which occurs when the faculty of sociability is raised to its transcendent exercise and breaks the unity of the fetishistic common sense. The transcendent object of the faculty of sociability is revolution. In this sense, revolution is the social power of difference, the paradox of society, the particular wrath of the social Idea.
>
> (ibid. 208)

Dramatic anger thus establishes a link between the actual and the virtual by completing the work of 'love', a link, which Deleuze calls 'the temporally eternal' (ibid. 189). This link makes it possible for the agent to see the actual world in a transcendental, metaphysical perspective, in the 'perspective of eternity', without however needing a transcendent God. As a consequence, the subject of the act is radically transformed. What is significant regarding this transformation is the triadic structure of the event. First, an imagined act (whether realized or not) defines the past, the before, in which the event has no place and thus seems impossible. Second, the act defines a present, the time of a 'metamorphosis' through which the agent becomes capable of the act. And finally, the act defines a future from which the agent himself is excluded (ibid. 89).

> Why is suicide the act *par excellence*? The act differs from an active intervention (action) in that it radically transforms its bearer (agent): the act is not simply something I 'accomplish' – after an act, I'm literally 'not the same as before'. In this sense, we could say that the subject 'undergoes' the act ('passes through' it) rather than 'accomplishes' it: in it, the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn (or not), i.e., the act involves a temporary eclipse, *aphanisis*, of the subject. Which is why every act worthy of this name is 'mad' in the sense of radical *unaccountability*: by means of it, I put at stake everything, including myself, my symbolic identity; the act is therefore always a 'crime', a 'transgression', namely of the limit of the symbolic community to which I belong.
>
> (Žižek 1992b: 44)

In this sense, the agent is a vanishing mediator that performs its own disappearance. But, to repeat, 'vanishing' does not mean the extinction of

the actual agent. Rather, the self is transformed through a becoming (Deleuze 1994: 89). This transformation is a 'symbolic death', which makes a new beginning possible through a gesture of sublimation (Žižek 2000: 127). So, the act is autonomous in relation to the actor (the present) or its condition (the past).

DEMOCRACY TO COME

Let us, finally, return to Nietzsche's mythical city, the 'land of the Hyperboreans', which is, in contrast to the City of God, positioned on earth by nihilists who have overcome themselves. It is, to put it simply, the virtual component of the existing city. Hence, Zarathustra ascends to the mountain top to speak to the sun (nature), which is a virtual event that inspires him. However, he is also interested in actualization; thus he descends from the mountain to the actual city, Motley Cow. Between the city and the mountain there is the forest, a paradoxical zone of indistinction, where Zarathustra meets a resentful holy man, who speaks of himself as an animal: 'Do not go to men, but stay in the forest! Go rather to the animals! Why will you not be as I am – a bear among bears, a bird among birds'? (Nietzsche 1961: 41) The 'forest' is the space of naked life, a space, in which one remains an animal that, per definition, cannot overcome itself. Whereas the city is the space of event, nothing can happen in the forest. Zarathustra thus continues his descent. What is in wait for him in Motley Cow, however, is nihilism. Thus Zarathustra declares the necessity of destruction to create new values; hence his destructive, pharmakon-like gift, fire. Yet he knows that:

> The condition for this act of creation is to live simultaneously in two worlds: the world of decadence and the world of the Hyperboreans. Residence in the world of decadence is thus not simply the precondition for, but is actually the same as, residence in the land of the Hyperboreans.
>
> (Rosen 1995: 10)

But, people are frightened by Zarathustra's fire and try to kill him. They are dominated by passions, by fear, and their political culture cannot accommodate Zarathustra's anti-nihilism. As the name 'Motley Cow' signifies, theirs is a democracy degenerated into herd mentality, a democracy perverted by nihilism, and thus ruled by the dictates of passivity and

mediocrity. But how does this perversion occur? Initially, it must be noted that, in the context of (anti) nihilism, the status of democracy is problematic in that democracy has always been subject to corruption both from inside and from outside. Democratic form is a form that corrupts itself. In other words, democracy is a question of 'auto-immunity': it is a system that can attack itself because it consists of not only a promise but also a threat, or rather, a 'threat *in* the promise itself' (Derrida 2005: 82).

Thus, already in the ancient Greek democracy, in which free rivals could participate in a competitive *agon*, one can speak of a perversion that emerged together with the idea of transcendence. As Deleuze remarks, in Greek democracy, 'opinion' had a crucial significance; democracy was founded on the opinions expressed by the citizens and, in line with this, the task of critical thought was to 'rectify' or 'secure' the opinions circulating among citizens in an immanent horizon (1998: 136–7). With Plato, however, the doctrine of 'judgment' imposed a vertical principle of selection on the rivals by introducing in the field of agonism a transcendent Idea, against which the claims and the validity of the rivals, their qualities, could be measured up. What Plato criticized in the Athenian democracy was 'the fact that anyone can lay claim to anything; whence his enterprise of restoring criteria of selection among rivals' (ibid. 137).

Nevertheless, the idea of immanence, like a ghostly double, has persisted alongside that of transcendence. After all, immanent interactions are the basis of all sociality. Therefore, some characteristics of the ancient agonistic democracy 'survive' in today's democracies, albeit in new forms: the immanence of capital, the free competition among rivals, the reign of opinion (Deleuze 1998: 137). It was mentioned before that, although it is an immanent system, capitalism needs the State to actualize itself in concrete contexts. By 'reterritorializing' on the nation state, capitalism thus 'reactivated' ancient Greek democracy in the form of liberal democracy (see Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 98). However, just as it was the case with ancient Greece, today's liberal democracy is also prone to nihilistic perversions and this happens mainly because of two factors: the logic of capitalist development and the 'reign of opinion'.

Regarding 'opinion', the problem is that the ideal that guides it is consensus (Deleuze 1994: 152). Therefore, even though it is an institutional precondition for the functioning of democracy, 'opinion' also delimits the potential of democracy when, for instance, the dominant opinions (e.g. on class, race, sex) foreclose the actualization of justice (see Patton 2008: 187). In other words, 'opinion' is inherently conservative,

which is why Deleuze juxtaposes the 'concept' to 'opinion'. Concept, creative thought, is what can question the taken for granted opinions and initiate a nomadic movement that deviates from received values, refusing to be integrated into the established ways of thinking. Following this, the task of critical thought vis-à-vis democracy is to 'counter-actualize' what passes for democracy in the present (ibid. 190). 'What saves modern philosophy is that it is no more the friend of capitalism than ancient philosophy was the friend of the city' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 99). Another name for this task is 'becoming minoritarian' vis-à-vis liberal democracy's emphasis on the majority:

> There is a universal figure of minoritarian consciousness as the becoming of everybody, and that becoming is creation. One does not attain it by acquiring the majority. The figure to which we are referring is continuous variation, as an amplitude that continually oversteps the representative threshold of the majoritarian standard, by excess or by default. In erecting the figure of a universal minoritarian consciousness, one addresses powers (*puissances*) of becoming that belong to a different realm from that of Power (*Pouvoir*) and Domination. Continuous variation constitutes the becoming-minoritarian of everybody, as opposed to the majoritarian Fact of Nobody. Becoming-minoritarian as the universal figure of consciousness is called autonomy. It is certainly not by using a minor language as a dialect, by regionalizing or ghettoizing, that one becomes revolutionary; rather, by using a minority elements, by connecting, conjugating them, one invents a specific, unforeseen, autonomous becoming.
>
> (ibid. 106)

Regarding the second line of perversion the problem is that in capitalism democracy is subordinated to the capitalist axiomatic. Subsequently, even creativity, the concept, is threatened with being reduced to its exchange value (see ibid. 99). In a capitalist society, universal democracy is per definition impossible because the only universal thing capitalism can recognize is the market, the cynicism of which renders democracy inherently 'isomorphous' (ibid. 106). Thus, in a capitalist society there is every reason to be critical of concepts such as 'human rights' which, as new forms of transcendence, refer to 'eternal values' while, at the same time, coexisting on the market together with other rights, e.g. those securing property, which can indefinitely 'suspend' them (ibid. 107; Deleuze 1995:

152; Patton 2008: 184). Most importantly, such rights 'say nothing about the immanent modes of existence of people provided with rights' (Deleuze and Guattari 1995: 107). Thus, democracy must be thought of in the context of such modes of existence, that is, as a question of becoming. In other words, one cannot be but can only 'become' democratic.

'Becoming democratic' has a virtual dimension that must not be confused with or reduced to the actually existing constitutional states (ibid.112–3; Patton 2008: 180). 'Democracy' is an event that cannot fully actualize itself; not an abstract, ideal, future state one can then strive to actualize. For that matter, if asked precisely what 'democracy' is, Deleuze would probably answer that he has never seen one, just as he says his favourite sentence in *Anti-Oedipus* is 'No, we've never seen a schizophrenic' (1995: 12). Democracy cannot be simply an absolute, self-positing concept because it necessarily deterritorializes itself in the moment it is actualized. 'Becoming democratic therefore points towards future as yet unrealized forms of democracy, but also reminds us that there is no definitive form that will ever arrive' (Patton 2008: 180).

As such, democracy is a paradoxical concept, a virtual 'problem', that can be actualized in different conceptions or solutions. However, since what returns is difference, on each occasion the virtual is actualized differently. Therefore, a democratic city can only be imagined as a unity of multiplicities in which multiple conceptions and solutions signify actual diversification. Only on this basis it can be possible to hold a common *concept* of the democratic city while everybody can agree to disagree about its different *conceptions*. What makes such a city interesting is the surface, the mediation, between its virtual and actual components, which is precisely what disappears in radical and passive nihilism: in the first, the actual city is destroyed; in the latter, the virtual one.

However, as argued in detail before, the mediation between the two does not need to be a religious one for one does not need religion to have values. This is also why *Zarathustra*'s transcendental naturalism has inspired many contemporary thinkers in their search for values that are, to use Simmel's term, 'immanent transcendences'. Derrida, for instance, inscribing democracy into the context of what he calls the 'messianicity without messianism', argues that democracy has a spectral, virtual moment that does not belong to chronological time; democracy is always 'to come' and is distinguished from its actual forms (1994: 73, 99). Thus the tangible intangibility of the ghost, of the spectre of democracy, never disappears; 'a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back'

(ibid. 99). With a spectre, after all, the question is always, at once, to be *and* not to be, actual phenomenality and virtuality (see ibid. 11, 17). Democracy is 'to come' not because it points to a promise that belongs to the future but because 'it will always remain aporetic in its structure' (Derrida 2005: 86). Yet, at the same time, this aporia, this inherent undecidability and uncertainty of democracy, does not mean at all that democracy is merely an ideal, a utopia that can be infinitely deferred:

> This im-possible is not privative. It is not the inaccessible, and it is not what I can indefinitely defer: it announces itself; it precedes me, swoops down upon and seizes me *here and now* in a nonvirtualizable way, in actuality and not potentiality. It comes upon me from on high, in the form of an injunction that does not simply wait on the horizon, that I do not see coming, that never leaves me in peace and never lets me put it off until later. Such an urgency cannot be idealized any more than the other as other can. This im-possible is thus not a (regulative) *idea* of *Ideal*. It is what is most undeniably *real*. And sensible. Like the other. Like the irreducible and nonappropriable différance of the other.
>
> (ibid. 84)

Even though 'democracy to come' structurally remains an impossible promise, the ethical, political responsibility regarding the 'decision' to actualize democracy cannot be deferred. Hence it is absolutely necessary to take a position in actual politics in relation to justice. Hence Derrida reverts, at this moment, to a very concrete way of discussing democracy, proposing a list of the most urgent issues of justice that challenge today's liberal democracies: unemployment and poverty caused by neo-liberal deregulation; the exclusion of the homeless from democratic participation; the international economic wars, including the military wars, which deliberately transgress the international law; the inability to control the 'free market'; foreign debt; the arms industry; the 'dissemination' of nuclear weapons; inter-ethnic wars and the displacements they cause; the mafia and the drug cartels; the domination and manipulation of the international law by single particular nation-states; and so forth (see 1994: 78–84).

Nevertheless, Derrida insists that even in these concrete contexts, the conception of democracy must be opposed to a regulative idea because such a conception would locate it in the realm of the possible, as a teleological end, a potential that can be fully actualized. Thus he aligns justice with event: with a 'disjointure, with being *out of joint*, with the interruption of

relation, with unbinding, with the infinite secret of the other' (2005: 88). The democratic decision is a political act, a nonrelation to or deviation from the established ethical, political codex. Justice is an event. Which is why 'democracy to come' cannot consist in a rule following or in application of a norm either. Reduced to rule following, the democratic 'decision' would cease to be a decision and subsequently the room for responsibility, for justice, would be emptied out. Hence one must insist on the simultaneity of the unconditional urgency of the here and now *and* on the structure of the promise (ibid. 85).

Let us, at this point, return to the problem of nihilism via Nietzsche's critique of liberal democracy. Also for Nietzsche, democracy is a paradoxical concept in that it can always degenerate into a perfect environment for *ressentiment* covered as a moral (rather than political) demand for justice. Nietzsche thinks that this internal perversion of democracy can occur because modern democracy has overtaken, although by secularizing it, the notion of the 'individual' from Christianity: the immortal soul as an abstract, unconditional and indivisible category (Nietzsche 1972: 107). Just as the private space of the Christian soul provided an escape route from the social and the political, from the world as it is, modern liberal democracy 'turns this escape into a political foundation' by representing the body politic as an entire sum of private spaces (Warren 1988: 215).

Thus, liberal democracy is marked by a fear of totalitarianism, of the colonization of such private spaces by the State. Paradoxically, however, what makes totalitarianism possible is the very process of individualization. As Foucault puts it, in modernity the Christian soul reappears as an object of 'salvation oriented' scientific rationality that aims at disciplining and normalizing populations, that is, at creating 'docile bodies' reminiscent of Nietzsche's last man (see Foucault 1977: 135–69; 1982: 214–5). In other words, it is nihilism, the survival of the last man, that makes the colonization of the self by the State possible and probable. Which is why, for Foucault as for Nietzsche, the political task in modern society is 'not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are' (1982: 216). To refuse the kind of individuality imposed on us by the State. That is, as Nietzsche would put it, to 'perish'.

Nietzsche distinguishes three elements in the origin of Christianity: the oppressed, the mediocre and the discontented. The first enabled Christianity to fight against the nobility, the second against the exceptional and the privileged, and the third against the instincts of happiness and health. Gradually, however, the second element has stepped into the

foreground in the sense that Christianity has persuaded the warrior classes to its side together with the powerful, which had an interest in the conquest of the 'mob' (Nietzsche 1967: 126). Finally, the self-consciousness of the mediocre, the herd instinct, grew to the extent that it, in liberal democracies, 'arrogates even political power to itself' (ibid.). In this sense, for Nietzsche, modern democracy is 'Christianity made natural' (ibid.). And for this internal reason, because of its nihilistic heritage, democracy can always degenerate, can always result in the 'mediocritizing of man – a useful, industrious, highly serviceable and able herd-animal man . . . a type prepared for slavery in the subtlest sense' (Nietzsche 1972: 154; see also 1967: 80, 256).

As such, Nietzsche's critique of slave morality is still as relevant as ever, provided that the 'slave' here is not confused with someone dominated. Namely, the 'dominators' can also be the bearers of slave morality to the extent that they are influenced by passive, reactive forces. Even 'totalitarian regimes are in this sense regimes of slaves, not merely because of the people that they subjugate, but above all because of the type of "masters" they set up' (Deleuze 1983: x). In line with this, and in contrast to another common misunderstanding, Nietzsche is not against the possibility of the weak's struggle for more power to be able to create a better, more just world: the weak can, and should, engage in a struggle for power but this struggle must be a power struggle rather than a moral one (see Hass 1982: 150). What defines *ressentiment* is precisely the translation of the political issues into moral ones. Insofar as 'freedom' is defined as freedom from external constraints rather than overcoming them, the democratic ideal comes to legitimize passivity and slave morality: a degenerated democracy as the form of the city's decay (ibid. 108, 161). The freedom democracy brings with it paradoxically also opens up the space for nihilism:

> *My conception of freedom*. – The value of a thing sometimes lies not in what one attains with it, but in what one pays for it – what it *costs* us. I give an example. Liberal institutions immediately cease to be liberal as soon as they are attained: subsequently there is nothing more thoroughly harmful to freedom than liberal institutions. One knows, indeed, *what* they bring about: they undermine the will to power, they are the levelling of mountain and valley exalted to a moral principle, they make small, cowardly and smug – it is the herd animal which triumphs with them every time. Liberalism: in plain words, *reduction to the herd animal* . . . . As long as they are still being fought for, these same institutions

> produce effects; they then in fact promote freedom mightily. Viewed more closely, it is war which produces these effects, war *for* liberal institutions which as war permits the illiberal instincts to endure. And war is a training in freedom.
>
> (Nietzsche 1969: 92)

What must be noted here is that Nietzsche is not saying that liberalism is bad in itself. Indeed, as long as it is 'fought for', as long as it is 'to come', liberal democracy can lead to achievements in the direction of positive freedom. What matters, in other words, is 'becoming democratic' and then again 'war' has an indispensable role to play in this. However, once liberal institutions are 'attained', they turn into harmful monuments of levelling. Thus Nietzsche does not, in any way, find it desirable 'that the kingdom of righteousness and peace should be established on earth' because it 'would be the kingdom of the profoundest mediocrity' (1960: 343). A democracy that declares itself to have arrived, a democracy that cannot question itself any more, can only be a nihilistic form of government.

There is, in this respect, an interesting structural similarity between 'democracy to come' and the will to power. What is crucial in this regard is that the will to power is not a blind desire. It constantly needs a determinate content, a resistance. That is, the will to power can only be satisfied in so far as the agent desires something else than power (Reginster 2006: 132). The will to power is not a desire for power but rather a desire to desire. And as such it has a paradoxical structure in that its satisfaction would mean its destruction. Hence power for Nietzsche is not a condition or a state but rather an activity, a process of overcoming resistance. Along the same lines, it is only in a relationship between the actual and the virtual that democracy can get a determinate content. 'Democracy to come', therefore, cannot be actualized without destroying itself.

> An 'agonistic' democracy requires accepting that conflict and division are inherent to politics and that there is no place where reconciliation could be definitively achieved as the full actualisation of the unity of the 'people'. To imagine that pluralist democracy could ever be perfectly instantiated is to transform it into a self-refuting ideal, since the condition of possibility of a pluralist democracy is at the same time the condition of impossibility of its perfect implementation. Hence the importance of acknowledging its paradoxical nature.
>
> (Mouffe 2000: 16)

The ultimate paradox of 'democracy to come', one could say, is that it is a democracy that wants to perish, a democracy that constantly wants to overcome itself. On the other hand, a democracy that is content with the actual, with the existing 'choices', necessarily leads to nihilism, to corruption. Hence Nietzsche's critique of parliamentarism as a political expression of passive nihilism:

> Parliamentarism, that is to say, the public permission to choose between five main political opinions, insinuates itself into the favour of the numerous class who would fain *appear* independent and individual, and like to fight for their opinions. After all, however, it is a matter of indifference whether one opinion is imposed upon the herd, or five opinions are permitted to it. – He who diverges from the five public opinions and goes apart, has always the whole herd against him.
>
> (Nietzsche 1960: 190–1)

'The whole herd against him.' Paradoxically, that is, passive nihilism can lead to its opposite, to dogmatism, through an insistence on its own position. After all, when we get rid of truth and values, what we are left with is not necessarily pluralism but rather the rendering of the dominant political and ethical values absolute (see Carr 1992: 134). Thus anti-nihilism has to fight on two fronts at once: passive nihilism (value relativism) *and* fundamentalism (value absolutism). Values are not absolute but this does not mean that there are no values. 'Democracy to come' can live with neither an absolutism of values (e.g. fundamentalism) nor a passive nihilism disguised as value relativism (e.g. post-politics). And a 'democracy to come' can only be a democracy insofar as it can avoid corruption. Crucially, however, it cannot perceive the nature of this corruption in moral terms. For it, corruption signifies a possibility of transfiguration, of metamorphosis, as well as decay. In the end, corruption, the development of nihilism, is bound to make anti-nihilism stronger as well. 'Enough: the time is coming when politics will have a different meaning' (Nietzsche 1967: 504).

AFTERWORD

THE ASS FESTIVAL

When John Lennon first sang *Revolution* in 1968, one of the most culturally rich periods of recent history, his message disappointed many who considered themselves revolutionary. Lennon was complaining about 'minds that hate' and demanding to be counted out if the talk was about the 'destruction' of the institutions. 'You better free your mind instead.' Thus, another key figure of the '68 movement, John Hoyland, responded to *Revolution* by writing an open letter to Lennon which was published in the October 27 issue of the *Black Dwarf*. This letter firmly states that a 'repressive, vicious, authoritarian system' must be 'ruthlessly destroyed'. And this is, the letter continues, not a matter of 'spiritual undernourishment'. Thus Lennon is advised to look at the society around him and ask himself: why? 'Now, do you see what was wrong with *Revolution*? That record was no more revolutionary than *Mrs Dale's Diary*.' To which Lennon answers with another ferocious open letter that starts with 'Dear John':

> Your letter didn't sound patronizing – it was. Who do you think you are? What do you think you know? [. . .] I *know* what I am up against – narrow minds – rich/poor. I don't remember saying that *Revolution* was revolutionary – fuck Mrs Dale . . . You say: 'In order to change the world, we've got to understand what's wrong with it. And then – Destroy it. Ruthlessly'. You're obviously on a destruction kick. I'll tell you what's wrong with the world – people – so do you want to destroy them? [. . .] Love, John. PS – You smash it – I'll build around it.
>
> (Quoted from Hoyland 2008)

As such, the 'Dear John' letters embody a disjunctive synthesis of two camps within the '68 movement: a left wing radicalism that emphasizes 'destruction' and a hippy spirituality that preferred 'love'. 'Minds that hate' versus 'all you need is love'; hatred without love versus love without hatred. And the rest is, more or less, a well-known history of hostile backlash against radicalism. Thus, since 1968, the radical nihilist aspects of May '68 have repeatedly, like an obsessive compulsive ritual, provoked a bitter, moralizing critique that invokes the impossibility of 'revolution'. But, on the other hand, the critique of May '68 has been assimilated, domesticated and thus accommodated by a consumer capitalism that can effortlessly trade in 'alternative' life-styles, even perversion, as long as it sells. In a sense, therefore, the political hatred of the event went hand in hand with its digestion in consumerism. A revamped search for authority coupled with a reduction of May '68 to a hedonistic, carnivalesque pseudo-event.

In the end of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, we meet some of Zarathustra's guests who all think they have 'unlearned' from Zarathustra the nihilist despair. Thus, they are in the carnival mood. Yet, Nietzsche makes it clear that overcoming nihilism is an intricate matter; killing God is not enough to get rid of him. A materialist, hedonist world without value is prone to new, this-worldly illusions, even new gods and idols. Thus, suddenly, at one point in the carnival, the noise stops and, at the point at which they think they have overcome it, the crowd falls back upon a religious mood. Zarathustra is shocked: 'They have all become *pious* again, they are *praying*, they are *mad*!' (Nietzsche 1961: 321). But what they worship is a this-worldly God: an ass. They explain that the ass carries their burden, he is patient and never says No, indeed he never speaks, except saying Yes (singing/crying Yea, Yea, Yea) to the world, and so on. 'Better to worship God in this shape than in no shape at all' (ibid. 322). In the modern age of materialism, the ass is perhaps best embodied in the celebrity figure as the only form of 'spirit' the crowd can imagine (see also Rosen 1995: 241). And significantly in this context, it is the 'ugliest man' who has murdered God, that is, the passive nihilist, who delivers the tribute to the ass that has 'created the world after his own image, that is, as stupid as possible' (Nietzsche 1961: 322). One is tempted to say that, along the same lines, the history of '68 is perhaps a history where the desire for change, for transfiguration, has disappeared into the cry of the ass. But:

> Becoming isn't part of history; history amounts only the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to 'become', that is, to create something new. This is precisely what Nietzsche calls the Untimely. May 68 was a demonstration, an irruption of a becoming in its pure state. It's fashionable these days to condemn the horrors of revolution. [. . .] They say revolutions turn out badly. But they are constantly confusing two different things, the way revolutions turn out historically and people's revolutionary becoming. These relate to two different sets of people. Men's only hope lies in a revolutionary becoming: the only way of . . . responding to what is intolerable.
>
> (Deleuze 1995: 171)

If one can see through the celebration of absurdity, the ass festival, May '68 might appear as a sign of the intrusion of the real into reality, a sign of 'pure reality breaking through' (ibid. 144–5). In this sense, May 68 was an event. At the very least, it resulted in books such as *Anti-Oedipus* and *Difference and Repetition*, books that significantly contributed to the critique of nihilism following the Spinozist and Nietzschean tradition.

In this book I followed this tradition along three lines of argument. First, moral ideals are illusions that repress, negate life. But behind the illusion, behind the mask of nihilism, there is always hidden a will to power, which, second, can ultimately turn to (self)destruction characteristic of radical nihilism. Yet, third, this does not mean that a life without ideals is a solution to the problem of nihilism. As I argued, the significance of these points are obvious if we look at the society around us. In the war against terrorism, for instance, moral ideals are used as a justification for an aggressive war, a 'just war', and put into the service of 'this worldly' strategies of the American empire. Thus, in the fifth anniversary of invasion, Bush was still trying to argue that 'the battle in Iraq is noble, it is necessary, and it is just' (quoted in MacAskill 2008). Yet, for all that happened, the American empire could not avenge itself. 'The worst thing for global power is not to be attacked or destroyed, but to be humiliated. And it was humiliated by September 11 because the terrorists inflicted something on it then that it cannot return' (Baudrillard 2003: 101). Thus, one wonders: would it not be more 'noble' for the empire to fight its own nihilism, its own *ressentiment*, instead of mirroring Bin Laden, becoming a shadow of its own shadow, in a radical nihilist, fundamentalist pact that reduces politics to 'moral duty'? Is vengeance not, after all, a way of accepting the standards of the enemy, thus a cause of self-abasement?

A morality that can accommodate 'nobility' would necessitate overcoming its own nihilism, its own urge for revenge. An ethics of nobility can only emerge on the basis of transvaluating existing values, without reducing 'value' to a single definition and thus putting it into the service of despotism (see Nietzsche 1969: 82). An ethics of nobility can only come into view on the basis of 'hospitality', of the affirmation of the pluralism of values. But, as Derrida (1999: 35; 2000: 3) shows, such hospitality always carries within itself the risk of hostility and without taking this risk there can be no affirmative hospitality. One must run the risk of being overtaken, surprised and even raped and stolen from (Derrida 2002: 360–1). In this sense, hospitality is the urge to do the impossible, to move beyond nihilism and its aporetic paralysis.

But, if it is futile to run after values that cannot be realized, it is equally futile to hope that a world without values, a 'scientific' axiomatic that reduces all belief to knowledge, can be a solution to the problem of nihilism. Consider Tony Blair's advice to young people in one of his 'goodbye tours' before he stepped down as prime minister: 'an idealistic young person [who] wanted to change the world [should] become a scientist' (quoted in Rawnsley 2006). Notwithstanding its curious effect – don't waste time on politics! – this message, uttered by a prime minister who pulled his country into the Iraqi war by justifying this with reference to his Christian 'values', reveals the core of post-politics: science as ersatz politics. To be sure, science has always competed with religion. But this competition seems to have reached a point at which knowledge literally takes the place of belief. Thus, today, only science can claim authority regarding significant political matters, offering the certainty of 'truth', according to which other forms of thinking can be judged and denounced; 'like the Church in the past, it has the power to destroy, or marginalize, independent thinkers' (Gray 2003: 19; quoted in Žižek 2008a: 69).

> In this dimension, science is what Lacan called 'university discourse' at its purest: knowledge whose 'truth' is a Master-signifier, that is, power. Science and religion have changed places: today, science provides the security religion once guaranteed. In a curious inversion, religion is one of the possible places from which one can deploy critical doubts about today's society. It has become one of the sites of resistance.
>
> (Žižek 2008a: 69–70)

Indeed, it seems today as if we have gone through the full circle of

nihilism, at the end of which the illusion of the 'real world' has disappeared. If the history of nihilism is the 'history of an error', the illusion of a 'real world', in today's science-based society, this error is abolished:

> we have abolished the real world: what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? . . . But no! *with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world*! Mid-day; moment of the shortest shadow; end of the longest error; zenith of mankind.
>
> (Nietzsche 1969: 41)

In other words, overcoming the metaphysical juxtaposition of this world to the 'real world', is not enough. The moment of the 'shortest shadow' is a world without value and meaning, a life without a virtual dimension. Which is why, for Nietzsche, illusions (fictions) are necessary to live. But, having stressed the illusory character of nihilism, is this not a paradoxical claim? What is crucial to note in this context is that nihilism pretends that its illusions are truths. Accordingly, nihilism is to insist that truths are necessary to live. Nietzsche's re-evaluation, on the other hand, consists in showing that it is not truths but illusions that are necessary (Hass 1982: 90). Significantly, illusion or fiction is something created. Our illusions are our values, that is, the ways in which we live/interpret life, the ways in which life interprets, or expresses, itself through us. Since all life is interpretative, that is, necessitates perspective illusions, then what is relevant is not opposing reality to illusion but rather differentiating illusions (e.g. affirming or life-negating). Indeed, such an opposition itself is an indication of nihilism.

> You must forgive me this humorous expression and grimace: for I have long since learned to think differently, to judge differently on the subject of deceiving and being deceived, and I keep in readiness at least a couple of jabs in the ribs for the blind rage with which philosophers resist being deceived. Why *not*? It is no more than a moral prejudice that truth is worth more than appearance; it is even the worst-proved assumption that exists. Let us concede at least this much: there would be no life at all if not on the basis of perspective evaluations and appearances; and if . . . one wanted to abolish the 'apparent world' altogether, well, assuming, *you* could do that – at any rate nothing would remain of your 'truth' either!
>
> (Nietzsche 1972: 47)

In a film from 1913, *The Student from Prague*, a poor student comes across the devil, who offers him a pile of gold in exchange for his mirror-image. A deal is struck. The devil removes the image from the mirror, rolls it up, puts it in his pocket, and leaves. In virtue of his wealth the student is happy, and hardly considers that he can no longer see himself that he no longer has a shadow. But, a day arrives when he sees himself in the flesh. Frequenting the same social circles as he, his double begins to follow him and give him no rest. This double is of course his image, which the devil put into circulation. The alienated double is angry because he has been sold and wants to take revenge. Consequently the double starts to shadow him everywhere, destroying the student's social life, even committing crimes in his guise. One night, the mirror-image chases the student into his room. In a violent confrontation, the student pulls the mirror from the wall at the moment when the double passes before the mirror from which he was rolled up. The mirror shatters, and the double, becoming once again the fantasy he was, disappears. But at the same time the student collapses: he is the one who is murdered. For in killing his image, he kills himself, since, imperceptibly, it was the image who came to be living and real in his place (see Baudrillard 1998a: 187–8).

The alienation at work in *The Student from Prague* mirrors the paradoxical relationship between illusion and the real. If the illusion, shadow, disappears, the real disappears as well. Then, 'illusion' is not merely an irreality or non-reality; rather, as in *il-ludere* in Latin, it is a *play* upon, a challenge to actual 'reality' (Baudrillard 1993b: 140). Illusion is creation, putting something into play, inventing the 'modes of appearance of things' (ibid. 59).

> Symbolic culture has always been lived as a degeneration of the real, something like a radical distrust: the idea that the essential happens elsewhere than in the real. And that possibility is what is disappearing, little by little, without a pressure from the operation of the world – the idea that the world is real and that all that is required now is to operate in the real. There is not even a utopian world any longer. There is no utopia. There is not even a 'scene' of utopia. And well, utopia has gone into the real, we are in it. . . .
>
> (ibid. 62)

A world without utopia is a totally 'realized', scientific world without illusion, or, a hyper-real world devoid of a virtual dimension that can

'challenge' or 'negate' it, thus rendering it 'real' (ibid. 184). Precisely in this sense, in its lack of a virtual dimension, simulacra is 'the desert of the real' (Baudrillard 1994: 1). Then, how can we save the 'illusion' without falling back upon radical nihilism? Significantly in this respect, for all the passive nihilist reduction of belief to knowledge, what is at issue for anti-nihilism is not the devaluation of knowledge as such. Even though 'truth' should not be reduced to knowledge, this does not mean that 'knowledge' is a redundant category. This would be a recourse to religious illusion. The point is, rather, that truth and knowledge are not contradictory. Just as the virtual cannot be attained on the basis of the extinction of the actual, the total separation of truth from knowledge leads to the loss of 'truth'. Indeed, 'truth is subtracted from knowledge' (Badiou quoted Hallward 2003: 163).

Here we encounter another passion for the real, which is fundamentally different from a nihilistic destruction of the actual that seeks an authentic real, a 'truth', by trying to isolate it from its semblances. This passion for the real is counter-actualization, or 'subtraction', which tries to distill from 'reality' a minimal, constitutive difference, a creative act that opposes the minimal difference to maximal destruction (Badiou 2007: 56). If everything consists of a virtual dimension as well as an actual one, of abstract lines as well as a particular cluster of points, subtraction is a method of finding those lines of flight, virtual potentialities, contained within an actual state. With reference to Deleuze, such a method is 'transcendental', that is, it seeks, through intuition, to move beyond the constraints of the actual. But at the same time, since the virtual can only express itself through the actual, it remains 'empiricist'. As such, 'transcendental empiricism' is an epistemological utopia that seeks to attain the 'highest level' of knowledge that can link the actual and the virtual.

Indeed, within the hierarchy of knowledge, the originary, religious nihilism scores the lowest point, because this nihilism, or 'superstition', as Spinoza calls it, originates not from reason but from emotions. It consists in inadequate, inconsistent and vague ideas acquired on the basis of the perception of singular phenomena through chance encounters (Spinoza 1993: 54–61). What follows is only passive joy and a feeling of impotence, or, sadness, as a direct consequence of being subjected to one's passions. Since there are no joyful superstitions, there is an intrinsic relation between sadness and superstition, between sadness and tyranny (Deleuze 1990: 270). Hence the task of practical thought vis-à-vis religious nihilism consists in denouncing life-negating illusions, or, in

one word, sadness (ibid.). A task that can be undertaken only by the second type of knowledge, which corresponds to reason, that is, a knowledge of 'common notions', through which what is singular is positioned in relation to other singularities and structures through common categories. Now, things are no longer regarded as contingent but as necessary (Spinoza 1993: 71). Consequently, the joy attained on the basis of the second kind of knowledge is an active joy that corresponds to our power to act and understand. And ultimately, with the third and highest form of knowledge, intuitive knowledge, one attains the knowledge of eternity, of the virtual. One no longer only conceives of things as actual but as 'contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature' (ibid. 211). That is, knowledge now seeks to go beyond the actual, beyond things in their relationality in time and space. It perceives the essence of things as singular events outside time and space, as singularities which express their cause, God. The attributes of things are no longer perceived merely as common properties but 'as what constitutes the singular essence of divine substance, and as what contains all the particular essences of its modes' (Deleuze 1990: 300). Now singularity reveals God's (or Nature's) essence; through singularity we reach the idea of the virtual, of God. For Spinoza, the active joy that arises here is the intellectual love of God, that is, a joy that follows from knowledge 'accompanied by the idea of God as its cause' (ibid. 212).

It goes without saying that there is a parallel between Spinoza's intellectual love of God and Dionysian wisdom, that is, the joy related to overcoming, becoming, the 'joy in what is coming and lies in the future, which triumphs over existing things, however good' (Nietzsche 1967: 224). This, of course, provided that 'future' here is not taken as a reference to the chronological time but rather to 'eternity', to the virtual. 'All joy wants eternity' (Nietzsche 1961: 332). But significantly, even though this third kind of knowledge goes beyond the second kind, it is not possible without the second. The knowledge of the virtual is 'subtracted' from the second kind of knowledge. In this sense, anti-nihilism is about an epistemological break, a leap from the second to the third kind of knowledge, and it is in this context that the event, revolution, is a libertarian utopia of immanence, which connects up with the here-and-now. 'Actually, *utopia is what links* philosophy with its own epoch. . . . It is with utopia that philosophy becomes political and takes the criticism of its own time to its highest point' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 99).

The anti-nihilist 'utopia' is a belief in the possibility of social change.

And as such it has nothing to do with optimism or pessimism. To refer to an anecdote from Zygmunt Bauman, the optimist is the one who believes that the given world is the best possible world; the pessimist is the one who fears the optimist might be right. On this account, anti-nihilism is neither an optimistic nor a pessimistic idea. It is the confidence in that there is another dimension to the 'one dimensional society'. But since this confidence cannot be based on an optimism, that is, a defence of a God 'who *has* to have created the best of worlds', or a pessimism, that is, an insistence 'that evil reigns', its only option is to look aside from theology and its disjunctive synthesis with 'evangelical atheism'. Only then it becomes 'obvious that the world is neither good or evil, let alone the best of all or the worst of all worlds, and that these concepts "good" and "evil" possess meaning only when applied to men' (Nietzsche 1986: 27). And only then can the laughter that permeates the 'ass festival' be countered with a Nietzschean, diabolic laughter.

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera dramatizes the opposition between two different forms of laughter in this way: when, in a crowded feast, an angel heard the Devil's laughter for the first time, he was horrified. He knew that the Devil's laughter was aimed against God. Yet, feeling weak and defenceless, 'unable to fabricate anything of his own', he could do nothing except try to turn his enemy's tactics against him. So, he opened his mouth and let out a 'wobbly, breathy sound . . . and endowed it with the opposite meaning'. Whereas the diabolic laughter points out the nihilism of illusions, the angelic laughter rejoices in their rationality, beauty and goodness:

> There they stood, Devil and angel, face to face, mouths open, both making more or less the same sound, but each expressing himself in a unique timbre – absolute opposites. And seeing the laughing angel, the Devil laughed all the harder, all the louder, all the more openly, because the laughing angel was infinitely laughable. Laughable laughter is cataclysmic. And even so, the angels gained something by it. They have tricked us all with their semantic hoax. Their imitation laughter and its original (the Devil's) have the same name. People nowadays do not even realize that one and the same external phenomenon embraces two completely contradictory internal attitudes. There are two kinds of laughter, and we lack the words to distinguish them.
>
> (Kundera 1982: 62; see also White 1990: 124–5)

And so we have moved from Dostoevsky's moderate devil to Nietzsche's diabolic anti-nihilism. Only, with nihilism, one must be able to count till four: there are four nihilisms and so four different kinds of laughter: the angelic laughter of religious nihilism; the spiteful laughter of the radical nihilist (after all, the one who laughs last laughs best!); the laughter that enjoins the ass festival, consumer capitalism with its celebrity worship; and the laughter that comes with the joy of destroying idols, of creating new values, or, 'illusions'. Do we really lack, after Spinoza, Nietzsche and Deleuze, the words to distinguish them?

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