

Social Madness

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In The Dialectics of Disaster: A Preface to Hope I have analyzed the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Problem' as an act of societal madness <1>. We ordinarily use this term 'madness' quite freely in conversation, but then abandon it upon moving into serious discourse and study - perhaps in trying to be more precise, objective or scientific, perhaps to avoid a contentious descriptive term. I would argue, however, that sophisticated thought has ignored an important spontaneous insight. Used carefully and self-consciously, the term 'madness' illuminates much of the century's genocidal history, including above all the Nazi project to exterminate Europe's Jews.

Mad: untutored and casual reflection contains an insight to be preserved and deepened, not suppressed, by systematic and scientific study. Nazi policies towards the Jews were mad, as were Stalin's attacks upon Russian society, as was the American near-destruction of Vietnam. And in the dynamic structures of these and other quite different madneses we can find guides for understanding and perhaps combatting the nuclear madness menacing all of us.

Yet to describe social policies as 'mad' immediately exposes one to a raft of doubts: about indulging in rhetorical excess, about being imprecise, about confusing the social with the individual, injecting normative conceptions that have no place in social analysis. For example, even if we grant that individuals may be described as mad - and this language is contestable as being value-charged, unscientific and obsolescent - how can psychological terms appropriate to individual mental functioning be applied to collective behaviour? After all, don't societies function according to different processes than do individuals?

This and similar objections are reinforced by the functionalist premise that generally guides studies of social life. It is no great leap from assuming, quite appropriately, that all social policy is intentional, to seeing that intentionality as rational - thus gilding rulers' acts with the rationality of those studying them. If it had a function and purpose, the 'final Solution' was done 'in order to ...': to unite Germany, say, or to divert it. It had a particular function, then, a logic. The executioners were guided by or manipulated according to this logic. But such formulations tend to cast genocide as another human project among the universe of projects - whose rationality is either assumed or lies beyond the specific study in question - rather than as a policy whose logic is fundamentally rooted in illogic. Yes, it was just another human act, but it was also an insane one. Yes, understanding it demands that we use customary explanatory categories, but it also stretches them to their limit.

The Nazi policy and practice of extermination was - in spite of its overwhelming technical rationality, in spite of the palpable reality of the extermination-camp universe - as supremely irrational as can be imagined. Yet its madness, if felt and intuited, is difficult to locate, more difficult to argue. Was it in the decision to exterminate, in the

machinery itself, in the mental functioning of those who ordered it or those who carried out their orders, in the society that made it possible? Although the debate continues, it is at least plausible for us to see, as did Hannah Arendt, the organisers of the 'Final Solution' such as Adolph Eichmann as banal and mediocre rather than as pathologically mad <2>. And it is at least possible to argue, as did Richard Rubenstein, that the key to the Holocaust is not a crazed intentionality but a rather indifferent and impersonal process of twentieth-century technological rationality <3>.

Certainly I agree that 'madness' is a methodologically troubling term - a culturally-bound concept whose use for socio-historical processes is so problematic and controversial that it would be preferable to avoid it altogether. But discarding the term will not dispel what it would convey. How else can we preserve what is essential to it - the systematically and radically deranged character of the 'Final Solution'? How do justice to the intuition that at its core it was insane, from beginning to end?

Yet aren't these subjective responses? Rubenstein has argued that we should bracket out emotional responses as interfering with our objective understanding of this event <4>. Is not our sense of its madness similarly subjective and distortive? Won't dwelling on it slant our discussion in a hopelessly coloured personal direction? Shouldn't we limit ourselves to presenting and understanding the facts without adding any such personal evaluation to them?

On the contrary, if the Holocaust commands our attention it is because we cannot separate data - the numbers of dead, for example - from our definition of their meaning. The event's impact and significance is indeed subjectively based: the sheer scale of the catastrophe cannot be disentangled from our sense of its grotesque character. The 'Final Solution' was an end in itself. There is no value-free way of characterising the Holocaust - its very definition as the worst catastrophe imaginable short of nuclear war is rooted in our respect for life, our sense of what humans should be and how they should and should not treat each other. Objectivity, insofar as history and society are concerned, is an intersubjective product constituted by those who share this same space, the earth. It is assumed, perhaps elaborated, as our sense of the collective conditions for survival, let alone well-being. In its utter gratuitousness, the Nazi extermination programme so violates even the most minimal of these norms - proper behaviour in wartime - that we cannot help but perceive it by using such terms as 'unspeakable', 'evil', 'barbaric', 'horrifying', or 'demonic'.

We perceive it this way: our lenses are inescapably emotional - subjective and objective, and give us the event already laden with meaning. We perceive it this way: it is this way. In the human world 'subjective' reactions are indeed objective: they claim to illuminate not our feelings about the Holocaust but its very structure and character.

Conversely, as a human project it has a structure and character only within the human world whose norms it so systematically outraged. Our objective-subjective reactions claim to mark it off from other historical events and tell us how and why it is unique. In this sense such terms do not call for being bracketed out at the start, but rather for being retained - clarified and understood, in order to better guide us to the event itself.

II

But what does it mean to call social policy and collective behaviour 'mad'? How can the intuition be preserved and rendered usable for research and analysis?

Let us be clear what we do when we call an act 'mad'. First, our assertion may be of various strengths, and our emphasis may vary accordingly. We may simply mean that it is severely and systematically abnormal - that it departs considerably from our sense of the normal. 'Normal', of course, is a subjective-objective notion which strictly speaking conveys our judgement on the range of proper human behaviour - the norm we apply. But even if we try to restrict this judgement to behaviour, it is hard to escape an accompanying reference to the psychological state underlying the behaviour. In other words, in addition to considering a 'mad' act as extremely abnormal, we imply that its source is in a mind that is somehow deranged. A mad action, we may suggest, proceeds from a disordered psyche. Indeed, if we call an act 'insane' we complete this shift and our emphasis falls more heavily on the mental state of the actor. Between the milder emphasis on an action's abnormality and the stronger focus on its subjective source, I propose to explore 'madness' in the middle sense, as suggested by 'deranged' - as judgement of an act which opens towards, but does not immediately insist on focusing on, its subjective source.

Second, we must insist on the normative claim implied at each stage so far. When we speak of individuals as mad/deranged, we may have in mind three possible areas: systematic derangement of perception, systematic derangement of intention, or systematic derangement of affect. The individual may claim to see things that are not there or not see things that are there, may seek to do things that are inconceivable, or may show feelings or responses that are seriously and systematically inappropriate. In each type of madness, a standard is implied against which the act is measured: what is really there to be perceived, what is really possible to do, what is normal for human beings to feel. Obviously we cannot restrict ourselves to common-sense judgements of reality for our standard - revolutionaries, inventors and poets constantly break beyond and redefine what are assumed to be the limits of reality, and are frequently falsely thought to be mad. This does not deny that there are standards, however: just that a given society's definition of what is real - as in the case of Nazi Germany - must in turn be judged against more solid standards.

What is their source? Daily life is underpinned by a shared sense of the real world, its structures and limits. Science uses but sees beyond this, remains guided by its own, and corresponding, shared sense of reality which is continuously and collectively refined and redefined just as is that of common sense. Even a revolutionary social philosophy, Marxism, which projects social transformation - a radically different reality which if glimpsed has not yet been achieved - bases its claim to truth on its scientific character. In other words, it is no more than utopian speculation if its projections are not based on actual, observable tendencies and possibilities of this society.

Even if it is now regarded as intersubjectively based rather than independent and external to us, a structured real world is central to all our experience. The rebellious - or revolutionary - rejection of the common-sense version of these structures is not mad, nor are the transcending

visions of great poets, artists and scientists. Their visions have seen through to deeper layers of the reality, and allowed future generations access to them. To be sure, sometimes we cannot tell for sure whether we are witnessing a transcendence of common sense or a mad break with reality - a visionary of a madman. But then no normative concept is without its grey areas. Despite these, judgements of abnormality/derangement still rest on a shared and demonstrable sense of objective reality, its spheres including intention and feeling as well as perception.

III

The three categories of individual madness demand closer examination to see which are useful for societal analysis. First, what does it mean to see what is not really there? The Nazis saw the Jews as the source of Germany's problems: they perceived them as sub- and super-humans, as a danger, a pollutant, a parasite, an evil <5>. I do not mean 'see' and 'perceive' literally in terms of the physiological/optical fact of perception, but inferentially, as in the case of a belief. When someone sees the devil we assume not a perceptual but a mental malfunctioning: madness is not colour-blindness but a mental disorder in which we believe our world of experience to form a causal pattern which is radically false. Patently absurd connections or processes of causation are invented, beings are created for whom there is no basis in reality. These specific people, the Jews, were endowed by large numbers of Germans with certain menacing qualities and were linked mentally to their actually experienced problems.

To see this as madness is to concede that at its core were not the manipulators and the manipulated but rather, more disturbingly, people who believed the inanities they spoke. Like the madman who sees the devil, those who thought the Jews were racially defiling them were sincere. They believed in their fantasies.

To see what is not there is also to not see what is there. If one looks at nuclear weapons and does not see danger but instead security we may speak of a similar double, and similarly radical, misperception. Again, the term 'perception' is used loosely: the derangement lies in the mental, not the optical process.

Why not simply speak of an error? Why is it not enough simply to label as mistaken the man who sees the devil - or, the Nazi who sees the Jews as the devil? After all, we are first of all talking about a mistake. The problem is that to call misperception a mistake locates it within the realm of reason and evidence we presume in all discourse and indeed perception. Within that realm a mistake may be corrected, for example, by demonstrating it to be false. But to call it madness underscores on the one hand its depth and seriousness, on the other its psychological roots and quality of being beyond reason and demonstration. If we regard a belief as mad we see it as being both wilful and beyond reach.

This is a remarkable combination of opposites: a mad belief is beyond control, unreachable by any customary process of evidence or reasoning, yet it is wilful. It proceeds with determination and from a definite intention.

Madness of the first sort, then, suggests a wilful turning away from both normal perception and inference and its standards of evidence and truth, and a turning away which proclaims - and acts on the non-existence of what is real and the existence of what is not. Of course no individual or social movement turns completely from reality. Hitler not only showed normal perceptual capacities when he ate and drank, but in rising to power he demonstrated a brilliant grasp of the political situation down to the smallest detail of timing. If he was deranged it was only in certain specific areas. The same is true for those judged and treated as clinically insane: however far from normal reality they may be in specific areas, they know where and how to eat, how to walk, what it means to sleep. Total

derangement, if possible, would deprive the would-be pathological killer of the very capacity to kill: every reality would be scrambled. Derangement is always selective and limited, leaving intact most of the vast web of one's other ties to reality as well as abilities to function within it.

Which is why we must see madness as lying along a continuum which stretches from the impossible extreme of seeing and acknowledging reality completely to the other impossible extreme of breaking with it totally. If the second is inconceivable for the reasons just given, Freud has made clear why the first is also inconceivable: civilized life demands repression and neurosis. If sane people stand somewhere along the continuum, the insane stand further along, having broken with more of reality. It is, however, a quantitative change which becomes qualitative. To speak of 'madness' implies that reality is being denied more fully and in an area that is decisive for functioning. One could scarcely imagine functioning without denying some aspects of reality - this is the meaning of repression and neurosis as Freud articulated them. Repression is necessary to civilized life as such - for example generating the sublimations that yield culture as well as protecting humanity from the impulses that would threaten it. Neurosis, differentiated from madness only by degree, afflicts every member of Western society in some way(s) which at some time(s) may become disruptive. Madness is more pronounced, more disruptive, more systematic.

If the phenomenon of denial characterises all neurosis and suggests the (relatively) easy reversibility that treatment or time can bring, a stronger term is needed to describe the wilful, radical, systematic, departure from reality we mean by 'madness': a rupture with reality. This formulation captures all of the meanings I have been exploring: the fact that madness involves a relationship with reality; the normative character of the description; the seriousness of the derangement; its wilful character; and the difficulty of return.

A second meaning of 'madness' emphasises the derangement not of perception but of intention. Of course the two are linked: belief is an act whose derangement proceeds from an intention to rupture with reality and so believe. Moreover, madness has consequences - and is thus talked about and studied - only when it becomes yet more active and produces practical results. Nevertheless 'madness' has still a further implication, within the practical sphere, of an act that is undertaken contrary to evident possibility and in spite of that evidence. To attempt unaided flight from a tall building is so patently pursuing the impossible and courting death as to be mad. Of course, as with the earlier qualifications of misperception, acts that seek to 'do the impossible' are regarded as mad when they are sustained, serious and far-reaching. If this madness indeed contains strong elements of misperception, the emphasis falls on the misperception of causal relations between act A and intended result B. 'If I leap I will fly.' The absence of any conducting path between A and B is rejected, replaced instead with magical belief. B can be accomplished by doing A, in the face of all contrary evidence and experience. Reality is defied.

The intention is mad not insofar as it is felt or desired, but insofar as it is willed against reality. I focus on this as a distinct kind of madness because the intention dominates so wholly as to be pursued in spite of its patent impossibility. My desire to fly goes against reality, but instead of submitting to that reality I attack and disregard it by jumping from the window. If I disregard it with reference to the laws of physics, I attack it with regard to my own body. In this sense the realities in and through which the action takes place are violated in decisive ways - my body in particular - in hope of achieving B. Madness: an extreme and systematic violation of reality in the intention of achieving an impossible result.

And yet common sense tells us that many things are impossible which are later accomplished. Was flight impos-

sible in 1900? Black-white equality in the American South in 1950? I select a technical and a socio-political example which were both susceptible to change over time. Yesterday's impossibility becomes tomorrow's common sense; space travel, for example, or women's equality with men. This implies that special caution is necessary when talking about madness. Moreover, systematic analysis of social structures and tendencies may reveal certain possibilities which are roundly denied by established ideologies: social movements sometimes suddenly and momentarily extend the field of possibilities, as when Russian workers created the Soviets in 1905 <6>.

Thus the intention for social change - even for revolutionary change - cannot be a priori characterised as mad any more than can the impulse to invent what has not yet been invented. Defenders of the status quo may see a given project as mad because of interests which understandably limit their sense of what is possible. Here it is important to note not that 'madness' is and can be falsely applied - true of any normative term - but that it is used, and with a precise but incorrectly applied meaning: to attempt what is plainly contrary to possibility.

A third meaning of 'madness' needs to be considered: systematic and radical estrangement from oneself. Psychopathic mass murderers are often regarded as mad not only because they kill but also because they do so without normal affect. 'Cold-blooded murder': the assumption is of an appropriate complex of motivations and feelings which this killer utterly lacks. We see him as having thus ruptured with his own moral sensibilities and human fellow-feeling. He does not feel or react as one is supposed to, meaning in turn that he is not only abnormal but quite probably radically separated from himself. Acts of extreme cruelty which spread beyond specific acts of self-defence or revenge can be easily seen to express this divorce between the person's actions and underlying feelings.

Rather than exploring the various problematic aspects of this meaning of 'madness', it will be useful to note that, like the others, it rests on demonstrable standards of reality and normality and makes no sense without them. Like the others, it may be arguable - but those who employ it as a normative concept would willingly shoulder this burden of argument.

IV

I have so far been discussing 'madness' as we usually use it - to describe individuals. In what ways, and with what qualifications, can it be applied to the social world? Certainly if we focus on a given ruler we can assess his or her mental state and describe his or her acts using the definitions just developed: Hitler's 'Final Solution' was mad. To the extent that an individual decides policy, we might conclude that any and all analysis of individual behaviour can be used. Was Hitler's perception deranged? His intention, or his affect? How are these reflected in Nazi policy?

But if we make no distinction between individual and social, we would ignore the specifically societal character and determinants of the acts of even the most powerful dictator. Hitler matters not because he was an individual but as the one who managed to become absolute ruler of that specific society. He became absolute dictator in the most intimate relation with those specific social and historical conditions - his character expressing and focusing that situation, right down to and including his insanity. Moreover, his individual qualities themselves were produced in and through a specific history of a specific social class in a specific society. Above all, they became reflected in policy only as Hitler took power: insofar as he led the movement that became the dominant political force in Germany.

The point is that every step and layer of the madness that became the 'Final Solution', even the most individual, was social. This suggests that the above meanings of 'madness' cannot simply be grafted from individual to social

process without prior reflection on their suitability. Hitler may have been mad in all the senses described above: our question turns on the madness of the social policy and collective behaviour he directed.

This difference between the individual and the societal becomes clear as soon as we ask how political behavior can be mad in the third sense used above, as systematic and radical estrangement from self: derangement of affect. What is the 'self' of a society from which it would become estrange in acting madly? Certainly it might be possible to describe a 'sane society' or a 'sick society' in terms of specific internal relations and standards of health. But such an exercise would require a totally new definition of categories rather than a translation of the individual into the social. Such a redefinition would mark the considerable difference, pace Plato, between character structure and social structure <7>.

Political behaviour is not individual behaviour 'writ large' - the body politic is a rather different animal than the individual human being. The affective character that is inextricable from relations between individuals, for example, has a wholly different place, if any, in collective relations these individuals direct or participate in.

Kennedy and Khrushchev confronted each other in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 not as individuals but as leaders of nations. That the difference was decisive can be gathered from a reading of Robert Kennedy's memoir on the near-catastrophe <8>. It was a political conflict which, however it may have used or been reinforced by individual feelings, was conducted in political terms, according to a political logic, for political ends. Kennedy and Khrushchev acted not as private individuals might - concerned above all, for example, about their children - but as rulers of nations, concerned about power. For example, the political consequences of being seen to be backing down were central in Kennedy's calculations because of his self-conscious role as president of the country that saw itself as the most powerful in the world. As such, an abstraction as remarkably distinct from the fate of the world's people - or of his own children - as 'national interest' largely controlled Kennedy's behaviour in the conflict. However we interpret this psychologically, we must clearly put its peculiarly political character at the centre of our interpretation.

Thus the example suggests that the third area of our definition of individual madness, estrangement from self, offers serious resistance to being applied to political behaviour. But the other two meanings can be more readily applied. When its rulers organise a society against false enemies, when they believe, and propagate the view that, the society is being mortally threatened although it is not, when they organise to combat the threat - then we may speak of madness as surely as when an individual does the same. For systematic misperception is involved.

But how can we say that the society perceives or misperceives? Especially when a society is fragmented into warring classes or groups? Here the shift from individual to societal 'madness' may complicate our efforts but not cancel them. In speaking of a ruler we may say, simply, that he sees what is not there and does not see what is there. Rulers' perceptions of themselves and their situation may be so deranged as to merit the term 'madness'.

In certain situations, however, this deranged perception is not theirs alone, but rather becomes collective madness. I would cite as an example, insofar as it has been believed, the Communist 'threat' to the United States, or Soviet society's organisation against Trotsky's 'threat' to the Bolshevik Revolution, or (taking a less controversial example) the Jewish 'threat' to Germany. In each case - however different from each other - the character and extent of a societal derangement was so extreme as to at least arguably warrant the description of 'madness'. What makes it a matter of a specifically societal derangement is, not only the obvious fact that it was shared by vast numbers of people, but that this sharing, beyond being an imposition by a powerful ruler or dominant class, had deep

social roots. The 'Final Solution' became policy as a response to what vast numbers crazily regarded as a real threat to their society. To be sure, along the road to Auschwitz there had to be manipulators and manipulated - those who consciously used paranoid antisemitism without sharing it for reasons of power, as well as those who acted according to it because they saw no alternative. But the manipulations of, and obedience to, authority were not the secret of the Nazi madness but only its inevitable corollary. Bullying and manipulation, submission and obedience may have a place in any social movement, but they never explain it.

But isn't everything we have been saying served adequately by the term 'ideology'? Nazism was an ideology - a class-centered vision of social reality which was offered, and accepted, beyond the German lower middle class because it made sense of the experience of vast numbers of people and gave them a programme of action. As such it had to distort aspects of reality, just as it had to render aspects of it adequately. Nazism, anti-Communism, Stalinism - in speaking of madness aren't I really describing ideologies which in these key respects are similar to all other ideologies?

Where I quarrel with such analysis is in emphasising that some ideologies must be seen as mad. A central question, in spite of all relativism, is how far ideology corresponds to reality. At what point do we call it deranged? Granted all ideologies distort in service of specific social classes; granted also that Marxism set itself up at the scientific critique of ideology but in power has become just another ideology. The original Marxian distinction between a more-or-less distorted and a more-or-less accurate vision of social reality is decisive. The psychological spectrum, stretching from (impossible) complete sanity to (impossible) complete madness, requires only slight alteration to become as relevant to the discussion of societies as of individuals. The rulers of any society may impose a more-or-less distorted vision of reality on all other social-groups and classes, but at a certain point along the continuum ideological distortion can become so severe as to fundamentally lose touch with reality. The image of the Jew in Nazi ideology is an example. Quantity becomes quality: the degree of wilful yet believed obfuscation is so great as to merit description as 'madness'. Even in class societies, then, ones governed by grotesque lies and absurdities, a point may be reached when the ruling vision crosses a line, the line of madness.

To explain Auschwitz means looking at those who believed that the Jews were menacing German society, and humanity, and were a threat that could only be eliminated by extermination. A 'misperception' on this scale, as I have said, stems from an intention: the various stresses and traumas of their experience were shaped by the Nazis and their supporters into a deranged vision which placed the evil Jew at its centre and called for action. The Nazis who so believed ruptured with the reality before them to create instead a fantasy-universe which 'explained' their problems and directed them towards a 'solution'. That it was evil, that it was barbaric and ultimately self-destructive, did not deter (and perhaps attracted) those who chose it. It motivated and united them, gave them moments of victory and indeed mastery, successfully propelling them far from their original pain and stress. Since they were able to reshape the world around them according to their mad vision, we might say that their madness 'worked' - the mental rupture led to an actual physical rupture in which the menacing subhuman parasites were progressively deprived of human rights and human treatment, and then were exterminated.

V

I have differentiated derangement of perception from that of intention, but the 'Final Solution' certainly crosses the line. In perceiving, then treating, people as people-who-are-not-human, the Nazis clearly acted contrary to reality.

Yet they succeeded whenever they exterminated a Jew, insofar as they did remake reality according to their mad fantasy. Nevertheless, testimony of survivors indicates that they failed, utterly. Not only did many of these people retain their sense of humanity while in the camps, as was demonstrated in acts of solidarity, compassion, cunning and outright resistance, most dramatically in the successful destruction of Treblinka. But afterwards, even those who felt themselves nearly reduced to subhumans by the Nazis but survived, returned: to reconstitute their sense of humanity, to testify, to remember, to remind us. Those who later demonstrated - or whose children demonstrated - against wars they saw as inhumane testified to a resilience of human fellow-feeling and moral sense which will forever mock the Nazis' effort to redefine their reality as human beings. Indeed, the only way the Nazis were successful in remaking reality according to fantasy was by committing genocide.

I originally spoke of the madness of intention in relation to an individual trying to do the impossible. We are dealing with action, the category where analyses of individuals have easiest societal application. As with the individual, so with social policy: trying to do what cannot be done is mad. I have emphasised that it must be clearly differentiated from trying to do what common sense says is impossible, for common sense always sets its boundaries in keeping with the prevailing social structures and their accompanying universe of discourse. But the criterion remains valid nevertheless: it is not madness to seek to transform society in keeping with its possibilities and tendencies, according to its demonstrable capacities. It was not madness to attempt to enslave another people when the differences of power and of culture were so great as to render this possible. It is madness to seek to realise a vision which has no basis in fact, actual tendencies, human relations, or human capacity.

And so we may judge the Nazi vision: the Reich sought to subjugate other 'Aryans', destroy the national identity of 'non-Aryans' like Slavs or others judged 'inferior', and exterminated the 'subhumans'. Even if extermination could be carried out - and it was the most successful of all the Nazi policies - the rest of the vision could not. Indeed, even without the Normandy invasion, the Soviet Union alone would have eventually destroyed Nazi Germany.

It is not mad to attempt a brutal or benevolent social policy whose success is unlikely, nor to attempt an action in order to test its possibility. The madness, rather, lies in going against reality, wilfully and obdurately, when it is quite clear that success is impossible. Great destruction is a likely corollary in such cases, because those bent on changing what is unchangeable easily seek to coerce it if they have the means. In The Dialectics of Disaster I have explored the dynamic whereby impotence, in power, can lead to genocide. Societal mass murder, in our century, has been rooted in ruptures with reality in which the project of transformation can only be achieved through violence. Human reality may be recalcitrant, even to those with political and military power, but human beings can be forced: threatened, beaten into submission, destroyed if they refuse. Violence is indeed the only way of reshaping what resists. Thus was 'socialism' created by Stalin; thus was an 'independent non-Communist South Vietnam' pursued by the United States after its unattainability became clear in late 1964. In each case reality was madly assaulted by those with power to do so, violently made over to resemble the guiding vision. In each case a grotesque mutant was created, and at frightful human cost.

VI

I have tried to develop a working notion of 'madness' as a rupture with reality and to indicate how it might be useful for understanding catastrophic events like the Holocaust. A number of unresolved questions remain, above all regarding

the kinds of societal processes that can produce mad social behaviour. If a society is not an individual 'writ large', how does it become deranged to the point of producing the kinds of acts we have indicated? And how is this derangement different from the 'normal' social conflicts and class struggles that make up so much of history?

In The Dialectics of Disaster I have explored the dynamics of uneven historical development within and between societies in search of an answer. For now, however, a more immediate question involves staying on the terrain of the concept and its application: how to employ the meanings of 'madness' described above to clarify current political behaviour? It may be possible to reflect fruitfully on the past, but can the understanding help us to clarify the far more volatile and difficult world in which we ourselves are immersed? Above all, I have in mind the impending nuclear holocaust. How are we to regard the casual intuition that the current process of nuclear escalation is mad?

Certainly the notion of radical misinterpretation can be our starting point. Do the nuclear planners, we may ask, not see what is there and see what is not there? The question may be posed from two directions - one regarding their perception of the Soviet Union, its behaviour and its intentions; the other concerning how they perceive danger and security vis-à-vis the spread of nuclear weapons. The point is not to fall into labelling a given policy 'mad' just because it is unpalatable, but to use the notion rigorously as a significant evaluation. It is possible that social policies are mad; it is possible that this policy is mad. The task is to evaluate the policy of nuclear escalation to determine whether it is indeed a rupture with reality of the sort we have been describing.

Secondly, we may ask whether it displays a madness of intention: trying obdurately to achieve what is demonstrably impossible, assaulting reality in doing so. Here our terrain would be the supposed quest for security involved in increasing and diversifying nuclear arsenals: 'peace through strength'. Does this in fact only increase the general insecurity? Is this not self-evident to all but those who insist on building more weapons? Again, the point is not whether the policy is mistaken, but rather whether it systematically flouts what is possible, and falsely redefines reality in doing so. To destroy a village 'in order to save it', as was done during the Tet offensive in 1968 (and indeed describes much of American conduct during the war in Vietnam), is more than a violation of sense. It is a madness of intention, trying to do the impossible, and then resorting to destruction.



We cannot yet talk about the nuclear planners actually destroying the world in order to achieve its security, because they have not done so yet. Still, we must not be mystified by the peculiar character of nuclear destruction: it is all prepared, waiting to happen, the missiles ready to be launched. If a mistake sets off the holocaust it will not only, or even primarily, be the fault of the mistaken machinery or persons, but of the entire process which lies waiting at this very moment. If the world's destruction depends on a computer error, we are justified in exploring whether the human process leading to this state of affairs was mad. In other words, then (and only then, alas, after the fact) will the intuition about the systematic rupture with reality be proven incontrovertibly true. The question now is, how do we regard the system that so endangers us? How do we analyze this derangement of intention now, before the catastrophe? In short, the intention to achieve security by expanding nuclear arsenals, can and must be evaluated today, before the holocaust.

Finally, I have left aside the question of estrangement of self as offering too many difficulties for societal analysis. Trying to assess the possible madness of nuclear war would force us to reconsider this. It may well be that the structure and governing logic of states are drastically different from the structure and governing logic of individuals, and that this makes it extremely difficult to diagnose a political rupture with normal human fellow-feeling. After all, states have quite 'normally' engaged in wars, and virtually all have habituated their young men to fight and die and their people to support their killing. But adequately describing nuclear policy brings a new perspective to such questions.

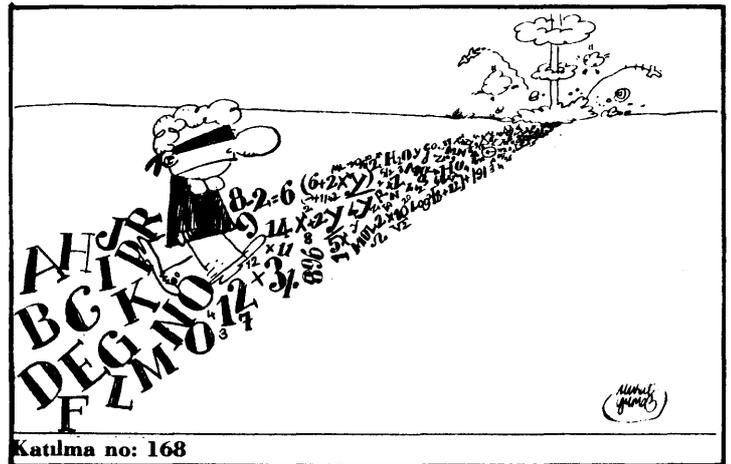
Ultimately the purpose of a society is to further the well-being of its people. I say 'ultimately', understanding that most societies have been marked by class and other social struggles - because they have also been characterised by class and other social consensus. When the consensus has totally broken down - and the rulers decide to survive by permanently suppressing a major part of the population - the society is ripe for revolution. Most often a state apparatus has contradictory functions - it serves all of its people in some fashion even while guaranteeing the exploitation of some by others. The point is that even slaves must be fed and kept alive at a human level adequate to their functioning. The slaveowners who declare all-out war on their slaves are destroying their own conditions of survival. Mad? Our earlier reservations about the psychological origins of the concept no longer apply because we are dealing with a self-rupture which is far more basic. They would be made in a structural sense similar to the estrangement from self discussed earlier. Similar, yet more profoundly so: actions which attack one's own survival itself are the most radical rupture with one's own reality.

Of course, to return to the individual level, suicide is not necessarily mad, even if it is the most extreme possible rupture with self. Great pain or suffering or a loss of all purpose can lead one to choose death over life, just as death in struggle may rationally be preferable to a life of subjection. The Warsaw Ghetto uprising, although suicidal, asserted for all time the dignity of the fighters and their refusal to die passively. It was a sane act. Their suicidal struggle was self-consciously seen as a testimony: it implied a world that would continue beyond this battle and even the Nazis, and it spoke to that world.

Are those who declare 'better dead than Red' threatening the same courageous battle to the death? Not at all. First, nuclear policy-makers are not only choosing their own death, but that of tens of millions of others. Certainly the Warsaw Ghetto fighters brought German retribution down upon the entire ghetto, but this happened in the process of the Nazi attack on the resistance. The primary targets of nuclear war are civilian population centres themselves, because they are population centres. Thus he who

would save Americans from an alleged Communist victory would 'save them' by having them killed. Moreover, the threat itself is an absurdity. The belief in the Communist or Soviet threat is one of those madneses of perception which has operated, and continues to be revived, against all evidence, by those whose perception is systematically deranged. But above all, the nuclear planners are mad because nuclear war would destroy the world as we know it. Even assuming for a moment that their cause were real, the war they plan on its behalf would leave no one alive to struggle for a better social system than the one they would combat.

Are there no conditions under which it would make sense to risk destroying all human life for an end superior to life itself? Or is it mad to risk destroying all life? We can find our direction of answering this by asking how we would respond if the Soviet Union were indeed Nazi Germany and threatened the rest of the world with nuclear weapons unless it surrendered. This is the deranged perception of some anti-Communists, notably the Committee on the Present Danger; let us suppose it were true. Even then, it would be mad to deprive tens of millions of people who had made no such decision, as well as virtually all of humankind, present and future, of the chance of struggling against and overthrowing such a monster. Yes, surrender under such conditions would not only be the best course, it would be the only sane course. Even the mass suicide at menaced Masada left Jewish communities intact elsewhere: otherwise no one would recall it today. It would then have had no meaning at all. Destroying the outside world as well as those locked in however righteous a struggle against an



evil system would render their own struggle absurd. A continuing existence is a presupposition of every struggle, just as the continuing existence of an outside world is a presupposition of every individual suicide.

In short, omnicide - the destruction of everything - is mad in a way that individual or group suicide is not. It is mad without regard to its reason, mad because it attacks the basis of all life, of all value, all meaning. To risk this - virtually unimaginable - total death is totally different than risking death amidst an abiding world. Today, 'better dead than Red' points us towards the ultimate rupture with reality, the nuclear planners' flirtation with destroying the human adventure as such. Or rather, we must say that they have already decided to do so - under such-and-such determinate conditions.

I have willy-nilly been characterising nuclearism while still in the process of asking whether our categories could be useful in describing it. The reason lies in the nature of omnicide itself - it is unlike any evil humans have yet encountered in that it promises destruction without appeal, the world at an end. It alone threatens the premise of continuing human existence implied by other, more partial dis-

asters, indeed, by suicide itself. Madness, in all of its forms, suggests a partial but significant and systematic rupture with reality. How, then, to characterise the preparation for total and ultimate rupture, the destruction of reality *per se*? We can understand the relevance of the category as we have done, only by briefly exploring the situation itself.

The rigorous use of 'madness' is deeply disturbing, of course, which is perhaps one reason why it has been so conspicuously avoided in a century so rife with madness. The functionalist bias of most systematic thought assumes that there is a reason of every societal act, a more-or-less rational intention behind political action. It offends the intellect to suggest that there is no reason behind a major policy - or that indeed its reason is profoundly and systematically irrational. 'Madness' is even more unsettling in suggesting that we may be living amidst a profound and destructive irrationality, one which lies beyond the traditionally understood irrationalities of history - those of mad individual leaders, for example, or of irrational class societies in a state of crisis. Moreover, our conventional political sense is deeply troubled by ascriptions of such madness: what political counter-measures will move the crazy leaders of mad societies? To describe a major social policy as 'mad' and to suggest that it is rooted in fundamental societal dynamics, is to rule out the hope of simple reforms improving the situation, of leaders seeing the light.

Above all, if these implications were not disturbing enough, much of this essay, and the study where these reflections began, points to our society, today, in the United States and the West. If it can be seriously discussed whether the Vietnam War was mad, whether nuclear escala-

tion is mad, then all of the above problems may apply to us, our social structures, our daily life. Not that they do not or have not applied elsewhere - in the Soviet Union for example, or in the genocidal transformation of Kampuchea - but we who study and think and act here have responsibility for understanding the situation we would influence. Did most Germans between 1933 and 1945 see the sickness of their society, or were some of them too deeply immersed to even question it, others deluded by false hopes? What assumptions did they share with those who ruled them, and with the genocidal policies they themselves carried out? Can the same question be asked, today, by ourselves, of ourselves? Can we afford to wait until the blinding flash to acknowledge that they are mad?

Such are some of the challenges of pursuing, rather than abandoning, a term like 'mad' to describe events such as the 'Final Solution'. Daunting to the intellect, certainly, and to the will as well. But too much is at stake to ignore the challenge.

- 1 London, 1983
- 2 Eichmann in Jerusalem, New York, 1965
- 3 The Cunning of History, New York, 1978
- 4 p. 2
- 5 See Eberhard Jackel, Hitler's Weltanschauung: A Blueprint for Power, Middletown, Conn., 1972
- 6 See Jean-Paul Sartre's interview with Daniel Cohn-Bendit on the events of May 1968, in The French Student Revolt, B. Brewster (trans.), New York, 1968
- 7 See Plato, The Republic, F.M. Cornford (trans.), London, 1941
- 8 Robert Kennedy, Thirteen Days: A Memoir of The Cuban Missile Crisis, New York, 1969
- 9 Which is Stanley Milgram's error in the famous experiments described in Obedience to Authority, New York, 1974

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