

Of Oxen and Obama: What Happens After the Orgy?

Jeremy Fernando

On January 26th, 2009, the Lunar New Year arrived, heralding in the Year of the Ox. Perhaps there is no guiding symbol more apt for this year than a castrated bull; a work-horse, domesticated, obedient, and non-independent. After all, in this current climate of an economy in disarray, this is the call — 'herd together, buckle down, and move in the same direction'.

Five days earlier, the world witnessed a historic event when the first black President of the United States of America — Barack Obama — was sworn in. At first glance, these two events seem to have nothing to do with each other. However, one finds echoes of the Ox throughout his inauguration speech, especially in his call to remain "faithful to the ideals of our forebears, and true to our founding documents. So it has been. So it must be with this generation of Americans."¹ A brutal translation of this would be, 'this is what you have to do, so just all shut up and follow the leader, follow me'. After all, the Obama formula for

¹ The transcript to Obama's inauguration speech is widely available from various sources, including <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20text-obama.html>. All references to the speech will be from this source.

success is summarized under the maxim of "what free men and women can achieve when imagination is joined to common purpose...". Just how this collective imagination is formed is altogether a different tale. It is not surprising that there was no elucidation of this point; it would have been terribly inappropriate, not to mention instant political suicide, to invoke any memory of Stalin and totalitarianism at his welcome party. However the traces of the call for communality — of persons under a common ideal, goal, idea — were undeniable.

Attempting to address the current economic crisis, Obama suggests that distribution of wealth and commonality are the solutions: "the success of our economy has always depended not just on the size of our gross domestic product, but on the reach of our prosperity; on the ability to extend opportunity to every willing heart — not out of charity, but because it is the surest route to our common good." A little later on, he situates this call for collective thinking in history when he says, "recall that earlier generations faced down fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks, but with the sturdy alliances and enduring convictions." The fact that Rick Warren and Aretha Franklin were chosen to lead the opening prayer and to sing at the inauguration ceremony respectively, further illustrates this logic: 'if a homo-phobic preacher and a has-been singer can find a place in my ceremony, this only shows that as long as you follow my philosophy you will have a place behind me'.

Nonetheless, the reverse of this statement also holds true: ‘resistance is futile, you will be assimilated’. The aim to close all extra-territorial prisons — Guantanamo Bay being one such example — only shows this: no longer are areas of exception needed. If one is optimistic, this would suggest that everyone will be given a free and fair hearing under the Laws of the United States. However, this could also mean that the United States under Obama is precisely this space of exception; or even more brutally, that Obama himself is the exception. The fact is, after the swearing in, he has now adopted the space of the sovereign.

The logic of ‘all under one idea’ is terror *par excellence*, for what is captured is the space of public opinion. As Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud never let us forget, terror is “a blow [that is] not struck on the adversary but it is hoped that the blow will be borne by the third party, the witness, public opinion.”² The events of September 11 were terroristic, not because two planes crashed into the World Trade Centre in New York City, but because we are no longer allowed to interpret that date in any other way. The fact that the year, 2001, no longer has to be mentioned, suggests that every other year has already been effaced. What has been taken hostage is the ability to negotiate, the ability for thought:

whereas in a two-sided battle, my opponent thinks that what I think and do is unjust, and I think that what he does and thinks is unjust. Well, his freedom is complete and so is mine. With a hostage, I am

² Jean-François Lyotard & Jean-Loup Thébaud. (1999). *Just Gaming*. pp.70.

applying ... not even 'pressure'. It is much more than that. It is the social bond taken as a fact of nature.³

What has been taken away is choice: one no longer has any choice but to constitute 'September 11' as a 'terror attack on the United States'; your only other option is to refuse this interpretation. This is hardly a space for negotiation — all you can say is 'yes' or 'no'.

One of the most brutal applications of a single idea occurred during the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. Whilst any idea didn't directly cause the death of 1.7 million Cambodians, it was the insistence of 'Year Zero' as the single solution to everything that led to their deaths; anyone who did not subscribe to the idea was branded as a traitor and executed. In some way the Khmer Rouge regime was the perverse version of the Christian maxim, "all men are brothers." It is no coincidence that Pol Pot is Brother number one: as long as you follow the piped piper, you are a brother, otherwise not only are you not a brother, you are also no longer a man, no longer human, and can be executed with impunity.

When Barack Obama said, "for we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth," he was met with thunderous applause, for this sounds like a reiteration of the American Dream, where regardless of race, language, or religion, anyone has a chance of success. In many ways, he is the very embodiment of this philosophy of meritocracy: the entire Obama campaign

³ Ibid. pp.70-71.

was run on the premise that Americans should vote for him not as a black man, but as the most competent candidate, the one that met all the conditions to be the leader. However this also reiterates the fact that ‘as long as you fulfill the set criteria, you will be rewarded’.

This is nothing more than capitalism at its purest: everything is equal, flattened — everything has been “liberated so that it can enter a state of pure circulation, so that it can go into orbit”⁴ — in the precise sense that everyone and everything is completely and utterly exchangeable.

This complete exchangeability comes with a price. If everything is equivalent to everything else, this also means that nothing is inherent any longer; there are no longer any secrets, any unknowns. Everything is completely and utterly knowable, calculable, disseminable. As Jean Baudrillard has warned us time and time again, when “each individual category is subject to contamination, substitution is possible between any sphere and any other: there is total confusion of types ... Each category is generalized to the greatest possible extent, so that it eventually loses all specificity and is reabsorbed by all the other categories.”⁵ In other words, it can be found everywhere; and by extension, nowhere at exactly the same time. If everything is political, then politics itself means nothing; if everything is economics, economics itself ceases to have any meaning. In terms of humans, if we are all exactly the same as the next person,

⁴ Jean Baudrillard. (1999). *The Transparency of Evil: Essays in Extreme Phenomena*. pp.4

⁵ Ibid. pp.8-9.

this just means that none of us are singular entities any longer. Perhaps this was already apparent by the rise of 'human resource' management over the last few decades: by this logic, humans are nothing more than resources; constantly depreciating, and more importantly, completely replaceable.

This is the fantasy of the information age, the orgy where everything and anything can be known, where nothing is sacred any longer. However, the lack of a secret is not just the disappearance of romanticism, but more pertinently the end of the possibility of events, of the possibility of anything new.

Consider the tale of Ra. When poisoned by Isis in order to find the secret to his power (i.e. his real name), Ra reveals it to her in order to obtain the antidote. Whispering in her ear his name, Amen-Ra, all of his powers become her powers. However, his real name is merely an affirmation of his name, 'I am Ra'; this shows that the secret is not in the content of his name (everyone already knew it), but the form, the knowledge of this secret.

This opens the register of the relationship between what is known and what is unknown, and their effects. At this point it is both strange, and appropriate, to turn to Donald Rumsfeld's now infamous statement at the US Department of Defense news briefing on February 12th, 2002 when he said, "but the truth is, there are things we know, and we know we know them — the known knows. There are things we know that we don't know — the known unknowns. And there are unknown unknowns; the things we do not yet know that we do not

know.”⁶ Whilst it is overly convenient to make fun of — or even brush aside — Rumsfeld, he does raise the important point of the relationship between cognition and knowledge: there is no point to knowing something if one does not realize that one knows it. The problem was that he did not go far enough: he missed out on the logical end point of his own statement (i.e. the fourth category, the ‘unknown knows’), the question of what happens when you do not realize that you actually know something. This was also the case with all the other Egyptian gods; all of them knew that his name was Ra, they just did not realize how significant this knowledge was.

It is precisely this understanding — the knowledge that power rests in forms — that Barack Obama possesses. This is why anyone and everyone can gain recognition under the new regime: no longer the banal binary of ‘you are either with us or against us’, but the far more insidious challenge of the “patchwork.” On the surface, it would seem a patchwork is fluid and welcoming to all differences. However, anyone who has done any sewing would know that patchworks run on strict logics: anything that does not fall within the overall scheme is cut out and thrown away. In this “patchwork” world that Obama is invoking, where every American (and by extension everyone in the world — after all, he never let the rest of the world forget that the US “remain[s] the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth”) is now a unit for exchange, a calculable entity which has to choose between fitting the master-plan or being cut out. You

⁶ <http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=3793>

are no longer even given the choice to be ‘against us’, to resist, for if you are assimilated, you no longer even exist. In this sense, one is no longer allowed to be the enemy; the only option that remains is to either play (and unconditionally accept the rules of the game), or leave.

The only benefit of being like oxen is that one can no longer be sacrificed. Only free men can be brought before the gods in symbolic exchanges, for it is precisely their freedom — their will — that is exchanged; not in a direct economic, calculable sense, but as a gift to the gods, in order to enter into a reciprocal relationship (even if the content of the reciprocation is unknown) with the gods. As Georges Bataille reminds us, “it is not necessary that the sacrifice actually destroys the animal or plant ... What the ritual has the virtue of rediscovering is the intimate participation of the sacrificer and the victim, to which a servile use had put an end.”⁷ And now that we are no longer in the age of sacrifices, in the age of secrets, we no longer have the ability, or even have the potentiality of “detaching from the *real* order, from the poverty of *things*, and of restoring the *divine* order.”⁸ In this sense, one could then slip into a sort of fatalism; after all, it is difficult not to be a nihilist when there seems to be no way out of servitude, when there is no way out of being merely part of a network.

⁷ Georges Bataille. (2007). *The Accursed Share Vol 1*. pp.56.

⁸ Ibid. pp.57. *italics* from source.

One could even posit that Barack Obama himself is simply the head of that network: after all, he himself was born in the Year of the Ox. Obama as the 44th incarnation of the same; the time between presidents a mere interregnum.

In this sense, perhaps Robert Mugabe might have inadvertently introduced the mascot of our times: the trillion dollar note.⁹ Finally a previously theoretical figure has been given actual form. Welcome to the world of material speculation; welcome to the world where the spectre of absolute circulation is everywhere, where materiality itself is what is speculated.

Here we find ourselves in an almost Beckettian situation; one where we can no longer go on (after all what is the point), but have to at the same time. Perhaps at this point we have to attempt to find hope in the perfection of the system itself, in the fact that no system can be perfect, in the fact that the absolute perfection of the system is its own failing. The only way to face up to this absurd premise (where perfection and imperfection are exactly the same) is to be completely ironic; not in the traditional sense of keeping a distance from it (the distance of analysis) but the very opposite, the absurd position of utterly plunging into the very absurdity itself.

When faced with an utterly indifferent system — governed by a single Idea without any regard for the followers of the Idea — one has no choice but to be even more indifferent.

⁹ News of Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe's introduction of a trillion-dollar note can be found in a variety of sources including <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7832601.stm>

This is the nightmare of any disciplinary mechanism: what power would it have over the subject if the subject did not mind being disciplined in the first place? In this sense, not only is resistance to the discipline expected, it is absolutely required: one can even go so far as to say that resistance is the very crux of the disciplinary mechanism. Without this pre-relational assumption, the entire disciplinary system would collapse on itself. The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is an apt metaphor for this paradox: it spreads, not by combating the defenses of the host, but doing the exact opposite; HIV attaches itself to its host precisely by using the host's defenses. In this manner, the more the host body attempts to defend itself, to combat the HIV, the more it spreads.

When faced with a system that attempts to objectify (to flatten everyone into variations of each other), instead of resisting or insisting on our very subjectivity and uniqueness, we must take the plunge and embrace our status as pure object(s). In turn, this position of hyper-conformity may potentially short-circuit the entire logic. For example, in the movie *The Matrix*, the subversive figure is not Neo, but Agent Smith. Neo and his cohorts are integral to the system — their resistance merely sharpens the system, which is why they are included in every reincarnation of the Matrix. It is Agent Smith who, by taking the logic of the system (reproduction, replication) to its extreme, ultimately over-loads the system.

Capitalism — and economics as a whole — is hinged on the fact that its subjects attach personal meaning to their consumption. However in order that the all things remain exchangeable, they have to be abstracted (i.e. in a strict sense, meaningless). Thus we must abandon the age old strategy of ‘finding meaning’ in our own lives. By plunging ourselves into infinite circulation, by ironically embracing utter and absolute meaninglessness, we will not face up to capitalism, but instead take it on its own terms.

Forget revolutions: they move around in circles and eventually end up in the same place. In the Year of the Ox, we must embrace the fact that we are castrated beings, all lined up and facing the same direction. And perhaps, in this absolute indifference, not just to the system, but to ourselves, we might be able to seduce the totalizing logic of capitalism itself. Thus, we offer it the challenge of our own emptiness, our own absence, in fact, our own deaths. Perhaps it might respond with its own ...

About the Author

Jeremy Fernando is the Jean Baudrillard Fellow at the European Graduate School. His PhD research attempts to think the intersections of literature, philosophy, and the media; and his mentors are Avital Ronell, Wolfgang

Schirmacher, and Werner Hamacher. He is the author of Reflections of (T)error, and has two forthcoming manuscripts entitled Blind Reading, and, The Suicide Bomber; and her gift of death. Exploring his thinking through different media has led him to both film and art; and his works have been exhibited in Seoul, Hong Kong, Vienna, and Singapore. He is the editor of the thematic magazine One Imperative, and also a Research Fellow at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University.

Echoes

- Badiou, Alain. (2002). *Ethics: an Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. (Peter Hallward, Trans.). London: Verso.
- _____. (2003). *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy*. (Oliver Feltham & Justin Clemens, Trans.). London: Continuum.
- Barthes, Roland. (1977). "The death of an author" in Stephen Heath. (Ed. and Trans.). *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Hill.
- _____. (1994). *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. (Richard Howard, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean. (1988). *The Ecstasy of Communication*. (Caroline Schutze, Trans.). New York: Semiotext(e).
- _____. (1990). *Seduction*. (Brian Singer, Trans.). New York: St Martin's Press.
- _____. (1999). *The Transparency of Evil: Essays in Extreme Phenomena*. (James Benedict, Trans.). London: Verso.
- _____. (2001). *Impossible Exchange*. (Chris Turner, Trans.). London: Verso.
- _____. (2002). *The Perfect Crime*. (Chris Turner, Trans.). London: Verso.
- _____. (2005). *The System of Objects*. (James Benedict, Trans.). London: Verso.
- _____. (2005). *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*. (Chris Turner, Trans.). Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- _____. (2007). *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*. (Paul Foss, John Johnston, Paul Patton, & Andrew Berardini, Trans.). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

- _____. (2007). *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. (Iain Hamilton Grant, Trans.). London: Sage Publications.
- Beckett, Samuel. (2006). *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Cixous, Hélène. (1976). "The Laugh of the Medusa" in *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4. (Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. (2004). *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*. (Beverly Bie Brahic, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. (1993). *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. (Tom Conley, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- de Man, Paul. (1979). *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. (1993). *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. (Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas, Trans.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- _____. (1996). *The Gift of Death*. (David Wills, Trans.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- _____. (1998). *Right of Inspection*. (David Wills, Trans.). New York: The Monacelli Press.
- _____. (2000). *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*. (Elizabeth Rottenberg, Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Duras, Marguerite. (1986). *The Malady of Death*. (Barbara Bray, Trans.). New York: Grove Weidenfeld.
- Hamacher, Werner. (1999). *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*. (Peter Fenves, Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- _____. (2007). *Uncalled: A Note on Kafka's 'Test'*. Saas Fee: Open Lecture at the European Graduate School.

- Kierkegaard, Søren. (1997). *The Seducer's Diary*. (Howard V. Hong, Trans.).
Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lucretius. (2005). *Sensation and Sex*. (R.E. Latham, Trans.). London: Penguin.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on
Knowledge*. (Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi, Trans.). Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press.
- _____. & Thebaud, Jean-Loup. (1985). *Just Gaming*. (Wlad
Godzich, Trans.). Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (2006). *Phenomenology of Perception*. (Colin Smith,
Trans.). London: Routledge.
- Ronell, Avital. (1989). *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric
Speech*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- _____. (1993). *Dictations: On Haunted Writing*. Lincoln: University of
Nebraska Press.
- _____. (2005). *The Test Drive*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj. (1991). *Looking Awry: an Introduction to Jacques Lacan through
Popular Culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- _____. (2000). *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political
Ontology*. London: Verso.
- _____. (2002). *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London: Verso.
- _____. (2003). *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of
Christianity*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- _____. (2004). *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*.
London: Routledge.