



Bülent Somay

Welcome to the desert of the Real, part II

In his post-9/11 essay "Welcome to the desert of the real", philosopher Slavoj Žižek argued fictions of the "stagedness" of life under late capitalism shockingly became "real"; that the attacks were an intrusion into US life from an "outside" at whose expense peace had been bought. Four years after 9/11, the US suffered another catastrophe. But the greatest shock of Hurricane Katrina was over the lawlessness that followed. Here, theorist Bülent Somay argues that when "the Real" upsets the balance of forces in US society, "civilization" itself breaks down; that when the coercive presence of the state is removed, the capitalist superego collapses. As natural and human disasters continue to strike around the world, placing the cohesion of societies under extreme duress, assumptions about "civilization" will increasingly need to be challenged. Arguments such as these are as important as they are uncomfortable.

In one of his lesser-known novels (*Tunnel in the Sky*), Robert Heinlein tries to answer the question, "Which species of animal is the deadliest?" The answer is, of course, human beings — the only animals who kill, maim, and destroy without the natural need, an instinctual drive. For human beings, even the fight for survival has ceased to be something natural: an animal under attack will defend itself by the instinctual response "fight or flight"; human beings, on the other hand, plan ahead, take precautions, "attack first" as the best line of defence, without considering whether the threat to their survival is real or merely imaginary. The desire for *individual* survival (as opposed to the species-oriented instinct in animals), and for preserving what constitutes individuality (whether the elements which constitutes it be bodily integrity, worldly possessions, or psychological features), makes human beings the deadliest of all animals: they can kill for "a fistful of dollars" (even when they are not hungry), for honour, for God, for king and country, or just "for the hell of it", for mere pleasure. Sartre's dictum, *l'enfer c'est les autres*, is a simple acknowledgement of this fact: when we are looking for hell, for the source of ultimate pain and loss, we tend to turn to an "other" that is other than human; hell, however, is other human beings. Verbal and visual descriptions of hell tend to prove this: demons, devils, and such are nothing but exaggerated images of human beings with surplus phallic imagery (horns, tails, spears, tridents), who occupy a position of absolute and undisputed power.

Since the very concept of hell is nothing but another failed attempt at describing the Real, the black hole in the texture of our empirical environments, the non-existent time/space where all attempts at description (hence symbolization, language) fail, then "other people" (an over-translation of Sartre's *les autres*) are at the same time *the Real*. Although most of the time we are half-aware of this fact, which hovers uncannily at the edges of our consciousness, the existence of individual and social superegos serves to hide it from our conscious minds. We take it for granted that our neighbour will not

turn into a raping and plundering maniac *for no reason at all*. Of course, there are psychiatric explanations (trauma, a hitherto unsurfaced genetic disorder, etc.) that tell us that there is a remote possibility that he may become so, but since the possibility is so rationally explained (away), we can sleep in peace.

We sleep in peace, not because we inherently love or trust our neighbour, but because we believe that the Name-of-the-Father, Lacan's famous phrase for the symbolic existence of a prohibiting/castrating father (*le nom du père / le non du père*), a metaphor for the actual father, the State, or God, is standing guard. Of course, there are many burglars, petty thieves, murderers, serial killers, and terrorists wandering about, but they are another kind of people, they are not our neighbours, not *of us*. The Name-of-the-Father, in this instance represented by the State with its police force, courts, prosecutors, jails, and hypodermic syringes, stands guard for us against these "others". They are one of the main reasons we consent to, even tolerate, the existence of the state. The Name-of-the-Father is never a separate entity, in and/or for itself; it consists of the endless series of safeguards we take against our fellow men, our brothers (not *sisters*). Our neighbour has a conscience; when it fails, he has an intrinsic fear of being caught in the act by other neighbours, which will discredit him in the endless game of micro-power going on between neighbours. When this fear fails, there is the state with its jails and gallows, and failing even this, there are the psychiatric institutions, which will declare him insane and take him out of the micro-power games altogether, make him a non-subject. Until recently, this last instance of the Name-of-the-Father was assigned to God and/or religious institutions; now that God and religion are to a great extent *passé*, they have been replaced by psychiatric institutions, which have been prepared for this function since the end of the eighteenth century.

The Real is that which disturbs our sleep, that which escapes this intricate web of checks and counter-checks of the Name-of-the-Father. The Real is where the phallic function and the threat of castration have no meaning. An earthquake or a storm belongs in the realm of the Real: we can't threaten a storm by castration now, can we? It is beyond our (or anybody's) powers to castrate. If SF predictions come to pass, we may foresee an earthquake and modify its force and direction, or even prevent it altogether. But we can't threaten it and make it change its mind: it is not afraid of us. Because it does not know fear, it has no ideas or feelings that have a meaning in the symbolic order, that is, in language, which is organized around a central, castrating principle, the phallus. A natural disaster is not subject to the phallic principle; it just *is*, or, if we have the know-how and the means to avert it, isn't.

The first invitation

Slavoj Žižek christened the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center towers "The Desert of the Real" (referring to a line in the film *Matrix*), thus informing us of a new phase in our relationship with the Real (that is, our lame attempts to name, symbolize, and hence domesticate it). The Real was no longer just fire and brimstone from the heavens; it was people who were civilized enough to hijack and fly a plane. In the multicultural world in which we live, any of these people could have been our neighbours, and therefore, theoretically at least, were supposed to have been under the control of the Name-of-the-Father. Alas, they were not: they did not have a conscience as defined by Western civilization, they were not afraid of the US police or army, prisons or death rows, and, guess what, they were not afraid of death itself.

To be made aware of the existence of such people was a big puncture in the American people's symbolic order. US culture had always flirted with the Real in Hollywood films, either as natural disasters, as alien invasions, or as "pure evil" — people who had nothing left to lose and were therefore liberated from the checks and counter-checks of the Name-of-the-Father. On 9/11, the flirtation ended in a serious relationship, and, like every flirtation-turned-serious, it was an act of pure horror. US audiences had watched the tall, phallic buildings of New York torn down by natural disasters, bomb attacks, or alien invasions many times; but this time it was for real, or *the Real*. And this time, the Real did not appear in the form of a natural disaster, aliens, or a single lunatic who always died during the act. In this case, "the Real" was an organized group, and although the attackers themselves died during the act, the organization as a whole lived on (or was supposed to do so).

This fact itself had ambiguous implications. On one hand, al-Qaeda, as the embodiment of pure evil (not much different from James Bond's Spectre), continued to be a threat — so we had reason to fear. On the other hand, at least the threat was represented and symbolized. By creating (or exaggerating) a continuous threat in the form of a transnational organization of pure evil (and its leader as some kind of Satan), the US government managed to *domesticate* the Real as a group of religious fanatics who were willing to commit suicide in exchange for a secure place in Heaven. Now it was possible to place the Real at the receiving end of a continuous war effort ("War Against Terror"), and represent it as something tangible, definable, and manageable.

This first encounter with the Real, therefore, was safely domesticated, and even turned to advantage by being made a *casus belli* for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. No longer the unspoken, indescribable act of terror, 9/11 was the reason the US and British troops were in Iraq, and killing more people than the 9/11 attacks. This, however, was an "act of war", and hence had a very definite place in the symbolic order (unless, of course, you happened to be of the troops in the heat of war itself). The absence of a superego, meaning a Western-style conscience, in al-Qaeda militants was matched by the military might of the US army. Though not designed to fight organizations like al-Qaeda, the US military was nevertheless deployed to rebuild and reinforce trust in the Name-of-the-Father, which had been toppled along with its most prominent phallic representation.

The second invitation

The second invitation to the "Desert of the Real" came on almost exactly the same date four years later. It was partially named and symbolized: Hurricane Katrina (naming hurricanes, storms, and tornadoes being another attempt to symbolize the Real) hit the southeastern US, devastating most of metropolitan New Orleans. The storm had been forecasted a long time before, but its effect was hugely underestimated. Though definitely an encounter with the Real, such encounters are a part of our everyday lives: a year earlier, a huge tsunami hit Sumatra, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and India, killing more than 200 000 people. In 1999, an earthquake hit the Turkish cities of Izmit and Gölcük, killing, by unofficial estimates, more than 30 000 people. The New Orleans disaster, therefore, was not something completely new.

What was new — and uncannily surprising — about it was the US government's utter failure to deal with it. Even the "Third World" states who faced the tsunami a year ago were much better than the US in disaster management; even the Turkish state, which is notorious for its sloppiness in

dealing with such events, managed to retain a degree of decency and respect for human life six years ago. The US government, however, claimed extenuating circumstances, blaming its inefficiency in dealing with the catastrophe on the extent of the destruction, especially the destruction *of US citizens by US citizens*. Not surprisingly, New Orleans' "homeland security chief" (a post-9/11 office, to be sure) Colonel Terry Ebbert said, "Some of the catastrophic deaths that some people predicted may not have occurred," and added that the search for the dead will be done *without media coverage*. His excuse was quite humanitarian: "You can imagine sitting in Houston and watching somebody removed from your parents' property. We don't think that's proper." The question is, of course, about the propertiless dead. It is obvious that the post 9/11 semi-military rulers hope (quite rightly) that most of the dead are homeless or unregistered citizens, and therefore will not show up in statistics, dragging the death toll down to "acceptable" levels. Nobody in Houston will be asking after them, or waiting for their bodies to be removed from "their property". They did not exist for the state while alive, so they had better not turn up to embarrass it when dead.

But the inefficiency and cover-up efforts of the US government after Katrina are not our main concern here. The hurricane itself was a brief encounter with the Real, but an encounter already expected and symbolized/represented. The *real* encounter with the Real occurs in the gap between the hurricane and the "rescue effort", which constitutes a tear, a crack in the symbolic texture of "catastrophe and rescue" discourse. The true horror of the New Orleans catastrophe was the wave of raping, looting, and shooting that occurred *in between* the hurricane and the rescue. After the dust had settled, the respectable international media backed down, saying events had been exaggerated, that they had not been properly documented, and that most of the eyewitnesses had disappeared. But in the terrible interval between the hurricane and the time the Federal Government finally managed to control, if not the atrocities themselves, then at least media coverage of them, hundreds, if not thousands, of people were raped, killed, harassed, and robbed. Much of the early media coverage revealed that the "security forces" themselves had become extremely trigger-happy, and in fact, had been responsible for some of the deaths.

In short, when the American concept of "civilization as we know it" broke down, with it went what little superego was left in the US population. Ivan Karamazov said, *"esli Boga net -- znachit, vsio pozvoleno"* -- "if there is no God, then everything is permissible". Lacan argued that the reverse was the case: if there is no God, nothing is permissible, because without the Name-of-the-Father, there is nobody to give permission for anything. In practical terms, this means it is dog-eat-dog universe, without any kind of order. When this is the case, there is nobody to declare "Thou shalt not kill" -- one is not even "permitted" to live. This is exactly what happened in New Orleans, with one small difference: what was missing in the days of Katrina was not God, but "civilization", or, in clearer terms, the basic infrastructure of capitalism.

The Name-of-the-Father doesn't live here anymore

In the civilized world, the superego is not a structure belonging to capitalism as such: it is a psychic faculty shaped by civilization, that is, by language, patriarchy and class-society in general. The capitalist superego is only the last phase of this formation, but pretends to be *the only possible form* that it can take, as an extension of the pretension of capitalism, of being the only possible form that civilization can take under the conditions of our time. No one has

expressed this pretension better than by Tony Blair in his speech following the London underground bombings: torn between his duty as PM to go to London, the site of the catastrophe, and his duty to stay in Gleneagles as a member of the G8 summit, Blair announced that the attack was directed towards "this country and other civilized nations throughout the world". But, since the other seven members were standing right behind him with sombre expressions on their faces while he made his speech, it was quite obvious (visually at least) that what he meant by "civilized nations" was what was represented by the G8, in one word, capitalism. But, however hard Blair tries to identify civilization with capitalism, it is not true for his country, neither is it true for six of the seven leaders lined up behind him, the sole exception being George W. Bush, for in *his* country, the US, civilization is indeed identical with capitalism.

This is the reason why, in the US, when the capitalist structure (that is, the material circumstances, life styles, conditions of production, circulation, consumption, and communication identified with capitalism) collapses, civilization also goes down the drain. In most European and "Third World" countries, which have a history of civilization *before* capitalism, the collapse of the capitalist infra- and superstructure may be a catastrophe, but the pre-capitalist cultural forms are always-already there to take over, at least until the crisis is over. However, in the US, which was built by settlers from all over the world who were the excesses of their respective civilizations, and through a process which almost totally annihilated what pre-capitalist cultural formations were already there on American soil, civilization starts (and perhaps, we have reason to fear, ends) with capitalism.

Both during the tsunami in the Indian Ocean last year, and in the big earthquake in Turkey six years ago, the capitalist infrastructure was torn down by an "act of God". What followed was in part chaos: of course there was looting, fights over aid, scattered shooting, maybe a few instances of rape, and perhaps, in very extreme circumstances, cannibalism. People may have lived in a *homo homini lupus* situation for a time. But there was also mutual aid; in most places, pre-capitalist cultural reflexes took over; people helped each other, a sense of community, of "love thy neighbour", existed as a counterpoint to unchecked, extra-ethical individualism. In Turkey, ultra-nationalist, proto-fascist groups and socialists and anarchists are known to have joined in the rescue effort, if not hand-in-hand, at least side-by-side. In both cases, in short, the commandments "Thou shalt not kill" and "Love thy neighbour" were, at least partially, in effect. It means that the pre-capitalist superego had taken over in the absence of the capitalist one, which could only survive between the horns of (a) the material wealth and its superstructural consequences provided by capitalism; and (b) the coercive and regulating power of the capitalist nation-state. By providing the material means to eliminate the need, if not the desire, to turn on your neighbour, and, when this fails, the coercive apparatus in the form of the police, prisons, and electric chairs, capitalism acts as the social superego. These, however, are only two instances of the Name-of-the-Father, and they are extremely fragile in the face of any encounter with the Real. The other instances of the Name-of-the-Father are pre-capitalist in character, and have to do with the concepts of family, morality, community, and mutual aid, concepts actually discredited by the rise of capitalism.

The problem in New Orleans seems to have been that, since the US has identified capitalism with civilization, and done away with pre-capitalistic cultural forms not only conceptually, but also in practice, when the capitalist superego collapses, there is nothing to replace it, even temporarily. When

communication, power, clean water, and shopping facilities broke down, the residents of New Orleans (or those who did not have the means to run away prior to Katrina) were abandoned. Their state, which was supposed to be the dominant power in the world, powerful enough to change the social and economic structures of whole nations forcibly, was not there: there were only warring gangs, looters, rapists having a field day, and impotent security forces shooting innocent people trying to get away from this bedlam. The American superego had collapsed.

The New Orleans disaster (we should be thankful that the second Hurricane, Rita, was not as catastrophic, or we would also have to talk about a "Houston disaster") demonstrated that, for all its apparent glory, American civilization is extremely fragile against such confrontations with the Real, which obliterate (albeit temporarily) the over-sensitive balance between capitalist material conditions and the coercive power of the state. It seems as if there was some kind of innate evil in American people waiting to be unleashed. This statement, for all its metaphysical overtones, is not too far from the truth: it was what Žižek calls "the Id-evil" that was unleashed in New Orleans. This was not evil with the pretension of being for some "higher good", as it was in the *Auto-da-Fé*, or in the reign of terror after the French Revolution ("superego-evil"); nor was it evil for simple individual gain ("ego-evil"); rather it was evil for pure *jouissance* (enjoyment). New Orleans was, at least for a time, the domain of uncontrolled *jouissance*: people killing, looting, and raping for no reason other than that *they could*. They did not loot for a material need (those who looted only because they were hungry are not our concern here, though there must have been those who did), they did not rape for sexual pleasure (very few rapists do), and they did not kill out of anger, revenge, or material gain.

In the 1999 Joel Schumacher film, *8MM*, a private detective (played by Nicholas Cage) is hired by an elderly and wealthy widow, who is disturbed by an 8mm pornographic film reel she found in her deceased (also elderly) husband's safe, depicting the torture and murder of a young woman. She asks the detective to find out whether this film was *real* — in porn terms, "snuff". The film takes us to the porn underworld, where at every junction we are told that there is no such thing as snuff, for if there were, it would be self-defeating, even suicidal for the porn industry. Just when we are about to be convinced by this argument, it turns out that the film was snuff after all, and that the young woman was in fact killed. It had nothing to do with the porn industry itself, however: the old and wealthy man himself had hired the director, the cameraman, the male actor ("the machine" who always wore a leather mask), and the woman to shoot the film — the woman, of course, being completely ignorant of the real intention. When Cage discovers this, he seizes the old man's male secretary (who was an accomplice all the way), and asks, "Why did he do it?" The answer is obvious: "Because he could." Not because what we half-see (see incompletely, through "the corner of our eye", by "looking awry") in the film was immensely erotic: it was badly made, with poor camerawork and terrible colours. Not because watching a woman being mutilated and eventually killed aroused him. No, what aroused the wealthy old man was the ability to do it, the power of "I can", and not the outcome itself.

In American culture (like in any other culture), this power of "I can" is reserved for the very wealthy. In other cultures, however, be they European or Asian, or even Latin American, which retain some kind of a pre-capitalistic superego, "I can" is hardly enough: the older, broader instances of the Name-of-the-Father get in the way, hinder the pure *jouissance* of "I can". In

the US, which has built its civilization on the ruthless extermination of an entire native population and a regime of slavery unprecedented anywhere else in the world throughout history, the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" means, "Thou shalt not kill, if you can't get away with it." The New Orleans disaster demonstrated that in extreme circumstances, the power of "I can" will not be reserved for the wealthy. When any kind of disaster hits (this could be an economic crisis too — a newer, bigger, and deeper version of the Depression), it will be *homo-homini-lupus*-land all over the US. Everybody, from all classes, ethnic backgrounds, age- and income-groups, who "can", *will*.

The New Orleans disaster is probably just the trailer of a film we will see in full in the not-too-distant future. The increasing fragility of American civilization, along with the fragility of its economic and military might, makes a mass visit to "the desert of the Real" for an extended period of time a real possibility. The increasing emphasis by the American Right on "family values", "morality", and religion (a puritanical Christianity) is just an indication that they, too, are aware of this fact (although "they do not know what they know"), and are doing their best to avert this fate. They are, alas, bound to fail, because (a) "family values" are what one can see in the real-world American family: failure and constant break-up; (b) "morality is not ethics"; and (c) the kind of religion the extreme right is preaching can only breed more hate, as can be seen in the issue of abortion. In order for the Americans to survive their next visit(s) to the desert of the Real, they have to learn to love their neighbours (that is, each other), the spirit of community and mutual aid, which were thrown out of their cultural structure a long time ago. But in order to be able to do that, they must learn to love their neighbours all over the world, voluntarily to give up the fragile, transient, but for the time being apparently mighty, power of coercion they enjoy: the power of "I can". Whether they can do it is the *real* question for all of us, all over the world.

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