Marginal Notes on
Commentaries on the
Society of the Spectacle

Strategist

Guy Debord's books constitute the clearest and most severe analysis of the miseries and slavery of a society that by now has extended its dominion over the whole planet—that is to say, the society of the spectacle in which we live. As such, these books do not need clarifications, praises, or, least of all, prefaces. At most it might be possible to suggest here a few glosses in the margins, much like those signs that the medieval copyists traced alongside of the most noteworthy passages. Following a rigorous anchoritic intention, they are in fact separated from the text and they find their own place not in an improbable elsewhere, but solely in the precise cartographic delimitation of what they describe.

It would be of no use to praise these books' independence of judgment and prophetic clairvoyance, or the classic perspicuity of their style. There are no authors
today who could console themselves by thinking that their work will be read in a century (by what kind of human beings?), and there are no readers who could flatter themselves (with respect to what?) with the knowledge of belonging to that small number of people who understood that work before others did. They should be used rather as manuals, as instruments of resistance or exodus—much like those improper weapons that the fugitive picks up and inserts hastily under the belt (according to a beautiful image of Deleuze). Or, rather, they should be used as the work of a peculiar pragmatist (the title Commentaries, in fact, harks back to a tradition of this kind)—a pragmatist whose field of action is not so much a battle in which to marshal troops but the pure power of the intellect. A sentence by Karl von Clausewitz, cited in the fourth Italian edition of The Society of the Spectacle, expresses perfectly this character:

In strategic critiques, the essential fact is to position yourself exactly in the actors’ point of view. It is true that this is often very difficult. Most strategic critiques would disappear completely or would be reduced to minor differences of understanding if the writers would or could position themselves in all the circumstances in which the actors had found themselves.¹

In this sense, not only Machiavelli’s The Prince but also Spinoza’s Ethics are treatises on strategy: operations de potentia intellectus, sive de libertate.

**Phantasmagoria**

Marx was in London when the first Universal Exposition was inaugurated with enormous clamor in Hyde Park in 1851. Among the various projects submitted, the organizers had chosen the one by Paxton, which called for an immense building made entirely of crystal. In the Exposition’s catalog, Merrifield wrote that the Crystal Palace “is perhaps the only building in the world with which the atmosphere is perceivable... by a spectator situated either at the west or east extremity of the gallery... where the most distant parts of the building appear wrapped in a light blue halo.”² The first great triumph of the commodity thus takes place under the sign of both transparency and phantasmagoria. Furthermore, the guide to the Paris Universal Exposition of 1867 reinstates this contradictory spectacular character: “Il faut au [public] une conception grandiose qui frappe son imagination... il veut contempler un coup d’œil féerique et non pas des produits similaires et uniformément groupés” [The public needs a grandiose conception that strikes its imagination... it wants to behold a wondrous prospect rather than similar and uniformly arranged products].

It is probable that Marx had in mind the impression felt in the Crystal Palace when he wrote the chapter of Capital on commodity fetishism. It is certainly not a coincidence that this chapter occupies a liminal position. The disclosure of the commodity’s “secret” was the key that revealed capital’s enchanted realm to our thought—a secret that capital always tried to hide by exposing it in full view.

Without the identification of this immaterial center—in which “the products of labor” split themselves into a use value and an exchange value and “become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same
time suprasensible or social— all the following critical investigations undertaken in *Capital* probably would not have been possible.

In the 1960s, however, the Marxian analysis of the fetish character of the commodity was, in the Marxist milieu, foolishly abandoned. In 1969, in the preface to a popular reprint of *Capital*, Louis Althusser could still invite readers to skip the first section, with the reason that the theory of fetishism was a “flagrant” and “extremely harmful” trace of Hegelian philosophy.

It is for this reason that Debord’s gesture appears all the more remarkable, as he bases his analysis of the society of the spectacle— that is, of a capitalism that has reached its extreme figure— precisely on that “flagrant trace.” The “becoming-image” of capital is nothing more than the commodity’s last metamorphosis, in which exchange value has completely eclipsed use value and can now achieve the status of absolute and irresponsible sovereignty over life in its entirety, after having falsified the entire social production. In this sense, the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, where the commodity unveiled and exhibited its mystery for the first time, is a prophecy of the spectacle, or, rather, the nightmare, in which the nineteenth century dreamed the twentieth. The first duty the Situationists assigned themselves was to wake up from this nightmare.

**Walpurgis Night**

If there is in our century a writer with whom Debord might agree to be compared, this writer would be Karl Kraus. Nobody has been able to bring to light the hidden laws of the spectacle as Kraus did in his obstinate struggle against journalists— “in these loud times which boom with the horrible symphony of actions which produce reports and of reports which cause actions.” And if someone were to imagine something analogous to the voice-over that in Debord’s film runs alongside the exposure of that desert of rubble which is the spectacle, nothing would be more appropriate than Kraus’s voice. A voice that— in those public lectures whose charm Elias Canetti has described— finds and lays bare the intimate and ferocious anarchy of triumphant capitalism in Offenbach’s operetta.

The punch line with which Kraus, in the posthumous *Third Walpurgis Night*, justified his silence in the face of the rise of Nazism is well known: “On Hitler, nothing comes to my mind.” This ferocious *Witz*, where Kraus confesses without indulgence his own limitation, marks also the impotence of satire when faced by the becoming-reality of the indescribable. As a satirical poet, he is truly “only one of the last epigones inhabiting the ancient home of language.” Certainly also in Debord, as much as in Kraus, language presents itself as the image and the place of justice. Nevertheless, the analogy stops there. Debord’s discourse begins precisely where satire becomes speechless. The ancient home of language (as well as the literary tradition on which satire is based) has been, by now, falsified and manipulated from top to bottom. Kraus reacts to this situation by turning language into the place of Universal Judgment. Debord
begins to speak instead when the Universal Judgment has already taken place and after the true has been recognized in it only as a moment of the false. The Universal Judgment in language and the Walpurgis Night in the spectacle coincide perfectly. This paradoxical coincidence is the place from which perennially resounds his voice-over.

**Situation**

What is a constructed situation? A definition contained in the first issue of the *Internationale Situationniste* states that this is a moment in life, concretely and deliberately constructed through the collective organization of a unified milieu and through a play of events. Nothing would be more misleading, however, than to think the situation as a privileged or exceptional moment in the sense of aestheticism. The situation is neither the becoming-art of life nor the becoming-life of art. We can comprehend its true nature only if we locate it historically in its proper place: that is, after the end and self-destruction of art, and after the passage of life through the trial of nihilism. The “Northwest passage of the geography of the true life” is a point of indifference between life and art, where both undergo a decisive metamorphosis simultaneously. This point of indifference constitutes a politics that is finally adequate to its tasks. The Situationists counteract capitalism—which “concretely and deliberately” organizes environments and events in order to depotentiate life—with a concrete, although opposite, project. Their utopia is, once again, perfectly topical because it locates itself in the taking-place of what it wants to overthrow. Nothing could give a better idea of a constructed situation, perhaps, than the bare scenography in which Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science*, develops his thought’s *experimentum crucis*. A constructed situation is the room with the spider and the moonlight between the branches exactly in the moment when—in answer to the demon’s question: “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?”—it is said: “Yes, I do.” What is decisive here is the messianic shift that *integrally* changes the world, leaving it, at the same time, *almost* intact: everything here, in fact, stayed the same, but lost its identity.

In the commedia dell’arte there were cadres—instructions meant for the actors, so that they would bring into being situations in which a human gesture, subtracted from the powers of myth and destiny, could finally take place. It is impossible to understand the comic mask if we simply interpret it as an undetermined or depotentiated character. Harlequin and the Doctor are not characters in the same way in which Hamlet and Oedipus are; the masks are not characters, but rather gestures figured as a type, constellations of gestures. In this situation, the destruction of the role’s identity goes hand in hand with the destruction of the actor’s identity. It is precisely this relationship between text and execution, between power and act, that is put into question once again here. This happens because the mask insinuates itself between the text and the execution, creating an indistinguishable mixture of power and act. And what takes
place here—both onstage and within the constructed situation—is not the actuation of a power but the liberation of an ulterior power. Gesture is the name of this intersection between life and art, act and power, general and particular, text and execution. It is a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography as well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics: it is pure praxis. The gesture is neither use value nor exchange value, neither biographic experience nor impersonal event: it is the other side of the commodity that lets the “crystals of this common social substance” sink into the situation.

**Auschwitz/Timisoara**

Probably the most disquieting aspect of Debord’s books is the fact that history seems to have committed itself to relentlessly confirm their analyses. Twenty years after *The Society of the Spectacle*, the *Commentaries* (1988) registered the precision of the diagnosis and expectations of that previous book in every aspect. Meanwhile, the course of history has accelerated uniformly in the same direction: only two years after this book’s publication, in fact, we could say that world politics is nothing more than a hasty and parodic mise-en-scène of the script contained in that book. The substantial unification of the concentrated spectacle (the Eastern people’s democracies) and of the diffused spectacle (the Western democracies) into an integrated spectacle is, by now, trivial evidence. This unification, which constituted one of the central theses of the *Commentaries*, appeared paradoxical to many people at the time. The immovable walls and the iron curtains that divided the two worlds were wiped out in a few days. The Eastern governments allowed the Leninist party to fall so that the integrated spectacle could be completely realized in their countries. In the same way, the West had already renounced a while ago the balance of powers as well as real freedom of thought and communication in the name of the electoral machine of majority vote and of media control over public opinion—both of which had developed within the totalitarian modern states.

Timisoara, Romania, represents the extreme point of this process, and deserves to give its name to the new turn in world politics. Because there the secret police had conspired against itself in order to overthrow the old spectacle-concentrated regime while television showed, nakedly and without false modesty, the real political function of the media. Both television and secret police, therefore, succeeded in doing something that Nazism had not even dared to imagine: to bring Auschwitz and the Reichstag fire together in one monstrous event. For the first time in the history of humankind, corpses that had just been buried or lined up on the morgue’s tables were hastily exhumed and tortured in order to simulate, in front of the video cameras, the genocide that legitimized the new regime. What the entire world was watching live on television, thinking it was the real truth, was in reality the absolute nontruth; and, although the falsification appeared to be sometimes quite obvious, it was nevertheless legitimized as true by the
media's world system, so that it would be clear that the true was, by now, nothing more than a moment within the necessary movement of the false. In this way, truth and falsity became indistinguishable from each other and the spectacle legitimized itself solely through the spectacle.

Timisoara is, in this sense, the Auschwitz of the age of the spectacle: and in the same way in which it has been said that after Auschwitz it is impossible to write and think as before, after Timisoara it will be no longer possible to watch television in the same way.

Shekinah

How can thought collect Debord's inheritance today, in the age of the complete triumph of the spectacle? It is evident, after all, that the spectacle is language, the very communicativity and linguistic being of humans. This means that an integrated Marxian analysis should take into consideration the fact that capitalism (or whatever other name we might want to give to the process dominating world history today) not only aimed at the expropriation of productive activity, but also, and above all, at the alienation of language itself, of the linguistic and communicative nature of human beings, of that *logos* in which Heraclitus identifies the Common. The extreme form of the expropriation of the Common is the spectacle, in other words, the politics in which we live. But this also means that what we encounter in the spectacle is our very linguistic nature inverted. For this reason (precisely because what is being expropriated is the possibility itself of a common good), the spectacle's violence is so destructive; but, for the same reason, the spectacle still contains something like a positive possibility — and it is our task to use this possibility against it.

Nothing resembles this condition more than the sin that cabalists call "isolation of the Shekinah" and that they attribute to Aher — one of the four rabbis who, according to a famous Haggadah of the Talmud, entered the Pardes (that is, supreme knowledge). "Four rabbis," the story goes, "entered Heaven: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher and Rabbi Akiba. . . . Ben Azzai cast a glance and died . . . Ben Zoma looked and went crazy . . . Aher cut the branches. Rabbi Akiba came out uninjured."

The Shekinah is the last of the ten Sefirot or attributes of the divinity, the one that expresses divine presence itself, its manifestation or habitation on Earth: its "word." Aher's "cutting of the branches" is identified by cabalists with the sin of Adam, who, instead of contemplating the Sefirot in their totality, preferred to contemplate only the last one, isolating it from the others — thereby separating the tree of science from the tree of life. Like Adam, Aher represents humanity insofar as, making knowledge his own destiny and his own specific power, he isolates knowledge and the word, which are nothing other than the most complete form of the manifestation of God (the Shekinah), from the other Sefirot in which he reveals himself. *The risk here is that the word — that is, the nonlatency and the revelation of something — might become separate from what it reveals and might end up acquiring an autonomous consistency.* The re-
vealed and manifested — and hence, common and shareable — being becomes separate from the thing revealed and comes in between the latter and human beings. In this condition of exile, the Shekinah loses its positive power and becomes harmful (the cabalists say that it "sucks the milk of evil").

The isolation of the Shekinah thus expresses our epochal condition. Whereas under the old regime the estrangement of the communicative essence of human beings substantiated itself as a presupposition that served as the common foundation, in the society of the spectacle it is this very communicativity, this generic essence itself (that is, language as Gattungswesen), that is being separated in an autonomous sphere. What prevents communication is communicability itself; human beings are kept separate by what unites them. Journalists and the media establishment (as well as psychoanalysts in the private sphere) constitute the new clergy of such an alienation of the linguistic nature of human beings.

In the society of the spectacle, in fact, the isolation of the Shekinah reaches its final phase, in which language not only constitutes itself as an autonomous sphere, but also no longer reveals anything at all — or, better yet, it reveals the nothingness of all things. In language there is nothing of God, of the world, of the revealed: but, in this extreme nullifying unveiling, language (the linguistic nature of human beings) remains once again hidden and separated. Language thus acquires, for the last time, the unspoken power to claim a historical age and a state for itself: the age of the spectacle, or the state of fully realized nihilism. This is why today power founded on a presupposed foundation is vacillating all around the planet: the kingdoms of the Earth are setting out, one after the other, for the spectacular-democratic regime that constitutes the completion of the state-form. Even more than economic necessities and technological development, what drives the nations of the Earth toward a single common destiny is the alienation of linguistic being, the uprooting of all peoples from their vital dwelling in language. But exactly for this reason, the age in which we live is also that in which for the first time it becomes possible for human beings to experience their own linguistic essence — to experience, that is, not some language content or some true proposition, but language itself, as well as the very fact of speaking. Contemporary politics is precisely this devastating experimentum linguae that disarticulates and empties, all over the planet, traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities.

Only those who will be able to carry it to completion — without allowing that which reveals to be veiled in the nothingness it reveals, but bringing language itself to language — will become the first citizens of a community with neither presuppositions nor a state. In this community, the nullifying and determining power of what is common will be pacified and the Shekinah will no longer suck the evil milk of its own separateness. Like Rabbi Akiba in the Haggadah of the Talmud, the citizens of this community will enter the paradise of language and will come out of it uninjured.
Tiananmen

What does the scenario that world politics is setting up before us look like under the twilight of the Commentaries? The state of the integrated spectacle (or, spectacular-democratic state) is the final stage in the evolution of the state-form — the ruinous stage toward which monarchies and republics, tyrannies and democracies, racist regimes and progressive regimes are all rushing. Although it seems to bring national identities back to life, this global movement actually embodies a tendency toward the constitution of a kind of supranational police state, in which the norms of international law are tacitly abrogated one after the other. Not only has no war officially been declared in many years (confirming Carl Schmitt’s prophecy, according to which every war in our time has become a civil war), but even the outright invasion of a sovereign state can now be presented as an act of internal jurisdiction. Under these circumstances, the secret services — which had always been used to act ignoring the boundaries of national sovereignties — become the model itself of real political organization and of real political action. For the first time in the history of our century, the two most important world powers are headed by two direct emanations of the secret services: Bush (former CIA head) and Gorbachev (Andropov’s man); and the more they concentrate all the power in their own hands, the more all of this is hailed, in the new course of the spectacle, as a triumph of democracy. All appearances notwithstanding, the spectacular-democratic world organization that is thus emerging actually runs the risk of being the worst tyranny that ever materialized in the history of humanity, against which resistance and dissent will be practically more and more difficult — and all the more so in that it is increasingly clear that such an organization will have the task of managing the survival of humanity in an uninhabitable world. One cannot be sure, however, that the spectacle’s attempt to maintain control over the process it contributed to putting in motion in the first place will actually succeed. The state of the spectacle, after all, is still a state that bases itself (as Badiou has shown every state to base itself) not on social bonds, of which it purportedly is the expression, but rather on their dissolution, which it forbids. In the final analysis, the state can recognize any claim for identity — even that of a state identity within itself (and in our time, the history of the relations between the state and terrorism is an eloquent confirmation of this fact). But what the state cannot tolerate in any way is that singularities form a community without claiming an identity, that human beings co-belong without a representable condition of belonging (being Italian, working-class, Catholic, terrorist, etc.). And yet, the state of the spectacle — inasmuch as it empties and nullifies every real identity, and substitutes the public and public opinion for the people and the general will — is precisely what produces massively from within itself singularities that are no longer characterized either by any social identity or by any real condition of belonging: singularities that are truly whatever singularities. It is clear that the society of the spectacle is also one in which all social
identities have dissolved and in which everything that for centuries represented the splendor and misery of the generations succeeding themselves on Earth has by now lost all its significance. The different identities that have marked the tragicomedies of universal history are exposed and gathered with a phantasmagorical vacuity in the global petite bourgeoisie—a petite bourgeoisie that constitutes the form in which the spectacle has realized parodistically the Marxian project of a classless society.

For this reason—to risk advancing a prophecy here—the coming politics will no longer be a struggle to conquer or to control the state on the part of either new or old social subjects, but rather a struggle between the state and the nonstate (humanity), that is, an irremovable disjunction between whatever singularities and the state organization.

This has nothing to do with the mere demands of society against the state, which was for a long time the shared concern of the protest movements of our age. Whatever singularities cannot form a societas within a society of the spectacle because they do not possess any identity to vindicate or any social bond whereby to seek recognition. The struggle against the state, therefore, is the more implacable, because this is a state that nullifies all real contents but that—all empty declarations about the sacredness of life and about human rights aside—would also declare any being radically lacking a representable identity to be simply nonexistent.

This is the lesson that could have been learned from Tiananmen, if real attention had been paid to the facts of that event. What was most striking about the demonstrations of the Chinese May, in fact, was the relative absence of specific contents in their demands. (The notions of democracy and freedom are too generic to constitute a real goal of struggle, and the only concrete demand, the rehabilitation of Hu Yaobang, was promptly granted.) It is for this reason that the violence of the state’s reaction seems all the more inexplicable. It is likely, however, that this disproportion was only apparent and that the Chinese leaders acted, from their point of view, with perfect lucidity. In Tiananmen the state found itself facing something that could not and did not want to be represented, but that presented itself nonetheless as a community and as a common life (and this regardless of whether those who were in that square were actually aware of it). The threat the state is not willing to come to terms with is precisely the fact that the unrepresentable should exist and form a community without either presuppositions or conditions of belonging (just like Cantor’s inconsistent multiplicity). The whatever singularity—this singularity that wants to take possession of belonging itself as well as of its own being-into-language, and that thus declines any identity and any condition of belonging—is the new, nonsubjective, and socially inconsistent protagonist of the coming politics. Wherever these singularities peacefully manifest their being-in-common, there will be another Tiananmen and, sooner or later, the tanks will appear again.

(1990)
The Face

All living beings are in the open: they manifest themselves and shine in their appearance. But only human beings want to take possession of this opening, to seize hold of their own appearance and of their own being-manifest. Language is this appropriation, which transforms nature into face. This is why appearance becomes a problem for human beings: it becomes the location of a struggle for truth.

The face is at once the irreparable being-exposed of humans and the very opening in which they hide and stay hidden. The face is the only location of community, the only possible city. And that is because that which in single individuals opens up to the political is the tragicomedy of truth, in which they always already fall and out of which they have to find a way.
What the face exposes and reveals is not *something* that could be formulated as a signifying proposition of sorts, nor is it a secret doomed to remain forever incommunicable. The face's revelation is revelation of language itself. Such a revelation, therefore, does not have any real content and does not tell the truth about this or that state of being, about this or that aspect of human beings and of the world: it is *only* opening, *only* communicability. To walk in the light of the face means to *be* this opening—and to suffer it, and to endure it.

Thus, the face is, above all, the *passion* of revelation, the passion of language. Nature acquires a face precisely in the moment it feels that it is being revealed by language. And nature's being exposed and betrayed by the word, its veiling itself behind the impossibility of having a secret, appears on its face as either chastity or perturbation, as either shamelessness or modesty.

The face does not coincide with the visage. There is a face wherever something reaches the level of exposition and tries to grasp its own being exposed, wherever a being that appears sinks in that appearance and has to find a way out of it. (Thus, art can give a face even to an inanimate object, to a still nature; and that is why the witches, when accused by the inquisitors of kissing Satan's anus during the Sabbath, argued that even there there was a face. And it may be that nowadays the entire Earth, which has been transformed into a desert by humankind's blind will, might become one single face.)

I look someone in the eyes: either these eyes are cast down—and this is modesty, that is, modesty for the emptiness lurking behind the gaze—or they look back at me. And they can look at me shamelessly, thereby exhibiting their own emptiness as if there was another abyssal eye behind it that knows this emptiness and uses it as an impenetrable hiding place. Or, they can look at me with a chaste impudence and without reserve, thereby letting love and the word happen in the emptiness of our gazes.

Exposition is the location of politics. If there is no animal politics, that is perhaps because animals are always already in the open and do not try to take possession of their own exposition; they simply live in it without caring about it. That is why they are not interested in mirrors, in the image as image. Human beings, on the other hand, separate images from things and give them a name precisely because they want to recognize themselves, that is, they want to take possession of their own very appearance. Human beings thus transform the open into a world, that is, into the battlefield of a political struggle without quarter. This struggle, whose object is truth, goes by the name of History.

It is happening more and more often that in pornographic photographs the portrayed subjects, by a calculated stratagem, look into the camera, thereby exhibiting the awareness of being exposed to the gaze. This unexpected gesture violently belies the fiction that is implicit...
in the consumption of such images, according to which the one who looks surprises the actors while remaining unseen by them: the latter, rather, knowingly challenge the voyeur's gaze and force him to look them in the eyes. In that precise moment, the insubstantial nature of the human face suddenly comes to light. The fact that the actors look into the camera means that they show that they are simulating; nevertheless, they paradoxically appear more real precisely to the extent to which they exhibit this falsification. The same procedure is used today in advertising: the image appears more convincing if it shows openly its own artifice. In both cases, the one who looks is confronted with something that concerns unequivocally the essence of the face, the very structure of truth.

We may call tragicomedy of appearance the fact that the face uncovers only and precisely inasmuch as it hides, and hides to the extent to which it uncovers. In this way, the appearance that ought to have manifested human beings becomes for them instead a resemblance that betrays them and in which they can no longer recognize themselves. Precisely because the face is solely the location of truth, it is also and immediately the location of simulation and of an irreducible impropriety. This does not mean, however, that appearance dissimulates what it uncovers by making it look like what in reality it is not: rather, what human beings truly are is nothing other than this dissimulation and this quietude within the appearance. Because human beings neither are nor have to be any essence, any nature, or any specific destiny, their condition is the most empty and the most insubstantial of all: it is the truth. What remains hidden from them is not something behind appearance, but rather appearing itself; that is, their being nothing other than a face. The task of politics is to return appearance itself to appearance, to cause appearance itself to appear.

The face, truth, and exposition are today the objects of a global civil war, whose battlefield is social life in its entirety, whose storm troopers are the media, whose victims are all the peoples of the Earth. Politicians, the media establishment, and the advertising industry have understood the insubstantial character of the face and of the community it opens up, and thus they transform it into a miserable secret that they must make sure to control at all costs. State power today is no longer founded on the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence—a monopoly that states share increasingly willingly with other nonsovereign organizations such as the United Nations and terrorist organizations; rather, it is founded above all on the control of appearance (of doxa). The fact that politics constitutes itself as an autonomous sphere goes hand in hand with the separation of the face in the world of spectacle—a world in which human communication is being separated from itself. Exposition thus transforms itself into a value that is accumulated in images and in the media, while a new class of bureaucrats jealously watches over its management.

If what human beings had to communicate to each other were always and only something, there would never be
politics properly speaking, but only exchange and conflict, signals and answers. But because what human beings have to communicate to each other is above all a pure communicability (that is, language), politics then arises as the communicative emptiness in which the human face emerges as such. It is precisely this empty space that politicians and the media establishment are trying to be sure to control, by keeping it separate in a sphere that guarantees its unsociality and by preventing communicativity itself from coming to light. This means that an integrated Marxian analysis should take into consideration the fact that capitalism (or whatever other name we might want to give to the process dominating world history today) not only was directed to the expropriation of productive activity, but was also and above all directed to the alienation of language itself, of the communicative nature of human beings.

Inasmuch as it is nothing but pure communicability, every human face, even the most noble and beautiful, is always suspended on the edge of an abyss. This is precisely why the most delicate and graceful faces sometimes look as if they might suddenly decompose, thus letting the shapeless and bottomless background that threatens them emerge. But this amorphous background is nothing else than the opening itself and communicability itself inasmuch as they are constituted as their own presuppositions as if they were a thing. The only face to remain uninjured is the one capable of taking the abyss of its own communicability upon itself and of exposing it without fear or complacency.

This is why the face contracts into an expression, stiffens into a character, and thus sinks further and further into itself. As soon as the face realizes that communicability is all that it is and hence that it has nothing to express—thus withdrawing silently behind itself, inside its own mute identity—it turns into a grimace, which is what one calls character. Character is the constitutive reticence that human beings retain in the word; but what one has to take possession of here is only a nonlatency, a pure visibility: simply a visage. The face is not something that transcends the visage: it is the exposition of the visage in all its nudity, it is a victory over character—it is word.

Everything for human beings is divided between proper and improper, true and false, possible and real: this is because they are or have to be only a face. Every appearance that manifests human beings thus becomes for them improper and factitious, and makes them confront the task of turning truth into their own proper truth. But truth itself is not something of which we can take possession, nor does it have any object other than appearance and the improper: it is simply their comprehension, their exposition. The totalitarian politics of the modern, rather, is the will to total self-possession: here either the improper extends its own rule everywhere, thanks to an unrestrainable will to falsification and consumption (as happens in advanced industrialized democracies), or the proper demands the exclusion of any impropriety (as happens in the so-called totalitarian states). In both these grotesque counterfeits of the face, the only truly human
possibility is lost: that is, the possibility of taking possession of impropriety as such, of exposing in the face simply your own proper impropriety, of walking in the shadow of its light.

The human face reproduces the duality that constitutes it within its own structure, that is, the duality of proper and improper, of communication and communicability, of potentiality and act. The face is formed by a passive background on which the active expressive traits emerge:

Just as the star mirrors its elements and the combination of the elements into one route in its two superimposed triangles, so too the organs of the countenance divide into two levels. For the life-points of the countenance are, after all, those points where the countenance comes into contact with the world above, be it passive or active contact. The basic level is ordered according to the receptive organs; they are the face, the mask, namely forehead and cheeks, to which belong respectively nose and ears. Nose and ears are the organs of pure receptivity. This first triangle is thus formed by the midpoint of the forehead, as the dominant point of the entire face, and the midpoint of the cheeks. Over it is now imposed a second triangle, composed of the organs whose activity quickens the rigid mask of the first: eyes and mouth.

In advertising and pornography (consumer society), the eyes and the mouth come to the foreground; in totalitarian states (bureaucracy), the passive background is dominant (the inexpressive images of tyrants in their offices). But only the reciprocal game between these two levels constitutes the life of the face.

There are two words in Latin that derive from the Indo-European root meaning "one": simulis, which expresses resemblance, and simul, which means "at the same time." Thus, next to similis (resemblance) there is simultas, that is, the fact of being joined (which implies also rivalry, enmity); and next to similare (to be like) there is simulare (to copy, to imitate, which implies also to feign, to simulate).

The face is not a simulacrum, in the sense that it is something dissimulating or hiding the truth: the face is the simultas, the being-together of the manifold visages constituting it, in which none of the visages is truer than any of the others. To grasp the face’s truth means to grasp not the resemblance but rather the simultaneity of the visages, that is, the restless power that keeps them together and constitutes their being-in-common. The face of God, thus, is the simultas of human faces: it is “our effigy” that Dante saw in the “living light” of paradise.

My face is my outside: a point of indifference with respect to all of my properties, with respect to what is properly one’s own and what is common, to what is internal and what is external. In the face, I exist with all of my properties (my being brown, tall, pale, proud, emotional...); but this happens without any of these properties essentially identifying me or belonging to me. The face is
the threshold of de-propriation and of de-identification of all manners and of all qualities—a threshold in which only the latter become purely communicable. And only where I find a face do I encounter an exteriority and does an outside happen to me.

Be only your face. Go to the threshold. Do not remain the subjects of your properties or faculties, do not stay beneath them: rather, go with them, in them, beyond them.

(1995)
Sovereign Police

One of the least ambiguous lessons learned from the Gulf War is that the concept of sovereignty has been finally introduced into the figure of the police. The nonchalance with which the exercise of a particularly devastating *in bello* was disguised here as a mere “police operation” cannot be considered to be a cynical mystification (as it was indeed considered by some rightly indignant critics). The most *spectacular* characteristic of this war, perhaps, was that the reasons presented to justify it cannot be put aside as ideological superstructures used to conceal a hidden plan. On the contrary, ideology has in the meantime penetrated so deeply into reality that the declared reasons have to be taken in a rigorously literal sense—particularly those concerning the idea of a new world order. This does not mean, however, that the Gulf War constituted a healthy limitation of
state sovereignties because they were forced to serve as policemen for a supranational organism (which is what apologists and extemporaneous jurists tried, in bad faith, to prove).

The point is that the police—contrary to public opinion—are not merely an administrative function of law enforcement; rather, the police are perhaps the place where the proximity and the almost constitutive exchange between violence and right that characterizes the figure of the sovereign is shown more nakedly and clearly than anywhere else. According to the ancient Roman custom, nobody could for any reason come between the consul, who was endowed with imperium, and the lictor closest to him, who carried the sacrificial ax (which was used to perform capital punishment). This contiguity is not coincidental. If the sovereign, in fact, is the one who marks the point of indistinction between violence and right by proclaiming the state of exception and suspending the validity of the law, the police are always operating within a similar state of exception. The rationales of "public order" and "security" on which the police have to decide on a case-by-case basis define an area of indistinction between violence and right that is exactly symmetrical to that of sovereignty. Benjamin rightly noted that:

The assertion that the ends of police violence are always identical or even connected to those of general law is entirely untrue. Rather, the "law" of the police really marks the point at which the state, whether from impotence or because of the immanent con-

nections within any legal system, can no longer guarantee through the legal system the empirical ends that it desires at any price to attain.¹

Hence the display of weapons that characterizes the police in all eras. What is important here is not so much the threat to those who infringe on the right, but rather the display of that sovereign violence to which the bodily proximity between consul and lictor was witness. The display, in fact, happens in the most peaceful of public places and, in particular, during official ceremonies.

This embarrassing contiguity between sovereignty and police function is expressed in the intangible sacredness that, according to the ancient codes, the figure of the sovereign and the figure of the executioner have in common. This contiguity has never been so self-evident as it was on the occasion of a fortuitous encounter that took place on July 14, 1418: as we are told by a chronicler, the Duke of Burgundy had just entered Paris as a conqueror at the head of his troops when, on the street, he came across the executioner Coqueluche, who had been working very hard for him during those days. According to the story, the executioner, who was covered in blood, approached the sovereign and, while reaching for his hand, shouted: "Mon beau frère!"

The entrance of the concept of sovereignty in the figure of the police, therefore, is not at all reassuring. This is proven by a fact that still surprises historians of the Third Reich, namely, that the extermination
of the Jews was conceived from the beginning to the end exclusively as a police operation. It is well known that not a single document has ever been found that recognizes the genocide as a decision made by a sovereign organ: the only document we have, in this regard, is the record of a conference that was held on January 20, 1942, at the Grosser Wannsee, and that gathered middle-level and lower-level police officers. Among them, only the name of Adolf Eichmann—head of division B-4 of the Fourth Section of the Gestapo—is noticeable. The extermination of the Jews could be so methodical and deadly only because it was conceived and carried out as a police operation; but, conversely, it is precisely because the genocide was a “police operation” that today it appears, in the eyes of civilized humanity, all the more barbaric and ignominious.

Furthermore, the investiture of the sovereign as policeman has another corollary: it makes it necessary to criminalize the adversary. Schmitt has shown how, according to European public law, the principle *par in paren non habet ius in mortibus* eliminated the possibility that sovereigns of enemy states could be judged as criminals. The declaration of war did not use to imply the suspension of either this principle or the conventions that guaranteed that a war against an enemy who was granted equal dignity would take place according to precise regulations (one of which was the sharp distinction between the army and the civilian population). What we have witnessed with our own eyes from the end of World War I onward is instead a process by which the enemy is first of all excluded from civil humanity and branded as a criminal; only in a second moment does it become possible and licit to eliminate the enemy by a “police operation.” Such an operation is not obliged to respect any juridical rule and can thus make no distinctions between the civilian population and soldiers, as well as between the people and their criminal sovereign, thereby returning to the most archaic conditions of belligerence. Sovereignty’s gradual slide toward the darkest areas of police law, however, has at least one positive aspect that is worthy of mention here. What the heads of state, who rushed to criminalize the enemy with such zeal, have not yet realized is that this criminalization can at any moment be turned against them. *There is no head of state on Earth today who, in this sense, is not virtually a criminal.* Today, those who should happen to wear the sad regalia of sovereignty know that they may be treated as criminals one day by their colleagues. And certainly we will not be the ones to pity them. The sovereigns who willingly agreed to present themselves as cops or executioners, in fact, now show in the end their original proximity to the criminal.

(1991)
Notes on Politics

The fall of the Soviet Communist Party and the unconcealed rule of the capitalist-democratic state on a planetary scale have cleared the field of the two main ideological obstacles hindering the resumption of a political philosophy worthy of our time: Stalinism on one side, and progressivism and the constitutional state on the other. Thought thus finds itself, for the first time, facing its own task without any illusion and without any possible alibi. The "great transformation" constituting the final stage of the state-form is thus taking place before our very eyes: this is a transformation that is driving the kingdoms of the Earth (republics and monarchies, tyrannies and democracies, federations and national states) one after the other toward the state of the integrated spectacle (Guy Debord) and toward "capitalist parliamentarianism" (Alain Badiou). In the same way in which the
great transformation of the first industrial revolution destroyed the social and political structures as well as the legal categories of the ancien régime, terms such as sovereignty, right, nation, people, democracy, and general will by now refer to a reality that no longer has anything to do with what these concepts used to designate—and those who continue to use these concepts uncritically literally do not know what they are talking about. Consensus and public opinion have no more to do with the general will than the “international police” that today fight wars have to do with the sovereignty of the jus publicum Europaeum. Contemporary politics is this devastating experiment that disarticulates and empties institutions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities all throughout the planet, so as then to rehash and reinstate their definitively nullified form.

The coming thought will have thus to try and take seriously the Hegelo-Kojèvian (and Marxian) theme of the end of history as well as the Heideggerian theme of the entrance into Ereignis as the end of the history of being. With respect to this problem, the battlefield is divided today in the following way: on one side, there are those who think the end of history without the end of the state (that is, the post-Kojèvian or postmodern theorists of the fulfillment of the historical process of humanity in a homogeneous universal state); on the other side, there are those who think the end of the state without the end of history (that is, progressivists of all sorts). Neither position is equal to its task because to think the extinction of the state without the fulfillment of the historical telos is as impossible as to think a fulfillment of history in which the empty form of state sovereignty would continue to exist. Just as the first thesis proves itself to be completely impotent against the tenacious survival of the state-form going through an infinite transition, the second thesis clashes against the increasingly powerful resistance of historical instances (of a national, religious, or ethnic type). The two positions, after all, can coexist perfectly well thanks to the proliferation of traditional instances of the state (that is, instances of a historical type) under the aegis of a technical-juridical organism with a posthistorical vocation.

Only a thought capable of thinking the end of the state and the end of history at one and the same time, and of mobilizing one against the other, is equal to this task. This is what the late Heidegger tried to address—albeit in an entirely unsatisfactory way—with the idea of an Ereignis, of an ultimate event in which what is seized and delivered from historical destiny is the being-hidden itself of the historical principle, that is, historicity itself. Simply because history designates the expropriation itself of human nature through a series of epochs and historical destinies, it does not follow that the fulfillment and the appropriation of the historical telos in question indicate that the historical process of humanity has now cohered in a definitive order (whose management can be handed over to a homogeneous universal state). It indicates, rather, that the anarchic historicity itself that—having been posited as a presupposition—
destined living human beings to various epochs and historical cultures must now come to thought as such. It indicates, in other words, that now human beings take possession of their own historical being, that is, of their own impropriety. The becoming-proper (nature) of the improper (language) cannot be either formalized or recognized according to the dialectic of Anerkennung because it is, at the same time, a becoming-improper (language) of the proper (nature).

The appropriation of historicity, therefore, cannot still take a state-form, given that the state is nothing other than the presupposition and the representation of the being-hidden of the historical arché. This appropriation, rather, must open the field to a nonstatal and nonjuridical politics and human life—a politics and a life that are yet to be entirely thought.

The concepts of sovereignty and of constituent power, which are at the core of our political tradition, have to be abandoned or, at least, to be thought all over again. They mark, in fact, the point of indifference between right and violence, nature and logos, proper and improper, and as such they do not designate an attribute or an organ of the juridical system or of the state; they designate, rather, their own original structure. Sovereignty is the idea of an undecidable nexus between violence and right, between the living and language—a nexus that necessarily takes the paradoxical form of a decision regarding the state of exception (Schmitt) or ban (Nancy) in which the law (language) relates to the living by withdrawing from it, by a-bandoning it to its own violence and its own irrelativeness. Sacred life—the life that is presupposed and abandoned by the law in the state of exception—is the mute carrier of sovereignty, the real sovereign subject.

Sovereignty, therefore, is the guardian who prevents the undecidable threshold between violence and right, nature and language, from coming to light. We have to fix our gaze, instead, precisely on what the statue of Justice (which, as Montesquieu reminds us, was to be veiled at the very moment of the proclamation of the state of exception) was not supposed to see, namely, what nowadays is apparent to everybody: that the state of exception is the rule, that naked life is immediately the carrier of the sovereign nexus, and that, as such, it is today abandoned to a kind of violence that is all the more effective for being anonymous and quotidian.

If there is today a social power [potenza], it must see its own impotence [impotenza] through to the end; it must decline any will to either posit or preserve right, it must break everywhere the nexus between violence and right, between the living and language that constitutes sovereignty.

While the state in decline lets its empty shell survive everywhere as a pure structure of sovereignty and domination, society as a whole is instead irrevocably delivered to the form of consumer society, that is, a society in which the sole goal of production is comfortable living. The theorists of political sovereignty, such as Schmitt, see in all this the surest sign of the end of politics. And
the planetary masses of consumers, in fact, do not seem to foreshadow any new figure of the polis (even when they do not simply relapse into the old ethnic and religious ideals).

However, the problem that the new politics is facing is precisely this: is it possible to have a political community that is ordered exclusively for the full enjoyment of worldly life? But, if we look closer, isn't this precisely the goal of philosophy? And when modern political thought was born with Marsilius of Padua, wasn't it defined precisely by the recovery to political ends of the Averroist concepts of "sufficient life" and "well-living"? Once again Walter Benjamin, in the "Theologico-Political Fragment," leaves no doubts regarding the fact that "The order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness." The definition of the concept of "happy life" remains one of the essential tasks of the coming thought (and this should be achieved in such a way that this concept is not kept separate from ontology because: "being: we have no experience of it other than living itself").

The "happy life" on which political philosophy should be founded thus cannot be either the naked life that sovereignty posits as a presupposition so as to turn it into its own subject or the impenetrable extremity of science and of modern biopolitics that everybody today tries in vain to sacralize. This "happy life" should be, rather, an absolutely profane "sufficient life" that has reached the perfection of its own power and of its own communicability—a life over which sovereignty and right no longer have any hold.

The plane of immanence on which the new political experience is constituted is the terminal expropriation of language carried out by the spectacular state. Whereas in the old regime, in fact, the estrangement of the communicative essence of human beings was substantiated as a presupposition that had the function of common ground (nation, language, religion, etc.), in the contemporary state it is precisely this same communicativity, this same generic essence (language), that is constituted as an autonomous sphere to the extent to which it becomes the essential factor of the production cycle. What hinders communication, therefore, is communicability itself: human beings are being separated by what unites them.

This also means, however, that in this way we encounter our own linguistic nature inverted. For this reason (precisely because what is being expropriated here is the possibility itself of the Common), the spectacle's violence is so destructive; but, for the same reason, the spectacle still contains something like a positive possibility—and it is our task to use this possibility against it. The age in which we are living, in fact, is also the age in which, for the first time, it becomes possible for human beings to experience their own linguistic essence—to experience, that is, not some language content or some true proposition, but the fact itself of speaking.
The experience in question here does not have any objective content and cannot be formulated as a proposition referring to a state of things or to a historical situation. It does not concern a *state* but an *event* of language; it does not pertain to this or that grammar but—so to speak—to the *factum loquendi* as such. Therefore, this experience must be constructed as an experiment concerning the matter itself of thought, that is, the power of thought (in Spinozan terms: an experiment *de potentia intellectus, sive de libertate*).

What is at stake in this experiment is not at all communication intended as destiny and specific goal of human beings or as the logical-transcendental condition of politics (as it is the case in the pseudophilosophies of communication); what is really at stake, rather, is the only possible material experience of being-generic (that is, experience of “compearance”—as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests—or, in Marxian terms, experience of the General Intellect). That is why the first consequence deriving from this experiment is the subverting of the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes any ethics and any politics. A finality without means (the good and the beautiful as ends unto themselves), in fact, is just as alienating as a mediality that makes sense only with respect to an end. What is in question in political experience is not a higher end but being-into-language itself as pure mediality, being-into-a-mean as an irreducible condition of human beings. *Politics is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the act of making a means visible as such.* Politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediability without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought.

The second consequence of the *experimentum linguae* is that, above and beyond the concepts of appropriation and expropriation, we need to think, rather, the possibility and the modalities of a *free use*. Praxis and political reflection are operating today exclusively within the dialectic of proper and improper—a dialectic in which either the improper extends its own rule everywhere, thanks to an unrestrainable will to falsification and consumption (as it happens in industrialized democracies), or the proper demands the exclusion of any impropriety (as it happens in integralist and totalitarian states). If instead we define the *common* (or, as others suggest, the *same*) as a point of indifference between the proper and the improper—that is, as something that can never be grasped in terms of either expropriation or appropriation but that can be grasped, rather, only as *use*—the essential political problem then becomes: “How does one use a *common*?” (Heidegger probably had something like this in mind when he formulated his supreme concept as neither appropriation nor expropriation, but as appropriation of an expropriation.)

The new categories of political thought—inoperative community, compearance, equality, loyalty, mass intellectuality, the coming people, whatever sin-
gularity, or however else they might be called—will be able to express the political matter that is facing us only if they are able to articulate the location, the manners, and the meaning of this experience of the event of language intended as free use of the common and as sphere of pure means.

(1992)
In This Exile

(Italian Diary, 1992-94)

We are told that the survivors who came back—and who continue to come back—from the camps had no stories to tell, and that, to the extent to which they had been authentic witnesses, they did not try to communicate what they had lived through, as if they themselves were the first to be seized by doubts regarding the reality of what had befallen them, as if they had somehow mistaken a nightmare for a real event. They knew—and still know—that in Auschwitz or in Omarska they had not become “wiser, better, more profound, more human, or more well disposed toward human beings”; rather, they had come out of the camps stripped naked, hollowed out, and disoriented. And they had no wish to talk about it. All due differences notwithstanding, we too are affected by this sense of suspicion regarding our
own witnessing. It seems as if nothing of what we have lived through during these years authorizes us to speak.

Suspicion regarding one’s own words arises every time that the distinction between public and private loses its meaning. What exactly did the inhabitants of the camps, in fact, live through? Was it a political-historical event (such as, say, in the case of a soldier who participated in the battle of Waterloo), or was it a strictly private experience? Neither one nor the other. If one was a Jew in Auschwitz or a Bosnian woman in Omarska, one entered the camp as a result not of a political choice but rather of what was most private and incommunicable in oneself, that is, one’s blood, one’s biological body. But precisely the latter functions now as a decisive political criterion. In this sense, the camp truly is the inaugural site of modernity: it is the first space in which public and private events, political life and biological life, become rigorously indistinguishable. Inasmuch as the inhabitant of the camp has been severed from the political community and has been reduced to naked life (and, moreover, to a life “that does not deserve to be lived”), he or she is an absolutely private person. And yet there is not one single instant in which he or she might be able to find shelter in the realm of the private, and it is precisely this indiscernibility that constitutes the specific anguish of the camp.

Kafka was the first to describe with precision this particular type of site, with which since then we have become perfectly familiar. What makes Joseph K.’s vicissitudes at once so disquieting and comic is the fact that a public event par excellence—a trial—is presented instead as an absolutely private occurrence in which the courtroom borders on the bedroom. This is precisely what makes The Trial a prophetic book. And not really—or, not only—as far as the camps are concerned. What did we live through in the 1980s? A delirious and solitary private occurrence? Or, rather, a moment bursting with events and a decisive moment in Italian history as well as in the history of the planet? It is as if all that we have experienced during these years has fallen into an opaque zone of indifference, in which everything becomes confused and unintelligible. Are the events of Tangentopoli (“Brieville”), Italy’s protracted corruption scandal, for example, public events or private ones? I confess that it is not clear to me. And if terrorism really was an important moment of our recent political history, how is it possible that it rises now to the surface of conscience only thanks to the interior vicissitudes of some individuals and in the form of repentance, guilt, and conversion? To this slippage of the public into the private corresponds also the spectacular publicization of the private: are the diva’s breast cancer or Senna’s death public vicissitudes or private ones? And how can one touch the porn star’s body, since there is not an inch on it that is not public? And yet it is from such a zone of indifference—in which the actions of human experience are being put on sale—that we ought to start today. And if we are calling this opaque zone of indiscernibility “camp,” it is, then, still from the camp that we must begin again.
One hears something being continuously repeated in different quarters: that the situation has reached a limit, that things by now have become intolerable, and that change is necessary. Those who repeat this more than anybody else, however, are the politicians and the press that want to guide change in such a way that in the end nothing really changes. As far as the majority of Italians are concerned, they seem to be watching the intolerable in silence, as if they were spying on it while motionless in front of a large television screen. But what exactly is unbearable today in Italy? It is precisely this silence—that is, the fact that a whole people finds itself speechless before its own destiny—that is above all unbearable. Remember that, whenever you try to speak, you will not be able to resort to any tradition and you will not be able to avail yourself of any of the words that sound so good: freedom, progress, democracy, human rights, constitutional state. You will not even be able to show your credentials of representative of Italian culture or of the European spirit and have them count for anything. You will have to try and describe the intolerable without having anything with which to pull yourself out of it. You will have to remain faithful to that inexplicable silence. You will be able to reply to the unbearableness of that silence only by means immanent to it.

Never has an age been so inclined to put up with anything while finding everything intolerable. The very people who gulp down the unspeakable on a daily basis have this word—intolerable—ready-made on their lips every time they have to express their own opinion on whatever problem. Only that when someone actually risks giving a definition, one realizes that what is intolerable in the end is only that human bodies be tortured and hacked to pieces, and hence that, apart from that, one can put up with just about anything.

One of the reasons why Italians are silent today is certainly the noise of the media. As soon as the ancien régime began to crumble, the press and television unanimously revolted against it, even though up to that day they had been the main organizers of consent to the regime. Thus, they literally silenced people, thereby impeding that facts would follow the words that had been recovered slowly and with much effort.

One of the not-so-secret laws of the spectacular-democratic society in which we live is that, whenever power is seriously in crisis, the media establishment apparently dissociates itself from the regime of which it is an integral part so as to govern and direct the general discontent lest it turn itself into revolution. It is not always necessary to simulate an event, as happened in Timișoara; it suffices to anticipate not only facts (by declaring, for example, as many newspapers have been doing for months, that the revolution has already happened), but also citizens’ sentiments by giving them expression on the front page of newspapers before they turn into gesture and discourse, and hence circulate and grow through daily conversations and exchanges of opinion. I still remember the paralyzing impression that the word
SHAME as a banner headline on the front page of one of the regime's major dailies made on me the day after the authorization to proceed legally against Bettino Craxi was not granted. 2 To find in the morning the right word to say ready-made on the front page of a newspaper produces a singular effect, a feeling at once of reassurance and of frustration. And a reassuring frustration, that is, the feeling of those who have been dispossessed of their own expressive faculties, is today the dominant affect in Italy.

We Italians live today in a state of absolute absence of legitimacy. The legitimation of nation-states, of course, had been in crisis everywhere for some time, and the most evident symptom of such a crisis was precisely the obsessive attempt to make up in terms of legality, through an unprecedented proliferation of norms and regulations, for what was being lost in terms of legitimacy. But nowhere has decline reached the extreme limit at which we are getting used to living. There is no power or public authority right now that does not nakedly show its own emptiness and its own abjection. The judicial powers have been spared such ruination only because, much like the Erinyes of Greek tragedy that have ended up in a comedy by mistake, they act solely as an instance of punishment and revenge.

This means, however, that Italy is becoming once again the privileged political laboratory that it had been during the 1970s. Just as the governments and services of the entire world had observed then with attentive participation (and that is the least one can say, for they actively collaborated in the experiment) the way that a well-aimed politics of terrorism could possibly function as the mechanism of re legitimation of a discredited system, now the very same eyes watch with curiosity how a constituted power might govern the passage to a new constitution without passing through a constitutive power. Naturally, one is dealing here with a delicate experiment during which it is possible that the patient may not survive (and that would not necessarily be the worst outcome).

In the 1980s, those who spoke of conspiracies were accused of Oldthink. Nowadays, it is the president of the republic himself who publicly denounces the state secret services before the whole country as having conspired, and as continuing to conspire, against the constitution and public order. This accusation is imprecise only with regard to one detail: as someone already has punctually pointed out, all conspiracies in our time are actually in favor of the constituted order. And the enormity of such a denunciation is matched only by the brazenness with which the supreme organ of the state admits that its own secret services have made attempts on the life of the citizens, while forgetting to add that this was done for the good of the country and for the security of its public institutions.

The statement released by the head of a large democratic party, according to whom the judges who were indicting him were actually conspiring against themselves, is more impenetrable and yet unwittingly pro-
phetic. During the terminal phase of the evolution of the
state-form, each state organ and service is engaged in a
ruthless as well as uncontrollable conspiracy against it-
self and against every other organ and service.

Nowadays one often hears journalists and politicians (and
in particular the president of the republic) warning citi-
zens regarding a presumed crisis of the “sense of the
state.” One used to speak rather of “reason of state”—
which Botero had defined without hypocrisy: “State is a
stable rule over a people and Reason of State is the
knowledge of the means by which such a dominion may
be founded, preserved and extended.” What is hidden
behind this slippage from reason to sense, from the ra-
tional to the irrational? Because it would be simply in-
decent to speak of “reason of state” today, power looks
for one last possibility of well-being in a “sense” that
nobody quite understands where it resides and that
reminds one of the sense of honor in the ancien régime.
A state that has lost its reason and become insane
has also lost its senses and become unconscious. It is
now blind and deaf, and it gropes its way toward its own
end, heedless of the ruination into which it drags its
subjects along.

Of what are Italians repenting? The first to repent were
mafiosi and members of the Red Brigades, and since then
we have been witnessing an interminable procession of
faces that have been grim in their resolve and determined
in their very wavering. In the case of the mafiosi, the
face would appear in shadow so as to make sure that it
would not be recognized, and—as if from the burning
bush—we would hear “only a voice.” This is the dire
voice with which the conscience calls from the shadows
nowadays, as if our time did not know any other ethical
experience outside of repentance. But this is precisely the
point at which our time betrays its inconsistency. Re-
pentance, in fact, is the most treacherous of moral cate-
gories—and it is not even clear that it can be counted
at all among genuine ethical concepts. It is well known
how peremptorily Spinoza bars repentance from any right
of citizenship in his Ethics. The one who repents—he
writes—is twice disgraceful: the first time because he
committed an act of which he has had to repent, and
the second time because he has repented of it. But re-
pentance presented itself right away as a problem already
when it began powerfully to permeate Catholic doctrine
and morality in the twelfth century. How does one, in
fact, prove the authenticity of repentance? Camps were
soon formed with Peter Abelard on one side, whose only
requirement was the contrition of the heart, and the
“penitentials” on the other side, for whom the unsathi-
omable interior disposition of the one who repents was
not important when compared instead to the unequivoc-
al accomplishment of external acts. The whole question
thus turned upon itself right away like a vicious circle,
in which external acts had to attest to the authenticity of
repentance and internal contrition had to guarantee the
sincerity of the works. Today's trials function according
to the same logic, which decrees that to accuse one's own
comrades is a guarantee of the truthfulness of repentance and that innermost repentance ratifies the authenticity of the accusation.

It is not a coincidence, after all, that repentance has ended up in the courtroom. The truth is that repentance presents itself from the start as an equivocal compromise between morality and the law. With the help of repentance, a religion that had ambiguously come to terms with worldly power attempts to justify such a compromise by instituting an equivalence between penance and the punishment of the law as well as between crime and sin. But there is no surer index of the irreparable ruination of any ethical experience than the confusion between ethical-religious categories and juridical concepts. Wherever morality is being discussed today, people immediately have legal categories on their lips, and wherever laws are being made and trials are being conducted, it is ethical concepts instead that are being brandished like the lictor’s ax.

The mock seriousness with which secular politicians rushed to welcome the entrance of repentance into codes and laws as an unquestionable act of conscience is therefore all the more irresponsible. If it is the case, in fact, that the ones who are forced by an inauthentic belief to gamble their whole inner experience on a false concept are truly wretched, it is also the case that for them there is perhaps still some hope. But for the media establishment elite acting as moralists and for the televisial maîtres à penser, who have erected their concealed victories on the misfortunes of the former, for these, no, there truly is no hope.

The icons of the souls of purgatory in the streets of Naples. The large one I saw yesterday near the courthouse had almost all the statuettes of the purgatorial souls with their arms broken off. They were lying on the ground; they were no longer raised high in gestures of invocation—useless emblems of a torture more terrible than fire.

Of what are Italians ashamed? It is striking how frequently in public debates, as well as in the streets or in cafés, as soon as the discussion gets heated up, the expression “Shame on you!” readily comes in handy, almost as if it held the decisive argument every time. Shame, of course, is the prelude to repentance, and repentance in Italy today is the winning card. But none of those who throw shame in other people’s faces truly expect them suddenly to blush and declare that they have repented. On the contrary, it is taken for granted that they will not do that. It seems, however, that, in this strange game that everybody here is busy playing, the first ones who succeed in using that formula will have truth on their side. If repentance informs the relationship that Italians have with the good, shame dominates their relation to truth. And if repentance is their only ethical experience, they likewise have no other relation to the true outside of shame. But one is dealing here
with a shame that survived those who should have felt it and that has become as objective and impersonal as a juridical truth. In a trial in which repentance has been given the decisive role, shame is the only truth on which judgment might be passed.

Marx still used to put some trust in shame. When Arnold Ruge would object that no revolution has ever come out of shame, Marx would reply that shame already is a revolution, and he defined it as “a sort of anger that turns on itself.” But what he was referring to was the “national shame” that concerns specific peoples each with respect to other peoples, the Germans with respect to the French. Primo Levi has shown, however, that there is today a “shame of being human,” a shame that in some way or other has tainted every human being. This was—and still is—the shame of the camps, the shame of the fact that what should not have happened did happen. And it is a shame of this type, as it has been rightly pointed out, that we feel today when faced by too great a vulgarity of thought, when watching certain TV shows, when confronted with the faces of their hosts and with the self-assured smiles of those “experts” who jovially lend their qualifications to the political game of the media. Those who have felt this silent shame of being human have also severed within themselves any link with the political power in which they live. Such a shame feeds their thoughts and constitutes the beginning of a revolution and of an exodus of which it is barely able to discern the end.

(At the moment when the executioners’ knives are about to penetrate his flesh, Joseph K. with one last leap succeeds in getting hold of the shame that will survive him.)

Nothing is more nauseating than the impudence with which those who have turned money into their only raison d’être periodically wave around the scarecrow of economic crisis: the rich nowadays wear plain rags so as to warn the poor that sacrifices will be necessary for everybody. And the docility is just as astonishing; those who have made themselves stolidly complicitous with the imbalance of the public debt, by handing all their savings over to the state in exchange for bonds, now receive the warning blow without batting an eyelash and ready themselves to tighten their belts. And yet those who have any lucidity left in them know that the crisis is always in process and that it constitutes the internal motor of capitalism in its present phase, much as the state of exception is today the normal structure of political power. And just as the state of exception requires that there be increasingly numerous sections of residents deprived of political rights and that in fact at the outer limit all citizens be reduced to naked life, in such a way crisis, having now become permanent, demands not only that the people of the Third World become increasingly poor, but also that a growing percentage of the citizens of the industrialized societies be marginalized and without a job. And there is no so-called democratic state today that is not compromised and up to its neck in such a massive production of human misery.
The punishment for those who go away from love is to be handed over to the power of judgment: they will have to judge one another.

Such is the sense of the rule of the law over human life in our time: all other religious and ethical powers have lost their strength and survive only as indult or suspension of punishment and under no circumstances as interruption or refusal of judgment. Nothing is more dismal, therefore, than this unconditional being-in-force of juridical categories in a world in which they no longer mirror any comprehensible ethical content: their being-in-force is truly meaningless, much as the countenance of the guardian of the law in Kafka’s parable is inscrutable. This loss of sense, which transforms the clearest of sentences into a non liquet, explodes and comes into full view with Craxi’s confessions and with the confessions of all those who were in power and governed us up until yesterday, precisely when they have to abdicate to others who are probably no better than they were. That is because here to plead guilty is immediately a universal call upon everyone as an accomplice of everybody else, and where everybody is guilty judgment is technically impossible. (Even the Lord on the Last Day would refrain from pronouncing his sentence if everybody had to be damned.) The law here retreats back to its original injunction that—according to the intention of the Apostle Paul—expresses its inner contradiction: be guilty.

Nothing manifests the definitive end of the Christian ethics of love intended as a power that unites human beings better than this supremacy of the law. But what betrays itself here is also the church of Christ’s unconditional renunciation of any messianic intention. That is because the Messiah is the figure in which religion confronts the problem of the law, in which religion and the law come to the decisive day of reckoning. In the Jewish as much as in the Christian and Shiite contexts, in fact, the messianic event marks first of all a crisis and a radical transformation of the proper legal order of religious tradition. The old law (the Torah of creation) that had been valid up to that moment now ceases to be valid; but obviously, it is not simply a question of substituting for it a new law that would include commandments and prohibitions that would be different from and yet structurally homogeneous with the previous ones. Hence the paradoxes of messianism, which Sabbatai Zevi expressed by saying: “The fulfillment of the Torah is its transgression” and which Christ expressed (more soberly than Paul) in the formula: “I did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it.”

Having struck with the law a lasting compromise, the church has frozen the messianic event, thereby handing the world over to the power of judgment—a power, however, that the church cunningly manages in the form of the indult and of the penitential remission of sins. (The Messiah has no need for such a remission: the “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” is nothing other than the anticipation of the messianic fulfillment of the law.) The task that messianism had assigned to modern politics—to think
a human community that would not have (only) the figure of the law—still awaits the minds that might undertake it.

Today, the political parties that define themselves as “progressive” and the so-called leftist coalitions have won in the large cities where there have been elections. One is struck by the victors’ excessive preoccupation with presenting themselves as the establishment and with reassuring at all costs the old economic, political, and religious powers. When Napoleon defeated the Mamluks in Egypt, the first thing he did was to summon the notables who constituted the old regime’s backbone and to inform them that under the new sovereign their privileges and functions would remain untouched. Since here one is not dealing with the military conquest of a foreign country, the zeal with which the head of a party—that up until not too long ago used to call itself Communist—saw fit to reassure bankers and capitalists by pointing out how well the lira and the stock exchange had received the blow is, to say the least, inappropriate. This much is certain: these politicians will end up being defeated by their very will to win at all costs. The desire to be the establishment will ruin them just as it ruined their predecessors.⁶

It is important to be able to distinguish between defeat and dishonor. The victory of the right in the 1994 political elections was a defeat for the left, which does not imply that because of this it was also a dishonor. If, as is certainly the case, this defeat also involved dishonor, that is because it marked the conclusive moment of a process of involution that had already begun many years ago. There was dishonor because the defeat did not conclude a struggle over opposite positions, but rather decided only whose turn it was to put into practice the same ideology of the spectacle, of the market, and of enterprise. One might see in this nothing other than a necessary consequence of a betrayal that had already begun in the years of Stalinism. Perhaps so. What concerns us here, however, is only the evolution that has taken place beginning with the end of the 1970s. It is since then, in fact, that the complete corruption of minds has taken that hypocritical form and that voice of reason and common sense that today goes under the name of progressivism.

In a recent book, Jean-Claude Milner has clearly identified and defined as “progressivism” the principle in whose name the following process has taken place: compromising. The revolution used to have to compromise with capital and with power, just as the church had to come to terms with the modern world. Thus, the motto that has guided the strategy of progressivism during the march toward its coming to power slowly took shape: one has to yield on everything, one has to reconcile everything with its opposite, intelligence with television and advertisement, the working class with capital, freedom of speech with the state of the spectacle, the environment with industrial development, science with opinion, democracy with the electoral machine, bad conscience and abjuration with memory and loyalty.
Today one can see what such a strategy has led to. The left has actively collaborated in setting up in every field the instruments and terms of agreement that the right, once in power, will just need to apply and develop so as to achieve its own goals without difficulty.

It was exactly in the same way that the working class was spiritually and physically disarmed by German social democracy before being handed over to Nazism. And while the citizens of goodwill are being called on to keep watch and to wait for phantasmatic frontal attacks, the right has already crossed the lines through the breach that the left itself had opened up.

Classical politics used to distinguish clearly between zêa and bios, between natural life and political life, between human beings as simply living beings, whose place was in the home, and human beings as political subjects, whose place was in the polis. Well, we no longer have any idea of any of this. We can no longer distinguish between zêa and bios, between our biological life as living beings and our political existence, between what is incommunicable and speechless and what is speakable and communicable. As Foucault once wrote, we are animals in whose politics our very life as living beings is at stake. Living in the state of exception that has now become the rule has meant also this: our private biological body has become indistinguishable from our body politic, experiences that once used to be called political suddenly were confined to our biological body, and private experiences present themselves all of a sudden outside us as body politic. We have had to grow used to thinking and writing in such a confusion of bodies and places, of outside and inside, of what is speechless and what has words with which to speak, of what is enslaved and what is free, of what is need and what is desire. This has meant—why not admit it?—experiencing absolute impotence, bumping against solitude and speechlessness over and over again precisely there where we were expecting company and words. We have endured such an impotence as best we could while being surrounded on every side by the din of the media, which were defining the new planetary political space in which exception had become the rule. But it is by starting from this uncertain terrain and from this opaque zone of indistinction that today we must once again find the path of another politics, of another body, of another word. I would not feel up to forgetting this indistinction of public and private, of biological body and body politic, of zêa and bios, for any reason whatsoever. It is here that I must find my space once again—here or nowhere else. Only a politics that starts from such an awareness can interest me.

I remember that in 1966, while attending the seminar on Heraclitus at Le Thor, I asked Heidegger whether he had read Kafka. He answered that, of the little he had read, it was above all the short story “Der Bau” (The burrow) that had made an impression on him. The nameless animal that is the protagonist of the story—mole, fox, or human being—is obsessively engaged in building an inexpugnable burrow that instead slowly reveals
itself to be a trap with no way out. But isn’t this precisely what has happened in the political space of Western nation-states? The homes—the “fatherlands”—that these states endeavored to build revealed themselves in the end to be only lethal traps for the very “peoples” that were supposed to inhabit them.

Beginning with the end of World War I, in fact, it is evident that the European nation-states no longer have any assignable historical tasks. To see the great totalitarian experiments of the twentieth century only as the continuation and execution of the last tasks of nineteenth-century nation-states—that is, of nationalism and imperialism—is to misunderstand completely the nature of such experiments. There are other, more extreme stakes here, because it was a question of turning into and undertaking as a task the fictitious existence of peoples pure and simple—that is, in the last instance, their naked life. In this sense, the totalitarianisms of our century truly constitute the other side of the Hegel-Kojèveian idea of an end of history: humankind has by now reached its historical telos and all that is left to accomplish is to depoliticize human societies either by unfolding unconditionally the reign of oikonomia or by undertaking biological life itself as supreme political task. But as soon as the home becomes the political paradigm—as is the case in both instances—then the proper, what is most one’s own, and the innermost fictitiousness of existence run the risk of turning into a fatal trap. And this is the trap we live in today.

In a crucial passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle wonders whether there is such a thing as an ergon, a being-in-the-act, a being-operative, and a work proper to man, or whether man as such might perhaps be essentially argōs, that is, without a work, workless [inaoperos]:

For just as the goodness and performance of a flute player, a sculptor, or any kind of expert, and generally of anyone who fulfills some function or performs some action, are thought to reside in his proper function [ergon], so the goodness and performance of man would seem to reside in whatever is his proper function. Is it then possible that while a carpenter and a shoemaker have their own proper function and spheres of action, man as man has none, but was left by nature a good-for-nothing without a function [argōs]?°

Politics is that which corresponds to the essential inoperability [inaoperosia] of humankind, to the radical being-without-work of human communities. There is politics because human beings are argōs-beings that cannot be defined by any proper operation—that is, beings of pure potentiality that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust. (This is the true political meaning of Averroism, which links the political vocation of man to the potentiality of the intellect.) Over and beyond the planetary rule of the oikonomia of naked life, the issue of the coming politics is the way in which this argōs, this essential potentiality and inoperability, might
be undertaken without becoming a historical task, or, in other words, the way in which politics might be nothing other than the exposition of humankind’s absence of work as well as the exposition of humankind’s creative semi-indifference to any task, and might only in this sense remain integrally assigned to happiness.

E. M. Forster relates how during one of his conversations with C. P. Cavafy in Alexandria, the poet told him “You English cannot understand us: we Greeks went bankrupt a long time ago.” I believe that one of the few things that can be declared with certainty is that, since then, all the peoples of Europe (and, perhaps, all the peoples of the Earth) have gone bankrupt. We live after the failure of peoples, just as Apollinaire would say of himself: “I lived in the time when the kings would die.” Every people has had its particular way of going bankrupt, and certainly it does make a difference that for the Germans it meant Hitler and Auschwitz, for the Spanish it meant a civil war, for the French it meant Vichy, for other people, instead, it meant the quiet and atrocious 1950s, and for the Serbs it meant the rapes of Omarska; in the end, what is crucial for us is only the new task that such a failure has bequeathed us. Perhaps it is not even accurate to define it as a task, because there is no longer a people to undertake it. As the Alexandrian poet might say today with a smile: “Now, at last, we can understand one another, because you too have gone bankrupt.”

(1995)

Translators’ Notes

Preface

1. The term naked life translates the Italian nuda vita. This term appears also in the subtitle of Giorgio Agamben’s Homo Sacer: il potere sacrato e la nuda vita, as well as throughout that work. We have decided not to follow Daniel Heller-Roazen’s translation of nuda vita as “bare life”—see Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen—and to retain the earlier translation of nuda vita as “naked life” to be found in Cesare Casarino’s translation of Agamben’s essay “Forma-di-vita” (see “Form-of-Life” in the collection edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, A Potentiel Politique: Radical Thought in Italy [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996], pp. 151-55).

Form-of-Life

1. The English term power corresponds to two distinct terms in Italian, potenza and potere (which roughly correspond to the French puissance and pouvoir, the German Macht and Vermeign, and the Latin potentia and potestas, respectively). Force can often resonate with implications of potentiality as well as with decentralized or mass conceptions of force and strength. Power, on the other hand, refers to the right or authority of an already structured and centralized capacity, often an institutional apparatus such as the state.


translators’ Notes

5. “Experiential life” is in English in the original.


7. The terminology in the original is the same as that used for bank transactions (and thus “banked life” becomes here the cash reserve contained in accounts such as the “banks of life”).


Beyond Human Rights


Notes on Gesture


Languages and Peoples


4. Ibid., p. 50.


7. Ibid., p. 50.


Marginal Notes on Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle


The Face


2. Ibid., p. 50.


6. The term *establishment* is in English in the original.


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