

**Why We Need to Talk about
the Stick Again**

A Post-Deconstructivist
Meditation

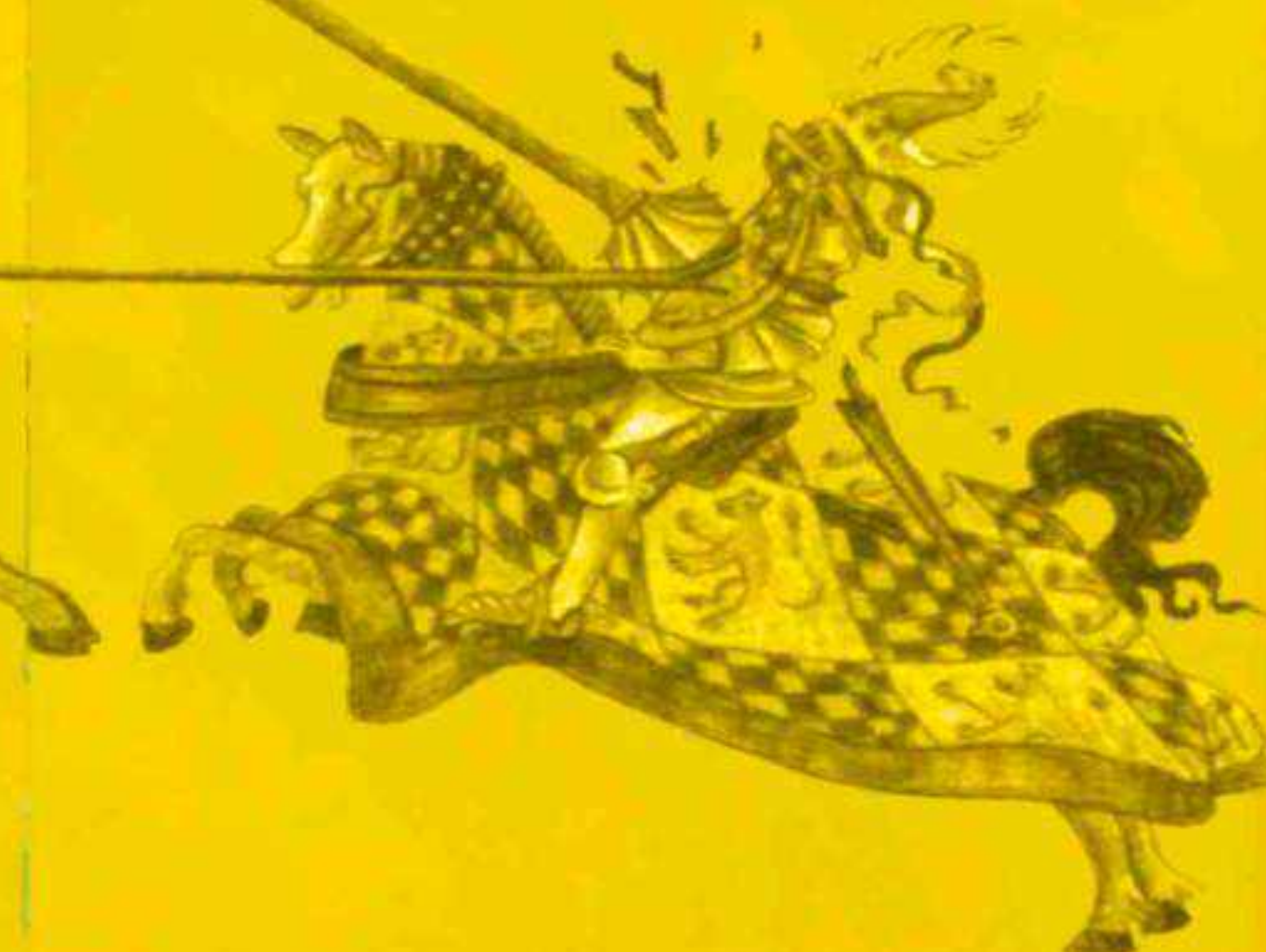
By Johannes Thumfart

In today's era of hedonist permissivity, which serves as the dominant ideology, the time has come to reappropriate discipline: there is nothing inherently fascist about this.
—Slavoj Žižek



According to French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, there is no such thing as the evolution of mankind: one rather has to speak of a co-evolution of humanity and technics that includes all kinds of tools man uses. In his *Technics and Time*, he formulates this idea of *Epiphylogenesis*, according to which humanity was only to evolve 'through means other than life', namely by 'organised inorganic matter', i.e. technics.

Although to Stiegler, it is foremost the *Silex*, a sharp blade of stone, that triggered the process, which shaped mankind in its present form, one also thinks of co-evolution of man and technology in terms of Stanley Kubrick's *2001—A Space Odyssey*. The ape uses a bone for a tool and therefore becomes human. In this vision, the bone, pole, bar or stick—how I will call the ideal type of this basic tool in the following—is conceived as an object that triggers the fall of mankind by technology, and this fall leads to an enhancement of its destructive and creative abilities alike.



The Lesbian Phallus: The Stick is not the Penis

At least from a cultural perspective, the vision of the stick as a central agent of human evolution seems to be more adequate than Stiegler's focus on the stone. Its basic form is in many ways fundamental to our culture, mostly because we associate it with the phallus. It is essential to note here, as Judith Butler has shown most explicitly in her text *The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary*, that the penis is not the phallus, but one possible representation of the phallus among many. The stick—which of course also served as a dildo since the earliest times—can embody the phallic signifier just as the penis embodies the phallus. Still we fear, admire and desire (all at the same time) bats, scepters and canes, and grant them almost mystical properties—this becomes obvious when one thinks about the kinky use of sticks in sadomasochistic practice.

However, the phallus-signifier doesn't have these mythic qualities because of its really existing power or because of its mere being-there. (It is here, where Jacques Lacan disagrees with a vulgar interpretation of Freud, to which the phallus is the penis.) According to Lacan, the phallus is *the lack*—it is powerful precisely because of its absence, because it paradoxically is the 'absent object' par excellence. Derek Hook explains this in his essay *Lacan, the Meaning of the Phallus and the 'Sexed' Subject*.

Despite the intensity of the mother—child bond, it is never an exclusively dyadic relationship; a third term is present, something beyond the child to which the mother's desire is aimed: the phallus. To be clear: the child is situated within the 'field' of the mother's desire—the infant does, after all, represent a nodal point of love, investment and care (at least for most mothers)—but it does not exhaust this desire. We are in a position now to offer a first tentative definition of what Lacan might mean by his understanding of the phallus: the phallus is the Imaginary object of the mother's desire which remains outside of the child's reach, something it can neither grasp nor bring into being, something quite 'other' than it.

Animals use Sticks too!

Now the phallus's absent qualities also shed a new light on the stick. In fact, the pattern represented in 2001—*A Space Odyssey*, is completely wrong in its understanding of the stick in terms of a threshold between apes and humans that is irreversible. If one investigates the stick further, one finds that animals use it too. Obviously chimps and gorillas use them to hunt for insects and to beat each other up, but also elephants and a number of birds know how to handle sticks for their benefit—foremost, the New Caledonian crow, which only recently has been discovered to be one of the smartest tool-users of the animal kingdom.

Such as the phallus signifies the absent, the stick, which likewise is one of the earliest representations of the phallus, is not simply the border between human and animal, but rather the absence of this border inasmuch as it points to an uncanny continuity between man and animal. The world-pole of the shaman, the scepter of the leader, the spear of the hunter, the cane of the teacher—they represent the brutish force of animals within the human world. And it is exactly because of this representation of an outside of the human realm why the stick does have the *mana*, the mythic energy par excellence, to stand in for the phallus, the master-signifier. Even today, if one thinks of contemporary,

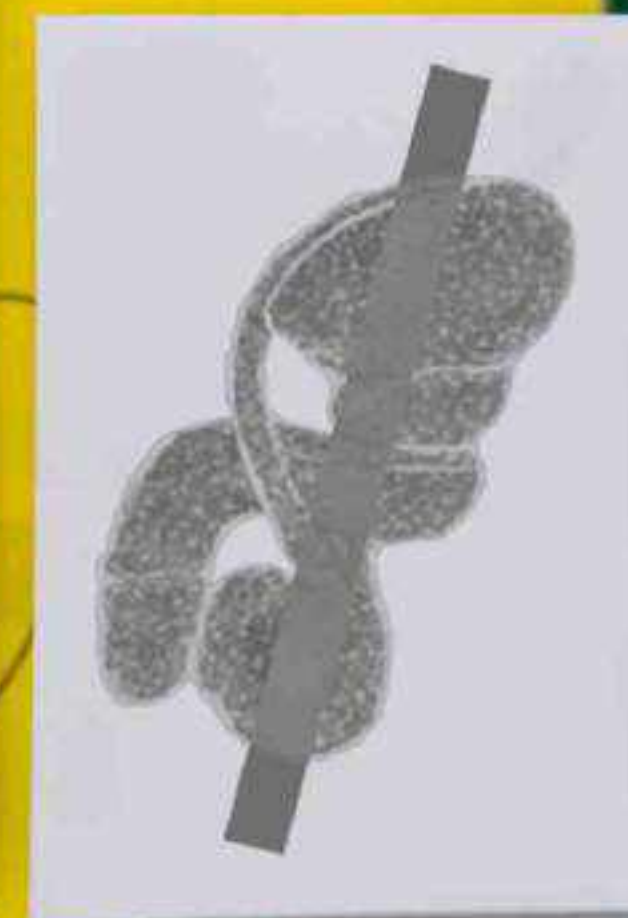
New Caledonian Crow

→ Description:

The New Caledonian Crow (*Corvus moneduloides*) is a moderately sized crow (40 cm in length) similar in size to the House Crow but less slender-looking. The bird has an all-black appearance with a rich gloss to its feathers of purple, dark blue and some green in good light. The beak, feet and legs are all black. The beak is of moderate size but is unusual in that the tip of the lower is angled up making it somewhat chisel-like in profile.

The ability to fashion tools had always been held as unique to primates. But humans and apes are not alone in having tool-making skills. Crows amazed the science community when footage recorded using tiny 'crow-cams' on the tails of New Caledonian crows showed the birds creating advanced implements. One crow was observed whittling twigs and leaves with its beak to fashion grabbers designed to retrieve grubs from the ground. The New Caledonian crows are among few known non-primates to create and use new tools.

The voice is described as a soft 'waa-waa' or 'wak-wak', and sometimes as a hoarse 'waaaw'.



secular and civilized forms of sticks, one recognizes in them the force or the primal instrumental wit of animals: the bat, the walking stick, the back-scratcher, the club, the fishing-rod, the pointer.

The Stick as Means of Education

But, although the stick doesn't yet make a man, it is true that the connection between man and animal, which the stick represents, is a two-way connection. If one thinks of the sticks the first rulers used to govern their people, and the ones the first teachers used as the essential tool of their, still primitive, but also still basic, idea of education—for pointing and punishing—then one understands the nature of this connection: the stick turns man into an animal by increasing its power, it however also turns animals into men by increasing control, by allowing men to treat their fellow-men as animals and hereby train them like dogs or horses (which sounds horrible but is the necessary precondition of civilization).

Also, the stick is of immense importance in education in that it enables the teacher to point to something, as a pre-linguistic, deictic means of communication. St. Augustine and Ludwig Wittgenstein both insisted on the necessity of the act of pointing to an object and attributing a word to it as a precondition of the learning of any language. It can therefore be said that the one pointing to an object, communicates in disguise—the disguise of an animal to another animal—in order to turn it into a human being like himself; an animal that has language, a *zoon logon echon*, as Aristotle writes.

Parallel to its deictic function, the stick serves as a tool to carve the first shadows of writing and painting in the sands and paint them on the walls of caves, the first faces, symbols and—first and foremost—animals, which are the main subject of cave paintings. It is not clear whether those paintings really show animals or, rather, teachers/shamans in their

animal costumes which they wore for magical purposes. In this way, even the first signs of writing (a thing most commonly thought of as being exclusively human) bear the traces of the animal/human-ambiguity.

The Stick as Centerpiece of Anthropogenesis

Thomas Hobbes (and similarly Aristotle)—in this, he was Marxist avant la lettre—conceived of the *body politic* as a factory that produces humanity. According to him, it is only within the city walls that men can become gods in the eyes of other men, and outside of it, man is a mere animal—a wolf among wolves. More brutally, Dante's teacher Remigius de Girolami drew this conclusion from Aristotle: '*Et si non est civis non est homo*'—'who is not a citizen is not human'. This instantly evokes the image of the banned, who is expelled from the city by his former fellow-citizens with sticks in their hands and left alone in the wild, being forced to become an animal once more.

The stick is the centerpiece of the human-producing-factory of the *body politic*. It however paradoxically produces the difference between man and animal both ways, exactly along the lines of what Giorgio Agamben in his *Homo Sacer* calls an 'inclusive exclusion'. It is as if the purely linear form of the stick represents a direct connection between

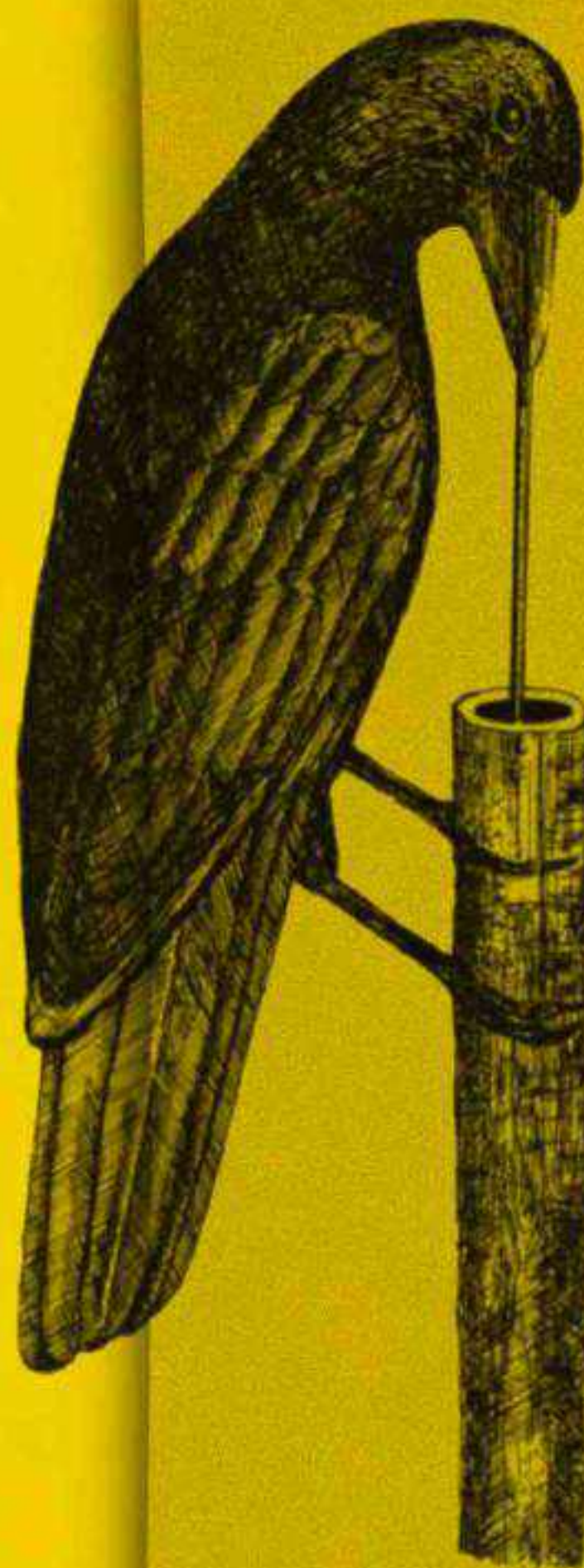
→ Tool making:

The New Caledonian Crow is the only non-human species with a record of inventing new tools by modifying existing ones, then passing these innovations to other individuals in the cultural group. Gavin R. Hunt and colleagues at the University of Auckland studied tools the crows make out of pandanus (or screw pine) leaves:

Crows snip into the leaf edges and then tear out neat strips of vegetation with which they can probe insect-harboring crevices. These tools have been observed to come in three types: narrow strips, wide strips and multi-stepped strips—which are wide at one end and, via a manufacturing process that involves stepwise snips and tears, become narrow at the opposite end.

Observations of the distribution of 5,500 leaf counterparts or stencils left behind by the cutting process suggest that the narrow and the stepped tools are more advanced versions of the wide tool type. The geographical distribution of each tool type on the island suggests a unique origin, rather than multiple independent inventions. This implies that the inventions, which





Drawing by Evelyn Laube.

man and animal as precondition of cultural genesis, such as the world-pole of the shaman, the *axis mundi*, represents the connection between the gods and men as the place of cosmogenesis. It is because of its central, yet paradoxical significance for civilization why the stick is even more of a phallus than the penis. One even has to correct Judith Butler here: the penis doesn't become the double of the phallus with the invention of the dildo, the penis is the double of the phallic stick from the beginning on.

Sticks in Post-Male Society

And here we must leave the history of the stick and come to its present. Clearly, the stick is a dying-out form in post-modern civilization. There are no empiric studies about this, but stick-shaped artifacts became less and less common during the last centuries. Most prominently, the term that a country is 'governed by the stick', which once had a concrete meaning in everyday-life beatings, has turned into the last resort reserved only for exceptional situations. (Pepper spray seems more civilized, less atavistic.) Likewise, educational caning, once popular, is now considered to be a felony in all developed countries. Similarly, fishing seems so phallic, all too phallic to us that it is considered a sport for impotent men only, not to mention activities involving swords, kendo-sticks and similar objects. Even among illu-

involve a delicate change in the manufacturing process, were being passed from one individual to another.

The New Caledonian Crow also spontaneously makes tools from materials it does not encounter in the wild, the only non-human species known to do so. In 2002, researcher Kacelnik and colleagues at the University of Oxford observed a couple of New Caledonian Crows called Betty and Abel.

Betty's toolmaking abilities came to light by accident during an experiment in which she and Abel had to choose between a hooked and a straight wire for retrieving small pieces of pig heart, their favorite food. When Abel made off with the hooked wire, Betty bent the straight wire into a hook and used the tool to lift a small bucket of food from a vertical pipe. This experiment was the first time the crows had been presented with wire.

Subsequently, this ability was tested through a series of systematic experiments. Out of ten successful retrievals, Betty bent the wire into a hook nine times. Abel retrieved the food once, without bending the wire. The process would usually start with Betty trying to get the food bucket



sionists, using a magic wand became a no-go. And last but not least: Where is the joystick? Have you seen one lately?—Highly unlikely in the age of invisible Wii-controlling.

It is clear: the stick became a victim of its own similarity with the penis, which it originally surpassed. With 'female values' (cooperation, care, manipulation...) on the rise and 'male values' (aggressiveness, bodily strength, visible dominance...) in decline, the stick represents something lost, something that is about to vanish (which is why it is an even more interesting object today, invested with almost melancholic feelings of loss or likewise a desperate hunt for a fetish to replace the lost phallus.)

But here again, it is important not to draw conclusions too hastily. If the phallus and the penis are not the same, this also means that the phallic signifier does not die with the penis. We experience the ongoing of the phallus in symptoms such as Apple or Angela Merkel who are post-male but not post-phallic inasmuch as they are being looked at by their subjects and admirers as mysterious, powerful, strangely present and absent entities at the same time. One reason for their paradoxically present absence is always the one that, of course, 'Apple' doesn't exist in the same way as 'Angela Merkel' doesn't exist—their very symbolic existence is phallic inasmuch as it evokes the lack as the place where the symbolic opens up towards the Real: a failing Merkel, a failing Apple, unworthy of their names. Since the phallus is a symbolic function, it is not undone by banning the male or the penis, which are merely its symptoms. In a way, the Teflon-chancellor and the gleaming white surfaces from Cupertino express the phallic signifier most brutally in their soft, yet overwhelming mother/care-energies that seem to be so much more effective than the unsophisticated male kind of dominance.

The Absent Phallus is the Most Powerful Phallus

Whilst the stick dominated only the exceptional realm of

representation, punishment and education, the centerless network- or bio-power of today controls every aspect of life. The phallus without its visible stick, it seems, is even more powerful than with it. As it became clear so far, this follows directly from the absent nature of the phallic signifier. A phallus that is totally hidden infinitely maximizes the power of the phallic signifier—invisible power is the most effective power, especially since the power of the phallus lies entirely in its absence. We can therefore assume, that with its separation from the stick, the phallic signifier reached the maximum of its historical impact.

If one wants to tackle this new, soft century of female values, one should not look for its hidden stick, its dildo, somewhere in a drawer—as detectives/genealogists in the tradition of Foucault or Agamben (and also Schmitt) do. 'Genealogies are cheap', as Jacob Taubes said, 'they just cost time in libraries'—and archives, one might add. Although one might find something there.

Likewise, one should not restrain oneself to demands to hide the phallus better by increasing the separation from its most common visualization, the stick or the penis. Demands of this kind are, for example, feminist demands that do not involve actual political and economic power of women, anti-racist demands that do not involve actual political and economic power of Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and—this is one of the

with the straight wire, but then she would make a hook from it bending it in different ways, usually by snagging one end of the wire under something, and then using the bent hook to pick up the tray.

Clearly, Betty's creation of hooks cannot be attributed to the shaping or reinforcement of randomly generated behavior. In 2004, Gavin Hunt observed the crows in the wild also making hooks, but the adaptation to the new material of the wire was clearly novel, and also purposeful. This type of intentional tool-making, even if it is generalizing a prior experience to a completely new context, is almost unknown in the animal world. Chimpanzees have great difficulty in similar innovative tasks.

The use of direct human activity has been recorded as well. This involves the placing of nuts in front of a vehicle on a heavy trafficked street and waiting for the/a car to crush it open, and then waiting at pedestrian lights with other pedestrians in order to retrieve the crushed nut safely.

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As said Wikipedia on November 11th, 2011.





THE "BROADS"
THAT ORGANIZE THE TARIFF VICTORY AT THE BOSTON DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION.

Top shelf. Look at her. Squid-like entrails flat on the glass. My love BONG. Though libidinal temperance comes as I encounter—once again—the banality of greyscale. Often I say "it's a greyscale" meaning that there are multiple possible positions.
"It's impossible to paint the misery of life, except maybe in grey"

most popular ones—anti-capitalist demands that do not involve the actual political and economic abolition of capitalism... and so on...

In the age of soft power, it is about asking the question of the stick again, rather than to denounce the stick as such: the question whether there could be a positive kind of power, a power that the powerful wouldn't need to hide behind transparent walls, demonstrative openness, and politically correct language, the question whether there could be anything positive in the punishment, discipline, authority and terror the stick represents and enables; the question, finally, whether there could be a 'right', a legitimate place for the phallus.

Governing with the Stick: Just Terror?

If one is looking for such a legitimate place for the phallus, one thinks about the very thing that doesn't exist in the eyes of orthodox postmodernism as it is most clearly expressed in Jean-François Lyotard's *Differend*, where a merely cultural relativist approach of justice is depicted that cannot be universally translated.

It is precisely here where contemporary communist theorists such as Slavoj Žižek or Alain Badiou insist on the fact that there is a universal idea of justice, and that there therefore is an 'egalitarian terror', a legitimate place for the stick. Both however base their claim on a Platonic understanding of justice that is stripped from all real-life, material relevance. Especially Badiou goes re-

markably far in that and claims a 'Being of Politics', an Être de la Politique. In his *Being and Event*, he even explicitly writes: 'Man is not a political animal: the chance of politics is a supernatural event.' He clearly thinks of politics in terms of ideological transcendence and not in realist terms, i. e. not as a factory that produces the difference between man and animal in both directions.

Žižek likewise cannot separate himself from Platonic-Christian Idealism when he describes—as it happened recently in his speech at *Occupy Wall Street*—the just society as a society of the 'Holy Spirit'. Correspondingly, he writes in his *In Defense of Lost Causes*:

If you say A—equality, human rights and freedoms—you should not shirk from its consequences and gather the courage to say B—the terror needed to really defend and assert the A.

To Žižek, the stick still serves the phallus, only that the phallus is the body of 'great occidental ideas' such as equality, human rights and freedoms (which are truly great; the question is, however, if it makes sense to use them as a phallic signifier).

Žižek und Badiou are not post-deconstructivist enough, inasmuch as by the use of idealistic rhetoric, they fall back behind the Marxist critique of Idealism as ideology. They still try to hide, to decorate the coming violence of the proletariat, such as if they were secretly ashamed of the unshaved, hairy phallus of the proletariat which they constantly evoke in an almost pornographic or—worse—theurgic way. By masking their own demands, they strip them of their credibility.

The Re-Appropriation of the Stick

Marx wrote:

Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or conso-

lation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower. The criticism of religion disillusion man, so that he will think, act and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true Sun. Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.

One should not only go and 'pluck the living flower' as Marx writes, clearly using sexual metaphor here, but one should go and use the stick without ideological nonsense. The question of the legitimate place of the stick should not be the question of a new ideological outfit for it, but the question of what the stick is that allows man 'to revolve around himself' (Marx is mocking Platonist imaginary here): the cold and naked stick of the reality-principle that is not identical with the penis any more.

It is precisely in the question of the naked stick, the stick that produces mankind by the employment of discipline and punishment, without either ideological nonsense or erotic connotation, where we reach the core of the communist problem. Communism means that one doesn't employ the stick in favour of the phallus-signifier anymore, any given powerful idea, class or person, but for its own sake—to mercilessly carve out humanity of the fleshy raw-matter of the animal, to build the new human by appropriating the oldest, most effective means of anthropo-production. The 'minimal difference' between Communism and Fascism is the Who and the Why of its terror. On one side, there is reason, on the other, there is tradition—there is only this urgent choice. That is why we need to talk about the stick again.



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