

# Collective Genius and Change of Existential Paradigm

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**Abstract:** - *When moving from Kant's architectonics of knowledge to Blumenberg's paradigm of shipwrecked humankind adrift in the medium of its immersion, the latter appears dynamic, i.e. susceptible of creating and transmitting vortexes. Hence, the need for a social rheology, in which the coherent bodily movements of the largest masses end up not just putting a literal spin on events but sucking from non-being into being the very factuality of our next global experience.*

*Playing particularly well the role of inert, compliant matter suffices to give the bulk of a social body a decisive edge of competitiveness, apt to make it deliver in excess of a mediocre remake vision. This outstanding radiance comes not from an exceptional new inspiration but from the superior social conductivity of a previously existing, underrated idea repeated until it fits the changing context.*

*If the radiance of a work is understood as its capacity to touch deepest the greatest number, the synchronic movement of this large public when touched appears instrumental in deepening and amplifying the touch. A superior passive conductivity can considerably eclipse the content of a vision, practically stealing the brilliant show of individual genius and relocating it in a corporeally, collectively accessible invisible.*

**Keywords:** - *social rheology, mimetic vortex, public self-affecting, infrastructures of togetherness, passive conductivity, extortive perception*

## 1. Introduction

Forty years ago Japan, now China: the impressive successes of social systems in which individually generated breakthroughs have not been traditionally emphasized intrigue the Western world. But perhaps a repeated shock should start to appear less as an accident and more as an ignored regularity worth bringing into light and thinking through.

There is much talk these days of the unethical aspect of faking and plenty of sermonizing about the negative consequences of this for our humanity—a highest-level, politically led campaign aimed at restoring the battered divide between creators and imitators. Comparatively, much less effort is spent trying to understand its genesis. For genius is a myth like any other—a social construct met with great enthusiasm and possibly not enough critical vigilance in the lands of the setting sun, where it shapes the understanding of social progress as a process periodically disrupted by exceptional

Individuals upon receiving salutary revolutionizing visions

Inducing feelings of guilt in imitators clumsily tries to cover a much deeper and less soluble problem, which will be addressed here: overall, if sufficiently repeated, the actualization of a mediocre vision can work at least as well as a genuine breakthrough. This is because, in and of itself, the exceptionally inspiring insight is less decisive for social success than the medium of its transmission. As for the latter, beyond the physical body of any visionary—genuine, or less so—lies the social body as larger, and as such determining, context. It is the latter that ultimately weaves the fate of any individual vision: the net of fascinated gazes this social body produces can alone pull out of irrelevance the work into which the vision got actualized.

Plato's famous cave fiction represents, if not quite the ultimate origin of the myth of genius—a position to which the Promethean theft of fire from

Olympus is a more credible candidate—at least it's most celebrated vehicle. Upon closer inspection, though, and given that no two repetitions are absolutely identical, a subtler, hardly noticeable, residual strand of creativity appears at work within the most passive and disreputable human disposition to follow blindly a given model of action. The bone of contention turns out to have an ideological nature, just like the fervor to restore a sharp distinction between creators and imitators: types of social organization unpopular in the democratic and individualistic West manage to tap this deep-level default creativity through little more than compliant concert.

## **2. The touch of Otherness**

Derrida drew our attention to a drifting [écart] through which our acts always and inexorably move slightly away from themselves, pried apart by a *différance* already at work within their self-sameness. Thus, we stay in touch with Otherness—the ultimate source of inspiration and betterment—not only discontinuously, through the great visions geniuses receive from time to time, but continuously and in our very senses, by virtue of the latter's openness to circumstantial change; this means through the very wall of sameness that repetition encapsulates us in. Such drifting being universally human and creative by default, it guarantees a democratic access to salutary renewal regardless of how insightful or talented one may be.

This suggests that playing particularly well the role of inert, compliant matter might suffice to give the bulk of a social body a decisive edge of competitiveness, apt to make it deliver brilliantly (here with the sense of in excess of) a rather mediocre remake vision. The radiance in case comes not from an exceptional inspiration but from the synergy established among the multitude of infinitesimal individual strands of drifting at work within repetitiveness, not away from it.

If the radiance of a work is understood as its capacity to touch deepest the greatest number, the synchronic movement of this large public when touched appears instrumental in deepening and amplifying the touch. Moving in sync and feeling moved represent two moments on a unique spiral of

self-affecting dynamics, which makes the act of individual creation both disappear and endure in its social trace as re-creation of the crowd by itself. In this process, the medium of reception completely claims the actualized message, rendering its individual origins irrelevant—a phenomenon signaled by Heidegger in his essay *The Origin of the Artwork*.

Granted that all of our repetitive acts get pushed to creatively drift away from themselves *ab initio*, some of them end up having a greater social impact than others; public receptivity is what ultimately seals the fate of the visions actualized into individual works. Essentially a phenomenon of receptivity,<sup>1</sup> genius appears to be more ambiguously situated than commonly admitted. On the one hand, as exceptional individual gift of spotting the end of the proverbial tunnel through the darkness of a crisis, it belongs in the domain of the visible; on the other, as acquired connectivity whereby the social body feels and takes advantage of salutary cracks in the wall of the same dark tunnel, genius manifests itself tactilely.

So, what if the destiny of vision is merely to mediate a crucial contact with the invisible—with the vital restlessness that, as source of freedom and creativity, liberates our access to the future without itself standing in need of liberation? Coincidentally, this is also what meditation purports to do; are then the industrious masses in the Far East busying themselves with the dullest tasks because, at another level—other than that of vision and consciousness—this fine-tunes their receptivity to the revitalizing to-and-fro movement credited elsewhere with conveying inspired visions? Before conveying anything, this movement has to be immediately felt, i.e. let be corporeally, hosted, resonated with, conducted—a least spectacular business that nonetheless some social bodies do better than others.

The issue appears less trivial upon considering that this cultivated propensity to move the individual obscurely but in sync with his/her immediate social environment connives with the finest and most respectable of local spiritual traditions, insofar as the latter also get taught by imitative doing. And, alas, tracing the obscure connection between

spirituality and the most dehumanizing routines forces us to go through the horror of rethinking the infamous Arbeit macht frei. At this point, suffice to signal only our suspicion that creativity owes more to the social body's reactions than to the individual mind's vision.<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Infrastructures of togetherness**

In defense of common sense, one is tempted to object that, logically, a reaction comes after the action that triggered it, and as such remains determined by the latter; the vision must, therefore, precede the action it inspires.

That the fully actualized reaction comes in the wake of the action remains indisputable, but that the former was not already virtually present in the latter is another thing altogether—and much more disputable at that. The ontological hierarchy of determination—which is the determining ground and which the grounded—gets seriously shaken upon reconsidering the fundamentals of perception, by virtue of which any vision takes place in a body that as such remains inseparable and, at least as far as we can tell with certainty, most original medium. This is not about the body that gets brought into light by anatomy or physiology but the body at its most obscure and elusive, as pure mediumship—i.e. unknowability that carries all knowledge without ever in turn fully exposing its nakedness.

Specifically, mediumship is at its most permeable, or unstoppable, in the implicit traffic of attitudes between the individual and his/her social environment; Derrida duly emphasized that repetition comes prior to what is repeated (1967). As the most natural tendency in humans, imitation is our first given, only subsequently abetted or inhibited through cultural prompts. The more unreflectively and inertially (go-with-the-flow) a social attitude gets adopted, the more deeply in touch with the untouchable of human nature, which is the flow itself. This goes against the mainstream Western theories of human action, where emphasis is placed on individual initiative and activeness to the detriment of social connectivity and passive conductivity.<sup>3</sup>

For Arendt, individual actions can be concerted or not, but do not originate in concert: forming a

coherent flow is something to be acquired upon democratic deliberation, which thus appears as the root of political power. This is because Arendt wants concert to be the contribution of free rational choice; but is that enough to deprive the more original, purely fusional, mimetic flow of image-movement, as Deleuze calls it in his book with the same title, of its power to mold individual behavior? The most obscure and least negotiable form of concert is always already given in human experience as tendency mimetically to blend in one's social environment to the point of phenomenologically disappearing. If naturally given—which remains a most questionable assumption—individuality can also most naturally resorb itself in its social medium, thus getting virtually erased through imitation.

Correspondingly, one can approach salutary societal change not starting from the exceptional vision an individual unpredictably and for the first time gets, but from this obscure, least resistive, infra-individual compliance with demands conveyed implicitly through peer pressure.<sup>4</sup> Insofar as it effectively realizes the cohesiveness needed for nimble movements of the social body as a whole, compliance rules; it connects efficaciously, making most immediately available the power associated with great numbers. As peer pressure, the mimetic infrastructure of togetherness ceaselessly and inescapably haunts the more individualized layers of social experience simply on reason of being the medium in which individuality always already finds itself immersed.

The term infrastructure has the advantage of conveying the idea that together-ness is all in the connecting paths, not in what gets connected: sheer accessibility, availability of ways out of individuality. Individual entities emerge only against, and thanks to, this impersonal medium of potential connectivity, which makes being appear as short for being touched by things. As for the prefix infra-, it indicates a value-neutral, most instinctual being in touch of the largest masses with the root of the human problem, insofar as one's blind obedience creates for another's political vision the least resistive path toward actualization.

Now, most dangerous this uncritical conveyance surely is, but also most directly unifying because of this, which means letting come into being without hindrance the political project, thus rushing it toward its end as if it were a disease to be cured as soon as possible. Indeed, one may wonder how much political ambition is healthy for a social body and how much of it betrays already the onset of metastasis. For instance, from Deng Xiaoping's third slogan "Development is the only true matter" (Debray and Tingyang 2014, 61) to China's present commitment to stay its course until acquiring world hegemony the difference might not be just a quantitative one.

Some societies focus on preventing an excessive accumulation of political power, whereas others favor curative purges as strategies of handling imbalance. There is overwhelming evidence that, left unchecked, political power dubiously inclines to uncontrollable growth, which brings proportionate risks along with the benefits. An analogy from physics reminds us that nuclear power also combines the highest risks with the greatest efficiency. As the nucleus of social power consists of law and order—i.e. is purely formal—the very best and worst can be expected to come from tinkering with it. Without these nuclear conditions being met, the reaching of social consensus remains itself unthinkable; even Chomsky's famous concept of educated anarchy makes some lawfulness and order implicit in the qualifier educated, therefore presupposing them.

Investing their leaders with unmatched powers and then obeying blindly is the specific way in which some societies understand to assume the supreme existential risk, which unsurprisingly goes together with the most enticing promise of success; put simply, an all-or-nothing, make-it-or-break-it logic very similar to the hero's extreme gambit on the battlefield.

#### **4. The mimetic vortex**

If immersion in the social environment defines our condition, it may be rewarding to look at some relevant strategies the octopus, this master of escapes, evolved. The creature commands special attention because its most formal remains at the same time the least so: polymorphous names in fact

an absence of proper form, hence a definitional impasse. Fluent movement and the fluid medium thereof prolong each other in an indistinctness that ends up eroding the limits around the very concept of adaptation, leaving it fuzzy, approximate, and susceptible of nuances.<sup>5</sup>

Especially when it comes to that smooth, non-resistant retraction of the individual back into the background of non-being through self-sacrifice—by overwork, or on the battlefield—can one still see it as an adaptation, or is it already an over-adaptation of the social body as a whole to historical vicissitudes? And does such a putative over-adaptation concern only the specific culture that condones it, or does it implicitly raise questions about the humanity of all humans insofar as it threatens to spread? A collective mode of being that exposes individual life to the extreme risks of workaholic self-destruction in the name of development of the whole is explicitly poised to export itself globally, which should not go without saying.

Through its unmatched capacity to replicate the patterns of its environment, the octopus renders itself practically transparent, thus 'disappearing' at will in a phenomenological sense (not in fact but in effect). Analogously, a social body is at its most efficacious when undetectable, or confoundable with the way 'things themselves are.' "A civilization has won," writes Debray, "... when the order-giver no longer needs to give orders." (2017, 32) Naturalizing ideology—rendering it as undetectable as the body of an octopus against its natural environment—is a campaign carried out with different degrees of success in different cultures; but certain modes of social organization manage to render themselves more undetectable than others, consequently pulling off the deception in a superlative, smoothest way.<sup>6</sup>

The least one can say is that an octopus does not wait for a great vision to help it move out of a trap; instead, it invests the adjacent space with all of its available terminations, subsequently translating its bulk in what appears to be the most promising direction—the one of least resistance. Extreme flexibility and solidarity among its parts are what makes this type of organism excel at finding

escapes; it locates the way out of an inhospitable location through its capacity to render its mass virtually amorphous, there-by seeking as full a contact as possible with its immediate environment. Particularly noteworthy is how the immersion of its body in the medium constantly reverses the relation between the two: fragment by fragment, the proximal environment gets engulfed by the gelatinous mass and taken imprints of. The touched undergoes partial immersions in the touching, with the latter yielding only in order better to envelop, and thus get the upper hand. The tactile given in the experience of an octopus appears to be more dynamically taken—not to say wrestled—out of concealment than simply offered to a purely passive receptivity. An actively sucking vortex swiftly scans immediacy, taking imprints of what is only virtually given in it. More than sight, which can catch its glimpses passively and from a distance, contact needs to be actively established, which requires a dynamic and fluid bodily investment in the medium. In this sense, the more yieldingly cursive a body, the more accurate, or truthful, its tactile reading of the environment.

The point is that an extremely flexible, octopus-like social body characterized by exceptional connectivity among its parts can organize its receptivity into a directional vortex whereby the virtually given in its experience gets actively wrestled out of concealment. To a certain extent, social events can be pulled out of their problematic givenness through what surpasses a classical, Kantian synthesis of understanding and deserves to be called extortive apperception. What gets added to the sensory data through apperception is, properly speaking, movement, flow, directionality—briefly, an exit from its concealing ‘den’ of inertia—in response to specific peer pressure at work in the form of expectations. Beyond the ken of a single individual, this vortex effect re-mains entirely social and not unlike the bending of physical space by great masses; only large crowds have the capacity to inflect the limit between what determines and what is determined in an experience.

The analogy between social bodies and octopi acquires additional pertinence upon seeing crises as traps in which historical becoming gets stuck.

Suggestively, the very name cephalopod preserves a functional ambiguity between head and feet, as if the creature thought with its feet, or rather muscled its thoughts at will, investing and divesting each of them with the other’s function in a remarkably versatile way. Nancy uses the hybrid forces-thoughts [forces-pensées] to describe the phenomenon (1992, 16). The cursive character externally displayed by the body of an octopus seems inter-nally paralleled by a functional fluidity that effectively relativizes the specialization of its different organs—in particular, those of perception and those of decision-making.

This deserves attention here primarily because, more blatantly than other organ-isms, that of the octopus is its own path: opening a way and following it are practically indistinguishable moments, fused in the same expansive impetus. Same with crowds, one can say; octopus-like, human infrastructures of togetherness also consist of inter-nal, functional paths to be cleared and beaten prior to seizing a historical opportunity. As the context constantly changes, ways out of an apparent dead end may get granted just briefly and unpredictably, which allows only the well-prepared, ready-and-waiting social organisms to take them. In this case, preparedness has to do with the capacity to decide while already in movement, i.e. as attunement to a deep-level flow.

Needless to reiterate that, for social bodies stuck in crises, a major problem is that of dereliction between the decisional center(s) and the moving periphery. The amazingly fluid functional reversibility displayed by cephalopods forms the antithesis of our sclerotic social infrastructures, where a specialization on receiving and sorting out visions comes together with a specific insensitivity, if not downright blindness, induced by routine, overprotection and lack of restructuring efforts.

It is not by accident that the political class claims to specialize in the first (and of-tentimes only) place on delivering great visions: the specialization on this coveted role goes hand in hand with privileges, to the point of justifying the question whether social inequity is to be imputed, in Marxist fashion, to the mode of production, or rather more originally to that of perceiving and reorganizing the social body

with a view to finding access farther out. Heidegger duly emphasized the inseparability of perception and action, without however stressing this reorganization reflex of a social body, which is more instinctual, less rationally decided than an action in the strict sense. And the myth of genius is instrumental in reproducing a questionable specialization on social roles, the necessity of which might be much exaggerated. Nothing is less certain than that, in times of existential crises, vision must needs come prior to a physical, concerted, multidirectional, octopus-like, periphery-driven push.

Being directional, actual movement always needs to comply with conditions of possibility that cluster together, restrictively configuring the available passageways to-ward future horizons of understanding and feeling. Insofar as, in their quest for ways out of crises, social bodies follow the path of least resistance, they have no choice but to reconfigure their structures accordingly, or get stuck. The bulk of relevant resistance comes from rigid considerations of status, which prevent the leadership from exchanging roles with the margins and, conversely, discourage the latter from political involvement under pretext of a lack of specialization. What is for sure, though, is that staying in touch with Otherness not only enables prompt responses but also exposes to a radical loss of identity.<sup>7</sup>

Internally, any social medium is characterized by specific configurations of re-sistance: although little permeable to novelty and bold outbound explorations, its conductivity of prompts coming from the decisional center can be very high. If, as Arendt believed, concerted actions are the source of power, such an active agreement has its passive counterpart in this conductivity of, and compliance with, peer pressure. Just as explicitly expressed concert brings together scattered strands of human action, in the opposite sense an impulse emanating from a single source can be more or less efficaciously disseminated within a social body. Now, it goes without saying that the less critically examined the message, the smoother its conduction. The whole question is, then, to what extent this superior conductivity can eclipse, in a phenomenological

sense, the content of the message, practically stealing the brilliant show of individual genius and relocating it within a collectively, corporeally accessible invisible.

### **5. The specular masses**

Characterized by above-the-norm resilience, some cultures develop impressive ways of recovering from political traumas; but, in return, such an exploit subsequently tempts them with brow-raising, reiterated explorations of invulnerability.

A case in point is China with its boastful proverb “We know how to drink bitter-ness”; one may know something so well as to confound it with the way things—in this case, humans themselves—naturally and beyond question are. As managerial thinking goes, if the Chinese can pull off their most unsavory exploit, why could not everyone else be pressured to imitate them? Understandably, surviving the worst seduces one into flirting with thoughts of indestructibility, whether divinely promised, or otherwise.<sup>8</sup> After all, excessive political risk-taking may well be just another face of an addiction to gambling that Chinese culture is no stranger of—utmost impatience as the dark side of its unrivaled patience.

If individual genius is about bringing into being a work starting from an inspired vision, collective genius may appear as its obscure counterpart unawares purging the world by returning the most outstanding individual creations back to the neutral back-ground of non-being upon consecration. For glory is but the gate leading back to oblivion, which makes the two modalities of genius — individual and collective—complementary: flushing the place in the spotlight through concerted forgetting makes it available for renewed ventures, while a sacrosanct, ultra-conservative fixation on the existing values slows down what Nietzsche calls their transvaluation and, with it, the whole process of historical becoming. But concerted action as generator of political power and concerted inaction as generator of acquiescent, compliant, non-resistive dissolution in one’s social medium obviously join and support each other.

Even when the message is an extreme one—for instance, an injunction to self-sacrifice through work—inert compliance can be made to prevail

over the instinct of self-preservation and to feel as the more natural of the two choices. Novelty gets displaced from the contents of the vision per se to the physical medium thereof: the blindness attending an ideologically heightened enthusiasm of the reception makes up for the déjà vu of the vision itself. Thus, blindness appears instrumental in abetting an invisible traffic.

At least in the short run, and just by unflinchingly following a not particularly inspired leader, unreflective masses seem able to bring about the same overall effect as a truly visionary genius would through his/her heroic solitary struggle for social recognition. But a short-term gain can be decisive for upsetting the balance of power in the longer run. In addition, shouting 'Victory!' convincingly enough—huge crowds produce a proportionate persuasive effect upon themselves—at a decisive moment in the dispute for the spotlight can end up bringing about a real, long-lasting victory through what is known as a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>9</sup> And, when the issue is crisis, finding the way out toward a more comprehensive and accommodating horizon of understanding is what victory stands for. But does killing oneself at work under peer pressure still count as acceptable, human victory?

Through nothing but its concerted movements—which are essentially labor, birth-giving ones—a crowd generates self-confidence, thus actually getting hold of and delivering itself, which means effectively appropriating its own potential power. Tenaciously repeated, slogans such as 'Yes, we can!' make power emerge from its merely virtual givenness and acquire the reality of a praxis—though not necessarily that of an action in the narrow sense, of purposefully directed break with inertia. Moving in concert appears then as a crowd's specific way of mining for power within itself, of squeezing a diamantine irresistibility out of its collective existence.

As success breeds success, this most addictive incipient touch of power in turn deepens the crowd's cohesion in an essentially artistic exercise (art for art's sake) neglectful of concerns about the purpose of such a self-empowering.<sup>10</sup> It is power for power's sake, repetition feasting upon itself,

addiction at its most formal and abstract: the crowd generates power and simultaneously gets inebriated with it into craving for more of the same.<sup>11</sup> Because it has a hard time believing that it is actually in touch with the ultimate fount of power, it keeps touching it compulsively and incredulously, as if it were a miracle. But the miracle acquires reality through the reiteration of the very gesture expressing disbelief in it—a most auspicious circularity at that. Collective genius fringes on magic insofar as it allows a crowd to transfigure itself, conjuring power out of powerlessness through nothing but flawless repetition.

At advanced stages of internal cohesion, any self-prophecy of this crowd seems possible to fulfill provided it be articulated in deep concert; the how makes all the difference, while the what hardly any. Such power is not specifically political, but indeterminate, unqualifiable, purpose-free: the power of the social body to acquire a self in the strong sense (a human face), to pull it(self) out of dispersion and irrelevance through a specular effect equivalent to the mirror stage in the infancy of individual development.<sup>12</sup>

Is there still an effective obstacle between potency and omnipotence at this point, where power gets generated purely formally, through nothing but spontaneous, fascinated, narcissistic concert? Yes, and it has to do with the crowd's remaining helplessly, uncontrollably creative, labored from within by the Derridean *différance*, i.e. already deviating from self-coincidence in ways that sooner or later will break the specular spell it exerts upon itself. For there is only this much concert it can get spontaneously; more of it requires supervision, which at the same time compromises it by delineating battlefronts, such as supervisors vs. supervised, rulers vs. ruled, planners vs. followers, and the like. The slightest division within a crowd unified by formal routine invites conflict to set in and deepen it.

Concert, therefore, appears as mimetic infrastructure, as access of a crowd to itself, as narcissistic craving for being one: the same insatiable hunger for power unites its members as though they were tentacles of one and the same ultimate naught. The most important consequence

of this self-empowering but fragile dynamics is that it can literally turn everything upside down; it operates not just a reversal between determining and determined, but their regression all the way to indistinctness.

At its most naked, socius reveals its infrastructure of adjustable togetherness, or connectivity—the muscled neuron that the body of a cephalopod evokes. Itself the indistinctness of its ends, a path both fuses them together and sets them apart. Asking whether it is the image that informs matter, or vice-versa, no longer makes sense, since the concerted, power-generating crowd is at the same time representation and the thing represented. The crowd’s power comes from its capacity to reproduce any expression of it in an ever-accelerated, vertiginous motion. But it also remains limited by the same.

#### **6. The ‘suit of lights’ done and undone**

As early as the 1980s, Japan managed to drive home the simple point that success depends not so much on getting revolutionary ideas as on doing roughly the same thing as the competition, except in slightly improved, innovative ways. The emphasis shifted from what gets done to how this happens; correspondingly, the extreme exigency of invention got dropped in favor of its lesser version known as innovation. Now, what does philosophy have to say about this much more obscure genius—or perhaps just ‘genius’—content with maximizing the social impact of politically-backed, second-rate visions?

Paradoxically, it might be in the lack-luster vulgarization of a vision—in the humble because open to all, repetitive, unspectacular but tenacious tinkering with it—that the very brightest of its radiance gets literally squeezed out. Let us not forget that tenacity is the capacity to hold fast to something, to prolong the contact with it as if this obscure incubation alone, if patiently brought to term, could deliver the supreme luster of any vision. What if this most common touch, which vulgarization basically is, ends up casting the noblest patina upon an individual creation, rendering irrelevant its genetic links with the author and thus ‘counterfeiting’ its virtual anonymity, but with brilliance? In consolation, it could say to the author, ‘You disappear as individual, but

nonetheless endure as halo surrounding this creation emancipated from your tutelage.’

Strictly speaking, the role of outstanding creator is assumed by donning a socially tailored costume originally made from that special fiber called inspiration—an intimate lingerie that, while wrapping one in greatness, can also expire anytime and most unexpectedly, leaving behind the embarrassing nakedness of human destitution. But, as Einstein’s formula of genius reminds us, inspiration is worth next to nothing until materialized into works to be subsequently appropriated and assessed by the social context—the ultimate weaver-cum-tailor of the ‘suit of lights,’ to use the jargon of bullfighting.<sup>13</sup>

Too often our individualist bias and need for a firm grip on reality makes us forget that everything in the individual remains traceable to further, outer sources. In and of itself, the individual is not without further ado a point of creative discontinuity in the routine functioning of social systems; nor is it one of unconditional continuity, automatically delivering an identical reproduction of what it receives. It is perhaps time to look at the individual as little more than a convenient beginning or end of our analyses, but not of the phenomenon analyzed (transmission of salutary clues from beyond a given horizon of understanding). Practical as it may be to have a point of anchorage in reality for our theories, deep down the individual remains but a medium co-originally characterized by both openness and the repetitive closure of habitus.

At this point, it is crucial to admit, with Heidegger, that openness is not the monopoly of consciousness and that questioning is not exhausted in linguistic articulations; the body constantly pries reality open through its gestures, which are as many implicit explorations and, at least potentially, attempts to creatively reposition their author within the world. From this enlarged perspective, creativity appears aimed at deepening the contact with the outside, at tapping into potential resources available beyond immediate reach, such as for instance a vital space characterized by enhanced capacity to shelter and nurture human existence.

But this better-quality contact need not be reduced to more penetrating insights into a supposedly

abysmal dimension of truth; it can also be understood more superficially, as characterized by reduced friction, or smoother social interaction. Accordingly, the shift would change from what is reached to how this is done (the best way to soften the rupture, to let go of what is not worth a definitive fixation) much along the lines of Levinas' phenomenology of caress.

### **7. The mixed blessings of blindness**

In Plato's famous analogy of the cave, the individual genius acquires the capacity to bring the prisoners of an existential condition out of their confinement and into a new relation with the exterior—both a new light and a new visual sensibility to go with it. But Plato is quick at warning about the social risks of disclosing new horizons: "And if it were possible to lay hands on and to kill the man who tried to release them [the prisoners of the cave] and lead them up, would they not kill him?" (Rep. VII, 517a) The question is merely rhetorical, aimed at getting the interlocutor's explicit approval.

So goes the Western myth of individually, heroically spearheaded social progress. However, nothing prevents social systems from questioning existence in other ways, as for instance reorganization aimed at enhancing connectivity. Considering that mining for power through drill works in the cave as anywhere else, leaving its subterranean darkness behind may seem somewhat arbitrary, if not rash; after all, how much richer and unintentionally experimental does social life get under the cover of darkness, one may ask?

It is not clear how Plato's seer of a higher truth escapes the fetters of the cave to start with. But he does not seem mandated with an exploration by the other prisoners, nor inspired by any of their fictions to pry open the unknown beyond the cave, rather than the handier one within the cave's social environment. And—for Sophocles at least—one's fellow human surpasses in wondrousness anything else under the sun, where wondrousness can be taken to stand for an exploration-inviting carnal obscurity not so unlike that of outer space.

If so, whence this impulse to distance oneself from one's fellow inmates and their collectivist type of social experience in favor of a distant existential

horizon? Is Plato's cave the Asia that the Pelasgians left behind when migrating into the archipelago of their later, greatest glory? What made them see the horizon as essentially promising and the movement toward it as liberating, when the Confucian Far East tends to regard the same with suspicion and apprehension, trusting instead in drastic reorganizations of life within the 'cave'?

Whatever the answers to the above questions, two different modes of organizing this quest for a salutary way out of crises have sent the Confucian Far East and the West in opposite directions: the former towards repetitive collective efforts made within a politically controlled framework and meant largely to optimize an already familiar habitation, and the latter towards individual go-it-alone, idiosyncratic explorations that, when graced with a worthwhile discovery, feel rich to the point of dispensing with social recognition altogether. Plato traces the rift between soft and hard power all the way back to Homer, who figures as patriarch, if not pioneer, of an intellectual freedom that no chains can suppress: ". . . would he [the seeker gifted with superior knowledge upon leaving the cave] feel with Homer and greatly prefer while living on earth to be serf of another, a landless man, and endure anything rather than opine with them [his fellows left behind in the cave] and live that life?" (Rep. VII, 516d)

By recycling a community's mode of being together, its social space can acquire a specifically human vastness—an increased roominess of the cave itself, characterized by its new because recycled 'light' (i.e. way of understanding living together). But this strand of novelty emerges through non-identical repetitions rather than by shunning repetition. Correspondingly, the opening of the cave gets transferred from visible into invisible register, in a way that makes Plato's reference to Homer—a blind man—acquire interesting, most likely unintended meanings.

It is well known that, to the blind, channels of receptivity other than the visual open with particular acuity, which means in the first place generosity: whether due to the things themselves, or to the receiving sensibility, more gets disclosed more accurately than the idea of disability and privation

logically suggests. Moreover, this implicitly eulogized blindness capable of inducing enhanced tactile or acoustic receptivity need not be tied to anatomic or physiological defects: there is also an ideological, a hysterical, and, most important in this context, a hypnotic blindness—a dereliction from contextual changes through the immobilization of one's attention to trivial tasks.

Mental discipline and concentration on dull, repetitive operations are reputed for opening the human being on levels other than the conscious one, especially in the spiritual traditions of Asia. At first blush, there may not be much in common between turning the beads of prayer in a Tibetan monastery and pulling a lever in the sweatshops of south-east Asia, except when it comes to one's existential openness to new modes of being (together). The latest view the West has got of discipline is heavily influenced by Foucault and the rebellious spirit of the 1960s that he embodied, which essentially suspected discipline of a collusion with political power.<sup>14</sup>

Notwithstanding the pertinence of this connection, the fact remains that in the most respectable spiritual traditions of Asia ascetic discipline liberates for subtler, less controllable and negotiable contacts with Otherness. Is it really surprising that work at its most dull and least creative, while abjectly enslaving the human being—one still shudders at recalling the Nazi *Arbeit macht frei*—also liberates it toward liminal encounters? Not quite, given that the fringes of human experience open confusingly onto both the subhuman and the super-human.

Hence, could the Far East be an advanced existential laboratory where one is dabbling in liberating an updated version of genie—genius or demon—from the good old human 'bottle'? Since human contact with what lies beyond the human is manifold, it makes sense to wonder through which opening of this 'bottle'—consciousness, angelic supra-consciousness, beastly insensitivity to self-destruction, or still other—genius might get released next, and especially what kind of genius that might be. As Goethe's *Faust* artfully illustrates, more often than not the genius has a dark side that a pact with the devil merely renders explicit and

dramatizes for stage purposes. But what about the most self-debasing masses resignedly toiling in abject conditions instead of rebelling? Could their tacit pact with the subhuman bear fruit just as *Faust's* deal with the devil did? Sure is only that their political silencing, understood as denial of a voice, favors strange, hyper-idiosyncratic interpellations that need not be all human, and the schizophrenic character of which has already been problematized by Deleuze and Guattari (1972).

### **8. Concluding remarks**

The major social and political decisions that shaped the Western world follow from the understanding of genius as basically a salutary vision embodied and actualized in a way that sets its human receptacle apart, individualizing it through the bestowal of glory and above-the-average social status. Unfortunately, a rigid understanding of status differences—excessive specialization, one might say—also stands in the way of an increased flexibility of the social body and a cultivated multi-functionality of its various parts. What eminently wedges the genius apart from the crowd is, according to the Western interpretation of the phenomenon, the exceptional vision he/she is graced with. Still, does it warrant a rigid centralization, tantamount to an isolation of center from periphery based on events as contingent and rare as the bouts of genuine inspiration? And can the head still find the way out of crises if incapable of investing the periphery to the point of fusing with it, octopus-like?

From another angle, even if inspiration accounts for only 1% of a breakthrough while 99% remains hard work, according to Einstein's recipe, it is still the 1% that makes the significant difference, considering that everyone can break their back working but not everyone gets graced with the spark of genius. Even so, a hard-worker can supplement the missing 1% of inspiration with a self-fulfilling prophecy: instead of waiting to be graced with the vision, he/she can self-confidently pretend to have received it, thereby stealing the show and, with it, a longer-term victory.

In a pitched competition, playing God when everything within human powers has been done makes one divine enough to tip the balance in one's

favor, at least as much as it takes to win. The up-and-coming makes his/her victory imminent by declaring it imminent; with a self-empowering gesture, self-confidence supplements a deficient factuality. The missing edge gets created by stealing the divine, capricious show of inspiration: shouting 'Eureka!' so that the contender can hear produces the coveted difference even when the latter is not conventionally given. Finding can be brought about—if not in fact, at least in effect.

When moving from the Kantian architectonics of knowledge to Blumenberg's proposed paradigm of a shipwrecked humankind adrift in the medium of its immersion, it is crucial to remember that this latter is dynamic, which means susceptible of creating and transmitting vortexes. As such, it pertains to a social rheology, in which the coherent movements of the largest masses end up putting a most literal spin on events. Huge social tides have been set in motion lately through globalization, just as huge amounts of ice have been liquefied through global warming. One needs to take into account that, generated through movement in sync, the largest social vortex is, among others, capable of sucking from virtuality into actuality the next given of our global experience.<sup>15</sup>

Tournier's derisive talk of a demographic diarrhea (1975, 154) deserves to be taken seriously and assessed not on its ethical, or aesthetical value, but on its scientific one, as a statement of social rheology: if we are part and parcel of the Heraclitean flow, who makes the events emerge from, and get submerged back into, imperceptibility and through what concerted repetitions? For it is not enough to say that, through superior concert, 1.4 billion people can set global trends; through the spin they put on the virtually given—the repetitions to which they subject it—they can even make, or make disappear, the difference between its being and not being.

#### Notes

1. Heidegger almost obsessively reminds us of this dependence of our experience upon a given—a phenomenon he calls finitude. While this is true and important beyond doubt, even more so might be the other fundamental fact that, through a sufficiently prolonged and

masterfully disguised recycling in the functioning of our social mechanisms, this less-than-original given can be endlessly changed, which legitimizes talk of an end of finitude, or infinitude.

2. "Time actually comes," writes Nancy, "to write and think this body in the infinite remoteness that makes it ours, that makes it come to us from further out than all of our thoughts: the exposed body of the world population." (1992, 14) That he does not have in mind a homogeneous reality analogous to the concept of sub-stance that subtended the history of metaphysics appears clearly in the preceding sentence, where reference is made to a plurality of diagrams, reticular structures, topological grafts and geographies of human multitudes. The present paper explores the corporeal ingenuity thanks to which some of these multitudes find the way out of historical crises.
3. This said, Deleuze and Guattari correctly identify the core of the problem: "Productive synthesis, production of production, has a connective form: 'and,' 'and then'... (1972, 11) Counterintuitive as it seems too many, connectivity comes prior to what gets connected; just as for Derrida repetition precedes and determines what gets repeated.
4. Late Heidegger's concept of acquiescence [Gelassenheit] purposefully obscures that which one acquiesces to. Could it be that, without conceptualizing it, China instinctively adopts this attitude when abandoning itself into the hands of an imperially empowered leader? Although Marx expected the proletarian revolution to break out in Britain, it took place in Russia; in the same way, could the Heideggerian move from philosophizing to thinking occur not in the excessively theoretical West but in the more pragmatic China, where abandonment into the hands of a political leader has something instinctual, profoundly irrational about it? "Deeds, not words" is what the Chinese masses explicitly ask for; correspondingly, an infra-conceptual, bodily synergy powerfully contends for

- supremacy with the Western-favored conceptual synthesis.
5. Tournier tinkers with the idea of over-adaptation [suradaptation] in which he sees individual happiness reaching an extreme of fragility, correlative with its surge in complexity (1975, 138). In the present context, one may find it worth wondering whether self-sacrifice for the common good does not mark this limit of biological adaptation—a phenomenon exploited by collectivist societies in various forms, the most infamous of which are perhaps the kamikaze and the karoshi (death by overwork).
  6. An unmatched reading on this topic is Hans Blumenberg's *Shipwreck with Spectator. Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. by S. Rendall, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996. To Blumenberg's most stimulating analysis of the vicissitudes in the relationship ground-grounded we would only like to add that, shipwrecked in the middle of the ocean, which means immersed in our medium rather than architectonically supported by it in Kantian fashion, learning from the octopus appears as a most sensible thing to do.
  7. According to Canetti, "There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown." (1973, 15) Heidegger refers to the same phenomenon with the term anxiety, which, in his analysis of human existence, names the ultimate paradigm-changer.
  8. Seminal for understanding the dialectics at work between survival against all odds and excessive risk-taking is Canetti's division of *Crowds and Power* entitled 'The Survivor.'
  9. A notorious example of this is the second presidential mandate George W. Bush won in 2000 by declaring victory in the state of Florida before all the ballots got cast. Instinctively, the undecided voters still waiting to express their political will ended up supporting what they had been manipulated to perceive as the imminent winner. Understandably so, for who wants to fight for a lost cause? But this merely begs the old Aristotelian question: when is a battle lost beyond retrieval? Our short answer: when the belief in imminence seizes the contenders actual facts do follow imminently. Imminence represents the cessation of struggle in the mind and the moment when action desists from its transformative engagement; it is the nakedness of the future showing itself anticipatively, if one may say so.
  10. Arendt qualifies this capacity of a community to act in concert; doing it for a public-political purpose, as she requires, might be what allows one to call it political power. But all-purpose power can also be tapped into without any clear objective—for example, performing meaningless routines in increasingly flawless sync. This mirror-effect of the crowd upon itself—the bridging of the gap between the phenomenon and its representation—amounts to an apprehension of power (in both senses of the term): getting in touch with the limitless resources within itself makes the crowd tremble, but the trembling seems to convey the presence of the great *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, in which Rudolf Otto saw the holy. With this, we are at the mirror-stage of a social body—the ultimate identification formulable as 'I am all of you and all of us are each of you.' Trembling in sync and fascinated with its apperception is the crowd revealed to itself as more than just a crowd—to wit, as source of its own power.
  11. "Whenever men have grown accustomed to this precisely repeated and limited experience in their churches or temples," writes Canetti, "they can no longer do without it." (1973, 25) He sees the connection between rhythmic movement of a crowd and increase in excitement to the point of frenzy (1973, 32) but stops short of identifying this with self-empowerment. This is because his notion of power passes through symbols—"is more ceremonious"—and surpasses the immediate, having inherent in it "a certain extension in space and in time." (1973, 281) That may well be, but at an incipient stage it must pass through unity of movement (dynamic, not static oneness). It looks as if, for Canetti, the

social body gets constituted through agglutination and only subsequently moves; this may be the case for objects, but not for a living social body.

12. Widespread in Confucian cultures, the practice known as *jian kang tsau* stands for group routine: it can be spontaneous or organized, free or enforced, meaningful or completely meaningless. In its purest form, it celebrates the power coming from belonging to a social group through a set of arbitrarily chosen bodily movements performed in concert. In the local educational systems, it is most instrumental in inculcating bodily compliance with social pressure.
13. This specific association between the heroic act of genius and the artful death-skirting by the bullfighter needs to be credited to Michel Leiris. Cf. *Miroir de la tauromachie*, Paris: Fata Morgana, 2013.
14. "Let us say that discipline is the unitary technical procedure [procédé] whereby bodily force is at the least expense reduced as 'political' force and maximized as useful force." (1975, 258) We wonder whether the result of discipline is itself re-ducible to a maximization of useful force, or also includes an emancipatory di-mension that can be called spiritual in keeping with the cultural traditions that perfected these techniques. For sure, though, impressive gains in the quality of public life have been achieved through tough disciplinary measures by countries like Singapore, and unlike comparable nations in the region where crass waywardness endangers lives and property with impunity in the name of tolerance. Overall, Foucault seems very unfair when assessing the contribution of discipline to civilization; a French-style individual penchant to rebel is definitely not all there is to human civilization.
15. We cannot subscribe to Debray's outdated, pre-phenomenological point of view, for which a change of world hegemony merely "displaces the accents within the original given [la donne originelle]." (2017, 106) As Derrida made clear, there is no original given

independent of the accents placed on, or special effects generated in, our experience. Power and the changes thereof are all in the effects produced.

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