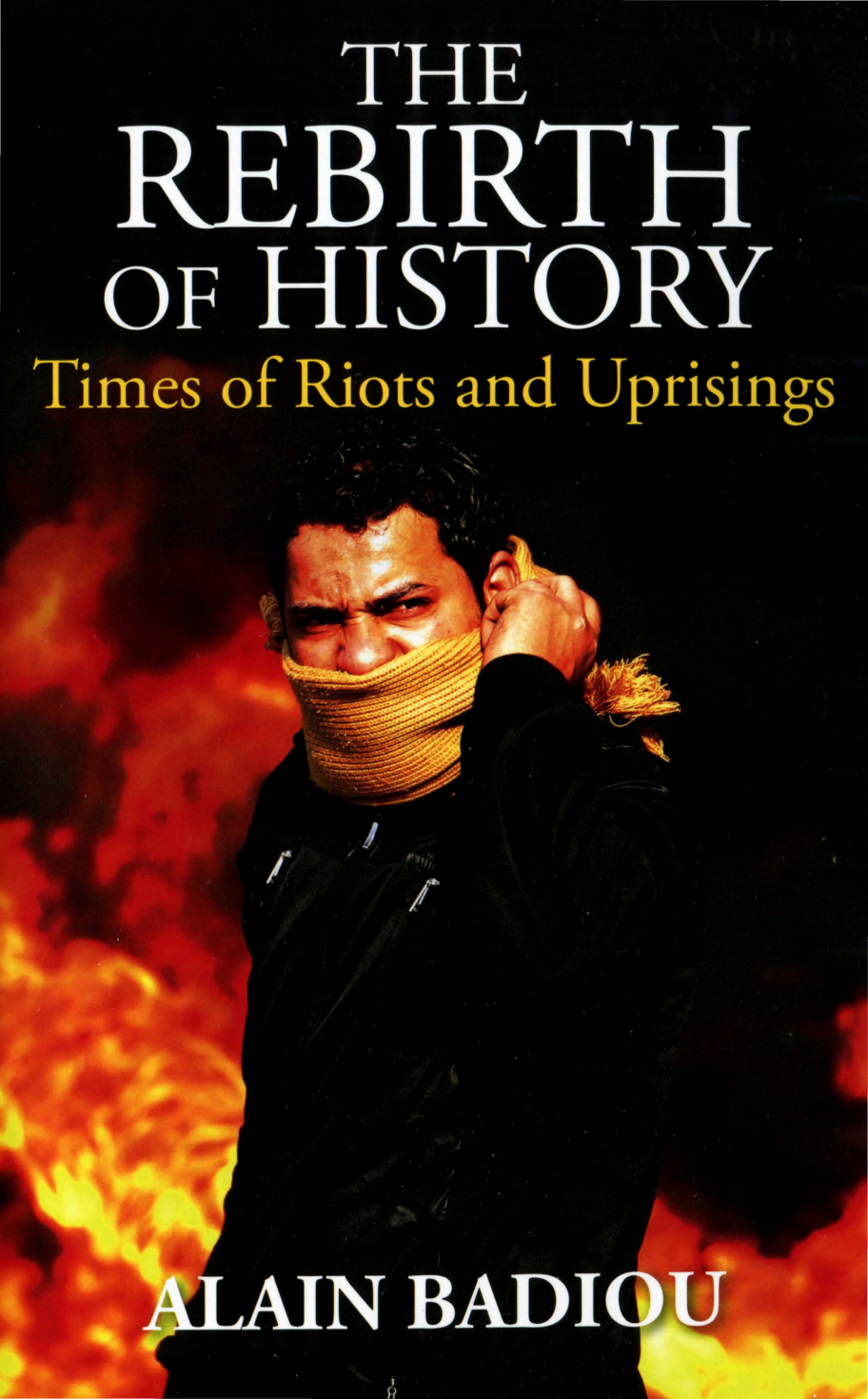
THE REBIRTH OF HISTORY

Times of Riots and Uprisings



ALAIN BADIOU

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Translated by Gregory Elliott



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Introduction

What is going on? Of what are we the half-fascinated, half-devastated witnesses? The continuation, at all costs, of a weary world? A salutary crisis of that world, racked by its victorious expansion? The end of that world? The advent of a different world? What is happening to us in the early years of the century – something that would appear not to have any clear name in any accepted language?

Let us consult our masters: discreet bankers; media stars; hesitant representatives of major commissions; spokesmen of the 'international community'; busy presidents; new philosophers; factory and estate owners; stock market men and boards of directors; chattering opposition politicos; urban and provincial notables; economists of growth; sociologists of citizenship; experts on all sorts of crises; prophets of the 'clash of civilizations'; heads of the police, justice and 'penitentiary' systems; profit assessors; productivity calculators; the prim editorialists of serious newspapers; human resources directors; people who in

their own view are of some account; people one would do well not to take for nobodies. What have they got to say about it, all these rulers, all these opinion-formers, all these leaders, all these thimble-rigging tyrants?

They all say that the world is changing at a dizzying pace and that, if we are not to risk ruin or death (for them it comes to the same thing), we must adapt to this change or, in the world as it is, be but a mere shadow of ourselves. That we should energetically engage in incessant 'modernization', accepting the inevitable costs without a murmur. Given the harsh competitive world that daily confronts us with challenges, we must climb the steep slopes of productivity, budget reduction, technological innovation, the good health of our banks, and job flexibility. All competition is sportive in its essence. In short, we must form part of the final breakaway alongside the champions of the moment (a German ace, a Thai outsider, a British veteran, a Chinese newcomer, not to mention the ever vigorous Yankee, and so on), and never crawl at the back of the pack. To that end everyone must pedal: modernize, reform, change! What politician on the campaign trail can dispense with proposing reform, change, novelty? The argument between government and opposition always takes the following form: What the others are saying isn't real change. It's a thinly resprayed conservatism. I represent real change! You've only to look at me to know it. I reform and modernize; new laws rain down every week – bravo! Let's break with routine! Out with the old!

So let us change.

But change what, in fact? If change is to be permanent, its direction, so it would seem, must be constant. All the measures dictated to us by the economic situation are to be implemented as a matter of urgency. This is so that the rich can continue to get rich while paying fewer taxes; so that the workforce of firms can be reduced with numerous redundancies and extensive restructuring; so that everything which is public can be privatized, and thereby ultimately contribute not to the public good (a particularly 'anti-economic' category), but to the wealth of the rich and the maintenance (costly, alas) of the middle classes, who form the reserve army of the rich; so that schools, hospitals, housing, transport and communications – those five pillars of a satisfactory life for all – can initially be regionalized (that is a step forward), then exposed to competition (that is crucial), and finally handed over to the market (that is decisive), in order that the places and resources where and with which the rich and semi-rich are educated, treated, housed and transported cannot be confused with those where the poor and their like struggle to get by; so that workers of foreign origin, who have often lived and worked here for decades, can have their rights reduced to nothing, their children targeted, their statutory papers rescinded, and have to endure the furious campaigns of 'civilization' and 'our values' against them; so that, in particular, young girls can only go out on the streets with their heads uncovered, and the rest too, mindful as they must be of

affirming their 'secularity'; so that the mentally ill can be imprisoned for life; so that the countless social 'privileges' on which the lower classes are getting fat can be hunted down; so that bloody military expeditions can be mounted the world over, especially in Africa, to enforce respect for 'human rights' – i.e. the rights of the powerful to carve up states, to put in power (through a combination of violent occupation and phantom 'elections') corrupt valets, who will hand over the totality of the country's resources to the aforesaid powerful for nothing. Those who, for whatever reason, and even if they were serviceable for 'modernization' in the past, even if they were obliging valets, are suddenly opposed to the carve-up of their country, to its pillaging by the powerful and the 'human rights' that go with it, will be brought before the tribunals of modernization, and hanged if possible.

Such is the invariant truth of 'change', the actuality of 'reform', the concrete dimension of 'modernization'. Such, for our masters, is the law of the world.

This short book aims to oppose to this view of things a rather different one, which can be summarized here in three points.

1. Under the interchangeable rubrics of 'modernization', 'reform', 'democracy', 'the West', 'the international community', 'human rights', 'secularism', 'globalization' and various others, we find nothing but an historical attempt at an unprecedented regression, intent upon creating a

situation in which the development of globalized capitalism, and the action of its political servants, conforms to the norms of their birth: a dyed-in-the-wool liberalism of mid-nineteenth-century vintage, the unlimited power of a financial and imperial oligarchy, and a window-dressing of parliamentary government composed (as Marx put it) of 'Capital's executives'. To that end, everything which the existence of the organized forms of the workers' movement, communism and genuine socialism had invented between 1860 and 1980, and imposed on a world scale, thereby putting liberal capitalism on the defensive, must be ruthlessly destroyed, and the value system of imperialism – the celebrated 'values' – recreated. Such is the sole content of the 'modernization' underway.

2. The present moment is in fact that of the first stirrings of a global popular uprising against this regression. As yet blind, naive, scattered and lacking a powerful concept or durable organization, it naturally resembles the first working-class insurrections of the nineteenth century. I therefore propose to say that we find ourselves in a *time of riots* wherein a rebirth of History, as opposed to the pure and simple repetition of the worst, is signalled and takes shape. Our masters know this better than us: they are secretly trembling and building up their weaponry, in the form both of their judicial arsenal and the armed taskforces

charged with planetary order. There is an urgent need to reconstruct or create our own.

3. Lest this moment flounder in glorious but defeated mass mobilizations, or in the interminable opportunism of 'representative' organizations, whether corrupt trade unions or parliamentary parties, the rebirth of History must also be a rebirth of the Idea. The sole Idea capable of challenging the corrupt, lifeless version of 'democracy', which has become the banner of the legionaries of Capital, as well as the racial and national prophecies of a petty fascism given its opportunity locally by the crisis, is the idea of Communism, revisited and nourished by what the spirited diversity of these riots, however fragile, teaches us.

1

Capitalism Today

I am often criticized, including in the 'camp' of potential political friends, for not taking account of the characteristics of contemporary capitalism, for not offering a 'Marxist analysis' of it. Consequently, for me communism is an ethereal idea; at the end of the day, I am allegedly an idealist without any anchorage in reality. Moreover, I am inattentive to the astonishing mutations of capitalism, mutations that authorize us to speak (with an eager expression) of a 'postmodern capitalism'.

For example, during an international conference on the idea of communism, Antonio Negri – I was (and remain) very pleased he participated – publicly took me as an example of those who claim to be communists without even being Marxists. In short, I replied that that was better than claiming to be Marxist without even being communist. Since it is commonly held that Marxism consists in assigning a determinant role to the economy and the social contradictions which

derive from it, who isn't 'Marxist' today? The foremost 'Marxists' are our masters, who tremble and gather by night as soon as the stock market wobbles or the growth rate dips. Put the word 'communism' in front of them, on the other hand, and they will jump up and take you for a criminal.

Here, without concerning myself with opponents and rivals, I would like to say that I too am a Marxist – naively, completely and so naturally that there is no need to reiterate it. Does a contemporary mathematician worry about demonstrating fidelity to Euclid or Euler? Genuine Marxism, which is identified with rational political struggle for an egalitarian organization of society, doubtless began around 1848 with Marx and Engels. But it made progress thereafter, with Lenin, Mao and a few others. I was brought up on these historical and theoretical teachings. I believe I am well aware of the problems that have been resolved, and which it is pointless to start reinvestigating; and of the problems that remain outstanding, and which require of us radical rectification and strenuous invention. Any living knowledge is made up of problems, which have been or must be constructed or reconstructed, not of repetitive descriptions. Marxism is no exception to this. It is neither a branch of economics (theory of the relations of production), nor a branch of sociology (objective description of 'social reality'), nor a philosophy (a dialectical conceptualization of contradictions). It is, let us reiterate, the organized knowledge of the political means required to undo existing society and

finally realize an egalitarian, rational figure of collective organization for which the name is 'communism'.

However, I would like to add that when it comes to the 'objective' data about contemporary capitalism I do not think I am badly informed. Globalization? The relocation of numerous sites of industrial production to countries with low labour costs and an authoritarian political regime? The transition during the 1980s in our old developed countries from an auto-centred economy, with a continual increase in workers' wages and social redistribution organized by the state and trade unions, to a liberal economy integrated into global trade and therefore export-orientated, specializing, privatizing profits, socializing risks and assuming a planetary increase in inequalities? A very rapid concentration of capital under the leadership of finance capital? The utilization of novel means whereby the velocity of circulation of capital initially, and of commodities subsequently, has significantly accelerated (generalization of air transport, universal telephony, financial machinery, the Internet, programmes geared to ensuring the success of instantaneous decisions, and so on)? The sophistication of speculation thanks to new derivative products and a subtle mathematics of risk combination? A spectacular decline of the peasantry, and the whole rural organization of society, in our countries? The absolute imperative, as a result, of constructing the urban petty bourgeoisie as a pillar of the existing social and political regime? The widespread resurrection, in the first instance among extremely rich

grands bourgeois, of the conviction as old as Aristotle that the middle classes are the alpha and omega of 'democratic' life? A planetary struggle, sometimes muffled and sometimes of an extreme violence, to secure cheap access to raw materials and energy sources, particularly in Africa – continent of every variety of 'Western' despoliation and, consequently, atrocity? I know all this reasonably well, as in truth does everyone.

The issue is whether this anecdotal compendium amounts to a 'postmodern' capitalism, a new capitalism, a capitalism worthy of Deleuze and Guattari's desiring machines, a capitalism that by itself generates a collective understanding of a new kind, which provokes the rising up of a hitherto subjugated constituent power, a capitalism that bypasses the old power of states, a capitalism that proletarianizes the multitude and makes workers of the immaterial intellect out of petit-bourgeois – in short, a capitalism of which communism is the immediate flip-side, a capitalism whose Subject is in a way the same as that of the latent communism which supports its paradoxical existence. A capitalism on the eve of its metamorphosis into communism. Such, roughly but accurately, is Negri's position. But such, more generally, is the position of all those who are fascinated by the technological changes and continuous expansion of capitalism over the last thirty years and who, dupes of the dominant ideology ('everything is changing all the time and we are chasing after this memorable change'), imagine they are witnessing a prodigious sequence of History

– whatever their ultimate judgement on the quality of this sequence.

My position is the exact opposite: contemporary capitalism possesses all the features of classical capitalism. It is strictly in keeping with what is to be expected of it when its logic is not counteracted by resolute, locally victorious class action. As regards the development of Capital, let us take Marx's predictive categories and we shall see that it is only now that their self-evidence is being fully attested. Did not Marx refer to the 'world market'? But what was the world market in 1860 compared with what it is today, which people have in vain seen fit to rename 'globalization'? Did not Marx conceive the ineluctable character of capital concentration? What did this concentration amount to? What was the size of firms and financial institutions when he predicted it, compared with the monsters thrown up every day by new mergers? It has long been objected to Marx that agriculture remained characterized by a system of family farms, whereas he announced that concentration would definitely affect landed property. But today we know that in fact the proportion of the population living off agriculture in the so-called developed countries (those where imperial capitalism is established unchecked) is, so to speak, insignificant. And what is the average size of landed property today, compared with what it was when the peasantry represented 40 per cent of the total population of France? Marx rigorously analyzed the inevitable character of cyclical crises, which testify, *inter alia*, to the absolute irrationality of

capitalism, and the compulsory character of imperial activities and wars alike. In his lifetime several very grave crises confirmed these analyses; and colonial and inter-imperialist wars rounded off the proof. But when it comes to the quantity of value that went up in smoke, all of this was as nothing compared with the crisis of the 1930s or the current crisis, or compared with the two world wars of the twentieth century, various ferocious colonial wars, and the Western 'interventions' of today and tomorrow. If we consider the situation in the world as a whole, and not just in our backyard, even the pauperization of enormous masses of the population is increasingly self-evident.

Basically, today's world is exactly the one which, in a brilliant anticipation, a kind of true science fiction, Marx heralded as the full unfolding of the irrational and, in truth, monstrous potentialities of capitalism.

Capitalism entrusts the fate of peoples to the financial appetites of a tiny oligarchy. In a sense, it is a regime of gangsters. How can we accept the law of the world being laid down by the ruthless interests of a camarilla of inheritors and parvenus? Cannot those whose only norm is profit reasonably be called 'gangsters'? Individuals who are ready, in the service of this norm, to trample over millions of people if necessary? That the fate of millions of people actually depends on the calculations of such gangsters is now so patent, so conspicuous, that acceptance of this 'reality', as the gangsters' scribblers call it, is ever more surprising. The spectacle of states pathetically frustrated because a

small, anonymous troop of self-proclaimed evaluators has given them a bad mark, as would an economics prof to dunces, is at once farcical and highly disturbing. So, dear voters, you have put in power people who tremble at night like schoolchildren when they learn in the early hours that representatives of the 'market' – i.e. the speculators and parasites of the world of property and capital – have rated them AAB rather than AAA? Is it not barbarous, this consensual hold over our official masters by unofficial masters, whose sole concern is their current and future profits in the lottery in which they stake their millions? Not to mention that their anguished bawling – 'a! a! b!' – will have to be paid for by compliance with the mafia's commands, which are invariably of the following kind: 'Privatize everything. Abolish help for the weak, the solitary, the sick and the unemployed. Abolish all aid for everyone except the banks. Don't look after the poor; let the elderly die. Reduce the wages of the poor, but reduce the taxes of the rich. Make everyone work until they are ninety. Only teach mathematics to traders, reading to big property-owners and history to on-duty ideologues.' And the execution of these commands will in fact ruin the life of millions of people.

But here too Marx's forecast has been confirmed, even surpassed, by our reality. He characterized the governments of the 1840s and '50s as 'Capital's executives'. This supplies the key to the mystery: at the end of the day, the rulers and the gangsters of finance come from the same world. The formula 'Capital's executives' is

perfectly correct only today, and all the more so in that no difference exists here between right-wing governments (Sarkozy, Merkel) and 'left-wing' ones (Obama, Zapatero, Papandreou).

So we are indeed the witnesses of a retrograde consummation of the essence of capitalism, of a return to the spirit of the 1850s, coming after the restoration of reactionary ideas that followed the 'red years' (1960–80), just as the 1850s were made possible by the counterrevolutionary Restoration of 1815–40 after the Great Revolution of 1792–94.

Admittedly, Marx thought that proletarian revolution, under the banner of communism, would cut short, and spare us, this full unfolding of capitalism, whose horror he clearly perceived. In his view it was indeed a case of communism or barbarism. The tremendous efforts to vindicate him on this score during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century did in fact significantly check and deflect the logic of capitalism, especially after the Second World War. For around thirty years, following the collapse of the socialist states as viable alternative forms (the case of the USSR), or their subversion by a virulent state capitalism following the failure of an explicitly communist mass movement (the case of China in the years 1965–68), we have had the dubious privilege of finally witnessing the confirmation of all Marx's predictions about the real essence of capitalism and the societies it rules. As to barbarism, we are already there, and are rapidly going to sink further into it. But it conforms, even in detail, to what

Marx hoped the power of the organized proletariat would forestall.

Contemporary capitalism is therefore not in any sense creative and postmodern. Reckoning itself shot of its communist enemies, it is merrily proceeding along the lines whose overall direction was perceived by Marx, following the classical economists and continuing their work from a critical perspective. It is certainly not capitalism and its political servants that are bringing about the rebirth of History, if by 'rebirth' is understood the emergence of a capacity, at once destructive and creative, whose aim is to make a genuine exit from the established order. In this sense, Fukuyama was not wrong: the modern world, having arrived at its complete development and conscious that it is bound to die – if only (which is plausible, alas) in suicidal violence – no longer has anything to think about but 'the end of History', just as Wotan, in Act II of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, explains to his daughter Brünnhilde that his only thought is 'the end! The end!'.

If there is to be a rebirth of History, it will not come from the barbaric conservatism of capitalism and the determination of all state apparatuses to maintain its demented pattern. The only possible reawakening is the popular initiative in which the power of an Idea will take root.

2

Immediate Riot

As I write these lines, we are being treated to speeches by Cameron, the British prime minister who is already implicated in several murky affairs, about the riots in impoverished parts of London. Here too the reversion to the anti-popular idiom of the nineteenth century is striking. Those involved are nothing but gangs, hooligans, thieves, brigands – in short, 'dangerous classes' contrasted, as in the days of Queen Victoria, with a morbid cult of property, defence of material possessions and good citizens (the ones who never rebel against anything). All this is coupled with the announcement of a ruthless, sustained repression, which is blind on principle. On this point we can trust Cameron. Catching up with the quasi–concentration camp use of prison in the United States, and having perfected a ferocious set of laws under the 'socialist' Blair, the United Kingdom has many more prisoners as a percentage of its population than France, which does not pull any punches when it comes to locking up youth.

To sow terror, TV obligingly runs footage of police squads, hulking brutes kitted out and armed to the teeth, who delightedly smash in doors with battering rams (when it comes to the property of the poor, they don't give a damn), and rush into the flats to remove with spectacular brutality a young man who has doubtless been denounced anonymously, or caught on one of the countless cameras with which Her Majesty's Government has filled the public space, transforming it into a gigantic stage of which the police are the constant voyeurs. At the same time, the courts are handing down staggering sentences pell-mell on bottle-throwers; petty thieves of tins of shoe polish; people who have abused the forces of law and order; burners of dustbins; loudmouths; those with a penknife on them; those who insulted the government; people who were running; those who, emulating their neighbours, smashed windows; those who uttered obscenities; people who hung around with their hands in their pockets; those who were doing nothing – highly suspicious; and even people who were not there, and whom justice must ask where they were. As Cameron nobly put it, going one step further than his police, 'It is criminality pure and simple and it has to be confronted and defeated.' For Cameron, who envisages 3,000 people being brought before the courts, and for his police, who have stated that they are hunting 30,000 suspects, tens of thousands of criminals have, bizarrely, suddenly been seen to erupt onto the streets ...

As ever, as in France, what gets forgotten in all this is

the real crime, as well as the actual victim: the person (often persons) killed by the police. With utter uniformity, riots by the popular youth in the 'suburbs' (the *banlieues* – a word which, like *faubourgs* in the past, refers to the huge working-class and poor areas of our spruce towns and cities, the dark continent of our megalopolises) are provoked by the actions of the police. The spark that 'lights a prairie fire' is always a state murder. Just as uniformly, the government and its police not only categorically refuse to accept the slightest responsibility for the whole affair, but use the riot as a pretext for reinforcing the arsenal of the police and criminal justice system. As a result of this view of things, the *banlieues* are spaces where one finds juxtaposed a contemptuous lack of interest in such hopeless zones on the part of the public authorities and heavy, violent, repressive incursions. All this on the model of 'native quarters' in colonial cities, black ghettos in the American *belle époque*, or Palestinian reservations on the West Bank. Servile intellectuals rush to the aid of the repression, regarding the more or less swarthy youth as an 'Islamist' rabble hostile to 'our values'. What are these celebrated values? We all know. They are called Property, Occident, Laicism. This is the dreadful POL, the dominant ideology in all countries that make themselves out to be civilized.

In the name of POL, 'public opinion' will demand 'zero tolerance' of our fellow citizens in the so-called *banlieues*. Note, by the way, that while there is 'zero tolerance' for the young black who steals a screwdriver,

there is infinite tolerance for the crimes of bankers and government embezzlers which affect the lives of millions. Sophisticated intellectuals, who shed tears at the sight of the millionaire director of the IMF in handcuffs, consider the government 'lax' in the inner cities and think one cannot see enough Arabs and blacks in chains.

In the name of this same POL, when dealing with those weak countries in Africa where we 'have interests', the same public opinion will demand that we exercise our 'right to intervene'. Courageous champions of the values that really count, our governments will flatten under bombs a petty tyrant they once adored, but who has become recalcitrant or superfluous. Obviously, there will be no question of touching those, more powerful and better advised, who possess key resources, are armed to the teeth and, sensing the wind change, have introduced opportune, appropriate 'reforms'. This means: have waved some declarations in favour of POL in the face of sainted Western opinion.

For our values, for POL, always read POLice.

In these processes, where the state puts on its most hideous expression, a no less detestable consensus is forged over a particularly reactive conception that can be summarized thus: the destruction or theft of a few goods in the frenzy of a riot is infinitely more culpable than the police assassination of a young man – the assassination that caused the riot. The government and press hastily assess the damage. And here is the vicious idea spread by all this: the death of the young man – a 'black

hooligan', no doubt, or an Arab 'known to the police' – is nothing compared with all these additional costs. Let us grieve not for the death, but for the insurance companies. Against the gangs and thieves, let us stand guard, shoulder to shoulder with the police, in front of our property, which is coveted by a rabble foreign to our values, hostile to POL, because it is impoverished (no Property), derived from Africa (not the Occident), and Islamist (anti-Laicist).

Here, by contrast, it will be asserted that the life of a young man is priceless – all the more so in that he is one of the countless people abandoned by our society. To believe that the intolerable crime is to burn a few cars and rob some shops, whereas to kill a young man is trivial, is typically in keeping with what Marx regarded as the principal alienation of capitalism: the primacy of things over existence,[1] of commodities over life and machines over workers, which he encapsulated in the formula: 'Le mort saisit le vif'. Of this lethal dimension of capitalism the Camerons and Sarkozys are the zealous cops.

I know full well that the kind of riot triggered by state murders – for example, in 2005 in Paris or 2011

1 For a modern, rigorous literary version of the Marxist theme of alienation – especially the prevalence of things over existence – and therefore of the subjective consequences of the fact that *le mort saisit le vif*, one might read or re-read Georges Perec's book *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (1965). Let us recall that, in the idiom of the period, capitalism's social potency was called the 'consumer society' or (in the Situationist version) the 'society of the spectacle'. But forty years later we were to discover that, under the sway of Capital, we can have the most ferocious subjective disintegration without consumption (other than of rotten products) or spectacle (other than fire-fighting).

in London – is violent, anarchic and ultimately without enduring truth. I know full well that it destroys and plunders without a concept, just as the Beautiful, according to Kant, 'pleases without a concept'. I shall come back to this point with all the more insistence in that it is precisely my problem: if riots are to signal a reawakening of History, they must indeed accord with an Idea.

For now, however, a philosopher will be permitted to lend an ear to the signal rather than rushing to judgement.

Today, there are riots throughout the world, from workers' and peasants' riots in China to youth riots in England, from the astonishing tenacity of crowds under gunfire in Syria to the massive protests in Iran, from Palestinians demanding the unity of Fatah and Hamas to Chicano *sans-papiers* in the United States. There are all sorts of riots, often very violent, but sometimes barely hinted at, mobilizing either specific social groups or whole populations. They are prompted by governments' and/or employers' decisions, electoral controversies, the activities of the police or an occupying army, even by simple episodes in people's existence. They immediately take a militant turn or develop in the shadow of a more official protest. They are blindly progressive or blindly reactionary (not every riot is up for grabs ...). What they all have in common is that they stir up masses of people on the theme that things as they are must be regarded as unacceptable.

We can distinguish between three types of riot,

which I shall respectively call immediate riot, latent riot and historical riot. In this chapter I shall deal with the first type. The others will be the subject of the next two chapters.

An immediate riot is unrest among a section of the population, nearly always in the wake of a violent episode of state coercion. Even the famous Tunisian riot, which triggered the series of 'Arab revolutions' in early 2011, was initially an immediate riot (in response to the suicide of a street vendor prevented from selling and struck by a policewoman).

Some of the defining characteristics of such a riot possess a general significance, and consequently an immediate riot is often the initial form of an historical riot.

First of all, the spearhead of an immediate riot, particularly the inevitable clashes with the forces of law and order, is youth. Some commentators have regarded the role of 'youth' in the riots in the Arab world as a sociological novelty, and have linked it to the use of Facebook or other vacuities of alleged technical innovation in the postmodern age. But who has ever seen a riot whose front ranks were made up of the elderly? As was evident in China in 1966–67 and France in 1968, but also in 1848 and at the time of the Fronde, during the Taiping Rebellion – and, ultimately, always and everywhere – popular and student youth form the hard core of riots. Their capacity for assembly, mobility and linguistic and tactical invention, like their inadequacies in discipline, strategic

tenacity and moderation when required, are constants of mass action. Moreover, drums, fires, inflammatory leaflets, running through the back streets, circulating words, ringing bells – for centuries these have served their purpose in people suddenly assembling somewhere, just as sheep-like electronics does today. In the first instance, a riot is a tumultuous assembly of the young, virtually always in response to a misdemeanour, actual or alleged, by a despotic state. (But riots show us that in a sense the state is always despotic; that is why communism organizes its withering away.)

Next, an immediate riot is located in the territory of those who take part in it. The issue of the localization of riots is, as we shall see, quite fundamental. When a riot is restricted to the site where its participants live (most often the crumbling districts of cities), it stops there, in its immediate form. It is only when it constructs – most often in the city centre – a new site, where it endures and is extended, that it changes into an historical riot. An immediate riot, stagnating in its own social space, is not a powerful subjective trajectory. It rages on itself; it destroys what it is used to. It lets fly at the meagre symbols of the 'wealthy' existence it is in contact with every day – particularly cars, shops and banks. If it can, it destroys the sparse symbols of the state, thus demolishing its very weak presence: virtually abandoned police stations, unglamorous schools, community centres experienced as paternalistic plasters on the running sores of neglect. All this fuels the hostility of POL-style public opinion

towards the rioters: 'Look! They're destroying the few things they've got!' Such opinion does not want to know that, when something is one of the few 'benefits' granted you, it becomes the symbol not of its particular function, but of the general scarcity, and that the riot detests it for that reason. Hence the blind destruction and pillaging of the very place the rioters live in, which is a universal characteristic of immediate riots. For our part, we shall say that all this achieves a *weak localization*, an inability of the riot to *displace itself*.

That is not to say that an immediate riot stops at one particular site. On the contrary, we observe a phenomenon dubbed contagion: *an immediate riot spreads not by displacement, but by imitation*. And this imitation occurs in sites that are similar, even largely identical, to the initial focal point. Youth on a housing estate in Saint-Ouen are going to do the same thing as those on an estate in Aulnay-sous-Bois. The popular districts of London are all going to be affected by the collective fever. Everyone remains *in situ*, but there they do what they have heard it said that others are doing. This process is indeed an extension of the riot, but once again we shall say that it is a *limited extension*, characteristic of an immediate riot or the immediate stage of a riot. It is only in discovering the means for an extension which cannot be reduced to an imitation that a riot assumes an historical dimension. Basically, it is when an immediate riot extends to sectors of the population which, by virtue of their status, social composition, sex or age, are remote from its constitutive core that a genuine

historical dimension is on the agenda. The entry onto the stage of ordinary women is invariably the first sign of such a generalized extension. An immediate riot, if one stops at its initial dynamic, can only combine weak localizations (at the site of the rioters) with limited extensions (through imitation).

Finally, an immediate riot is always indistinct when it comes to the subjective type it summons and creates. Because this subjectivity is composed solely of rebellion, and dominated by negation and destruction, it does not make it possible clearly to distinguish between what pertains to a partially universalizable intention and what remains confined to a rage with no purpose other than the satisfaction of being able to crystallize and find hateful objects to destroy or consume. As we know, obscurely mixed up with a mass of young people outraged by the death of their 'brother' are countless degrees of collusion with organized crime, which exists wherever poverty, social rejection, the absence of any public concern, and above all the lack of a rooted political organization that is the vector of powerful slogans induce a dislocation of popular unity and a temptation to engage in dubious expedients to circulate money where there is none. Organized crime, big-time or small-time, is a significant form of corruption of popular subjectivity by the dominant ideology of profit. The presence of organized crime in an immediate riot, to a greater or lesser degree depending on the circumstances, is inevitable. It should certainly be recognized by the rioters as a form of complicity

with the dominant order: after all, capitalism is merely the social power of an 'honourable' organized crime. But in as much as it is immediate, a riot cannot really purify itself. Hence, in among the destruction of hated symbols, the profitable pillaging, the sheer pleasure in smashing what exists, the joyous whiff of gunpowder and guerrilla warfare against the cops, one cannot really see clearly. The subject of immediate riots is always impure. That is why they are neither political nor even pre-political. In the best of cases – and this is already a good deal – they make do with paving the way for an historical riot; in the worst, they merely indicate that the existing society, which is always a state organization of Capital, does not possess the means altogether to prevent the advent of an historical sign of rebellion in the desolate spaces for which it is responsible.

3

Latent Riot

The *historical* riots of recent times – those that indicate the possibility of a new situation in the history of politics, without for now being in a position to realize that possibility – are obviously the multifaceted uprisings in a number of Arab countries. I shall base myself on these uprisings in the next chapter to define precisely what an historical riot is: a riot which is neither (below it) an immediate riot, nor (beyond it) the large-scale advent of a new politics.

What is to be said about our 'Western' countries?

We shall call 'Western' the countries which proudly call themselves by that name: countries historically situated at the leading edge of capitalist development, with a vigorous imperial and bellicose tradition behind them, still equipped with an economic and financial strike force that allows them to purchase corrupt governments the world over, and with a military strike force which enables them to intimidate all potential enemies of their domination. Let us add that

these countries are extremely satisfied with their state system, which they call 'democracy' – a system that is in fact particularly attuned to the peaceful coexistence of the various fractions of the governing oligarchy, which, in agreement on the basics (market economy, parliamentary regime, vigilant hostility towards anything dissimilar from them and whose generic name is 'communism'), are nevertheless separated by various nuances.

The Western countries have experienced immediate riots, and without a doubt will experience them on a much vaster scale than anything we have seen for ten years. They have not experienced an historical riot for around forty years. My view is that an era has opened, if not of their possibility, then at least of the possibility of their possibility. By this I mean an evental rupture creating the possibility of the unforeseen historical unfolding of some immediate riot.

What leads me to advance this (optimistic) hypothesis is what I call the existence in our countries, which are affluent albeit in crisis, and content although funerary, of a subjectivity of latent riot.

I shall start with an example.

Among the countless anti-popular crimes of the Sarkozy government, which in all likelihood is the most reactionary government France has had since Pétain, there is, as everyone knows, a pension reform clamorously demanded by 'the markets' of which Sarkozy is the compliant commensal. Basically, it involves working much longer for much less. The 'counter' to

this measure, taken in hand by the trade unions, was at once massive and very weak. People marched in their millions, but the union leaderships visibly started out defeated. Their real objective was limited to the need to control the masses and avoid 'things getting out of control', so as to patiently await better times with the election of a 'left' apparatchik as president.

However, it has been noted that inside this movement, as defeated from within by its leaders as the French army was in 1940 by its own generals, who far preferred Hitler to the Communists, several symptoms implicitly tended towards riot. First of all, the repeated chant of 'Sarkozy resign', which is typical of historical riots (we shall see why), frequently went up despite the 'apolitical' instructions of the ruling bureaucracies. Secondly, people registered the obvious dissent in the processions of several big union battalions, which were much more aggressive than their bosses, and which wanted more now. We should doubtless include in this the surprising decision of the petrol refinery workers' union, which for several days mounted a blockade of petrol deliveries – an action of a very real brutality with potentially large-scale consequences (the police soon intervened). Without a doubt these phenomena primed something that always occurs at a time of riot: a division in apparatuses, whatever they may be, under the subjective pressure of the slogans through which collective action tends to unify the people. Finally, and especially, the invention of new forms of action of a virtually riotous character, even though it was not

extended, prepared the future. In particular, we might cite the practice of 'proxy' strikes or 'free' strikes: a specific factory or establishment goes on strike even though its wage-earners declare themselves to be at work. This involves an external popular detachment, mainly composed of people not obliged to work (retired people, students, holidaymakers, unemployed people, and so on), occupying the site and blocking production, with the agreement of the relevant wage-earners obviously. Thus the strike situation is absolutely real even though the wage-earners are not legally on strike and can get paid. This procedure makes it possible to extend a strike with an occupation – an extension which especially today, when life is very difficult for the working poor and unions are much too weak to support strike funds, remains impossible beyond a few days in most instances.

This kind of action is quasi-riotous for several reasons. Firstly, it scorns the habitual reactionary opinion according to which the affairs of a site are those of its wage-earners and them alone. Secondly, it unwaveringly challenges the no less reactionary judgement that it is immoral to go on strike while declaring oneself not to be on strike. Thirdly, it absolutely links 'strike' and 'occupation', habitually separated by at least one rung in the ladder of the violence of action. It thereby creates a shared localization, and not merely a limited localization, as would be the case if only the wage-earners participated in the occupation. Fourthly, it has to be prepared for the inevitable arrival of the

police, which puts on the agenda the classic debate in riots between peaceful abandonment of the site or staying put and resisting. Finally, and above all, it effects in action a link between several social strata that are generally separated, thus creating on the spot a new subjective type beyond the fragmentation reproduced by both the state and its union appendages. The clearest evidence for this is that sizeable actions of this kind – for example, the occupation of certain airports or the stoppage of sewage plants – have been prepared and decided by committees with various names, but whose major feature is that they mix students, youth, wage-earners (whether unionized or not), retired people, intellectuals, and so on. Thus a significant dimension of the most significant riots was generated locally, and with a view to immediate actions: the creation of a new type of popular unity, heedless of state stratifications and resulting from seemingly disparate subjective trajectories.

In favour of the riotous latency of these actions, it can also be argued that the principal media, servants of 'democratic wisdom' – in other words, POL ideology – have studiously avoided regarding them as the sole real novelty in the situation, the sole future promise of a movement as loose as it is vast, and have referred to them as little as possible.

We can say that, over and above its penumbra of defeatism, the 'mobilization' (tiresome word) against the Sarkozy law on pensions contained a latent riotous subjectivity. A single spark, a spectacular incident, a

violent escalation, even an ill-understood trade union slogan, would have been enough for the so-called 'mobilization' to take a much more resolute turn, to escape locally and forcefully from the capitalo-parliamentarian consensus and construct, at least for a time, some impregnable popular sites.

Thus, even in our anxiety-ridden countries, tempted by the most extreme reaction, the latency of riot attests to the fact that circumstances can extract from our apathy an unforeseeable life beyond our lethal 'democracies'.

4

Historical Riot

Learning from the striking novelty of the riots in the Arab countries – especially their endurance, their determination, their unarmed tenacity, their unforeseen independence – we can, I believe, first of all propose a simple definition of an historical riot: it is the result of the transformation of an immediate riot, more nihilistic than political, into a pre-political riot. The case of the Arab countries then teaches us that for this the following are required.

1. A transition from limited localization (assemblies, attacks and destructive acts on the very site of the rebels) to the construction of an enduring central site, where the rioters install themselves in an essentially peaceful fashion, asserting that they will stay put until they receive satisfaction. Therewith we also pass from the limited and, in a sense, wasted time of the immediate riot, which is an amorphous, high-risk assault, to the extended

time of the historical riot, which instead resembles old sieges of a town, except that it involves laying siege to the state. In reality, everyone knows that destruction cannot last, except in 'major wars': an immediate riot can hold out for between one and five days at the most. In its monumental site, even when surrounded and harassed by the police, or on the main avenues it ritually occupies on a set day of the week, with the crowd constantly growing, an historical riot holds out for weeks or months.

2. For that to happen there must be a transition from extension by imitation to qualitative extension. This means that all the components of the people are progressively unified on the site thus constructed: popular and student youth, obviously, but also factory workers, intellectuals of all sorts, whole families, large numbers of women, employees, civil servants, even some police officers and soldiers, and so forth. People of different religious faiths mutually protect the others' prayer times; people of conflicting origin engage in peaceful discussion as if they had always known one another. And a multiplicity of voices, absent or virtually absent from the clamour of an immediate riot, asserts itself; placards describe and demand; banners incite the crowd. Even the reactionary world press will end up referring to the 'Egyptian people' in connection with those occupying Tahrir Square. At this point the threshold of historical riot is crossed: established localization, possible

longue durée, intensity of compact presence, multi-faceted crowd counting as the whole people. As Trotsky, who was conversant with the subject, might have said: 'The masses have mounted the stage of history.'

3. It was also necessary to make a transition from the nihilistic din of riotous attacks to the invention of a single slogan that envelops all the disparate voices: 'Mubarak, clear off!' Thus is created the possibility of a victory, since what is immediately at stake in the riot has been *decided*. At the antipodes of destructive desires for revenge, the movement can persist in anticipation of a specific material satisfaction: the departure of a man whose name – a short while before taboo, but now publicly condemned to ignominious erasure – is brandished.

From everything we have witnessed over the last few months let us remember the following: a riot becomes historical when its localization ceases to be limited, but grounds in the occupied space the promise of a new, long-term temporality; when its composition stops being uniform, but gradually outlines a unified representation in mosaic form of all the people; when, finally, the negative growling of pure rebellion is succeeded by the assertion of a shared demand, whose satisfaction confers an initial meaning on the word 'victory'.

In this very general framework we must stress from the outset what constitutes the specifically historical rarity of the Tunisian and Egyptian riots in early 2011:

in addition to the fact that they have taught or reminded us of the laws of the transition from immediate riot to historical riot, they were fairly rapidly *victorious*. There you had regimes which had long seemed securely in place, which had organized non-stop police surveillance and remorselessly employed torture, which were surrounded by the solicitude of all the imperial 'democratic' powers, large or small, which were constantly oiled by corrupting manna from these powers – and here they were overthrown, or at least those who were their emblem (Ben Ali and Mubarak) were overthrown, by completely unforeseen popular action directed by no established organization. This entails that the riotous dimension of these actions is not in doubt.

Such phenomena are sufficient in themselves for us to speak of a 'rebirth of History' in connection with the riots. How many years back do we have to go to find the overthrow of a centralized, well-armed power by huge crowds with their bare hands? Thirty-two years, when the Shah of Iran, who just like Ben Ali was regarded as a Westerner and modernizer, and just like him was adored, subsidized and armed by our rulers, was overthrown by gigantic street demonstrations against which armed force was unavailing. But then we were precisely at the end of a long historical sequence when riots, wars of national liberation, revolutionary initiatives, guerrillas and youth uprisings had conferred on the idea of History its full meaning, charged as it is with sustaining and validating radical political options. Between 1950 at the earliest and 1980 at the latest, the

ideas of revolution and communism were banally self-evident for masses of people throughout the world. However, a number of militants in our countries threw in the towel from the early 1970s onwards, starting down the distressing path of renegacy and rallying to the established order under the moth-eaten banner of 'anti-totalitarianism'. The Cultural Revolution in China, that Paris Commune of the epoch of socialist states,[2] foundered on its own anarchic violence – was it perhaps merely a collection of immediate riots? – in 1976, with Mao's death. On their own in the world, a few groups attempted to preserve the means for a new sequence. In this sense the Iranian Revolution was terminal, not inaugural. In its obscure paradoxicality (a revolution led by an ayatollah, a popular rising embedded in a theocratic context), it heralded the end of the clear days of revolutions. In this it coincided with the working-class movement Solidarnosc in Poland. This highly significant popular uprising against a corrupt, moribund socialist state reminded us that action by the popular masses is always possible, even in a situation blasted by foreign occupation and a political regime imposed from without. Solidarnosc also reminded us that such action derives particular strength from being centred on factories and their workers. But aside from its critical force, the Polish movement remained bereft

2 For a synthetic analysis of the Cultural Revolution, which is the historical point from which we must start out again if we wish to understand anything about the communist project, I refer to the pages I have devoted to it in *The Communist Hypothesis*, transl. David Macey and Steve Corcoran (London and New York: Verso, 2010).

of any new idea about the country's possible destiny, and was incongruously cheered on by a future pope and an utterly reactionary clergy. Moreover, the outcome of the Iranian Revolution – the oxymoron represented by the expression 'Islamic republic' – did not, as indicated by its name, possess any universal vocation. Nor did the sad fate of the Polish state 'liberated' from communism: fanatically capitalist, xenophobic and slavishly pro-American.

Obviously, we do not know what the historical riots in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and other Arab counties are going to lead to. We are in the initial post-riot period, and everything is uncertain. But it is clear that, unlike the Polish historical riot or the Iranian Revolution, which closed a sequence in a violent, paradoxical darkening of their ideological context, the revolts in the Arab countries are opening a sequence, by leaving their own context undecided. They are stirring up and altering historical possibilities, to the extent that the meaning which their initial victories will retrospectively assume will in large part determine the meaning of our future.

While preserving their purely evental dimension, which is thus subtracted from 'scientific' prediction, I believe that we can inscribe these riotous tendencies as characteristic actions of what I shall call *intervallic periods*.

What is an intervallic period? It is what comes *after* a period in which the revolutionary conception of political action has been sufficiently clarified that,

notwithstanding the ferocious internal struggles punctuating its development, it is explicitly presented as an alternative to the dominant world, and on this basis has secured massive, disciplined support. In an intervallic period, by contrast, the revolutionary idea of the preceding period, which naturally encountered formidable obstacles – relentless enemies without and a provisional inability to resolve important problems within – is dormant. It has not yet been taken up by a new sequence in its development. An open, shared and universally practicable figure of emancipation is wanting. The historical time is defined, at least for all those unamenable to selling out to domination, by a sort of uncertain interval of the Idea.

It is during such periods that the reactionaries can say, precisely because the revolutionary road is faint, even illegible, that things have resumed their *natural* course. Typically, this is what happened in 1815 with the restorationists of the Holy Alliance, for whom feudal social relations and their monarchical synthesis represented the sole order worthy of God, so that republican, plebeian revolution was nothing but a monstrosity encapsulated in the Terror and the diabolical figure of Robespierre. And this, typically, is what people have tried to make us believe for thirty years. We know from reliable sources (say the sanctimonious democrats and new Tartuffes) that the totalitarian aberration, lethal ideocracy, the socialist states, Marxism, Leninism, Maoism and the intellectual and practical movements that discovered the principle of their intense existence

in them, were nothing but inefficient, criminal impostures, encapsulated in the diabolical figure of Stalin. The peaceful course of things – the only valid thing on offer – is the natural harmony between unbridled capitalism and impotent democracy. Impotent because servile towards the site of real power – Capital – and firmly 'controlled' when it comes to working-class and popular aspirations.

For the intervallic period we are still in, running from 1980 to 2011 (and beyond?) – a period in which classical capitalism has been revived following the collapse of the state forms of the communist road issued from the Bolshevik revolution – 'liberal democracy' is what 'liberal monarchy' was for the intervallic period when modern capitalism took off, following the crushing of the final bursts of the republican revolution (1815–50).

During these intervallic periods, however, discontent, rebellion and the conviction that the world should not be as it is, that capitalo-parliamentarianism is in no wise 'natural', but utterly sinister – all this exists. At the same time, it cannot find its political form, in the first instance because it cannot *draw strength from the sharing of an Idea*. The force of rebellions, even when they assume an historical significance, remains essentially negative ('let them go', 'Ben Ali out', 'Mubarak clear off'). It does not deploy a slogan in the affirmative element of the Idea. That is why collective mass action can only take the form of a riot, at best directed towards its historical form, which is also called a 'mass movement'.

Let us recapitulate: *the riot is the guardian of the history of emancipation in intervallic periods*.

Let us return to the period 1815–50 in France and Europe, for our own interval bears an uncanny resemblance to that Restoration. It followed the Great Revolution and, like our own last thirty years, its vertebral column was a virulent reactionary restoration, which was politically constitutionalist and economically liberal. Yet from the start of the 1830s it was a major period of riots, which were often momentarily or seemingly victorious (the 'Trois Glorieuses' of 1830, workers' riots pretty much everywhere, the 1848 'revolution', and so on). These were precisely the riots, sometimes immediate, sometimes more historical, characteristic of an intervallic period: after 1850 the republican idea, now insufficient for demarcation from bourgeois reaction, would have to be succeeded by the communist Idea.

That the awakening of History, in the form of a riot and its possible immediate victory, is not generally contemporaneous with the revival of the Idea, which would give the riot a real political future, is a very old observation. This decoupling is fully evident in some of the riots of the sans-culottes, of the *bras nus*, during the French Revolution itself. These riots could not make do with revolutionary ideology in its strictly republican form. They presupposed an ideological hereafter, which had not taken shape. Consequently, in the absence of any real subjective sharing of an Idea, it was impossible for them to resolve the problem of the

transition from riot, albeit historical, to the consistency of an organized politics.

The inevitable lagging of riots, in as much as they are the mass sign of a reopening of History, behind the most contemporary questions of politics, themselves bequeathed by the pre-intervallic moment when there existed a broad vision of the politics of emancipation, is doubtless the most striking empirical proof of the fact that *History does not contain within itself a solution to the problems it places on the agenda*. However brilliant and memorable the historical riots in the Arab world, they finally come up against universal problems of politics that *remained unresolved in the previous period*. At the centre of these is to be found the problem of politics par excellence – namely, organization. Only, as Mao puts it, 'to have order in organization you must have it in ideology'. But ideology is only ever the set of abstract consequences of an Idea or (if you prefer) of one or several principles.

In short, guardians of the history of emancipation in an intervallic period, historical riots point to the urgency of a reformulated ideological proposal, a powerful Idea, a pivotal hypothesis, so that the energy they release and the individuals they engage can give rise, in and beyond the mass movement and the reawakening of History it signals, to a new figure of organization and hence of politics. So that the political day which follows the reawakening of History is likewise a new day. So that tomorrow is genuinely different from today. So that, in sum, the lesson contained in the last verse

of a famous poem by Brecht, 'In Praise of Dialectics', is wholly valid:

Today, injustice goes with a certain stride,
The oppressors move in for ten thousand years.
Force sounds certain; it will stay the way it is.
No voice resounds except the voice of the rulers
And on the markets, exploitation says it out loud:
I am only just beginning.
But of the oppressed, many now say:
What we want will never happen.
Whoever is still alive must never say 'never'!
Certainty is never certain.
It will not stay the way it is.
When the rulers have already spoken
Then the ruled will start to speak.
Who dares say 'never'?
Who's to blame if oppression remains? We are.
Who can break its thrall? We can.
Whoever has been beaten down must rise to his feet!
Whoever is lost must fight back!
Whoever has recognized his condition – how can anyone stop him?
Because the vanquished of today will be tomorrow's victors
And never will become: already today!

5

Riots and the West

Historical riots represent a challenge for the state because, in demanding the departure of those who rule it, they invariably expose it to a brutal, unprepared change, even to the possibility of its complete collapse (that is precisely what happened in Iran, thirty years ago, to the Shah's monarchical regime). At the same time, riots do not possess all the keys – far from it – to the nature and extent of the change to which they expose the state. What is going to happen in the state is in no wise prefigured by a riot.

Admittedly, in mass movements with a historical dimension there are always people who sincerely believe the opposite. They think that the popular democratic practices of the movement (of any historical riot, no matter when and where it occurs) form a kind of paradigm for the state to come. Egalitarian assemblies are held; everyone has the right to speak; social, religious, racial, national, sexual and intellectual differences are no longer of any significance. Decisions are

always collective. In appearance at least: seasoned militants know how to prepare for an assembly by a prior, closed meeting that will in fact remain secret. But no matter, it is indeed true that decisions will invariably be unanimous, because the strongest, most appropriate proposal emerges from the discussion. And it can then be said that 'legislative' power, which formulates the new directive, not only coincides with 'executive power', which organizes its practical consequences, but also with the whole active people symbolized by the assembly.

Why not extend these features of mass democracy, which are so powerful and inspiring, to the state in its entirety? Quite simply because between the democracy of the riot and the routine, repressive, blind system of state decisions – even, and especially, when they claim to be 'democratic' – there is such a wide gulf that Marx could only imagine overcoming it at the end of a process of the state's withering away. And, to be brought to a successful conclusion, that process required not mass democracy everywhere, but its dialectical opposite: a transitional dictatorship which was compacted and implacable.

Marx was unquestionably right, and I shall return to the rational paradox of an inevitable continuity between the egalitarian democracy established *within itself* by an historical riot and the popular dictatorship exercised *without*, in the direction of enemies and suspects, whereby an attempt is made to achieve *political* fidelity to the riot.

For now it suffices for us to note that a historical riot does not by itself offer any alternative to the power it intends to overthrow. There is a very important difference between 'historical riot' and 'revolution': the second, at least since Lenin, has been regarded as possessing within itself the resources required for an immediate seizure of power.

That is why rioters have always complained about the fact that the new regime, following the riotous overthrow of the previous one, is in the main identical to it. The prototype of such similarity is the construction of a regime dominated by political personnel from the putative 'opposition' to the Empire after the fall of Napoleon III, the lost war and the riots of 4 September 1870. To make it perfectly clear whose side it was on, this 'new' government was to display an especial anti-popular ferocity a few months later, by remorselessly massacring thousands of communard workers.[3]

The communist party, such as it was conceived by the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party and then the Bolsheviks, is a structure which, derived from a rigorous

3 It is essential to reconstruct the genesis of the (parliamentary) concept of 'the left' starting from its 'republican' origins – namely, the government composed of the left opposition to Napoleon, which took power in 1870. It was Thiers and the three Jules's, as Guillemin calls them (Jules Ferry, Jules Grévy and Jules Simon), who were the depressing heroes of this affair, welded together first by capitulation to the Prussians and then by the ferocious massacre of the Communards. Thereafter the French left (colonialism, *union sacrée* in 1914–18, broad rallying to Pétain, Algerian War, participation in de Gaulle's 1958 coup d'état, financial globalization under Mitterrand, repressive treatment of workers of African origin, and so on) has been loyal to its origins. On the knotting of the term 'left' to a counterrevolutionary invariance, I suggest some leads in the chapter on the Paris Commune in my *The Communist Hypothesis*, transl. David Macey and Steve Corcoran (London and New York: Verso 2010).

analysis of the Paris Commune by Lenin, declared itself capable of incorporating an alternative to the existing government and founding a new state after the complete destruction of the old Tsarist apparatus.

When the figure of riot becomes a political figure – in other words, when it possesses within itself the political personnel it requires and resort to the state's professional nags becomes unnecessary – we can say that what has arrived is *the end of the intervallic period, because a new politics has been able to seize on the rebirth of History symbolized by a historical riot*.

To return to the historical riots in the Arab world, especially Egypt and Tunisia, we already know that they are going to continue while becoming divided. Some of the rioters – the youngest, the most determined or the best organized – are going to declare that the transitional governments which have been established with difficulty, and which often conceal the persistence of the most important institutions of the old regime (for example, the army in Egypt), are so remote from the popular movement that they do not want them any more than they did Ben Ali or Mubarak. But for the moment these protests are not generating the idea on whose basis fidelity to the riot can be *organized*. Hence a vibrant indecision which, from a purely formal standpoint, closely equates the situation in the Arab world with situations already witnessed in the nineteenth century.[4]

4 One of the dialectical signs of the fact that contemporary capitalism is largely a return to the pure form of capitalism as it operated around the mid-nineteenth

Ultimately, we cannot avoid the question: what criteria make it possible to evaluate a riot, to assess the scope of the historical reawakening it incorporates?

From the outset, the Western powers, and the media dependent on them, have had a ready-made answer. According to them, the desire inspiring the riots in the Arab countries is 'freedom' in the sense given this term by Westerners – namely, 'freedom of opinion' in the fixed framework of unbridled capitalism ('free enterprise') and a state based on parliamentary representation ('free elections', which select between various practically indistinguishable managers of the established system).

Basically, our rulers and our dominant media have suggested a simple interpretation of the riots in the Arab world: what is expressed in them is what might be called a *desire for the West*. A desire to 'enjoy' everything that we, the drowsy, satiated inhabitants of the affluent countries, already 'enjoy'. A desire finally to be included in the 'civilized world' which Westerners, incorrigible descendants of racist colonists, are so

century is the fascinating similarity between the riots in the Arab world and the 1848 'revolution' in Europe. The same seemingly trivial origin; the same general rising up; the same extension across a whole historical space (Europe in 1848); the same differentiation from country to country; the same passionate, vague collective declarations; the same anti-despotic orientation; the same uncertainties; the same deaf tension between the petit-bourgeois and intellectual component and the working-class component; and so on. We know that none of these revolutions really resulted in a new situation in the state and society. But we also know that, starting from them, an entirely new historical sequence was begun, which only ended in the 1980s of the twentieth century. This is because the Idea was knotted with the event. Defeated barricade fighters in the German insurrections, Marx and Engels signed one of the most victorious texts in History: *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

certain of representing that they set up international 'courts' to judge anyone who asserts different values (which are indeed sometimes disreputable), or so much as affects to shake off the oppressive tutelage of the 'international community' (admittedly sometimes in purely self-interested fashion). In so doing, Westerners wrapped in the flag of Right forget that their alleged power to state the Good is nothing but the modernized name for imperial interventionism.

Any mass movement is obviously an urgent demand for *liberation*. With respect to regimes as despotic, corrupt and in thrall to imperial beck and call as those of Ben Ali and Mubarak, such a demand is wholly legitimate. That this desire as such is a desire for the West is infinitely more debatable.

It must be remembered that the West as a power has not hitherto shown any evidence that it was in the least concerned with organizing freedom in the places it intervenes in, often with arms. What counts for our 'civilized' men is: 'Are you with us or against us?' This gives the phrase 'with us' the meaning of a slavish inclusion in the planetary market economy, organized in the relevant countries by corrupt personnel, in close collaboration with a counterrevolutionary police force and army, trained, equipped and commanded by officers, secret agents and racketeers who are just like back home. 'Friendly countries' such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Mexico and many others are just as despotic and corrupt as Ben Ali's Tunisia or Mubarak's Egypt, if not much more so. But we scarcely hear those

who emerged on the occasion of the events in Tunisia or Egypt as ardent defenders of all riots in favour of freedom pronouncing on that subject. One senses that our states prefer the firm calm ensured by friendly despots to the uncertainty of riots. But once a riot is open to being interpreted as a desire for the West, and even better ends up being such, our politicians and media will accord it a warm reception.

However, such an outcome is not guaranteed. The very fact that, via the handy megaphone of Bernard-Henri Lévy, the French and British have ended up purely and simply inventing rag-tag and bob tail 'rebels' in Libya – of whom the only real effective ones have declared themselves to be ex–al-Qaeda (what a paradox!), but all of whom for the moment are under their heel (Libya is the only place in the world where people have the absurd idea of shouting 'Long live Sarkozy!') – arming them, leading them and guaranteeing them the supporting fire of their air forces, demonstrates the extent to which our governments ultimately fear the expression in genuine rebellions of anything other than an inordinate love of imperial civilizations. That people should be referring, after five months of action by French and British planes with American logistical support, their attack helicopters, and their officers and agents on the ground, to a moving 'rebel victory' is frankly ridiculous.

But this is the kind of victory (Alain Juppé stating, in a telling admission, 'We did the job') that Westerners adore. For when genuine popular rebellions are

involved, they cannot help thinking that perhaps, after all, they are dealing with people who do not wish to shout themselves hoarse in support of Cameron, Sarkozy or Obama. Maybe – as their anxiety mounts – all these episodes contain an Idea, as yet unformulated, which is highly displeasing to them. A conception of democracy completely opposed to their own, perhaps. In this state of uncertainty, they conclude, let us get our machine guns ready and confirm that they are in working order.

In these conditions we must attempt to define more precisely what a popular movement reducible to a 'desire for the West' is or might be; and what the current riots, should they rise above this lethal temptation, could be.

Let us try, then. A riot subject to a desire for the West takes the immediate form of an anti-despotic riot, whose negative, popular power is indeed that of the crowd, but whose affirmative power has no other norm than those vaunted by the West. A popular movement corresponding to this definition has every chance of ending in very modest constitutional reforms and elections firmly controlled by the 'international community'. From these, to the general surprise of supporters of the riot, there will emerge victorious either some well-known hired guns of Western interests, or a version of those 'moderate Islamists' from whom our rulers are gradually learning that there is nothing to fear. I propose to say that at the end of such a process we will have witnessed a phenomenon of *Western inclusion*.

Among us the dominant interpretation of what is happening is that this phenomenon is the natural, legitimate outcome of the riots in the Arab world under the rubric of 'victory of democracy'.

Moreover, this explains why, by contrast, riots are brutally repressed and execrated when they occur at home. If a 'good riot' demands inclusion in the West, why on earth rise up where this inclusion is well-established, in our robust civilized democracy? From time to time the flea-ridden, the Arabs, the blacks, the Orientals and other workers from hell may, without exaggeration, demand to be 'like us' – all the more so because it will not happen tomorrow, and in the meantime the good old colonial plunder that fuels our serenity will continue in various forms. At home, on the other hand, they only have the right to work and vote in silence. If not, look out! Cameron and his little London gulag for inner-city youth, Sarkozy and his anti-rabble Kärchers, are guarding the walls of civilization.

If it is true, as Marx foresaw, that the space of realization of emancipatory ideas is global (something, incidentally, that was not *really* true of twentieth-century revolutions), then a phenomenon of Western inclusion cannot be regarded as genuine change. What would be a genuine change would be an *exit from the West*, a 'de-Westernization', and it would take the form of an *exclusion*. A daydream, you will say. But it could be that it is right there, in front of our eyes. And in any event this is what we *must* dream, because this dream

makes it possible, without reneging on everything we have stood for or sinking into the 'no future' of nihilism, to go through the painful years of an intervallic period.

6

Riot, Event, Truth

Readers will appreciate that the value we have assigned to the current riotous reawakening of History stems from the possibility it secretes of opening out onto political loyalties not motivated by a desire for the West.

What guarantee can we have that the event, the historical riot, actually generates this possibility? Who will protect us from the all too real subjective power of the desire for the West? No formal response can be given here. Meticulous analysis of the long and tortuous process underway in the state will be of no real help. In the short term, it will issue in elections without truth. What we must carry out is a patient, meticulous inquiry with people in search of what, at the end of an inevitable process of division (for it is always the Two that is the bearer of truth, not the One), will be affirmed by the movement's irreducible fraction – namely, some *statements*. Statements that cannot be dissolved in Western inclusion. When they exist, these statements are easily recognizable. And these new statements are

a precondition for conceiving a process of *organization* of figures of collective action, which will signal their political becoming.

It is already quite something to note that in the Egyptian historical riot – the most important and consistent of all – nothing indicates a massive desire for the West. Those who day after day have read the banners of Tahrir Square in the Arab language have noted, often to their great surprise, that the word 'democracy' virtually never features. Apart from the unanimous 'Clear off!', the key elements are as follows: the country, Egypt; the restoration of the country to its uprisen people (hence the ubiquitous presence of the national flag), and thus precisely the end of its servility to the West and its Israeli component; an end to corruption and the monstrous inequality between a handful of corrupt elements and the mass of ordinary workers; the desire to build a welfare state that will put an end to the terrible poverty of millions of people. All this can much more readily be integrated into a major new political Idea, in accordance with what I have called 'movement communism', which is specific to all movements of this kind, than into electoral artifices – a trap set by the old historical oppressor.

I can summarize all this in a language at once more abstract and simpler. In a world structured by exploitation and oppression masses of people have, strictly speaking, no existence. They count for nothing. In today's world nearly all Africans, for example, count for nothing. And even in our affluent lands the majority

of people, the mass of ordinary workers, basically decide absolutely nothing, have only a fictional voice in the matter of the decisions that decide their fate. Only a simultaneously remote and ubiquitous oligarchy manages to link successive episodes in people's lives via a unified parameter – namely, profit, off which that oligarchy lives.

Let us call these people, who are present in the world but absent from its meaning and decisions about its future, the *inexistent* of the world. We shall then say that a *change of world* is real when an inexistent of the world starts to exist in this same world with maximum intensity. This is exactly what people in the popular rallies in Egypt were saying and are still saying: we used not to exist, but now we exist, and we can determine the history of the country. This subjective fact is endowed with an extraordinary power. *The inexistent has arisen.* That is why we refer to *uprising*: people were lying down, submissive; they are getting up, picking themselves up, rising up. This rising is the rising of existence itself: the poor have not become rich; people who were unarmed are not now armed, and so forth. Basically, nothing has changed. What has occurred is restitution of the existence of the inexistent, conditional upon what I call an *event*. In the knowledge that, unlike the restitution of the inexistent, the event itself is invariably elusive.

Definition of the event as *what makes possible the restitution of the inexistent* is an abstract but incontestable definition, quite simply because the restitution

is *proclaimed*: it is what people are saying in the here and now. What do we observe objectively? The determination of a site plays a decisive role: a square in Cairo acquires global fame in the space of a few days. It is imperative to note that, during a real change, we witness the production of a new site which is nevertheless internal to the general localization that is a world. Thus, in Egypt the people who had rallied in the square believed they were Egypt; Egypt was the people who were there to proclaim that if, under Mubarak, Egypt did not exist, now it existed, and them with it.

The power of this phenomenon is such that – a truly remarkable thing – the whole world concurs. Throughout the world it is accepted that the people who are there, in this site which they have constructed, are the Egyptian people in person. Even our governments, even our submissive media, who are trembling behind the scenes, who are asking how they are going to do without their servant-despots in strategic countries like Egypt, have on their lips nothing but the 'democratic uprising of the Egyptian people' and assure it, hats off, of their support (while preparing, still behind the scenes and at the hallowed end of an electoral masquerade, a 'change' to something identical).

So the rioters who have gathered in a Cairene square are the 'Egyptian people'? But then what becomes of the democratic dogma, sacrosanct universal suffrage? I know full well that, behind the façade of unfailing support for the rioters, lies hidden fear and, ultimately, strong pressure for a rapid return to a reliable

pro-Western state order. But even so! Isn't it dangerous? Isn't it – horror! – the advent of a new conception of politics when on all sides one salutes, as if it stood for the whole, the metonymy of Egypt constituted by people rallying in a square, with their mass democracy, their unity of action and their radical banners? For even if they are a million strong, that still does not represent many of the 80 million Egyptians. In terms of electoral numbers it is a guaranteed fiasco! But this million, present in this site, is enormous if we stop measuring political impact (as in voting) by inert, separated number.

We old timers knew this at the end of May 1968. There had been millions of demonstrators, occupied factories, sites where assemblies were in permanent session; and with that De Gaulle organized elections which resulted in a *chambre introuvable* of reactionaries. I remember the amazement of a number of my friends, who said: 'But we were all on the streets!' And I replied: 'No, certainly not, we weren't *all* on the streets!' For however big a demonstration is, it is always a tiny minority. Its power consists in an *intensification* of subjective energy (people know they are needed night and day; enthusiasm and passion are everywhere), and in the *localization* of its presence (people rally in sites that have become impregnable – squares, universities, boulevards, factories, and so on).

Once transported by intensity and compacted by localization, the movement, which is always utterly minoritarian, is so certain of representing the country's

people in their entirety that no one can publicly deny that it does in fact represent them. Not even its enemies, who are as secret as they are determined. This proves that such a scenario – historical riots which open up new possibilities – contains an element of *prescriptive universality*. The complex of localization, which constitutes a symbol for the whole world, and intensification, which creates new subjects, entails massive adherence, to which anyone who is an exception is immediately *suspect* – suspected of being hand-in-glove with the old despots.

It is then much more appropriate to speak of popular *dictatorship* than democracy. The word 'dictatorship' is widely execrated in our 'democratic' environment. All the more so in that the rebels legitimately brand the corrupt despots as 'dictators'. But just as movement democracy, which is egalitarian and direct, is absolutely opposed to the 'democracy' of the executives of Capital's power, which is inegalitarian and representative, so the dictatorship exercised by a popular movement is radically opposed to dictatorships *as forms of separated, oppressive state*. By 'popular dictatorship' we mean *an authority that is legitimate precisely because its truth derives from the fact that it legitimizes itself*. No one is the delegate of anybody else (as in a representative authority); for what they say to become what everyone says, nobody needs propaganda or police (as in a dictatorial state), for what they say is *what is true in the situation*; there are only the people who are there; and those who are there, and who are obviously a minority,

possess an accepted authority to proclaim that the historical destiny of the country (including the overwhelming majority comprising the people who are not there) is them. 'Mass democracy' imposes on everything outside it the dictatorship of its decisions *as if they were those of a general will*.

Rousseau's sole shortcoming in *The Social Contract* is the concession he makes to electoral procedures, whereas he demonstrates in the most rigorous fashion that the parliamentary system, representative democracy (this form of state was nascent in England in Rousseau's time), is nothing but an imposture. Why should the 'general will' emerge in the form of a numerical majority? Rousseau does not succeed in clarifying this issue, and for good reasons: it is only during historical riots, which are minoritarian but localized, unified and intense, that it makes any sense to refer to an expression of the general will.

I shall call what occurs in them, for which 'expression of the general will' is Rousseau's term, by a different philosophical name: it is the *emergence of a truth* – in this particular case, of a political truth. This truth concerns the very being of the people, what people are capable of as regards action and ideas. It emerges – this truth – on the edge of an historical riot, which extricates it from the laws of the world (in our case, from the pressure of the desire for the West) in the form of a new, previously unknown possibility. And the assertion (and then, as we shall see, the organization) of this new political possibility is presented in an explicitly authoritarian

form: the authority of truth, the authority of reason. Authoritarian in the strict sense, because, at the start at any rate, the fact that there is an absolute justice in the historical riot is what no one is entitled publicly to ignore. And it is precisely this dictatorial element that enthuses everyone, just like the finally discovered proof of a theorem, a dazzling work of art or a finally declared amorous passion – all of them things whose absolute law cannot be defeated by any opinion.

7

Event and Political Organization

This localized rallying in a square, on avenues or in factories, this quantitative contraction or compaction – all this acts as reality, because what informs it is a super-existence, intensive and subjectivized, of pre-political truth, or the violent restitution of an inexistent, correlated, in the form of an historical riot, with a 'disengagement' from symbols of the state. It emerges from nothing; it has the dictatorial power of a creation *ex nihilo*. When there are traces of the event prior to the event, pre-eventual indices that can be identified retrospectively, then they reproduce or pre-produce the articulation of a quantitative contraction and an intensive super-existence. In Egypt, as in France prior to May 1968, there were such traces: the factory strikes of 1967 and early 1968, which were peculiar because they were decided independently of the representative trade unions by groups of young workers (this is the aspect of representation of the totality by contraction – the 'activist minority', as our apprehensive democrats

put it); and they involved, before any reference could be made to strikes, factory occupations (this is the aspect of activist intensity bound up with occupation of the site).

As a reopening of history, the event is heralded by three signs, all of them immanent in massive popular demonstrations: intensification, contraction and localization. These are the pre-political elements, the awakening of History by riots that go beyond an immediate riot and its potent nihilism. With them begins the *labour* of the new truth which, in politics, is called 'organization'.

An organization lies at the intersection between an Idea and an event. However, this intersection only exists as process, whose immediate subject is the political militant. The militant is a hybrid being, since she is what a riotous movement that has once again been seized hold of by the Idea can give birth to. The Idea was republican for decades, 'naively' communist in the nineteenth century, and state communist in the twentieth century. Let us provisionally suggest that it is dialectically communist in the twenty-first century. Its true name will arrive in the margins of the rebirth of History.

How is militant hybridization accomplished as fidelity to the event? That the *historical* value of the Idea is *first of all* attested by the riot is certain. That the *political* value of the riot is attested by the organization which is faithful to it, and faithful to it because for it the riot affirms the Idea, is no less certain.

Here the Idea refers to a kind of historical projection

of what the historical becoming of a politics *is going to be* – a becoming originally validated by the riot. For example, we shall say that equality 'will have to become' the rule, as the norm of all the struggles being waged; or that 'communism' refers to the possibility, subjectively assumed, of a society that is radically different because subtracted from the sway of Capital, normed by equality and governed by the free association of those who constitute it. But we shall say it only because to think, speak and act accordingly organizes the permanent duration of the abolished riot. That is why the Idea does not precede the riot, but is intertwined with its real effects in the construction of a duration. Likewise, the Idea will later presuppose the reality of popular political organization.[5]

A politics regards as eternal what the riot has unearthed in the form of the existence of an inexistent, and which is the sole content of a rebirth of History. To do this, it is necessary that in the light of the Idea, which abstractly unites militants, the organization retains traces within itself of what made for the creative power of the historical riot: contraction, intensification and localization.

Classically, contraction (whereby a small minority is the genuine existence of the whole of the riot) is guarded by strict rules of membership of the organization. A formal demarcation is created between those who are of it and those who are not, which is

5 For the theme of the Idea, readers are referred to the final text in *The Communist Hypothesis*.

as powerful as the demarcation during a riot between those who are there and those who stay at home. Intensification is preserved by militant activism, a life devoted to the demands of action, a subjectivity that is keener and more sensitive to circumstances than one which has reverted to routine existence. Localization will be guarded by firm rules of conquest of the sites where one is present (a particular popular market, an African workers' hostel, a factory, a tower block on some housing estate, and so on). This set constitutes the militant dimension of a particular type of organization, which was called 'communist party' for some decades in the twentieth century, but which must doubtless seek a different name today.

Initially, these imperatives of fidelity seemed reasonable; and that is why they won over millions of workers, peasants and intellectuals throughout the era that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917. The three characteristics of militant obligation symbolized that the organization remained a pupil of the processes wherein a rebirth of History had transpired and, in so doing, nourished the communist Idea of all this riotous popular reality.

Yet it is likely that the procedures for guarding the True will be altered in the coming sequence. The party-form has had its day, exhausted in a brief century by its state avatars. Appropriate for the military conquest of power, the communist parties proved incapable of performing on a large scale what, ultimately, is the sole task of a state in the process of withering away:

creatively resolving contradictions *within the people*, without following, when it comes to the least difficulty, the terrorist model of resolving contradictions *with the enemy*. This is an enormous problem for today: inventing a revolutionary political discipline which, although heir to the dictatorship of the True born with the historical riot, does not follow the hierarchical, authoritarian and quasi-mindless model of armies or storm troopers.

Anyway, it remains the case that, by formalizing the constitutive features of the event, organization makes it possible for its *authority* to be preserved. It might be said that with this formalization a transition is in a sense made from the real to the symbolic, or from desire to the law. Organization transforms into political law the dictatorship of the true from which the reality of the historical riot derived its universal prestige.

Lacan says that desire is the same thing as the law. I say so as well, with the clarification that, when I transcribe Lacan's axiom thus: 'Organization is the same process as the event', I base myself on the mediation of a formalization. But in Lacan too – and I take this profound view from him – formalization refers to a mediation between desire and law whose name is: the Subject.

A political organization is the Subject of a discipline of the event, an order in the service of disorder, the constant guardianship of an exception. It is a mediation between the world and changing the world; it is, in a sense, the worldly element of changing the world, because organization deals with the subjective

question: 'How are we to be faithful to changing the world *within the world itself*?' This becomes: How are we to weave in the world the political truth whose historical *condition of possibility* was the event, without it being able to be the realization of this possibility? How are we to inscribe politically, as active materiality under the sign of the Idea, a reawakening of History?

Perhaps, to clarify all this, we must repeat it according to the order of reasons.

1. A world always ascribes *intensities of existence* to all the beings inhabiting that world. From the standpoint of their *being*, the people to whom this world as it is ascribes a weak, even negligible, quantity of *existence* are in principle in a situation of equality with the others. The proletarians who say 'We are nothing, let us be all!', are absolutely in that situation; and if they say they are nothing, it is with respect not to their being, but to the intensity of *existence* accorded them in the organization of this world, which results in their being virtual *inexistents* in it. We can also say that the concept of being is extensive (everyone presents themselves in the equality of being a human living thing), whereas the category of existence is an intensive predicate (existence is hierarchically ordered). An historical riot creates a moment when an increase in equal-being, which is always of the order of the event, makes it possible to judge the judgement made about one's intensity of existence.

2. In any world there are inexistent beings who are alive, but on whom the world confers minimal intensity of existence. Any creative affirmation is rooted in identification of the inexistents of the world. Basically, what counts in any genuine creation, whatever its domain, is not so much what exists as what in-exists. It is necessary to learn from the inexistent, for that is where the existential injuries done to these beings, and hence the resource of equal-being against these injuries, are manifested.
3. An event is signalled by the fact that an inexistent is going to attain genuine existence, an intense existence, relative to a world.
4. If we consider political action, the initial forms of a change of world or rebirth of History – those visible in the event, but whose future is not as yet determined – are as follows: *intensification*, since the mainspring of things is the distribution of different intensities of existence; *contraction* – the situation contracts in a sort of representation of itself, a metonymy of the overall situation; and *localization* – the necessity of constructing symbolically significant sites where people's capacity to dictate their own destiny is visible. It should be noted that visibility as such is not reducible to visibility in the media, or what is called communication.
5. The visibility achieved by localization of the riot has an intrinsic significance. It is an immanent norm; it must render *itself* visible: visibility is a

universal address, including to itself. Why is it so important? Because it is necessary for the being of the inexistent to *appear* as existent – something that initiates a transformation in the rules of visibility themselves. Localization is the idea of asserting in the world the visibility of universal justice in the form of the restitution of the inexistent. And to do this requires not so much showing your muscles, or even that you are several thousand (even million) strong, as demonstrating that you have become the symbolic master of the site.

6. A pre-political *event*, an historical riot, occurs when an intensive super-existence, articulated with an extensive contraction, defines a site where the entire situation is refracted in a universally addressed visibility. Identifying an evental situation is something done in the blink of an eye: since it is universally addressed, you, like everyone else, are touched by the universality of its visibility. You *know* that the being of an inexistent has just appeared in a site specific to it. That is why, as we have said, no one can publicly deny it.
7. What I call the question of *organization*, or the *discipline of the event*, is the possibility of an efficacious fragmentation of the Idea into actions, proclamations and inventions attesting to a *fidelity to the event*. All in all, an organization is something that declares itself collectively adequate to the event and the Idea alike, in a duration which has once again become that of the world. This moment of

organization is by far the most difficult. It requires particular collective attention, because it is the moment of divisions as well as the one when the enemy (the guardian of slumbering History) seeks to regain the upper hand. If this moment is missed, the rebirth of History is nothing more than a brilliant anecdote, and politics remains apathetic.

8. The process I call 'organization' is therefore an attempt to preserve the characteristics of the event (intensification, contraction and localization), when the event as such no longer possesses its initial potency. In this sense organization is, in the subjective latency where the Idea holds itself, the transformation of evental power into temporality. It is *the invention of a time* whose particular characteristics are taken from the event, a time that in a sense unfolds its beginning. This time can then be regarded as *outside time*, in the sense that organization is not amenable to being inscribed in the order of time dictated by the previous world. We have here what might be called *the outside-time of the Subject, as Subject of the exception*.

If the event, the historical riot, is a break in time – a break in which the inexistent appears – organization is an outside-time in time, which creates the collective subjectivity wherein the existence taken on by the inexistent in the light of the Idea is going to challenge the conservative power of the state, guardian of all temporal forms of oppression.

8

State and Politics: Identity and Genericity

The state is an extraordinary machine for manufacturing the inexistent – through death (the history of states is essentially a history of massacres), but not exclusively so. The state is capable of manufacturing the inexistent by imposing a figure of identitarian normality, 'national' or otherwise. Now, especially in Europe, this issue of identity has become an obsession. A sort of cultural racism, which in fact conveys the fear of the 'middle classes' – querulous profiteers from the imperial dynamic – of being reduced to the inferior status of 'people from the *banlieues*', poisons the situation and even ends up clouding the minds of once admirable and courageous intellectuals. It is true that our rulers set the tone. Let us recall the recent declaration by a French minister: 'There are too many Muslims in France.' 'Too many' can only mean one thing here: some of them are uncalled for. The minister affirms with the utmost clarity that the particular being of

these excess people, at least among us where they are permanently settled, should be a pure and simple inexistence. Obviously, the minister is announcing that he is going to proceed in such a way that this becomes the case. His statement concerns the relationship between being and existence; it is an ontological statement, not merely a reactionary blunder.

The state has a considerable range of solutions for transforming what is there, before our very eyes, into what does not exist. These extend from the refusal of legal documents to police abuse and judicial expulsion through the impossibility of being treated in public hospitals, raids on train stations, the arrest of kids at the end of school, prohibition of women from dressing as they wish, detention centres, and so forth. All these solutions are presented as the final solution of the 'problem' raised by Sarkozy's minister: there are 'excess' people among us.

But for the sake of younger people, as well as those with a short memory, let us recall that in Mitterrand's time the prime minister, Fabius, had conceded to Le Pen that there was indeed a real 'immigrant problem' in our country, and that therefore he, Fabius (who is here merely the name for a collective conviction among our rulers, left-wing and right-wing alike), was going to find ways to solve this problem, if possible definitively. And he did in fact propose some: thus it was the socialist left in government that introduced, *inter alia*, detention centres and nitpicking control of family reunion.

These repeated declarations would possess nothing but the significance of a sort of ideological madness were they not sustained by the machine, ever ready to swing into operation, with which the state manufactures a ghostly 'identity'.

Let us sketch the functioning of this machine by means of an elementary formalization.[6]

A state always generates the existence of an imaginary object that is supposed to embody an identitarian 'average'. For example, let us call F (for 'French') the set of distinguishing features that authorize the state to refer all the time to the 'French' – what identifies them and their particular rights, which are entirely different from those who 'are not' French – as if there existed a completely identifiable 'being-French'.

This imaginary object is composed of inconsistent predicates. The 'French person', the average F, is, for example, secular, a feminist, civilized, a worker, a good pupil of the 'republican school', white, a good French-speaker, courteous, courageous, of Christian civilization, a tax evader, undisciplined, a subject of the homeland of human rights, less serious than the Germans, more open than the Swiss, less lazy than the Italians, a democrat, a good cook ... and piles of other variable, contradictory things, brandished by national propaganda as and when required by the circumstances. The main thing is that one can make reference

6 The theory of identitarian objects and separating names can be significantly developed if it is immersed in the context of the transcendental theory of worlds, such as I present it in *Logics of Worlds*, transl. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009).

to this purely rhetorical 'French person' *as if he or she existed*.

The inordinate importance of opinion polls for the state derives exclusively from the fact that, as the science of average statistics, *opinion polls make the virtual French person exist numerically*. Commenting on a poll indicating that 51 per cent of those questioned prefer to vote for François Hollande than Martine Aubry as Socialist Party presidential candidate, propaganda will have no hesitation in making statements of the kind: 'The French think that Hollande is a better candidate than Aubry.' Thus, our non-existent F ends up thinking, deciding and choosing. F wants Hollande; F supports the French attack on Libya; F thinks that pension reform is inevitable; F prefers Camembert to Roquefort; and so on.

But the most important thing, once the existence of F in accordance with artificial predicates is ensured, and thus once the actual identity of the French person is guaranteed, is that the state and those who obey it possess a means of assessing what is normal and what is not.

To be brief, let us posit that, given two individuals, the degree of their identity is measured on a scale from a minimum (say, 0) to a maximum (10), as at school. The degree of identity of the individual x to the individual y can be written Id (x, y). If Id (x, y) = 10, x and y are identical twins. If Id (x, y) = 0, the individual x and the individual y have practically nothing in common. If Id (x, y) = 5, they are averagely identical and averagely different.

The whole point is to introduce into this operation our F, whose reality is presupposed by the state, as if s/he were an individual – the average individual, the epitome of the French person.

Let us take a situation that requires some propaganda effort. In all these cases the dominant parameters of the imaginary construction of the 'French person' are drawn from the incoherent list of the available features of F. The state and its propaganda select the features they deem appropriate either to the measures they wish to take, or for wrong-footing their rivals in the opposition. Let us say – such is the case today – that in order to divide the people (always a fundamental objective, whatever the state) between 'normal French wage-earners' and 'suspect foreign workers', it is necessary to underscore the supposed 'values' to which, although non-existent, F is especially attached. Propaganda starts by declaring that what is normal for an empirical French person, a 'someone' who is here and wants to stay here, is to be, in the situation under consideration and when it comes to 'values', *largely identical to the object F*. We can write that for any 'normal' individual x, we have Id (x, F) = 10 (the identity of x to F is very close to the maximum: the individual x is a good average French person; s/he esteems and practises French values). Any individual who deviates from this quasi-maximal identity to F is not 'normal'. But what is not normal is already *suspect* for the state and the public opinion dependent on it. Of this individual, whose degree of identity to F is insufficient (for

example, equal to less than the average, less than 5), whose being-there in the situation is consequently not 'normal', it will be said that s/he 'doesn't share our values'. The proof of this is that his or her identity to the average French person is not even average! This suspect would do well to 'integrate' as soon as possible, on pain of expulsion for a crime of identity.

The fictional F, measure of normality and matrix of suspicion, or its stand-in in any state structure, is always identitarian. It must be understood that it represents the most primitive, most fundamental product of state oppression. When this point is radicalized, when one ends up requiring of each person countless 'proofs' that their identity with the fictional identitarian object ('Aryan' is a classic example, but, as Pétain showed, 'French' is scarcely any better) is maximal, or at any rate excellent (never less than 8), we are generally in a state embarking on the road of fascism.

Various symptoms, involving first of all the status of families of foreign origin and enveloping government attempts to 'clarify' what the fictional object F is, and hence to trace a brutal line of demarcation between the normal and the suspect, and extending to the hysterical Islamophobia of parts of Europe's intelligentsias, indicate that we are slowly but surely approaching a temptation of this kind in our weary old imperial states.

In any event, what exists, as soon as the identitarian frenzy makes commonplace reference to imaginary objects of the F variety, is the appearance of names that collectively refer to suspects. In France today there

are numerous such names. They all expose a group of people in our country to stigmatization, on the charge of not being 'normal' as regards their degree of identity to the state object F. I shall call these names, which are applied to collectivities of suspects, *separating names*.

Let us cite a few examples of separating names in the current situation: 'Islamist', 'burqa', 'youth from the *banlieues*' and even (as we have seen with the minister's infamous remarks) 'Muslim' or (as has been heard in Sarkozy's pronouncements) 'Roma'. Moreover, some names function secretly, under the shelter of official names, hidden emblems of what is situated at maximum distance from the noble F and its values – such as 'Arab' or 'black', the latter standing in for the supreme repressed, which is 'Negro'.

So let us say it: by 'justice' today is also, or even primarily, to be understood *the eradication of separating words*. We must affirm the generic, universal and never identitarian character of any political truth. This involves dispelling, through the real consequences of a choice of truth, the fiction of the identitarian object, the 'average' state object, F and the like. In a powerful confrontation with state oppression, this point validates a politics intent on remaining faithful to an historical riot.

When an emancipatory event is in fact rooted in an historical riot, we straightaway observe the disappearance of, or at least a considerable reduction in, separating names. We have the very familiar example of the assemblies of the French Revolution, which

decided that the Jews and Protestants were citizens like the others. There is also this passage from the 1793 Constitution, which I like to quote, according to which 'any foreigner who adopts a child, or feeds an elderly person, and finally any foreigner who will be deemed by the legislative body to have deserved well of humanity, is admitted to the exercise of the Rights of the French citizen'. Rather than being identitarian, the norm has become generic: whoever proves by their actions that they are concerned with the human race must be treated in egalitarian fashion as one of us.

The great rallies in Egypt have forcefully reminded us of this principle and revitalized it for our times. They have occurred publicly without any identitarian selection. We have seen Muslims and Copts, men and women, veiled women and 'bareheaded' women, intellectuals and workers, young and old, and so on, side by side. All identities were in a sense absorbed by the movement, but the movement itself was not reducible to any one of them.

I shall therefore say that organization, and hence politics, exists *when the power of the generic is preserved outside the movement, outside the riot*. This means that an organization acts in such a way that, in the name of the generic, it succeeds in demolishing the power of the identitarian fiction over some particular point in people's existence.

Paradoxically, in the gap opened up by an historical riot any politics is therefore an organization of the generic. Paradoxically, because there will always be

people who say that the generic, precisely because it is not an identity, because it is even the opposite of an identity, does not need to be organized; that it must unfold itself freely; that a hundred flowers must bloom spontaneously, and so on. But experience shows that the generic does not then survive beyond the time of the riot; that in the absence of an active Idea, nothing can preserve it. In the absence of the outside-time incorporated by the organization, a statist return of identitarian fictions is inevitable. What is therefore needed is an organized politics, which will take responsibility for guarding genericity.

Let us take the word 'proletariat'. It was the name of the power of the generic. Under the name 'proletariat' Marx thought possible the emancipation of the whole of humanity. However, in a certain 'objective' Marxism, and under the name 'working class', that word, because it designated a component of social analysis as leadership of the revolutionary movement (the communist party as 'party of the working class'), also represented the possibility of an identitarian instrumentalization. The great revolutionaries were always careful to block any identitarian drift in the word. In 'The Crisis Has Matured' Lenin stresses that if the conditions for an insurrection exist, it is because a signification fraction of the *peasantry* has risen up. The subject of the revolution is therefore the *whole* Russian people. Mao, in saying that the word 'proletariat' refers not so much to an identifiable social class as to 'the friends of the Revolution', or a particularly

multifaceted, non-totalizable ensemble, underscores the generic aspect of the term.

However, Lenin and Mao intervened in the framework of the party-form. But if the party-form is obsolete, what is an organized process that lives off a kind of rectitude and genuine fidelity to the struggle of the politically generic – whose norm is equality – against state identity, which separates and suppresses? This is the main problem bequeathed to us by the state communism of the last century. Its terms are reactivated by the riots – immediate, latent or historic – that are in the process of reopening History. This problem is manifestly as difficult to resolve as a problem of transcendental mathematics, if not more so. We have behind us two centuries of fascinating experiments. They have resolved many problems, notably in connection with the power of the Idea, the dialectical relationship between riot and politics, the absolute necessity of complete political independence, the imposture of elections, internationalism, activist links with the popular masses, the construction of political sites, ideological struggle, and so on. But here we are, after thirty years of local resistance and perseverance, of passionate but limited defensive inventions, and History is reawakening; the historical riots teach us the shape of things to come. Our turn is going to come (again). And for us the central problem will be political organization, whose 'outside time' must also be 'outside party', if it is true that the era of parties – initiated by the Jacobin Club of the French Revolution

in the late eighteenth century, punctuated by 'communists' in the sense of the International founded by Marx in the mid-nineteenth century, institutionalized by German social-democracy in the 1880s, and revolutionized by the Lenin of *What Is to Be Done?* at the very start of the twentieth century – ended when the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and '70s was not able to realize the desire of Mao and the revolutionaries, students and workers, to transform the Party of the socialist dictatorship into a Party of the communist movement.

At all events, we can propose a definition of a *political truth*: a political truth is the organized product of an event – an historical riot – which preserves intensification, contraction and localization to the extent that it can replace an identitarian object and separating names with a real presentation of generic power such as its significance has been disclosed to us by the event.

Since the radicalized generic is incompatible with the state, which lives exclusively off identitarian fictions, any political truth presents itself as a restriction of the power of the state. This is the meaning of the Marxist axiom of the necessary withering away of the state as genuine evidence of the strength of the communist movement. This is the meaning of the fundamental slogan in France in the 1980s and '90s of the Organisation politique, in whose construction I was active, a slogan that can be summarized thus: Mao's almost despairing directive during the Cultural Revolution – 'Get involved in the affairs of state!' – must

be replaced by: 'You decide what the state must do and find the means of forcing it to, while always keeping your distance from the state and without ever submitting your convictions to its authority, or responding to its summonses, especially electoral ones.'

Let us note that if we include, as we should, in the concept of the state the totality of what constitutes capitalism's hold over society, the Marxist 'withering away' must be conceived as the exact opposite of the liberal maxim of 'less state', which aims to consummate the power not of communism, but of a passion that is in truth criminal: profit, concentration of property, inequalities, and an oligarchical government of the rich free from any control, and above all free from taxation.

The property-owner, the banker, 'the successful' will have to be succeeded by the anonymous genericity of the assembled people and everything that is faithful to its assembly, just as Tahrir Square, whatever its fate, has for a time succeeded, for all those of us who desire the Truth, the Mubarak clique.

By way of illustration, let us consider the theme of the monument 'to the unknown soldier'. Here we unquestionably have an acknowledgement of the power of the anonymous, the power of the generic, of equality. This power is such – it is so obviously recognized by peoples – that even the butchers of peoples have to erect a monument to it. Obviously, in this utilization of the power of the egalitarian theme there is an appropriation that inverts its meaning. For this famous

unknown soldier is draped in the tricolour, in the cult of the Nation, in the identitarian duty in whose name he was led to get himself killed. He died, this unknown soldier, not for the principle of affirming the generic, but for the goal of putting an end to the obscure inter-imperialist contradictions between the French, the British and the Germans through bloody battles. In these battles millions of soldiers, whether unknown or not, were ignobly sacrificed. If a large number of young French peasants could be sent to the slaughter in order to defend interests that were in no sense theirs, it is because they were made to march to identity ('Down with the *Boches*!'). The unknown soldier died in the service of the identitarian Moloch.

An appropriation of the same type is effected in our country with propaganda for democracy. For in principle 'democracy' refers to the power of the anonymous, the anyone, the without-rank, the 'without-part', as Rancière puts it. Everybody knows our societies are the very opposite. So should we not at least erect a monument to the unknown elector? Throughout the bourgeois centuries has she too not been instrumentalized and deceived, and had her voice sacrificed on the altar of a 'democracy' where she is in fact stripped, by her very vote, of any iota of power?

And as for the unknown worker, the generic worker, who is often Moroccan, Malian or Tamil, and without whom any profit is inconceivable, who will erect a monument to them?

At any rate, Bertolt Brecht proposes that we concern

ourselves with him or her. Let us quote one of his poems, entitled 'Guidance for the People on Top':

On the day when the unknown dead soldier
Was buried amid gun salvoes
At the same midday hour
From London to Singapore
Between twelve two and twelve four
For a full two minutes, all work stopped
Simply to honour
The dead Unknown Soldier

But all the same
Perhaps instructions should be issued
For a ceremony at last to honour
The *Unknown Worker*
From the great cities on the teeming continents.
Some man from the tangle of traffic
Whose face no one noticed
Whose mysterious character was overlooked
Whose name was never heard distinctly
Such a man should
In the interest of us all
Be commemorated by a substantial ceremony
With a broadcast tribute

'To the Unknown Worker'
And
A stoppage of work by the whole of humanity
Over the entire planet.

9

Doctrinal Summary

Since it synthesizes everything suggested to me by the rebirth of History in its three riotous forms, I would like to recommence from the definition I proposed of a political truth. So let us repeat it, with one or two variations: *A political truth is a series of consequences, organized on the condition of an Idea, a massive popular event, in which intensification, contraction and localization replace an identitarian object, and the separating names bound up with it, with a real presentation of the generic power of the multiple.*

I am going to re-punctuate each element of this summary definition.

A political truth is ...

An important tendency in political philosophy maintains that one characteristic of politics is that it is – and must remain – foreign to the notion of truth. Decidedly in a majority today, this current asserts that any articulation of the political process with the notion of truth plunges us into the totalitarian presumption. What is

deduced from this axiom – in fact a liberal or, more precisely, 'left'-liberal one – is that in politics there is nothing but opinions. In more sophisticated form, it will be said that in politics there are only judgements and the conditions of these judgements.

It should be noted that those who maintain this would not dream of arguing that in science, art or even philosophy there is nothing but opinions. It is a thesis peculiar to political philosophy. The argument goes back to Hannah Arendt, the British liberals, perhaps Montesquieu, or even the Greek Sophists. It amounts to saying that politics (meaning democratic politics, but for our left liberals other forms of politics are not really politics), which is about being-together, must construct a peaceful space where disparate, even contradictory opinions can be expressed, on condition of agreeing (there's the rub) 'rules of the game' that make it possible to decide which opinion is temporarily going to prevail without violent conflict.

As we know, this rule has never been able to take any form other than that of counting votes. Our liberals affirm that, if there is a political truth, it will necessarily involve oppression – elitist at best, terrorist at worst (but the transition from one to the other, which is the transition from Lenin to Stalin, is wellnigh obligatory for liberals) – of the obscure, confused regime of opinions. This thesis has been deeply rooted among Western intellectuals for three decades – that is, since the onset of the period of reaction I have called 'intervallic', whose start I date to the late 1970s.

But, several peoples and situations are telling us in a still indistinct language of riot, it may be that this period is over; that there is a rebirth of History. We must then remember the revolutionary Idea, inventing its new form by learning from what is happening.

What – abstractly, philosophically – characterizes the revolutionary political Idea is precisely the conception that there are political truths and that political action is in itself a *protracted* struggle of the true against the false. When I speak of political truth, this does not involve a judgement but a process: a political truth is not 'I say I am right and the other person is wrong', or 'I am right to like that ruler and detest that opponent'. A truth is *something that exists in its active process*, which manifests itself, as truth, in different circumstances marked by this process. Truths are not prior to political processes; there is no question of confirming or applying them. Truths are reality itself, as a process of production of political novelties, political sequences, political revolutions, and so forth.

Truths – but of what? Truths of what is actually the collective presentation of humanity as such (the communal of communism). Or: the truth of the fact that, over and above their vital interests, human animals are capable of bringing into being justice, equality and universality (the practical presence of what the Idea can do). It is perfectly apparent that a high proportion of political oppression consists in the unremitting negation of this capacity. Our liberals perpetuate this negation: when people decide to say that there are only

opinions, it is the opinion which possesses the material, financial, military and media means of domination that is going to be imposed as consensual, or as the general framework within which different opinions will exist.

... a series of consequences, organized on the condition of an Idea ...

The process of a political truth *is rational*, not nondescript. It applies itself to unfolding in reality the particular consequences of principles, which are themselves affirmed, or reaffirmed, in historical riots. Such is the mainspring of new political organizations, which are invariably the real body of a political truth in motion. By standing firm on the combative rationality of such inscription, they inscribe in the world the practical consequences of an event, *qua consequences of a principle in which the practical lessons of a riot and the breakthrough of an Idea are combined.*

Thus in Egypt, what is underway is, *inter alia*, a bitter fight over the new constitution. On one side is the army, unimpaired remnant of the previous regime, which intends to retain its power while, if necessary, sacrificing the Mubarak clan to popular anger. On the other is everything that claims to bring into being an organization faithful to the historical riot in Tahrir Square. What exactly does this fidelity mean? Compelled to deal with the situation while claiming to be representative of a history, it is a characteristic blend of Idea and tactics. In it we find both the conviction that the Egyptian people now exists in a different way from what it was before,

in the forms of the generic Idea of this people (we are standing up, we are all united, the idea we have of our historical destiny transcends all our social or cultural differences, we have proved ourselves, and so on) and of tactical slogans that organize in the situation *crucial points* through which the consequences of the Idea absolutely must pass if the historical reawakening of the riot is not to be nullified. For example: the date of elections, the social content of the constitution, immediate measures in favour of the poor, the unconditional opening of the crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, and so on. The victories, point by point, intentionally indicate that henceforth it is the consequences of the historical riot which are organizing collective time, including the time of the state, and not the state that is retrospectively legislating on the significance of the riot.

... of a massive popular event ...

No doubt I have said enough about this. Let us simply note that if every political truth is rooted in a massive popular event, it nevertheless cannot be said that it is reducible to it. A political truth is not a simple moment of uprising. Certainly, the statement for which we are indebted to Sylvain Lazarus – namely, politics is rare – does indeed derive from the fact that the conjunction of an event and an Idea is rare. But this historical rarity does not *define* political truth.

It sometimes seems to me that Jacques Rancière is too quick to accept a reduction of politics to history,

when he defines genuine equality by a kind of active, momentary break in the continuous inequality instilled by the state. I maintain that the time of organization, the time of construction of an empirical duration of the Idea in its post-riot stage, is crucial. Otherwise, we end up thinking that the state must endlessly retain a monopoly on the definition of political time.

... in which intensification, contraction and localization ...
Intensification: During a massive popular uprising, a general subjective intensification, a violent passion for the True occurs, which Kant had already identified at the time of the French Revolution under the name of *enthusiasm*. This intensification is general, because it is an intensification and radicalization of statements, taking of sides and forms of action, as well as the creation of an intense time (people are in the breach all day long, night no longer exists, people do not feel tired even though they are washed-up, and so on). Intensification explains the rapid exhaustion of this kind of moment; it explains Robespierre's bizarre withdrawal just before Thermidor; it explains why Saint-Just said 'the revolution is frozen'; it explains why at the end there are only scant detachments in the squares, on the strike and occupation pickets, on the barricades (but it is they who will be the vector of the organized moment, should it arrive). This is because such a state of collective creative exaltation cannot become chronic. It certainly creates something eternal, in the form of an active correspondence, whose power is dictatorial,

between the universality of the Idea and the singular detail of the site and circumstances. But it is not itself eternal. Nevertheless, this intensity is going to carry on unfolding long after the event that gave rise to it has itself faded. Even when a majority of people revert to ordinary existence, they leave behind them an *energy* that is subsequently going to be seized on and organized.

Contraction: The historical situation contracts around an active, thinking minority whose provenance is multifaceted. It produces a sort of presentation of itself, which is simultaneously pure, complete and very limited, a sample of the generic being of a people. The conservative 'heartlands' disappear and all the focus is on what might be called a *massive minority*. Moreover, herein consists the importance of the distinction in revolutionary Marxism between 'classes' and 'masses'. The former define the field of the logical movement of History (the 'class struggle') and of the (class) politics that clash in it. The second refers to an originally communist aspect of the popular mobilization, its generic aspect, once the riot is historical. We must not be misled: it is 'class' that is an analytical and descriptive concept, a 'cold' concept, and 'masses' that is the concept with which the active principle of the riots, real change, is designated. Marx always insisted on the fact that class analysis is a bourgeois invention, attributable to French historians. But it is the masses, much more indistinct, who are feared ...

Localization: Let us recall simply this: in times of

historical riot the masses create sites of unity and presence. In such a site the massive event is exhibited, exists, in a universal address. A political event occurring everywhere is something that does not exist. The site is the thing whereby the Idea, still fluid, encounters popular genericity. A non-localized Idea is impotent; a site without an Idea is merely an immediate riot, a nihilistic spurt.

... replace an identitarian object, and the separating names bound up with it ...

The state can virtually be defined as an institution with the means for imposing norms on a whole population that prescribe what pertains to this state, the duties it imposes and the rights it confers. In the context of this definition the state fictionalizes an *identitarian object* (for example, the 'French person') that individuals and groups have a duty to resemble as closely as possible, if they are to merit positive attention from the state. Anyone declared unduly dissimilar from the identitarian object will also be entitled to the attention of the state, but in a negative sense (suspicion, police checks, internment, expulsion, and so on).

A *separating name* refers to *a particular way of not resembling the fictive identitarian object*. It enables the state to separate certain groups from the collectivity, who therefore call for particular repressive measures. These can range from 'immigrant', 'Islamist', 'Muslim' and 'Roma' to 'youth from the *banlieues*'. Let us note that 'poor' and 'mentally ill' are in the process of

being constructed before our very eyes as separating names.

What the state in France today calls 'politics' – such of it as is addressed to the public, not decided behind closed doors and justified after the event – boils down to mulling over considerations on the identitarian object and separating names in inconsistent, aggressive fashion.

... a real presentation of the generic power of the multiple. When there is a massive popular event, it tends by its very nature to destroy the identitarian object and the separating names bound up with it. What arrives in the square is a real *presentation*, the affirmation that what exists – what unconditionally, dictatorially proclaims what exists and must exist – is the people who are there and are acting together, whatever the name given them by the state. In this sense the historical riot *deposes names*. It is in the latent state of this deposition that a political organization is going to develop the consequences of a new existence, the existence of what used not to exist: the existence of the anonymous, the purely popular political existence of the people.

Finally, it will be said of all these people, who are nameless for the state, that they represent the whole of humanity, for what drives them in their intense localized rallying possesses a universal significance. And that is something everyone realizes. Why? Because they have constructed a site where, the fictive identitarian object being inoperative, even abolished, it is no longer identity

that counts, but non-identity: the universal value of the Idea, its generic virtue – that is, what concerns, what enthuses, humanity in general. The enthusiasm created by an historical riot is precisely bound up with this passion for the universal with which one can – must – credit seemingly the most ordinary people.

We can extend our analysis of collective evental passion in a different direction: the thrilling sense of an abrupt alteration in the relationship between the possible and the impossible. A massive popular event creates a de-statification of the issue of what is possible. In general, and especially in recent decades, the state has arrogated to itself the right to say what is possible in the political order and what is not. It is thus possible to 'humanize' capitalism and 'develop' democracy. But to construct a productive, institutional social order normed by equality and genuine popular command – that is completely impossible, a fatal utopia.

Similarly (and this is what the identitarian object is for), in the past it was possible for France to extend its generous hospitality to some poor foreigners from Africa ('hospitality' involved making them slave away on the assembly line in factories and housing them in revolting hostels, without allowing them to be joined by their family. But let us pass on ...). Today, however, it is impossible to extend this so-called hospitality to all these people, who do not share 'our values' and who, in addition, have children. And so on and so forth.

The state is ideally relieved of this normative function as regards what is possible by a massive popular

event – and on point after point, issue after issue, by the political organization that deals with its consequences. It is the assembled and/or organized people who unconditionally prescribe a new possibility. Their subjective energy is precisely defined by this engagement in the idea that they have the right to define what is possible, in an entirely new way and without the guarantee of the state.

Already on the original site, in the great rallies of an historical riot, there occurs what might be called a *subjective de-localization of the site*. What is said in the new site always claims that its value extends beyond it, in the direction of universality. 'Tahrir Square' is a site the whole world is listening to. The Spanish *indignados* have encapsulated such de-localizing extension of the site very well: 'We are here, but anyway it's global, and we're everywhere.'

Some people assemble on a site in order that what they do and say will have the same value everywhere. This initial extension is going to be seized on from without by other people, who are going to think: 'Since I'm definitely included in "everywhere", I'm going to try to do the same thing as the people over there in that specific site, who have acted and spoken as if they were everywhere.' There is a back-and-forth movement at work here: in so far as those who threw themselves into the historical riot and its potential organization open up their singular site to the universal, conversely, all over the world, masses that are still in thrall or fearful end up identifying with these pioneers of a reopened History.

10

To Conclude (with a Poet)

In defining a political truth, I rather left to one side the phrase *real presentation* (of the generic power of the multiple). Yet this is an essential point in the rioters' consciousness. How many Egyptians, Tunisians, Moroccans, Algerians, Yemenis, Bahrainis (the great forgotten ones: the American base there is too big), Syrians, and then Greeks, Spaniards, and also Palestinians and Israelis, have said in recent months, in their different languages and with various nuances, something basically like this: 'The representation of my country by its state is false! All of you – powerful Westerners or ascendant Chinese, or brothers from vilified countries – listen to us, look at us! In this square, on this avenue, we are presenting to you our real country, our authentic subjectivity!'

All the attempts to reopen History, from which this short essay hopes to derive some initial instruction, aim to subtract themselves, through an unprecedented, sweeping collective gesture, from the representation

of the site where they have occurred – a representation constantly fictionalized by the state. The intention is to replace this representation by a kind of pure presentation.

The Spanish movement of the *indignados* is at once a sincere, active and yet very limited imitation of the historical riots in Arab countries. To demand 'real democracy', as opposed to bad democracy, does not create any enduring dynamic. In the first place, it remains much too internal to the established democratic ideology, too dependent on the categories of the West's crepuscular domination. As we have seen, in the reopening of our history, what is involved is the organization not of a 'real democracy', but of the authority of the True, or of an unconditional Idea of justice. Secondly, we must both salute and criticize the category of indignation, courageously and (as we know) successfully launched (and this is a positive symptom) by Stéphane Hessel. He was absolutely right to invite our young people to inquire, to go and look, never to shield their eyes from the countless crimes of contemporary capitalism. He was right to say: 'Really take a look at what's going on in Gaza, in Baghdad, in Africa, and also at home! Break with the "democratic" consensus and its sanctimonious propaganda.' But being indignant has never sufficed. A negative emotion cannot replace the affirmative Idea and its organization, any more than a nihilistic riot can claim to be a politics.

Even so, among the great virtues of the Spanish riot was the striking, instructive simultaneity between the

occurrence of a *real presentation* (the rallying of the country's vibrant youth in a Madrid square) and a *representative* phenomenon (a crushing electoral victory by the Spanish right, well-known for being particularly reactionary). Simply in order to maintain itself, the movement immediately had to proclaim *the utter vacuity of the electoral phenomenon, and hence of representation* ('these people don't represent us'), in the name of the presentation it incorporated. In today's conditions, and in a new idiom, the Spanish movement reiterated the great truth of late June 1968 in France: 'Elections are a con!'

There is a lesson here: the possibility of a political truth, on the one hand, and the perpetuation of the representative regime, on the other, occurred in the Spanish conjuncture in theatrical fashion, combining seeming simultaneity and declared disjunction. Deleuze would have said that what we have, as between state and mass movement, is a disjunctive synthesis of two theatrical scenes. Disjunctive, because in a massive popular event what inevitably arises is a detachment from state representation. Any real movement, especially when its blind mission is to reopen History, maintains that what is merely visible should not be considered genuinely given; that one should know how to be blind to the self-evidence of representation so as to have confidence in what is happening, what is being said, here and now, about the Idea and its implementation.

The movement is forever being asked: What is your programme? But the movement does not know. In the

first instance, it wants to want; it wants to celebrate its own dictatorial authority – dictatorial because democratic ad infinitum – when it comes to statement and action. It subordinates the results of action to the value of the intellectual activity of action itself, not to the electoral categories of a programme and results. Organized, it will maintain this type of discipline while extending it to enduring questions of strategy and tactics.

On these two points we shall borrow our conclusion from René Char.

Fragment 59 of *Feuillets d'Hypnos* declares: 'If man didn't sometimes close his eyes tightly, he'd end up not seeing what's worth looking at.' Yes indeed! Let us close our eyes tightly, and our ears too, in our complete indifference to everything content to persevere in its being, everything exhibited and declared by the state and its servants! Finally free – which means in the service of a truth – let us then see not what is represented to us, but what is purely and simply presented.

And fragment 2 says the same thing in a different way: 'Don't linger in the rut of results.' Representation is the regime of the result; the state has nothing but results on its lips; politicos always fight promising that, unlike their opponents, they will 'deliver results'. That the rhetoric of the result is a rut means this: when History reawakens, it is the reawakening that matters; it is what is to be saluted; its rational consequences are what must be invested in by the Idea. This is valid by itself. As for the results, we shall see.

Appendices

I have published two articles in the 'mainstream press' on the series of historical riots in the Arab world. The first, published in *Le Monde*, sought to assess what was universal in the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. The second, published in *Libération*, adopted a completely hostile stance towards the Franco-British intervention in Libya as soon as it was announced.

These interventions are obviously dated, but they are consistent with what I would say today. Particularly as regards the Western intervention in Libya (Qatar is a Western colony), I could only go further. The complicity of a large section of public opinion, and every single parliamentary party, with the ridiculous caricature of a 'rebellion' launched to justify the 'humanitarian' intervention of Western armies, forms part of a revolting tradition – that of the *union sacrée* around a bellicose, imperialist foreign policy. Forces that claim to be fiercely critical of Sarkozy's government suddenly find themselves in complete agreement with him in this kind of venture, which is at once swaggering and sordid. Had I found some virtue in the 'radical' left of the Jean-Luc Mélenchon variety (which was definitely not the case), his rallying to this *union sacrée* would have brought me back down to earth – the reality that the whole 'left-wing' hullaballoo is internal to the contemporary logic of domination.

I want to reiterate here that I have no whit of sympathy for Gaddafi, any more than I did (contrary to the lies that accompany me here and there) for Milošević when we were bombing Belgrade, for Saddam Hussein

when the Americans were putting Iraq to fire and the sword, or for the Taliban regime when NATO descended on it. But I am categorically opposed to the principal brigands of the contemporary world – the major economic predators represented by oil companies, arms dealers, mineral extractors, loggers, the sellers of tainted goods, and all their like, as well as their political protectors (namely the Western states) – in concert pulling the confidence trick on us, with the quavering voices of their media ideologues, of 'morality' and 'democracy', in order to go and crush remote, weak countries, conduct their interminable wars, and profit from these circumstances to establish themselves there, plunder the local resources, and set up permanent military bases. This kind of propaganda, and the consensus that forms part of it, is no better than the hair-raising description of the 'Boches' which accompanied the pointless massacre of millions of soldiers during the 1914–18 war, or the presentation of whole peoples as backward savages, which 'justified' colonial conquest, the systematic exploitation of countless regions and the forced labour of their populations.

Let us finally allow peoples to determine their historical development for themselves, just as Westerners did for centuries with numerous appalling wars, arresting revolutions, deadly civil conflicts and political regimes of every kind. The peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America have had European or North American colonialists on their backs long enough for them to have the right to try to make their own history,

without us interfering. All the more so in that they have good reasons for thinking that our fine words, however democratic and moral, pave the way for a very dark and bloody future. They know from experience that, unlike at home, the predators who have arrived from afar only like strong states that are servile and free states that are emasculated and carved up. As is said in one of the Madagascan songs set to music by Ravel: 'Distrust the Whites, inhabitants of the coast.'

Appendix I

Tunisia and Egypt: The Universal Significance of the Popular Uprisings

Published in Le Monde, *18 February 2011, under the title 'Tunisie, Égypte: quand un vent d'Est balaie l'arrogance de l'Occident'.*

1. The East Wind Prevails over the West Wind

For how long will a futile, crepuscular West, the 'international community' of those who still consider themselves masters of the world, go on giving lessons in good governance and correct behaviour to the whole planet? Is there not something risible about the spectacle of intellectuals on call, disorientated soldiers of the capitalo-parliamentarianism that serves as our moth-eaten paradise, donating themselves to the magnificent Tunisian and Egyptian peoples, in order to teach those savage peoples the ABC of 'democracy'? What a pathetic survival of colonial arrogance! In the condition of political misery that has been ours

for three decades, is it not obvious that it is we who have everything to learn from the current popular uprisings? Should we not with the utmost urgency very closely study what made possible the overthrow by collective action of governments that were oligarchic, corrupt and, in addition – perhaps especially – in a state of humiliating vassalage to the Western states? Yes, we must be the pupils of these movements, not their stupid teachers. For in the peculiar genius of their inventions they are reviving some principles of politics that people have long sought to persuade us were obsolete. Especially this principle, which Marat constantly recalled: when it comes to liberty, equality and emancipation, we owe everything to popular riots.

2. It Is Right to Rebel

Just as our states and those who vaunt them (parties, trade unions and servile intellectuals) prefer governance to politics, so they prefer demands to revolt and 'orderly transition' to any rupture. What the Egyptian and Tunisian peoples are reminding us is that the only action commensurate with a shared sense of the scandalous occupation of state power is a mass uprising. And that in this instance the only slogan which can unite the disparate components of the crowd is: 'You there, clear off!' The exceptional importance of the revolt in this instance, its critical power, consists in the fact that the slogan repeated by millions of people gives us an idea of what will be – unquestionably, irreversibly

– its initial victory: the flight of the man thus referred to. And whatever happens thereafter, this triumph of popular action, which is inherently illegal, will have been eternally victorious. Now, that a revolt against state power can be absolutely victorious is a teaching of universal significance. This victory forever indicates the horizon against which every collective action subtracted from the authority of the law stands out – what Marx called 'the withering away of the state'. In other words, one day, freely associated in the deployment of their creative power, the peoples will be able to do without ghastly state coercion. It is indeed for this, for this ultimate Idea, that a revolt toppling an established authority is eliciting unqualified enthusiasm the world over.

3. A Single Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire

Everything began with the suicide by self-immolation of a man reduced to unemployment, a man they wanted to prohibit from engaging in the pitiful street vending that enabled him to survive, and whom a female cop slapped to make him understand what is real here down below. In a few days, a few weeks, this gesture extended to millions of people who shouted their joy in a remote square, and to the departure of powerful dictators in a blind panic. Where did this fantastic expansion come from? The spread of an epidemic of liberty? No. As Jean-Marie Gleize poetically puts it, 'A revolutionary movement does not spread

by contamination, but through resonance. Something constituted here resonates with the shock wave emitted by something constituted over there.' Let us call this resonance an 'event'. The event is the abrupt creation not of a new reality, but of a myriad of new possibilities. None of them is the repetition of what is already known. That is why it is obscurantist to say 'this movement is demanding democracy' (meaning the kind we enjoy in the West), or 'this movement is demanding social improvement' (meaning the average prosperity of the petit-bourgeois among us). Starting from virtually nothing, resonating everywhere, the popular uprising creates unheard-of possibilities for the whole world. The word 'democracy' is practically unspoken in Egypt. People there refer to the 'new Egypt', the 'real Egyptian people', a constituent assembly, an absolute change in existence, possibilities that are unprecedented and previously unknown. This is the new prairie to come when the one to which the spark of the uprising has finally set fire is no more. This future prairie stands between the declaration of an inversion in the balance of forces and the declaration of an assumption of new tasks; between what a young Tunisian said – 'We, the sons of workers and peasants, are stronger than the criminals' – and what a young Egyptian said: 'From today, 25 January, I am taking my country's affairs in hand.'

4. The People, and the People Alone, Are the Motive Force in the Making of World History

It is very surprising that in our West the rulers and media regard the rebels in a Cairene square as 'the Egyptian people'. How come? For these folk, is not the only reasonable, legal people usually reduced to the majority either in an opinion poll or an election? How is it, all of a sudden, that hundreds of thousands of rebels are representative of a population of 80 million? It is a lesson not to be forgotten, and which we shall not forget. Beyond a certain threshold of determination, tenacity and courage, the people can in fact concentrate its existence in a square, on an avenue, in a few factories or a university, and so on. The whole world will witness this courage, and above all the astounding creations accompanying it. These creations will count as proof that a people has stood up there. As an Egyptian demonstrator powerfully put it, 'Before, I was watching television; now it is television that's watching me.' In the wake of an event, the people comprises those who know how to resolve the problems posed by the event. Thus, in the occupation of a square, there are the problems of food, sleeping arrangements, guards, banners, prayers, defensive actions, so that the site where everything is happening – the site that constitutes a symbol – is guarded for its people, at all costs. Problems which, at the level of hundreds of thousands of people who have come from all over, seem insoluble – and all the more so in as much as in this square the

state has disappeared. Resolving insoluble problems without the help of the state – such is the destiny of an event. And it is what causes a people suddenly, and for an indeterminate period, to exist where it has decided to rally.

5. There Is No Communism without a Communist Movement

The popular uprising we are talking about is manifestly without a party, a hegemonic organization, or a recognized leader. There will be time enough to determine whether this characteristic is a strength or weakness. In any event, it means that the uprising possesses in a very pure form – no doubt the purest since the Paris Commune – all the features of what must be called a movement communism. 'Communism' means here: the creation in common of the collective destiny. This 'common' has two particular features. Firstly, it is generic, representative in a site of humanity as a whole. In this site there is to be found every variety of person of whom a people is composed; every speech is listened to, every proposal examined, and every difficulty dealt with for what it is. Secondly, it overcomes all the major contradictions that the state claims it alone can manage, without ever transcending them: between intellectuals and manual workers, men and women, poor and rich, Muslims and Copts, people from the provinces and people from the capital, and so on. Thousands of new possibilities arise in connection

with these contradictions at every instant, to which the state – any state – is utterly blind. We see young female doctors from the provinces care for the wounded, sleeping among a circle of fierce young men; and they are calmer than they were before, knowing that no one will harm a hair of their head. We also see an organization of engineers addressing young people from the suburbs, begging them to hold the square, to protect the movement through their energy in the fight. We further see a row of Christians on the lookout, standing guard over Muslims bent in prayer. We see shopkeepers feeding the unemployed and the poor. We see everyone talking to neighbours they do not know. We read a thousand placards where each person's life joins in the History of all, without any hiatus. The set of these situations, these inventions, constitutes movement communism. For two centuries now the sole political problem has been this: How are we to make the inventions of movement communism endure? And the sole reactionary statement remains: 'That is impossible, even harmful. Let us put our trust in the state.' Glory to the Tunisian and Egyptian people, who are recalling us to our true, sole political duty: in the face of the state, organized fidelity to movement communism.

6. We Do Not Want War, But We Are Not Afraid of It

The peaceful calm of the gigantic demonstrations has been universally noted and linked to the ideal of elective democracy attributed to the movement. However,

let us note that there have been hundreds of deaths and more are occurring every day. In many cases the victims died as fighters and martyrs of the rebellion at its inception and then protecting the movement. The political and symbolic sites of the uprising have had to be guarded at the cost of ferocious battles with the militia men and police of the threatened regimes. And who has made a personal sacrifice if not youth from the poorest part of the population? May the 'middle classes', of whom our undreamt-of MAM [Foreign Affairs Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie] has said that the democratic outcome of the events depends on them and them alone, remember that at the crucial moment the uprising's duration was ensured exclusively by the unbounded commitment of popular detachments. Defensive violence is inevitable. It is continuing in difficult conditions in Tunisia, after the young activists from the provinces were returned to their poverty. Does anyone seriously think that the fundamental goal of these countless initiatives and cruel sacrifices is nothing but getting people to 'choose' between Soulieman and El Baradei, just as at home people are pathetically resigned to arbitrating between Sarkozy and Strauss-Kahn? Is that the only lesson of this splendid episode?

No, a thousand times, no! The Tunisian and Egyptian people are telling us this: to rise up, construct the public site of movement communism, and defend it by all possible means while inventing the successive steps of our action – such is the reality of the popular politics

of emancipation. The states of the Arab countries are certainly not the only ones that are anti-popular and, regardless of elections, substantively illegitimate. Whatever their development, the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings possess a universal significance. They prescribe new possibilities whose value is international.

Appendix II

Short Dialogue on the Present Times

Text published in Libération, *28 March 2011, under the title 'Un monde de bandits, dialogue philosophique'.*

You agree, my friend the street philosopher said to me one day, that the universal rule today, no longer discussed by any of the powerful of this world, is profit?

I agree, I replied. But what are you driving at?

Someone who unashamedly says: 'I only exist for my own personal benefit, and I'll liquidate yesterday's friend to maintain or improve my lifestyle', what is he? Come on, make an effort ...

A gangster. That's a gangster subjectivity.

Excellent!, exclaimed the street philosopher. Yes, our world is unashamedly a world of gangsters. There are illegal gangsters and official gangsters, but that's a mere nuance.

Let's agree on that. But what do you conclude?

That we're entitled to refer to everything in the imagery of organized crime, said the street philosopher craftily. The godfathers, the lieutenants, the small-time bosses, the killers …

I'd like to see that, I said, very sceptical.

Look what's happening at the moment: in numerous places people are rallying en masse, peacefully, to state the truth day and night that those who have commanded them for decades are nothing but gangsters. The problem is that these local bosses, whose departure is being demanded by the assembled people, have been installed, paid and armed by the most powerful of the godfathers, by the superior gangsters, the refined gangsters: the Usanian and his lieutenants, the Zeuropeans. The lands where peoples are rising up possess a strategic interest for these supreme godfathers and the local bosses were the brutal guardians of this higher interest. What's to be done? Against people who have rallied and massed in their millions, who are unarmed but who are speaking, who know what they want and who speak the truth, killers aren't enough. The Usanian and the Zeuropeans are forced to adopt a low profile. They even pay lip service to the popular cleansing.

But tell me: is this the beginning of the end for the planetary organized crime that passes for a world for us?, I hopefully said to the street philosopher.

If people can enduringly organize the illumination that is theirs in the event, History can change direction. But the civilized godfathers have hit on a trick. You know that in a corner of the desert with petrol there's a small-time boss who's been around for forty-two years.

Ah! The colonel! But it's not looking good for him either. A section of the population is demanding his head.

Things started there like elsewhere, but they've gradually taken a very different turn. Some characters with weapons have taken over the leadership of the event. It's no longer huge rallies speaking the truth, but little groups who parade up and down in 4x4s brandishing submachine guns, who are led by an ex-lieutenant of the small-time local godfather, and who cross the desert at top speed to go and seize undefended small towns.

And obviously, I said, the local mafia boss, the hysterical colonel, sends his killers against them. But how is this situation a gift for the refined big godfathers?

That's the stroke of genius, exclaimed the street philosopher. The Usanians and the Zeuropeans are themselves going to take responsibility for liquidating the desert colonel.

But, I said, it's very dangerous for them! He's done them big favours! Without flinching he's done the dirtiest work demanded by the Zeuropeans. He's intervened in a horrific way against the poor

African workers who want to come to Europe crossing his territory. He's become the ferocious caretaker of the European home sweet home.

You don't get something for nothing from gangsters. When their interests are at stake, the big godfathers know how to be pitiless towards those who were serving them yesterday. Civilization dictates!

And what are their interests, then, when they send their civilized killers against their crude protégé of yesterday?

Considerable. First of all, they're finally getting to intrude in the political affairs of territories where people have been rallying and speaking the Truth for weeks. They were almost distraught, the godfathers, at being out of the loop, spectators of their own disaster. Secondly, they're reminding the whole world that they are force, no one else. The real killers, whom everyone must fear, are them. Thirdly, they're behaving as if they were acting in the name of Right, Justice and even (let's not hesitate) Fraternity and Liberty. Since they're coming to kill the small-time local gangster, no? Whereas he was their precious client. Isn't that magnanimity? Fourthly, they hope that by scattering bombs around they're going to return to the good old days when the only distinction that mattered was: either you are for the world as it is, with its inegalitarian laws, insignificant elections,

commercial codes, international killers and profit as the only rule. That's perfect! Or you are against all the godfathers, all the moth-eaten codes, for the end of universal organized crime, and that's very bad.

Terrible. How, then, do you explain the fact that nearly everyone supports the expedition of the Usanian and his Zeuropean accomplices against their ex-associate, the desert boss?

Fear of the masses, says the street philosopher gloomily. In our affluent countries, where the dominant oligarchy has the resources to buy countless direct or indirect clients, there's a strong desire for the powerful godfather-states, under the fine-sounding names of 'international community' or the United Nations, to settle matters. You see, 'we' – I'm referring to our public, electoral, media 'we' – are too corrupt. Our rule remains: 'my standard of living first and foremost'. We're not really resigned to seeing this principle undermined by the flea-ridden of the world finally rallying to speak the Truth.

So that, my dear friend, is how you explain why so many people suddenly find merit in our rulers, who only yesterday were being barracked everywhere?

Exactly. For the occasion they've even wheeled out the Bigmouth of High Lineage.[7] He's previously served for the carving up of Yugoslavia by

7 The reference is to Bernard-Henri Lévy. [Transl.]

bombers. He's a bit threadbare, but still serviceable. Given the opportunity.

Which always makes the thief.