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In the Nebulous Zone between Class Antagonism and Violence

01/09

I. Why "Violence"?

Today, as we witness an upsurge of resentment and violence stemming from right-wing, clerical, and fundamentalist movements, it is important to reconsider the remedies for social injustice that have historically been put forth by the politics of equality. In many of them, "violence" was a legitimate term for emancipatory struggle, although its agency was not always acknowledged as a political force by some social thinkers (e.g., Arendt). As the history of the October Revolution and the demise of historical socialism show, freedom and coercion never meant the same thing for various social groups; what might be liberating for one layer of society might imply limitations for another. At the same time, what seems to be *a priori* affirmative and progressive in the critical discourse of our own day – the commons, equality, the general – might in practical implementation be undesirable and vicious compared to the common-good imaginaries of that very anticapitalist critique.

All theoretical works that claim violence as an indispensible component of emancipatory struggle (Sorel, Benjamin, Lukács, Fanon, Žižek[1]) insistently place this term in the foreground, although violence is far from being the only component of insurrectionary agency or the struggle for justice. Meanwhile, no state system or penal institution would use the term "violence" in its rhetoric or its judicial documentation when carrying out legal acts of coercion. Within the language of authority, violent acts can only be committed by "perpetrators," never by the State or the Law. So the Law, which tacitly applies violence in order to realize certain goals, conceals this application behind legislative rhetoric; whereas the aforementioned theoretical works, which posit violence as a component of emancipatory struggle, lay it bare. In these works, violence as a term is meant as a kind of metaphor for the urgency of bringing about the end of the present state of affairs, when the existing system does not permit transition, progress, or transformation. The urgency in this case can be thought of as the need to block the present regime and to reject the present state of injustice, oppression, and inequality – that which cannot be transformed "now" or even in the near future.

In *Reflections on Violence* (1906), George Sorel differentiates the protective and establishing *force* of the state from the destructive violence of strikes and revolution. For him, the reason why violence becomes an important term is the impossibility of changing the modes of production under conditions of the capitalist state and its economy. Revolution cannot be developmental and evolutionary; it can

In the opening sequence of Michael Haneke's film *Code Unknown (*2000), a little girl looks at the camera and slowly retreats as if hiding from it.

only be eschatological and destructive. Destruction is inevitable in the struggle for a new world of noncapitalist equality. Therefore, for Sorel destruction supersedes utopia. Utopia, according to Sorel, relies on a rationalist illusion of a better world and doesn't take into account the needs of exploited social groups in concrete historical situations. It delegates the solving of problems to evolutionary reformism, which treats a better future as an imaginary horizon; whereas direct struggle by syndicalist groups and trade unions carries out concrete decisions and mobilizes for real struggle. However, the theoretical stance of revolution as destruction ignores an important part of Marxist thought concerning the historical and transformative role of the dynamic between the forces of production and relations of production. Sorel's focus on eschatology is all the more problematic in that it is unclear what would follow after destructive and eschatological rupture: Sorel's theory stops at the moment when syndicalist groups appropriate the means of production and the working class sabotages the owning class. Such conditions would be insufficient to either bring about a new "general, socialist" order or preserve the economic hegemony of the strikers.[2]

Benjamin's attitude in "Critique of Violence" (1921) is also eschatological – and consciously so – in its treatment of violence as a tool of resistance. By inventing the term "divine violence" to describe a procedure that can terminate the law-making and law-sustaining conditions of the capitalist state, he provides an explanation for the necessity of his nonpolitical eschatology. Divine violence, in contrast to law-making and law-sustaining violence, is extra-political, theologically termed, and nondevelopmental. This is because insurgence cannot be seen as the continuation of the present politics, transforming it by means of democratic resistance; it has to eschatologically sublate not only the present political situation, but also everything that abides by the present law. Benjamin's essay is perhaps the most developed effort to show that the term "violence" is not only a tool for an insurgency against bourgeois state law; it also instigates a leap out of the condition of inequality. This leap out of the "bourgeois order" cannot happen politically, i.e., within existing social and economic conditions; hence the term "divine" – which, on the one hand, marks the impossibility of radical social change, but on the other, appeals for this change despite its social and political impossibility.

Unlike Sorel, who embeds violence in the immanent proletarian syndicalist struggle and the framework of a single class (the proletariat), Benjamin's use of the term "general strike" treats the act of empirical insurgency as collateral, as the down payment towards the purchase of a more general or universal freedom. For Benjamin, to be proletarian is not possible "in itself"; one has to become proletarian "for itself." The trick here is that becoming proletarian "for itself" does not mean merely the self-emancipation of a particular oppressed class and its transformation into a political subject; it also necessitates establishing conditions for a common cause – for all classes, not solely for the working class. So "the general" as the condition of emancipation for the working class (the class that needs emancipation) should also become necessary for the privileged classes, which might not be so greatly in need; this implies that the common cause would lead to the loss of these privileges, in favor of a common and general interest. Thus, what is central in the "divinity" of Benjamin's general strike is the concept of "the general" rather than the act of the strike by the proletariat as a specific social group. In other words, proletarianism is a necessary condition of generality both for the working class, i.e., the oppressed, as well as for the classes that are not oppressed – that is, for everyone.

According to Benjamin, the goal is not so much to broaden the power of the proletariat by means of a strike but to assert that when the proletariat claims and exerts its will – that is, when it appears "for-itself" – then this will is a general will and thus a condition for everyone, including non-proletarians. It is at this point that certain non-proletarian social layers find themselves in conflict with the general will, since Benjamin's general strike is claimed as necessary not only for the proletariat, not only in the name of the working class, but for the sake of the *overall* condition of equality.

When the political realization of the common is impossible, then one applies methods and terms that would accomplish political change via nonpolitical means; hence Benjamin's reference to the "divinity" of violence, which shows that his application of the term "violence" is more symbolic and quasi-theological than empirical or even social.

II. The Shame of "Mere Life"

In addition to the cleavage between law-making and divine violence, Benjamin puts forth another, less evident, but still very important antagonism: the ethical difference between life as such ("mere life" or "bare life") and "the living."[3] By confronting the capitalist state, proletarian violence is equally opposed to "mere life" (*blossen Leben*) – which is nothing more than normal life as part and parcel of the capitalist state's law and force. The shame of mere life is

that it is confined to a mere utilitarian existence. Divine violence – when surmounting the present inequality supported by the state – is a force that sublates not only the law of the state but also the mere life embedded in that law and produced by it. Revolutionary violence asserts that the condition of mere life, if not life as such, can be transcended.

In fact, Benjamin speaks of a redemptive procedure that runs counter to the individual human life's existential intentionality. For example, when Abraham chooses to sacrifice his son Isaac, he does so out of his shame at living a mere life, which only divine violence can redeem. This act is meant to be a rejection of the old world of pagan servitude to multiple gods, opening up the new monotheistic world. Benjamin says that the new world redeemed by divine violence does not *demand* sacrifice (as the old world of worship had done), but *accepts* sacrifice as the sign of ultimate fidelity. God does not demand that Abraham make such a sacrifice, but Abraham nevertheless decides to carry out the act – the act that tears away the advantages and laws of mere life in order to live a life accepted by God, which is now for him the condition of universality and objectivity. Interestingly, the courage and the readiness to perform such a violent act ends in an act of mercy that makes the violent act unnecessary.[4]

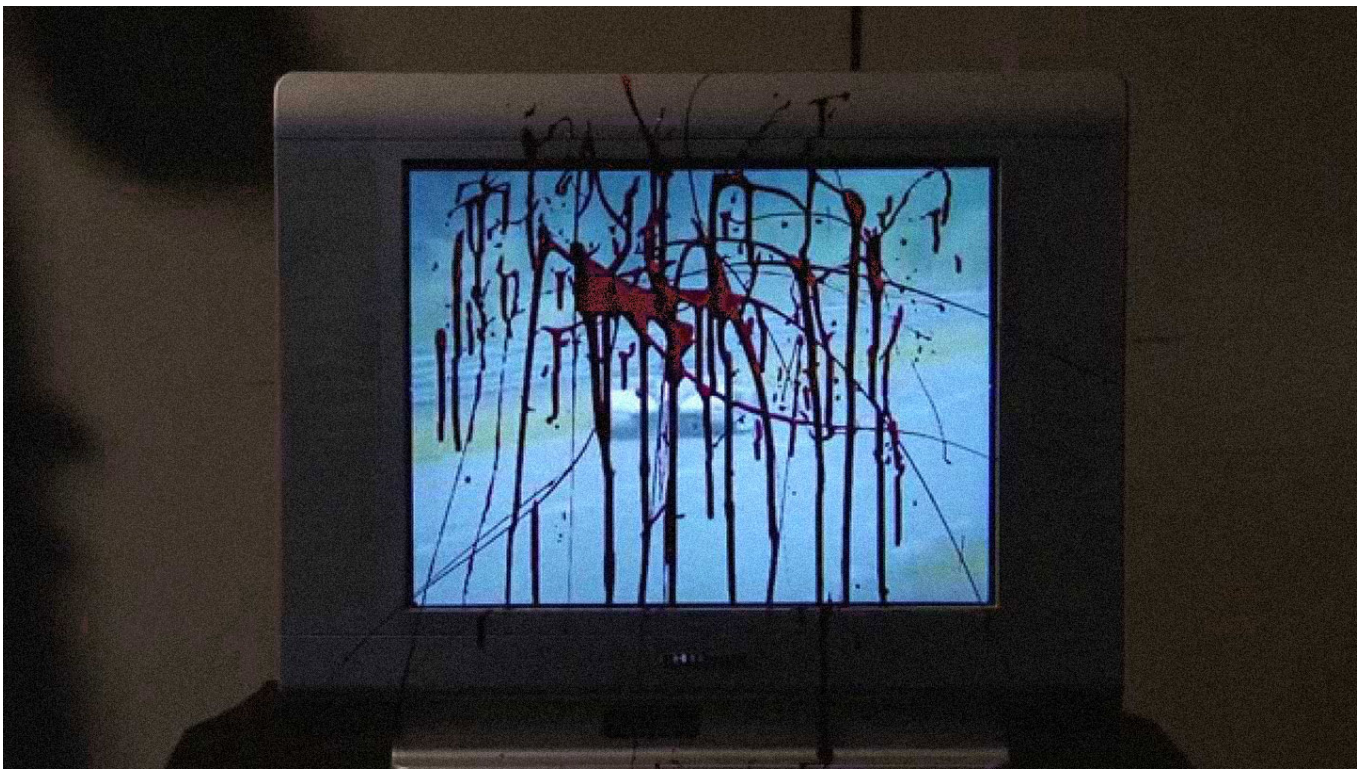
In the film *Funny Games* (1997) by Michael Haneke, we are confronted with unconditional violence that befalls a decent, law-abiding middle-class family – a couple and their child. Visitors in white – the cruel "angels" – break into the country house where the family is spending a holiday and stage their attack as a game, mercilessly bringing gradual death to all three family members. Much has been written about Haneke's visual methodology of representing violence in the film. However, our focus here will be on the dialectic between the unmotivated attack by the perpetrators and the inevitable violent invasion into the dwelling-place of the "innocent," law-abiding bourgeoisie.

The film was made in 1997, in an era when global terrorist attacks were less prevalent than in our own era. The two villains who terrorize the innocent family are not desperate jihadists or raging subalterns. They are polite, young yuppies who look like they could be beneficiaries of Western welfare democracy. Even when arrogantly violent, they speak the language of neighborly hospitality. The plot exposes an important trait of the democratic order: the serene life of a decent family seems not to harm anyone, yet what Haneke shows is that the humanist social contract, with its humanitarian rhetoric of goodwill, hides within itself the "internal" social colonization of the unequal "other."[5] This might be the potential "other" of the commons, the other of solidarity and equality, the other with whom to share the dimension of the general. But it might also be the uncanny "other" (whom Žižek calls "a neighbor," or whom Judith Butler defines as the melancholically internalized "other"[6]) – the one who cannot be loved, but who also cannot be murdered, mourned, or dispensed with either. This tacit subjugation of the unequal other, which maintains the other inside and among us in order to keep our conscience clean, is an inherent component of the social security of civil society and the private security of its members. Civic life is permeated by the unconscious fear of the intrusion of this tacitly eliminated unequal "other," who sooner or later might invade.

In the film the intruders are not in any way the oppressed. However, the rhetoric used by the murderers reveals two aspects of this unconditional violent assault. On the one hand, with their communicative behavior, the cruel visitors mirror the hypocrisy of the language of democracy, which manifests social empathy but simultaneously seeks to keep the evicted "other" at a safe distance. On the other hand, structurally, the murderers occupy the position that the oppressed "others" usually find themselves in. They are the newcomers who are not welcome, who are treated like anonymous aliens, but who are nevertheless received hospitably, only in the hope that they will leave once their requests have been satisfied. The "mere" private life of a middle-class family is thus shown in the film as already guilty, since its social complacency automatically presupposes a *nonrecognition* of the "others" and an indifference to their socially evicted position. It is this tacit nonrecognition that becomes the spark for the violent act of the intruders, which at first sight seems unmotivated. (In *Code Unknown* [2000], another film by Haneke, a young migrant obscenely assaults a middle-class French lady during a subway ride. In the two or three minutes that the train is on the move – while the passengers inside have no juridical protection and while legislative rules are suspended – the young man has enough time to aggressively insult the lady merely for being a middle-class white European woman: he spits into her face and hastily exits the train at the next stop.)

III. The Conservative Turn

We increasingly hear about the resentful and conservative, even clerical, turn in layers of society that previously would have formed the proletariat class. Benjamin's divine violence in this case turns into "surplus enjoyment" attained through violence[7] – the difference being



A still from Michael Haneke's film *Funny Games* (1997).

that this is the violence of resentful revenge and not at all the violence of establishing the dimension of the general. The revenge against the polite and *condescending nonrecognition* that the underprivileged receive from the civilized and enlightened classes appears as an outrageous, merciless, and senseless attack. In his comments on the assault at *Charlie Hebdo*, Žižek emphasizes the logic of contemporary fundamentalism. Rather than fighting "the sinful," liberal residents of the civilized West, the pseudo-fundamentalists fight their own temptation, their own inability to be believers – the very fact that they themselves are not fundamentalist enough – which leads Žižek to assert that their rage comes not so much from the West's disregard for real belief and genuine values, but from the fundamentalists' experience of nonrecognition and inferiority vis-à-vis the "civilized."[8] In this case the motive might really be "envy" of the enjoyment of the privileged other – hence the attempt to retrieve some surplus enjoyment from a violent act, as Žižek puts it.

Interestingly, recent events reveal a shift from fundamentalism to fanaticism. The difference might seem insignificant at first, but it is in fact very important: fundamentalism delegates faith to the Big Other, i.e., to the "Institution," formalizing one's pragmatic conduct and regulations, which guarantees implementation of the tenets of religion without indulging in them emotionally, or without sensuous involvement. Fundamentalism, in other words, is formal. Fanaticism, on the other hand, even when it is unaware of the history and the details of confessional rules, relies on internalizing a spiritual "message," making it an existential lived experience – thus instigating a believer to experience faith at every moment of their life, and rendering it even more volatile.

IV. Class at Stake

Democracy has to insistently assert civil equality and constantly display concern for the disinherited and underprivileged, but at the same time it cannot help but keep such groups deprived of the conditions of genuine emancipation. This disposition tacitly affirms inequality as an insurmountable social condition even as it demonstrates social and institutional concern for the non-equal.

Yet the question at stake not only concerns the vicissitudes of democracy or of "real" politics. It also concerns the possibility, in the sphere of left-leaning artistic production and cultural politics, of falling into the trap of social-democratic rhetoric. It is obvious that the leftist stance – be it in political activism, art and culture, or social struggle – is critical of representative democracy under conditions of the capitalist state. However, it is here, among the cultured, that a false democracy is implemented even as it is simultaneously criticized.

The biggest problem of the enlightened Left today is the appropriation of the voice of the oppressed by a social group (class) that, however precarious, is not the Subject of oppression itself. The support of the dispossessed in and by emancipatory discourses and institutions is positioned far from the grasp of the underprivileged; in short, this "other" is taken to be representative of alienated and lower social layers in its relation to the privileged bearers of critical theory and discourse. In this context it is worth mentioning a point made by Sorel: he claims that the shame of the bourgeoisie for its privileges and its voluntary philanthropy is much more dangerous to the working class than its indifference, since social agency on the part of the bourgeoisie for the sake of the underprivileged blocks the proletariat's own agency and makes it more difficult to maintain the possibility of consistent social change.[9]

Today's class constellation is quite reminiscent of the one described by Louis Althusser in his programmatic text "Marxism and Humanism" (1963). Althusser mentions how the bourgeoisie of the French Revolution, in its struggle with the aristocracy, formed the humanist ideology of equality, and due to this universal claim managed to unite the lower classes around itself. The bourgeoisie represented the premises of equality merely in rhetoric and in beliefs, unwilling to exert it socially (practically). This split between the classes ideally leads to a further stage in which the lower social layers coalesce into "the class for itself" and appropriate the language of emancipation. But if this does not happen and it is the enlightened intelligentsia that represents the subjectivity of the oppressed, or engages in emancipatory programs on their behalf, the oppressed do not recognize their interests in this "theater" of democracy, and choose to identify with the institutions from which one can acquire immediate recognition and self-esteem: the state; nationalist, religious, or other communities. In this case oppression is not transformed into class consciousness, turning instead into identitarian mythologies.

The well-known Marxian provision according to which the proletariat as the most dispossessed class is seen as the embodiment of the general dimension of emancipation implies an inevitable premise: the social condition that instigates egalitarian politics emerges when more privileged social groups voluntarily proletarianize themselves. Only this

kind of social move can engage the dimension of the common (general). Hence, disparate social layers can unite in a common cause only if this cause has a proletarian genesis. In this case, anyone who is for the commons becomes a "proletarian." However, such conditions can only be realized (be it voluntarily or coercively) on a massive scale, which is not feasible in our present historical situation. (It was feasible, for example, in the era of the prerevolutionary Russian intelligentsia, which sought to cultivate a proletarian sensuousness.)

Unlike the end of the nineteenth or the beginning of the twentieth centuries – when theories of equality were able to incorporate the dispossessed into the struggle for emancipation, both practically and cognitively – today the discursive and theoretical edifice of social critique cannot expand broadly enough into the social field to form social continuity with the underprivileged, in a way that might go beyond the mere rhetoric of solidarity.

The principal class confrontation of the present then is not between the cognitive Left and the financial elite of global capitalism, between governing forces and the governed, or between the rich and the poor. It is between the enlightened (progressive) and the unenlightened (obscurantist). (There is also an alarming gap between, on the one hand, the "folk politics" [Nick Srnicek] of grassroots activists, and on the other the cognitively advanced Left.) In the case of the cognitive Left, knowledge is the principal means of production and is hence a form of privileged property and wealth. Thus, today's ruling class not only includes the big proprietors – the technocratic bureaucracy – but also the owners of knowledge and the operators of its mediations – i.e., to a considerable extent the progressive and cultured cognitariat.

In fact, we can notice a mutation here: the successful participants in capitalist production claim precarity and anticapitalism, whereas the outcasts of capitalist production search for icons of authority and dignity.

Among the effects of such a contradictory situation, one can point to the paradoxical outcome of the anti-Kremlin protests in Russia in 2011–12. The leftists in the anti-Putin movement appeared to be socially much closer to the creative class than to the majority of the dispossessed, who either supported Putin or were politically passive. As a result, the ones producing the discourses of emancipation and the ones who needed to be emancipated were political and social adversaries. The underprivileged population was not only being socially colonized by the ruling regime, but also manipulated by the enlightened agents of emancipation themselves. Unfortunately, this paradox exists not only in so-called failed democracies (post-socialist countries, Russia included), but also in any nation that fails to integrate the underprivileged "other."

Interestingly enough, during the transitional period of the early 1990s, despite mass impoverishment in conditions of primitive accumulation, the formerly socialist societies (and Russia in particular) managed to preserve social continuity between the completely impoverished and the suddenly wealthy. This was because the differences between social groups were not yet qualitative or systemic, but ontic. The concrete facts of impoverishment and prosperity had not yet acquired a social logic. The early post-Soviet period paradoxically retained the dimension of the commons despite the collapse of factual equality; this was because irreversible class gaps and segregated areas had not yet been established.

V. The Violence of the General

Returning to the issue of class, one can observe the following paradox. Contemporary art institutions engage with the problems of oppression, migration, and neocolonial injustices by relying on the revolutionary practices of the Russian avant-garde or the legacies of the protest movements of the 1960s. However, a solidarity confined mainly to rhetoric only widens the gap between racially or socially segregated groups and creative and academic workers.

The most uncanny effect of such a "progressive" condition arises when art institutions, with their pretensions to enlightenment, try to intervene in urban ghettos.[10] The art institution attempts, on the one hand, to research social problems and import them as research material into the art space. On the other, the institution positions itself as a site of applied education and cultural production for the socially deprived. The outcome of such activity is that the institution's work on behalf of segregated groups garners international praise, which in turn generates more funding for the institution. Thus we, the proponents of emancipation, by researching and exhibiting the dispossessed, increase the class gap between privileged and underprivileged social groups.

It is in this nebulous zone that a violent outcome might emerge: this could be an act of resentment on the part of the segregated, who might seek to violently block the contrived discourse of solidarity, which in fact hides our *nonrecognition* of them.[11] In cases when the segregated are in any way inscribed as exhibits in an art institution that claims to help "them," or even when they engage as participants in an activist or research project, they might have an

incentive to sabotage the institution, to paralyze its functions and thus transcend their inferior status and nonrecognition through "the surplus enjoyment" of this act of reciprocal nonrecognition.

A second option would be to imagine an impossibly miraculous situation (miraculous in the Leninist sense) in which out of nowhere a general decision about equality becomes a matter of urgency – a decision that would not only assert but also implement the procedures of the general, in terms of the general interest, the general will, and the common cause. Such a decision would be "divinely" violent – violent because it might negatively impact the interests of many of us, who would then be compelled to bring the interests of all into real-life practice and not merely into discourse. Enlightenment and education would then involve the presumption of *general* equality and an overall civil recognition of this condition. To achieve equality, it is not enough to equally distribute property and wealth – whether material or immaterial. It can only be reached when the need of the general is established as the interest of every individual. The general – whether it is property or immaterial wealth – is not distributed piece by piece, but is something that belongs to each, in all of its fullness. This seems unrealistic at present.

The question then is the following: Is it possible to desegregate "the other" without a revolutionary procedure, without a drastic change? To put it another way, as Lukács asked in his text "Bolshevism and the Moral Problem" (1918), is it possible to attain equality via gradual democratic reforms?[12] Or should there be a decision that brings about an irreversible shift from a society of inequality to one of equality? Such a decision would presuppose that all share the necessity of the general, and thus would very likely be undesirable and undemocratic for many. That is why it is not merely Benjamin's general strike that is violent, but first and foremost the dimension of the general in its insistent demand for overall equality.

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1
Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 277–300; Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1967); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Penguin books, 2001); Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008).

2
Arendt subjects the transgressive function of violence to critique. Although she admits the agency of riot and rebellion, Arendt explicitly disputes the political potentiality of violence or its capacity to produce political power. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harvest Books, 1970).

3
By "bare life" Benjamin means not the life of the deprived, but private life deprived of the dimension of the common.

4
In pre-monotheism, the various gods existed as receptacles of material sacrifice, which confirmed the centrality of mere life insofar as it was mere life's desire for the best meat that made the burning of that same meat a sacrifice worthy of the name. In Genesis, by contrast, Abraham's potential sacrifice of Isaac functions as an attack on this same faculty of mere life – for what could be more instinctually desirable than the well-being of one's child? Where polytheistic sacrifice confirmed mere life, monotheistic sacrifice denied it utterly.

5
Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

6
Žižek, *Violence;* Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), especially the chapter "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification."

7
Žižek, *Violence*.

8
Slavoj Žižek, "Are the Worst Really Full of Passionate Intensity?," *New Statesman*, January 10, 2015 http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/01/slavoj -i-ek-charlie-hebdo-massacre -are-worst-really-full-passi onate-intensity.

9
Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 157–82.

10
A frequent practice of socially engaged art institutions.

11
In fact, no progressive cultural institution would acknowledge such nonrecognition of the socially bereft, when so much effort is invested into social work. However, the remedy here is not theoretical or conceptual; it can only be practical and sensuous.

12
Georg Lukács, '"Bolshevism as a Moral Problem," in *Social Research* 44 (1977): 416–24.