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WHY WE ALL

LOVE TO HATE HAIDER

THE ENTRY OF Jörg Haider's Freedom Party into a coalition government in Austria has been greeted with expressions of horror from the entire spectrum of the 'legitimate' democratic political bloc in the Western world. From the social democratic Third Way to the Christian conservatives, from Chirac to Clinton—not to mention, of course, the Israeli regime—all voiced 'dismay' and announced a diplomatic quarantine of Austria until the plague should disappear. Establishment commentators naturally hailed this demonstrative reaction as evidence that the anti-fascist consensus of post-war European democracy holds firm. But are things really so unequivocal?

Plain to see, in fact, is the structural role of the populist Right in the legitimation of current liberal-democratic hegemony. For what this Right—Buchanan, Le Pen, Haider—supplies is the negative common denominator of the entire established political spectrum. These are the excluded ones who, by this very exclusion (their 'unacceptability' for governmental office), furnish the proof of the benevolence of the official system. Their existence displaces the focus of political struggle—whose true object is the stifling of any radical alternative from the Left—to the 'solidarity' of the entire 'democratic' bloc against the Rightist danger. The *Neue Mitte* manipulates the Rightist scare the better to hegemonize the 'democratic' field, i.e. to define the terrain and discipline its real adversary, the radical Left. Therein resides the ultimate rationale of the Third Way: that is, a social democracy purged of its minimal subversive sting, extinguishing even the faintest memory of anti-capitalism and class struggle.

The result is what one would expect. The populist Right moves to occupy the terrain evacuated by the Left, as the only ‘serious’ political force that still employs an anti-capitalist rhetoric—if thickly coated with a nationalist/racist/religious veneer (international corporations are ‘betraying’ the decent working people of our nation). At the congress of the Front National a couple of years ago, Jean-Marie Le Pen brought on stage an Algerian, an African and a Jew, embraced them all and told his audience: ‘They are no less French than I am—it is the representatives of big multinational capital, ignoring their duty to France, who are the true danger to our identity!’ In New York, Pat Buchanan and Black activist Leonora Fulani can proclaim a common hostility to unrestricted free trade, and both (pretend to) speak on behalf of the legendary *desaparecidos* of our time, the proverbially vanished proletariat. While multicultural tolerance becomes the motto of the new and privileged ‘symbolic’ classes, the far Right seeks to address and to mobilize whatever remains of the mainstream ‘working class’ in our Western societies.

The consensual form of politics in our time is a bi-polar system that offers the appearance of a choice where essentially there is none, since today poles converge on a single economic stance—the ‘tight fiscal policy’ that Clinton and Blair declare to be the key tenet of the modern Left, that sustains economic growth, that allows us to improve social security, education and health. In this uniform spectrum, political differences are more and more reduced to merely cultural attitudes: multicultural/sexual (etc.) ‘openness’ versus traditional/natural (etc.) ‘family values’. This choice—between Social Democrat or Christian Democrat in Germany, Democrat or Republican in the States—recalls nothing so much as the predicament of someone who wants an artificial sweetener in an American cafeteria, where the omnipresent alternatives are Nutra-Sweet Equal and High&Low, small bags of red and blue, and most consumers have a habitual preference (avoid the red ones, they contain cancerous substances, or vice versa) whose ridiculous persistence merely highlights the meaninglessness of the options themselves.

Does the same not go for late-night talk shows, where ‘freedom of channels’ comes down to a choice between Jay Leno and David Letterman? Or for the soda drinks: Coke or Pepsi? It is a well-known fact that the *Close the Door* button in most elevators is a totally inoperative placebo, placed there just to give people the impression they are somehow contributing to the speed of the elevator journey—whereas in fact, when we push this button,

the door closes in exactly the same time as when we simply pressed the floor button. This extreme case of fake participation is an appropriate metaphor for the role accorded citizens in our 'postmodern' political process. Postmoderns, of course, will calmly reply that antagonisms are radical only so long as society is still—anachronistically—perceived as a totality. After all, did not Adorno admit that contradiction is difference under the aspect of identity? So today, as society loses any identity, no antagonism can any longer cut through the social body.

Postmodern politics thus logically accepts the claim that 'the working-class has disappeared' and its corollary, the growing irrelevance of class antagonisms *tout court*. As its proponents like to put it, class antagonisms should not be 'essentialized' into an ultimate point of hermeneutic reference to whose 'expression' all other antagonisms can be reduced. Today we witness a thriving of new multiple political subjectivities (class, ethnic, gay, ecological, feminist, religious), alliances between whom are the outcome of open, thoroughly contingent struggles for hegemony. However, as thinkers as different as Alain Badiou and Fredric Jameson have pointed out, today's multiculturalist celebration of the diversity of lifestyles and thriving of differences relies on an underlying One—that is, a radical obliteration of Difference, of the antagonistic gap. (The same, of course, goes for the standard postmodern critique of sexual difference as a 'binary opposition' to be deconstructed: 'there are not two sexes but a multitude of sexes and sexual identities'. The truth of these multiple sexes is Unisex, the erasing of Difference in a boringly repetitive, perverse Sameness that is the container of this multitude.) In all these cases, the moment we introduce the 'thriving multitude' what we effectively assert is its exact opposite, an underlying all-pervasive Sameness—a non-antagonistic society in which there is room for all manner of cultural communities, lifestyles, religions, sexual orientations. The reply of a materialist theory is to show that this very One already relies on certain exclusions: the common field in which plural identities sport is from the start sustained by an invisible antagonistic split.

Memory-traces of labour

Of course, even to mention terms like 'class' or 'labour' is enough to invite the reproach of 'economic essentialism' from the postmodernists of the Third Way. My first reaction to the charge is: *why not?* If we look around the world today, we soon see how handy a dose of this out-of-

date way of thinking can be. The lands of former 'socialism', which the ideology of the moment still finds so hard to assign to their place in its scheme of things, offer particularly rich examples. How else should we conceive the connexion between the two mega-powers, the United States and China, for example? They relate to each other more and more as Capital and Labour. The US is turning into a country of managerial planning, banking, servicing etc., while its 'disappearing working class' (except for migrant Chicanos and others who mainly toil in the service economy) is reappearing in China, where a large proportion of American goods, from toys to electronic hardware, are manufactured in ideal conditions for capitalist exploitation: no strikes, little safety, tied labour, miserable wages. Far from being merely antagonistic, the relationship of China and US is actually also symbiotic. The irony of history is that China is coming to deserve the title of a 'working class state': it is turning into the state of the working class for American capital.

Meanwhile, the failed 'real Socialist' venture has left another legacy in Europe. There, the idea of labour (material, industrial production) as the privileged site of community and solidarity was especially strong in East Germany. Not only was engagement in the collective effort of production in the GDR supposed to bring individual satisfaction, but problems of private life (from divorce to illness) were held to be put into their proper perspective by discussion in the workplace. This notion is the focus of what is arguably the ultimate GDR novel, Christa Wolf's *Divided Heaven*. It is to be confused neither with the pre-modern idea of work as a ritualized communal activity, nor with the romantic celebration of older industrial forms of production (say, elegies for the authenticity of the English miners' lives in the manner of *How Green Was My Valley*), still less with any proto-fascist cult of craft work (along the lines of *The Meistersinger*). The production group is a collective of modern individuals who rationally discuss their problems, not an archaic organic community.

Therein perhaps resides the ultimate cause of *Ostalgie*, a continuing sentimental attachment to the defunct 'real Socialism' of the former GDR—the sense that, in spite of all its failures and horrors, something precious was lost with its collapse, that has now been repressed once again into a criminal underground. For in the ideological sensibility of the West today, is it not work itself—manual labour as opposed to 'symbolic' activity—rather than sex, that has become the site of obscene

indecenty to be concealed from the public eye? The tradition, which goes back to Wagner's *Rheingold* and Lang's *Metropolis*, in which the working process takes place in dark caves underground, now culminates in the millions of anonymous workers sweating in Third World factories, from Chinese gulags to Indonesian or Brazilian assembly lines. Due to the invisibility of all these, the West can afford to babble about the 'disappearance of the working class'. Crucial to this tradition is a tacit equation of labour with crime: the idea that hard work is a felonious activity to be hidden from public view.

Thus the only place in Hollywood films where we see a production process in all its amplitude is in the genre of thriller where the hero penetrates the master criminal's secret domain, and sees a hidden installation of furiously concentrated labour (distilling and packaging drugs, constructing a rocket that will destroy New York, etc.). When the arch villain, after capturing Bond or his like, typically takes the hero on a tour of his monstrous enterprise, is not this vision of some vast, illegal production-complex the nearest American equivalent to the proud socialist-realist images of the Soviet epoch? Bond's role, of course, is to escape and blow up the whole assemblage in a spectacular fireball that returns us to the daily semblance of our life in a world cleansed of the working class. What is abolished in the final orgy of such violence is a certain utopian moment in Western history, when participation in a collective process of material labour was perceived as the ground of an authentic sense of community and solidarity. The dream was not to get rid of physical labour, but to find fulfilment in it, reversing its biblical meaning as a curse for Adam's Fall.

In his short book on Solzhenitsyn, one of his last works, Georg Lukács offered an enthusiastic appraisal of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a novella that depicted for the first time in Soviet literature daily life in a gulag (its publication had to be cleared by Nikita Khrushchev in person). Lukács singled out the scene in which, towards the end of the long working day, Ivan Denisovich rushes to complete the section of wall he has been building; when he hears the guard's call for all the prisoners to re-group for the march back to the camp, he cannot resist the temptation of quickly inserting a final couple of bricks into it, although he thereby risks the guards' wrath. Lukács read this impulse to finish the job as a sign of how, even in the brutal conditions of the gulag, the specifically socialist notion of material production as the locus of crea-

tive fulfilment survived; when, in the evening, Ivan Denisovich takes mental stock of the day, he notes with satisfaction that he has built a wall and enjoyed doing so. Lukács was right to make the paradoxical claim that this seminal dissident text perfectly fits the most stringent definition of socialist realism.

Perduring in the palace

Yugoslavia offers another variant of postmodern misconceptions of post-communism which cast more light on the West than on the former East. 'Enlightened' liberal states seem baffled by the reaction of rulers like Slobodan Milošević and Saddam Hussein to the campaigns against them. They appear to be impervious to all external pressures: the West bombards them, chips off parts of their territory, isolates them from their neighbours, imposes tough boycotts on them, humiliates them in every way possible, and yet they survive with their glory intact, maintaining the semblance of courageous leaders who dare to defy the New World Order. It is not so much that they turn defeat into triumph; it is rather that, like some version of a Buddhist sage, they sit in their palaces and endure, occasionally defying expectations with eccentric gestures of almost Bataillean expenditure, like Milošević's son opening a local version of Disneyland in the midst of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, or Saddam completing a large amusement park for his elite nomenklatura. Sticks (threats and bombings) achieve nothing, and neither do carrots. So where have Western perceptions gone wrong? Our theorists, projecting onto these regimes a stereotyped opposition of rational hedonistic pursuit of happiness and ideological fanaticism, fail to take note of a more apposite couple: apathy and obscenity. The apathy that pervades daily life in Serbia today expresses not only popular disillusion in the 'democratic opposition' to Milošević, but also a deeper indifference towards 'sacred' nationalist goals themselves. How was it that Serbs did not rally against Milošević when he lost Kosovo? Every ordinary Serb knows the answer—it's an open secret in Yugoslavia. They really don't care about Kosovo. So when the region was lost, the secret reaction was a sigh of relief: finally, we are rid of that over-rated piece of soil which caused us so much trouble! The key to the readiness of 'ordinary' Serbs to tolerate Milošević lies in the combination of this kind of apathy with its apparent opposite, an obscene permissivity. Here is how Aleksandar Tijanić, a leading Serb columnist who was even for a brief period Milošević's min-

ister for information and public media, describes ‘the strange symbiosis between Milošević and the Serbs’:

Milošević generally suits the Serbs. Under his rule, Serbs have abolished working hours. No one does anything. He has allowed the black market and smuggling to flourish. You can appear on state TV and insult Blair, Clinton, or any other ‘international dignitary’ of your choice . . . Milošević gave us the right to carry weapons, and to solve all our problems with weapons. He gave us the right to drive stolen cars . . . Milošević changed the life of Serbs into one long holiday, making us all feel like high-school pupils on a graduation trip—which means that nothing, but really nothing, of what you do is punishable.¹

Marx long ago emphasized that the critical test of a historico-materialist analysis is not its ability to reduce ideological or political phenomena to their ‘actual’ economic foundations, but to cover the same path in the opposite direction—that is, to show why these material interests articulate themselves in just such an ideal form. The true problem is not so much to identify the economic interests that sustain Milošević, as to explain how the rule of obscene permissivity can serve as an effective ideological social bond in today’s Yugoslavia. Of course, Milošević’s rule also yields an unexpected bonus for the nationalist ‘democratic opposition’ in the country, since for the Western powers he is a pariah who embodies all that is wrong in Yugoslavia. The opposition is therefore counting on his death as the moment when, Christ-like, he will take upon himself all their sins. His demise will be hailed as the chance of a new democratic beginning, and Yugoslavia accepted again into the ‘international community’. This is the scenario that has already taken place with the death of Franjo Tuđman in Croatia. Ignoring the ominous pomp of his funeral, Western commentators dwelt on the way his personal obstinacy had been the main obstacle to the democratization of Croatia, opening up a fair prospect for the future of the nation—as if all the dark sides of independent Croatia, from corruption to ethnic cleansing, had now magically vanished, interred forever with Tuđman’s corpse. Will this be Milošević’s last service to his nation, too?

Expelling the material realities of sweated labour, collective production and anomic licence from its visions of the East, the official imaginary

¹ ‘The Remote Day of Change’, *Mladina*, Ljubljana, 9 August 1999, p. 33.

naturally has no time for traces of the working class in the West. In today's political discourse, the very term 'worker' tends to have disappeared from sight, substituted or obliterated by 'immigrants'—Algerians in France, Turks in Germany, Mexicans in the USA, etc. In the new vocabulary, the class problematic of exploitation is transformed into the multiculturalist problematic of 'intolerance of the Other', and the investment of liberals in the particular rights of ethnic minorities draws much of its energy from the repression of the general category of the collective labourer. The 'disappearance' of the working class then fatally unleashes its reappearance in the guise of aggressive nativism. Liberals and populists meet on common ground; all they talk about is identity. Is not Haider himself the best Hegelian example of the 'speculative identity' of the tolerant multiculturalist and the postmodern racist? Now that his party has reached office, he takes pains to stress the affinity between New Labour and the Austrian Free Democrats, which renders the old oppositions of Left/Right irrelevant. Both forces, he notes, have jettisoned old ideological ballast, and now combine a flexible market economics, determined to dismantle statist controls and free entrepreneurial energies, with a politics of care and solidarity concerned to protect children and help the elderly and disadvantaged, without reverting to dogmas of the welfare state. As for immigration, Haider contends his policies are more liberal than those of Blair.²

There is both truth and falsehood in such claims. Once in power, Haider—blatantly an opportunist rather than a genuine 'extremist'—would no doubt perform quite conventionally. After all, in Italy his homologue Fini, till recently a fervent admirer of Mussolini, is now the most respectable of democratic statesmen, whose reputation the whole Italian establishment—from President Ciampi and Prime Minister D'Alema downwards—has rushed to defend against 'anachronistic' slurs from Schröder. But for the moment, Haider is still a demagogue whose attraction in Austria is based on remaining an outsider. His self-comparisons with New Labour are to that extent deliberately misleading, designed to cover up the xenophobic kernel of his populism. They belong to the same series as attempts by Afrikaans politicians of old to present apartheid as just another version of identity politics, devoted to safeguarding the rich variety of cultures in South Africa. Ernesto Laclau

² 'Blair and Me versus the Forces of Conservatism', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 February 2000.

has taught us the distinction between the elements of an ideological construct and the articulation which gives them their meaning. Thus fascism was not characterized simply by a series of features like economic corporatism, populism, xenophobic racism, militarism and so on, for these could also be included in other ideological configurations; what made them 'fascist' was their specific articulation into an overall political project (for example, large public works did not play the same role in Nazi Germany and New Deal America). Along the same lines, it would be easy to show that Haider's manipulation of a menu of free-market and social-liberal dishes is not to be confused with the Third Way: even if Haider and Blair do propose a set of identical measures, these are inscribed in different ideological enterprises.

This, however, is not the whole story. There is also a sense in which Haider is indeed a kind of uncanny double of Blair, his obscene sneer accompanying like a shadow New Labour's big smile. For New Right populism is the necessary supplement of the multiculturalist tolerance of global capital, as the return of the repressed. The 'truth' of Haider's claim does not lie in the identity of New Labour and the New Right, but in the generation of his populism by the zombification of European social democracy at large. In Haider's clinching to Blair—we use the term in the precise sense, of the boxing-ring—the Third Way gets its own message back in inverted form. Participation by the far Right in government is not punishment for 'sectarianism' or a failure to 'come to terms with postmodern conditions'. It is the price the Left pays for renouncing any radical political project, and accepting market capitalism as 'the only game in town'.