On Behalf of the Barbarians

Bleu Marin

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> If I don't know the meaning of a language, I will be a barbarian to he who speaks it, and he who speaks to me will be a barbarian. — *Paul, First Corinthians*
>
> Civilization finishes when the barbarians flee. — *Karl Krauss*

In the Heart of the City

The history of a civilization is simultaneously the history of the transformation of its language. A society develops around its knowledge, which is articulated through its language, which becomes concrete in thinking itself. Humans act on the basis of their desires, they desire on the basis of their thoughts, they think on the basis of their language. The form and content of the latter are hence at the same time the condition and result of the whole of social relations. The dominant language of an epoch is therefore always the language of those who dominate socially in that period.

If there is a concept that clearly expresses the relation between language and society it is that of the barbarian. For the Greeks the barbarian was the foreigner and at the same time he was also the "stutterer" since he who couldn't master the language of the *polis*, of the city, was defined with contempt. The origin of the word referred to being deprived of *logos*, i.e. of discourse. If one considers that Aristotle defined man alternately as a "political animal" and as an "animal endowed with *logos*", it follows from this that, by confirming the identity of language with politics, the barbarian is excluded not only from the city, but from human community itself. The barbarian is a non-man, a monster.

The Logos of Work

The logos is not only discourse or language, but is also science, law, reason, order (in the sense of a regulative principle and of the plot that connects and expresses the multiplicity of the real. All of these meanings are present at the same time in the word logos, which is veritably untranslatable (the English term that comes closest to it is "expression"). Only by keeping all of these in mind can one grasp the meaning of the Aristotelian definition of man, as well as the nature of its opposite, the barbarian. The first trace of the word logos is found in the fragments of Heraclitus (4^{th} to 5^{th} century B.C), which from time to time, and simultaneously, point to a cosmic principle, the order of reality with its multiple expressions, the human understanding of this order and Heraclitan discourse itself. Already in these fragments the element common to men is identified in the logos.

Until the times of Homeric poems common space is the assembly which the warriors put at their disposal, for the collective good, the loot of war, or discussions. This relation between the center and that which is common is transferred to the *agora*, that

is in the city square, the place of political decisions. The categories of public discourse indicate precisely the act of bringing down (*kata*) into the middle of the assembly (*agora*) words submitted for general approval. The barbarian is thus he who is outside categories, he who, not having access to the center of the assembly, is excluded from public life. A stranger in his own house, the stutterer in the language of the city, he will thus join the foreigner outside. The woman and the slave, those banished from discourse (that is order, reason and law) these inhabitants of the internal colony, represent two steps of the staircase that ends in the worst cruelty permitted and committed towards the barbarian, the inferior, the enemy.

The power of assembly belongs to he who knows the art of rhetoric, the techniques for ingratiating oneself for the favors of the powerful goddess Persuasion. The more one has time to gain the possession of discourse, the more one is able to exercise its force, in eliminating the private reason of others, one's own discourse is imposed as common. "The power of the *logos* on the soul persuades as it is like that of the master on the slave; with the difference that the soul is reduced to slavery not by force but by the mysterious pressure exercised on his conscience." Thus wrote Plato in Philebus, illustrating well the dominating force of language. But that which is important is not only to recognize that, in politics, discourse is an arm of war, but also to ask oneself about the relation that links this arm to all others. Only he who has slaves that work for him can chain others with his discourse. The activity of individuals is already specialized because a hierarchical and superior role is attributed to the word. The division between manual and intellectual labor, in the meantime makes the activity of slaves accumulate in objects (and then in money and in machines) for the master, increasing the *logos* of the latter. "This is the fate of verbalized logic; where the word has all meaning, the dominant meaning loses no time in taking hold of all the words." G. Cesarono. But the "mysterious pressure" exercised on the assent of the slave would not be possible if the language of his body were not reduced to the coercive rationality of work. It is in producing work that the economy has produced its own language. So, one better understands why controlling the language of the exploited has always been the project of the exploiters. To first give discursive logic all the power (at the expense of the barbaric reason of the body) is to subsequently give to the powerless an increasingly reduced logic. The I that speaks is a figure that represents the body of the individual (corporeality that is first of all a work force) as the state, the holder of public Discourse, represents the whole of society. The more the interior dialogue of the individual — his consciousness — conforms to the dominant language, the greater his assent, his submission will be. In this sense, capital, the dead work of a life constrained to survival, is "discourse" "the organization of fictitious meanings, mechanical logic, the fictitious game of representation" (G. Cesarano). It makes the language of that which extinguishes passions speak to the passions.

A Flight Backwards

But let's return to our barbarians who tell us the history of civilization, this land of *logos* and politics, better than anyone.

If the accepted meaning of the concept of barbarians bears witness to a meaning that is that of progressive ideology (the barbarian is the opposite of a reasonable, scientific, and democratic society; that is monstrosity, menacing silence, irrational violence, superstition, gloomy withdrawal etc), there is a whole tradition of thought that has seen the barbarians as more vigorous beings than the civilized because they are closer to nature. From Polibio to Cioran, passing through Tacitus and Giucciardini, Machiavelli and Montesquieu, Rousseau and Leopardi one can once again go over the idea that they are illusions, copiously distilled from nature to push men towards generous actions, while reason, the product of civilization becomes calculating, turned on the same eternal doubters themselves. Leopardi said that a people of philosophers would be the most cowardly and wretched of all, precisely because it would be the most civilized. The fall of Rome and "Hellenist decadence" are brought up in particular by Montesquieu, as examples in this sense. From the Germans of Tacitus to the modern Unni of Cioran, the conducting wire of this tradition is the connection between the affirmation of the body, the imaginative faculty, bold virtue and desire for action. Quite often within this conception of history, the time of civilization repeats in a cyclical manner, because of an excess (and not due to a lack) of civilization, the barbarian is born, this counterstroke which puts civilization in the bag, then the cycle begins again. The development of a civilization is compared to that of living organisms, in which childhood is followed by maturity and then old age and death, stages characterized by a different passionality and reflexivity. The same language would bear witness to the various degrees of vitality of a culture (it is not by chance that one speaks of the becoming barbarian of language").

If the progressive criticism of the conception of civilization has been guided for the most part by a reactionary point of view (like for example in Spengler and Schmidtt) with an abundance of biological and hierarchical metaphors on the struggle for survival, the attacks on the ideology of progress in the name of an enlightenment "other" are not however lacking (for example in Sorel and Adorno) or let loose at the shoulders, with the eyes of the Greeks like in the same Leopardi, in Holderlin, in Burkhardt and in Nietzsche; or still, from the angle of a artistic-craftsman know-how that mechanized work has destroyed (for example in William Morris).

Barbarism and Nihilism: the Demon of Analogy

The case of Leopardi is particularly significant. In him we find a Greco-Vician vision of history (everything repeats itself, but we don't ever know for certain at what point we are in the repetition) a work of revealing — materialist but not dialectical — of

the dominant political and religious lies (in its style, if you will, of truth), and a radical affirmation of the vital illusion on which modern science along with the other manifestations of calculating reason, has wreaked havoc. The concept of barbarian is taken by him with ambivalence. He expresses what civilization would be at its highest degree of evolution (for it is not sleep, but rather the totalitarian wakefulness of reason that gives birth to monsters) that vitality and that natural force that is not unharmed by the deadly sophistication of the civilized, and is thus susceptible to wonder and virtue. His concept of barbarian recalls the Nietzschean concept of nihilism, which indicates at the same time an enemy and a necessity, typical Christian resentment in the confrontations between life and the tragic and the creator — *tabula rasa* — of given values. These secret wiles of the demon of analogy should not surprise. Can one say that nihilism and barbarian are not two words that, in the mouths of the conservatives as well as in those of the revolutionaries, often change places in this way? How many times have the state and capital been defined nihilist? And even they perhaps deny, those two forbidding monsters, all values? Obedience, competition, reasonable resignation, fussy fatalism, can one say that they are not values? In the same way, that which passes for barbarian is not only the delirious short circuit of this civilization, the flip side of its dreams bottled by psycho-pharmacy and electronic narcotics. On the other hand, what is there outside the present civilization of authority and the market? The barbaric is, very often, that which we are not accustomed to and it is for this reason that it appears to us as the enemy.

Around Four Angles

Maybe the ambivalence of the concept of the barbarian is an indispensable fact, above all if one wants to conserve that intuitive sensibility towards the social fires that burn beneath the judicial bureaucratic and mercantile officialdom of an era, that is if one wants to understand what the forces on the field are.

If the barbarian is a being deprived of *logos*, it is the nature of this *logos* to clarify what its deprivation means. In the *logos* repressive order and human possibility are confused, being at the same time reason, discussion, law and community. To critique progressive ideology cannot consist of a banal overturning of values (for which all that which seems to oppose civilization becomes a positive position) since this would only make us postpone approaching the other four angles of the problem.

It is more fertile to know how to distinguish that which is hypercivilized from that which is decivilized. Hypercivilization is the fulfillment (in the double sense of realization and conclusion) of civilization, the totalitarian displaying of its technical power; the "barbarian" of a world that passes without respite from "amusements" to the purges of the masses, from domestic commodities to catastrophe. Decivilization on the contrary is all the material and spiritual autonomy that individuals manage to attain by escaping this robotized society: an anarchy of passions that shakes off

domestication. It is not because a river is free from cement dams that it doesn't let itself be conquered by other rocks, putting its waters on currents which are not its own. But it will never be an artificial lake. To return again to the *logos*, the silence of he who has no more words because electronic alienation has taken them away from him is hypercivilized; he who feels a richness inside himself that he doesn't allow to be trapped with the verb is decivilized. Decivilized is the disorder of he who does not accept any more orders, hypercivilized is the damage caused by he who carries them out with too much zeal. It is about two opposed ways of transcending misery, two enemy forms (of *hybris*, as the Greeks used to say). A society recognizes itself above all from the way in which it represents arrogance, the de-measuring that frightens it.

Hypercivilization — that civilization calls barbarian with the goal of justifying itself — is at the same time a radical distancing from nature and the swamp of a rationality that reveals itself to bring always more coerced madness. The *logos* at the service of power has made law and reason coincide, therefore it has defined submission as reasonable. Discourse has extended its breath of death on all that which does not speak its language; it has leveled the differences, to return finally to monologue, only in the terrible silence of technics.

The "absolute persuasiveness" of technological language is no other than the landing place of a culture that has definitely banished its own barbarians, in this way making everyone a barbarian to the other. The possessors of technical knowledge, necessary to the authoritarian administration of society, strategize to become increasingly fortified against the masses of "stutterers" — foreigners of the outside and inside — that endure their new language without understanding it. Discourse has won, since everybody is silent, or they repeat the 100 words that they possess, among them the most recurrent are *over, super, zero,* and *mythic*. Through the *logos* of the market and of instant efficiency, the civilized make entreaties against the monsters that besiege the city, addressing their appeals of peace and civic education to them. But the *polis* is in pieces, and Persuasion has a club in its hand.

Just as the techno-bureaucrats reduce the whole of social life to the demands of the economic and administrative inorganic structure, defining everything that blocks its way as barbarian; in the same way fragmented and mechanical reason joins with technological constrictions driving out, like barbarians, the untrained impulses and voices that still inhabit social life. And they are really barbarians, as soon as they set themselves free. No invitation to calm enchants them anymore.

When there is no common language, there is no community, just as, reciprocally when common space dwindles, language can no longer exist. The most important and most obvious consequence of such a condition is that it becomes impossible to come to an agreement. Master Dialogue is no longer among the invited. A collision without protocols or codes is thus the only way, and the contours become those of civil war.

Civil War

The civilized don't oppose anything to war except the ideology of dialogue and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. But to dialogue one needs to also have common values, just as in order to have common values a sharing of places and practice is necessary. Which is the morality, today if one indeed looks yonder where the social fabric is born and dies, namely beyond political officialdom? They claim and proclaim so-called universal values at the very moment of their disappearance.

Human and civil rights wishing to pacify all of society don't pacify anything anymore. The ideology of the two blocks that contest the global scene and the hopes of individuals is collapsed together with that of belonging to a working class capable of taking power ("social" if not political) and of reorganizing the world. The certainties with regard to the future offered by science no longer warm the tepid orphan hearts of religion. All that is finished.

Exploitation remains, but the "community" created in order to concentrate the exploited — and their images — explodes. Production, thanks to the telematic, atomizes itself in structures ever more peripheral and spreads across the territory, in the same way that the identities of wage earners are atomized, tied to competence and to pride for that vanished renown that is the craft. Memory eclipses itself before the eternal present which is fabricated in the mass media (only the news counts the rest does not exist). Human communication (in the sense of common engagement) subsequently reduces itself to the continuation of an impoverishment of that which is called culture, which is everyday more profound. Technology recuperates scientific doubt in its favor and makes programmed uncertainty a new ideology in a position to justify any frenzy of control over species and planet. "As long as it lasts", this is the motto of the powerful. And the existence of the exploited is more a holding out than really living. From the school to the workplace, from the family to the shopping mall, only one ability is required: that of adapting oneself. It is civil war: a cohabitation without common values or assurance for the future, an order that unites individuals in their very separation.

And if war is always occurring, there is not much need to declare it — as the case of the recent military intervention in the Balkans shows — to underscore the separation between "times of peace" and times of war" with formal gestures. Permanent war brings new social relations to the international level, just as the old diplomacy of sovereignty of governments extended the confines and agreements between the state and the representatives of its exploited further. The clash is no longer between national oligarchs, but between finance or Mafia groups (two interchangeable and fundamental forms of money making) that traverse the frontiers and the state apparatuses and to which the brutal atomization of society provides a copious and implacable labor. Businessman or gangster, there are only two modes of organizing into economic bands, the only difference is that in the second case the road to riches is richer and shorter.

But this clash without respite traverses the whole of society and its individuals. The conflict sharpens between institutional order — the always more perfected guillotine

of civilization — and the ferocious implosion of the relations beneath the burden of constrictions. At the same time the tension between the spontaneous activity of the human organism and the preeminence of the external stimulus characteristic of mechanized modern activity is exacerbated; abstract organizing reason engages a battle without precedents with the profound impulses of the individual. The quagmire that the *logos* has proposed to reclaim, to take back the images with which Freud symbolized the civilizing action of the I on the unconscious, is revealing itself to be more extensive and muddy than ever. The class struggle widens to frighteningly new territories.

It's a question of tendency, it is clear; it is not already uniformly accomplished in fact. Here the civil war is larval; elsewhere it is terribly manifest. But this elsewhere is nearby. Like a former Yugoslavia.

Nationalisms, and ethnic and religious demands are the authoritarian and hierarchical response to the fall of values, result in their time of the decline of ancient communitarian forces. Integralisms of various natures are first of all communitarian ideologies, attempting to restore the identity of the *logos* (that is language, laws, and order) while common space diminishes. It's about the hypercivilized reaction to that virtual community that is everywhere supplanting real reciprocity between individuals. The instruments of civilization — technological "welfare", democratic dialogue, parliamentary legality, humanitarian and mercantile universalism — are impotent since they are part of the problem.

Destroy everything to remake everything

Capitalism, in its historic development, has unified the exploited in work and in alienation, determining them as a programmatic class, that is, capable of political and social programming. The struggles of the dispossessed have found themselves linked (through places, instruments, class-consciousness) with the very structure of capital. The awareness that the worker "can destroy everything because he can remake everything" responded to his concrete possibility of making the society without masters function. It's not interesting to explore further which ideologies (determinism, productivism, reformist gradualism, scientism etc) had produced that condition, nor in which forms of self organization of the exploited (worker's councils, agrarian collectives, etc.) it had already come to life. That which is worth noting is that an entire project of emancipation, in its bureaucratic and authoritarian falsifications like in its libertarian authenticity, depended on it; and this is part of the vision of a future society, and the methods of struggle (union activity, general strike as a cause of insurrection, armed party, etc) to destroy capitalist society. Today all that has finished, and with it also its illusions.

The problem, as it is usual to say, is complex. It would be attacked from both sides of the social barricade: from the side of a capital that is extended to all social relations and that wants to valorize the whole day of the exploited; and from the side

of the dangerous classes that no longer have political or union programs. Considering these first reflections it will be enough to say that the places of production no longer contain resistance to capital, which is becoming directly social. If that makes daily life itself the authentic place of social war, and can therefore increase the knowledge that nothing of these social relations is worth saving, the consequence is at the same time the disappearance of practical unification — the *logos* of class — from beneath the feet of the exploited. Where to meet and begin such change? Will it be a case that, wherever injured life explodes, the isolated riots are thus often substituting the old general wildcat strikes? But how can revolts dialogue at a distance, in order to snatch away how much more possible time and space as inevitable institutionalization waits?

Without direct relations there is no communication, without communication there is no social utopia. In this sense, there are always more barbarians in the world.

But not only in this sense. Authentic community is the one which is based on the autonomy of individuals, that of the community of difference, in which everyone wants to know the thoughts of the other as different from ones own. It is the feeling that a *one* universal reason does not exist, that pushes people to communicate, to enrich with the game of proximity and of the subtleties of their language. A language dies when thoughts no longer deserve to be communicated, by now all desolately identical, when they lose the dreams which nourish its poetry. Only a diverse life, individual, gives birth to diverse thoughts.

To decivilized hearts and minds

Vitality is found today in the least civilized conditions. The "barbarian" of technical reason destroys great illusions, these eternal forces of confusion, attacking the very source of life. But illusions that push to outbursts of passion are born for the most part wherever humans conserve the instinct of the herd, that the atomized multitude has modified. For this reason nationalism and integralism offer two false solutions to lead social dissatisfaction by hand, with a mixture of ideals of purification, rituals of atonement and millenarian expectation. What is there in the greatest of ethnic and religious conflicts to create artificial enemies and in this way lock up every protest against the established order? The difference of the immigrant, of belonging to a different ethnicity, is visible and comprehensible, unlike the difference of the exploited, which don't have a nation. In their telematic fortress, they are speaking one single Esperanto: that of the market, that nevertheless does not inflame the old ardors of faith. If it is necessary, the new propaganda can wave the old patriotic and divine rags to continue its own monologue eliminating the restless and numerous exploited. In the name of civilization naturally. But the illusions are of the barbarians always of the door, those that ruthlessly transform the violence with which they are expelled.

More and more, from such a situation of civil war — that is not an all against all but an all against an interchangeable and whole one — there are only two possible

exits: ethnic and Mafia wars or the social tempest of class struggle. The nationalist or religious lie, in certain areas carefully prepared by the mass media, is only the last card that domination can play in face of the danger of a generalized revolt. In fact, contrary to the determinist fable of the end of history, or all the reformism of revolutionaries in step with the times, the possibility for immense popular uprisings does not wait for the occasion to explode. Recent examples, even those two steps away from us, are not lacking.

In face of the feeling of dispossession that many individuals experience towards a mercantile standardization that constricts everyone to dream the same lifeless dream, humanitarian universalism is as much a liar as the "differentialism" — hierarchical and interclass — of the new right. Real differences are thoroughly affirmed (well beyond those of cultural and linguistic belonging) only in the free and reciprocal game of singularity. Real equality (not legal) is the sharing of that which we have most in common: the fact of being all different. A community of unique individuals without a state or classes, or money: that is the utopia of decivilized hearts and minds. A utopia that, like each conquest of the marvelous, will be born only from destruction and filth.

The wind of thaw

To once again take up the thesis of the Barbarians as the men and women closest to communism today, would not brighten the powerful intuition that the anarchists Coeurderoy and Dejaque had in the last century, but would be first of all tranquilizing, a simple turning on its head of the ideology of progress. Civilization is ripe, supercession is about to hatch — this determinism would make us take sparks for fire, without this making us more determined. But perhaps this is not the point. We are not partisans of democratic integration nor of legal and reformist battles, this is sure. We foresee only free accord in the anarchic movement of social forces, in the barbaric assaults against every domestication. And still. Are we not at bottom the last civilized people, with our values, other, individual, but still values? Is not the search for perilous virtues, for us, the source of the marvelous?

It is useless to hide from ourselves that social explosions scare everyone, including the subversives. They also scare us. Above all when there aren't expectations for a diverse life, when popular uprisings mix with the worst communitarianisms or with the disconnected outbursts of a moribund society. The flip-side of calculating reason is found in the collective dreams and in the reality the salvific myths of sacrifice and of self destruction keep under cover. The "liberation of customs" after having modernized morality, transmits directly to technology, this power on this side of good and evil, the control of consciousness. All this certainly does not make us grieve the old political programs and the orthopedics of their civilization, capable of averting violence in only one way: by institutionalizing it. But this does not push us towards hidden certainties of regeneration. We do not swear on decadence. Capital — and not the revolutionaries —

has liquidated all the programs, bringing great possibilities of liberation and lamentable centralist illusions to the same tomb. As the terrorism of progress says, it does not turn back. But even to turn oneself around backwards, along the dead tracks of this senseless production of commodities and of dependence, it is necessary to find the right path. And then where to?

That which is lacking today are adequate projectual hypotheses — ideas and methods — for the new conditions of the conflict; but maybe above all what is lacking is that sense of defiance that is ethical tension and dreaming together, that great passion for free discussions and for resolute action.

If from one side one doesn't believe that History (or Wild Nature) works in its place, from the other one can see only the social freeze on the horizon that feels the powerful blowing of the wind of thaw.

A faraway whisper

In 1870 facing the invasion of France by the Prussia of Bismarck, History seemed at the crossroads; and the revolutionary movement was divided. Marx and those who shared the analyses seen in the Prussian victory, the most developed strengthening of capitalism in Europe and therefore, by virtue of the incantations of dialectics, the consolidation of the historical conditions for that inevitable birth of communism which lacked only the forceps, that is, a united and disciplined urban proletariat. Bakunin and other libertarians saw in militarism and the bismarckian bureaucratic order the forecast of dozens of reactions in Europe, after France appeared to them by its tradition, as the birthplace of every revolutionary hope. For the brightest to defend France did not mean that they would collaborate with the state and with the French bourgeoisie against the enemy invader but to transform the military conflict into social insurrection, passing from armed proletarian defense to the creation and the federation of revolutionary Communes. On that disastrous situation of civil war, Bakunin, engaged a few minutes afterwards in an insurrectional attempt at Lyon, wrote one of his best analyses which concentrated on the union of workers and peasants and on the necessity to everywhere substitute the deed for the revolutionary right, popular anarchy for the Jacobean terrorism of political decrees and administrative officialdom. For him it was a matter of "the unchaining of bad passions". But it is not that story, and its lessons that we want to talk about. (To ask ourselves already what would be able to bring forth the spontaneity of the masses of young people born in the cybernetic age would bring us far). That which returns to our memories of those days is only a whisper. The same that brought Bakunin to write that the French proletariat could count on only one desperate force: that of the devil in the body. A few months later, against the predictions of the same Russian revolutionary, the devil was on the barricades of Paris.

Civil war, the "barbarian", this spectacular antithesis with which the masters of the world and their servants have always justified themselves; this blackmail that has

extorted the capacity of the dispossessed, becomes more and more our condition. The federation of revolutionary Communes seems to move further away, while the "bad passions" stay with us without any pretence of organizing unleashing. The demon does not let itself be programmed, even less so today.

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