

Gomorra

2h 17m

Italian

English Subtitles

Adapted from Roberto Saviano's controversial non-fiction book, Matteo Garrone's crime drama Gomorrah examines how organized crime reaches deep into every facet of life in Naples, Italy by telling the tale of over a dozen different characters. Among the main protagonists is a pair of wannabe thugs who take their cue from movie gangsters, a grocery-delivery boy who must learn to kill, and a criminal mastermind who plots to make a fortune while dumping toxic waste near overpopulated communities.

Gomorrah, Direct by Matteo Garrone
November, Thursday 29th, *Readings list*

REAL FICTIONS

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[Collegamento al documento ProQuest](#)

ABSTRACT

"Art is what makes life more interesting than art," the actor declaims (perhaps on behalf of the artist) in *Event for a Stage*.¹¹ These declarations are not witticisms à la Oscar Wilde that delight in paradox and advocate style so much as they are proposals about how artifice, the utopian glimmer of fiction, can be placed in the service of the real. Might the desire to open up alternative futures be, in part, a response to the dominance of financial futures- that is, to the reality that, in a world governed by finance capitalism, present time is always mortgaged to a time to come (a time that never actually arrives)?²³ Second, what relation do the real fictions reviewed here have to "alternative facts," and might the former be deployed to challenge the latter in a way that avoids a simple retrenchment to a positivistic framing of the real? ?

TESTO COMPLETO

Headnote

HAL FOSTER ON ALTERNATIVES TO ALTERNATIVE FACTS

1. DESPITE RUMORS OF ITS DISAPPEARANCE, the real remains with us. The labor of its production is "obstinate," Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt argue; it persists in the overlooked furniture of our everyday lives. The real is as intractable as history, Fredric Jameson adds; neither can be transcended. If these formulations seem right, then the question of the real is not a matter of its presence but of its position- where it is located, how, by whom, and for what reasons. One way to come to terms with some criticism, art, and literature is through these framings.¹
2. We say that modern critique took its bearings from Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, but what did these thinkers have in common? Little more than a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (as Paul Ricoeur termed it), the operative assumption that the real is hidden or buried and the critic must hunt it out or dig it up.² Of course, for Marx the unacknowledged truth of history is class struggle; that is the occluded narrative that must be extracted from all other accounts. For Freud, the unconscious reality of subjective life is psychic conflict; such is the latent content that must be teased from the manifest confusions of our dreams, symptoms, and slip-ups. And for Nietzsche, the unspoken force behind any system of thought is a will to power, which is to be challenged or celebrated as one sees fit. The Frankfurt School drew on all three approaches, and a key instance of its caustic critique remains the assessment of *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography delivered by Brecht by way of Benjamin: "A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions," Brecht remarked, with the steel manufacturer and the electric utility in mind. "The reification of human relations-the factory, say- means that they are no longer explicit. So something must in fact be built up, something artificial, posed." This statement captures the characteristic move of ideology critique: to expose the real behind the representations that conceal it or otherwise shore it up. As Brecht indicated, one way to attempt this exposé in art is via an image or text (or, from John Heartfield to Barbara Kruger, a combination of the two) that is "built up," montaged.
3. A late epitome of ideology critique is *Mythologies* (1957), in which, with a mix of old Brechtian estrangement and new structuralist decoding, Roland Barthes read various manifestations of middlebrow culture (e.g., the "Family of Man" exhibition staged by Edward Steichen in 1955, the Blue Guide travel books) as so many class-bound myths

Hal Foster, Real Fictions
Artforum International, 2017

that present specific beliefs as general truths. Mythologies was a first manual of critical suspicion for many artists and critics; its influence was especially strong in Conceptual and feminist practices that employed image appropriation (e.g., those of Victor Bûrgin and Sherrie Levine). However, in the wake of 1968, Barthes had second thoughts: "Any student can and does denounce the bourgeois or petit-bourgeois character of such and such a form," he wrote in 1971. "It is no longer the myths which need to be unmasked (the doxa now takes care of that), it is the sign itself which must be shaken." What could be more radical than this quasi-Maoist call for a "semioclasme" that passed beyond demystification to attack representation as such? The signs that stitch the real together were to be not merely exposed but utterly torn asunder.

4. In the end, however, the real was only repositioned: No longer hidden or buried, it was now thought to lie, overlooked but in plain sight, on the surface of things. One signal of this shift, soon to be associated with poststructuralist theory, was another Barthes essay, "L'effet de réel" (The Reality Effect, 1968), which considered the function of the detail in nineteenth-century narrative, both fictional and historical (his test cases were Flaubert and Michelet, respectively).⁵ In such narratives, Barthes argued, everything is expected to mean; even incidental details that seem not to signify do so nonetheless, for what they thus signify is /«significance, and the apparent meaninglessness of the mere facts of the contingent world helps to clinch the realist evocation of the real. In this account, nothing escapes the "empire of signs," and so it was but a short step to see realism in toto as a system of conventions, as Barthes did in S/Z (1970), his painstaking analysis of the 1830 short story "Sarrasine." There he demonstrated, line by line, how Balzac referred "not from a language to a referent but from one code to another"-that is, how the narrative consisted "not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real." "This is why realism cannot be designated a 'copier,'" Barthes concluded, "but rather a 'pasticheur' (through secondary mimesis, it copies what is already a copy)."⁶ A decade later this figure of the pasticheur became the dominant avatar of the postmodernist artist, in the guise of both the neo-expressionist painter who mixed historical and pop motifs and the critical appropriationist who held up media stereotypes for our scrutiny. Semiotically speaking, these ideological opponents played on the same team.

5. If Barthes contributed to the first two framings of the real, he exemplified yet a third. Here the real was still attached to the detail that resists meaning, but it was now located in the subject as much as in the object. This detail is the famous punctum Barthes proposed in Camera Lucida (1980), the inadvertent point in a particular photograph that pricks the unconscious of the viewer: "It is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me."⁷ Inflected by Lacan, this third positioning of the real, which we might call traumatophilie, differs from the first two in key ways. In the ideology-critical framing, the critic exposes the real, whereas here the real exposes the subject; and in the poststructuralist framing, the subject is displaced, and the real subsumed, by conventions and codes, whereas here the subject is called back as witness to a real now understood as traumatic.⁸ What could be more real than a real that resists all symbolization? Gradually, however, it became clear that this real could be codified, too; in fact, it could count as a realism of its own. This was the case with abject art and fiction in the 1990s, exemplified in the work of Mike Kelley and Dennis Cooper, once their tropes of bodily disfiguration and psychic damage were established.

6. In one way or another, all the aforementioned framings of the real rejected the naive notion that the realist work is a mirror of the world. Yet a reflectionist assumption sneaks back in when we link cultural outlooks too directly to economic processes. Nonetheless, we might hazard a few connections between the two registers here, if only to underscore that they do in fact exist. Jameson saw the transition to postmodernism in terms of a crack-up of the sign under advanced capitalism. In the modernist epoch, he argued, "reification 'liberated' the Sign from its referent," as evidenced in the abstraction that pervaded its arts. Yet this "dissolution" only deepened in the postmodernist era: Now internal to the sign, reification worked to liberate "the Signifier from the Signified, or from meaning proper."⁹ Here our second framing of the real, the real as a textual effect, was suddenly repositioned, for such semioclasme was now taken to do the cultural work of a capitalist order that thrives on "floating signifiers." In part, the third framing of the real-the real as traumatic affect-stemmed from a recognition that the postmodernist crack-up of the sign was not as resistant to advanced capitalism as it purported to be, that it might even be

structurally consonant with that order. Of course, other forces were also at work in this shift from the textual to the traumatic-the AIDS crisis, systemic poverty, racism, sexism, a broken welfare state, a wounded body politic.¹⁰ Nevertheless, to some degree, "the body in pain" emerged as a protest against the empire of signs.

7. The past decade has seen yet another turn in the framing of the real, one that bespeaks a frustration with the three positionings that preceded it. First, ideology critique was already under attack on account of the authority that it appeared to arrogate. Like most poststructuralist theory, much postmodernist art had questioned such authority, but this challenge was soon understood to erode the very ability to claim a truth or to posit a reality at all, and so it came to be questioned as a species of nihilism. (The critique of representation, central to both poststructuralism and postmodernism, was also tainted when the Right later appropriated it for its own ends, as in the assertion that global warming is a "mere construction.") Last, the traumatophilic framing of the real brought authority back into play, in the strong guise of the subject as witness (even as survivor), yet this development came with a problem of its own-for how is such authority to be questioned in turn? Bruno Latour emerged as a prominent skeptic of all three framings of the real, especially with regard to the negativity that each appeared to advance in its own way. Against this destructive critic, he offered his own benevolent figure:

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naive believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in need of great care and caution.¹¹

8. This shift, with the real now viewed as a fragile construction to tend with care and caution, is evident in recent documentary practice, a category that was often a bad object for both ideology critique and postmodernist art (not to mention poststructuralist theory). Brecht can represent the former position-again, "a photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions"-while Martha Rosier can stand in for the latter with her framing of documentary photography as an "inadequate descriptive system." Today, however, this critique of the document is largely assimilated, and many artists have passed from a posture of deconstruction to one of reconstruction-that is, to the use of artifice to rehabilitate the documentary mode as an effective critical system, if not an adequate descriptive one. (Roughly speaking, this is the epistemological posture of Harun Farocki, Hito Steyerl, and Trevor Paglen, among others.) In large part, this shift was a response to the increased control by corporations and governments, through satellite imaging and information mining, of what is given to us as the real in the first place-what can be represented, known, disputed, proved-at all scales, from the individual pixel to the vast agglomerations of big data. With such control, events that are criminal or catastrophic (secret wars, genocidal campaigns, territorial occupations, environmental disasters, refugee abuses, detention centers, drone strikes, and so on) can be partially or totally blocked from view.¹² It becomes imperative, then, to reconstruct these events as cogently as possible by means of media both new and old (some of which were questioned in the initial critique of the documentary). Eyal Weizman has termed this modeling of the real "forensic architecture," and he points to a turn from a politics of the witness, based on "individual testimony" and aimed at "empathy with victims" (which corresponds to our traumatophilic framing of the real), to a politics of human rights advocacy undertaken as "a process of materialization and mediatization."¹³ Such forensic practice salvages, assembles, and sequences fragmentary representations in order both to image and to narrate disputed events; these scripts can then be offered as evidence in courts of law as well as in courts of opinion. (As Latour speaks of "arenas," so Weizman speaks of "forums," which can include art institutions, too, and he reminds us that forensis is Latin for "pertaining to the forum.") At first glance, this turn might be interpreted as neo-Brechtian ("something must in fact be built up, something artificial, posed"), but the relevant work here (again, Farocki, Steyerl, Paglen, et al.) is concerned less with exposing a given reality behind representation than with reconstructing an occluded reality, or with pointing to an absented one, by means of representation.¹⁴

9. This epistemological recalibration is also active in recent literature. The fiction in question does not express a "reality hunger," as proclaimed by David Shields- that is, it does not conscript real experience to reanimate novel

writing in an attempt to overcome the old binary of life versus art. Rather, it too deploys great artifice, not to demystify or to disrupt the real but to make the real real again, which is to say, effective again, felt again, as such. Consider the 2005 novel *Remainder* by Tom McCarthy. The unnamed narrator is struck by an unknown object fallen from the sky, and receives a large settlement from an insurance company as a consequence. He then spends this vast sum on reenactors, whom he hires to perform, repeatedly, his fragmentary memories of scenes that seem relevant to the event. Affectively blocked by his trauma, he stages these episodes to experience them as if for the first time, and as his desperation grows, his enactments become ever more violent. On the one hand, *Remainder* circles around the real as a traumatic remainder; in Lacanian terms, it narrates a "missed encounter" with the real that, because it is missed, can only be repeated.¹⁵ On the other hand, the repetition of the scenes is dedicated to realize them, not to simulate them, much less to derealize them. The 2015 film adaptation of *Remainder* captures this repetition-compulsion perfectly; its director, the artist Omer Fast, explores this mixed framing of the real, which oscillates between the traumatophilie and the reconstructive, in his other work as well.¹⁶

10. Thomas Demand has also advanced this mixed positioning of the real. As is well known, he builds his photographs from models based on found images-news sources, postcards, and the like-in a way that complicates the discursive opposition between indexical and constructed representations. Demand treats the imagistic mediation of the world as given, and he assumes that we do as well; here, too, the aim is not to demystify or deconstruct the real but to activate it. Consider a familiar work, *Bathroom*, 1997, which shows an oblique view of a porcelain tub set in blue tile. In 1987, the premier of the German state of Schleswig-Holstein, Uwe Barschel, was found dead in a hotel bath like this one; in fact, Demand based his image on the tabloid photo taken by the journalist who discovered the body. A rising star in the Christian Democratic party, Barschel was involved in a secret investigation of a political opponent, and the cause of his death-originally ruled a suicide-remains undetermined. This information alters our response to the image: Suddenly, the open door, the rumpled curtain, the creased mat, and the undrained bathwater read as possible signs of foul play. Yet *Bathroom* is also true to the utter banality of its source. "What is decisive," Demand has remarked, "are the blurred traces left in the media by [the] incidents [that they relay]." On the one hand, this blurring produces a distraction in us, "a very diffuse sense of dullness"; on the other, it allows these traces of incidents to "lodge in the memory," one that Demand regards as collective as well as individual. Such are the blurred traces of the real that he is able to evoke in the blunted details of his photographs. Here, contra Barthes, the punctum is not inadvertent: It must be constructed (again, "built up") if the real is to be made effective as such.¹⁷

11. Repetition takes on a new valence in this epistemological recalibration. From Pop paintings to Pictures photographs, serial images typically evinced a world of spectacle become simulacral, where representations appear to float free, through repetition, from referents and signifieds alike. This view changed with the traumatophilie framing; there repetition was rededicated to the real, now understood in a Lacanian sense. Lately, however, a further shift has occurred in fiction and art: Repetition is not on the side of simulation, but neither does it circle around a traumatic past. Rather, its purpose is to produce an interruption, a crack or a gap, that might allow a different reality to be glimpsed. Consider *10:04* (2014) by Ben Lerner, who places his novel under the epigraphic sign of Benjamin: "The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything will be just as it is.... Everything will be as it is now, just a little different."¹⁸ The narrator, who is Lerner but just a little different, replays episodes from his life in this way, too, as "a little changed, a little charged," charged as real through repetition-or, perhaps better, through coincidence.¹⁹ Intermittently, as the narrator does this, he also reflects on how such coincidence can be transformative. For example, of the partially transparent hand of an otherwise embodied saint in a nineteenth-century painting by Jules Bastien-Lepage, he remarks, "It's as if the tension between the metaphysical and physical worlds, between two orders of temporality, produces a glitch in the pictorial matrix."²¹ Yet his exemplum of these folds in space-time is Christian Marclay's *The Clock*, 2010, a digital video that proceeds through twenty-four hours of film clips, each keyed to a precise moment, which is almost always registered on the face of a timepiece depicted in the found footage. Lerner takes the title of his novel from

the clip that represents 10:04 pm, the moment at which lightning strikes the clock tower in *Back to the Future* (1985). The narrator draws his own lesson here:

I'd heard *The Clock* described as the ultimate collapse of fictional time into real time, a word designed to obliterate the distance between art and life, fantasy and reality. But... that distance hadn't been collapsed for me at all; while the duration of a real minute and *The Clock's* minute were mathematically indistinguishable, they were nevertheless minutes from different worlds.... I felt acutely how many different days could be built out of a day, felt more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction.²¹

12. Tacita Dean also produces a glitch in the matrix in her film *Event for a Stage* (2015). A man paces a stage as people wander into an auditorium; we surmise that he is an actor and they are an audience. He speaks of a great storm; his lines, from *The Tempest*, cue us that illusion will be one subject of this event. Yet the film lays bare not only its setting but also its production: There are abrupt shifts from one camera to another (which the actor calls out), as well as from one staging to another. (Dean constructed her film from four performances, each marked by different costumes and hairstyles.) Sometimes, too, the actor interacts with an audience member who prompts him with notes (it is Dean); at other times he leaves the stage altogether. At such moments, the fourth wall (which the actor calls "a membrane") is not broken so much as stretched: Life does not intrude on art so much as art expands to comprehend actions, thoughts, and feelings that lie beyond the usual ambit of theater. These moments include confusions that seem genuine ("I don't know what this is," the actor proclaims at one point), as well as statements that sound autobiographical (the line between the lived and the performed is blurred too). The actor tells us about the dementia of his mother (she repeats things) and the "unconventional relationship" of his father with "characters in a TV series," but then we realize that the actor shares in mental uncertainties and unconventional relationships, and that we do too (especially in our viewing of *Event*). Here, again, life does not break into art, nor does all the world become a stage; rather, the imbrication of the two is explored as a condition that is as common as it is complex. If, near its beginning, *Event for a Stage* quotes *The Tempest*, toward the end it cites "On the Marionette Theater" (1810), the great Heinrich von Kleist story that ponders the equal and opposite "grace" achieved by God and marionettes, the former through total consciousness, the latter through its utter lack. What is his relation to self-awareness? Dean asks the actor. Does he ever experience stage fright? Can he ever forget the gaze of the audience on him? He responds ambiguously that, like all actors, he becomes real only through a "great text," but that, like "good parents," good actors can provide a space-time for make-believe that is actual.

13. "The lie described my life better than the truth," the narrator says (or imagines he says) in 10:04. "Art is what makes life more interesting than art," the actor declaims (perhaps on behalf of the artist) in *Event for a Stage*.¹¹ These declarations are not witticisms à la Oscar Wilde that delight in paradox and advocate style so much as they are proposals about how artifice, the utopian glimmer of fiction, can be placed in the service of the real. Two questions linger, however. First, what prepares this latest shift in the framing of the real? Might the desire to open up alternative futures be, in part, a response to the dominance of financial futures- that is, to the reality that, in a world governed by finance capitalism, present time is always mortgaged to a time to come (a time that never actually arrives)?²³ Second, what relation do the real fictions reviewed here have to "alternative facts," and might the former be deployed to challenge the latter in a way that avoids a simple retrenchment to a positivistic framing of the real? ?

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TOTALITARIANISM

Normal men do not know that everything is
possible.
—*David Rousset*

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them.¹²⁴ The reason why the totalitarian regimes can get so far toward realizing a fictitious, topsy-turvy world is that the outside nontotalitarian world, which always comprises a great part of the population of the totalitarian country itself, indulges also in wishful thinking and shirks reality in the face of real insanity just as much as the masses do in the face of the normal world. This common-sense disinclination to believe the monstrous is constantly strengthened by the totalitarian ruler himself, who makes sure that no reliable statistics, no controllable facts and figures are ever published, so that there are only subjective, uncontrollable, and unreliable reports about the places of the living dead.

Because of this policy, the results of the totalitarian experiment are only partially known. Although we have enough reports from concentration camps to assess the possibilities of total domination and to catch a glimpse into the abyss of the "possible," we do not know the extent of character transformation under a totalitarian regime. We know even less how many of the normal people around us would be willing to accept the totalitarian way of life—that is, to pay the price of a considerably shorter life for the assured fulfillment of all their career dreams. It is easy to realize the extent to which totalitarian propaganda and even some totalitarian institutions answer the needs of the new homeless masses, but it is almost impossible to know how many of them, if they are further exposed to a constant threat of unemployment, will gladly acquiesce to a "population policy" that consists of regular elimination of surplus people, and how many, once they have fully grasped their growing incapacity to bear the burdens of modern life, will gladly conform to a system that, together with spontaneity, eliminates responsibility.

In other words, while we know the operation and the specific function of the totalitarian secret police, we do not know how well or to what an extent the "secret" of this secret society corresponds to the secret desires and the secret complicity of the masses in our time.

124. The Nazis were well aware of the protective wall of incredulity which surrounded their enterprise. A secret report to Rosenberg about the massacre of 5,000 Jews in 1943 states explicitly: "Imagine only that these occurrences would become known to the other side and exploited by them. Most likely such propaganda would have no effect only because people who hear and read about it simply would not be ready to believe it" (*Nazi Conspiracy*, I, 1001).

Totalitarianism in Power

Total Domination

The concentration and extermination camps of totalitarian regimes serve as the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified. Compared with this, all other experiments are secondary in importance—including those in the field of medicine whose horrors are recorded in detail in the trials against the physicians of the Third Reich—although it is characteristic that these laboratories were used for experiments of every kind.

Total domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other. The problem is to fabricate something that does not exist, namely, a kind of human species resembling other animal species whose only "freedom" would consist in "preserving the species."¹²⁵ Totalitarian domination attempts to achieve this goal both through ideological indoctrination of the elite formations and through absolute terror in the camps; and the atrocities for which the elite formations are ruthlessly used become, as it were, the practical application of the ideological indoctrination—the testing ground in which the latter must prove itself—while the appalling spectacle of the camps themselves is supposed to furnish the "theoretical" verification of the ideology.

The camps are meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not; for Pavlov's dog, which, as we know, was trained to eat not when it was hungry but when a bell rang, was a perverted animal.

Under normal circumstances this can never be accomplished, because spontaneity can never be entirely eliminated insofar as it is connected not only with the individual but with the species. As Hitler mentions several times that he "[strives] for a condition in which each individual knows that he lives and dies for the preservation of his species" (p. 349). See also p. 347: "A fly lays millions of eggs, all of which perish. But the flies remain."

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only with human freedom but with life itself, in the sense of simply keeping alive. It is only in the concentration camps that such an experiment is at all possible, and therefore they are not only "*la société la plus totalitaire encore réalisée*" (David Rousset) but the guiding social ideal of total domination in general. Just as the stability of the totalitarian regime depends on the isolation of the fictitious world of the movement from the outside world, so the experiment of total domination in the concentration camps depends on sealing off the latter against the world of all others, the world of the living in general, even against the outside world of a country under totalitarian rule. This isolation explains the peculiar unreality and lack of credibility that characterize all reports from the concentration camps and constitute one of the main difficulties for the true understanding of totalitarian domination, which stands or falls with the existence of these concentration and extermination camps; for, unlikely as it may sound, these camps are the true central institution of totalitarian organizational power.

There are numerous reports by survivors.¹²⁶ The more authentic they are, the less they attempt to communicate things that evade human understanding and human experience—sufferings, that is, that transform men into "uncomplaining animals."¹²⁷ None of these reports inspires those passions of outrage and sympathy through which men have always been mobilized for justice. On the contrary, anyone speaking or writing about concentration camps is still regarded as suspect, and if the speaker has resolutely returned to the world of the living, he himself is often assailed by doubts with regard to his own truthfulness, as though he had mistaken a nightmare for reality.¹²⁸

126. The best reports on Nazi concentration camps are David Rousset, *Les Jours de Notre Mort*, Paris, 1947; Eugen Kogon, *op. cit.*; Bruno Bettelheim, "On Dachau and Buchenwald" (from May, 1938, to April, 1939), in *Nazi Conspiracy*, VII, 824 ff. For Soviet concentration camps, see the excellent collection of reports by Polish survivors published under the title *The Dark Side of the Moon*, also David J. Dallin, *op. cit.*, though his reports are sometimes less convincing because they come from "prominent" personalities who are intent on drawing up manifestos and indictments.

127. *The Dark Side of the Moon*, the introduction also stresses this peculiar lack of communication: "They record but do not communicate."

128. See especially Bruno Bettelheim, *op. cit.* "It seemed as if I had become convinced that these horrible and degrading experiences somehow did not happen to 'me' as subject but to 'me' as an object. This experience was corroborated by the statements of other prisoners. . . . It was as if I watched things happening in which I only vaguely participated. . . ." "This cannot be true, such things just do not happen. . . ." The prisoners had to convince themselves that this was real, was really happening and not just a nightmare. They were never wholly successful."

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This doubt of people concerning themselves and the reality of their own experience only reveals what the Nazis always knew: that men determined to commit crimes will find it expedient to organize them on the vastest, most improbable scale. Not only because this renders all punishments provided by the legal system inadequate and absurd; but because the very immensity of the crimes guarantees that the murderers who proclaim their innocence with all manner of lies will be more readily believed than the victims who tell the truth. The Nazis did not even consider it necessary to keep this discovery to themselves. Hitler circulated millions of copies of his book in which he stated that to be successful, a lie must be enormous—which did not prevent people from believing him as, similarly, the Nazis' proclamations, repeated *ad nauseam*, that the Jews would be exterminated like bedbugs (*i.e.*, with poison gas) prevented anybody from *not* believing them.

There is a great temptation to explain away the intrinsically incredible by means of liberal rationalizations. In each one of us there lurks such a liberal, wheedling us with the voice of common sense. The road to totalitarian domination leads through many intermediate stages for which we can find numerous analogies and precedents. The extraordinarily bloody terror during the initial stage of totalitarian rule serves indeed the exclusive purpose of defeating the opponent and rendering all further opposition impossible; but total terror is launched only after this initial stage has been overcome and the regime no longer has anything to fear from the opposition. In this context it has been frequently remarked that in such a case the means have become the end, but this is after all only an admission, in paradoxical disguise, that the category "the end justifies the means" no longer applies, that terror has lost its "purpose," that it is no longer the means to frighten people. Nor does the explanation suffice that the revolution, as in the case of the French Revolution, was devouring its own children, for the terror continues even after everybody who might be described as a child of the revolution in one capacity or another—the Russian factions, the power centers of party, the army, the

See also Rousset, *op. cit.*, p. 213. " . . . Those who haven't seen it with their own eyes can't believe it. Did you yourself, before you came here, take the rumors about the gas chambers seriously?"

"No, I said."

" . . . You see? Well, they're all like you. The lot of them in Paris, London, New York, even at Birkeman, right outside the crematoriums . . . still incredulous, five minutes before they were sent down into the cellar of the crematorium. . . ."

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bureaucracy—has long since been devoured. Many things that nowadays have become the specialty of totalitarian government are only too well known from the study of history. There have almost always been wars of aggression; the massacre of hostile populations after a victory went unchecked until the Romans mitigated it by introducing the *pacere subjects*; through centuries the extermination of native peoples went hand in hand with the colonization of the Americas, Australia, and Africa; slavery is one of the oldest institutions of mankind and all empires of antiquity were based on the labor of state-owned slaves who erected their public buildings. Not even concentration camps are an invention of totalitarian movements. They emerge for the first time during the Boer War, at the beginning of the twentieth century, and continued to be used in South Africa as well as India for “undesirable elements”; here, too, we first find the term “protective custody” which was later adopted by the Third Reich. These camps correspond in many respects to the concentration camps at the beginning of totalitarian rule; they were used for “suspects” whose offenses could not be proved and who could not be sentenced by ordinary process of law. All this clearly points to totalitarian methods of domination; all these are elements they utilize, develop, and crystallize on the basis of the nihilistic principle that “everything is permitted,” which they inherited and already take for granted. But wherever these new forms of domination assume their authentically totalitarian structure they transcend this principle, which is still tied to the utilitarian motives and self-interest of the rulers, and try their hand in a realm that up to now has been completely unknown to us: the realm where “everything is possible.” And, characteristically enough, this is precisely the realm that cannot be limited by either utilitarian motives or self-interest, regardless of the latter’s content.

What runs counter to common sense is not the nihilistic principle that “everything is permitted,” which was already contained in the nineteenth-century utilitarian conception of common sense. What common sense and “normal people” refuse to believe is that everything is possible.¹²⁹ We attempt to understand elements in present or recollected experience that simply surpass our powers of understanding. We attempt to classify as criminal a thing which, as we all feel, no such category was ever intended to cover. What meaning has the concept of murder when we are confronted with

129. The first to understand this was Rousset in his *Univers Concentrationnaire*, 1947.

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the mass production of corpses? We attempt to understand the behavior of concentration-camp inmates and SS-men psychologically, when the very thing that must be realized is that the psyche *can* be destroyed even without the destruction of the physical man; that, indeed, psyche, character, and individuality seem under certain circumstances to express themselves only through the rapidity or slowness with which they disintegrate.¹³⁰ The end result in any case is inanimate men, *i.e.*, men who can no longer be psychologically understood, whose return to the psychologically or otherwise intelligibly human world closely resembles the resurrection of Lazarus. All statements of common sense, whether of a psychological or sociological nature, serve only to encourage those who think it “superficial” to “dwell on horrors.”¹³¹

If it is true that the concentration camps are the most consequential institution of totalitarian rule, “dwelling on horrors” would seem to be indispensable for the understanding of totalitarianism. But the recollection can no more do this than can the uncommunicative eyewitness report. In both these genres there is an inherent tendency to run away from the experience; instinctively or rationally, both types of writer are so much aware of the terrible abyss that separates the world of the living from that of the living dead that they cannot supply anything more than a series of remembered occurrences that must seem just as incredible to those who relate them as to their audience. Only the fearful imagination of those who have been aroused by such reports but have not actually been smitten in their own flesh, of those who are consequently free from the bestial, desperate terror which, when confronted by real, present horror, inexorably paralyzes everything that is not mere reaction, can afford to keep thinking about horrors. Such thoughts are useful only for the perception of political contexts and the mobilization of political passions. A change of personality of any sort whatever can no more be induced by thinking about horrors than by the real experience of horror. The reduction of a man to a bundle of reactions separates him as radically as mental disease from everything within him that is personality or character. When, like Lazarus, he rises from the dead, he finds his personality or character unchanged, just as he had left it.

Just as the horror, or the dwelling on it, cannot affect a change of character—

130. Rousset, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

131. See Georges Bataille in *Critique*, January, 1948, p. 72.

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ter in him, cannot make men better or worse, thus it cannot become the basis of a political community or party in a narrower sense. The attempts to build up a European elite with a program of intra-European understanding based on the common European experience of the concentration camps have foundered in much the same manner as the attempts following the first World War to draw political conclusions from the international experiences of the front generation. In both cases it turned out that the experiences themselves can communicate no more than nihilistic banalities.¹³² Political consequences such as postwar pacifism, for example, derived from the general fear of war, not from the experiences in war. Instead of producing a pacifism devoid of reality, the insight into the structure of modern wars, guided and mobilized by fear, might have led to the realization that the only standard for a necessary war is the fight against conditions under which people no longer wish to live—and our experiences with the tormenting hell of the totalitarian camps have enlightened us only too well about the possibility of such conditions.¹³³ Thus the fear of concentration camps and the resulting insight into the nature of total domination might serve to invalidate all obsolete political differentiations from right to left and to introduce beside and above them the politically most important yardstick for judging events in our time, namely: whether they serve totalitarian domination or not.

In any event, the fearful imagination has the great advantage to dissolve the sophistic-dialectical interpretations of politics which are all based on the superstition that something good might result from evil. Such dialectical acrobatics had at least a semblance of justification so long as the worst that man could inflict upon man was murder. But, as we know today, murder is only a limited evil. The murderer who kills a man—a man who has to die anyway—still moves within the realm of life and death familiar to us; both have indeed a necessary connection on which the dialectic is founded, even if it is not always conscious of it. The murderer leaves a corpse behind and does not pretend that his victim has never existed; if he wipes out any traces, they are

132. Rousset's book contains many such "insights" into human "nature," based chiefly on the observation that after a while the mentality of the inmates is scarcely distinguishable from that of the camp guards.
133. In order to avoid misunderstandings it may be appropriate to add that with the invention of the hydrogen bomb the whole war question has undergone another decisive change. A discussion of this question is of course beyond the theme of this book.

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those of his own identity, and not the memory and grief of the persons who loved his victim; he destroys a life, but he does not destroy the fact of existence itself.

The Nazis, with the precision peculiar to them, used to register their operations in the concentration camps under the heading "under cover of the night (*Nacht und Nebel*).¹³⁴ The radicalism of measures to treat people as if they had never existed and to make them disappear in the literal sense of the word is frequently not apparent at first glance, because both the German and the Russian system are not uniform but consist of a series of categories in which people are treated very differently. In the case of Germany, these different categories used to exist in the same camp, but without coming into contact with each other; frequently, the isolation between the categories was even stricter than the isolation from the outside world. Thus, out of racial considerations, Scandinavian nationals during the war were quite differently treated by the Germans than the members of other peoples, although the former were outspoken enemies of the Nazis. The latter in turn were divided into those whose "extermination" was immediately on the agenda, as in the case of the Jews; or could be expected in the predictable future, as in the case of the Poles, Russians, and Ukrainians; and into those who were not yet covered by instructions about such an over-all "final solution," as in the case of the French and Belgians. In Russia, on the other hand, we must distinguish three more or less independent systems. First, there are the authentic forced-labor groups that live in relative freedom and are sentenced for limited periods. Secondly, there are the concentration camps in which the human material is ruthlessly exploited and the mortality rate is extremely high, but which are essentially organized for labor purposes. And, thirdly, there are the annihilation camps in which the inmates are systematically wiped out through starvation and neglect.

The real horror of the concentration and extermination camps lies in the fact that the inmates, even if they happen to keep alive, are more effectively cut off from the world of the living than if they had died, because terror enforces oblivion. Here, murder is as impersonal as the squashing of a gnat. Someone may die as the result of systematic torture or starvation, or because the camp is overcrowded and superfluous human material must be liquidated. Conversely, it may happen that due to a shortage of new human shipments the danger arises that the camps become depopulated and that the

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order is now given to reduce the death rate at any price.¹³⁴ David Rousset called his report on the period in a German concentration camp "*Les Jours de Norre Mori*," and it is indeed as if there were a possibility to give permanence to the process of dying itself and to enforce a condition in which both death and life are obstructed equally effectively.

It is the appearance of some radical evil, previously unknown to us, that puts an end to the notion of developments and transformations of qualities. Here, there are neither political nor historical nor simply moral standards but, at the most, the realization that something seems to be involved in modern politics that actually should never be involved in politics as we used to understand it, namely all or nothing—all, and that is an undetermined infinity of forms of human living-together, or nothing, for a victory of the concentration-camp system would mean the same inexorable doom for human beings as the use of the hydrogen bomb would mean the doom of the human race.

There are no parallels to the life in the concentration camps. Its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death. It can never be fully reported for the very reason that the survivor returns to the world of the living, which makes it impossible for him to believe fully in his own past experiences. It is as though he had a story to tell of another planet, for the status of the inmates in the world of the living, where nobody is supposed to know if they are alive or dead, is such that it is as though they had never been born. Therefore all parallels create confusion and distract attention from what is essential. Forced labor in prisons and penal colonies, banishment, slavery, all seem for a moment to offer helpful comparisons, but on closer examination lead nowhere.

Forced labor as a punishment is limited as to time and intensity. The convict retains his rights over his body; he is not absolutely tortured and he is not absolutely dominated. Banishment banishes only from one part of the world to another part of the world, also inhabited by human beings; it does not exclude from the human world altogether. Throughout history slavery has

¹³⁴ This happened in Germany toward the end of 1942, whereupon Himmler served notice to all camp commandants "to reduce the death rate at all costs." For it had turned out that of the 136,000 new arrivals, 70,000 were already dead on reaching the camp or died immediately thereafter. See *Nazi Conspiracy*, IV, Annex II.—Later reports from Soviet Russian camps unanimously confirm that after 1949—that is, when Stalin was still alive—the death rate in the concentration camps, which previously had

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been an institution within a social order; slaves were not, like concentration-camp inmates, withdrawn from the sight and hence the protection of their fellow-men; as instruments of labor they had a definite price and as property a definite value. The concentration-camp inmate has no price, because he can always be replaced; nobody knows to whom he belongs, because he is never seen. From the point of view of normal society he is absolutely superfluous, although in times of acute labor shortage, as in Russia and in Germany during the war, he is used for work.

The concentration camp as an institution was not established for the sake of any possible labor yield; the only permanent economic function of the camps has been the financing of their own supervisory apparatus; thus from the economic point of view the concentration camps exist mostly for their own sake. Any work that has been performed could have been done much better and more cheaply under different conditions.¹³⁵ Especially Russia, whose concentration camps are mostly described as forced-labor camps because Soviet bureaucracy has chosen to dignify them with this name, reveals most clearly that forced labor is not the primary issue; forced labor is the normal condition of all Russian workers, who have no freedom of movement and can be arbitrarily drafted for work to any place at any time. The incredibility of the horrors is closely bound up with their economic uselessness. The Nazis carried this uselessness to the point of open anti-utility when in the midst of the war, despite the shortage of building material and rolling stock, they set up enormous, costly extermination factories and transported

reached up to 60 per cent of the inmates, was systematically lowered, presumably due to a general and acute labor shortage in the Soviet Union. This improvement in living conditions should not be confused with the crisis of the regime after Stalin's death which, characteristically enough, first made itself felt in the concentration camps. Cf. Wilhelm Sturlinger, *Gegen der Sowjetmacht*, Würzburg, 1955, 135. See Kogon, *op. cit.*, p. 58: "A large part of the work exacted in the concentration camps was useless, either it was superfluous or it was so miserably planned that it had to be done over two or three times." Also Beutelheim, *op. cit.*, pp. 81–83: "New prisoners particularly were forced to perform nonsensical tasks. . . . They felt debased . . . and preferred even harder work when it produced something useful. . . ." Even Dallin, who has built his whole book on the thesis that the purpose of Russian camps is to provide cheap labor, is forced to admit the inefficiency of camp labor, *op. cit.*, p. 105.—The current theories about the Russian camp system as an economic measure for providing a cheap labor supply would stand clearly refuted if recent reports on mass amnesties and the abolition of concentration camps should prove to be true. For if the camps had served an important economic purpose, the regime certainly could not have afforded their rapid liquidation without grave consequences for the whole economic system.

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millions of people back and forth.¹³⁶ In the eyes of a strictly utilitarian world the obvious contradiction between these acts and military expediency gave the whole enterprise an air of mad unreality.

This atmosphere of madness and unreality, created by an apparent lack of purpose, is the real iron curtain which hides all forms of concentration camps from the eyes of the world. Seen from outside, they and the things that happen in them can be described only in images drawn from a life after death, that is, a life removed from earthly purposes. Concentration camps can very aptly be divided into three types corresponding to three basic Western conceptions of a life after death: Hades, Purgatory, and Hell. To Hades correspond those relatively mild forms, once popular even in nontotalitarian countries, for getting undesirable elements of all sorts—refugees, stateless persons, the asocial, and the unemployed—out of the way; as DP camps, which are nothing other than camps for persons who have become superfluous and bothersome, they have survived the war. Purgatory is represented by the Soviet Union's labor camps, where neglect is combined with chaotic forced labor. Hell in the most literal sense was embodied by those types of camp perfected by the Nazis, in which the whole of life was thoroughly and systematically organized with a view to the greatest possible torment.

All three types have one thing in common: the human masses sealed off in them are treated as if they no longer existed, as if what happened to them were no longer of any interest to anybody, as if they were already dead and some evil spirit gone mad were amusing himself by stopping them for a while between life and death before admitting them to eternal peace.

It is not so much the barbed wire as the skillfully manufactured unreality of those whom it fences in that provokes such enormous cruelties and ultimately makes extermination look like a perfectly normal measure. Everything that was done in the camps is known to us from the world of perverse, malignant fantasies. The difficult thing to understand is that, like such fantasies, these gruesome crimes took place in a phantom world, which, however, has materialized, as it were, into a world which is complete with all sensual data of reality but lacks that structure of consequence and responsibility.

¹³⁶ Apart from the millions of people whom the Nazis transported to the extermination camps, they constantly attempted new colonization plans—transported Germans from Germany or the occupied territories to the East for colonization purposes. This was of course a serious handicap for military actions and economic exploitation. For the numerous discussions on these subjects and the constant conflict

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bility without which reality remains for us a mass of incomprehensible data. The result is that a place has been established where men can be tortured and slaughtered, and yet neither the tormentors nor the tormented, and least of all the outsider, can be aware that what is happening is anything more than a cruel game or an absurd dream.¹³⁷

The films which the Allies circulated in Germany and elsewhere after the war showed clearly that this atmosphere of insanity and unreality is not dispelled by pure reportage. To the unprejudiced observer these pictures are just about as convincing as snapshots of mysterious substances taken at spiritualist séances.¹³⁸ Common sense reacted to the horrors of Buchenwald and Auschwitz with the plausible argument: "What crime must these people have committed that such things were done to them!"; or, in Germany and Austria, in the midst of starvation, overpopulation, and general hatred: "Too bad that they've stopped gassing the Jews"; and everywhere with the skeptical shrug that greets ineffectual propaganda.

If the propaganda of truth fails to convince the average person because it is too monstrous, it is positively dangerous to those who know from their own imaginings what they themselves are capable of doing and who are therefore perfectly willing to believe in the reality of what they have seen. Suddenly it becomes evident that things which for thousands of years the human imagination had banished to a realm beyond human competence can be manufactured right here on earth, that Hell and Purgatory, and even a shadow of their perpetual duration, can be established by the most modern methods of destruction and therapy. To these people (and they are more numerous in any large city than we like to admit) the totalitarian hell proves only that the power of man is greater than they ever dared to think, and that man can realize hellish fantasies without making the sky fall or the earth open.

between the Nazi civilian hierarchy in the Eastern occupied territories and the SS hierarchy see especially Vol. XXIX of *Trial of the Major War Criminals*, Nuremberg, 1947.

¹³⁷ Bettelheim, *op. cit.*, notes that the guards in the camps embraced an attitude toward the atmosphere of unreality similar to that of the prisoners themselves.

¹³⁸ It is of some importance to realize that all pictures of concentration camps are misleading insofar as they show the camps in their last stages, at the moment the Allied troops marched in. There were no death camps in Germany proper, and at that point all extermination equipment had already been dismantled. On the other hand, what provoked the outrage of the Allies most and what gives the films their special horror—namely, the sight of the human skeletons—was not at all typical for the German concentration camps; extermination was handled systematically by gas, not by starvation. The condition of the camps was a result of the war events during the final months: Himmler had ordered the evacuation

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These analogies, repeated in many reports from the world of the dying,¹³⁹ seem to express more than a desperate attempt at saying what is outside the realm of human speech. Nothing perhaps distinguishes modern masses as radically from those of previous centuries as the loss of faith in a Last Judgment: the worst have lost their fear and the best have lost their hope. Unable as yet to live without fear and hope, these masses are attracted by every effort which seems to promise a man-made fabrication of the Paradise they had longed for and of the Hell they had feared. Just as the popularized features of Marx's classless society have a queer resemblance to the Messianic Age, so the reality of concentration camps resembles nothing so much as medieval pictures of Hell.

The one thing that cannot be reproduced is what made the traditional conceptions of Hell tolerable to man: the Last Judgment, the idea of an absolute standard of justice combined with the infinite possibility of grace. For in the human estimation there is no crime and no sin commensurable with the everlasting torments of Hell. Hence the discomfiture of common sense, which asks: What crime must these people have committed in order to suffer so inhumanly? Hence also the absolute innocence of the victims: no man ever deserved this. Hence finally the grotesque haphazardness with which concentration-camp victims were chosen in the perfected terror state: such "punishment" can, with equal justice and injustice, be inflicted on anyone.

In comparison with the insane end-result—concentration-camp society—the process by which men are prepared for this end, and the methods by which individuals are adapted to these conditions, are transparent and logical. The insane mass manufacture of corpses is preceded by the historically and politically intelligible preparation of living corpses. The impetus and, what is more important, the silent consent to such unprecedented conditions are the products of those events which in a period of political disintegration suddenly and unexpectedly made hundreds of thousands of human beings homeless, stateless, outlawed, and unwanted, while millions of human beings were made economically superfluous and socially burdensome by unemployment. This in turn could only happen because the Rights of Man,

of all extermination camps in the East, the German camps were consequently vastly overcrowded, and he was no longer in a position to assure the food supply in Germany.

139. That life in a concentration camp was simply a dragged-out process of dying is stressed by Rousset, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

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which had never been philosophically established but merely formulated, which had never been politically secured but merely proclaimed, have, in their traditional form, lost all validity.

The first essential step on the road to total domination is to kill the juridical person in man. This was done, on the one hand, by putting certain categories of people outside the protection of the law and forcing at the same time, through the instrument of denationalization, the nontotalitarian world into recognition of lawlessness; it was done, on the other, by placing the concentration camp outside the normal penal system, and by selecting its inmates outside the normal judicial procedure in which a definite crime entails a predictable penalty. Thus criminals, who for other reasons are an essential element in concentration-camp society, are ordinarily sent to a camp only on completion of their prison sentence. Under all circumstances totalitarian domination sees to it that the categories gathered in the camps—Jews, carriers of diseases, representatives of dying classes—have already lost their capacity for both normal or criminal action. Propagandistically this means that the "protective custody" is handled as a "preventive police measure,"¹⁴⁰ that is, a measure that deprives people of the ability to act. Deviations from this rule in Russia must be attributed to the catastrophic shortage of prisons and to a desire, so far unrealized, to transform the whole penal system into a system of concentration camps.¹⁴¹

The inclusion of criminals is necessary in order to make plausible the propagandistic claim of the movement that the institution exists for social elements.¹⁴² Criminals do not properly belong in the concentration camps, if only because it is harder to kill the juridical person in a man who is guilty of some crime than in a totally innocent person. If they constitute a permanent category among the inmates, it is a concession of the totalitarian state to the

140. Maurer, *op. cit.*, p. 10, insists that criminals should never be sent to the camps for the time of their regular sentences.

141. The shortage of prison space in Russia has been such that in the year 1931-1936, only 36 per cent of all court sentences could be carried out. See Dallin, *op. cit.*, p. 158 ff.

142. "Gestapo and SS have always attached great importance to mixing the categories of inmates in the camps. In no camp have the inmates belonged exclusively to one category" (Kogon, *op. cit.*, p. 19).

In Russia, it has also been customary from the beginning to mix political prisoners and criminals. During the first ten years of Soviet power, the Left political groups enjoyed certain privileges; only with the full development of the totalitarian character of the regime "after the end of the twenties, the political were even officially treated as inferior to the common criminals" (Dallin, *op. cit.*, p. 177 ff.).

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prejudices of society, which can in this way most readily be accustomed to the existence of the camps. In order, on the other hand, to keep the camp system itself intact, it is essential as long as there is a penal system in the country that criminals should be sent to the camps only on completion of their sentence, that is when they are actually entitled to their freedom. Under no circumstances must the concentration camp become a calculable punishment for definite offenses.

The amalgamation of criminals with all other categories has moreover the advantage of making it shockingly evident to all other arrivals that they have landed on the lowest level of society. It soon turns out, to be sure, that they have every reason to envy the lowest thief and murderer; but meanwhile the lowest level is a good beginning. Moreover it is an effective means of camouflage: this happens only to criminals and nothing worse is happening than what deservedly happens to criminals.

The criminals everywhere constitute the aristocracy of the camps. (In Germany, during the war, they were replaced in the leadership by the Communists, because not even a minimum of rational work could be performed under the chaotic conditions created by a criminal administration. This was merely a temporary transformation of concentration camps into forced-labor camps, a thoroughly atypical phenomenon of limited duration.¹⁴³) What places the criminals in the leadership is not so much the affinity between supervisory personnel and criminal elements—in the Soviet Union apparently the supervisors are not, like the SS, a special elite trained to commit crimes¹⁴⁴—as the fact that only criminals have been sent to the camp in connection with some definite activity. They at least know why they are in a concentration camp and therefore have kept a remnant of their juridical person. For the political this is only subjectively true; their actions, insofar as they were actions and not mere opinions or someone else's vague suspicions, or accidental membership in a politically disapproved group, are as a rule

143. Rousset's book suffers from his overestimation of the influence of the German Communists, who dominated the internal administration of Buchenwald during the war.

144. See for instance the testimony of Mrs. Buber-Neumann (former wife of the German Communist Heinz Neumann), who survived Soviet and German concentration camps: "The Russians never . . . evinced the sadistic streak of the Nazis . . . Our Russian guards were decent men and not sadists, but they faithfully fulfilled the requirements of the inhuman system" (*Under Two Dictators*).

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not covered by the normal legal system of the country and not juridically defined.¹⁴⁵

To the amalgam of political and criminals with which concentration camps in Russia and Germany started out, was added at an early date a third element which was soon to constitute the majority of all concentration-camp inmates. This largest group has consisted ever since of people who had done nothing whatsoever that, either in their own consciousness or the consciousness of their tormenters, had any rational connection with their arrest. In Germany, after 1938, this element was represented by masses of Jews, in Russia by any groups which, for any reason having nothing to do with their actions, had incurred the disfavor of the authorities. These groups, innocent in every sense, are the most suitable for thorough experimentation in disenfranchisement and destruction of the juridical person, and therefore they are both qualitatively and quantitatively the most essential category of the camp population. This principle was most fully realized in the gas chambers which, if only because of their enormous capacity, could not be intended for individual cases but only for people in general. In this connection, the following dialogue sums up the situation of the individual: "For what purpose, may I ask, do the gas chambers exist?" — "For what purpose were you born?"¹⁴⁶ It is this third group of the totally innocent who in every case fare the worst in the camps. Criminals and politicals are assimilated to this category; thus deprived of the protective distinction that comes of their having done something, they are utterly exposed to the arbitrary. The ultimate goal, partly achieved in the Soviet Union and clearly indicated in the last phases of Nazi terror, is to have the whole camp population composed of this category of innocent people.

Contrasting with the complete haphazardness with which the inmates are selected are the categories, meaningless in themselves but useful from the standpoint of organization, into which they are usually divided on their arrival. In the German camps there were criminals, politicals, social elements, religious offenders, and Jews, all distinguished by insignia. When the

145. Bruno Bettelheim, "Behavior in Extreme Situations," in *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 4, 1943, describes the self-esteem of the criminals and the political prisoners as compared with those who have not done anything. The latter "were least able to withstand the initial shock," the first to disintegrate. Bettelheim blames this on their middle-class origin.

146. Rousset, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

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French set up concentration camps after the Spanish Civil War, they immediately introduced the typical totalitarian amalgam of political with criminals and the innocent (in this case the stateless), and despite their inexperience proved remarkably inventive in creating meaningless categories of inmates.¹⁴⁷ Originally devised in order to prevent any growth of solidarity among the inmates, this technique proved particularly valuable because no one could know whether his own category was better or worse than someone else's. In Germany this eternally shifting though pedantically organized edifice was given an appearance of solidity by the fact that under any and all circumstances the Jews were the lowest category. The gruesome and grotesque part of it was that the inmates identified themselves with these categories, as though they represented a last authentic remnant of their juridical person. Even if we disregard all other circumstances, it is no wonder that a Communist of 1933 should have come out of the camps more Communist than he went in, a Jew more Jewish, and, in France, the wife of a Foreign Legionary more convinced of the value of the Foreign Legion; it would seem as though these categories promised some last shred of predictable treatment, as though they embodied some last and hence most fundamental juridical identity.

While the classification of inmates by categories is only a tactical, organizational measure, the arbitrary selection of victims indicates the essential principle of the institution. If the concentration camps had been dependent on the existence of political adversaries, they would scarcely have survived the first years of the totalitarian regimes. One only has to take a look at the number of inmates at Buchenwald in the years after 1936 in order to understand how absolutely necessary the element of the innocent was for the continued existence of the camps. "The camps would have died out if in making its arrests the Gestapo had considered only the principle of opposition,"¹⁴⁸ and toward the end of 1937 Buchenwald, with less than 1,000 inmates, was close to dying out until the November pogroms brought more than 20,000 new arrivals.¹⁴⁹ In Germany, this element of the innocent was furnished in vast numbers by the Jews after 1938; in Russia, it consisted of random groups of the population which for some reason entirely unconnected with their

147. For conditions in French concentration camps, see Arthur Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*, 1941.

148. Kogon, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

149. See *Nazi Conspiracy*, IV, 800 ff.

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actions had fallen into disgrace.¹⁵⁰ But if in Germany the really totalitarian type of concentration camp with its enormous majority of completely "innocent" inmates was not established until 1938, in Russia it goes back to the early thirties, since up to 1930 the majority of the concentration-camp population still consisted of criminals, counterrevolutionaries and "politicals" (meaning, in this case, members of deviationist factions). Since then there have been so many innocent people in the camps that it is difficult to classify them—persons who had some sort of contact with a foreign country, Russians of Polish origin (particularly in the years 1936 to 1938), peasants whose villages for some economic reason were liquidated, deported nationalities, demobilized soldiers of the Red Army who happened to belong to regiments that stayed too long abroad as occupation forces or had become prisoners of war in Germany, etc. But the existence of a political opposition is for a concentration-camp system only a pretext, and the purpose of the system is not achieved even when, under the most monstrous terror, the population becomes more or less voluntarily co-ordinated, *i.e.*, relinquishes its political rights. The aim of an arbitrary system is to destroy the civil rights of the whole population, who ultimately become just as outlawed in their own country as the stateless and homeless. The destruction of a man's rights, the killing of the juridical person in him, is a prerequisite for dominating him entirely. And this applies not only to special categories such as criminals, political opponents, Jews, homosexuals, on whom the early experiments were made, but to every inhabitant of a totalitarian state. Free consent is as much an obstacle to total domination as free opposition.¹⁵¹ The arbitrary arrest which chooses among innocent people destroys the validity of free consent, just as torture—as distinguished from death—destroys the possibility of opposition.

150. Beck and Godin, *op. cit.*, state explicitly that "opponents constituted only a relatively small proportion of the [Russian] prison population" (p. 87), and that there was no connection whatever between "a man's imprisonment and any offense" (p. 97).

151. Bruno Bettelheim, "On Dachau and Buchenwald," when discussing the fact that most prisoners "made their peace with the values of the Gestapo," emphasizes that "this was not the result of propaganda . . . the Gestapo insisted that it would prevent them from expressing their feelings anyway" (pp. 834-835).

Himmler explicitly prohibited propaganda of any kind in the camps. "Education consists of discipline, never of any kind of instruction on an ideological basis." "On Organization and Obligation of the SS and the Police," in *National-politische Lehrgang der Wehrmacht*, 1937. Quoted from *Nazi Conspiracy*, IV, 616 ff.

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Any, even the most tyrannical, restriction of this arbitrary persecution to certain opinions of a religious or political nature, to certain modes of intellectual or erotic social behavior, to certain freshly invented "crimes," would render the camps superfluous, because in the long run no attitude and no opinion can withstand the threat of so much horror; and above all it would make for a new system of justice, which, given any stability at all, could not fail to produce a new juridical person in man, that would elude the totalitarian domination. The so-called "*Völkennutzen*" of the Nazis, constantly fluctuating (because what is useful today can be injurious tomorrow) and the eternally shifting party line of the Soviet Union which, being retroactive, almost daily makes new groups of people available for the concentration camps, are the only guarantee for the continued existence of the concentration camps, and hence for the continued total disfranchisement of man.

The next decisive step in the preparation of living corpses is the murder of the moral person in man. This is done in the main by making martyrdom, for the first time in history, impossible: "How many people here still believe that a protest has even historic importance? This skepticism is the real masterpiece of the SS. Their great accomplishment. They have corrupted all human solidarity. Here the night has fallen on the future. When no witnesses are left, there can be no testimony. To demonstrate when death can no longer be postponed is an attempt to give death a meaning, to act beyond one's own death. In order to be successful, a gesture must have social meaning. There are hundreds of thousands of us here, all living in absolute solitude. That is why we are subdued no matter what happens."¹⁵²

The camps and the murder of political adversaries are only part of organized oblivion that not only embraces carriers of public opinion such as the spoken and the written word, but extends even to the families and friends of the victim. Grief and remembrance are forbidden. In the Soviet Union a woman will sue for divorce immediately after her husband's arrest in order to save the lives of her children; if her husband chances to come back, she will indignantly turn him out of the house.¹⁵³ The Western world has hitherto, even in its darkest periods, granted the slain enemy the right to be remembered as a self-evident acknowledgment of the fact that we are all men

152. Rousset, *op. cit.*, p. 464.

153. See the report of Sergei Malakhov in Dallin, *op. cit.*, pp. 20 ff.

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(and only men). It is only because even Achilles set out for Hector's funeral, only because the most despotic governments honored the slain enemy, only because the Romans allowed the Christians to write their martyrologies, only because the Church kept its heretics alive in the memory of men, that all was not lost and never could be lost. The concentration camps, by making death itself anonymous (making it impossible to find out whether a prisoner is dead or alive) robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life. In a sense they took away the individual's own death, proving that henceforth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one. His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never really existed.

This attack on the moral person might still have been opposed by man's conscience which tells him that it is better to die a victim than to live as a bureaucrat of murder. Totalitarian terror achieved its most terrible triumph when it succeeded in cutting the moral person off from the individualist escape and in making the decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal. When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their deaths; when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family—how is he to decide? The alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder. Who could solve the moral dilemma of the Greek mother who was allowed by the Nazis to choose which of her three children should be killed?¹⁵⁴

Through the creation of conditions under which conscience ceases to be adequate and to do good becomes utterly impossible, the consciously organized complicity of all men in the crimes of totalitarian regimes is extended to the victims and thus made really total. The SS implicated concentration-camp inmates—criminals, politicals, Jews—in their crimes by making them responsible for a large part of the administration, thus confronting them with the hopeless dilemma whether to send their friends to their deaths, or to help murder other men who happened to be strangers, and forcing them, in any event, to behave like murderers.¹⁵⁵ The point is not only that hatred is diverted from those who are guilty (the *capos* were more hated than the SS),

154. See Albert Camus in *Twice A Year*, 1947.

155. Rousset's book, *op. cit.*, consists largely of discussions of this dilemma by prisoners.

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but that the distinguishing line between persecutor and persecuted, between the murderer and his victim, is constantly blurred.¹⁵⁶

Once the moral person has been killed, the one thing that still prevents men from being made into living corpses is the differentiation of the individual, his unique identity. In a sterile form such individuality can be preserved through a persistent stoicism, and it is certain that many men under totalitarian rule have taken and are each day still taking refuge in this absolute isolation of a personality without rights or conscience. There is no doubt that this part of the human person, precisely because it depends so essentially on nature and on forces that cannot be controlled by the will, is the hardest to destroy (and when destroyed is most easily repaired).¹⁵⁷

The methods of dealing with this uniqueness of the human person are numerous and we shall not attempt to list them. They begin with the monstrous conditions in the transports to the camps, when hundreds of human beings are packed into a cattle-car stark naked, glued to each other, and shunted back and forth over the countryside for days on end; they continue upon arrival at the camp, the well-organized shock of the first hours, the shaving of the head, the grotesque camp clothing; and they end in the utterly unimaginable tortures so gauged as not to kill the body, at any event not quickly. The aim of all these methods, in any case, is to manipulate the human body—with its infinite possibilities of suffering—in such a way as to make it destroy the human person as inexorably as do certain mental diseases of organic origin.

It is here that the utter lunacy of the entire process becomes most apparent. Torture, to be sure, is an essential feature of the whole totalitarian police and judiciary apparatus; it is used every day to make people talk. This type of torture, since it pursues a definite, rational aim, has certain limitations: either the prisoner talks within a certain time, or he is killed. To this rationally conducted torture another, irrational, sadistic type was added in the first Nazi concentration camps and in the cellars of the Gestapo. Carried on for the

¹⁵⁶ Bettelheim, *op. cit.*, describes the process by which the guards as well as the prisoners became "conditioned" to the life in the camp and were afraid of returning to the outer world.

Rousset, therefore, is right when he insists that the truth is that "victim and executioner are alike ignoble; the lesson of the camps is the brotherhood of abjection" (p. 388).

¹⁵⁷ Bettelheim, *op. cit.*, describes how "the main concern of the new prisoners seemed to be to remain intact as a personality" while the problem of the old prisoners was "how to live as well as possible within the camp."

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most part by the SA, it pursued no aims and was not systematic, but depended on the initiative of largely abnormal elements. The mortality was so high that only a few concentration-camp inmates of 1933 survived these first years. This type of torture seemed to be not so much a calculated political institution as a concession of the regime to its criminal and abnormal elements, who were thus rewarded for services rendered. Behind the blind bestiality of the SA, there often lay a deep hatred and resentment against all those who were socially, intellectually, or physically better off than themselves, and who now, as if in fulfillment of their wildest dreams, were in their power. This resentment, which never died out entirely in the camps, strikes us as a last remnant of humanly understandable feeling.¹⁵⁸

The real horror began, however, when the SS took over the administration of the camps. The old spontaneous bestiality gave way to an absolutely cold and systematic destruction of human bodies, calculated to destroy human dignity; death was avoided or postponed indefinitely. The camps were no longer amusement parks for beasts in human form, that is, for men who really belonged in mental institutions and prisons; the reverse became true: they were turned into "drill grounds," on which perfectly normal men were trained to be full-fledged members of the SS.¹⁵⁹

The killing of man's individuality, of the uniqueness shaped in equal parts

¹⁵⁸ Rousset, *op. cit.*, p. 390, reports an SS-man haranguing a professor as follows: "You used to be a professor. Well, you're no professor now. You're no big shot any more. You're nothing but a little runt now. Just as little as you can be. I'm the big fellow now."

¹⁵⁹ Kogon, *op. cit.*, p. 6, speaks of the possibility that the camps will be maintained as training and experimental grounds for the SS. He also gives a good report on the difference between the early camps administered by the SA and the later ones under the SS. "None of these first camps had more than a thousand inmates. . . . Life in them begged all description. The accounts of the few old prisoners who survived those years agree that there was scarcely any form of sadistic perversion that was not practiced by the SA men. But they were all acts of individual bestiality, there was still no fully organized cold system, embracing masses of men. This was the accomplishment of the SS" (p. 7).

This new mechanized system eased the feeling of responsibility as much as was humanly possible. When, for instance, the order came to kill every day several hundred Russian prisoners, the slaughter was performed by shooting through a hole without seeing the victim. (See Ernest Feder, "Essai sur la Psychologie de la Terreur," in *Synthesés*, Brussels, 1946.) On the other hand, perversion was artificially produced in otherwise normal men. Rousset reports the following from a SS guard: "Usually I keep on hitting until I ejaculate. I have a wife and three children in Breslau. I used to be perfectly normal. That's what they've made of me. Now when they give me a pass out of here, I don't go home. I don't dare look my wife in the face" (p. 273).—The documents from the Hitler era contain numerous testimonials for the average normality of those entrusted with carrying out Hitler's program of extermination. A good collection is found in Léon Poliakov's "The Weapon of Antisemitism," published by UNESCO in 1946.

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by nature, will, and destiny, which has become so self-evident a premise for all human relations that even identical twins inspire a certain uneasiness, creates a horror that vastly overshadows the outrage of the juridical-political person and the despair of the moral person. It is this horror that gives rise to the nihilistic generalizations which maintain plausibly enough that essentially all men alike are beasts.¹⁶⁰ Actually the experience of the concentration camps does show that human beings can be transformed into specimens of the human animal, and that man's "nature" is only "human" insofar as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man.

After murder of the moral person and annihilation of the juridical person, the destruction of the individuality is almost always successful. Conceivably some laws of mass psychology may be found to explain why millions of human beings allowed themselves to be marched unresistingly into the gas chambers, although these laws would explain nothing else but the destruction of individuality. It is more significant that those individually condemned to death very seldom attempted to take one of their executioners with them, that there were scarcely any serious revolts, and that even in the moment of liberation there were very few spontaneous massacres of SS men. For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events.¹⁶¹ Nothing then remains but ghastly marionettes with human faces, which all behave like the dog in

Third Reich, London, 1935. Most of the men in the units used for these purposes were not volunteers but had been drafted from the ordinary police for these special assignments. But even trained SS-men found this kind of duty worse than front-line fighting. In his report of a mass execution by the SS, an eyewitness gives high praise to this troop which had been so "idealistic" that it was able to bear "the entire extermination without the help of liquor."

That one wanted to eliminate all personal motives and passions during the "exterminations" and hence keep the cruelties to a minimum is revealed by the fact that a group of doctors and engineers entrusted with handling the gas installations were making constant improvements that were not only designed to raise the productive capacity of the corpse factories but also to accelerate and ease the agony of death.

¹⁶⁰. This is very prominent in Rousset's work. "The social conditions of life in the camps have transformed the great mass of inmates, both the Germans and the deportees, regardless of their previous social position and education... into a degenerate rabble, entirely submissive to the primitive reflexes of the animal instinct" (p. 183).

¹⁶¹. In this context also belongs the astonishing rarity of suicides in the camps. Suicide occurred far more often before arrest and deportation than in the camp itself, which is of course partly explained by

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Pavlov's experiments, which all react with perfect reliability even when going to their own death, and which do nothing but react. This is the real triumph of the system: "The triumph of the SS demands that the tortured victim allow himself to be led to the noose without protesting, that he renounce and abandon himself to the point of ceasing to affirm his identity. And it is not for nothing. It is not gratuitously, out of sheer sadism, that the SS men desire his defeat. They know that the system which succeeds in destroying its victim before he mounts the scaffold... is incomparably the best for keeping a whole people in slavery. In submission. Nothing is more terrible than these processions of human beings going like dummies to their death. The man who sees this says to himself: 'For them to be thus reduced, what power must be concealed in the hands of the masters,' and he turns away, full of bitterness but defeated."¹⁶²

If we take totalitarian aspirations seriously and refuse to be misled by the common-sense assertion that they are utopian and unrealizable, it develops that the society of the dying established in the camps is the only form of society in which it is possible to dominate man entirely. Those who aspire to total domination must liquidate all spontaneity, such as the mere existence of individuality will always engender, and track it down in its most private forms, regardless of how unpolitical and harmless these may seem. Pavlov's dog, the human specimen reduced to the most elementary reactions, the bundle of reactions that can always be liquidated and replaced by other bundles of reactions that behave in exactly the same way, is the model "citizen" of a totalitarian state; and such a citizen can be produced only imperfectly outside of the camps.

The uselessness of the camps, their cynically admitted anti-utility, is only apparent. In reality they are more essential to the preservation of the regime's power than any of its other institutions. Without concentration camps, without the undefined fear they inspire and the very well-defined training they offer in totalitarian domination, which can nowhere else be fully tested with

the fact that every attempt was made to prevent suicides which are, after all, spontaneous acts. From the statistical material for Buchenwald (*Nazi Conspiracy*, IV, 800 ff.) it is evident that scarcely more than one-half per cent of the deaths could be traced to suicide, that frequently there were only two suicides per year, although in the same year the total number of deaths reached 3,516. The reports from Russian camps mention the same phenomenon. Cf., for instance, Starlinger, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

¹⁶². Rousset, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

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all of its most radical possibilities, a totalitarian state can neither inspire its nuclear troops with fanaticism nor maintain a whole people in complete apathy. The dominating and the dominated would only too quickly sink back into the "old bourgeois routine"; after early "excesses," they would succumb to everyday life with its human laws; in short, they would develop in the direction which all observers counseled by common sense were so prone to predict. The tragic fallacy of all these prophecies, originating in a world that was still safe, was to suppose that there was such a thing as one human nature established for all time, to identify this human nature with history, and thus to declare that the idea of total domination was not only inhuman but also unrealistic. Meanwhile we have learned that the power of man is so great that he really can be what he wishes to be.

It is in the very nature of totalitarian regimes to demand unlimited power. Such power can only be secured if literally all men, without a single exception, are reliably dominated in every aspect of their life. In the realm of foreign affairs new neutral territories must constantly be subjugated, while at home ever-new human groups must be mastered in expanding concentration camps, or, when circumstances require, liquidated to make room for others. The question of opposition is unimportant both in foreign and domestic affairs. Any neutrality, indeed any spontaneously given friendship, is from the standpoint of totalitarian domination just as dangerous as open hostility, precisely because spontaneity as such, with its incalculability, is the greatest of all obstacles to total domination over man. The Communists of non-Communist countries, who fled or were called to Moscow, learned by bitter experience that they constituted a menace to the Soviet Union. Convinced Communists are in this sense, which alone has any reality today, just as ridiculous and just as menacing to the regime in Russia, as, for example, the convinced Nazis of the Röhm faction were to the Nazis.

What makes conviction and opinion of any sort so ridiculous and dangerous under totalitarian conditions is that totalitarian regimes take the greatest pride in having no need of them, or of any human help of any kind. Men, insofar as they are more than animal reaction and fulfillment of functions, are entirely superfluous to totalitarian regimes. Totalitarianism strives not toward despotic rule over men, but toward a system in which men are superfluous. Total power can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes, of marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity.

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Precisely because man's resources are so great, he can be fully dominated only when he becomes a specimen of the animal-species man.

Therefore character is a threat and even the most unjust legal rules are an obstacle; but individuality, anything indeed that distinguishes one man from another, is intolerable. As long as all men have not been made equally superfluous—and this has been accomplished only in concentration camps—the ideal of totalitarian domination has not been achieved. Totalitarian states strive constantly, though never with complete success, to establish the superfluity of man—by the arbitrary selection of various groups for concentration camps, by constant purges of the ruling apparatus, by mass liquidations. Common sense protests desperately that the masses are submissive and that all this gigantic apparatus of terror is therefore superfluous; if they were capable of telling the truth, the totalitarian rulers would reply: The apparatus seems superfluous to you only because it serves to make men superfluous.

The totalitarian attempt to make men superfluous reflects the experience of modern masses of their superfluity on an overcrowded earth. The world of the dying, in which men are taught they are superfluous through a way of life in which punishment is meted out without connection with crime, in which exploitation is practiced without profit, and where work is performed with-out product, is a place where senselessness is daily produced anew. Yet, within the framework of the totalitarian ideology, nothing could be more sensible and logical; if the inmates are vermin, it is logical that they should be killed by poison gas; if they are degenerate, they should not be allowed to contaminate the population; if they have "slave-like souls" (Himmler), no one should waste his time trying to re-educate them. Seen through the eyes of the ideology, the trouble with the camps is almost that they make too much sense, that the execution of the doctrine is too consistent.

While the totalitarian regimes are thus resolutely and cynically emptying the world of the only thing that makes sense to the utilitarian expectations of common sense, they impose upon it at the same time a kind of super-sense which the ideologies actually always meant when they pretended to have found the key to history or the solution to the riddles of the universe. Over and above the senselessness of totalitarian society is enthroned the ridiculous super-sense of its ideological superstition. Ideologies are harmless, uncritical, and arbitrary opinions only as long as they are not believed in seriously.

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Once their claim to total validity is taken literally they become the nuclei of logical systems in which, as in the systems of paranoiacs, everything follows comprehensibly and even compulsorily once the first premise is accepted. The insanity of such systems lies not only in their first premise but in the very logicity with which they are constructed. The curious logicity of all isms, their simple-minded trust in the salvation value of stubborn devotion without regard for specific, varying factors, already harbors the first germs of totalitarian contempt for reality and factuality.

Common sense trained in utilitarian thinking is helpless against this ideological supersense, since totalitarian regimes establish a functioning world of no-sense. The ideological contempt for factuality still contained the proud assumption of human mastery over the world; it is, after all, contempt for reality which makes possible changing the world, the erection of the human artifice. What destroys the element of pride in the totalitarian contempt for reality (and thereby distinguishes it radically from revolutionary theories and attitudes) is the supersense which gives the contempt for reality its cogency, logicity, and consistency. What makes a truly totalitarian device out of the Bolshevik claim that the present Russian system is superior to all others is the fact that the totalitarian ruler draws from this claim the logically impeccable conclusion that without this system people never could have built such a wonderful thing as, let us say, a subway; from this, he again draws the logical conclusion that anyone who knows of the existence of the Paris subway is a suspect because he may cause people to doubt that one can do things only in the Bolshevik way. This leads to the final conclusion that in order to remain a loyal Bolshevik, you have to destroy the Paris subway. Nothing matters but consistency.

With these new structures, built on the strength of supersense and driven by the motor of logicity, we are indeed at the end of the bourgeois era of profits and power, as well as at the end of imperialism and expansion. The aggressiveness of totalitarianism springs not from lust for power, and if it feverishly seeks to expand, it does so neither for expansion's sake nor for profit, but only for ideological reasons: to make the world consistent, to prove that its respective supersense has been right.

It is chiefly for the sake of this supersense, for the sake of complete consistency, that it is necessary for totalitarianism to destroy every trace of what we commonly call human dignity. For respect for human dignity implies the

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recognition of my fellow-men or our fellow-nations as subjects, as builders of worlds or cobuilders of a common world. No ideology which aims at the explanation of all historical events of the past and at mapping out the course of all events of the future can bear the unpredictability which springs from the fact that men are creative, that they can bring forward something so new that nobody ever foresaw it.

What totalitarian ideologies therefore aim at is not the transformation of the outside world or the revolutionizing transmutation of society, but the transformation of human nature itself. The concentration camps are the laboratories where changes in human nature are tested, and their shameful-ness therefore is not just the business of their inmates and those who run them according to strictly "scientific" standards; it is the concern of all men. Suffering, of which there has been always too much on earth, is not the issue, nor is the number of victims. Human nature as such is at stake, and even though it seems that these experiments succeed not in changing man but only in destroying him, by creating a society in which the nihilistic banality of *homo homini lupus* is consistently realized, one should bear in mind the necessary limitations to an experiment which requires global control in order to show conclusive results.

Until now the totalitarian belief that everything is possible seems to have proved only that everything can be destroyed. Yet, in their effort to prove that everything is possible, totalitarian regimes have discovered without knowing it that there are crimes which men can neither punish nor forgive. When the impossible was made possible it became the unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil which could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice; and which therefore anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive. Just as the victims in the death factories or the holes of oblivion are no longer "human" in the eyes of their executioners, so this newest species of criminals is beyond the pale even of solidarity in human sinfulness.

It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a "radical evil," and this is true both for Christian theology, which conceded even to the Devil himself a celestial origin, as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word *radical Böse* he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of this evil even though he immediately

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rationalized it in the concept of a "perverted ill will" that could be explained by comprehensible motives. Therefore, we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know. There is only one thing that seems to be discernible: we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous. The manipulators of this system believe in their own superfluousness as much as in that of all others, and the totalitarian murderers are all the more dangerous because they do not care if they themselves are alive or dead, if they ever lived or never were born. The danger of the corpse factories and holes of oblivion is that today, with populations and homelessness everywhere on the increase, masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous if we continue to think of our world in utilitarian terms. Political, social, and economic events everywhere are in a silent conspiracy with totalitarian instruments devised for making men superfluous. The implied temptation is well understood by the utilitarian common sense of the masses, who in most countries are too desperate to retain much fear of death. The Nazis and the Bolsheviks can be sure that their factories of annihilation which demonstrate the swiftest solution to the problem of overpopulation, of economically superfluous and socially rootless human masses, are as much of an attraction as a warning. Totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man.

‘Gomorra’

By ROBERTO SAVIANO NOV. 14, 2007

The container swayed as the crane hoisted it onto the ship. The spreader, which hooks the container to the crane, was unable to control its movement, so it seemed to float in the air. The hatches, which had been improperly closed, suddenly sprang open, and dozens of bodies started raining down. They looked like mannequins. But when they hit the ground, their heads split open, as if their skulls were real. And they were. Men, women, even a few children, came tumbling out of the container. All dead. Frozen, stacked one on top of another, packed like sardines. These were the Chinese who never die. The eternal ones, who trade identity papers among themselves. So this is where they’d ended up, the bodies that in the wildest fantasies might have been cooked in Chinese restaurants, buried in fields beside factories, or tossed into the mouth of Vesuvius. Here they were. Spilling from the container by the dozen, their names scribbled on tags and tied with string around their necks. They’d all put aside money so they could be buried in China, back in their hometowns, a percentage withheld from their salaries to guarantee their return voyage once they were dead. A space in a container and a hole in some strip of Chinese soil. The port crane operator covered his face with his hands as he told me about it, eyeing me through his fingers. As if the mask of his hands might give him the courage to speak. He’d seen the bodies fall, but there’d been no need to sound the alarm. He merely lowered the container to the ground, and dozens of people appeared out of nowhere to put everyone back inside and hose down the remains. That’s how it went. He still couldn’t believe it and hoped he was hallucinating, due to too much overtime. Then he closed his fingers, completely covering his eyes. He kept on whimpering, but I couldn’t understand what he was saying.

Everything that exists passes through here. Through the port of Naples. There’s not a product, fabric, piece of plastic, toy, hammer, shoe, screwdriver, bolt, video game, jacket, pair of pants, drill, or watch that doesn’t come through the port. The port of Naples is an open wound. The end point for the interminable voyage that merchandise makes. Ships enter the gulf and come to the dock like babies to the breast, except that they’re here to be milked, not fed. The port of Naples is the hole in the earth out of which what’s made in China comes. The Far East, as reporters still like to call it. Far. Extremely far. Practically unimaginable. Closing my eyes, I see kimonos, Marco Polo’s beard, Bruce Lee kicking in midair. But in fact this East is more closely linked to the port of Naples than to any other place. There’s nothing far about the East here. It should be called the extremely near East, the least East. Everything made in China is poured out here. Like a bucket of water dumped into a hole in the sand. The water eats the sand, and the hole gets bigger and deeper. The port of Naples handles 20 percent of the value of Italian textile imports from China, but more than 70 percent of the quantity. It’s a bizarre thing, hard to understand, yet merchandise possesses a rare magic: it manages both to be and not to be, to arrive without ever reaching its destination, to cost the customer a great deal despite its poor quality, and to have little tax value in spite of being worth a huge amount. Textiles fall under quite a few product classifications, and a mere stroke of the pen on the shipping manifest can radically lower price and VAT. In the silence of the port’s black hole, the molecular structure of merchandise seems to break down, only to recompose once it gets beyond the perimeter of the coast. Goods have to leave the port immediately. Everything happens so quickly that they disappear in the process, evaporate as if they’d never existed. As if nothing had happened, as if it had all been simply an act. An imaginary voyage, a false landing, a phantom ship, evanescent cargo. Goods need to arrive in the buyer’s hands without leaving any drool to mark their route, they have to reach their warehouse quickly, right away, before time can even begin — time that might allow for an inspection. Hundreds of pounds of merchandise move as if they were a package hand-delivered by the mailman. In the port of Naples — 330 acres spread out along seven miles of coastline — time undergoes unique expansions and contractions. Things that take an hour elsewhere seem to happen here in less than a minute. Here the proverbial slowness that makes the Neapolitan’s every move molasses-like is quashed, confuted, negated. The ruthless swiftness of Chinese merchandise overruns the temporal dimension of customs inspections, killing time itself. A massacre of minutes, a slaughter of seconds stolen from the records, chased by trucks, hurried along by cranes, helped by forklifts that disembowel the containers.

COSCO, the largest Chinese state-owned shipping company, with the world’s third-largest fleet, operates in the port of Naples in consort with MSC, a Geneva-based company that owns the world’s second-largest commercial fleet. The Swiss and Chinese decided to pool together and invest heavily in Naples, where they manage the largest cargo terminal. With over 3,000 feet of pier, nearly a million and a half square feet of terminal, and more than 300,000 square feet of outdoor space at their disposal, they absorb almost all the traffic in transit for Europe. You have to reconfigure your imagination to try to understand the port of Naples as the bottom rung of the ladder of Chinese production. The biblical image seems appropriate: the eye of the needle is the port, and the camel that has to pass through it are the ships. Enormous vessels line up single file out in the gulf and await their turn amid the confusion of pitching sterns and colliding bows; rumbling with heaving iron, the sheet metal and screws slowly penetrate the tiny Neapolitan opening. It is as if the anus of the sea were opening out, causing great pain to the sphincter muscles.

But no. It’s not like that. There’s no apparent confusion. The ships all come and go in orderly fashion, or at least that’s how it looks from dry land. Yet 150,000 containers pass through here every year. Whole cities of merchandise get built on the quays, only to be hauled away. A port is measured by its speed, and every bureaucratic sluggishness, every meticulous inspection, transforms the cheetah of transport into a slow and lumbering sloth.

I always get lost on the pier. Bausan pier is like something made out of LEGO blocks. An immense construction that seems not so much to occupy space as to invent it. One corner looks like it’s covered with wasps’ nests. An entire wall of bastard beehives: thousands of electrical outlets that feed the “reefers,” or refrigerator containers. All the TV dinners and fish sticks in the world are crammed into these icy containers. At Bausan pier I feel as if I’m seeing the port of entry for all the merchandise that mankind produces, where it spends its last night before being sold. It’s like contemplating the origins of the world. The clothes young Parisians will wear for a month, the fish sticks that Brescians will eat for a year, the watches Catalans will adorn their wrists with, and the silk for every English dress for an entire season — all pass through here in a few hours. It would be interesting to read someplace not just where goods are manufactured, but the route they take to land in the hands of the buyer. Products have multiple, hybrid, and illegitimate citizenship. Half-born in the middle of China, they’re finished on the outskirts of some Slavic city, brought to perfection in northeastern Italy, packaged in Puglia or north of Tirana in Albania, and finally end up in a warehouse somewhere in Europe. No human being could ever have the rights of mobility that merchandise has. Every fragment of the journey, with its accidental and official routes, finds its fixed point in Naples. When the enormous container ships first enter the gulf and slowly approach the pier, they seem like lumbering mammoths of sheet metal and chains, the rusted sutures on their sides oozing water; but when they berth, they become nimble creatures. You’d expect these ships to carry a sizable crew, but instead they disgorge handfuls of little men who seem incapable of taming these brutes on the open ocean.

The first time I saw a Chinese vessel dock, I felt as if I were looking at the production of the whole world. I was unable to count the containers, to quantify them. I couldn’t keep track of them all. It might seem absurd not to be able to put a number on things, but I kept losing count, the figures were too big and got mixed up in my head.

These days the merchandise unloaded in Naples is almost exclusively Chinese — 1.6 million tons annually. Registered merchandise, that is. At least another million tons pass through without leaving a trace. According to the Italian Customs Agency, 60 percent of the goods arriving in Naples escape official customs inspection, 20 percent of the bills of entry go unchecked, and fifty thousand shipments are contraband, 99 percent of them from China — all for an estimated 200 million euros in evaded taxes each semester. The containers that

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need to disappear before being inspected are in the first row. Every container is duly numbered, but the numbers on many of them are identical. So one inspected container baptizes all the illegal ones with the same number. What gets unloaded on Monday can be for sale in Modena or Genoa or in the shop windows of Bonn or Munich by Thursday. Lots of merchandise on the Italian market is supposedly only in transit, but the magic of customs makes transit stationary. The grammar of merchandise has one syntax for documents and another for commerce. In April 2005, the Antifraud unit of Italian Customs, which had by chance launched four separate operations nearly simultaneously, sequestered 24,000 pairs of jeans intended for the French market; 51,000 items from Bangladesh labeled "Made in Italy"; 450,000 figurines, puppets, Barbies, and Spider-men; and another 46,000 plastic toys — for a total value of approximately 36 million euros. Just a small serving of the economy that was making its way through the port of Naples in a few hours. And from the port to the world. On it goes, all day, every day. These slices of the economy are becoming a staple diet.

The port is detached from the city. An infected appendix, never quite degenerating into peritonitis, always there in the abdomen of the coastline. A desert hemmed in by water and earth, but which seems to belong to neither land nor sea. A grounded amphibian, a marine metamorphosis. A new formation created from the dirt, garbage, and odds and ends that the tide has carried ashore over the years. Ships empty their latrines and clean their holds, dripping yellow foam into the water; motorboats and yachts, their engines belching, tidy up by tossing everything into the garbage can that is the sea. The soggy mass forms a hard crust all along the coastline. The sun kindles the mirage of water, but the surface of the sea gleams like trash bags. Black ones. The gulf looks percolated, a giant tub of sludge. The wharf with its thousands of multicolored containers seems an uncrossable border: Naples is encircled by walls of merchandise. But the walls don't defend the city; on the contrary, it's the city that defends the walls. Yet there are no armies of longshoremen, no romantic riffraff at the port. One imagines it full of commotion, men coming and going, scars and incomprehensible languages, a frenzy of people. Instead, the silence of a mechanized factory reigns. There doesn't seem to be anyone around anymore, and the containers, ships, and trucks seem animated by perpetual motion. A silent swiftness.

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