

brutally arbitrary way: these Bantustans amounted to 13 per cent of the country's land, carefully selected so as not to contain any important mineral deposits, the remainder being reserved for the white population. The process was completed by the Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act of 1970, which formally designated all black South Africans as citizens of the homelands, even if they lived in 'white South Africa', and cancelled their South African citizenship. From the apartheid standpoint, this solution was ideal. Whites possessed most of the land, and blacks were proclaimed foreigners in their own country, treated as guest workers who could be deported at any point back to their 'homeland'. What cannot but strike the eye is the artificial nature of this entire process. Black groups were suddenly told that an unattractive and infertile piece of land was their 'true home'. And even if a Palestinian state were to emerge on the West Bank, would it not be precisely such a Bantustan, its formal 'independence' serving the purpose of liberating the Israeli government from any responsibility for the welfare of the people living there?

The Limits of Neighbourhood

To understand fully the deepest background of our troubled relationship with neighbours, one should take a closer philosophical look at the notion of the Neighbour. As Adam Kotsko has shown in his book *Creepiness*, 'creepy' is today's name for the uncanny core of a neighbour: every neighbour is ultimately creepy. What makes a neighbour creepy are not his weird acts but the impenetrability of the desire that sustains these acts. For example, the creepiness of Marquis de Sade's writing is not primarily its content (which is rather dull and repetitive) but 'why is he doing it?' Everything in Sade is a 'sadist' perversion, everything except his writing, the act of its creation, which cannot be accounted for as a perversion. So the question is: What does a creepy neighbour want? What does he get out of it? An experience, an encounter, gets creepy when we all of a sudden suspect that he is doing something for a motive other than the obvious one.

The onset of the post-'68 hedonist permissiveness that was part of the prospect of integrating nations into larger communities held together by the global market did not give rise to universal tolerance but, on the contrary, triggered a new wave of racist segregation: 'Our future as common markets will be balanced by an increasingly hard-line extension of the process of segregation.'⁴⁴ Why?

Those who understand globalization as an opportunity for the entire earth to be a unified space of communication, one which brings together all humanity, often fail to notice this dark side of their proposition. Since a Neighbour is, as Freud suspected long ago, primarily a Thing, a traumatic intruder, someone whose different way of life (or, rather, way of *jouissance* materialized in its social practices and rituals) disturbs us and, when the Neighbour comes too close, throws the balance of our way of life off the rails, this can also give rise to an aggressive reaction aimed at getting rid of this disturbing intruder. As Peter Sloterdijk puts it: 'At first, more communication means, above all, more conflict.'⁴⁵ This is why Sloterdijk is right to claim that the attitude of 'understanding-each-other' has to be supplemented by the attitude of 'getting-out-of-each-other's-way', by maintaining an appropriate distance, by implementing a new 'code of discretion'. European civilization finds it easier to tolerate different ways of life precisely on account of what its critics usually denounce as its weakness and failure, namely the alienation of social life. One of the things alienation means is that distance is woven into the very social texture of everyday life: even if I live side by side with others, in my normal state I ignore them. I am allowed not to get too close to others. I move in a social space where I interact with others obeying certain external 'mechanical' rules, without sharing their inner world. Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that, sometimes, a dose of alienation is indispensable for the peaceful coexistence of ways of life. Sometimes *alienation* is not a problem but a solution.

Sometimes, alienation is like alcohol for Homer Simpson: 'the cause of, and solution to, all life's problems'!

What, then, is the factor that renders different cultures (or, rather, ways of life in the rich complexity of their daily practices) incompatible, what is the obstacle that prevents their fusion or, at least, their harmoniously indifferent co-existence? The psychoanalytic answer is: *jouissance* (Lacan's term designating excessive pleasure coinciding with pain). It is not only that different modes of *jouissance* are incongruous with each other, without a common measure; the other's *jouissance* is insupportable for us because (and insofar as) we cannot find a proper way to relate to our own *jouissance* — the ultimate incompatibility is not between mine and other's *jouissance*, but between myself and my own *jouissance*, which forever remains an ex-timate intruder. It is to resolve this deadlock that the subject projects the core of its *jouissance* onto an Other, attributing to this Other full access to a consistent *jouissance*. Such a constellation cannot but give rise to jealousy: in jealousy, the subject creates or imagines a paradise (a utopia of full *jouissance*) from which he is excluded. The same definition applies to what one can call political jealousy: from the anti-Semitic fantasies about the excessive enjoyment of the Jews to the Christian fundamentalists' fantasies about the weird sexual practices of gays and lesbians.

When Freud and Lacan insist on the problematic nature of the basic Judeo-Christian injunction to love one's neighbour, they are thus not just making the standard critico-ideological point about how every notion of

universality is coloured by our particular values and in this way implies secret exclusions. They are making a much stronger point about the incompatibility of the idea of the Neighbour with the very dimension of universality. What resists universality is the properly *inhuman* dimension of the Neighbour. The humanist universality that is condemned to failure is the universality of fellow men who recognize themselves in others, i.e. who 'know' that beneath all our political and religious passions we are all the same, sharing the same fears and emotions . . .

The same strategy of ideological 'humanization' ('rendering-human' in the sense, for example, of the proverbial wisdom 'to err is human') is a key constituent of the ideological (self-)presentation of the Israeli Defense Forces. The Israeli media love to dwell on the imperfections and psychic traumas of the Israeli soldiers, presenting them neither as perfect military machines nor as over-human heroes, but as ordinary people who, caught in the traumas of history and warfare, commit errors and can get lost like all normal people do. When, in January 2003, the Israeli Defense Forces demolished the house of the family of a 'suspected terrorist', they did so with accentuated kindness, even helping the family to move their furniture out before destroying the house with a bulldozer. A similar incident was reported a short time before in the Israeli press. And when an Israeli soldier was searching a Palestinian house for suspects, the mother of the family called her daughter by her name in order to calm her down, and the surprised soldier learned that the frightened girl's name was the same as that of his own

daughter; in a sentimental upsurge, he pulled out his wallet and showed her picture to the Palestinian mother. It is easy to discern the falsity of such a gesture of empathy: the notion that, in spite of political differences, we are all human beings with the same loves and worries, neutralizes the impact of what the soldier is effectively doing at that moment. So, the only proper reply of the mother would be: 'If you really are human like me, why are you doing what you are doing now?' The soldier could then take refuge only in reified duty – 'I don't like it, but it is my duty' – thereby avoiding the subjective assumption of his duty. The message of such humanization is to emphasize the gap between the complex reality of the person and the role he has to play against his true nature: 'In my family, genetic is not military,' as one of the interviewed soldiers says in Claude Lanzmann's *Tsahal*.

Does this mean that we are constrained to cultural relativism, that there is no universal human dimension? No, but this universal dimension is to be sought beyond sympathy and understanding, beyond the 'we're all human' level: at another level, which should be designated precisely as that of the *inhuman* Neighbour. Let us illustrate this key point with a perhaps unexpected example. As Robert Pippin has shown in his perspicacious reading of John Ford's film *The Searchers*, this move towards the abyss of the Neighbour is what happens in the crucial scene towards the end, when Ethan finally gets hold of Debbie (who has spent years as a captive of Comanches) and runs after her. Throughout the film, his explicit intent is not to save her and bring her home, but to kill her: he is

motivated by the racist idea that a white girl who has lived with Indians becomes a worthless outcast and deserves only to die. Holding Debbie in his hands, he raises her up, embraces her and decides to take her home. Where did this change come from? The standard explanation is that, at the vital moment, Ethan's deep goodness takes over. Pippin, however, rejects this reading. He focuses on a strange shot of Ethan's (John Wayne's) face just before he gets hold of Debbie, when he sees her running away from him. Ethan's gaze, Pippin notes, does not express some reawakened human warmth and sympathy. Rather,

the primary expression here is *puzzlement*, some indication that Ethan does not know his own mind and suddenly realizes he does not know his own mind . . . What we and he discover is that he did not know his own mind well, that he avowed principles that were partly confabulations and fantasy. We (and he) find out the depth and extent of his actual commitments only when he finally must act.⁴⁶

One can therefore say that, at the moment of the strange shot of Ethan's perplexed face, Ethan discovers himself as a Neighbour, in the impenetrable abyss of his subjectivity. When he finally finds himself in the position to act upon this self-identity, he confronts the undecidable enigma of his personality that is undermining his identity as the 'Ethan' onto which he (and we, the film's spectators) have been fixed: a man obsessed by a murderous commitment to securing Debbie's redemption through

killing her. The link with universality is clear here: Ethan accepts Debbie not by 'finally understanding her', getting an empathetic insight into how she must have experienced her predicament, but by realizing that he does not understand even himself, that he is also a stranger to himself.

Universality is a universality of 'strangers', of individuals reduced to the abyss of impenetrability in relation not only to others but also to themselves. When dealing with foreigners, we should always bear in mind Hegel's concise formula: the secrets of the ancient Egyptians were secret also for the Egyptians themselves. That's why the privileged way to reach a Neighbour is not that of empathy, of trying to understand them, but a disrespectful laughter which makes fun both of them and of us in our mutual lack of (self-)understanding (inclusive of 'racist' jokes).

And we should ruthlessly apply this insight also to the poor; more precisely, on the attempts of the well-off to 'understand' the poor, to learn how it feels to be poor. Alenka Zupančič develops this point succinctly apropos Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), a movie directly dealing with the limits of 'understanding the poor'. Sturges

frontally dismantles the axiom 'poor is good', as well as the condescending posture relating to it. And, philosophically most interestingly, he proposes a kind of *ontology of poverty*. I am referring to the deservedly famous exchange between Sullivan and his valet Burrows, when the latter learns that Sullivan wants to get out there to experience poverty and deprivation first hand, so as to

make a better and more realistic movie about it. Here are some bits of the dialogue:

Sullivan: I'm going out on the road to find out what it's like to be poor and needy and then I'm going to make a picture about it.

Burrows: If you'll permit me to say so, sir, the subject is not an interesting one. The poor know all about poverty and only the morbid rich would find the topic glamorous.

Sullivan: But I'm doing it for the poor. Don't you understand?

[. . .]

Burrows: You see, sir, rich people and theorists – who are usually rich people – think of poverty in the negative, as the lack of riches – as disease might be called the lack of health. But it isn't, sir. Poverty is not the lack of anything, but a positive plague, virulent in itself, contagious as cholera, with filth, criminality, vice and despair as only a few of its symptoms. It is to be stayed away from, even for purposes of study.

This is an amazing speech, a speech that we should repeat and recite today with rigour, in the face of the (exclusively) humanitarian approach to poverty and of its sentimentalization. There is absolutely nothing glamorous or 'nice' about poverty, and we should not think of it simply in negative terms: it is an ontological entity of its own standing. Poverty does not simply mean to have

little or no money; it is not reducible to the description of one's miserable circumstances.

As much as a good-hearted rich man may want to think that underneath all his wealth, he is just the same kind of human being as the poor are, *he is wrong*. Once we have our social (class) positions, there is no zero-level of humanity where we are all the same. He is not one of them: they are not in the same boat, and it would be extremely presumptuous to think so.⁴⁷

Sturges engages here in an implicit polemic with Frank Capra, the director whose work can be conceived as a long variation on the motif of the supposed 'goodness' of the (poor) neighbour. As the critic James Harvey writes:

Capra seems nearly unable to imagine a poor person who isn't genteel, once you get to know him. Getting to know him is always the main problem – as it is with your neighbor, too. John Doe sees 'the answer' – 'the only thing capable of saving this cockeyed world' resides in people's 'finally learning that the guy next door isn't a bad egg.' But what if you learn that he *is* – even worse than you imagined, or at least more troublesome? Then what? – forget him?⁴⁸

And exactly the same holds for refugees. What if 'getting to know them' reveals that they are more or less like us – impatient, violent, demanding – *plus*, usually, part of a culture that cannot accept many of the features we perceive as self-evident? One should therefore cut the link

between refugees and humanitarian empathy, in which we ground our help to refugees in our compassion for their suffering. We should, rather, help them because it is our ethical duty to do so, because we cannot not do it if we want to remain decent people, but without any of the sentimentalism that breaks down the moment we realize that most of the refugees are *not* 'people like us' (not because they are foreigners, but because *we* ourselves are not 'people like us'). To paraphrase Winston Churchill: 'Sometimes doing the good is not enough, even if it is the best you can do. Sometimes you must do what is required.' It is not enough to do (what we consider to be) the best for the refugees, receive them with open hands, show sympathy and generosity to the utmost of our ability. The very fact that such displays of generosity make us feel good should make us suspicious: are we not doing this to forget what is required?

Hateful Thousands in Cologne

Who are the 'hateful eight' in Quentin Tarantino's film of the same name? The *entire* group of participants – white racists and the black Union soldier, men and women, law officers and criminals – all are equally mean, brutal and revengeful. The most embarrassing moment in the film occurs when the black officer (played by the superb Samuel L. Jackson) narrates in detail and with obvious pleasure to an old Confederate general how he killed the general's racist son, who had been responsible for many black deaths: after forcing him to march naked in cold winds, Jackson promises the freezing man he will get a warm covering if he performs fellatio; the deed done, Jackson reneges on his promise and lets him die. So there are no good guys in the struggle against racism: they are all engaged in it with utmost brutality. And is the lesson of the recent Cologne sex attacks not uncannily similar to the lesson of the film? Even if (most of) the refugees are effectively victims fleeing from ruined countries, this does not prevent some of them from acting in a despicable way. We tend to forget that there is nothing redemptive in suffering: being a victim at the bottom of the social ladder does not make you some kind of privileged voice of morality and justice, as we saw earlier in Ruth Klüger's example.

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‘Few thinkers illustrate
the contradictions
of contemporary
capitalism better than
Slavoj Žižek – one of
the world’s best-known
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SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

AGAINST THE DOUBLE BLACKMAIL

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AGAINST
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Refugees,
Terror and Other
Troubles with
the Neighbours

Today, hundreds of thousands of people, desperate to escape war, violence and poverty, are crossing the Mediterranean to seek refuge in Europe. Our response, argues Žižek, offers two versions of ideological blackmail: either we open our doors as widely as possible; or we try to pull up the drawbridge. Both solutions, states Žižek, are bad. They merely prolong the problem, rather than tackling it.

The refugee crisis also presents an opportunity, a unique chance for Europe to redefine itself: but, if we are to do so, we have to start raising unpleasant and difficult questions. We must also acknowledge that large migrations are our future. Only then can we commit to a carefully prepared process of change, one founded not on a community that sees the excluded as a threat, but one that takes as its basis the shared substance of our social being.

The only way, in other words, to get to the heart of one of the greatest issues confronting Europe today is to insist on the global solidarity of the exploited and oppressed. Maybe such solidarity is a utopia. But, warns Žižek, if we don't engage in it, then we are really lost. And we will deserve to be lost.

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Slavoj Žižek is a Hegelian philosopher, Lacanian psychoanalyst, and political activist. He is international director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities and the author of numerous books on dialectical materialism and the critique of ideology and art, including *Less Than Nothing*, *Living in the End Times*, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* and, most recently, *Trouble in Paradise*.



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Against the Double
Blackmail

*Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles
with the Neighbours*

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK



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