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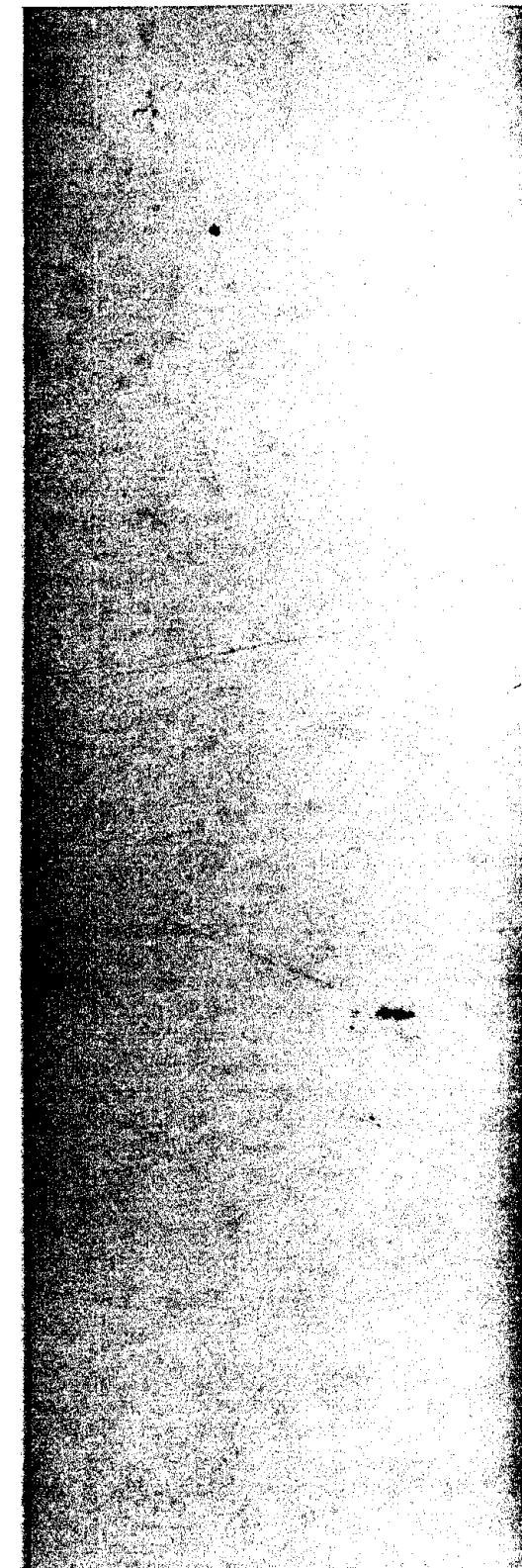
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THE  
NERVOUS  
SYSTEM

MICHAEL TAUSSIG

ROUTLEDGE  
NEW YORK • LONDON



# 7

## MALEFICIUM: STATE FETISHISM

We spent our time fleeing from the objective into the subjective and from the subjective into objectivity. This game of hide-and-seek will end only when we have the courage to go to the limits of ourselves in both directions at once. At the present time, we must bring to light the subject, the guilty one, that monstrous and wretched bug which we are likely to become at any moment. Genêt holds the mirror up to us: we must look at it and see ourselves.

—Sartre, *Saint Genêt*

### I: THE STATE AS FETISH

My concern lies with this endless flight in modern times back and forth from the hard-edged thing to its ephemeral ghost and back again, which, in what must surely seem a wild gesture, I see as a spin-off of what I plan to call *State fetishism*, so studiously, so dangerously, ignored by the great theorists of the poetics of the commodity-fetish such as Walter Benjamin and T. W. Adorno, with the crucial exception of the implications of the latter's early work with Max Horkheimer on German fascism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>1</sup> It is to the peculiar sacred and erotic attraction, even thrallship, combined with disgust, which the State holds for its subjects, that I wish to draw attention in my drawing the figure of State fetishism, and here we would do well to recall that for Nietzsche, good and evil, intertwined in the double helix of attraction and repulsion, are so much aesthetic-moralistic renderings of the social structure of might. Given the considerable, indeed massive, might of the modern State, it would seem obvious enough that here we encounter the most fabulous machination for such rendering: "I know nothing sublime," wrote the young Edmund Burke in his enquiry into our ideas of the beautiful, "which is not some modification of power."<sup>2</sup> But how is it possible to emote an abstraction, and what do I mean by State fetishism?

I mean a certain aura of might as figured by the Leviathan in Hobbes' rendering as that "mortal god," or, in a quite different mode, by Hegel's

intricately argued vision of the State as not merely the embodiment of reason, of the Idea, but also as an impressively organic unity, something much greater than the sum of its parts.<sup>3</sup> We are dealing with an obvious yet neglected topic, clumsily if precisely put as the cultural constitution of the modern State—with a big S—the fetish quality of whose holism can be nicely brought to our self-awareness by pointing not only to the habitual way we so casually identify “the State” as a being unto itself, animated with a will and mind of its own, but also by pointing to the not infrequent signs of exasperation provoked by the aura of the big S—as with Shlomo Avineri, for instance, writing in the Introduction to his *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*:

Once one writes ‘State’ rather than ‘state,’ Leviathan and Behemoth are already casting their enormous and oppressive shadows,

while the celebrated anthropologist, A.R. Radcliffe (in his student days nicknamed “Anarchy”) Brown, in the preface to the classic *African Political Systems* (first published in 1940) also puts his finger on the palpable unreality of State fetishism when he denounces it as *fictional*.<sup>4</sup> Yet he writes as if mere words, very much including his own, were weapons; being such they can whisk away the spell of their own mischief.

In writings on political institutions there is a good deal of discussion about the nature and origin of the State, which is usually represented as being an entity over and above the human individuals who make up a society, having as one of its attributes something called ‘sovereignty,’ and sometimes spoken of as having a will (law being often defined as the will of the State) or as issuing commands. *The State in this sense does not exist in the phenomenal world; it is a fiction of the philosophers.*<sup>5</sup>

“What does exist,” he goes on to declaim, “is an organization, i.e. a collection of individual human beings connected to a complex set of relations.” He insists that “there is no such thing as the power of the State; there are only, in reality, powers of individuals—kings, prime ministers, magistrates, policemen, party bosses and voters.” Please note here the repeated emphasis on Being—on “what does exist,” and powers contained therein. It’s all so plausible at first and so desirable too, this seduction by real policemen, real kings, and real voters. And don’t think I’m pulling your leg here. Jean Genêt might pull at the policemen’s penis in search of the really real. But we who

might learn some lessons about Stately reality from Anarchy Brown and the genealogy of Anthropology figured by his stately presence should pause and think about why he is so hostile to what he describes as the fiction of the State—the big S. For what the notion of State fetishism directs us to is precisely the existence and reality of the *political power* of this *fiction*, its powerful insubstantiality.

### The State as Mask

Some thirty years after Radcliffe-Brown’s dismissive *pronunciamiento* on the unreality of the big S, Philip Abrams in a truly path-breaking analysis, referred to this fiction in a way at once more clear and complicating:

The state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is [and] it starts its life as an implicit construct; it is then reified—as the *res publica*, the public reification, no less—and acquires an overt symbolic identity progressively divorced from practice as an illusory account of practice.<sup>6</sup>

And he calls on sociologists to attend to the senses in which the state does not exist. Like Avineri he sees the big S as misrepresentation—Radcliffe-Brown’s “fiction”—yet credits it, as does Avineri, with mighty force, not merely in the maw of Leviathan but more to the point in work-a-day “democracies” such as Great Britain’s, where “armies and prisons, the *Special* patrol and the deportation orders as well as the whole process of fiscal extraction” depend critically on State fetishism.<sup>7</sup> For, he argues, it is the association of these repressive instruments “with the idea of the state and the invocation of that idea that silences protest, excuses force and convinces the rest of us that the fate of the victims is just and necessary.”<sup>8</sup>

Now the question has to be raised as to what can be done to this misrepresentation by means of which reification acquires alarming fetish-power? Abrams’ striking figure of mask and reality—of the State as not the reality behind the mask of political reality, but as the *mask* which prevents us seeing political reality—is a dazzling and disturbing representation. For it not only implicates the State in the cultural construction of reality, but delineates that reality as masked and inherently deceptive, real and unreal at one and the same time—in short, a thoroughly nervous Nervous System.

Therefore how strikingly fitting, how (unintentionally) magical, is Abrams's response to the power of the reality-effect of the mask. "My suggestion," he writes,

is that we should recognize that cogency of the *idea* of the state as an ideological power and treat that as a compelling object of analysis. But the very reasons that require us to do that also require us not to *believe* in the idea of the state, not to concede, even as an abstract formal-object, the existence of the state.<sup>9</sup>

And as an inspired dada-like shock tactic exercise in how to pull this off, he recommends that we should, as an experiment, try substituting the word *God* for the word *state*—which is exactly what I intend to do, since State fetishism begs just such an excursus, provided one is up to dealing with the profound ambiguity which, according to one track of influential Western analysis, the sacred is said to contain.

### The Impure Sacred

What I want to consider is the everlastingly curious notion, bound to raise hackles, that not only God but evil is part of the notion of sacredness—that bad is not just bad but holy to boot. Emile Durkheim labeled this holy evil in 1912 as "impure sacred" and scantily illustrated it in but seven pages in his major work on primitive religion, by reference to the fresh human corpse, to the forces conjured by the sorcerer, and the blood issuing from the genital organs of women—all of which, he insisted, from his ethnographic evidence from central Australia as much as from W. Robertson Smith's *The Religion of the Semites*, inspired men with fear, into which horror generally entered, yet could, through a simple modification of external circumstance, become holy and propitious powers endowing life. While according to this formulation there is the most radical antagonism between the pure and the impure sacred, there is, nevertheless, close kinship between them as exhibited in the fact that the respect accorded the pure sacred is not without a measure of horror, and the fear accorded the impure sacred is not without reverence. Hence not just Genêt the homosexual in a homophobic society, not just Genêt the thief, in a State built on the right to property, but Saint Genêt.

### Reason & Violence

Before you use a military force, you should use the force of reason.

—Governor Mario Cuomo<sup>10</sup>

Where this confluence of the pure with the impure sacred is most relevant to the modern State is where the crucial issue of "legitimacy" of the institution abuts what Max Weber regarded as a crucial part of the definition of the State—namely, its monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a given territory. The other part of that definition, of course, as with Hegel's, was the State's embodiment of Reason, as in the bureaucratic forms.

What needs emphasis here is how this conjuncture of violence and reason is so obvious, and yet is at the same time denied, and therefore how important it is for acute understanding of the cultural practice of Statecraft to appreciate the very obtuseness of this obviousness, as when we scratch our heads about the concept of "war crimes"—it being legal for the US State to incessantly bomb the Iraqi enemy, but a crime for the Iraqi State to beat up the pilots dropping the bombs. Such legal niceties testify to the self-contradictory yet ever more necessary attempts to rationalize violence.

That is why there is something frightening, I think, merely in saying that this conjunction of reason and violence exists, not only because it makes violence scary, imbued with the greatest legitimating force there can be, reason itself, and not only because it makes reason scary by indicating how it's snuggled deep into the armpit of terror, but also because we so desperately need to cling to reason—as instituted—as the bulwark against the terrifying anomie and chaos pressing in on all sides. There has to be a reason, and we have to use reason. Yet another part of us welcomes the fact that reason—as instituted—has violence at its disposal, because we feel that that very anomie and chaos will respond to naught else. And consider how we slip in and out of recognizing and disavowal. Consider this as Stately cultural practice. Nothing could be more obvious than that the State, with its big S rearing, uses the sweet talk of reason and reasonable rules as its velvet glove around the fist of steel. This is folklore. This is an instinctual way of reacting to the big S. But on the other hand this conjunction of reason-and-violence rapidly becomes confusing when we slow down a little and try to figure it

out: so much reason versus so many units of violence? the mere threat of violence hovering way in the background of Kafka's cave? different types of people affected in different places and different times get a different mix? And so forth. Weber himself registers this latent yet vital presence of violence where he notes in his famous essay, "Politics As A Vocation," delivered at Munich University in 1918, that even with the legitimacy of domination based on rationally created rules, which he portrays as "the domination exercised by the modern 'servant of the state' and by all bearers of power who in this respect resemble him," that "it is to be understood that, in reality, obedience is determined by highly robust motives of fear and hope."<sup>11</sup>

And in noting Weber's inclusion if not emphasis on violence as what defined the modern State, we cannot forget how decidedly flat, how instrumental, his notion of violence generally seems to be; how decidedly reified it is, as if violence were a substance, so many ergs of spermatic effluvial power that the father exerts in the private fastness of the family, with permission of the State, and that the State exerts over civil society and, at times, over other States. What is missing here, and I mean this to be a decisive critique, is the intrinsically mysterious, mystifying, convoluting, plain scary, mythical, and arcane cultural properties and power of violence to the point where violence is very much an end in itself—a sign, as Benjamin put it, of the existence of the gods.<sup>12</sup>

So, what I wish to suggest with considerable urgency is that what is politically important in my notion of State fetishism is that this necessary institutional interpenetration of reason by violence not only diminishes the claims of reason, casting it into ideology, mask, and effect of power, but also that *it is precisely the coming together of reason-and-violence in the State that creates, in a secular and modern world, the bigness of the big S*—not merely its apparent unity and the fictions of will and mind thus inspired, but the auratic and quas sacred quality of that very inspiration, a quality we quite willingly impute to the ancient States of China, Egypt, and Peru, for example, or to European Absolutism, but not to the rational-legal State that now stands as ground to our being as citizens of the world.

### 1886, A Surreal Moment, The Reemergence of the Sacred: Torture Should Give Way to Totemism

W. Robertson Smith (author of *The Religion of the Semites*), wrote a letter in 1886 to the publisher of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, of which he was editor:<sup>13</sup>

I hope that Messrs. Black [publishers of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*] understand that Totemism is a subject of growing importance, daily mentioned in magazines and papers, but of which there is no good account anywhere—precisely one of those cases where we have an opportunity of being ahead of every one and getting some reputation. There is no article in the volume for which I am more solicitous. I have taken much personal pains with it, guiding [James George] Frazer carefully in his treatment; and he has put about seven months' hard work on it to make it the standard article on the subject. We must make room for it, whatever else goes. "Torture," though a nice paper, is not at all necessary, for people can learn about torture elsewhere, and the subject is one of decaying and not of rising interest.

### The State As Sacred: Rejuxtaposing the Colonial Gaze

Elsewhere—always elsewhere. Decay. But a nice paper. Such is the fate of torture, especially in the face of the rising star of Totemism. So much for the decline of the sacred. That is why the restoration of that mysterious entity as an object worthy of study by Georges Bataille's College of Sociology group in the late 1930s, and precisely its attempt to examine the place of the sacred in the modern State, strikes me as a timely task—one that I myself see as involving a somewhat larger project, yet to be worked out, namely that of rejuxtaposing the terms of the colonial inquiry, recycling and thus transforming the anthropology developed in Europe and North America through the study of colonized peoples back into and onto the societies in which it was instituted, where the terms and practices imposed upon and appropriated from the colonies, like *fetish*, *sorcery* (the *maleficium*), and *taboo*, are redeemed and come alive with new intensity.<sup>14</sup> As will become obvious from even this short attempt, such a rejuxtaposition is hardly a simple practice, certainly more than just reversing the light from the dark zones of empire. Let us begin with the fetish.

### The Fetish: Genealogy of Making

Bill Pietz has presented us with a genealogy of the *fetish* that grounds this eminently strange word in a western history of *making*, rooted in strategic social relationships of trade, religion, slaving, and modern science.<sup>15</sup> To this end he discusses certain social practices in the commerce of ancient Rome (separating natural products from *factitious*, artificially cultivated, ones), in early Roman Christianity (with God making man in His image, but man denied, therefore, similar sorts of making), in the “bad making” of the *maleficium* of the magic of the Middle Ages, in the notion of the fetish or *fetiso* in the Portuguese pidgin trading language of the West African slave routes, and, finally, in the Positivist rendering of fetishism as the sheen or mystical component of the Positivist worship of objectness itself. Quite a story.

To develop and bring to our comprehension a genealogy like this strikes me as curiously analogous to the fetish itself, in that such genealogizing assumes that the meaning of the word bears traces of epochal histories of trading with the edges of the known universe and that, although it is these traces which endow the word—as Raymond Williams in his *Keywords* might have said—with an active social history pushing into and activated by the present, these trace-meanings are nevertheless lost to present consciousness.<sup>16</sup> What is left, and what is active and powerful, is the word itself, enigmatically incomplete. Just the signifier, we could say, bereft of its erased significations gathered and dissipated through the mists of trade, religion, witchcraft, slavery, and what has come to be called science—and this is precisely the formal mechanism of fetishism (as we see it used by Marx and by Freud), whereby the signifier depends upon yet erases its signification.

What Pietz does for us with his genealogizing is restore certain traces and erasures and weave a spell around what is, socially speaking, at stake in *making*. This amounts to a European history of consciousness making itself though making objects, and this involves a compulsion to fuse and separate and fuse once again the maker with the making with the thing made, wrestling with poignancy and urgency with what we might call Vico’s insight, which is also Marx’s—God made nature, but it is man who makes history and thus can come to understand it by understanding this making. In short,

the fetish takes us into the realm of praxis and to genealogize the fetish the way Pietz does is in effect to problematize praxis—the subject of making itself through making the object—and by the same token this take us into the realm of what has come to be called “agency”—the vexing problem of individual versus social determination. Now in the genealogy of fetishism as I write it, this vexing issue can be translated into a confrontation of sorcery with sociology, the sorcery of the *maleficium* that informed the fetish-word in the era of Iberian expansion into Africa and the colonization of the New World, on the other hand, and *sociology* as with Comte’s successor Emile Durkheim, the sociologist’s sociologist, on the other. It is to sociology as a form of inquiry enlivened by fetish powers that I now turn, and later, with Genêt, to the revelatory epistemology of the *maleficium*.

### II: SOCIOLOGY

It was Durkheim and not the savage who made society into a god.  
E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*<sup>17</sup>

How strange and multitudinous a notion “society” becomes when we thingify it, as if this very act makes it slip away from us. “Social facts are things,” Durkheim grimly reiterated time and again in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (first published 1895), desperate to nail down this elusive thinghood. Things of God or things made? we might with a twinge of anxiety ask in turn, pondering the place of things-made in the abyss created between God and the sorcerer. And in keeping with that discourse, should we not allow the terminology to more fully express its sacral bent, and instead of saying social facts are *things*, say social facts are *reification*, thus entering not only into the sacrosanct language of Latin but into the holy darkness created by the Luckacsian *thing* (as in “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”)? Thus Steven Lukes, in his study of Durkheim, aptly pin-points the crucial flip-flop from *res* to *deus*, the instability at the heart of the fetishization of “society”—from thing to god:

Hence, above all, his [Durkheim’s] talk of “*la société*” as a “reality” distinct from the “individual,” which led him to reify, even deify “society,” to treat it as a *deus ex machina*, to attribute to it “powers and qualities as mysterious and baffling as any assigned to the gods by the religions of this world.”<sup>18</sup>

The dismay expressed by exponents of Anglo common sense at what is seen as mysticism in Durkheim's sociology is as ubiquitous as it is self-defeating. Hence the valiant attempts (as with Radcliffe-Brown for example) to extract social facticity clean of its mystical penumbra. Take this heroic attempt to sever the Durkheimian twins, the *social fact* from the *social conscience collectif* in the Introduction to the English translation of the *Rules*:

Durkheim's method, most suggestive in itself, yet involves, it so happens, the use of the hypothesis of a collective consciousness; it results in a deplorable effort to interpret social phenomena in terms of this alleged consciousness [and thus] Durkheim is not singular among men of science in being more valuable in respect of the byproducts of his theory than in his main contention.<sup>19</sup>

And that erratic genius, Georges Sorel, himself no slouch when it came to both using and theorizing the powers of mystery in modern society (as in his *Reflections on Violence*, 1915), claimed that Durkheim said it was unnecessary to introduce the notion of a social mind, but reasoned as if he were introducing it.<sup>20</sup>

In that formidably important book, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), Talcott Parsons represents this flip-flop from thing to god, not as the inevitable outcome of the very concept of "society," but as a movement embedded in a more familiarly acceptable form, that of narrative—an adventure of ideas in which first there was Durkheim of the Rules and of The Division of Labor, the positivist empiricist who understood social facts to be things, external and constraining *faits sociaux*, and then, years later, there emerged a new Durkheim, the idealist, beginning with his desire to identify the crucial quality of social facticity as legal and normative rules resulting, finally, with his emphasis on the weave of moral obligations as the constitutive basis to "society."<sup>21</sup>

We will have need to recall this adventure of ideas from *thing* to *deus* through the various types of rules—of fact, of law, of norm, and of morality—when we come to a certain sexual quality of the law and of breaking the law, the beauty and libidinality of transgression, and the place of the sacred in the profanity of modern life, particularly French versions of that life, from Georges Bataille's College of (non-Parsonian) Sociology of the late 1930s, onward into the post war period with Jean Genêt. Suffice it to reinforce the point that this noble attempt to invent for the Founding Father

of Sociology a narrative of the concept "society," first thing, then God, is the consequence of the inability to appreciate that the concept is *both these simultaneously* and, in any event, the fetish character of the "social fact" as sheer thing and as moral thing is here strikingly conveyed. Which brings us to totems, their sacred power, and the rule of old men.

### Intoxication

The fetish is extensively theorized—not as fetish but as totem<sup>22</sup>—in what is in many ways Durkheim's greatest work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), the work that Parsons sees as occupying the fulcrum in the adventure of ideas where the thing becomes a god.<sup>23</sup> There is poignancy in Parson's representation of this travail of ideas from thing to God, for it is an inexorable journey and the stakes are high—the base of knowledge itself. Parsons writes:

This tendency [to emphasize the idea and value factor in the constitution of society] culminated in his sociological epistemology where he identified the social factor with the a priori source of the [Kantian] categories, thus finally breaking the bond which had held it as a part of empirical reality. But having done this it was impossible for him to get back to empirical reality.<sup>24</sup>

It must be chilling to lock yourself out of empirical reality. But when confronted by the fact that it was this very "sociological epistemology" that allowed for the brilliance of the *Année sociologique* school, I wonder if it was such a terrible fate. My argument, of course, is that this brilliance was not the result of a narrative step-by-step development from social fact as thing to social fact as moral web and the fetishization of Society (as *deus*), but instead it was the result of a specific epistemic tension within the very notion of the Social as both thing and godly at one and the same time. In other words, far from being an unfortunate side effect, it was Durkheim's very fetishization of "society" that provided the intellectual power of his sociology. Reification-and-fetishism—*thing-and-deus*—was a powerful mode of reckoning in modern society, nowhere more so than when applied to "society" itself, and Durkheim was correct in problematizing—to the degree of fanaticism—the invisible presence, the intangibility, the literally unspeakable but begging to be spoken nature of "society." That is why I think it so half-

hearted, so mindlessly self-congratulatory, to incessantly make the criticism that he (to follow Lukes)

reified [the distinctions between society and the individual] into the abstractions of "society" and the "individual." Indeed as Morris Ginsberg justly observed, "in general 'la société' had an intoxicating effect on his mind, hindering further analysis."<sup>25</sup>

But as against these strictures of Messrs Ginsberg and Lukes isn't it this very intoxication that, far from hindering, facilitates further analysis? Instead of trying to cleave what is taken to be sober from intoxicated thought, why not seize upon the intoxication itself and wonder why—as so named—it is so necessary and powerful a force in this influential Sociology centrally located in the Positivist tradition? As Walter Benjamin, following the Surrealists, might have elaborated on his insight into modern society as animated by new mythic powers located in the tactility of the commodity-image, the task is neither to resist nor admonish the fetish quality of modern culture, but rather to acknowledge, even submit to its fetish-powers, and attempt to channel them in revolutionary directions. Get with it! Get in touch with the fetish!

#### In Touch With the Fetish: Inscription and Erasure

A picture keeps swimming in and out of focus in *The Elementary Forms*. It comes from Baldwin Spencer and Frank J. Gillen's two pioneering ethnographies (1899, 1904) of people native to central and north-central Australia, and it concerns the character of sacred objects called Churinga, the way they are touched and rubbed, the way they are emblematised with abstract designs and—according to Durkheim—stand in some ineffably complex way, involving the erasure of their meaning as signs, for the abstraction that is our old otherwise unrepresentable friend, "society," itself. It turns out that it is from the peculiar way these objects embody and erase that embodiment of society, that their sacred power derives.

To read Durkheim is to feel the force of these mysterious objects, standing at the center of group cults and thought by many anthropologists at one time to represent, as "totemism," a universal stage in the history of religions and serving to hold a group together. Concentrating great power, which

"radiates to a distance and communicates itself to all the surroundings," having marvelous properties to heal sickness and ensure the reproduction of animal and plant life, the powers of these sacred objects can be communicated to officiants and their assistants by being "rubbed over the members and stomachs of the faithful after being covered with grease."<sup>27</sup> Throughout the *Elementary Forms* (as Rodney Needham and Roger Keesing have pointed out) Durkheim is disposed to reify whatever it is that is meant by sanctity, representing it as a spreading force such as might be conveyed by electricity or by fluids, unprepared contact with which can be shocking and even fatal.<sup>28</sup>

It is, strangely enough, the designs on the Churinga—the designs in themselves, the mark—that seem to Durkheim crucial to this force.

Now in themselves, the churinga are objects of wood and are distinguished from profane things of the same sort by only one particularity: this is that the totemic mark is drawn or engraved upon them. So it is the mark and this alone which gives them their sacred character.<sup>29</sup>

Absolutely crucial to this argument is that the mark, which bestows sanctity, is in itself not only sanctifying but is *more sacred than what it represents*—the totem, animal species, whatever. Let us take this step by step.

Durkheim stresses that the sacred nature of the object comes not from imputations of an inner soul or from the object being an image of an ancestor's body, but that the sacred power

comes to it, then, from some other source, and whence could it come, if not from the totemic stamp which it bears? It is to this image, therefore, that the demonstrations of the rite are really addressed; it is this which sanctifies the object upon which it is carved.<sup>30</sup>

The designs represent specific things, what he calls *totems*, such as trees, frogs, kangaroos. But the designs themselves are stupendously abstract, dots and circles—which fact Durkheim seizes upon with the curiously mimetic argument that this abstraction indicates the diffuse and abstract character of "society" (which, in his reading, the design stands for).<sup>31</sup> In the picture of a design of the frog totem (dreaming) I would have liked to have presented from Spencer and Gillen's 1899 monograph, the three large concentric circles—according to their "level" of interpretation—represent celebrated eucalyptus trees along the Hugh River at Imanda which, Spencer and Gillen

This empty space is where I would like to have presented Spencer and Gillen's drawing of the frog totem because it seems to me next to impossible to get the points about representation across without this amazing image. But my friend Professor Annette Hamilton, of Macquarie University, Sydney, tells me that to reproduce the illustration would be considered sacrilege by Aboriginal people—which vindicates not only the power of the design but of the prohibitions against its being seen, strenuously noted but not observed by Spencer and Gillen themselves.

say, is the center of the group of the frog totem to which the owner of the totem belongs.<sup>32</sup>

The straight lines on one side of the Churinga represent the trees' large roots, and the little curves lines at one end stand for the smaller roots. Note that frogs are said to come out of the roots of these trees. Smaller concentric circles represent smaller roots of trees and, what to me is a radical shift in representational logic, the dotted lines alongside the edge of the Churinga are tracks of frogs hopping in the sand of the river bed. We would probably want to call this an abstract—a super-abstract—representation, but it has a decidedly mimetic concreteness to it also, as registered by those frog-tracks. This type of abstraction thus turns out to be curiously complex—like the fetish itself; spiritually material, materialistically spiritual.

Now this peculiar conflation and destabilization of (what we generally take to be) abstraction and figuration is intimately bound to the most decisive operation Durkheim carries out in order to derive the very notion of "society" as well as its sacred quality. I want you to hold these things together—the image of the old men hugging their totems; the terrific physicality of those mysterious objects; the central importance Durkheim

gives to the design over and beyond what the design represents; the curious abstractness of the design—and I want you to realize that everything turns on his proposal that the representation is more important than the represented, that the totemic design itself is not only sacred and powerful, but more so than the totemic species or entity it represents, and more so than the clan it also represents, because it *in some way* represents the great and complex abstraction "society." The question then fairly becomes: what is this way—the way, we might say, of the fetish itself?

What seems crucial in this predominance of the signifier over the signified is a certain materialization; materialization by inscription. The elementary forms are not, to Durkheim's way of thinking, to be saddled with the Ur-presence of voice, nor with the hand-wringing of Lévi-Strauss's appraisal of *civilization* (as in *White Man's Civilization*) as a writing lesson.<sup>33</sup> To the contrary, writing is the elementary form, lying at the very beginnings of thought itself, in its aboriginality. For Durkheim it is the visual and tactile image which is crucial, not the spoken sign.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the representation of the totem by means of a design is, he feels, in response to the basic need to create an image, *no matter what the image is itself!* Put otherwise, the image here is an image of the need for images. In Durkheim's words, the Australian's urge to represent the totem

is in order not to have a portrait of it before his eyes which would constantly renew the sensation of it; it is merely because he feels the need of representing the idea which he forms of it by means of material and external signs, *no matter what these signs may be.*<sup>35</sup>

Given that these signs are of aesthetic value as well as being, he says, "above all, a written language," it follows, he says—in one breathtaking swoop—that the origins of design and writing are one and the same and that man "commenced designing, not so much to fix upon wood or stone beautiful forms which charm the senses, as to translate his thought into matter."<sup>36</sup>

### The Fetish is Where Thought and Object Interpenetrate in the Signification of Collective Sentiment

It is of course to this very reciprocation of thought in worked matter, and of worked matter into thought, that much of the puzzle (and all of the power) of fetishism lies. This is where I began, following Pietz' genealogy of the fetish, from ancient Roman trading through modern slaving, as a genealogy of praxis, of the maker making him/herself. And this reciprocation of thought in worked matter and of such matter in thought is crucial to Durkheim's most basic propositions concerning the nature of thought and its relation to "society." Elsewhere in the *Elementary Forms*, the Father of Sociology states that "in general a collective sentiment can become conscious of itself only by being fixed upon some material object; but by virtue of this very fact [and this is what is so, remarkably, crucial], it participates in the nature of this object, and reciprocally, the object participates in its nature."<sup>37</sup> He also states that "the emblem is not merely a convenient process for clarifying the sentiment society has of itself; it also serves to create this sentiment; it is one of its constituent elements."

So much for the social construction of signs as arbitrary!

### Sociology as the Art of Magical Correspondences

This reciprocation of collective thought in matter and of matter in collective thought, such that worked-upon matter itself acquires an animated and hence a fetish character, is crucial for what Talcott Parsons calls Durkheim's "sociological epistemology," whereby Durkheim sociologizes Kant's schematism with often wonderful results (as is also the case, for instance, in the gemlike essay of his colleague, Robert Hertz, "On the Predominance of the Right Hand").<sup>38</sup> What I think is exceedingly remarkable here is not only the boldness of Durkheim's sociological argument that Kant's a priori categories of space, time, cause, and so forth, stem from and express socially established classification as in settlement pattern and kinship, but that the epistemic basis of the science of sociology he was forging depends completely on an unacknowledged yet profoundly magical notion of natural correspondences.<sup>39</sup>

He asks whether the (Kantian) categories, because they directly translate social organization, can be applied to rest of nature only as metaphors, as "artificial symbols" with "no connection with reality." And he answers with a decisive No! The connections are real and not artificial because society is part of nature—that is why "ideas elaborated on the model of social things can aid us in thinking of another department of nature."

It is at least true that if these ideas play the role of symbols when they are turned aside from their original signification, *they are at least well-founded symbols*. If a sort of artificiality enters into them from the mere fact that they are constructed concepts, it is an artificiality which follows nature very closely and which is constantly approaching it still more closely.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, it is the *social* origin of the ideas of time, space, class, cause, or personality, that leads to the theorem that "they are not without foundation in the nature of things."<sup>41</sup>

Where does this leave us with regard to (Durkheimian) Sociology—the modern science of man? What seemed like the most rigorous case that could ever be put for a science of society seeing society as an autonomous sphere now suddenly collapses, imploding into nature, with which it becomes subtly congruous.

This I take to be the law of the fetish itself. The most rigorously sociological sociology in the history of Western Man turns out to be bound, hand and foot to fetishism from which it is itself inseparable, and of which it becomes exemplary.

### The Peeling Off of the Signifier and the Power Thereof

Durkheim provides spell-binding evocations of what I can only call imageric seduction, first of the natives, then—through them—of us. "It is the emblem that is sacred," he reiterates, and in noting that it can be painted on the body and on the rock face of caves, he attempts to invoke the attitude of the beholders toward the image drawn in human blood on the sand for the Intichiuma ("life-endowing") ritual of the emu totem.

When the design has been made the faithful remain seated on the ground before it, in attitude of the purest devotion. If we give the word a sense

corresponding to the mentality of the primitive, we may say that they adore it.<sup>42</sup>

Here we are inching toward a critical dismantling of the sign in which the image lifts off from what it is meant to represent. In this peeling off of the signifier from its signified, *the representation acquires not just the power of the represented, but power over it, as well.*

The representations of the totem are therefore more actively powerful than the totem itself.<sup>43</sup>

It is fascinating that what we might call (with some perplexity) the *image itself* should be granted such a power—not the signified, the sacred totemic species, animal, vegetable, and so forth, but the signifier is itself prized apart from its signification so as to create a quite different architecture of the sign—an architecture in which the signified is erased. Thus can Durkheim make his final claim that what is “represented” by sacred objects is “society” itself:

Totemism is the religion, not of such and such animals or men or images, but of an anonymous and impersonal force, found in each of these beings but not to be confounded with any of them.<sup>44</sup>

Which force, for Jean Baudrillard, in the form of the image, would be the anonymous and impersonal one of the latest form of the commodity; the force of the capitalist market functioning at its silkiest postmodern best. Which force, for Marx, in the form of commodity fetishism, would exist and be effective *precisely on account of erasure*—of the erasure locked into the commodity in its exchange-value phase ensuring its dislocation, its being prized apart from the social and particularist context of its production. Which force, for Durkheim, is “society.”<sup>45</sup>

This process of inscription and erasure finds an uncannily mimetic representation in Spencer and Gillen’s description of the Churinga of the Arunta people of the central desert, and like all mimesis it inheres in the biological organism, in this case the aged male body, the hands and the stomach, into which the design disappears. While most Churinga have patterns incised with tooth of an opossum, they write, many are “scarcely decipherable, owing to the constant rubbing to which they have been subjected at the hands of generation after generation of natives.” For “whenever the Churinga

are examined by the old men they are, especially the wooden ones, very carefully rubbed over with the hands” and pressed against the stomach.<sup>46</sup>

### III: MALEFICUM; THE BAD-MAKING

In Pietz’ genealogy of the fetish, the *maleficium*, or the sorcerer’s “bad-making,” enjoys a substantial place in the layering of histories that stratify the fetish-word. This seems particularly the case for the contribution of the *maleficio* in the Iberian Peninsula at the time of Portuguese slave trading along the West coast of Africa, and later on during the time of the Spanish expansion into the New World. Hence, as an instance of what I earlier proposed as the juxtapositioning of anthropology, I would now like not so much to *study* the sorcerer’s tool of the *maleficium* as to *deploy* it as a tactic for drawing out some of the fetish power of the modern State. My deployment is unabashedly plagiaristic and comes in the name of Genêt, Saint Genêt who, because of the maleficent role in which Society cast him, and which he so manifestly made the most of, was able, to the extent that love be not blind, to illuminate the fetish force of Stately prowess. My use of Genêt as *maleficium* is not to ensorcel anyone, least of all readers or the State, but rather to do what I have seen the *maleficio* so good at doing over my years spent with healers in southwest Colombia, which is to stir the pot of discussion and scratch heads as to the perennial problems of understanding evil and misfortune in relation to social process. The *maleficio*, in other words, brings out the sacred sheen of the secular, the magical underbelly of nature, and this is especially germane to an inquiry into State fetishism in that (as I have discussed earlier, following Durkheim’s view of the sacred) the pure and the impure sacred are violently at odds and passionately interlocked at one and the same time. It is to this ability to draw out the sacred quality of State power, and to out-fetishize its fetish quality, that the *maleficium*—as I use it—speaks.

#### Taboo; Transgression and Fantasy

Predictably, given his emphasis on the representation over the represented, Durkheim states that “contrarily to all that could be foreseen,” the prohibitions referring to the *representation* of the totem are “more numerous,

stricter, and more severely enforced than those pertaining to the totem itself." He emphasizes that uninitiated men and all women are prohibited access to the representations. Indeed, the very first thing Spencer and Gillen say in their chapter on the Churinga is that they are sacred objects "which, on penalty of death or very severe punishment, such as blinding by means of a fire-stick, are never allowed to be seen by women or uninitiated men."<sup>47</sup>

We are then in a situation in which "society," inscribed and erased in thereby sacred objects, can, in this peculiarly objectified and highly concentrated form, only be seen and touched by one, presumably rather small, group of persons within "society." This raises two somewhat unsettling questions. First, whether the sacred force of these objects arises only in conjunction with such seeing, touching, and absorption into the initiated male body? Second, whether it is the object's sacred force which impels such powerful taboos, as vividly expressed in the punishment of blinding with fire or, to the apparent contrary, *is it the societal prohibition itself*—the taboo—which is decisive to the sanctification of the object?

This second question tends to undermine a lot of things. It moves us into another type of world where not the solidity of substance but the diaphonous veil of negation bears the world on its back, and it makes us pose further questions: Is the sanctity of the whole that is "society" always, throughout history, in the hands of a few select men? What happens to this sacred power, expression of the whole, with the decline of the power of religion and the emergence of the modern secular State (the question posed by Bataille's "College of Sociology")? Finally, if it is restriction to a small group together with the prohibition that is decisive in sanctification, might it turn out that it is not just the sacred knowledge of myth and ritual of the *initiated* which constitutes the power of the sacred, but that instead such power derives from the *fantasies of the people prohibited* concerning the (supposed) nature of that sacred knowledge?

### Secrets of State

The real official secret, however, is the secret of the non-existence of the state.

Philip Abrams, "Notes On The Difficulty of Studying The State."<sup>48</sup>

Not the anthropology of Australian aborigines but the memoir of a sheep farmer born in 1874 in Tierra Del Fuego provides me with the secret of the

secret, which is to say the real, official secret. The son of British missionaries, E. Lucas Bridges grew up speaking the language of the Ona people, with whom he played as a child. Towards the end of a long life spent in the land of the Fuegians he wrote down the curious history of his now-legendary family, in which he paid a good deal of attention to the Indians, especially some Onas, into whose Lodge he had been initiated. Only men were initiated, and only initiated men were allowed close to or into the Lodge. No woman was allowed close, under penalty of death. But long ago, so the story went, things were different. For then the lodge belonged exclusively to the women. There they practised and passed on to younger women the secrets of magic and sorcery of which the men were ignorant. Frightened, the men banded together and massacred the adult women. They married the young ones and, so as to prevent them from reconstituting the link between the feminine and magical power, made their own secret society wherein they supped on supernatural nourishment brought them by a handful of monstrous and short-tempered women-hating spirits such as the two fierce sisters, the red one from red clay, the white one from cumulus clouds, and the horned man who came out of the lichen-covered rocks. When Bridges was taken into the Lodge, he was told that he would make a good impersonation of Short, a spirit who came from the grey rocks and wore a piece of parchmentlike skin over the face and head. Grey down from birds was applied to the body, and there was a good deal of variation in that the arm and the opposite leg could be painted in white or in red, with spots or stripes of the other color superimposed. Periodically, in the company of the men, Short would emerge from the Lodge, a large wigwam set a quarter of a mile or so from the village, and dart unpredictably around the village, causing the women to flee and hide their heads. On other occasions the women and uninitiated men would be summoned to appear in front of the Lodge where, to the accompaniment of an unearthly noise, the cruel sister from the clouds, dressed in heaped-up furs covered in white chalk, would slowly make her way from a clump of trees to the lodge's entrance. When the horned man appeared with his mask of red-rimmed eyes, the women fled home, threw themselves face down on the ground in groups, and covered their heads with skins.

The initiation of a man demanded ordeals and isolated journeys in which he would be shadowed by a spirit-monster, and the culminating moment arrived in the Lodge when he had to fight one of them. Bridges was present when a

terrified novice was forced to engage in combat with Short, whose anger and disgust at the novice had grown to almost a frenzy. Unbeknown to the novice, the outcome was set in advance so that the novice would always win and when, in this case, he finally threw his spirit-opponent to the ground and the identity of his attacker was revealed to be a fellow-human in disguise, he attacked him with such fury, writes Bridges, "that he had to be dragged off, to the accompaniment of roars of laughter, in which Short joined heartily." Thus the novice became an inner member of the Lodge.

As this laughter finally, after many adventures of transmission through the colonial lifeline reaches through me to you, we can appreciate a certain plenitude in the hollowness—the catharsis following the vicious struggle by the firelight leading to the eventual revelation of the monster's true nature previously concealed by its appearance of parchment, paint, and down. But the catharsis is far from fulfilling. The revelation makes the novice rage. The duped then becomes the duper, obligated to support the deception. The basis of this primitive "State" is male theater organized around a female audience, and it exists as a hollow core, a meticulously shielded emptiness and magnificent deceit in whose making all members of the society, so it would seem, conspire. When Bridges suggested to the men that the women might only be acting so as to please them, the men's reaction left him in no doubt as to "their firm conviction of the women's blind credulity." To Bridges it seemed impossible that the women could be deceived, yet he noted that the male initiates, who lived constantly with their mothers for twelve years or so and would surely have heard any expression of disbelief, were undoubtedly terrified when they came face to face with Short for the first time. He leaves us with this reminder. "One thing is certain: that if any woman had been indiscreet enough to mention her doubts, even to another woman, and word of it had reached the ears of the men, the renegade would have been killed—and most likely others with her. Maybe the women suspected; if they did they kept it to themselves."<sup>49</sup>

Might it turn out, then, that not the basic truths, not the Being nor the ideologies of the center, but the fantasies of the marginalized concerning the secret of the center are what is most politically important to the State idea and hence State fetishism? Here the secret takes on the burden of protecting

not merely the deceit practised by the initiated men but of protecting a great epistemology, one that drives philosophers, scientists, social scientists, and policemen—the epistemology of appearance and reality in which appearance is thought to shroud a concealed truth—but not the truth that there is none. In so far as you can trust a thief, it is here where Jean Genêt's thief's journal can be our guide, juxtaposing to the majesty of the State the homoerotic emblem-fetishes of the criminal, Saint Genêt.

### Saint Genêt and The Supreme Organ

The State is above all, supremely the organ of moral discipline.

Durkheim, *Professional Ethics & Civic Morals*, 1904<sup>50</sup>

It is one of Genêt's triumphs to have brought the fetish character of the modern State into a clear and sensual focus, and this could be accomplished only by one deft in the management of the ancient art of the *maleficium*, the fetish-power intrinsic to the impure sacred. By means of his remorselessly holy yet secular blend of crime and homosexuality, he does for the State what Sartre would have him do for us—he holds out the mirror in which we might see the holiness of its monstrous self. Is it necessary here, to recall Durkheim's notion, drawn from his theorizing from turn-of-the-century monographs of primitive societies, of the kinship between the pure and the impure sacreds? And Nietzsche: "It might even be possible that what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things—maybe even one with them in essence."<sup>51</sup>

In Genêt's case, to be deft in the management of the *maleficium* means above all to be deft with the logos. I think of him not only as the transgressor of the taboo but as the one who ably registers a vision born from its diabolic logic of mystical attraction and repulsion. This is the vision of persons who, in being prohibited access to the sacred, ensure its sanctity which, far from being a thing in itself, is what we might call a self-fulfilling fantasy of power projected into an imagined center—like that of the old men rubbing their fetishes into their bodies, their adoration of these objects, as revealed to us, but not to the tribe, by the anthropologists of long ago. But this adroit

anthropology stumbles on its own taboos when it comes to gaining access, let alone reveal, the seminal centers of fetish-riddled power in its own society where male knowledge, sanctity, and age coalesce. There is no anthropology of the ruling class that rules over us, just as there is no sociology of it, either. And the time is long past for that project to have been initiated. There are institutional reasons for it not having happened. Failing that revelation, we fall back on our fantasies about the center, fantasies that in some curious back-handed and utterly effortless manner constitute that center. It is here where the great guides, the Dantes of our era, the supermarginalized such as Genêt, come forth to lead us underground. For they are, thanks to their structural malposition, blessed with vision.

### A Dominating Order

He loves criminals. Yet it seems to me that Genêt loves crime even more. And this is the point. For when I say “love of crime” I mean a love so strictly spiritual that it has to be carnal. For to love the abstraction “crime,” there is naught else to do but make love with the infamous, the practitioners of crime, which is where another strange catch arises. As Durkheim himself made much of, there can be no spirit of Crime without its Other, no crime without Law.<sup>52</sup> And so we find the thief that is Saint Genêt hopelessly in love with the Dominating Order, the shimmering power that lies as mystery in the abstraction that is the State, and carnally involved with its policemen as well as with the spirit of Crime as incarnated in criminals.

Here he is, this handsome thief, caught by a Spanish coastguard on the lookout for smugglers. It is a cold night by the ocean stretching to Morocco. Who seduces whom, the criminal or the cop? Does it matter? The policeman needs the criminal and the criminal . . . “In submitting to the whims of the coastguard I was obeying a dominating order which it was impossible not to serve, namely the Police. For the moment I was no longer a hungry, ragged vagabond whom the dogs and children chased away, nor was I the bold thief flouting the cops, but rather the favorite mistress who, beneath a starry sky soothes the conqueror. When I realized that it was up to me whether or not the smugglers landed safely, I felt responsible not only for them but for all outlaws.”<sup>53</sup>

### In That Skin

Genêt, the thief, says that for him the police form a sacred power, a troublesome power that acts directly on his soul. Please note first and foremost that when he speaks of the sanctity of the police, he is speaking of them as an institution, of that “dominating order,” not of individual policemen. And here’s the rub. It’s not a question of the particular policeman as an instantiation or symbol of the general Order. These terms are of some secondary relevance, to be sure, but there’s something else, more metonymic, more carnal, tactile and sensuously material, which is central here—and this is the issue of the fetish, of the State with its big S rearing, of the Dominating Order as that which oscillates, like Durkheim’s “society,” between *res* and *deus*, between thing and God, with a carnal and ritualised relation to objects, as with the totems. Here the policeman and his gear are precisely that—a totem, with whom the Saint that is the thief establishes just such a carnal and ritualized relationship. Hence Bernardini, the secret policeman whom he met in Marseilles, “was to me the visible, though perhaps brief manifestation on earth of a demoniacal organization as sickening as funeral rites, as funeral ornaments, yet as awe-inspiring as royal glory. Knowing that there, in that skin and flesh, was a particle of what I would never have hoped could be mine, I looked at him with a shudder. His dark hair was flat and glossy, as Rudolph Valentino’s used to be, with a straight white part on the left side. He was strong. His face looked rugged, somewhat granite-like, and I wanted his soul to be cruel and brutal.”<sup>54</sup> Or, again, as instantiation of this the most crucial, the ultimate State fetish-move and one which we all make and succumb to: “Little by little I came to understand his beauty. I even think that I created it, deciding that it would be precisely that face and body, on the basis of the idea of the police which they were to signify.”<sup>55</sup>

### The Invisible Presence of The Object In Which The Quality of Males Is Violently Concentrated

Again, the fetish that is the other side of the reification that is the big S: Bernadino “was not aware that, beside him, at the bar, crushed by his

huskiness and assurance, I was excited chiefly by the invisible presence of his inspector's badge. The metal object had for me the power of a cigarette lighter in the fingers of a workman, or the buckle of an army belt, of a switchblade, of a calliper, objects in which the quality of males is violently concentrated. Had I been alone with him in a dark corner, I might have been bold enough to graze the cloth, to slip my hand under the lapel where cops usually wear the badge, and I would have then trembled just as if I had been opening his fly."<sup>56</sup>

Bernadino's virility was centered on that badge just as much as in his penis. Had his penis "been roused at the touch of my fingers," continues the thief, deftly picking his pocket as well as (some of) ours, grasping at the finest nerves connecting the State with sex, reification with its fetish-creation, then that penis "would have drawn from the badge such force that it might have swelled up and taken monstrous proportions."<sup>57</sup>

### The Body of the Nation

This circulation of forceful swellings between the State and its fetish-objectifications knows other circuits and by-ways as well. These are formed by the vital organs of the big S; its cities, its ports and railways stations of entry, its language, and its borders. In reality and in fantasy this thief's journal is a record of contested journeying through the erotic zones of the Nation-State, a sexual picaresque into the abstractions, Nation and State, including very much the reification of the nation's language itself.

### The Language Mass

Reflecting on his vocation as a thief and his return to France to practice that vocation once again, the thief writes—and he is as much concerned with writing as with language—"I think that I had to hollow out, to drill through, a mass of language in which my mind would be at ease. Perhaps I wanted to accuse myself in my own language."<sup>58</sup> For him, crime is synonymous with treason, and it is very much as a traitor to his country that he understands his activity as attaining the status of art. But only with language, the language of the nation, can this art be practised. This language

binds not only the thief to his victim, but to the thief's own victimization at the hands of the Law and the laws of Language. The reifications are as endless as they are full-bodied. "To be a thief in my own country and to justify my being a thief who used the language of the robbed—who are myself, because of the importance of language—was to give to being a thief the chance to be unique. I was becoming a foreigner."<sup>59</sup>

### Ports

The city blurs into the male body burning with desire, and it is the city as port, entry to the nation, that establishes this incarnation.

"What do you feel like doing?"

"With you, everything."

"We'll see."

He didn't budge. No movement bore him toward me though my whole being wanted to be swallowed up within him, though I wanted to give my body the suppleness of osier so as to twine around him, though I wanted to warp, to bend over him. The city was exasperating. The smell of the port and its excitement inflamed me.<sup>60</sup>

This entry to the nation is immovable. "No movement bore him toward me." Yet in its very stolidity its animate quality emerges, swallowing one up into its fixed, great, and beautiful, self. This figuration of the port-city as man's body is no easy substitution. It is not a question of a code, substituting one thing for another. The thief's journal strains to establish the connection predestined in desire, the desire accompanying fetishization whereby the body is the idea of the Nation-State, here by the port where the ships of many nations lie at anchor. But how can a body be an idea? This thief is hell-bent on incarnation. He desperately wants to be in-corporated—embodied—and he has to work at it. It is his body that has to move and be supple so it can twine around, warp, and bend over the other. Hard labor. The city is exasperating. You smell the sweat, the inflammatory smell of the port. His semiosis is sensuous—or, rather, from his vantage point of forbidden desire, he can visualize the sets of mimetic correspondences which link the body to the Nation's ports.

### Borders

Why is this thief so fascinated by borders? With his innumerable border crossings, is he not caught up in his own restless form of Statecraft, circumnavigating the body as much as the Law of the nation? "After many stays in jail the thief left France. He first went to Italy. The reasons he went there are obscure. Perhaps it was the proximity of the border. Rome. Naples. Brindisi. Albania. I stole a valise on the 'Rodi' which set me ashore in Santi Quaranta. The port authorities in Corfu refused to let me stay. Before I could leave again, they made me spend the night on the boat I had hired to bring me. Afterwards it was Serbia. Afterwards Austria. Checkoslovakia. Poland, where I tried to circulate false zlotys. Everywhere it was the same: robbery, prison, and from every one of these countries, expulsion. I crossed borders at night, and went through hopeless autumns when the lads were all heavy and weary, and through springtimes when suddenly, at nightfall, they would emerge from God knows what retreat where they had been priming themselves to swarm in alleys, on the docks . . ."<sup>61</sup>

### Death and The Country

Like the Nation-State, the fetish has a deep investment in death—the death of the consciousness of the signifying function. Death endows both the fetish and the Nation-State with life, a spectral life, to be sure. The fetish absorbs into itself that which it represents, erasing all traces of the represented. A clean job. In Karl Marx's formulation of the fetishism of commodities, it is clear that the powerful phantasmagoric character of the commodity as fetish depends on the fact that the socioeconomic relations of production and distribution are erased from awareness, imploded into the made-object to become its phantom life-force. In the thief's view of the Nation-State, the policeman's badge displaces his organ which has, in turn, displaced and erased Durkheim's ("the State is the supreme organ of moral discipline"). In like fashion the State solemnly worships the tomb of the unknown soldier and (many) young men are, as Benedict Anderson reminds us, prepared not only to go to war and kill their nation's enemies, but are

ready to die themselves.<sup>62</sup> With this erasure we are absorbed into the object's emptiness.

### Less Into a Country Than to The Interior of An Image

But far from anaesthetizing awareness, this involution of reference intensifies sensuousness, breaks sense into the senses, and annuls the distance between subject and object, subject and the State. The subject enters into the object as image, into the State as tomb of the unknown soldier and, with this sensuous entry, breaks radically with mere contemplation of the object. As the thief writes: "The crossing of borders and the excitement it arouses in me were to enable me to apprehend directly the essence of the nation I was entering. I would penetrate less into a country than to the interior of an image."<sup>63</sup>

### The State as Fetish

So, we are back into the strange world of (Durkheim's) totems, where the territory was bound to the group by means of the sacred objects—by means of the images (so the arguments runs) on those objects. In that world, so the first anthropologists reported back to what was to become our patrimony, only the initiated men were allowed to see those images which, on account of their adoration, they erased over time and loving caressing into themselves. But the thief, who needs to be carefully distinguished from the anthropologist, with whom in some ways he overlaps, and from the men at the center, sees it differently. He likewise caresses the images of the State, the policeman's hidden badge, but instead of his body being penetrated by the sacred image, he says that he penetrates it. His time is modern and godless, and he is bound to the impure sacred of the margin, not the sacred center of power. He sees not the tabooed objects but imagines himself as one. "A picture is worth a thousand words," it is said. *Then what of a tabooed object? Imagine if it could talk?* Imagine this thing called Genêt as a taboo-object, epitome of the impure sacred, writing the sacred designs on himself as a Churinga of the modern Western underworld where he gathers and concentrates into himself all the fantasies of those at the center. Now he is

one of Walter Benjamin's treasured devices, that infamous "dialectical image" emerging like lightning from the storm of mimetic correspondence—Genêt the petrified object being jolted awake to give voice to the modern dreamtime compacted within, opening up to the little hunchback of history that through cunning, will win every time so long as it enlists the sacred, wizened though it be. For Durkheim something called "society" spoke through—or, rather, was written into—sacred objects. That's what made them sacred, so long as this curious spirit-thing, society itself, was blocked, silenced, and the discourse bounced back into the object's design and substance. That's what made them fetishes. But as a bad fetish-object, as a *maleficium*, of what we might call Durkheim's "own society" and Nation-State, which is in many respect "ours" too, Genêt, like the little hunchback, does something wonderfully instructive to the erased presence of society animating the fetish. First of all, he disconcertingly speaks back, as fetish, and thus perturbs what was said on the fetish's behalf. In this regard he can be said to be an agent of defetishization. But in doing so, he displaces the balmy term 'society,' replacing it by the State and its sexuality, and writes with clarity and beauty the endless story of its seductive bodily prowess and the sensuous trafficking between *thing* and *spirit*, rationality and violence, as writ into the Law itself. He not only defetishizes; he reenchants. That is how he gained sainthood.

# 8

## TACTILITY AND DISTRACTION

"Now, says Hegel, all discourse that remains discourse ends in *boring man*."  
Alexander Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*

Quite apart from its open invitation to entertain a delicious anarchy, exposing principles no less than dogma to the white heat of daily practicality and contradiction, there is surely plurality in everydayness. My everyday has a certain routine, doubtless, but it is also touched by a deal of unexpectedness, which is what many of us like to think of as essential to life, to a metaphysics of life, itself. And by no means can my everyday be held to be the same as vast numbers of other people's in this city of New York, those who were born here, those who have recently arrived from other everydays far away, those who have money, those who don't. This would be an obvious point, the founding orientation of a sociology of experience, were it not for the peculiar and unexamined ways by which "the everyday" seems, in the diffuseness of its ineffability, to erase difference in much the same way as do modern European-derived notions of the public and the masses.

This apparent erasure suggests the trace of a diffuse commonality in the commonweal so otherwise deeply divided, a commonality that is no doubt used to manipulate consensus but also promises the possibility of other sorts of nonexploitative solidarities which, in order to exist at all, will have to at some point be based on a common sense of the everyday and, what is more, the ability to sense other everydaynesses.

But what sort of sense is constitutive of this everydayness? Surely this sense includes much that is not sense so much as sensuousness, an embodied and somewhat automatic "knowledge" that functions like peripheral vision, not studied contemplation, a knowledge that is imageric and sensate rather than ideational; as such it not only challenges practically all critical practice,