

Whose Servant Is a Master?

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There is a general narrative gradually emerging of what has been going on in recent decades—to cut a long story short, it is the return of what was repressed in the age of modernity and Enlightenment. More precisely, the antagonism we encounter today is not just that between the Enlightenment and its repressed, it is at its most basic an antagonism that runs through the Enlightenment edifice itself, back to Ancient Greece: the antagonism between Plato and Aristotle, Sparta and Athens, French Revolution and English reform, rationalism and empiricism, egalitarian freedom and liberty rooted in customs. It is the antagonism between radical egalitarian universalism and a particular experimental approach, and the truth by far is not on the side of a cautious empirical approach.

The dissatisfaction with the hegemonic ideological coordinates expresses itself in the guise of its opposite, as a redoubled surplus-enjoyment: not the surplus-enjoyment and/or surplus-value that sets in motion the capitalist edifice but a surplus over this surplus itself, a surplus palpable in the obscenity of the populist discourse permeated by racist and sexist enjoyment (see Dolar 2021, p. 167). We are learning the hard way that modernity's attempt at dispensing with traditional forms of domination (father of the family, master, etc.) and installing secular democracy has failed: the dimension of the master is returning with a vengeance in all its forms (patriarchal values, political authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, etc.). It was clear already to Freud that the decline of paternal authority is an ambiguous process: the father as

a figure of moral authority enables the child to adopt a stance of moral autonomy resisting the pressure of their peers and of their corrupted social environment. Following Freud, in his study on authority and family written back in the 1930s, Max Horkheimer made the same point, while, in the same spirit, Adorno pointed out that Hitler was not a paternal figure. And in his classic *Auf dem Weg zur vaterlosen Gesellschaft* (1966), Alexander Mitscherlich analyzes in detail the process by which paternal authority is lost and how it gives birth to new forms of domination.

The obvious answer to this crisis is: no authorities should rule the people, people themselves should reign. But in today's populism, the dark, obscene side of this appeal to the people has also made itself palpable. The 'People' to which populism refers does not exist: populism is by definition a mask of power, it is a fantasized entity evoked by new masters to justify their role as the servants of the people, enabling them to dismiss their opponents as the enemies of the people. The first step towards populism was made centuries ago, when, to counter the loss of traditional authority, a leader (king) proclaimed himself a servant. Friedrich the Great defined himself as "the first servant of State," and this is how, from the early Enlightenment onwards, a master has justified his rule: he is, in reality, the greatest servant, the servant of all his subjects/servants. But there are various modalities of this position of "serving the servants," from technocracy and religious fundamentalism to obscene master-clown, or even, as Mao Ze Dong can be characterized, to a "Lord of Misrule," a master who periodically organizes a rebellion against the order installed by himself. The obscene master is not a direct reaction to the failure of the traditional master; its figure is a reaction to the fact that knowledge (S_2 , the agent of the University discourse) cannot properly function at the place of the agent of a discourse (social link), so that it has to be supplemented by a new obscene figure (see Dolar 2021, p. 174). Insofar as the obscene Master operates as a superego figure, we should recall here Miller's old

claim that the superego is on the side of S_2 , not on the side of S_1 (the master-signifier that totalizes a symbolic space). The point of this disintegration is not that the empirical bearer of a symbolic function (father, leader) cannot live up to his symbolic mandate (say, that a father doesn't properly function as a father) but that this mandate itself is losing its power (see Dolar 2021, p. 123).

The reaction to this predicament is double. We can reluctantly accept the need to return to some form of social authority since, if the symbolic Law (Name-of-the-Father) loses its authority, desire itself (sustained by the prospect of transgressing it) vanishes. Along these lines, some Lacanians claim that the problem today is the decline of the Name-of-the-Father, of the paternal symbolic authority: in its absence, pathological Narcissism explodes, evoking the specter of the primordial Real Father. Consequently, we should try to restore some kind of Law as the agent of prohibition. Although this idea is to be rejected, it correctly points out how the decline of the master in no way automatically guarantees emancipation but can well engender much more oppressive figures of domination. Is, however, the return to Prohibition as sustained by the Law the only way out? It seems that the very last Lacan, aware of this problem, proposed another solution which Miller, in his reading of Lacan, calls "cynical"—we cannot return to the authority of the Law, but what we can do is act as if we sustain the Law... in short, Miller's solution is: we are psychotics trying to play normal hysterics. Miller has fearlessly spelled out the political implications of this stance: a psychoanalyst "acts so that semblances remain at their places while making sure that the subjects under his care do not take them as *real* ... one should somehow bring oneself to remain *taken in by them* (fooled by them)." (Miller 2008, p. 109) The axiom of this cynical wisdom is that "one should protect the semblances of power for the good reason that one should be able to continue to *enjoy*. The point is not to attach oneself to the semblances of the existing power, but to consider them necessary" (ibid., p. 112). (Miller repeats here

the famous line from Kafka's *The Trial*: the law is not true, it is just necessary.) Is this cynical stance the only way out?

Another perhaps more refined form of the return of the repressed is that the repressed returns as a fiction, and, well-aware that it is only a fiction, we fully commit ourselves to it emotionally. The TV spectacle we were able to watch on 9 September 2022—the ceremony of Queen Elisabeth's burial—reminds us of how the British monarchy embodies a similar paradox: the more not only the British monarch but also United Kingdom as a state lost its superpower status and became a local power, the more the status of the British royal family become the stuff of ideological fantasies all around the world—according to the official estimates, the ceremony was watched by 4 billion people around the world. We should not dismiss this as ideology masking actual power relations: the British royal fantasy is one of the key components enabling actual power relations to reproduce themselves. This fantasy doesn't concern only the present royal family: remember how, in 2012, an archaeological excavation was commissioned by the Richard III Society on the site previously occupied by Grey Friars Priory. The University of Leicester identified the skeleton found in the excavation as that of Richard III as a result of radiocarbon dating, comparison with contemporary reports of his appearance, identification of trauma sustained at the Battle of Bosworth and comparison of his mitochondrial DNA with that of two matrilineal descendants of his sister Anne. He was reburied in Leicester Cathedral on 26 March 2015, and, again, the burial ceremony (where only a hundred or so people were expected) was witnessed by over one hundred thousand people. Facts like these cannot be dismissed as reactionary fantasies: the correct insight they bear is the distinction between the symbolic top of power and the actual executive power. Kings and queens reign, they don't rule; their reign is ceremonial and as such crucial.

There is yet another way to mystify the distinction between the monarch's reign and executive power: to focus on how the

traditional dignified master is already per se interchangeable. Since it is a contingent body attached to a name (and as such a purely performative agency), nothing really changes if it is replaced by a double. It is no wonder that leaders, and precisely those who were perceived as unique, are as a rule suspected to have doubles who appear publicly on their behalf (from Tito to Saddam). But is it true that nothing changes? The ideological fantasy is that everything may change. In Ivan Reitman's *Dave* (1993), Dave Kovic, a good-natured and caring temp agency operator, by a staggering coincidence looks exactly like the actual President of the United States, the philandering and distant Bill Mitchell. As such, when Mitchell wants to escape an official luncheon, the Secret Service hires Dave to stand in for him. Unfortunately, Mitchell suffers a severe stroke while having sex with one of his aides, and Dave finds himself stuck in the role indefinitely. The corrupt and manipulative Chief of Staff Bob Alexander plans to use Dave to elevate himself to the White House—but unfortunately, he doesn't count on Dave enjoying himself in office, using his luck to make the country a better place. A prior version of this fantasy is provided in Alexandre Dumas's *The Man in the Iron Mask*: Philippe, Louis XIV's twin brother, is locked in a prison with an iron mask on his face so that nobody can recognize him; the three musketeers and d'Artagnan liberate Philippe and replace Louis (who is put in a prison with iron mask) with him—Philippe becomes the Louis XIV we all know, leading France to glory.

A more radical solution is provided by the figure of a Stalinist Leader who is the very opposite of a monarch: he is definitely not a traditional master, also not an obscene master, and also not an agent of liberal-democratic stance or of contemporary scientific knowledge based on rational reasoning and experimentation. He is rather a pathological distortion of the University discourse, the return of its repressed: in Stalinism, the master-signifier directly overlaps with the space of knowledge. There is no post-truth here, no obscene multiplicity and self-irony: knowledge is acting as Truth itself.

But why a master at all? The other way to deal with the decline of traditional authority is the anarchist way, and anarchism is having a revival today, from Noam Chomsky to David Graeber. Anarchism is not against public power—Catherine Malabou, another neo-anarchist, refers to Jacques Rancière, who asserts “radical equality between citizens who are considered able to both command and obey.” (Catherine Malabou’s words in: Malabou and Balibar 2022, p. 179) There is an essential relationship between the lot and democratic expression: there is public power, but “true democracy would rely on the contingency of who governs and who is governed because governing does not require any particular skill.” (Ibid.) In his reply to Malabou, Étienne Balibar gets to the crux of the problem:

The anarchist will say that we are able to imagine and realize in practice now an alternative social fabric because the whole society could, one way or another, emerge from forms of self-government and self-organization that can be experienced and experimented with at the level of cooperatives, towns and so on. Today, this idea is becoming increasingly influential and people give us examples of what the Kurdish fighters tried in Rojava, what the Zapatistas are trying in Chiapas, and so forth. From there they extrapolate and say what works at the local level could work at the global level, provided you find the right forms of federation. (Étienne Balibar’s words in: *ibid.*, p. 182)

Malabou herself points out two other problems; first, anarchism is becoming today a key feature of global capitalism: “Our current epoch is characterized by a coexistence between a *de facto* anarchism and a dawning or awakening anarchism. *De facto* anarchism is the reign of anarcho-capitalism, which is contemporaneous with the end of the welfare state, creating in citizens a feeling of abandonment—just think of the state of hospitals and healthcare today. My contention is that current capitalism is undertaking its anarchist or libertarian turn: a generalized ‘Uberization’ of life.” (Catherine Malabou’s words in: *ibid.*, p. 178) Second, this anarcho-capitalism is the other side of

a new authoritarianism: “Authoritarianism does not contradict the disappearance of the state; it is its messenger—the mask of this so-called ‘collaborative’ economy which, by bringing professionals and users into direct contact through technological platforms, pulverizes all fixity.” (Ibid., p. 179) One should only add here that this mask is not only a mask, but it is also the hidden truth of the anarchic collaborative economy.

What this means is that the rising authoritarianism is the other side of the disappearance of the state—more precisely, of the most precious function of the state, that of providing public services. We thereby touch upon the vast domain of public services (healthcare, education, etc.) which cannot be provided through expanding cooperatives and other forms of local self-organizations. Balibar makes this point clear: “If you look at the poor in American suburbs, mainly African Americans and other migrant groups, what they suffer from is the fact that America never really had a welfare state or a social state in the British, French, or German sense. The catastrophe for them is not that there is too much state, it’s that there is not enough of the state.” (Étienne Balibar’s words in: *ibid.*, p. 184) So yes, popular mobilization outside party politics and state apparatuses is needed—but communities evoked by anarchists rely on a thick texture of ‘alienated’ institutional mechanisms: where do electricity and water come from? Who guarantees the rule of law? To whom do we turn for healthcare? The more a community is self-ruling, the more this network has to function smoothly and invisibly.

So we have to be very cautious and precise when speaking about the fall of traditional authorities, and especially when we link this fall to the disintegration of the big Other: this disintegration is not a straightforward process of approaching what Miller called “generalized foreclosure,”¹ a state in which the big Other no longer serves as the symbolic space in which subjects

¹ Miller introduces the term “generalized foreclosure” in his lesson of 1986-7 *Ce qui fait insigne*. See Miller 1986-7.

communicate (the idea is that, today, each of us is caught in our own bubble, where our own messages are merely echoed back at us). Is the chaotic digital space of “fake news” nonetheless not a new form of the big Other, a chaotic public space in which influencers fight for numbers of clicks? When we engage in spreading (fake or not) news on Facebook; we are not directly ourselves there, we play a certain role in this new big Other. And is the space of Cancel Culture not also a very strict form of the big Other in which those “canceled” are excluded from the public space? This is what makes so misleading the description of the generalized foreclosure as a carnival without limitation in which every entity is an exception. Duane Rousselle claims: “Today the exception has become the universal. The ‘carnival’, as Lacan called it in his interview with a journalist in 1974, has become a carnival without limitation of place thanks to the power of the virtual, which has modified the category of perceptual space.” (Rousselle 2020) But is there really no limitation in this carnival? Does the limitation, in some sense much stronger than the paternal prohibition that elicits the desire to transgress it, not return with a vengeance in the Politically Correct Woke or Cancel Culture? The characterization of Woke as “racism in the time of the many without the One” (ibid.) may appear problematic, but it hits the mark: in an almost exact opposite to the traditional racism, which opposes a foreign intruder posing a threat to the unity of the One (say, immigrants and Jews to our Nation), Woke reacts to those who are suspected of not having truly abandoned old forms of the One (“patriots,” proponents of patriarchal values, Eurocentrists, etc.). This is why the Woke stance provides the supreme case of how permissiveness turns over into universal prohibition: in a Politically Correct regime, we never know if and when some of us will be canceled for our acts or words, as the criteria are murky.

This murkiness brings us to another key aspect of every actual edifice of state power: no matter how democratic and responsive to its subjects it is, one can easily detect an implicit but unmistakable signal in it: “Forget about our limitations—

ultimately, we can do whatever we want with you!” This excess is not a contingent supplement spoiling the purity of power but its necessary constituent—without it, without the threat of arbitrary omnipotence, state power is not a true power and it loses its authority. And we have to stop playing games of limiting power to a rational-democratic extent: we have to accept this excess fully. It is the Trumpian populists who undermine it.

Consequently, a paradox I argue for is that false opposition is to be left behind: we do not overcome alienation by disalienation, we do not overcome the master by eliminating it, and we do not overcome public power by limiting it to useful public services. The non-alienated autonomous liberal individual is itself a product of alienation in capitalist society; a master effectively serving the people, taking care of them, is a fetish created to prevent the possibility that individuals will themselves take care of themselves; the idea of power serving society justifies power and thus obfuscates its constitutive excess.

But does this not involve a contradiction with Lacan’s claim that there is no big Other? How should we read together the fact that the big Other does not exist with our utter self-sacrificial reliance on the figure of an Other? The obvious reading of the fact that there is no big Other would have been for the bearers of authority to admit their lack of qualification for exerting authority openly to those subjected to them, and thereupon to simply step down, leaving their subjects to confront reality as they can—Hannah Arendt outlines this gesture apropos parental authority:

Modern man could find no clearer expression for his dissatisfaction with the world, for his disgust with things as they are, than by his refusal to assume, in respect to his children, responsibility for all this. It is as though parents daily said: ‘In this world even we are not very securely at home; how to move about in it, what to know, what skills to master, are mysteries to us too. You must try to make out as best you can; in any case you are not entitled to call us to account. We are innocent, we wash our hands of you. (Arendt 1961, p. 191.)

Although this imagined answer of the parents is factually more or less true, it is nonetheless existentially false: a parent cannot wash their hands in this way. The same goes for saying: “I have no free will, my decisions are the product of my brain signals, so I wash my hands, I have no responsibility for crimes that I committed!” Even if this were factually true, it is false as my subjective stance. This means that “the ethical lesson is that the parents should pretend (to know what to do and how the world works), for there is no way out of the problem of authority other than to assume it, in its very fictionality, with all the difficulties and discontents this entails.” (Schuster 2020, p. 219)

But, again, how does this differ from Miller’s cynical solution? Paradoxically, it is that the subject, although fully aware of their incompetence to exert authority, assumes it not with a cynical distance but with full sincerity, ready even to sacrifice their life for it if needed. The opposite of fundamentalism is the awareness that the authority we refer to has no real fundament but is self-referentially grounded in an abyss. Let’s take a perhaps surprising example: the finale of Wagner’s *Rhinegold*, which ends with the contrast between Rhinemaidens bemoaning the lost innocence and the majestic entrance of the Gods into Valhalla, a powerful assertion of the rule of Law. It is customary to claim that the Rhinemaidens’ sincere and authentic complaint makes it clear how the triumphant entrance of the Gods into Valhalla is a fake, a hollow spectacle; however, what if it is precisely the saddening background of the Rhinemaidens’ song that bestows upon entry into Valhalla its authentic greatness? The gods know they are doomed, but nonetheless they heroically perform their ceremonial act. This is why we are not dealing here with the usual fetishist disavowal but with a courageous act of taking a risk and ignoring the limitations, along the lines of Kant’s *Du kannst, denn du sollst!*—I know I am too weak to do it, but I’ll do it nonetheless—a gesture very much the opposite of cynicism. In Wagner’s opera, the cynic is Loge (Loki), the embodiment of

knowledge (S₂), the demi-god of fire, Wotan's clever, manipulative executive servant who does not follow gods to Valhalla; he says in an aside that he is tempted to destroy the complacent gods by fire, but he will think it over. Far below, the Rhinemaidens mourn the loss of their gold and condemn the gods as false and cowardly—Roger Scruton writes of this lament: “And yet, ever sounding in the depths, is the lament of the Rhine-daughters, singing of a natural order that preceded the conscious will that has usurped it. This lament sounds in the unconsciousness of us all, as we pursue our paths to personality, sovereignty and freedom...” (Scruton 2017). These are the last voices that are heard in the opera, “piercing our hearts with sudden longing, melting our bones with nostalgic desire,” before the gods, “marching in empty triumph to their doom,” enter Valhalla to a thunderous orchestral conclusion (ibid.). Is this triumph really empty? Is there not in it a heroic dignity, an indication that Wotan is taking a risk, well aware that his authority is not properly grounded?

But, again, are we here not back at the cynical position—authority is not true, just necessary? No, because, to quote Miller himself, the cynical position “resides in saying that enjoyment is *the only thing that is true*,” while in the case evoked by Arendt, the fiction is truer than reality, and thus we are ready to risk our life for it precisely because it is a fiction—we are back at Lacan's “the truth has the structure of a fiction.” “There is no big Other” does not mean that if there is no God, then everything is permitted—as Lacan knew it, it means the exact opposite, that everything is prohibited, and to break out of this prohibition I have to act counterfactually. “There is no big Other” is not a cold description of the state of things—such a description implies that I occupy the place of a big Other, a neutral view of reality, in the same sense that universal historicism exempts me from historical relativism. “There is no big Other” means that, in a maximum of subjective engagement, I have to identify myself as the hole in the big Other, as the crack in its edifice.

So, to finish, one has to correct Lacan here: the last, most radical, subjective position is not that of the analyst. After achieving this, after traversing the fantasy and assuming that there is no big Other, the only way to avoid cynicism is to heroically pass to the position of a new master.

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