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***Unthinkable*: Ethico-Political Fiction in the Present**

The term *unthinkable* usually refers to the incapability of being conceived or considered, to something that escapes symbolization and representation, to something that is not comparable or that cannot be believed; it can also mean the incredible; inconceivable or unimaginable; extremely improbable in a way that goes against common sense. Unthinkable is what is beyond common sense, rationality and generally accepted norms of thinking and doing. Unthinkable, thus, equals to non-normative, non-legal, or even to non-constitutional. Unthinkable is something that cannot find its own name and its own meaning.

In other words, it might also mean that thinking as such makes and reproduces the normativity - thinking *is* normativity. Does it mean that we *can* think only about the things that we already know? How do we think of change? How do we conceive the political? How do we think the unthinkable?

The main idea here is to try to point to the ways in which the category such as “unthinkable” binds morality, ideology, thinking and politics as a direct embodiment of general interests in order to preserve the status quo of the

existing/dominant social order. As a result, today, almost everything appears as thinkable – the horrors and tortures, the end of life on earth, market oriented everyday living, proprietary structures in capitalism, the militarization of the world, the militarization of the concept of humanity etc. The only “unthinkability” we can think of in our contemporary world is the understanding of the notion of the political as necessarily related to continuous possibility of change.

The movie *Unthinkable* (2010), made by Gregor Jordan, opens up a set of questions on the status of what is un/thinkable in relation to the dominant moral values of our time. Let us remind ourselves of the story: A convert to Islam, Yusuf, sends the U.S. government a tape showing him in three storage rooms, each of which may contain a nuclear bomb set to detonate in less than a week. Helen Brody, an FBI agent in L.A is tasked with finding the bombs while a CIA “consultant,” known as H, interrogates the suspect who has allowed him to be caught. Yusuf, whose wife and children have left him and disappeared, seems to know exactly what the interrogation will entail. Even as H uses torture over Brody’s objection, the suspect doesn’t crack.

One of the most striking scenes in the movie relates to the moment when the official in charge of the operation demands that H brings Yusuf's children back in for further interrogation. H demands that Brody brings the children back in, because her decency will give him the moral approval that he needs to do the "unthinkable."

Agent Brody: *Just do what you have to do!*

H: *What I have to do agent Brody is – unthinkable. Bring me the children.*

In this highly moralized, but also militant, violent and terrifying situation, what appears as "unthinkable" is to harm the children and everyone agrees on that. Let us try to read this scene more carefully: what is actually "unthinkable" (one man torturing the other with the moral approval of a decent person) appears as rather thinkable and acceptable for a "greater" cause - finding the bombs and thus protecting and saving thousands, maybe millions of lives, with no doubt some of them being children (if it's not enough to simply say "lives"). Yet, does it mean that all lives are not of the same worth? Should we sort them according to age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, etc?

I would like to claim that it is a purely moralistic question that this scene evokes, and as it is the case with all moralistic questions, the answer is already pre-defined, that is to say - there is no possibility of thinking which actually depoliticizes the situation. Even more so, this situation defines the very limits of the logic of humanity. There is a social consensus that such an appeal to protect innocent children is impossible to refuse. Of course, this social consensus is not related to any particular child as such but to the inscription of the figure of the innocent child into the socio-symbolic structure; its function is purely representative.

Thus, the innocent child represents the helpless victim; a victim that needs to be in the scene in order to preserve the idea of moral and/or social order that needs to be protected. Nevertheless, what remains unquestionable is the logic of the scene as such (which is, let me repeat it, violent, militant and terrifying). In other words, the moral and ideological presuppositions embedded in the scene, which are functioning through the complex web of state regulatory mechanisms are based on the idea that one has to die for the law that regulates our tradition, our very social substance. Perhaps this could explain the fact that what defines our understanding of the political is almost always related to violence, war and various kinds of exclusions and enmity. Thus, a war appears as a proper stage for this culture of sacrificing life, while simultaneously veiling these very mechanisms of sacrifice and violence, and thus entails and sustains the illusion of order's unquestioned phallic impenetrability, in the name of its perpetual reproduction and maintenance.

This sort of logic that relies on morally and ideologically unquestionable and unthinkable presuppositions, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, as well as the figure of a child as the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the phantasmical beneficiary of every future political intervention.¹

The figure of pure innocence (child) serves to prove its superiority over the corrupt and violent world. As we might imagine, true corruption does not reside in any particular situation perceived as such, but in the "innocent gaze" which perceives corruption everywhere. Even if our efforts and values have failed, this figure of innocence is a guarantee of the success that will come in the form

of experiencing the unthinkable and unquestionable: the potential of something that could have been.

Contrary to what we usually think, we tend to think of the past as of a site that is ideologically contaminated. It appears however, I would argue, that the most ideologically contaminated sites are the various discourses on the future that bear the logic of the present understanding of the political realm as a guarantee of status quo. This calls for the preservation and maintenance of the acknowledged politics and already existing socio-ideological order, an order that proves as the militarisation of thinking and politics. Such “self-evident” affirmation of values that are unquestioned and unquestionable impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such; it appears that its logic is in preserving the absolute privilege of the existing dominant social order and its normative aspects by rendering the unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a resistance to this, the “unquestionable” organizing principles of social relations,² some of them being a family, nation, religion, but also patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc.

Let us try, for a moment, to think the “unthinkable.” Let us be traitors, let us not be either just or right, let us not have our proper place we are identified with. Let us try to create a space for ethico-political fiction in the present. Here is the fiction: Pride parade for heterosexuals. What is it in this idea that makes it seem “unthinkable?” What is it that makes us feel that such an event appears as senseless in the world we live in? What makes heterosexuality to exist as the normative principle of social relations is precisely its unquestionable, unthinkable character. Try to imagine a group

of heterosexuals wandering around the streets trying to mark a political space for their sexual preferences and choices; **For their lifestyles; For their right to be different.** What could be wrong with this scene? Can we imagine the very norm questioning, re-thinking and re-claiming its own normativity? The true target of this, as I called it, ethico-political fiction in the present, would be nothing else but the power itself, the demand for the power to open up the space for its different functioning. This would imply the creation of political public spaces which would be self-referent, self-questioning by the very means of marking its unmarked political position, making visible its own mystified and closeted political histories, its own status of normativity, the mechanisms of power relations’ normalization. It demands from us to make fiction necessary and to fictionalize, on the other side, order’s unquestioned status of being reality, to invent new relationships, new possibilities of being-together, solidarity and sharing that is not based on protection and mirroring and self-reflective narcissistic claims of the identity, etc. It demands, I would argue, thinking and enacting modes and practices of communality which would be capable of engaging us in order to question the power regimes as such and open futurity towards differences not yet anticipated in the normalized frames of present political horizons.

It seems that it is precisely the “unthinkability,” which serves the present power structures and the dominant social discourses as a law and as the last line of defense of the morality and humanity.

As Slavoj Žižek, who writes about the ways in which we, as individuals, participate in this kind of thinking and the preservation of the *status quo* has put it:

Let me go directly to the point: It is a well known fact that the close-the-door button in most elevators is a totally dysfunctional placebo which is placed there just to give individuals the impression that they are somehow participating, contributing to the speed of the elevator journey. When we push this button the door closes in exactly the same time as when we just press the floor button without speeding up the process by pressing also the close-the-door button. This extreme and clear case of fake participation is, I claim, an appropriate metaphor [for] the participation of individuals in our post-modern political process. We are all the time asked by politicians to press such buttons. But some things are excluded. What is excluded from this participatory, multi-culturalist, tolerant democracy?³

I would like to claim that what is excluded from the participatory, multi-culturalist, tolerant democracy of our times is precisely the thinking of the unthinkable; the non-normative, non-legal, non-constitutional thinking which does not reproduce the already known, but rather a kind of thinking that opens up a space for a different functioning of power, for a change. Excluding the thinking of the unthinkable, excluding the possibility of the change as a necessary site of the political, makes us impotent participants of the scene in which it is unthinkable to think of the improvement of life within our communities; or even more, to improve the act of life itself with all its complexities.

Another ethico-political fiction in the present: try to imagine that the existing institutions are doing all that they are actually supposed to do. That the juridical system is really about justice. That the medical system is really about healing and helping people instead of the perpetual production of (new) diseases. That the economic system

is about expanding possibilities and improving different lifestyles for everyone, and not about exclusively serving the interests of certain elite groups. Try to imagine that human rights organizations are really dealing with improving the lives of those who are suffering instead of just managing them.

One of the important conclusions that one can draw from Žižek's paragraph is an explanation of the way the ideology functions; those we may consider as belonging to the "system" don't necessarily see themselves as constituting to the status quo. They don't know it but they do it. In fact, we may even say that ideology has succeeded when it becomes invisible to those who practice it without being able to articulate exactly why they do so. This offers the following logic: don't think, be active, be engaged, *do* things. This suggests a logic of the conformity of not thinking. In other words, since we have fulfilled our moral duties, we can forget about them and we don't have to think (critically) about them.

As Hannah Arendt has written extensively on, thinking is necessarily related to ethics and politics; not thinking leads to genocide. For Arendt, thinking relates precisely to its non-normative, non-institutional aspect; thinking means plurality against every homogenous, institutionalized and dominant logic. According to her, thinking is always already critical since it can't be reduced to any particular law itself; even if it is the law of preserving and maintaining the existing social order.

In her lecture on Hannah Arendt in Sussex, entitled *Cohabitation, and the Dispersion of Sovereignty*,⁴ Judith Butler explored Arendt's concept of thinking as a splitting of Kant's Transcendental Unity of Apperception into

a fragmented, plural individual whose multiple voices are consistently in dialogue. So, there is a duty opposed to thinking, opposed to this structure of dialogue. Thinking is thus always already plural and it maintains plurality of the self as well as the plurality of the community. Thinking that is related to ethics and politics should stake its claim to the realm which makes “ethics and politics” unthinkable; the realm beyond the field within which ethics and politics as we know them appear; and so beyond the overall monolithic demands for preserving the religious and moral foundations of thinking as such. Deconstruction as a way of thinking (about the unthinkable) begins with identification of what goes without questioning. Therefore, its true task is not in resolving the already identified problems, moral or any other dilemmas, but in reflecting and reformulating them as well as rethinking the ways in which we perceive the existing problems of our time. The process of deconstruction marks the “other” side of thinking: the side that is beyond the all “thinkable” sides. Thus, the ethics and politics – being the question of the relationship with the other – are always already about the unthinkable, and it is this unthinkability that inextricably binds them to thinking.

Notes:

1. See, Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2004).
2. See, *ibid.*
3. Slavoj Žižek in the lecture “Human Rights and its Discontents,” held at The European Graduate School, November 16, 1999, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/human-rights-and-its-discontents>
4. The lecture was held at University of Sussex, at February 2011, as a part of the Hannah Arendt Lecture in Modern Jewish Thought series.

References:

- Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No future: Queer theory and the death drive*. Durham: Duke University Press Books.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 1999. Human rights and its discontents. Lecture delivered at The European Graduate School, November 16. <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/human-rights-and-its-discontents>