



# *You Have to be Stupid to See That*

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### Abstract

The article presents a philosophical analysis of a current historical situation, in which humanity is facing the urgency of a radical politico-economic change, a need to establish a new mode of relating to our environs, which can be understood as civilizing civilizations, or imposing universal solidarity and cooperation among all human communities. This task is rendered all the more difficult by both the ongoing rise of sectarian fundamentalist violence, and its (apparent) opposite, that is, cynical indifference. Addressing Marx's well-known characterization of religion as the "opium of the people," this article shows, using the most real examples of our social and political reality, how ideology functions and how it affects our ideas of equality and freedom.

### Keywords

ideology, violence, drugs, religion, war, revolution

Until now, each culture has disciplined/educated its own members and guaranteed civic peace among them in the guise of state power, but the relationship between different cultures and states has been permanently under the shadow of potential war, with each state of peace nothing more than a temporary armistice. As Hegel conceptualized it, the entire ethic of a state culminates in the highest act of heroism, the readiness

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to sacrifice one's life for one's nation-state, which means that the wild barbarian relations between states serve as the foundation of the ethical life within a state.

However, the moment we fully accept the fact that we live on Space-ship Earth, the task that urgently imposes itself is that of civilizing civilizations themselves, of imposing universal solidarity and cooperation among all human communities. There is a need to establish a new mode of relating to our environs, a radical politico-economic change. This task is rendered all the more difficult by the ongoing rise of sectarian religious and ethnic "heroic" violence, and a readiness to sacrifice oneself (and the world) for one's specific Cause. Alain Badiou wrote that the contours of the future war are already drawn:

The United States and their Western-Japanese clique on the one side, China and Russia on the other side, atomic arms everywhere. We cannot but recall Mao Zedong's statement: "Either revolution will prevent the war or the war will trigger revolution." This is how we can define the maximal ambition of the political work to come: for the first time in History, the first hypothesis—revolution will prevent the war—should realize itself, and not the second one—a war will trigger revolution. It is effectively the second hypothesis which materialized itself in Russia in the context of the First World War, and in China in the context of the second. But at what price! And with what long-term consequences! (Badiou 2017: 56–57).

There is no way to avoid the conclusion that a radical social change—a revolution—is needed to civilize our civilizations. We cannot afford the hope that a new war will lead to a new revolution: a new war would much more probably mean the end of civilization as we know it, with the survivors organized in small authoritarian groups. However, the main obstacle to this process of civilizing civilizations is not so much sectarian fundamentalist violence as its (apparent) opposite, cynical indifference.

In October 2017, Donald Trump declared a public health emergency in response to what he called the "national shame and human tragedy": the US's escalating opioid epidemic, the "worst drug crisis in American history" caused by the mass prescription of opioid painkillers:

The United States is by far the largest consumer of these drugs, using more opioid pills per person than any other country by far. No part of our society—not young or old, rich or poor, urban or rural—has been spared this plague of drug addiction (Guardian 2017a).

Although Trump is as far as one can imagine from being a Marxist, his proclamation cannot but evoke Marx's well-known characterization of religion as the "opium of the people"—a characterization worth quoting here:

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo (Marx 1844).

One can immediately notice that Trump (who wants to begin his war on opioids by prohibiting the most dangerous drugs) is a very vulgar Marxist, similar to those hard-line Communists (such as Enver Hoxha or the Khmer Rouge) who tried to undermine religion by simply outlawing it. Marx's approach is more subtle: instead of directly fighting religion, the goal of the Communists is to change the social situation (of exploitation and domination) that gives birth to the need for religion.

Marx nonetheless remains all too naïve, not only with regard to his idea of religion but with regard to different versions of the opium of the people. It is true that radical Islam is an exemplary case of religion as the opium of the people: a false confrontation with capitalist modernity that allows Muslims to dwell in their ideological dream while their countries are ravaged by the effects of global capitalism—and exactly the same holds for Christian fundamentalism. However, there are today, in our Western world, two other versions of the opium of the people: the opium and the people. As the rise of populism demonstrates, the opium of the people is also “the people” itself, the fuzzy, populist dream destined to obfuscate our own antagonisms. And, last but not least, for many among us the opium of the people is opium itself, escape into drugs—precisely the phenomenon Trump is talking about.

Where does this need to escape into opium come from? To paraphrase Freud, we have to take a look at the psychopathology of global-capitalist everyday life. Yet another form of today's opium of the people is our escape into the pseudo-social digital universe of Facebook, Twitter, etc. In a speech to Harvard graduates in May 2017, Mark Zuckerberg told his public: “Our job is to create a sense of purpose!”—and this from a man who, with Facebook, has created the world's most expanded instrument of purposeless loss of time!

As Laurent de Sutter demonstrated, chemistry (in its scientific version) is becoming part of us: large aspects of our lives are characterized by the management of our emotions by drugs, from the everyday use of sleeping pills and antidepressants to hard narcotics. We are not just controlled by impenetrable social powers; our very emotions are “outsourced” to chemical stimulation. The stakes of this chemical intervention are double and contradictory: we use drugs to keep external excitement (shocks, anxieties, etc.) under control, that is, to desensitize us for them, and to generate artificial excitement if we are depressed and lack desire.

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Drugs thus react to the two opposing threats to our daily lives: over-excitement and depression, and it is crucial to notice how these two uses of drugs relate to the couple of private and public: in the developed Western countries, our public lives more and more lack collective excitement (exemplarily provided by a genuine political engagement), while drugs supplant this lack with private (or, rather, intimate) forms of excitement—drugs perform the euthanasia of public life and the artificial excitation of private life.<sup>1</sup> The country whose daily life is most impregnated by this tension is South Korea, and here is Franco Berardi's report on his recent journey to Seoul:

Korea is the ground zero of the world, a blueprint for the future of the planet. [...] After colonization and wars, after dictatorship and starvation, the South Korean mind, liberated from the burden of the natural body, smoothly entered the digital sphere with a lower degree of cultural resistance than virtually any other populations in the world. In the emptied cultural space, the Korean experience is marked by an extreme degree of individualization and simultaneously it is headed towards the ultimate cabling of the collective mind. These lonely monad walks in the urban space in tender continuous interaction with the pictures, tweets, games coming out of their small screens, perfectly insulated and perfectly wired into the smooth interface of the flow. [...] South Korea has the highest suicide rate in the world. Suicide is the most common cause of death for those under 40 in South Korea. Interestingly, the toll of suicides in South Korea has doubled during the last decade. [...] in the space of two generation their condition has certainly improved by the point of view of revenue, nutrition, freedom and possibility of travelling abroad. But the price of this improvement has been the desertification of daily life, the hyper-acceleration of rhythms, the extreme individualization of biographies, and work precariousness which also means unbridled competition. [...] The intensification of the rhythm of work, the desertification of the landscape and the virtualization of the emotional life are converging to create a level of loneliness and despair that is difficult to consciously refuse and oppose" (Berardi 2015: 186–95).

What Berardi's impressions on Seoul provide is the image of a place deprived of its history, a worldless place. Badiou noted that we live in a social space that is progressively experienced as worldless. Perhaps it is here that one should locate one of the main dangers of capitalism: although it is global and encompasses the whole world, it sustains a *sensu stricto* worldless ideological constellation, depriving the large majority of people of any meaningful cognitive mapping. This, then, is what makes millions

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<sup>1</sup> For a precise description of this predicament, see de Sutter (2018).

seek refuge in our opiums: not just new poverty and lack of prospect but the unbearable superego pressure in its two aspects: the pressure to succeed professionally and the pressure to enjoy life fully in all its intensity. Perhaps this second aspect is even more unsettling: What remains of our life when our retreat into private pleasure itself becomes the stuff of brutal injunction? In short, is Trump himself—the way he acts, emitting endless tweets, etc.—not the cause of the disease he is trying to cure?

Back in the 1960s, the motto of the early ecological movements was “Think globally, act locally!” With his politics of sovereignty echoing the stance of North Korea, Trump promises to do the exact opposite, to turn the US into a *glocal* power, but, this time, in the sense of: “Act globally, think locally!” We should not be afraid to add that we think locally because we are caught in a Plato’s cave of ideology—so how to get out of it? We encounter here an intricate dialectics of freedom and servitude:

The exit from the cave begins when one of the prisoners is not only freed from his chains (as Heidegger shows this is not at all enough to liberate him from the libidinal attachment to the shadows), but when he is forced out. This clearly must be the place for the (libidinal, but also epistemological, political and ontological) function of the master. This can only be a master who does neither tell me what precisely to do nor one whose instrument I could become, but must be one who just “gives me back to myself.” And in a sense, one might say this could be connected to Plato’s anamnesis theory (remembering what one never knew as it were) and does imply that the proper master just affirms or makes it possible for me to affirm that “I can do this,” without telling me what this is and thus without telling me (too much of) who I am (Frank Ruda, personal communication).

The point Ruda makes here is a subtle one: it’s not only that, if I am left to myself in the cave, even if without chains, I prefer to stay there, so that a master has to force me out—I have to volunteer to be forced out, similarly to the way in which, when a subject enters psychoanalysis he volunteers to it, that is, he voluntarily accepts the psychoanalyst as his master (albeit in a very specific way).

A question arises at precisely this point from using the reference to the master in psychoanalytic terms: Does this mean that those who need a master are—always already—in the position of the analysand? If—politically—such a master is needed to become who one is (to use Nietzsche’s formula) and this can be structurally linked to liberating the prisoner from the cave (to forcing him out after the chains are taken off and he still does not want to leave), the question arises how to link this with the idea that the analysand must constitutively be a volunteer (and not simply slave or bondsman). So, in short, there must be a dialectics of

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master and volunteer(s): a dialectics because the master to some extent constitutes the volunteers as volunteers (liberates them from previously seemingly unquestionable position) such that then they become voluntary followers of the master's injunction whereby the master ultimately becomes superfluous—but maybe only for a certain period of time, afterwards one has to repeat this very process (one never leaves the cave entirely, so to speak, such that one constantly has to re-encounter the master, and the anxiety linked to it, such that there must always be a repunctuation if things get stuck again, or mortifyingly habitualized) (Frank Ruda, personal communication).

What further complicates the picture is that:

capitalism relies massively on unpaid and thereby structurally “voluntary” labour. There are, to put it with Lenin, volunteers and “volunteers,” so, maybe, one has not only to distinguish between different types of master-figures but also link them (if the link to psychoanalysis is in this way pertinent) to different understandings of the volunteer (i.e., analysand). Even the analysand as a volunteer must be somehow forced into analysis. This might seem to bring classical readings of the master-slave dialectics back onto the stage, but one should bear in mind that as soon as the slave identifies himself as a slave he is no longer a slave, whereas the voluntary worker in capitalism can identify himself as what he is and this changes nothing (capitalism interpellates people as “nothings,” volunteers, etc.) (Frank Ruda, personal communication).

Two levels of volunteering (which are simultaneously two levels of *servitude volontaire*) are different not only with regard to the content of servitude (to market mechanisms, to an emancipatory cause), their very form is different. In capitalist servitude, we simply feel free, while in authentic liberation, we accept voluntary servitude as serving a Cause and not just ourselves. In today's cynical functioning of capitalism, I can know very well what I am doing and continue to do it, the liberating aspect of my knowledge is suspended, while in the authentic dialectics of liberation, the awareness of my situation is already the first step of liberation. In capitalism, I am enslaved precisely when I “feel free,” this feeling is the very form of my servitude, while in an emancipatory process, I am free when I “feel as a slave,” that is, the very feeling of being enslaved already bears witness to the fact that, in the core of my subjectivity, I am free—only when my position of enunciation is that of a free subject, I can experience my servitude as an abomination. We thus get here two version of the Moebius strip reversal: if we follow capitalist freedom to the end, it turns into the very form of servitude, and if we want to break out of the capitalist servitude volontaire, our assertion of freedom again has to assume the form of its opposite, of voluntarily serving a Cause.

If Marx defined bourgeois human rights as those of “liberté-égalité-fraternité and Bentham,” the proletarian and properly Leftist version should be, precisely, “Liberty-Equality-Freedom and... TERROR,” terror of being torn out of the complacency of bourgeois life and its egotistic struggles, terror as the pressure to elevate ourselves to the standpoint of universal emancipation. Bentham or terror—this, perhaps, is our ultimate choice. Why is a form of terror needed? Because the chains in the cave have today a specific form different from the traditional functioning of ideology. In order to be operative, every ideological edifice has to be inconsistent, that is, its explicit norms have to be supplemented by higher-level implicit norms telling us how to deal with explicit norms (when to obey them and when to violate them). In other words, an ideology is not just its explicit texture; it always comprises a thick network of its obscene underground that violates its explicit norms—this inconsistency is what makes it ideology. Robert Pippin recently deployed how this tension works in our time; he pointed out how

the complexity of our situation has created something quite unprecedented that only /Hegel’s/ philosophy, with its ability to explain the “positive” role of the negative, and the reality of group agency and collective subjectivity, can account for. Life in modern societies seems to have created the need for uniquely dissociated collective doxastic states, a repetition of the various characters in the drama of self-deceit narrated by the Phenomenology. This is one wherein we sincerely believe ourselves committed to fundamental principles and maxims we are actually in no real sense committed to, given what we do. [...] The principles can be consciously and sincerely acknowledged and avowed, but, given the principles they are, cannot be integrated into a livable, coherent form of life. The social conditions for self-deceit in this sort of context can help show that the problem is not rightly described as one where many individuals happen to fall into self-deceit. The analysis is not a moral one, not focused on individuals. It has to be understood as a matter of historical Geist (Pippin 2017: 146–47).

The key point in this passage is Pippin’s emphasis on “the ‘positive’ role of the negative, and the reality of group agency and collective subjectivity”: the “negative,” in this case, is the dissonance, the gap between explicit ideological texture and actual lifeworld practice, and its positive role means that this dissonance does not prevent the full actualization of an ideological edifice but “makes it liveable,” is a condition of its actual functioning—if we take away the negative side, the edifice itself falls apart. The “reality of group agency and collective subjectivity” means that we are not dealing just with individual distortions and imperfections—in this case, the guilt would be on the side of individuals, their corruption and moral depravity, and the cure would also to be sought in their moral

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improvement. What we are dealing with is a dissonance inscribed into the “objective” shape of social spirit itself, into the basic structure of social customs. Such collective forms of self-deceit function as forms of objective social being and are thus in some sense “true” even if they are false. In her *America Day by Day* (1948), Simone de Beauvoir noted: “many racists, ignoring the rigors of science, insist on declaring that even if the psychological reasons haven’t been established, the fact is that blacks are inferior. You only have to travel through America to be convinced of it” (quoted in Sandford 2006: 42). Her point about racism has often been misunderstood—for example, Stella Sandford claims that “nothing justifies Beauvoir’s [...] acceptance of the ‘fact’ of this inferiority”:

With her existentialist philosophical framework, we might rather have expected Beauvoir to talk about the interpretation of existing physiological differences in terms of inferiority and superiority [...] or to point out the mistake involved in the use of the value judgments “inferior” and “superior” to name alleged properties of human beings, as if to “confirm a given fact” (Sandford 2006: 49).

It is clear what bothers Sandford here. She is aware that Beauvoir’s claim about the factual inferiority of blacks aims at something more than the simple social fact that, in the American South of (not only) that time, blacks were treated as inferior by the white majority and, in a way, they effectively were inferior. But her critical solution, propelled by the care to avoid racist claims on the factual inferiority of blacks, is to relativize their inferiority into a matter of interpretation and judgment by white racists, and distance it from a question of their very being. But what this softening distinction misses is the truly trenchant dimension of racism: the “being” of blacks (as of whites or anyone else) is a socio-symbolic being. When they are treated by whites as inferior, this does indeed make them inferior at the level of their socio-symbolic identity. In other words, the white racist ideology exerts a performative efficiency, it is not merely an interpretation of what blacks are, but an interpretation that determines the very being and social existence of the interpreted subjects.

We can now locate precisely what makes Sandford and other critics of Beauvoir resist her formulation that blacks actually were inferior: this resistance is itself ideological. At the base of this ideology is the fear that, if one concedes this point, we will have lost the inner freedom, autonomy, and dignity of the human individual. Which is why such critics insist that blacks are not inferior but merely “inferiorized” by the violence imposed on them by white racist discourse. That is, they are affected by an imposition that does not affect them in the very core of their being, and, consequently, which they can (and do) resist as free autonomous agents through their acts, dreams, and projects.



If we look at the problem of equality from a purely scientific standpoint, why should “powers of reason” (in whichever problematic way we define them) be equal among races? Equality is an ethico-political norm, not a fact: people are equal in spite of their natural and social differences. One should even make a step further and ask: What people are equal, that they all share the same freedom, reason, and dignity? If this equality as a norm is a historical fact, something that only emerged with modernity, then people only became equal, etc., with modernity when equality became a norm. So, again, when we demand equality, on what do we ground this demand? Is it a natural fact (in what sense?), a fact (or, rather, an a priori feature) of human nature, or (as Habermas tried to demonstrate) a normative structure implied by the fact of symbolic communication, or, again, a norm that emerges with modernity (and which, consequently, has no meaning in premodern civilizations, so that it is effectively a form of cultural colonialism to treat it as universal)? Furthermore, if the so-called axiom of equality is part of a specific historical constellation, in what sense can we claim that it is ethically superior to more traditional (or modern scientific) forms of hierarchy? Is not every claim of its superiority circular (in the sense of already presupposing what it tries to demonstrate)? A Hegelian answer would have been that equality-in-freedom arises immanently out of the pragmatic contradictions inherent to all previous notions of justice—but are we still ready to endorse the “Eurocentric” notion of progress which underlies this approach?

Pippin is right to point out that Hegel’s description of such collective self-deceit is much more relevant to our times than the search for possible actuality of some of Hegel’s positive institutional solutions. There is, however, one problem with Pippin’s diagnosis: it remains within the horizon of Hegel’s “progressive” dialectics where unearthing inconsistency leads to the self-cancellation, while in actual life the dissonance of an ideological formation mostly works as the ultimate resort of its stability—only in a specific situation (a change in ideological sensitivity) does the realization that our ideological edifice is dissonant lead to its disintegration. (For example, although slavery was in obvious dissonance with Christian morality, it took a long time before it became intolerable for the majority.)

Pope Francis usually displays the right intuitions in matters theological and political. Recently, however, he committed a serious blunder in endorsing the idea, propagated by some Catholics, to change a line in the Lord’s Prayer where it asks God to “lead us not into temptation”: “It is not a good translation because it speaks of a God who induces temptation. I am the one who falls; it’s not him pushing me into temptation to then see how I have fallen. A father doesn’t do that, a father helps you to get up immediately. It’s Satan who leads us into temptation, that’s his department” (*Guardian* 2017b). So the pontiff suggests we should all follow the

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Catholic Church in France, which already uses the phrase “do not let us fall into temptation” instead.

Convincing as this simple line of reasoning may sound, it misses the deepest paradox of Christianity and ethics. Is God not exposing us to temptation already in paradise where he warns Adam and Eve not to eat the apple from the tree of knowledge—why did he put this tree there in the first place, and then even drew attention to it? Was he not aware that human ethics can arise only after the Fall? Many most perspicuous theologians and Christian writers, from Kierkegaard to Paul Claudel, were fully aware that, at its most basic, temptation arises in the form of the Good—or, as Kierkegaard put it apropos Abraham, when he is ordered to slaughter Isaac, his predicament “is an ordeal such that, please note, the ethical is the temptation” (Kierkegaard 1983: 115). Is the temptation of the (false) Good not what characterizes all forms of religious fundamentalism?

Here is a perhaps surprising historical example: the killing of Reinhard Heydrich. In London, the Czechoslovak government-in-exile resolved to kill Heydrich; Jan Kubiš and Jozef Gabčík who headed the team chosen for the operation, were parachuted in the vicinity of Prague. On 27 May, 1942, alone with his chauffeur in an open car (to show his courage and trust), Heydrich was on his way to his office, when, at a junction in a Prague suburb the car slowed, Gabčík step in front of the car and took aim at it with a submachine gun, but it jammed. Instead of ordering his driver to speed away, Heydrich called his car to halt and decided to confront the attackers. At this moment, Kubiš threw a bomb at the rear of the car as it stopped, and the explosion wounded both Heydrich and Kubiš. When the smoke cleared, Heydrich emerged from the wreckage with his gun in his hand; he chased Kubiš for half a block but became weak from shock and collapsed. He sent his driver, Klein, to chase Gabčík on foot, while, still with pistol in hand, he gripped his left flank, which was bleeding profusely. A Czech woman went to Heydrich’s aid and flagged down a delivery van; he was first placed in the driver’s cab of the van, but complained the van’s movement was causing him pain, so he was placed in the back of the van, on his stomach, and quickly taken to the emergency room at a nearby hospital... (Incidentally, although Heydrich died a couple of days later, there was a serious chance that he would survive, so this woman may well have entered history as the one who saved Heydrich’s life.) While a militarist Nazi sympathizer would emphasize Heydrich’s personal courage, what fascinates me is the role of the anonymous Czech woman: she helped Heydrich who was lying alone in a pool of blood, with no military or police protection. Was she aware who he was? If yes, and if she was no Nazi sympathizer (both the most probable surmises), why did she do this? Was it a simple half-automatic reaction of human compassion, of helping a neighbor in distress no matter who he or she is? Should this compassion win over the awareness of the fact that this

“neighbor” is a top Nazi criminal responsible for thousands (and later millions) of deaths? What we confront here is the ultimate choice between abstract liberal humanism and the ethics implied by radical emancipatory struggle: If we progress to the end of the side of liberal humanism, we find ourselves condoning the worst criminals, and if we progress to the end of partial political engagement, we find ourselves on the side of emancipatory universality—in the case of Heydrich, for the poor Czech woman to act universally would have been to resist her compassion and try to finish the wounded Heydrich off...

Such impasses are the stuff of actual engaged ethical life, and if we exclude them as problematic we are left with a lifeless benevolent holy text. What lurks behind this exclusion is the trauma of the book of Job where God and Satan directly organize the destruction of Job’s life in order to test his devotion. Quite a few Christians claim the book of Job should therefore be excluded from the Bible as pagan blasphemy. However, before we succumb to this Politically Correct ethic cleansing, we should pause for a moment to consider what we lose with it. If we want to keep the Christian experience alive, let us resist the temptation to purge from it all “problematic” passages—they are the very stuff that confers on Christianity the unbearable tensions of a true life.

And the same goes for the viability of a state. As Fredric Jameson perspicuously noted, *Antigone* is not the story of the disintegration of the organic unity of mores (*Sittlichkeit*), of the split of this unity into public and private (family) customs (Jameson 2010: 75–95). The split (ethical conflict) *Antigone* describes is rather constitutive of the very public order, so *Antigone* is a story about the division constitutive of power, the story about the constitution, not disintegration, of state power. Because of this limitation, Pippin also seems to miss the full extent of today’s form of self-deceit when he describes it in quantitative terms (“an even more widespread phenomenon,” etc.):

But collective self-deceit of the kind explored by Hegel is [today] a different and arguably an even more widespread phenomenon. [...] “Political actors are presented, and present themselves,” [Bernard] Williams suggests, “like actors in a soap opera, playing roles in which they neither cynically pretend to represent positions they know to be false (not always or mostly, anyway), nor, given the theatricality, exaggeration, ‘posing,’ and the ‘protest too much’ rhetoric, do they comfortably and authentically inhabit those roles.” Williams’s description is memorable. “They are called by their first names or have the same kind of jokey nicknames as soap opera characters, the same broadly sketched personalities, the same dispositions to triumph and humiliations which are schematically related to the doings of other characters. One believes in them as one believes in characters in a soap opera: one accepts the invitation to half believe them.” He goes on to say that “politicians, the media, and the audience

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conspire to pretend that important realities are being considered, that the actual word is being responsibly addressed. And of course it is not being addressed. The whole strategy is an attempt to avoid doing so.” [...] this is all best accounted for by saying that Geist, in this case, the communal Geist of a nation, is, in its self-representations, engaging in collective self-deceit. [...] this is exactly the situation we find ourselves in, in anonymous mass societies, in which the absence of what, according to Hegel, amounts to genuine commonality, *Sittlichkeit*, is a felt absence, not merely an indeterminate absence (Pippin 2017: 134–35).

However, the fact that, in our “anonymous mass societies,” the absence of *Sittlichkeit* “is a felt absence, not merely an indeterminate absence,” in no way precludes the possibility that *Sittlichkeit* works here as a retroactive dream covering up the fact that the reality of every *Sittlichkeit* implies dissonances. Furthermore, do the quoted passages from Williams that describe political actors as persons in a soap opera, although beautifully written, really deliver what they promise to deliver? Do they really describe a new form of moral corruption? Is the fact that “politicians, the media, and the audience conspire to pretend that important realities are being considered, that the actual word is being responsibly addressed,” not a feature of every ideology in its actual functioning? In every ideology, the clear division between the deceived and their deceivers is blurred since the deceived comply with the illusion and even desire to be deceived. What goes on today is not just more of the same but a qualitatively new form of dissonance: a dissonance openly admitted and for that reason treated as irrelevant, as with our example of the ashtray alongside the “no smoking” sign. Recall the debates on torture—was the stance of the US authorities not something like: “Torture is prohibited, and here is how you do a waterboarding”? The paradox is thus that today, there is in some way less deception than in a more traditional functioning of ideology: nobody is really deceived.

At this point we reach the supreme irony of how ideology functions today—it appears precisely as its opposite, as a radical critique of ideological utopias. The predominant ideology today is not a positive vision of some utopian future but a cynical resignation, an acceptance of how “the world really is,” accompanied by a warning that if we want to change it (too much), only a totalitarian horror can ensue. Every vision of another world is dismissed as ideology. Alain Badiou put it in a wonderful and precise way: the main function of ideological censorship today is not to crush actual resistance—this is the job of repressive state apparatuses—but to crush hope, to immediately denounce every critical project as opening a path at the end of which is something like a gulag. This is what Tony Blair had in mind when he recently asked “is it possible to define a politics that is what I would call post-ideological?” (quoted in Knight 2017)...

In order to get how ideology functions in its traditional mode, the well-known expression “You have to be stupid not to see that!” should be turned around: You have to be stupid to see that—what? The supplementary ideological element that provides meaning to a confused situation. In anti-semitism, for example, you have (to be stupid enough) to see “the Jew” as the secret agent who secretly pulls the strings and controls social life. Today, however, in its predominant cynical functioning it is ideology itself which claims that “you have to be stupid to see that”—what? The hope of radical change.

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