

Geographies of Violence

Killing Space, Killing Time

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1

The Best of All Possible Violence

The Frightful Fallout from the Great Lisbon Earthquake

The true Evil is the very gaze which sees evil all around itself.

Hegel, quoted in Žižek, Santner and Reinhard, 2005: 139

Our taste for violence is as ardent as ever. My fondest example is a housewife recalling her first use of a food processor. ‘Crushing food with lightning rapidity seems brutal and shocking’, she recalls. ‘I see hard nuts, apples, lemon peel cut to pieces and transformed into an unrecognizable mass. ... Something inside me rebels against this bringing of food into line’ (quoted in Wildt, 1995: 31). Her distaste for the miniature slaughterhouse placed at her disposal is palpable. And yet, she continues, ‘once I had tried it out a few times my hostility changed to honest admiration’.

Although unleashing ferocious violence on innocent vegetables is hardly a moral outrage, it nicely illustrates how violence has been industrialized and domesticated: from the ritual cruelty shared between lovers (teasing, taunting, belittling) to the calculated exploitation of mass-murder machines. Our culture has not become accustomed to all violence, to be sure; but enough violence, nonetheless: more than enough, perhaps. For just as millions of tabletop slaughterhouses rip through the flesh of soft fruit, millions of financial transactions tear through the fabric of the world: everything from deforestation and strip mining to ghost cities and suburban sprawl (Ewing, 2016; Leslie, 2013). Neighbourhoods, conurbations, and landscapes are shredded by capitalist development in an



ever-intensifying maelstrom of violence: ‘from its relentless and insatiable pressure for growth and progress; ... its pitiless destruction of everything and everyone it cannot use ... and its capacity to exploit crisis and chaos as a springboard for still more development, to feed itself on its own self-destruction’ (Berman, 1999: 138–9). Capitalism is a carnival of cannibalism (Baudrillard, 2010b), some of which is spectacularly dramatized, especially in times of ‘crisis’, but most of which takes the form of an ‘attritional lethality’ (Nixon, 2011) that nibbles away at the face of the Earth – as if the planet itself had been taken to Room 101 in the Ministry of Love (Orwell, 2000). ‘Landscapes could be classified in terms of how easily they can be nibbled, BITTEN’, suggests Lyotard (1989a: 214). Walter Benjamin (1985) famously drew inspiration from Paul Klee’s painting, *Angelus Novus* (1920), to convey this nightmarish storm of gnawing violence:

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to ... make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise. ... This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin, 1985: 257–8)

Before entering the slaughterhouses of modernity and the ruins of capitalist development, I want to consider another key instance of divine violence: the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which shook Europe’s newly acquired spirit of philosophical optimism (*that all was for the best*) and its renewed confidence in human reason (*daring to know*), leaving ‘those who lived through it feeling *conceptually* devastated’ (Neiman, 2004: 239). We remain subject to the aftershocks of a shattered optimism and a wrecked Enlightenment, aftershocks that continue to reverberate around the world.

Optimism – in the sense of the optimal, *the best possible*, rather than the merely ‘hopeful’, which, once soured, becomes ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011) – sought to explain how a thoroughly good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God could allow evil to flourish in His world, and the explanation boiled down to an optimal calculation that only a divinity could make: not simply that the occurrence of evil contributes to the greater good (sacrifice and silver linings), but rather that these specific evils are necessary for the greatest possible good to occur (optimization). God chose *these* evils because they are *the best* evils for His world. For an optimist, then, whatever happens is not only an integral part of a ‘divine plan’, it is essential to the unfolding of ‘the best possible world’. Disease, war, famine, and suchlike all turn out to have been for the best. Similarly, with storms, floods, droughts, and so on. What was so shocking about the Lisbon earthquake, however, was that it demolished one of the most religious and modern cities on Earth. Indeed, the Lisbon of 1755 was a powerful imperial city in the grip of a construction boom. In the reign of King João V (1706–50), around 500 tons of gold had been brought to Lisbon from Portugal’s most lucrative colony, Brazil,

along with other plundered riches, including diamonds, sugar, tobacco, coffee, and slaves. “Riches do not profit in the day of wrath,” warned Proverbs, and on All Saints’ 1755 they didn’t’, comments Nicholas Shrady (2009: 111), ‘like a biblical day of reckoning, most of what the city and its inhabitants had coveted was reduced to rubble’. At least 60,000 people were killed, and 12,000 buildings destroyed, by the earthquake, tsunami, and wildfires. Such devastation shocked God-fearing folk, not least because ‘one in six of Lisbon’s adult population was a *religioso*’, notes Edward Paice (2008: 10). ‘With more than 500 monasteries and convents and countless churches, the Portugal of this era came to be memorably described as “more priest-ridden than any other country in the world, with the possible exception of Tibet”’ (Paice, 2008: 10, quoting Charles Davison, 1936). Whether this ‘urbicide’ expressed God’s wrath or the optimal unfolding of the world, people feared what lay in store for other, less pious, places.

The Lisbon of 1755 was on the cutting edge of modernity. Like many other European cities, Lisbon became a repository for extraordinary wealth plundered from a worldwide empire. The suffering of millions of distant others was transmogrified into monumental architecture and lavish interiors. And yet Lisbon remained in the grip of monarchy and church, whose despotic tendencies were a fetter on the Enlightenment spirit of entrusting human reason with the power to take command of the brave new world of modernity. The Portuguese Inquisition, established in 1536 by Pope Paul III at the request of King João III, was still combating heresy in the 1750s through ‘torture, show trials, and ghastly public *autos-da-fé*’ (Shrady, 2009: 89) – those ritual ‘acts of faith’ by way of which evildoers performed public penance through suffering, such as being flayed, hung or burnt at the stake; acts that could even seize the dead. For example, ‘the execution of suicides ... was usually done by dragging their corpses through the street’ (Friedland, 2012: 188). Secular versions of the *auto-da-fé* continued well beyond the eighteenth century, not least in the form of public executions and exemplary punishments; although with the death of God, and the abandonment of Man to the ‘here and now’, at least the dead were spared the indignity of postmortem execution as their souls were cast beyond the reach of power. Death no longer necessarily signified the transition from one authority to another (from an earthly sovereign to a Heavenly Father), but rather ‘the moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on himself and retreats ... into his own privacy’ (Foucault, 2004: 248). Nevertheless, cadavers would continue to be exploited for all manner of purposes, from dissection to crash tests (Roach, 2004).

Lisbon, then, was a Janus-faced city in 1755, and optimism bridged the gulf between faith and reason. The city glanced forward to the blossoming of modernity by gingerly ‘daring to know’ (as Immanuel Kant belatedly put it when answering the question ‘What is Enlightenment?’ in 1784), thereby risking the wrath of God for usurping His prerogative; whilst also harking back to the foundations of the monarchy and church that still had to be secured at all costs: faith, devotion, and servitude to God and His representatives on Earth, enforced

through the law-preserving violence of the Inquisition, and the long-standing institutions of a 'persecuting society' originally designed to control heretics, lepers, and Jews (Moore, 1990). Trying to reconcile faith with reason was always a risky undertaking, and the Inquisition was well versed in the suppression of such heresy: from idiosyncratic ravings to rival doctrines. Even proving the necessity of God by way of doubt was to put Him on trial. Indeed, the seventeenth century's toying with 'doubt' (which offered a foretaste of 'critical' and 'revolutionary' thinking), exemplified by René Descartes, would lead Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to declare in their *Communist Manifesto* (1848): 'All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life.' Accordingly, empowering human reason, daring to know, and raising doubt all flirted with heresy and invited the wrath of God and the state. Enlightenment thinking was primarily a clandestine and scurrilous affair in the eighteenth century, doggedly pursued by the police and censors. The iconic 'Light of Reason' tended to illuminate not the upper echelons of society (enlightening despotism from above), but the filth of 'Grub Street', often in the guise of pornography and slander (Darnton, 1996).

Faith and reason have always been blood-soaked terms, and would become even more so in the 'Age of Revolution' (1789–1848) and the 'Age of Empire' (1875–1914), to use Eric Hobsbawm's (1962, 1994) periodization. The enlightened doctrine of optimism (from the Latin '*optimum*', meaning 'best'), which was most famously associated with Leibniz's (1985) claim in 1710 that God had created 'the best of all possible worlds', sought to reconcile faith and reason. For Leibniz, there was no contradiction between the notion that God is omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient, and the fact that suffering, misfortune, and evil exist in His world. God has chosen *this* world precisely because it is the best of *all* possible worlds. This combination of good and evil is optimal, and each instance of minimalist evil contributes to the greater good. Accordingly, what we regard as inexplicable suffering, misfortune, or evil from our all-too-human perspective is necessary for the realization of all that is good. Optimism is essentially a philosophy of silver linings in which 'evil is a rational manifestation of God's grandeur and forms a requisite part in the most complex fulfillment of a providential plan' (Yolton et al., 1995: 382).

Optimism was the perfect mentality for Janus-faced Lisbon, with its 'embarrassment of riches' garnered from landscapes of horror on the one hand and its pious devotion to church and state on the other hand. 'Armed with a portentous faith and a treasury swollen with Brazilian gold', writes Shrady (2009: 107), King João V 'went on a building frenzy for the glory of God and his own majesty', the most lavish part of which was a vast monastery-cum-palace at Mafra. From 1715 to 1735, the project occupied 50,000 workers, 'had nearly a thousand rooms, from gilt-filled royal chambers to spartan monks' cells', and cost an astronomical figure (£4 million), entirely 'financed by the infernal, slave-driven mines of Brazil' (Shrady, 2009: 108). And then, on All Saints' Day 1755, an earthquake laid the priest-ridden and slave-driven city of Lisbon to waste.

‘By the time the first English refugees returned home religious shock-waves generated by the earthquake had spread throughout the northern hemisphere’, contends Edward Paice (2008: 163). Religious and scientific orthodoxy obviously agreed that God spoke through ‘natural’ disasters. While ‘the role of science was to ascertain the exact means by which his speech had been articulated’ (Paice, 2008: 216), the role of religion was to interpret God’s speech: ‘what was His message? And to whom exactly was it addressed?’ (Paice, 2008: 164).

Many Protestants averse to Catholicism, such as the Methodist preacher John Wesley, insisted that God’s wrath was directed at the barbaric Inquisitions of Spain, Portugal, and Rome. By contrast, the Catholic Church attributed the disaster to the sinfulness of the people, even though ‘many people were killed as they crowded into their churches’ while the red-light district emerged largely unscathed (O’Hara, 2010: 38) and ‘hundreds of criminals ... made their escape from the fallen prisons’ (Hamblyn, 2009: 44). Despite the ruination of much of Lisbon’s inquisitorial infrastructure – including the Palace of the Inquisition itself, two of its prisons, and its torture chambers – the Catholic Church concluded that it needed to be more, rather than less, zealous in its persecution of heretics, a response that Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet) satirized in his best-selling underground novella, *Candide, or Optimism*: ‘After the earthquake, which had destroyed three-quarters of Lisbon, the sages of that country could think of no more effective means of averting further destruction than to give the people a fine *auto-da-fé*’ (Voltaire, 2005: 15). *Candide* was published in 1759 – in the midst of the Seven Years War (1756–63), which was the last major conflict involving all of the great European powers prior to the French Revolution (1789). It was also published under a pseudonym (Dr Ralph), and as a faux translation (ostensibly from German), to misdirect the religious and secular authorities. (Arouet had adopted the *nom de plume* Voltaire in 1718, after a spell in the Bastille for composing satirical verses that defamed the Duke of Orléans, Regent of France.)

If the disaster was occasioned by the vices of Lisbon’s population, then what did God have in store for rapacious London and debauched Paris? As a precaution, King George II decreed 6 February 1756 as a day of fasting and penance throughout Britain. After all, even the French were ‘shocked by “the extraordinary licentiousness that reigns openly in London”’ (White, 2012: 347). But not every monarch was so god-fearing and credulous. The court of King Louis XV at Versailles ‘seems to have regarded the disaster as a source of morbid amusement’ (Shrady, 2009: 46). Jittery Britain also offered unprecedented aid, sending six ships laden with food, construction materials, and gold and silver coins. Meanwhile, Spain sent four wagonloads of gold coins, and Hamburg sent four shiploads of timber and clothing. Richard Hamblyn (2009: xviii) considers the Lisbon quake to have been ‘the first modern disaster, establishing the protocols of international humanitarian response’, while Shrady attributes this newfound generosity to the growing interdependencies of the

European powers. Eighteenth-century Europe was already binding itself into one incestuous world, and Lisbon was its third busiest port.

While Europe was fixated on the meaning of the Lisbon earthquake, it remained oblivious to the devastation of other places, including Albufeira, Cádiz, Cascais, Faro, Lagos, Sanlúcar, and Setúbal, and had been largely indifferent to other destructive quakes, such as Lima in 1746, and Port au Prince in 1751. Indeed, Lisbon itself had endured many earthquakes, ‘including severe ones in 1597, 1598, 1699 and 1724’ (Hamblyn, 2009: 12). As always, some people and places are presumed to matter to all, while others count for next to nothing. The suffering of the latter does not yield grievable lives, says Judith Butler (2004, 2009). Such is the intertwined ‘asymmetry of suffering’ and ‘asymmetry of compassion’ (Klein, 2002: 166 and 168, respectively) that reveals the existence of not one but two worlds (at least), despite all of the guff about globalization, the global village, and one-worldism. The world *as such* ‘does not really exist’, insists Alain Badiou (2008: 60). ‘What exists is a false and closed world, artificially kept separate from general humanity by incessant violence.’ This is why the Occident’s encounter with the New World was so terrifying and diabolical – not only for those Amerindians exterminated and enslaved in their millions, and the millions of Africans subsequently swept up by the transatlantic slave trade to feed the sugar, tobacco, and cotton plantations’ insatiable demand for labour, but also for those god-fearing Europeans who came face to face with the material existence of what should have remained void. It is also why Arizona’s Sonoran Desert (which braces the US–Mexico border) and the Mediterranean Sea (buttressing Europe against incursions from North Africa and the Middle East) have become key sites for the enforcement of lethal border control in the twenty-first century. Thousands have died in these and similar deathscapes, through drowning, dehydration, hypothermia, etc. (De León, 2015; IOM, 2014; Rubio-Goldsmith et al., 2016). The death marches and death voyages have continued, under policies with poetic names such as *Prevention Through Deterrence* (est. 1994), the US Border Patrol’s on-going strategy, which has ‘pushed unauthorized migration away from population centers and funneled it into more remote and hazardous border regions. This policy has had the unintended consequence of increasing the number of fatalities along the border, as unauthorized migrants attempt to cross over the inhospitable Arizona desert’ (Haddal, 2010: 13–14). The optimization of such policies has made them more lethal, precipitating efforts to ameliorate the suffering, such as the US Border Safety Initiative (with its water stations, panic poles, and rescue teams for ‘distressed aliens’), Italy’s short-lived ‘Operation Mare Nostrum’, the European Union’s (EU) Frontex-led ‘Operation Triton’ (named after the Greek God who weaponized the oceans), and the European Border Surveillance System (Eurosir), all of which deliver militarized humanitarianism and humane militarism. Behind the veil of optimism, which spares the blushes of good people the world over, lies a wasteland where all of the residual evils are dumped.

The screening off from one another of the interconnected worlds of slave-driven colonial horror on the one hand and priest-ridden metropolitan civility

on the other is exemplified by the ‘rubber terror’ of the Congo Free State under King Leopold II of Belgium, a century or so after the Lisbon quake. In the late 1890s, Edmund Morel worked for a Liverpool-based shipping company that carried all cargo to and from the Free State via Antwerp. While vessels filled with valuable commodities (mainly rubber and ivory) came out of the Congo, they returned laden with military supplies, steamer parts, and little else. ‘From what he saw at the wharf in Antwerp, and from studying his company’s records in Liverpool, [Morel] deduced the existence – on another continent, thousands of miles away – of slavery’ (Hochschild, 2006: 180). Between 1880 and 1920, as many as 10 million Congolese were murdered, worked to death, starved to death, or died from disease as Leopold’s Congo became the most lucrative colony in Africa. Moreover, since the Congo was the king’s personal property, it was not an affair of state (and therefore not subject to public scrutiny), but an investment vehicle for various companies (such as the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber and Exploration Co., and Société Anversoise du Commerce au Congo), backed by a mercenary gendarmerie (*Force Publique*), whose brutality became legendary once the veil of commercial secrecy was lifted by Morel (Hochschild, 2006). Like the ‘Honourable East India Company’ – a British joint-stock company backed by Royal Charter (1600) and vast private armies that effectively ruled India for 100 years (from the 1757 Battle of Plassey to the 1857 Indian Rebellion, after which the Crown assumed direct control of India), and which, once China had been broken open during the ‘Opium Wars’ (1839–42, and 1856–60), controlled half of the world’s trade (Milligan, 1995; Robins, 2012) – the Congo Free State was a proving ground for regimes of optimal horror more commonly associated with totalitarianism and the mercenary armies of disaster capitalism’s increasingly lucrative ‘war on terror’ (Scahill, 2008; Singer, 2008).

The screening off from view of the ‘Congo Holocaust’ was so effective that Leopold came to be seen as a great humanitarian for the vast expenditure this ‘Builder King’ lavished on the ‘good people’ of Belgium: parks, museums, galleries, and palaces. Meanwhile, Jeremy Black (2011: 226) wryly notes that Leopold’s form of ‘colonialism involved a degree of control that, while not slavery, was scarcely freedom’. Thereafter, the adventure of capitalism experimented with countless ways of enforcing ‘slavery by another name’, as Douglas Blackmon (2008) phrased it when referring to the re-enslavement of African Americans through involuntary servitude from the Civil War to the Second World War, such as California’s ‘Golden Gulag’, the wider ‘Prison Industrial Complex’, and the ‘global war prison’ (Gilmore, 2007; Gilmore and Gilmore, 2008; Gregory, 2006, 2007). The US contains barely one twentieth of the world’s population, but holds a quarter of its prison population. It enjoys – by a considerable margin – the highest per capita rate of imprisonment of any country on earth. The re-emergence of ‘precarity’ as a key component of the neoliberal regime of accumulation and mode of social regulation is only the latest variant of wage slavery (Standing, 2011).

On an even greater scale than the Congolese Holocaust, Tzvetan Todorov (1992) estimates that as the Spanish colonized the Americas, the indigenous population collapsed from 80 million to 10 million, most dying from disease and starvation attributable to colonization, and the rest from massacres and slave labour. ‘None of the great massacres of the twentieth century can be compared to this hecatomb’, he declares (Todorov, 1992: 133). Moreover, Todorov emphasizes the modern character of this sixteenth-century annihilation. The age-old desire for gold was no longer just one passion amongst others (alongside prestige, obligation, purgation, pleasure, etc.). It had become *the* passion subsuming all others, pursued with unprecedented ferocity. Furthermore, this monomania accords with the subsequent acceleration of capital accumulation, and the obliteration of all obstacles that stood in its way; the use of famine as a weapon of mass destruction (Conquest, 1986; Davis, 2002; Dikötter, 2011), or ‘*terror by starvation*’, as Gregori Maximoff (1940: 45) memorably called it; and the disposability of prisoners of war (Steinbacher, 2004). For example, from 1933 to 1945, the Nazi *Schutzstaffel* (SS) constructed an ever-shifting concentration-camp system (*Konzentrationslager* – KL or KZ for short), comprising 27 main camps and over 1,100 satellite camps, primarily for forced and lethal labour. The KL held millions of prisoners, most of whom died. The SS brought optimized evil into the heart of Europe, and revelled in the worst of all possible worlds. Optimism has remained indelibly stained with horror ever since.

KL labour perfectly illustrates horror at work, the spectre of which stalks capitalism (Cederström and Fleming, 2012), not least because dead labour (capital) feeds off living labour (work), as if it were a vampire or cannibal (Carver, 1998; Neocleous, 2003; Sutherland, 2011). Whereas capital consumes labour in its thirst for profit, and fattens itself by devouring the flesh and brains of others, ‘labor in the camp was a means of oppression, an instrument of terror. It was meant to humiliate, to torment, to break the power of the inmates to resist, to drain and destroy them’ (Sofsky, 1997: 21). Indeed, camp labour took its place alongside mass shootings, gas chambers, disease, and starvation as ‘one of the principal instruments of annihilation’ (Cavarero, 2011: 37). While regimes of ‘convict labour’, ‘slave labour’, and even ‘wage labour’ entail at least some effort to sustain people’s capacity to work, regimes of ‘lethal labour’ consume them directly. ‘The economy of the concentration camps was an economy of waste, the squandering of human labor power’ (Sofsky, 1997: 21). These people were not regarded as valuable lives ‘sacrificed’ to an insatiable war economy, but worthless lives to be ‘wasted’ pure and simple. Indeed, ‘the Germans’ invocation of “work” was not necessarily or primarily referring to productive labor, “work” for Jews having been understood ... for what it was: just another means of slaughter’ (Goldhagen, 1997: 369). At Buchenwald, for instance, ‘work consisted of carrying sacks of wet salt back and forth’, and starvation diets made it fatal. It is worth recalling that the so-called ‘work ethic’ emerged in prisons as a disciplinary technique for moral instruction – breaking rocks, digging earth, hauling logs – rather than as a productive technique to be exploited. It is also worth

noting that the movement of people can also be murderous, such as the Bataan death march (1942) and the Armenian death caravans (1915–16). As the Ottoman Empire was emptied of its Armenian population, those that were not immediately massacred were herded towards the Syrian Desert.

Only a quarter of all deportees survived the hundreds of miles and weeks of walking. ... The Ottoman government had made no provisions for the feeding and the housing of the hundreds of thousands of Armenian deportees on the road. On the contrary, local authorities went to great lengths to make travel an ordeal from which there was little chance of survival. ... At remote sites along the routes ... the killing units slaughtered the Armenians with sword and bayonet. (Adalian, 1997: 44–5)

In the autumn of 1941, on the outskirts of the small Polish town of Oświęcim (Auschwitz), near a recently established concentration camp for Polish political prisoners, the Nazi SS began to construct a gigantic concentration camp at the village of Brzezinka (Birkenau). Heinrich Himmler ‘wanted to intern tens of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war here and engage them in forced labour. There were plans for a “prisoner of war camp” for 50,000 inmates, which could later be enlarged first to 150,000, and later to 200,000 prisoners’, writes Sybille Steinbacher (2004: 89). With the German invasion of Russia in the previous summer, ‘the supply of Soviet prisoners of war was initially thought to be inexhaustible [and so] hundreds of thousands of them were thus abandoned to starvation. Of a total of 5.7 million Soviet prisoners of war, 3.3 million died’, she continues (Steinbacher, 2004: 94), and of those, ‘two-thirds never left the occupied territories and remained under the supervision of the Wehrmacht’ (Mazower, 2009: 161). By winter, as the German advance faltered and the Red Army pushed back, ‘it became clear that Soviet prisoners of war were not going to be supplying the massive numbers of workers expected’, and so Auschwitz–Birkenau ‘was transformed ... into an extermination camp’. At least 870,000 Jews were murdered according to Nikolaus Wachsmann’s (2015) estimate, along with at least 230,000 others, thereby aligning the camp with the five other extermination centres that killed at least 2 million more Jews between them: the other hybrid KL concentration and extermination camp at Majdanek; the three *Aktion Reinhard* camps dedicated to extermination at Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka; and the death camp at Chelmno. All of these built on the involuntary ‘euthanasia’ *Aktion T-4* programme that imposed ‘mercy deaths’ on those mentally ill and physically disabled patients in German medical institutions who were deemed ‘useless eaters’, ‘burdensome’, and ‘lives unworthy of life’ (Friedlander, 1995; Gallagher, 1997). Naturally, T-4 doctors preached the optimism of the *Aktion*. The purgation of ‘lives unworthy of life’ was for the greater good. Indeed, the Nazis’ optimism knew no bounds: worldwide racial purgation would yield the best of all possible worlds – a world ‘free’ and ‘clean’ of the Jews (*Judenfrei*). ‘In Auschwitz, Chelmno, and the three *Aktion Reinhard*

death camps, the Germans gassed the overwhelming majority of the almost exclusively Jewish victims upon arrival. In Majdanek, they gassed or shot 40 per cent' (Goldhagen, 1997: 293), with the rest dying primarily from starvation-induced exhaustion and disease.

In addition to those killed in the camps, at least 1.5 million Jews were killed on the spot, mostly in mass shootings undertaken by SS death squads (*Einsatzgruppen*) and Police Battalions, which accompanied the Wehrmacht advance into the Soviet Union. They all 'understood that this ... was not to be a war of military conquest, but one in which the opponents ... were to be vanquished utterly, destroyed, obliterated from the face of the earth' (Goldhagen, 1997: 149). Hundreds of thousands more died through lethal labour, starvation, epidemics in the ghettos – 'those German holding tanks for Jews consigned to extermination' (Goldhagen, 1997: 149) – and death marches, which 'were not means of transport; the marching transports were means of death' (Goldhagen, 1997: 367). Some of the trains that transported Jews to the ghettos, transit camps, and extermination camps also functioned as 'death trains' (Browning, 2001; Gigliotti, 2010).

Given that the Nazis could exterminate millions of people using little more than paramilitary death squads, Daniel Goldhagen (1997: 10) challenges the notion 'that without gas chambers, modern means of transportation, and efficient bureaucracies, the Germans would have been unable to kill millions of Jews'. Indeed, the Armenian and Rwandan genocides, which claimed over 2 million lives between them, were essentially low-technology affairs: 'death caravans' (death marches) for the former – 'organized like an ambulatory extermination camp' (Cavarero, 2011: 33) – and machete attacks for the latter; and all the while shooting and raping (Balakian, 2005; Hatzfeld, 2005). Moreover, at the January 1942 meeting in Wannsee to coordinate the so-called 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question', the concentration-camp system was conspicuously absent:

Within days of the Wannsee conference, however, SS leaders changed their tune. The trigger, it seems, was their final acceptance that the grandiose settlement plans in the east would never be realized with Soviet POWs. ... The SS now looked for replacements and soon found them: instead of Soviet soldiers, Jews would build the gigantic settlements. (Wachsmann, 2015: 295)

Wachsmann (2015) estimates that 2.3 million people passed through the SS concentration-camp system between its inception in 1933 and its cessation in 1945, of whom at least 1.7 million died. Meanwhile, Anne Applebaum (2004) estimates that between the 1920s and 1950s, almost 29 million passed through the Soviet Gulag. This was a vast system of 'corrective labour camps', 'labour colonies', and prisons, that comprised 476 camps with around 2.5 million inmates at its fullest extent in the early 1950s, and numerous 'special settlements'

and ‘colonization villages’, with around 1.8 million ‘special settlers’ at its peak in 1931. The Gulag was created for the express purpose of liquidating much of the peasantry (the so-called ‘dekulakization’ and ‘collectivization’ of farming) and in so doing provided a vast pool of labour for the USSR’s most inhospitable regions (Khlevniuk, 2004; Viola, 2007). In the decade of the Stalinist Purges and the Great Terror, the 1930s, there were at least 2 million deaths in custody, around a third of which were accomplished by firing squad (Getty and Naumov, 2010). ‘Estimates of the number of Stalin’s victims over his twenty-five-year reign, from 1928 to 1953, vary widely, but 20 million is now considered the minimum’ (Brent, 2008: 3). Maximoff (1940) coined a pair of chilling phrases to convey the emergence under Lenin of this two-fold regime of extermination through shooting and ‘state slavery’. He called the former the ‘wet guillotine’ and the latter the ‘dry guillotine’ – the physical annihilation of people ‘by handing out long prison sentences, by exiling them to baneful places, to break their morale by making them living corpses’ (Maximoff, 1940: 129). Likewise, the Nazi regime’s move away from the mass murder of Jews by shooting squads (*Einsatzgruppen*) to their mass murder in death factories is another example of the shift from a ‘wet’ to a ‘dry’ guillotine. ‘Between Auschwitz and the Gulag, there was no difference in kind’ (Vidal-Naquet, 1996: 153). The best of all possible worlds would have the worst of all possible evils for its foundations.

Scarcely anyone now gives much credence to the notion that the horrors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were expressions of either God’s wrath or His optimism. In 1755, however, few were prepared to countenance the possibility that God had not singled out Lisbon for destruction. And yet, a more enlightened view about the catastrophe was beginning to occur to some doubting Thomases: that ‘this was a natural disaster, without malice, direction or purpose’ (O’Hara, 2010: 39). For although hardly anyone was ready to embrace the earth-shattering realization that we inhabit a godless world, in which nothing is permitted or proscribed, the Lisbon quake undoubtedly ‘shook the confidence of many Enlightenment thinkers in providence and the essential goodness of God. ... The earthquake undermined faith in a rational God, and precipitated a backlash against Enlightened optimism’ (O’Hara, 2010: 39). Voltaire powerfully articulated this backlash in a letter to his banker, Jean-Robert Tronchin, in November 1755:

This is indeed a cruel piece of natural philosophy! We shall find it difficult to explain ... such fearful disasters *in the best of all possible worlds* – when a hundred thousand ants, our neighbours, are crushed to death in seconds in one of our ant-heaps. ... What will the preachers say now – especially if the Palace of the Inquisition is left standing! I flatter myself that those reverend fathers, the Inquisitors, have been crushed just like everyone else; which ought to teach men not to persecute men: for, while a few sanctimonious hypocrites are burning a few fanatics, the earth opens up and swallows them all. (Voltaire, 2005: 128, note 3)

Voltaire argued that ‘optimism was a cruel deceit for human sufferers’ (Yolton et al., 1995: 382), and his satirical novella, *Candide, or Optimism* (1759), was a scathing parody. Candide lives in an Eden-like paradise and is indoctrinated with optimism by his tutor, Pangloss. Once ousted from paradise, however, Candide gradually becomes disillusioned with optimism as he witnesses all manner of catastrophes. In Lisbon’s harbour, a storm destroys their boat. A sailor makes no effort to save a drowning man, and Pangloss explains that the harbour was created so that the man might drown. When they reach Lisbon, an earthquake and tsunami kill tens of thousands. The sailor starts looting, and Pangloss lectures Candide on the optimism of the situation. Subsequently, Pangloss discusses his optimism with Inquisitors, leading to him and Candide being arrested as heretics. Candide is flogged, and Pangloss miraculously survives a hanging. Eventually, Candide concludes that nothing turned out for the best – ‘the ultimate reason of things is unknown and unknowable’ (Hampson, 1990: 92). When the earth, sea or air quake, there is nothing to understand or explain. There is no solution – least of all a Final Solution – to the horror of the world.

While shaken optimists and anxious moralists agonized over the meaning and significance of the quake, those accustomed to the Grand Tour simply embraced the ruined landscape, which, unlike the sublime ruins of Ancient civilizations, ‘was far more immediate and sinister because it lacked the patina of age’ (Shrady, 2009: 166). Lisbon’s ruins ‘produced only horror’ (Shrady, 2009: 167). Such horror echoes down the centuries. For example, it echoes in the wake of San Francisco’s 1906 earthquake and firestorm, ‘one of history’s biggest urban infernos before aerial warfare’ (Solnit, 2009: 13), which some regarded as yet another expression of God’s wrath. ‘All along the path of the earthquake, priests seized upon this act of nature to warn that damnation was at hand’ (Thomas and Morgan Witts, 1971: 217–18; cf. Solnit, 2009). Likewise with contemporary quakes (Gergan, 2017). Lisbon’s horror also echoes in the postindustrial ruins of cities such as Detroit (Marchand and Meffre, 2010; Moore, 2010), a city destroyed by the violence of finance capitalism, which may yet prove to have the best possible ruins if the metastatic urban sprawl gives way to a sublime ‘re-wilding’ and ‘pastoralization’ through plant recolonization and urban agriculture (Gallagher, 2010). And it also echoes in the wake of the Allies’ Second World War area-bombing campaign (1942–5), which consumed cities such as Dresden and Hamburg in hurricane-force firestorms (Addison and Crang, 2006; Lowe, 2007; Taylor, 2004). If the ‘1944 proposal ... for the post-war “pastoralization” of Germany by the removal of all its heavy industry had ever been implemented, how long would it have taken for woodland to cover the mountains of ruins all over the country?’ (Sebald, 2003: 40–1).

By a cruel twist of fate, much of the ruination wrought by the slow violence of finance capitalism has been consumed in its turn by the slow-motion conflagration unleashed by the ‘best of all possible’ arsonists: from legions of landlords who made the rational calculation that building-insurance fraud

was more lucrative than residential lettings, to spatial scientists working for the RAND corporation who optimized New York City's Fire Department, with the result that 'Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and Mother Teresa came to marvel at the spectacular ruins and wonder just how it was that the richest city in the world could burn down' (Flood, 2010: 277). At the peak of the destruction, 1970–80, 'roughly 600,000 people's homes were lost to fire and abandonment' (Flood, 2010: 18). Some census tracts in the South Bronx lost more than 97 per cent of their buildings, and many others lost more than half. Detroit has recently been at the forefront of postmodernity's creeping firestorms (LeDuff, 2013), just as New Orleans has been at the forefront of its creeping floods (Brinkley, 2006; Cooper and Block, 2006; Dyson, 2006; Giroux, 2006).

In the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake, the Portuguese Court considered relocating to Brazil but chose instead to rebuild Lisbon, embracing enlightened 'conceptions of monumental town planning' (Yolton et al., 1995: 291), including seismic-resistant buildings, standardized construction techniques, and comprehensive sanitation (Shrady, 2009). Modernity was badly shaken by the quake but back on track, although without the optimized stabilizers of faith and reason. If there was going to be a world in which all turned out for the best, then it would have to be *forced* into existence by human action. So, we can anticipate much more horror to come. The 'Age of Revolution' (1789–1848) is only a few twists and turns ahead, and a different class of heretic will find itself seeking salvation through secular *autos-da-fé*: strung up from lamp posts and beheaded by Saint Guillotine.

Ironically, Portugal was an early beneficiary of revolutionary zeal. As the Napoleonic Wars raged (1803–15), 'something remarkable was happening, unparalleled in the history of European colonialism' (Wilcken, 2004: 3). In 1807, King João VI, and 10,000 of his subjects, fled Lisbon for Rio de Janeiro, leaving Portugal to be picked over by the other European powers. 'The seat of the Portuguese Empire, cast adrift from the Continent, had come to rest in the New World' (Wilcken, 2004: 3). Having endured the Inquisition, the wrath of God, and ferocious warfare, perhaps all had been for the best after all. Or perhaps not: 'The gold mines long exhausted, the colony had fallen back on its traditional role – as a slave-driven factory farm for Europe. Rio was then the largest slave market town in the Americas', writes Patrick Wilcken (2004: 4). In Brazil, 'the regent's ministers and advisers were forced to contemplate the effects of their policies and, worse still, to live amongst their own colonial handiwork. The shock was mutual.'

Across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, optimism was largely kept at bay. The twentieth century in particular was a century of *extremes* (Hobsbawm, 1995) rather than *optima*, of *fractures* rather than *integrals*, and of *antagonisms* rather than *reconciliations*: 'the omnipresence of scission', says Alain Badiou (2007: 38). 'The passion of the [twentieth] century is the real, but the

real as antagonism.’ The twentieth century was above all the century of genocide, extermination, and annihilation – of Herero, Nama, Armenians, Kulaks, Jews, Slavs, Tutsi, Bosniaks, and many others (Levene, 2013a, 2013b; Totten, Parsons and Charny, 1997). If there is any optimizing to be done, then it is for maximum efficiency and asymmetry, in an attempt to extinguish all resistance (Caygill, 2013). The historical geography of ‘manhunting’ (heretic hunts, witch hunts, Jew hunts, jihadi hunts, etc. of both men and women) is a perfect illustration (Chamayou, 2012; Gaskill, 2010; Maxwell-Stuart, 2003; Scarre and Callow, 2001), especially when it is interlaced with the historical geography of barbed wire (Krell, 2002; Netz, 2009; Razac, 2002). Tens of millions of people were killed in the twentieth century as if they were animals, prey, or pests – rounded up, hunted down, fumigated, and incinerated.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, collapse of the Soviet Union, and capitulation of ‘communist’ and ‘socialist’ states to capitalism, in the 1990s it seemed as though optimism had returned in a blaze of glory. As the millennium staggered to a close, capitalism imagined itself to be globally triumphant, with nothing standing in the way of its unfettered ‘globalization’ – not even the archaic revival of ethnically and religiously charged civil wars in the Congo, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Yugoslavia, and elsewhere, which it regarded as merely parochial anachronisms harking back to feuds from yesteryear; and certainly not the spluttering of the biosphere as it started to choke on the ash clouds of three centuries’ worth of industrial activity, which it regarded as a new investment frontier crying out for capital-intensive and financialized solutions: weather derivatives, catastrophe bonds, carbon trading, etc. At long last, then, everything was poised to revolve around ‘You’ – politics, economics, culture, religion, and even the future of the climate and the planet. Francis Fukuyama was the most vocal in proclaiming the optimistic Good News. We have arrived at *The End of History*, he declared (Fukuyama, 1993), thanks to the victorious and virtuous Holy Trinity of consumer capitalism, liberal democracy, and Enlightened individualism. There was seemingly nothing left to challenge the Empire of Capital and its New World Order – except, perhaps, for an anachronistic blast from the past, such as religious fundamentalism, violent extremism, or a suicide pact between the climate and the biosphere. Welcome to the twenty-first century, which sees only Capitalism or Barbarism ahead. In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida (1994) advances a wonderful riposte to Fukuyama’s neo-evangelistic and optimistic tone. Everything is far from the best in the Empire of Capital (Hardt and Negri, 2001; Harvey, 2010, 2014; Wood, 2005), and silver linings are conspicuously absent from the ‘catastrophic convergence’ of so many environmental, climatic, and social disasters (Parenti, 2011). By way of example, Derrida (1994: 81) lists ten of the most obvious ‘plagues’ of the ‘new world order’, which include inter-ethnic wars, nuclear weapons, and phantom states (drug cartels, the mafia, etc.).

Our world is clearly far from being the best. Indeed, I am tempted to say that if it is making progress, then its progress is ‘ever worstward’ into the ‘utmost dim’, as Samuel Beckett put it in *Worstward Ho!* ‘So leastward on. So long as dim still. Dim undimmed. Or dimmed to dimmer still. To dimmest dim. Leastmost in dimmest dim. Utmost dim. Leastmost in utmost dim. Unworsenable worst’ (Beckett, 2009: 108). So many genocides. So many Gulags. So many death factories. So many incinerated cities. And the promise of so much worse to come. Now that God is dead, and it is the turn of zombie capitalism to run amok over the face of the Earth, we are perhaps left with the *worst* of all possible worlds: a world of *optimal* evil, of *optimized* evil – not *pure* evil or *absolute* evil; but the *lesser* evil, the *leastmost* evil, the *calculated* evil; an evil that is precisely tailored by the ‘invisible hand’ of optimization to the measure of the situation. Hereinafter, modernity promises *just enough* violence and *just enough* horror. Such is the judicious reasoning of the strongest. Accordingly, Eyal Weizman suggests that we should memorialize this optimal evil:

in the form of the digits 6-6-5 built of concrete blocks, and installed like the Hollywood sign. ... This number, one less than the number of the beast – that of the devil and of total evil – might capture the essence of our humanitarian present obsessed with the calculations and calibrations that seek to moderate, ever so slightly, the evils that it has largely caused itself. (Weizman, 2011a: 6)

Leibniz conceived of God as perpetually optimizing the combination of good and evil as if He were an econometrician ‘solving a minimum problem in the calculus of variations’ (Weizman, 2011a: 2). Optima are always balanced calculations – of positive and negative variances – and yet the fiendish twist for the calculus of the optimal evil is that the positive and negative variances are no longer cast as ‘good’ and ‘evil’, but rather as ‘lesser’ and ‘greater’ evils. The ‘lesser’ evil only appears to be relatively good in the mirror of the ‘greater’ evil (and vice versa). This is a truly diabolical twist, since the goodly are always *forced* to choose the ‘lesser evil’ to counter the ‘greater evil’, and they are always forced to choose *evil*. No wonder, then, that ‘those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil’ (Arendt, 2003: 37). And the goodlier their intentions, the faster they loosen the ‘lesser’ and the quicker they forget their investment in evil. Given that the goodly *must* do evil, how can they do evil *well*? How can they undertake the *best* of all possible evils? Michael Ignatieff (2004) argues that when liberal democracies seek to prevent greater evils by resorting to lesser evils (coercive interrogation, torture, extrajudicial killings, human-rights violations, etc.), then it ‘imposes an obligation on government[s] to justify such measures publicly, to submit them to judicial review, and to circumscribe them with sunset clauses so that they do not become permanent’; and he insists that ‘exceptions do not destroy the rule but

save it, provided that they are temporary, publicly justified, and deployed only as a last resort' (Ignatieff, 2004: viii). The law is called upon to circumscribe and govern its own suspension, like a slipped clutch that expends energy but without applying force. When the 'greater' evil tends towards pure evil, then the 'lesser' evil can correspondingly expand to approach asymptotically pure evil itself. Such is the logic that can rationalize the goodly recourse to internment camps, detention centres, terror bombing, and the weaponization of life itself. And when the goodly combat evildoers, they are frequently tempted to treat the latter as if they were beasts or rogues (Chomsky, 2005; Derrida, 2005). 'When a hypocritical imperialism combats its enemies in the name of human rights and treats its enemies like beasts, ... it is waging not a war but ... a state terrorism' (Derrida, 2011: 74).

The logic of the lesser evil is well suited to the imperatives that now govern the military–industrial–humanitarian complex. Optimal violence – optimized violence – is efficient and effective violence. It can be modulated and leveraged over time and space in a measured response to the ups and downs of the situation as it unfolds. Such is the supple logic of a 'society of control' (Deleuze, 1992). Similarly, international humanitarian law also accords with the logic of the lesser evil. Its principle of *proportionality*, which aims to avoid 'excessive' violence and 'undue' suffering, is perfectly attuned to the principle of *optimal* violence. Indeed, there is nothing new about limiting excessive violence, which in so doing legitimates all forms of violence that are not excessive: 'by delineating categories of "illegitimate violence," the rules and regulations of war implicitly and explicitly construct what is legitimate violence' (Bourke, 2014: 79). Curtailing violence to suit the minimalist needs of the occasion was enshrined in the English Bill of Rights in 1689: '*excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted*' (my emphasis). This snug tailoring of violence was also woven into the Eighth Amendment to the US Constitution in 1791 (Bessler, 2013). What is new today is that the military and humanitarian convergence upon the miserly energetics of optimal violence is modulated by 'increasingly sophisticated technologies for minimizing the number of "necessary" corpses, [and] the search for "the best of all possible worlds" started giving ground to the present neo-Panglossian pessimism of the "least of all possible evils"' (Weizman, 2011a: 3). This modulation allows the optimal quantity and quality of violence to be continuously applied to sustain the desired objective indefinitely – whether that be the suppression of a marginalized community's capacity to riot in the rotting fringes of cities like London and Paris, or the 'splintered occupation' of territories such as the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Ophir, Givoni, and Hanafi, 2009; Segal and Weizman, 2003; Weizman, 2007, 2012). The ebb and flow of optimal violence would enable the perfect siege – in places such as the Arizona Desert, the Mediterranean Sea, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Accordingly, Weizman (2011a: 6) argues that 'Gaza – where the system of

humanitarian government is now most brutally exercised – is the proper noun for the horror of our humanitarian present.’ That enduring obscenity is symptomatic of our worstward drift into the utmost dim, whilst beaming with undiminished optimism, even if the latter has turned increasingly cynical and cruel, and strayed far from equilibrium on countless occasions (DeLanda, 1997). Still, it could be worse, I suppose. We might have lived long, long ago, when things were dimmer still.