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A POLITICS OF BOUNDLESSNESS

by

FERNANDO ORELLANA GARZA

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

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Dedication

A Politics of Boundlessness

by

Fernando Orellana Garza

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

A Politics of Boundlessness

by

Fernando Orellana Garza

Advisor: John Wallach

Spirituality has nothing to do with politics. Nonetheless, there is a functional relationship between them. Although spirituality supposes a disposition against boundaries – of experience and consciousness – and politics appears to involve the definition of limits insofar as they enable political action and meaning, these two distinct dimensions of human existence are not in opposition to each other. Politics here can be characterized as a kind of vectorization: the inscription of a gesture – as a force with magnitude and direction – into an intelligible (political) matrix. When we talk about politicization, we are concerned with the investigation of political meaning: how is it that something makes sense – or becomes meaningful – from a political perspective and within the political domain. In other words, for the political to arise, it must be forcibly cast: made to *mean* politically. A spiritual sensibility – oriented towards an expansive, inclusive consciousness which is necessarily apolitical – brings to bear on the political on account of its experiential effects. Yoga, in all its politically multivalent character, is approached as a science of experiential transformation: ultimately a technology of self-annihilation. The concern is to elaborate on a multidimensional perspective which casts yoga's radical political potential by politicizing boundlessness.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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*To my family, friends and comrades.*

*In struggle, love and friendship, I used to think the point was to be bound together.*

*Now it seems the whole thing is about being boundless together*

*— in the willingness of dissolution.*

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Intro

Spirituality

Politics

Spirituality has nothing to do with politics. Nonetheless, there is a functional relationship between them. A spiritual process is about enhancing our perception. It is an orientation towards an expansive consciousness: a state of being inclusive of all dimensions of life. In this sense, it is about bringing that which is beyond the physical – beyond our five senses – into our level of experience. For this purpose, yoga was developed not as a religion but as a method: a science of consciousness with its own technology for experiential transformation. The yogic system developed historically as a part of a larger cultural tradition in South Asia and the Indian subcontinent. As such, it designates a specific set of practices grounded in a certain socio-cultural context. However, even within yoga's own account of itself, whatever allows a person to reach higher states of awareness is yoga. This is the point of a spiritual process.

Spirituality and politics are two distinct dimensions of existence. Spirituality doesn't have anything to do with politics simply because it is apolitical. We are not dealing here with the standard ideological operation of disavowal that characterizes *any* gesture that attempts to assert itself as apolitical. Spirituality is apolitical because it is an empty place. To put it somewhat schematically: it cannot be filled by any positive content. The (dis)position of a 'seeker' is that of

*I do not know.* The yogic tradition is identified with ignorance, not with knowledge; since in the recognition of ignorance the possibility of seeking and knowing arises. If one is already identified with whatever knowledge, it will preclude one from experiencing life. In other words, yoga solicits a longing for certainty that nonetheless refrains from making any conclusions about the world. It is a position of radical doubt, but not of suspicion – if suspicion already carries investment in a conclusion. As an orientation towards clarity of perception, it supposes that any petty claim or preference – like or dislike – will color, distort and constrain the experience of life. This is why someone ‘on the spiritual path’ will avoid making judgements about the world by striving to maintain a certain openness of experience.

In contrast, politics appears to involve the definition of limits insofar as these enable political action. Political positions are established by drawing discriminate boundaries, which render political forces legible as such. Politics can be characterized as a complex game of power differentials, in which things forcibly appear as interacting vectors with distinct directions. The political is its own (multidimensional) domain, as is spirituality. Here, their relationship is like two axes on a multidimensional space.

Perhaps we can imagine the dimension of spirituality as it would correspond to an axis of length, and politics as an axis of depth. To carry this further in an illustrative exercise, place your hands in front of you. Point your index fingers towards each other and make the tips touch. Then move one finger away from you while maintain the appearance that they are touching. From your vantage point, if you took a one-dimensional snapshot, strictly speaking the fingers would be touching. Now, if you added more spatial dimensions and you shifted the perspective, you could see that the tips are not in physical contact with each other. However, the fact remains that from a specific perspective they appear to be touching and in a very real sense they are. The

point is that the fact that they appear to be touching already makes this appearance functional. *How?* It is functional in relationship to the vantage point from which the image arises. In other words, if is intelligible from a perspective which accounts for the political dimension of its appearance, then it is *politically* functional. Politics here can be characterized as a kind of vectorization: the inscription of a gesture – as a force with magnitude and direction – into an intelligible (political) matrix. When we talk about politicization, we are concerned with the investigation of political meaning: how is it that it something makes sense – or becomes meaningful – from a political perspective and within the political domain. In other words, for the political to arise, it must be forcibly cast: made to *mean* politically. On the other hand, a spiritual disposition is not only oriented towards an expansive consciousness, but also towards an experiential clarity that has no room for political or social meaning: it aims to experience the world *as it is*. This necessarily requires disregarding or suspending political meaning and judgment; nothing short of a lack of political valorization. In spite of this, spirituality and politics are not diametrically opposed: again, they simply account for different aspects of our lives. The concern here is to consider their relationship in such a way that it allows for the conscious conduct of human development towards the highest possibilities, both spiritually and politically.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unequivocally, the following arises not from a position of certainty but of seeking.

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1

yoga

geopolitical india

the biopolitical west

There once was a fish who was swimming in the ocean. Another fish came by and greeted him saying, “Hello, the water is quite nice today!”, to which the other asked perplexed, “What is water?” A spiritual process can be characterized like this: from ignorance to awareness, from unconsciousness to consciousness. It is about enhancing the level of perception and the depth of experience. Yoga developed as a method to achieve precisely this. Here, yoga is cast as a science in itself. It is a set of techniques derived from a profound understanding of the human system and the mechanics of life, directed at higher possibilities of awareness and capacity through disciplined self-mastery. It aims towards a state of expansive, inclusive consciousness: an ultimate union with the divine. This is why it is claimed that anything that expands your consciousness and helps you achieve a higher possibility within yourself is yoga.

Yoga comes from the early Indic and Vedic traditions, and historical evidence points to a heterogenous and syncretic array of practices across a large portion of South Asia. The word itself, *Yōga*, comes from Sanskrit – an ancient Indo-European language – and is most commonly understood to mean ‘union’. However, in the Sanskrit lexicon *Yōga* has a variety of meanings derived from a range of practices; like ‘yoking’ animals to their harnesses, but also unifying or yoking individual consciousness

with the divine.<sup>2</sup> (Gordon White 2012, 2) Recent scholarship points to the establishment of a relatively systematic yoga nomenclature among Hindus, Buddhists and Jains in the Indian subcontinent between 300 BC and the fifth century. (Godrej 2017, 774) This was a process replete with cross-cultural exchanges between the myriad cultures and traditions that shared that geographical space.

As far as the West is concerned, yoga first arrived on the scene starting in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In short, the dialectical dynamic between the British colonization and the project of building an independent Indian nation shaped yoga's contemporary form. According to Farah Godrej, yoga "was the combined product of the retrospective reconstruction of a so-called classical yogic tradition by modern Indian pioneers, along with key dialogical exchanges between Indians and Western interlocutors." (Godrej 2017, 775) At the time, there was a palpable global fascination with physical fitness, from calisthenics to gymnastics. This, along with India's nationalist aspirations – a concerted interest in developing the discipline and strength to reject colonial rule – helps to account for how "popular postural yoga came into being in the first half of the twentieth century as a hybridized product of colonial's India's dialogical encounter with the worldwide physical culture movement," (Singleton 2010, 81) It is notable that while the practice of *yogasanas*, or yogic postures, is well documented to have taken place as early as medieval times<sup>3</sup>, it was only relatively recently that they became such a focal point of (westernized) yogic practices.

As India's aspirations for independence grew, yoga became embroiled in the geopolitical drama. Before European colonization and India's independence, India itself was not really a thing so much as an array of principalities, kingdoms, cultures and pseudo-states. Colonial rule brought a large portion of them together under the territory of the British Raj; which consisted of modern-day India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Pakistan. The British Raj included the areas that were under direct British control, as well

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<sup>2</sup> For David Gordon White, the word *Yōga* was used to denote "a device, a recipe, a method, a strategy, a charm, an incantation, fraud, a trick, an endeavor, a combination, union, an arrangement, zeal, care, diligence, industriousness, discipline, use, application, contact, a sum total, and the work of alchemists. But this is by no means an exhaustive list. (Gordon White 2012)

<sup>3</sup> There is general agreement among scholars that it was not until the medieval development of tantric philosophy in Hinduism and Buddhism (around the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> centuries) that postural practice emerged. (Godrej 2017, 774)

as those ruled by indigenous leaders but under British tutelage or influence. It lasted from 1858 – when the century-old rule of the East India Company was transferred to the British Crown – until 1947 when it was partitioned into Pakistan and India. (Kaul 2011)

Amidst racial tensions and prejudice in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, many modernizers, Indian and Western, aimed to establish yoga's legitimacy in the global stage. Swami Vivekananda famously addressed the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893, where he offered “a rationalistic, ascetic, contemplative interpretation of yogic spirituality.” (Godrej 2017, 775) While yoga is decidedly not a religion, when western scholars came to India during its colonization they brought with them their own frames of reference to account for the mystical and spiritual practices they encountered. They were looking for texts: solid codifications of the practices, philosophies and ideas they wanted to study. When they were pressed for such artifacts, Indian Yogis and reformers – Vivekananda included – pointed to Patanjali's *Yōga-Sūtras* and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, among others. Thus, the centrality of these texts was cemented as a new transnational tradition of yoga emerged. B. K. S. Iyengar and K. Pattabhi Jois each developed innovative schools of postural practices (Iyengar and Ashtanga respectively). “The yogas disseminated by these figures [...] were linked to a putatively ancient tradition, and simultaneously represented as comporting with the rationalism of modern science and biomedicine.” (Godrej 2017, 776)

Yoga exploded in popularity during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of an Euro-American counterculture interested in ‘alternative spiritualities,’ now commonly called *New Age*. This period also saw the rise of *guru* figures in the West, like Osho and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Simultaneously, here yoga ran into the emergent global consumer capitalist culture: western practitioners began commodifying, marketing and branding their own kinds of ‘yoga.’<sup>4</sup> (Jain 2015, 43-44) At this juncture, too, we find yoga's ideological inscription into biopolitics: its deployment of a selective ‘self-discipline of

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<sup>4</sup> “The mindboggling array of yoga practices now available in the West includes aerial or flying yoga (performed on silk scarves suspended from the ceiling); acroyoga (performed in acrobatic, circus-like style); Stand-Up Paddleboard (SUP) yoga, performed on a paddleboard on open water; “rock-n-roll yoga” (set to certain kinds of music); “yogalates” (a hybrid of yoga and pilates); Anusara yoga (innovated by American yogi John Friend); “hot yoga,” or Bikram yoga (performed in a heated environment); “kundalini yoga” (ostensibly based on a version of tantra ); as well as Iyengar, Ashtanga, and Vinyasa yoga, among many others.” (Jain 2015) (Godrej 2017, 776)

wellbeing' as it supports hegemonic neoliberal regimes.

The biopolitical practices of yoga can be characterized as what Michel Foucault called 'technologies of the self': practices that "permit individuals to effect [...] operations of their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality." (Foucault 1998, 18)

Foucault's concept of biopolitics deals with emergence of the population as a political category; as well as a correlative concern to manage its optimization through processes that directly address the biological dimension of human beings. This manifests as the instantiation of self-disciplinary regimes that penetrate the 'most intimate' domains of modern life, like the body and even the soul. The medicalized form of yoga now so commonplace in the West – with its emphasis on physical fitness – is easily accommodated into such biopolitical circuits.

Foucauldian scholarship defines government as 'the conduct of conduct.' (Lemke 2012, 5) It also stresses how contemporary practices of government rely less on direct injunctions and solicitations; instead preferring the subtler method of configuring the space of possible action. This is achieved by forming subjects with a specific understanding of their relationship to themselves – and the world in general – that is conducive to the government's aims. Here, 'responsibilization' functions as a biopolitical device: the emphatic encouragement for individuals to manage their own affairs – their health, education, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions, etc. – according to the market logic of self-investment and self-optimization. Neoliberal subjects appear as 'entrepreneurs-of-the-self': an 'economized' mode of living in which the enterprise of our lives is oriented towards the maximization of profit(ability). Yoga is used as another avenue to promote the kind of self-regulation beneficial to neoliberalism. Many yoga classes in the United States are rife with the language of individual choice and responsibilization; congratulating practitioners for their healthy choices and self-care. "This is *your* time" and "Thank yourself for coming to your mat" are commonly heard phrases in yoga studios across the U.S. Not to mention the wild variety of yoga merchandise: a different kind for a different lifestyle brand – unequivocally in line with consumerist attitudes – that can serve to announce a kind spiritual-cultural capital of the self. Here, yoga

is just one more strategic way of investing in yourself: it is marketed as a stress-reductor, conducive to good health, more focus at work, an enjoyable life and so on.

Curiously enough, contemporary capitalist societies are defined by the moral injunction to enjoy and by their disposition towards happiness. Slavoj Žižek's points out that today we find happiness elevated to a supreme duty. He notes the recent rise of happiness as a scientific discipline of its own and he identifies two main branches: the sociological and the psychological cognitivist approach. The first one is based on data gathered from several surveys across cultures, economic classes, professions and so on. It purports to consider different notions of what happiness is according to varying contexts. The second more cognitivist approach aims to measure and identify the brain processes found alongside states of satisfaction and happiness. It makes occasional incursions into New Age practices like meditation, yoga and Buddhism. This combination of cognitive science and Buddhism, he argues, is here given an ethical twist: "what is offered in the guise of scientific research is a new morality that one is tempted to call *biomorality* – the true counterpart to today's biopolitics. And indeed, was it not the Dalai Lama himself who wrote: 'The purpose of life is to be happy'?<sup>5</sup>" (Žižek 2008, 45)

Potentially, the most politically devastating effect of yoga's insertion into the neoliberal project is its disarticulation (or foreclosure) of the political proper. Although, it must be noted this is not achieved *solely* through the use of yoga. In other words, neoliberal ideology is articulated through yoga – effectively though not exclusively. The point is that when people experience stress, depression, anxiety or whatever else, yoga can serve to remind them that their wellbeing is reduced to their personal choice. In this de-politicizing framework, it is not the lack of adequate public services, the racial and sexual prejudices, the ethically and spiritually

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<sup>5</sup> (Lama 1996)

bankrupt political landscape, nor the obscene economic inequality or the unconscionable business practices accelerating ecological devastation that make people sad: it is their own fault. This means your unhappiness and dissatisfaction must be addressed at the level of your own person. You can go ahead and take more yoga classes, eat more organic food, have a better exercise regiment, better friends and a better job. Any kind structural account which warrants or enables a large-scale collective response is dismissed: it is simply incompatible.

The point to be made here is that neither yoga nor spirituality *necessarily* suppose any kind of politics or political project, sensibility or disposition; *and yet*, they bring to bear on the political on account of the experiential possibilities they offer. If anything, they're politically multi-valent; but this is because of the way these different dimensions of human life are related to each other. Nonetheless, yoga is (un)comfortably and ideologically inscribed in the reprehensible political project that is neoliberalism; and a lot of what is called yoga in the West today is either distorted or dramatically mis-represented and thus under-utilized. The distortions may be a bit easier to spot: consider hip-hop and rock and roll yoga. The mis-representation and underutilization are perhaps more tragic: a technology as sophisticated as yoga is akin to a spaceship; it can take you to other planes of existence or you can go to your friend's house in a nearby neighborhood, depending on your use. The reduction of yoga to a physical fitness regimen is deplorable; as is its characterization as a method to cultivate and invest in your self. *Yoga is a technology of the self but in a very precise sense: it is a technology of self-annihilation.*

The concern here is to elaborate on yoga's political multivalence: to account for the (in)congruency of its neoliberal deployment and to articulate its anti-neoliberal potential. By establishing a clear functional relationship between politics and spirituality, and in the interest of building a world of higher spiritual and political possibilities, the idea is to venture a sketch of a contemporary politics that is not defined by the limits of the self: a politics of boundlessness.

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2

remarks

about

ideology

For Karl Marx religion was ideology par excellence. In a pseudo genealogical move, Slavoj Žižek reminds of what Hegel had to say about religion. In particular, Hegel distinguished three moments: doctrine, ritual and belief. For Žižek, it is tempting to organize notions of ideology around these three axes: 1) ideology as a complex set of ideas, 2) ideology in its material externality (Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses), 3) and "the 'spontaneous' ideology at work at the heart of social 'reality' itself." (Žižek 1992, 9) Notably, Žižek has his own reservations about this last elusive domain so he reminds us that apropos of commodity fetishism Marx never actually used the term ideology. Regardless, he proceeds to Hegel-it-up by mapping these to the Hegelian triad of In-Itself – For-Itself – In-and-For-Itself. This is premised on the repeated occurrence of the reversal of non-ideology into ideology: it is precisely when we think we have dispelled ideological traps that we become immersed in ideology.

#### 1. Ideology In-itself / Doctrine

Žižek succinctly summarizes this thus: "the immanent notion of ideology as a doctrine, a composite of ideas, beliefs, concepts and so on, destined to convince us of its 'truth', yet actually serving some unavowed particular power interest" (Žižek 1992, 10) The mode of critique of ideology here corresponds to the discernment of the unavowed bias of the discourse through its enunciation, its blanks and slips. It supposes a gap between its official public meaning and its actual intention (social interests of domination,

etc.). In the Enlightenment tradition, ideology is understood as a false notion of reality caused by pathological power interests. However, in contemporary discourse analysis “the very notion of an access to reality unbiased by any discursive devices or conjunctions with power is ideological.” (Žižek 1992, 10) In short, the belief that we can position ourselves non-ideologically is already an ideological symptom itself: the very gesture of stepping out finds you pulled right back in.

## 2. Ideology For-Itself / Ritual

What follows is the moment of externalization of ideology: the step from In-itself to For-Itself. For Žižek this is epitomized in Althusser’s ISAs (Ideological State Apparatuses). These locate the material existence of ideology in ideological practices, institutions and rituals. It accounts for the performative dimension of ideology. For example, the Church is not just an inner conviction, but a whole set of institutions and practices (baptism, confession, prayer, masses, etc.) For both Žižek and Althusser, the important point here is that such rituals are not a mere secondary externalization of the inner belief, but rather the very mechanisms that generate it. Here Althusser repeats Blaise Pascal, where he writes ‘Act as if you believe, pray, kneel down, and you shall believe, faith will arrive by itself’. The implicit logic is this: “kneel down and you shall believe that you knelt down because of your belief – that is, your following the ritual is an expression/effect of your inner belief; in short the ‘external’ ritual performatively generates its own ideological foundation.” (Žižek 2012, 12-13)

## 3. Ideology In-and-For-Itself / Belief

The next step finds this externalization ‘reflected into itself’: something strange happens where the notion of ideology disintegrates and we confront its self-limitation and self-dispersal. Ideology is no longer a homogenous mechanism whose function guarantees social reproduction. Ideology manifests itself as our spontaneous relationship to reality, as structured by a set of pre-suppositions which are also in line with certain power interests. For power to be effective, there must be some non-transparency in its effect of domination; in other words, it all works a lot better if things appear to us as part of our own subjective volition – and not as a condition of our subjection. That is to say, if we are made to observe some critical

distance that enables us to freely assume our inscription into the ideological matrix. In Žižek's own words:

“What thereby comes into sight is a third continent of ideological phenomena: neither ideology qua explicit doctrine, articulated convictions on the nature of man, society and the universe, nor ideology in its material existence (institutions, rituals and practices that give body to it), but the elusive network of implicit quasi-‘spontaneous’ presuppositions and attitudes that form an irreducible moment of the reproduction of ‘non-ideological’ (economic, legal, political, sexual ...) practices.” (Žižek 2012, 15)

Here we can make recourse to the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism: it points not to a bourgeois theory of political economy but a series of presuppositions – structured by specific political investments – that determine the actual practices of market exchange. In this ideological configuration, what really matters is not the positive content of political (or economic) propositions, but rather “*the way this content is related to the subjective position implied by its own process of enunciation.*” (Žižek 2012, 8) In this way, what is important is not necessarily the accuracy of the statement, but whether or not it is functional with regard to some relation of domination or some power interest. In a way, these are like Kant's reflective judgments, which reveal more about the subject's experienced relation to political reality, and less about this reality itself.

Here, to address our predicament of non-ideology turning into ideology, we can follow both Kant and Marx. From Kant, we can characterize a certain impasse of ideology as ‘the antinomy of critical-ideological reason’. This impasse is the recognition that every time we attempt to critique ideology from a non-ideological position, we find ourselves acknowledging that ideology is already always at work in our experience of reality; such that making recourse to an extra-ideological reality devoid of power is always an ideological move. Rather than succumbing to the post-modern gesture of renouncing extra-ideological reality for the notion of some relative discursive plurality that is never ‘reality’, we must nonetheless insist on the tension that makes the critique of ideology possible. This is the Kantian gesture transposed to our purposes: “ideology is not all; it is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance

from it, but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determined reality – the moment we yield to this temptation, we are back in ideology” (Žižek 2012, 17)

Several points are to be made in light of this. First, yoga is decidedly not an ideology (in the same vein in which it is not a religion) although it *can* be ideologically articulated. While yoga does appear to have a composite set of positive ideas and beliefs about the world and existence in general, they are deployed strategically – often times in contradictory ways – not to assert the certainty of their knowledge but to provoke a radical state of seeking. If the point is to expand awareness, then a state of confusion and uncertainty is more conducive. In the yogic perspective, ignorance is a tremendous possibility since knowledge is always constituted through limits. In short, yoga bets on the infinitude of the unknown.

Similarly, whatever rituals are performed in yoga serve a precise strategic function. The reason there is such an emphasis in the Guru-Disciple relationship in more traditional yoga is because these ‘rituals’ need to be calibrated in accordance with the current state of the disciple. The guru will ‘mix the cocktail’ for you, as it were, in a way that takes into consideration all aspects of the work being done: your capabilities, tendencies, prejudices, aversions, etc.

The third continent of ideology described by Žižek is perhaps the most useful for us here: it helps to account for yoga’s political multi-valence and ideological deployment. In this framework, the ideological articulation of yoga lies not so much in whatever positive content is being asserted through/in yoga, but in the way this articulation is functional to some power relation. In other words, what counts is the efficacy of its inscription into a political project: how much it enables or increases the force of a political vector. Consider the following example: a quick and dirty way of ‘testing’ the ideological waters is to look for the untroubled holding of contradictory claims. Perhaps some racists in the United States will characterize Mexicans as being very lazy while simultaneously accusing them of stealing jobs. The accuracy of the statements is not really relevant, since what matters is how these statements are related to the subjective position of the racists. This is to be deciphered by their mode of enunciation. What appears to be a pseudo-spontaneous configuration of the racists’ relationship to reality is traversed by a series of

pre-suppositions about Mexicans, nationality, the immigration system, the economy, the U.S. etc. Again, at this level, the factuality of the statements doesn't matter<sup>6</sup>; what matters is that their enunciation allows for the enacting of a racist politics. Yoga's position in the circuit of neoliberal governmentality works in this way.

Furthermore, this pseudo-Kantian "ideologically empty" place which enables a critique of ideology is an apt description of the requisite spiritual disposition of yoga. After all, a yogi would say something like only nothingness can hold everything, etc. (Sadhguru 2014, 4) Here, we follow Žižek's insistence that it is possible to maintain a position of clarity with which to sustain ideological critique, but this position necessarily lacks ideologic-political valence. Such a position is congruent with yoga's orientation towards a perceptual clarity un-colored by petty preferences or pre-suppositions about the world; *and yet* the experience of this position can be brought to bear on the political by re-inscribing it into a political vector. In other words, spiritually, whatever you do as a piece of life – as a piece of existence – is unequivocally not political, but it can be made to mean politically once its grounded in a perspective which (forcibly) casts its political dimension.

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<sup>6</sup> Although if whatever is being asserted is correct or accurate, so much the better for ideological effect.

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3

shiva/nothingness/yoga

samurais/death/zen

liberalism/freedom/karma

The yogic lore has its own way of accounting for the origin of yoga. About fifteen to twenty thousand years ago, a yogi appeared somewhere in what we now know as the Himalayas, specifically Mount Kailash. People were drawn to his presence because it carried a phenomenal energy. He never bothered to say his name, nor did he pay much attention to the curious onlookers that gathered around him expectantly. Whenever his intensity allowed it he would dance wildly, otherwise he would still utterly still. Because he seemed to be in such an ecstatic trance – a state beyond physical limitations – people called him a *yogi*. Later, they called him *Adiyogi*: the first yogi. As the years went by, people became disinterested in this ascetic being but there were seven people who could not tear themselves away. Driven by their fascination and longing, they begged him to share his secrets, to teach them what he knew. Without much attention he turned to them and gave them very simple preparatory exercises, which they followed intensely. He went back into a deep state of *samadhi*, a phrase which here means: he went back to dancing wildly and sitting very still in tearful ecstasy. Eighty-four years passed like this, until one day he began to notice something. These seven beings were no longer ordinary: they had made themselves into shining receptacles of knowing. He understood they were ready for him to transmit some of his stuff. As the story goes, on that day – known as *Guru Pournami* – he turned south to face them, and in doing so he became the Adiguru, the first Guru. (Sadhguru 2014, 3)

In Hinduism Shiva is represented as a god. But in the yogic culture the Adiyogi is referred to as

Shiva, which literally means “that which is not”. (Sadhguru 2014, 3) In the yogic cosmology, the source of existence – the divine itself – is nothingness. It comes from the understanding that only that which is not can be unlimited. It is both the origin and destination of existence. According to Sadhguru, yogi and mystic:

“This being, who is a yogi [Adiyogi], and that non-being [Shiva], which is the basis of the existence, are the same, because to call someone a yogi means he has experienced the existence as himself. If you have to contain the existence within you even for a moment as an experience, you have to be that nothingness. Only nothingness can hold everything. Something can never hold everything.” (Sadhguru 2014, 4)

The Adiyogi is called Shiva for the same reason we would call someone a doctor: namely because they have some depth of experience and knowledge of medical practices. Similarly, one who is in touch with the source of existence is called Shiva. This is not arbitrary, since the sound *shi* in Shiva fundamentally means power or energy. In the Indian culture, the feminine is symbolized as power/energy, or *Shakti*.<sup>7</sup> However, too much *shi* will make one unbalanced, so *va* is added as a damper to control and direct the energy to keep the balance. This *va* comes from the Sanskrit work *vama*, which means mastery. (Sadhguru 2014, 4) This is based on the science of *mantras*, which is best understood as a sound technology. In fact, the Sanskrit language is based on a certain understanding of how sound affects the human system and our environment.

In the yogic culture, the universe itself is understood to be carrying out different modes of reverberation. This is another way of saying that it’s all the same energy manifesting in different ways. The point here is that where there is a reverberation there is a sound, called *nada* in Sanskrit. *Nada Yoga*, or Yoga based on sound, stems from the recognition that there is a tremendous possibility in uttering or hearing certain sounds. A mantra, or sonic device, is a way to direct energetic forms towards states of higher awareness. Another way to think about sound is to acknowledge the spatial geometry it supposes: it is a certain configuration of energy. Here, sound is considered to be the subtlest form of physicality,

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<sup>7</sup> Curiously enough the English language found the same sound to refer to the feminine: she.

with most other physical things being electromagnetic and of a grosser quality.

In the yogic lore, Shiva is often covered in ashes. In one story he is even depicted as bleeding ashes when his limbs are cut. In the tradition, there is a kind of sacred ash called *vibhuti*, which is consecrated and used in rituals to activate certain energy centers of the human system. For this reason, it is common to find devotees of Shiva covered in *vibhuti*. (Sadhguru 2014, 10) In a way, it is not unlike the Christian tradition of Ash Wednesday, which insists on a certain awareness of the human condition and our relationship to the earth: “from dust you came and to dust you will return.” Or perhaps more commonly, like the David Bowie song, ‘ashes to ashes.’ The point is to consider how our bodies are a piece of earth that decided to stand up and run around; and that it will eventually fall back down into the earth. It makes recourse to a spiritual perspective in which this recognition makes us turn to the dimensions of our existence which are beyond the physical. But more importantly, it shows that a yogi not only embodies life but also death: the death of the limited.

This death can have a variety of meanings. In order to achieve a state of boundlessness the limits which prevent such a state must be eliminated. In Hinduism, Shiva is called *the destroyer* precisely because his function is to annihilate these boundaries. The yogic system does not talk about God, the soul or heaven. Yoga addresses the barriers that we set up for ourselves. In other words, in yoga there is no work with existence: you work only on the existence you have created yourself. It aims to take down our likes and aversions, the things we accumulate and the things we over-identify with: the things that constitute our ego. Here, a spiritual journey emerges as a conscious self-annihilation.

This disposition towards death may conjure terror, especially in the political register. But to get there perhaps we could move, like yoga did, through different terrains, cultures and

languages: from India to China and Japan, to the Zen Samurai's *bushido*, or way of the warrior. Curiously, the word *Zen* comes from the Sanskrit word *Dhyan*, which means meditation and which Patanjali considers to be one of the eight limbs of yoga. Gautama the Buddha practiced and taught Dhyan. Bodhidharma, a Buddhist priest, carried Dhyan to China, where it became *Chan*. This form of mediation known as Chan kept going further down into Far East Asian countries, where it eventually became Zen. (Sadhguru 2016)

Yoga and Zen are actually not very different from each other. Zen is a form of spiritual path which has no scriptures, texts, rules or specific practices. It has nothing. In this sense it is an uncharted path. Perhaps we can characterize the way Zen is handled as comparable to an art form. Like art, it requires a certain sensibility to be appreciated and practiced. (Sadhguru, Isha 2016) Zen Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries and found its way into samurai philosophy. (Tsunetomo 2014, xxxix) According to William Scott Wilson “the warriors [...] were attracted to Zen for its lack of complicated ceremonies and discourse, and for its emphasis on self-reliance, self-discipline, and paradoxically the non-existence of the self, *muga*.” (Tsunetomo 2014, xxxix) One of the differences between Hinduism and Buddhism that is commonly touted is Buddhism's insistence on the inexistence of an unchanging permanent self, or soul. Gautama the Buddha went around talking about *anatman* – the Sanskrit word for *muga* in Japanese – which scandalized some Hindus who believed in the existence of the soul, or *atman*.

According to Zen Buddhism it is our sense of self which hinders true freedom, or *mukti/moksha* in Sanskrit.<sup>8</sup> Our self only appears to be a thing because of our attachment to the content of our limited perception, which is referred to as *maya*, or illusion in Sanskrit. Thinking

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<sup>8</sup> Which means ultimate liberation, enlightenment, etc.

of our self as a distinct identity, we separate ourselves from the world. We draw a boundary on account of which we can declare ‘this is me, this is mine.’ We are on one side while the rest of the world sits on the other. (Tsunetomo 2014, xl)

The word samurai comes from *saburau*, which means ‘to serve.’ In their view, “the self, intent on preserving its physical, psychological, or spiritual integrity, is an impediment to any unadulterated thought or action.” (Tsunetomo 2014, xl) In other words, the self would get in the way of them serving others and doing whatever was needed. As warriors, they were wary of the ego inserting itself on a crucial moment in the battlefield, where they had to act with immediacy and clarity. For samurais, Buddhism carried the good news that the self did not really exist, or more precisely, that it had no reality of its own. It is an illusion fed by memory, karma, the five senses, culture etc.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century a samurai named Yamamoto Tsunetomo wrote a series of texts known as the *Hagakure* illustrating the way of the warrior, or *bushido*, described as ‘the way of death.’ The opening line of the *Hagakure* is: “The way of the samurai is found in death.” To suggest that the samurai culture displays a morbid fascination with death here would miss the point. He does address the death of the body but he is clearly more concerned with the death of the ego. As the text goes further it claims that the ego can be killed through meditation; after which we finally become truly free. Furthermore, this is how Zen priest Yamamoto Jocho characterized the proper attitude of a warrior: “every day without fail he should consider himself as dead. There is a saying of the elders that goes, ‘Step from under the eaves and you’re a dead man. Leave the gate and the enemy is waiting.’ This is not a matter of being careful. It is to consider oneself as dead beforehand.” (Daizen Victoria 2003, 132)

According to Hillis Lory, this accounts for why Japanese soldiers in the Second World War performed their own funerals before leaving for battle. “This holds no element of the ridiculous for the Japanese. Rather, it is admired as the spirit of the true samurai who enters the battle with no thought of return.” (Daizen Victoria 2003, 106-7) For Slavoj Žižek, this voluntary and preemptive exclusion from the domain of the living turns the warrior/soldier into a sublime figure. He goes further and argues that “instead of dismissing this feature as part of fascistic militarism, one should assert it as also constitutive of a radical revolutionary position” (Žižek 2008, 170) The point to be made here is that while the liberal-democratic consensus would be inclined designate such a disposition as inherently fanatic and terroristic, there is more to be said about its political possibilities.

Žižek elaborates on this by way of Brian Singer’s film *The Usual Suspects*. In it, the character Keyser Soeze returns home to find his wife and daughter held at gunpoint by a rival mob. In a wild gambit, he shoots his daughter and wife dead and declares that he will pursue his rivals mercilessly; tracking down their parents, families and friends in order to kill them all. In a situation of a forced choice he strikes at himself, at what is most important and precious to him. This, far from being an act of impotent aggression directed at himself, rather radically changes the coordinates of the situation. By cutting himself loose from the precious object by which the enemy kept him in check, he gains the space to act freely<sup>9</sup>. Here, of course, the price of freedom is terrible. Curiously enough, Žižek calls this an ‘inhuman’ position of absolute freedom. For him, his renunciation of all personal idiosyncrasies and pleasures amounts “to turn[ing] himself into a king of the ‘living dead’”. (Žižek 2008, 170-1) For Žižek, this inhuman freedom coinciding

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<sup>9</sup> “To preserve your life you must kill it. Kill it off completely, and you will be at peace for the first time.” – Zenrinkushun (Tsunetomo 2014, xi)

with an absolute subjection to a Task (Soeze's vengeance, political struggle, etc.) is perhaps what characterizes the revolutionary subject at its core.<sup>10</sup>

This violent act of self destruction – which is the condition of radical freedom – is also at the heart of yogic practices, although not necessarily in a militarized/politicized context. In liberal politics, it is meaningful to talk about self-expression. Here, the possession of a self entitles one to certain rights: one can speak and have an opinion because there is a kernel – a kind of liberal substance – that is irreducible, inviolable and which makes up the essence of our being. This liberal core is what constitutes both the justification and limit of government: the separation of private vs public, of what is personal/intimate and thus beyond the reach of politics vs what is properly political. Historically, this liberal self comes from the secularization of the judeo-christian notion of a soul. This self is accorded a certain dignity and thus its expressions carry a certain validity. In contrast, yoga approaches these expressions much differently. They are the result of an accumulation of impressions: the result of a certain memory that has been recorded on account of our actions. In short, in a liberal framework, freedom means the freedom to express these aspects of your self and government means the delineation of appropriate spaces for different aspects of its expression. In yoga, freedom means you are free from the compulsions and tendencies that make up your self: you are no longer bound by your petty idiosyncrasies. Within the yogic cosmology, the thing that holds together this 'appearance of you' is called *karma*.

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<sup>10</sup> In a way, Žižek's illustrative choice is potent but perhaps unfortunate. Soeze's sacrifice can also be read as a hyper masculine gesture with narcissist overtones. After all, he is striking at figures which carry an undeniable feminine symbolic weight. Maybe he cares more about his reputation as a mobster and his ability to exercise certain kinds of power than his family's wellbeing, etc. However, objections notwithstanding, the point stands.

Karma is one of the most misunderstood yogic terms; possibly because it has several aspects to it and because it accounts for many different things. A commonplace explanation of karma from a western perspective would probably say something like: karma is a kind of existential law where if you perform good actions (good karma) then good things will happen to you; conversely, if you perform bad actions (bad karma) then bad things will happen to you. In short, people seem to think karma is existence's reward or punishment system.

In a way, yoga means to go beyond karma. Karma means action, or the imprint of action which remains with us. In this sense it is a kind of memory: karmic memory. Karma means memory and action at the same time: there is no memory without action, and there is no action without memory. (Sadhguru 2013)

What is important to understand here is that, according to the yogic culture, what we call 'my life' or 'myself' is a kind of energy which is configured by a certain amount of information. Contemporary yogis compare this information to a computer's 'software.' (Sadhguru 2013) The human system is programmed according to this software which determines the way our mind, emotion, body and energy function. This package of information is 'us' and we have a certain character because of the kind of data that has gone into us. This data is all the past impressions of life, which go far beyond our birth. Consider epigenetics: a branch of biology which studies how human beings' life experiences and behaviors have an impact on their DNA and are thus transmitted through generations. In the yogic perspective, the influence of the past extends all the way to the very first life form on this planet. So, it is not only our parents, our upbringing and the surrounding culture which has influenced who we are; it is also the lives our ancestors lived, all the way to single-cell organisms. This information is there on many different levels. For now, let us discuss two: *sanchita* and *prarabdha* karma. (Sadhguru 2013)

According to Sadhguru, sanchita karma is like a big old storage warehouse that contains a record of pretty much everything: all the memory from single-cell creatures and even inanimate substances from which life sprang up. This is why it is claimed that you can know the universe by looking inward and knowing yourself: because all that information is encoded into our very being, the very way our bodies are made. This is sanchita karma. Nonetheless, not all that information is ‘readily available’ for processing, as it were. The information that *is* available – called prarabdha – is dealt out according to how much can be handled in the current state, or life(time). (Sadhguru 2013)

Prarabdha karma is the information allotted for *this* life. Depending on the vibrancy of our system, life allots itself according to how much information can be processed. Too much karma can be overwhelming in certain conditions, so not all of our sanchita karma is dispensed at once. Consider how some people are already tortured by the ‘simple’ memories of 20-40 years of their current lifetime. (Sadhguru 2013)

Notably, Shiva is also known as *Pashupati* which means lord of all creatures and all animals: The Lord of Life. Nonetheless, he is not referred to as that because they are all somehow subject to his will. He is called Pashupati because he has conquered all creatures within himself. All of the ancestral pieces of life, which are constantly fighting to find expression within our being, manifesting as all of our compulsions, desires and aversions, he was able to master. In this way, every act he performs is an act of consciousness borne of an intelligence unsullied by memory: an unadulterated act. (Sadhguru 2014, 2)

The reason a bunch of sages went around saying ‘it is all *maya* (illusion)’ is because they figured that people tend to have grand ideas about themselves, when in fact things are playing out in such a way that almost everything they do is controlled by their karma and past

information: people are just the mobile effect of the tendencies they have accumulated. In other words, they are subject to their compulsions because of the impressions left by their past actions. Once the karmic structure builds beyond a certain point, in existential terms there really is no such thing as freedom: everything is conditioned by the past.<sup>11</sup> This is the difference between a conscious act –which supposes a tremendous level of involvement – and an unconscious discharge of memory. In order to move in the direction of liberation these karmic shackles need to be loosened. For someone on the spiritual path, there is no such thing as good or bad karma: it is all bondage.

Notwithstanding, karma is not to be understood as something categorically bad: it is not an enemy. After all, and curiously enough, not wanting to create or accumulate karma generates tremendous karma. If there is to be a proper enemy, perhaps it could be our unawareness of what is what. Karma is the memory of life. As such, it is the requisite for us to have bodies, existence and experience. In short, the basis of physical existence is karma. Our bodies can assemble themselves properly because they remember how to do it. We can walk, run, think and do all sorts of things because of karma. If you remove all your karma you will ‘shed’ your body. Here, karma can be likened to glue: it is that which is binding us together, cementing our bodies. The problem is not karma. Rather, the problem arises when we become entangled and enmeshed in it: when we become creatures of habit hopelessly locked into the behavioral patterns we glorify as our selves. (Sadhguru 2013)

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<sup>11</sup> “Someone who does absolutely nothing is free from karmic memory and karmic cycles. As long as you’re identified with your karmic memory, the past repeats itself.” (Sadhguru 2017)

How, then, to loosen karma when it starts to weigh as chains? There are many ways, some crude and gross and others more sophisticated and subtler.<sup>12</sup> Yoga mostly offers the latter. At the same time, it has a curious way of answering the question: “are there activities that are more conducive than others on the path to liberation?” According to Sadhguru, no activity at all would be best, actually. If karma means action, then it stands to reason that a complete lack of action would have some meaningful impact on the human system. Bear in mind that this means no movement in the body, no movement in the mind. It refers to a state of absolute stillness, which is wildly rare. Not many people are capable of that. Most are in a mental and physical condition that demands activity. If you try simply sitting still for ten minutes, you will see all sorts of things will spring up within you, compelling you to perform some action or another, to pursue a thought or nourish an emotion, etc. So, if action must happen, it can be conducted in such a way that it doesn’t generate (much) karma.

Karma grows from self-gratification and self-importance. Volition of this kind generates karma. So, the kind of activity you do actually doesn’t matter, nor does the quantity. Unconscious action generates karma: Over-identification with your self arises out of unawareness and unconsciousness. This is why what matters here is whether or not what you do is functional to your sense of self: whether or not what you do something means something to you by way of your identification with it. Conversely, performing something that means absolutely nothing to you with total involvement will break the karmic structure. This is why gurus emphasize the ethics of ‘offering oneself’:

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<sup>12</sup> A simple way would be to do it physically. If your karma is to wake up at 7am and drink a cup of coffee, you could set an alarm for 5am and take a cold shower instead of having that coffee. The old karmic process will start to break because you are consciously doing something else. Another aspect of this is that whatever you dislike, if you have to do it you have to do it consciously. Maybe something that you like you can experience on ‘auto-pilot,’ unconsciously and without much involvement.

“Doing activity as an offering is a simple way of turning off the karmic recorder within you. As long as you have the need to do something and you identify with your activity, the karmic recorder records this activity for you, and its consequences will multiply. By contrast, if you yourself do not have the need to do anything, but you do something because it is needed by someone else or something else, then the activity will not result in karmic bondage.” (Sadhguru 2017)

This is not an endorsement of indifference. Rather, it solicits involvement without entanglement. How? You abandon yourself. One way to do it would be to hold everything precious: everything except yourself. This does not mean abandoning responsibility. It means abandoning your own opinions, philosophies and ideas: your egoistic approach to life. There is a story about a Zen Master named Huitti. Apparently, he never actually taught Zen to anyone, but he was still known as a Master. He used to carry around a big old bag with many things, some of which were sweets and candy. In the towns he would visit as he traveled, children would gather around him. He would distribute the sweets and leave. That’s it. All sorts of people came to him for teachings but he just laughed and walked away. Eventually, another Zen Master, Nbanin, came to meet Huitti. He was skeptical of Huitti and wanted to know if he was really in Zen or not. He asked him: “What is Zen?” Huitti immediately dropped his sack and stood upright. Then Nbanin interrogated him again: “What is the goal of Zen?” Huitti picked the sack back up and walked away. According to Sadhguru, this is what yoga and every other spiritual path is about. “When you want to attain to yoga or Zen or whatever you call it, you have to drop your load, discard everything that is on the way, remain free, and stand up straight. [...] What is the goal of yoga? Then, take up the whole load once again! But now it is no more a load; it does not feel like a load because you know the whole thing is there, but is not really there.” (Sadhguru, Isha 2016)

Here one does not abandon ‘reality’ but simply achieves a greater sense of awareness about it.

The point is not that having a self, or (perhaps more precisely) an ego, is always already reprehensible. Egos are actually very useful things. In a sense, they are the basis for action in the world. Egos are rather like clothes we put on. If you want to do a specific kind of action, then you wear the appropriate clothes. You do not wear the same thing to work as you would to a wedding, and you certainly do not think of your clothes as yourself.<sup>13</sup> But when the action is over you have no issue taking them off. The problem arises when you become overidentified with your clothes and then you become trapped in them. Similarly, for certain actions in the world you can use certain kinds of egos: if you want to build a bridge you can be an engineer, if you want to compose poetry you can be a poet, if you want to build a world with higher political and spiritual possibilities you can be a kind of spiritually driven revolutionary communist, and so on. When action is needed, you act in the most sensible way possible according to your intelligence. When action is not required, you are able to simply be. Like Huitti, you are able to drop your self and pick it back up as needed.

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<sup>13</sup> Unless, of course, you really are invested in the whole consumerist culture thing.

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4

habits

terror

maps

Breaking the chains of karmic habits, or at the very least loosening them up, is an essential aspect of yoga. In unawareness, whatever you may choose to do is bound by the past: your actions are a re-play of impressions within yourself gathered through unconscious action. If you devote yourself to an activity with a certain level of intensity some change may happen to you because of the level of involvement. But if you're after freedom, if you want to consciously decide how to be, how to act, then the level of involvement is of a different nature. It requires a committed atmosphere and an unyielding willingness. Even though you may find certain yogis pursuing certain rituals with clocklike precision in a daily fashion, yoga is resolutely against habits.

If you have ever tried breaking a habit, then you know how difficult it can be. If you're used to doing things a certain way and suddenly you force yourself to act otherwise, it can be a jarring experience. However, it is precisely this discomfort which may allow you to go through it consciously; simply because it commands your attention. When you impose a new regimen upon yourself, it may not appear without a terroristic dimension. Whether it is depriving yourself of food before noon or doing more pushups than you can do comfortably, trying to experience your

annoying roommate as a part of you or getting up before dawn, it rarely happens without some initial friction: there's often a kernel of resistance that experiences the whole thing as a kind of unwarranted totalitarian imposition. After all, all these things within yourself *want* to find expression and you're deliberately preventing that. Now imagine changing a habit at the societal level.

In the political arena societal habits have added layers of complexity. They refer not only to the customs or 'rules' which designate of what is proper, polite, rude, etc., but also *how* we are to relate to these rules depending on the context; that is to say, there is another level of rules which implicitly conducts and regulates their application. In Žižek's words:

“Every legal order (or every order of explicit normativity) has to rely on a complex “reflexive” network of informal rules which tells us how we are to relate to the explicit norms, how we are to apply them: to what extent we are to take them literally, how and when are we allowed, solicited even, to disregard them, and so on - and this is the domain of habit. To know the habits of a society is to know the metarules of how to apply its explicit norms: when to use them or not to use them; when to violate them; when not to choose what is offered; when we are effectively obliged to do something, but have to pretend that we are doing it as a free choice (as in the case of potlatch).” (Žižek 2008, 171)

This is another way of saying that we know a society's habits not only by their rules but also by how they choose to enact them. Consider racial prejudice: policemen are nominally expected to avoid employing lethal force unless absolutely necessary, yet there are countless examples of them blatantly murdering black people through excessive force – who often do not even pose a threat to anyone on any level – while subduing their white counterparts non-lethally. Consider Eric Garner, a black man who died in a chokehold by white U.S. police officer Daniel

Pantaleo. Garner was being harassed on the Staten Island streets by cops who accused him of selling cigarettes illegally. After Garner pointed out the harassment the police moved to arrest him. Even though NYPD policy prohibits the use of chokeholds he was killed in a chokehold while 4 other officers restrained him. His last words were “I can’t breathe.” (Goodman 2014) In contrast, there is Dylann Roof, a white 21-year-old who killed nine black people in a church in Charleston, North Carolina, with the explicit intent of igniting a race-war. He was calmly arrested, and the police officers even bought the self-avowed white supremacist a Burger King hamburger on their way to the precinct. (The Guardian: Charleston church shooter Dylann Roof pleads guilty to state murder charges 2017)

One could point out similar examples apropos of sex and gender. There is another disturbing aspect to Žižek’s account: the case “when we are effectively obliged to do something, but have to pretend that we are doing it as a free choice.” (Žižek 2008, 171) Is this not the position in which many (potential) mothers could find themselves in? In many ways, women are still expected to give birth insofar as it is considered a constitutive element of their femininity. Furthermore, there are other wild expectations regarding how they are to raise their children and fulfill a certain role within the family structure. All while eliciting the free embrace of the position thrust upon them.

Here we also find the neoliberal bent of these societal metarules: from the student who ‘freely’ incurs debt/indenture to pay for school, to the precarious worker who ‘chooses’ to forego a stable pension plan and health insurance for his entrepreneurial free-lancing. Sometimes there’s a carrot/stick kind of deal accompanying such phenomena: the choice is between liberal-democratic McDonald’s or miserable Soviet Bread Lines<sup>TM</sup>. Or perhaps more saliently: between

a barely greener, more environmentally friendly capitalism or a techno-primitive, austere Stalinist gulag.

Against this background, the political task is to renounce and reject habits; nothing short of refusing so-called ‘realistic compromises.’ Here, for Žižek, Robespierre emerges as a revolutionary-egalitarian figure without habits:

“Such is the natural dominion of habit that we regard the most arbitrary conventions, sometimes indeed the most defective institutions, as absolute measures of truth or falsehood, justice or injustice. It does not even occur to us that most are inevitably still connected with the prejudices on which despotism fed us. We have been so long stooped under its yoke that we have some difficulty in raising ourselves to the eternal principles of reason; anything that refers to the sacred source of all law seems to us to take on an illegal character, and the very order of nature seems to us a disorder. The majestic movements of a great people, the sublime fervours of virtue often appear to our timid eyes as something like an erupting volcano or the overthrow of political society; and it is certainly not the least of the troubles bothering us, this contradiction between the weakness of our morals, the depravity of our minds, and the purity of principle and energy of character demanded by the free government to which we have dared aspire.” (Robespierre 2007, 103)

Within this egalitarian logic, to break the yoke of habit requires exercising ruthless determination and immediate enactment: ‘if all men are equal then they are to be treated as such. If blacks and women are also human, then they are to be treated as such.’ For Žižek, another illustrative case is the history of the early struggle against slavery in the U.S. embodied in the figure of radical abolitionist John Brown. In short, even prior to the Civil War, his Christian radical egalitarianism culminated in armed confrontation with the gradualism of would-be compassionate liberals. This makes him a polarizing figure in U.S. history, in which he gets characterized as either an insane terrorist or a valiant hero. Although, for Žižek, because of his unrelenting commitment, he came closest to introducing the Jacobin ‘egalitarian logic’ into the American political landscape. (Žižek 2008, 172)

Nonetheless, here we find that this consistent egalitarianism also constitutes the limitation of Jacobin politics: “Recall Marx’s fundamental insight about the “bourgeois” limitation of the logic of equality: capitalist inequalities (“exploitation”) are not the “unprincipled violations of the principle of equality,” but are absolutely inherent to the logic of equality, they are the paradoxical result of its consistent realization.” (Žižek 2008, 173) The problem is not that there is no equality in capitalism, rather, the problem is that there *is*. The crucial point of Marx’s critique of bourgeois socialists is that in capitalist exploitation there is no ‘unequal’ exchange between workers and capitalists: the exchange is fully just and equal; in principle, it involves the worker getting compensated for the full value of the commodity she is selling (labor-power). This is when – since they are well aware of this paradox/limitation – bourgeois revolutionaries try to counteract this by enacting “a direct ‘terroristic’ imposition of more and more *de facto* equality (equal salaries, equal access to health care services...), which can only be imposed through new forms of formal inequality (different sorts of preferential treatments for the underprivileged)” (Žižek 2008, 173) That is to say, since the application of equality paradoxically produces inequality, then what is left is to ‘alleviate the symptoms,’ as it were, in order to bring a kind of stability to the whole thing.

The issue is not ‘terror’ in itself. If anything, perhaps the political task before us today is the re-invention of emancipatory terror – especially in the face of imminent ecological catastrophe. For Žižek, “the problem lies elsewhere: egalitarian political “extremism” or “excessive radicalism” should always be read as a phenomenon of ideologico-political *displacement*: as an index of its opposite, of a limitation, of a refusal effectively to ‘go to the end.’” (Žižek 2008, 174) In a way, this means that these measures *address the symptom but not the cause*. In this view, the Jacobin’s recourse to ‘terror’ spelled out a hysterical ‘acting-out’ on account of their inability to disturb the fundamentals of the economic order<sup>14</sup> (bourgeois private property, etc.) Žižek goes further and suggests that perhaps the same is true of liberal ‘political correctness’: its excesses bear witness to a retreat from disturbing the effective – political, economic, etc. – causes of sexism and racism. In other words, political correctness – in all of its theatrical concern with appearances and in contrast to Jacobin terror – is a kind of lip-service that shows a lack of

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<sup>14</sup> Though not for lack of trying, certainly.

commitment to a genuine transformation.

What is the decisive moment of a revolutionary process? We must look to the ‘morning after’, the moment beyond all initial destructive explosions which clear the way. The moment where the question of how to re-organize quotidian rituals arises: how to weave a new texture of reality. More concretely, how to re-invent our sociality: from courtship and marriage to funerals, to common interactions in our neighborhoods, factories, and plazas. If we look at the Jacobins, they were at their best not in the theatrics of revolutionary terror but in their fearless utopian explosions of political imagination: from the radical self-organization of women to the creation of communal homes where the elderly could spend their last years in peace and dignity, etc. For Žižek, the harsh lesson to be drawn here is that “this excess of egalitarian democracy over and above the democratic procedure can only ‘institutionalize’ itself in the guise of its opposite, as revolutionary-democratic *terror*” (Žižek 2008, 175)

How, then, to *actually* effect a veritable emancipatory political change? How to get at the root, the cause, and not merely the symptoms? Here too, an old Marxist insight might be of help: namely, it concerns *how* we relate (politically) to the economy – and the material sphere more generally. Practically all liberals and ‘postmodern’ leftists alike share the topos, or terrain, where ‘totalitarianism’ results from the supremacy of technology and material production over socio-symbolic practice. In other words, totalitarianism arises when the principle of ‘instrumental reason,’ of the technological exploitation of nature, is extended and directed towards society – as in the case when people are treated as raw materials to be transformed into New Men.<sup>15</sup> But “what if it is the exact *opposite* which holds? What if political “terror” signals precisely that the sphere of (material) production is *denied* its autonomy and *subordinated* to political logic?” (Žižek 2008, 174) This means that political terror already supposes the foreclosure of (material) production proper: it reduces it to the terrain of political struggle. The point to be made here is that this perspective arises when one abandons “Marx’s key insight into how the political struggle is spectacle which, in order to be deciphered, has to be referred to the sphere of the economy.” (Žižek 2008, 174) In the words of political theorist Wendy Brown: “if Marxism had any analytical value for political

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<sup>15</sup> Looking at you, Soviet Union.

theory, was it not in the insistence that the problem of freedom was contained in the social relations implicitly declared ‘unpolitical’ – that is, naturalized – in liberal discourse?” (Brown 1995, 14)

Liberal politics involves the question of drawing boundaries and how they *become* meaningful. In this sense, liberalism can be thought of as a political space –a terrain or a set of coordinates– where it is meaningful to speak about the distinction of a political vs economic sphere, me vs others, and so on. This is so because the space is supported, or configured, by a set of presuppositions that render such a distinction functional to some power arrangement or circuit – in this case corresponding to capitalist liberal democracy. There may be a set of (presupposed) positive assertions about the world; be it the state, the economy, human nature (etc.) and their appropriate relationships to each other. The specificity of neoliberalism arises from the coordinates within this liberal political matrix where it is meaningful to speak about directing our conduct according to the internal rule of maximal economy: instead of flattening other spheres of human activities to a single economic axis of valorization, the ‘economic’ itself becomes multi-dimensional, recoding all other dimensions of human experience in economic terms.

As Michael Walzer suggests, liberalism is premised on the separation of human affairs into public vs private, political vs personal, state vs church, economic vs political, cultural vs social, etc. According to Walzer, liberalism is “a certain way of drawing the map of the social and political world” (Walzer 1984) and for him, a preliberal map showed a generally undifferentiated terrain; with rivers and mountains, cities and lakes, but no borders. The liberal sensibility practices what Walzer characterizes as the *art of separation*: the drawing of lines, marking off different realms and ascribing to them a quasi-autonomous quality. It was this process that gave rise to the sociopolitical map which we are still familiar with today: a landscape in which the properly political has a well-delineated area. As such, liberalism provided

the coordinates that allowed for the second wave feminism movement to declare ‘the personal is political’ and call into question this very separation and its (political) consequences.

In a sense, the question of deciding what is or is not political can appear as politics *par excellence*. This is so because it concerns the contestation of its own limit and the very way of making sense of that limit. In other words, what is at stake is not only what counts as political but *how* things count as political: the very logic and criteria under which things appear political. But is all politics based on the drawing of boundaries? On making sense out of these boundaries? Or are we dealing here with the liberal legacy which has come to configure not only our understanding of the political but also the very ways in which politics *can* be carried out? Perhaps our predicament today is not unlike Jorge Luis Borges story *On Exactitude in Science*. In it, he depicts an Empire in which the Art of Cartography attained such perfection that a map was struck whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. Eventually, the following generations – who were not as fond of cartography as their forebears – saw this grand map as useless and discarded it. Still, in the Deserts of the West, the ruins of that map are inhabited by animals and beggars. It is as if our liberal ancestors made a map that appeared so detailed that it became virtually indistinguishable from the landscape it was meant to help them traverse. But perhaps when historical exigencies demanded its renunciation, there were those who forgot it was a map and abandoned themselves to its spectral ruins.

It is precisely this spectral character that we confuse for reality when we accord too much importance to our selves. How does one address the ‘concrete terror’ of imposing a new order on quotidian reality (as opposed to the ‘abstract terror’ of the political revolution)? According to Sadhguru, as long as you experience yourself as a limited entity, you are bound to feel threatened. If you have never experienced anything beyond your physical body, you will fear

death. If you have been in contact with other dimensions of existence, death will look much differently. Once you become over-identified with whatever nonsense you're carrying around – whatever petty likes and dislikes – your instinct of self-preservation will kick in and you will be fiercely inclined to protect this bundle of recordings.

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The yogic tradition describes two forces in every human being: one is directed at self-preservation, the other one at self-expansion. Here, self-preservation can be characterized as the erecting of walls and borders for protection. Imagine that – perplexed by the complexities of the world – you build a castle or a fortress where you felt safe. You may build a very nice castle with all sorts of luxuries but eventually, if you do not go out, the castle will begin to feel like a prison. This is because of the other force which functions as a drive towards expansion. It is a sort of curious, ambitious, limitless yearning. So, you knock some castle walls down and you set out to build a bigger one. But this too, eventually feels too limiting, so what to do?

These longings – the instinct of self-preservation and the desire to become boundless – are not opposing forces but different aspects of life. One is meant to help root us in this planet and this body, the other one takes us beyond. Self-preservation should be limited to the physical body; after all, even if you pulverize all the ideas, philosophies and stuff you have in your mind, what's the problem? If there is enough awareness these two forces will work together. If you become overidentified with your body or your mind, there will be tension. Self-preservation becomes self-imprisonment. Simply put, if there is no spiritual perspective or consciousness this drive towards boundlessness will remain confined to the physical dimension of existence.

However, how can the physical world, with all of its material limitations, fulfill such a tall order? Is capitalism not a perverse manifestation of this very drive? The madness of capitalist rationality is simply this: it is trying to approach the infinite through the material world, which is finite by nature.

The invention of money unleashed capital's lust for the unending virtual accumulation of value; thus, the illusion of an unbounded capacity for wealth arose in people's minds. Nonetheless, no matter how many zeroes you add to your computer screen, whatever is physical has its limitations; and the ongoing ecological calamities bear witness to our devastating collective hubris. Even so, this drive towards the infinite is not reprehensible, but rather tragically mishandled. If we dare to pursue it seriously, we must look at things clearly.

In yoga, the work you do does not involve God, your soul, or heaven. Simply, yoga addresses barriers we have made for ourselves. Meditation means you are able to drop your identification with the limited. Meditation is not something you do, it is something that *happens*. Consider your vital bodily functions: your breath, your heartbeat, digestion, etc. Do you *do* them or do they happen? In yoga you simply prepare, you cultivate a certain atmosphere within yourself that's conducive to these expansive states. The spiritual process is not psychological. Memory has nothing to do with it. It is a life process; that is to say, it is existential. It only happens if you allow yourself to be a piece of life. Becoming silent is only possible when you do not think much of yourself. If you think you're so smart, how can you shut up? If you realize that you are actually stupid, that you don't know anything in this existence, then you would look at life with total amazement and wonder. No time or space for a thought in your head; no space for all this nonsense. The moment you think there is some value to what you think, then you cannot stop the thought process which is just memory recycling itself.

A proper spiritual disposition is not about looking for anything in particular, but rather about seeing how to go about expanding your awareness and your experience. If you do not ever get out of your shell, you're just a nut. But *how* to do this? In Sadhguru's words:

“If you really want to know spirituality, don't look *for* anything. People think spirituality is about looking for a God or truth or the ultimate. The problem is you have already defined what you are looking for. It is not the object of your search that is important: it is a faculty of looking. The ability to simply look without motive is missing in the world today. Everybody is a psychological creature, wanting to assign meaning to everything. Seeking is not about looking for something. It is about enhancing your perception, your very faculty of seeing.” (Sadhguru 2016, 15)

This is why the yogic tradition emphasizes ignorance; because it opens up receptivity. Drawing conclusions does the opposite: it closes up possibilities and insulates you from life. Memory means a boundary: what I know is always a boundary; what I do not know is a limitless possibility. Knowledge is always bound; ignorance is always boundless. So the yogic system identifies with ignorance, never with knowledge. ‘Identifying with cosmos’ is just another thought; it makes people airy and New Age-y. Let us simply look at things and acknowledge the limitations of whatever it is we think we know.

There is a joke which illustrates a certain aspect of contemporary politics really well: There are two muffins inside an oven. One turns to the other and says: “Oh wow, it is really hot in here.” The other muffin, astonished, exclaims: “Holy moly, a talking muffin!” Is this not how politics happens today? There is a great deal of misrecognition and lack of clarity. Simply, clarity will not arise if we keep exalting our fanciful ideas about our selves. The friend/enemy distinctions which form the basis of politics and struggle repeat the logic of enclosure and imprisonment. If I have a boundary and you have a boundary, when we meet we are bound to

clash. Our predicament today is just this: we are viciously protective of these boundaries, yet still trying to become boundless through material gains.

The limitation of egalitarian logic bound to the capitalist material arrangement of production is that it does not go far enough. A kind of *sadhana*, or tool for spiritual growth, that is commonly offered to people ‘on the path’ is to not consider anything or anyone above themselves; and to not consider anything or anyone beneath them either. If we want to re-draw the political map such that it includes differentiated terrain and phenomena with without borders, this logic must be brought to bear on the political sphere. Even during the *Mahabharata*, an epic poem depicting a multi-generational cataclysmic war, the Adiyogi closed his two eyes: only his third eye remained open. He did not see people as friends or enemies. Whoever came, if they were receptive enough, he engaged with. Not only should we not see people and things as beneath us or above us; existentially, we should not make the enemy/friend distinction at all. If someone is ‘bad’ will the air refuse to provide them oxygen? Will the sun refuse to give its light and warmth? Will food refuse to nourish them? The point here is that existence does not make any distinction between good or bad.

A friend of mine once said that the difference between us (our comrades) and our enemies lies in the fact that we not only fight our enemies, but we also strike at the very terms that make us fight each other; the conditions which make us appear as enemies in the first place. Against this background and in a very precise sense, perhaps we can repeat Mao’s dictum apropos of war but with an added twist: ‘first, we are against it; second, we are not afraid of it.’ That is to say, first, we are against enemies as such; second, we are not afraid of them. This means that – while we do not lose sight of how the terrain’s configuration is already unconscionable, and so our efforts remain resolutely directed at transforming this – we have no

problem entering an antagonistic dynamic when it is needed. In other words, if the situation demands it we will not hesitate to vanquish a political enemy if it results in the elimination the ignominies of white democracy, the wildly self-destructive<sup>16</sup> exploitation of the earth, and the indignities of subordinating humanity to perverse economic exigencies: the cretinizing, despotic rule of profit. After all, a political enemy is different from an existential one. Political struggle is to be carried out purely out of a sense of what is politically (and spiritually) sensible, and not based on personal preference or petty attachment to certain political forms.

Another condition of this politics must be the renunciation of attachment to any particular outcome. That is to say, if we enter political struggle it is simply because it is sensible and needed, not because our sense of self depends on it: our wellbeing must be completely divorced from its consequences, whatever they may be. This requires nothing short of the highest form of self-mastery: the point is to fashion ourselves such that we do not need anything – our very existence is self-sufficient, vibrant, ecstatic and joyful in/by itself – which would allow us to *give it all*; to act out of sense, intelligence and consciousness, not compulsion. No matter the boundaries, no matter the territories or the identities of yourself and people around you, you are able to act according to the full expression of your intelligence as a piece of life. In other words, it involves creating conditions where our actions are not bound by the past, be it collective or individual.

Unlike the neoliberal responsabilization which *depoliticizes* human wellbeing by atomizing individuals and dismissing the need to address structural processes, here we find a differently politicized responsabilization; one where it is imperative that we provide the means for everyone's wellbeing, the resources and tools for all of us to take conscious control of our existence. One of the main insights of yoga is that you *are* ultimately responsible for your experiential reality. This is a perspective which does not suppose indifference towards reality, but one that acknowledges that having our wellbeing bound to external situations not only makes no sense but ends up crippling and dis-empowering us. Again, this

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<sup>16</sup> And not in a commendable spiritual sense.

does not mean indifference towards others' suffering: true unlimited compassion can only arise if you're perfectly settled within yourself, if you have nothing to fear. Fearlessness will only arise if you have nothing to protect within yourself: paradoxically, only tearing down your barriers will relieve you of the anxiety of self-preservation<sup>17</sup>. This is not the passage from an universalized ethics of solidarity with every living being into indifference and the advocacy of a ruthless militaristic attitude. It is the understanding that the material world may bring us comfort and convenience, but joy and wellbeing may only spring from within us. We must learn to handle our interiority carefully and masterfully for unbounded action to occur.

On a different note, to approach unbounded inclusiveness, consider a glass of water. At some point you can see the water there, outside of you. Clearly it is not you, but once you drink it, it becomes a part of yourself. So, what happened? Now, how do you know this is me, this is not me? Whatever is in the boundaries of my sensation is me. Outside of it, it is not me. The boundaries of sensation are such that if you make your life energies very exuberant, they will expand. If this happens it is called yoga: you did not cause the union, but you allowed yourself to experience it. Notably, for Sadhguru, communism means an individual embraces the community as part of himself. (Sadhguru 2016)

Here we find a steady orientation towards dissolution. There is a very precise reason why a lot of yogic practices are performed in absolute silence:

“Speech is of the society, words are of the mind, sounds are of nature, the soundless is of the beyond. Thus, if one gets identified with one's own speech, he will belong to the society. If he gets identified with his words, he will belong to the mind. If he gets identified with the sounds, he will belong to nature. If one dissolves in the soundless silence, to him alone the realms of the beyond will yield.” (Sadhguru 2003)

Finally, consider western musical notation: what is the difference between a blank measure and a measure occupied by a full rest? Is it not the difference between nothingness and Shiva? A blank

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<sup>17</sup> “To preserve your life you must kill it. Kill it off completely, and you will be at peace for the first time.” – Zenrinkushun (Tsunetomo 2014, xi)

measure supposes (virtual) infinite potential contained in its nothingness; the latter measure, filled by silence, is a way to create/find something within our experience which points to this infinitude. Perhaps not really a concept as much as a doorway. As Sadhguru says, you need not knock on the door: it is already open. If anything, you only need to walk through it. Except, you don't even need to walk through it, because the door does not exist. (Sadhguru 2016)

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