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Smart Dictatorship: The Assault on Our Freedom

(Die Smarte Diktatur: Der Angriff auf unsere Freiheit)

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Surveillance requires energy. Science needs energy too, and so does war. But no one talks about that. Nor about the history of the products that populate our lives. They're there, but the reason why is invisible.

3. Is Capitalism Still Capitalism?

Perhaps it would be more accurate to call it neo-feudalism. As the dominant group grows smaller, the group of displaced people and refugees grows larger. And fate is making a comeback.

4. Is Freedom Still Freedom?

The scramble for access ensures freedom; uncontested power abolishes it. Self-logging can only make a person chronically ill and unhappy. And whales were not created for humans to take selfies with.

5. The Totally Reduced Personality and Its Consumption

The self is becoming a redundancy machine, and overlooking the fact that life is analog. Its new space is a hall of mirrors; it can only see itself. But in reality, life consists of experiences and other people – different people. That is why it is important to see not the obvious, but the obscure.

6. Welcome to the Plutocene

Market power continues to concentrate, and the assholes are today's idols. They not only develop totalitarian strategies, they also talk about it openly. Only no one is listening. Hence they enjoy a power that goes uncontested. The digital, by the way, is also fossil.

7. Back to the Future

The horizon of our desire and the hell of efficiency. What we need are visions of the future. And an aesthetics of resistance.

8. Resistance

Resistance has to be where the people are. The bait has to be something the fish like. An objective is not the same as a direction to start off in. Affirmation is a good strategy. The enemy has nothing to oppose it.

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1. Surveillance

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Earth on Earth

‘The world is more non-crisis than crisis: it is certainly not Heaven on Earth, but it is not Hell on Earth either: it is Earth on Earth.’¹ That’s a beginning. We can work with that.

Freedom

More and more, in fact. The world is more non-crisis than crisis because we look back on a civilization that for centuries has allowed more and more people to live in greater security, and in freedom at the same time. Of course, not everyone everywhere enjoys those advantages, and at the moment we are backsliding. Today there is a proliferation of wars, civil wars, massacres, migration, expulsion, attacks. Such reversals are a part of the process of civilization; its progress is not linear, and it offers no safety from relapses into uncivilized conditions. On the contrary: greater technical resources and greater rationalization increase the magnitude of inhumanity that can be perpetrated. The Holocaust was a product of the modern age, not a ‘relapse into barbarianism’, as it is still called by soapbox orators. Barbarians are not the inventors of large-scale industrial plants for annihilating people, nor of drones for that matter. Every anti-humanitarian disaster is produced using the means of the age.

Civilization is never guaranteed, as the 20th century has gruesomely demonstrated. And the forces that destroy it, history also teaches us, do not always come from without. The fear of freedom and of individual abandonment is the most dangerous motive that can lead people to combat modernism and the freedom it imposes. And those who oppose the values and the practices of modern civilization don’t necessarily look like the Nazis we see in Hollywood movies. They don’t

necessarily wear uniforms and listen to marches. Nor do they have to look like skinheads and neo-Nazis and listen to nationalist rockers like Frei.Wild. They don't have to look like the murderers of IS. All of those people obligingly make themselves recognizable as different and hostile. We have no trouble wanting to oppose them.

But the foes of freedom and democracy that arise from within the free society itself are more complicated. Their vanguard look just like you and me, or like our children. They listen to the same music, go to the same clubs, watch the same films, and seem to have the same opinions as we do. But it could be that they have already shaped our opinions to such an extent that we only think they are ours, while in fact we have long held theirs. In a word, I am afraid we are faced with a new phenomenon today: a voluntary surrender to the enemies of freedom. This is happening because the enemies of freedom today are not going around in uniforms and tanks. They are smart. They are perfectly friendly as they tell us they're interested in making the world a better place. Only they never ask whether anyone wants them to make the world better. They are suddenly there, like party-crashers who everyone assumes are someone else's guests.

Who Is Saving the World?

'The problem with governments is they're elected by majorities that don't give a shit about biodiversity. Whereas billionaires do tend to care. They've got a stake in keeping the planet not entirely fucked, because they and their heirs are going to be the ones with enough money to enjoy the planet.'² The character Walter who says these lines in Jonathan Franzen's epic novel *Freedom* draws a surprising connection: one between extinction, democracy and wealth. And although Walter is a problematic character in the novel, drawing connections is essential. We have grown accustomed to thinking of climate change, social inequality, the financial crisis, refugees, extinction, digitalization, globalization, hyperconsumption, economic growth, mobility, wars, surveillance, and terrorism as neatly separate phenomena, as if they occurred in reality in isolation from one another.

But they don't: the growing quantities of emissions that fuel climate change are caused by consumption and hyperconsumption, which require quantities of raw materials and energy that have to be produced as cheaply as possible due to 'global competition'; that in turn necessitates the rampant exploitation of natural resources

and human labour, which leads to social inequality and to conflicts and wars and terrorism, which call for expansive surveillance strategies; these are entrusted to a state and private-sector complex for the supervision of citizens that at the same time is used for personalized manipulation, guiding those citizens to still more consumption and hyperconsumption, requiring still more energy and raw materials ...

And we call the consequences ‘crises’. We have a climate crisis, a refugee crisis, a euro crisis, a Greek crisis, a growth crisis in southern Europe, and so on and so forth. But those aren’t crises. The problem with climate change is not going to pass. Climate change is slow; it tracks the quantities of emissions with a delay of about a generation. The change we see today is the result of the industrial processes of thirty to fifty years ago. Today’s emissions in turn will determine the climate in the second half of the 21st century. And as for refugees: why should their numbers decline? They are the results of wars, civil wars, expulsions, land loss, effects of climate change, rising food costs, growing population pressure – why should their situation be any better in the future? The euro crisis, like the Greek crisis, is an unsolved problem being kicked down the road by means of new debt – where is the crisis supposed to end? The principle of economic growth is spreading worldwide with amazing speed – how is that supposed to alleviate the ecological consequences – declining diversity, overfishing, the salinization of rivers, the acidification of the oceans?

The list could be continued indefinitely, but even this much makes it plain: it’s not going to get better. These aren’t crises. This is a process of transformation. What made up the cohesion of the Western capitalist world – that is, Europe and North America – its freedom, democracy and rule of law, long celebrated as an extremely successful civilizational model, can no longer hold that world together. New forces have come into play, both geopolitical forces and forces that have formed within the civilization, political forces of finance and information. This capitalism is not the one we knew. It is more predatory, more disintegrative, more destructive than ever. However, not everyone thinks that’s bad.

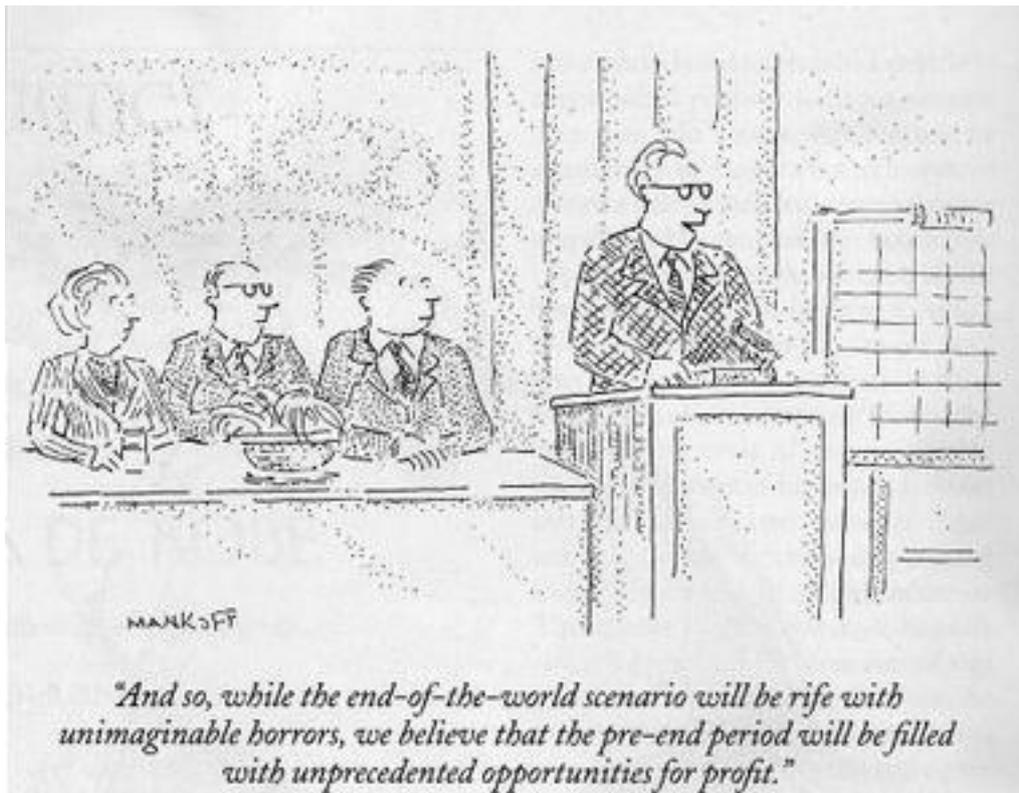


Figure 1: Good times, bad times

The smart employee in the cartoon by Bob Mankoff is right: the future doesn't look good in the 21st century; perhaps we really are 'pre-end'. But in an unequal world, even the end strikes different people at different times, and to some, 'pre-end' means a fantastic business opportunity. Why? Because one of the most commonplace truths in capitalism is that prices are determined by supply and demand, so that, while the growing scarcity of resources is bad for many people, it is very good for the few who have access to those resources. Moreover, when resources grow scarcer, that reinforces the advantages that strong groups, companies and individuals have over those who are weaker – their advantages of power and organization. It's a simple equation: one person's disadvantage is another's advantage.

The strong – those who have advantages of power and organization – accumulate more potential power with every passing day. That's because of the capital they possess, and because of the data available to them. Having both gives them dynamic opportunities to increase their power. That is what's called 'smart'.

The effects of these processes make most people poorer, dumber and more powerless, and destroy the conditions of their subsistence. Or those of their

children and their descendants. Processes like that are called exploitation. Or conquest.

But these terms sound somehow archaic in regard to what is going on today. We are dealing with events that are difficult to grasp in their entirety; events in which both democracy and the influence of nation states are in decline. Meanwhile inequality and injustice are on the rise, and so is a kind of neo-feudalism, a perspective that sees the weak as simply having had the bad luck to be weak: it's just fate. This new order, unlike historic feudalism, is not built on a religious foundation – it is not proclaimed to be ordained by God. Yet today too, good fortune and bad are apportioned by a higher power that commands our faith: its name is The Market. The commandment to believe in this power is anti-modern, anti-Enlightenment, anachronistic.

What is arising now is a new kind of dictatorship: the smart dictatorship. And if we don't fight it, it will mean the end of freedom.

While You Were Sleeping

On February 12, 2015, the New York Times Magazine published a story with the title 'How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco's Life'.³ The story goes like this: Justine Sacco, 30, Senior Director of Corporate Communications at IAC, the corporation that owns the video platform Vimeo, is travelling to South Africa for a few days' vacation. She has been sending playful tweets about her fellow passengers the whole time, about a 'weird German dude', for example, who smells bad and ought to use a deodorant. Justine has fun tweeting. From London's Heathrow airport, where she catches her plane to Cape Town, she sends the following tweet: 'Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!'

She boards the aircraft. The flight from London to Cape Town takes eleven hours. On arrival, Sacco switches her smart phone back on. The first message she reads is from a person she hasn't heard from since high school: 'I'm so sorry to see what's happening.' In the second message, her best friend, Hannah, asks her to call immediately. Then a constant flood of messages rolls in. The phone rings; it's Hannah calling to tell Justine, 'You're the number one worldwide trend on Twitter.'

Things had happened quickly while Justine was sleeping in her airplane seat. By the time she landed, not only had a gigantic shitstorm broken loose, but the

rapidly assembled mob were keeping each other posted using the hashtag ‘#HasJustineLandedYet’. And in fact there were social networkers in Cape Town who had gone to the airport to photograph Sacco on her arrival – the pursuit shifted from online to offline; that is the moment when a virtual propensity to violence gives way to a real one. In the meantime, Justine’s employer IAC had reported, ‘This is an outrageous, offensive comment. Employee in question currently unreachable on an intl flight.’

We can skip ahead: In the few hours between London and Cape Town, Justine Sacco lost her whole social situation. IAC fired her; her South African relatives, long-time opponents of apartheid, were offended; the shitstorm did not blow over; she was hounded in the media; her old tweets were dug up and published (‘16 Tweets Justine Sacco Regrets’), and on and on. There is a particular irony in the fact that an aircraft in flight is just about the only place in the world where a person is unreachable. In other words, Sacco could not read along as her prosecution began and took its course. By the time she was back online, she had already been found guilty. Her punishment was administered offline, in real life. How was all this possible?

Very simply, apparently. In the age of the so-called social networks and ‘media ubiquity’, with phones, drones and cameras everywhere, it is extremely easy to ostracize a person. All that’s needed to unleash a full-blown shitstorm is an occasion with a scandalous aspect, however minimal, and a sufficient number of followers. A glossary may help with some of these terms: Followers are copycats; a shitstorm is the collective expulsion of the shit that’s in the heads of those copycats. That may be anatomically impossible, but as we know many wonders have come to pass in the digital age. You couldn’t say Justine’s tweet was particularly intelligent, but certainly something more was necessary before it could destroy her life: it had to be taken out of context. Because, if you read it carefully, the sentence she tweeted was not racist, but a play on racist stereotypes.

As a member of a South African family, Justine is naturally quite familiar with the common prejudice that AIDS in Africa is due primarily to the allegedly promiscuous sexual behaviour of the black population, and by pretending to be afraid and then immediately backtracking with the notion that *she* couldn’t get AIDS because she is *white*, she is condensing a discourse about sexually grounded racist phobias into the length of a tweet. On any cabaret stage, her message would have gone over as a halfway passable joke. But the machine of the social networks is impervious to irony. Irony requires the intelligence of context, while the essential

principle of scandal technology is destroying context. In the Internet, this principle comes into play as never before in the history of human communication.

All you have to do is take Justine's sentence literally, and it is immediately, obviously racist. And on the social networks, all it takes is a retweeting tweet taking something literally that was not so intended to trigger an avalanche like the one that buried Justine Sacco. The article in the New York Times Magazine does a good job of describing the mechanism by which such a scandal propagates. Ultimately it's very simple: someone has to misunderstand the tweet, intentionally or otherwise, and get his network to echo his indignation. Then the wave of outrage has to reach someone who works in the it's-my-business-to-punish-every-defamatory-expression-by-any-means-possible-regardless-of-whether-I-understand-it-or-not department, i.e. some blogger or self-appointed militant of the no-risk resistance; and then the opportunity to approve of the indignant reaction has to be so great and so attractive that even racists can join in the shitstorm – because of course the object is to clobber someone without the least risk to oneself. And racists in particular enjoy doing that.

The SA men who picketed Jewish shops or drove people through the streets in 1933 – which was an early form of the shitstorm – those SA men had to show their faces, but today that is no longer necessary at all. From the anonymity of the network, all kinds of ostracism and baiting are possible without the baiter running the least risk of being called to account for it. Thus the medium permits an extremely asymmetrical communication: the collaboration of many for the purpose of shaming one.

[...]

Schönhaus

Here's a little story. In my life I have met a number of people who have made a deep impression on me. One of them is Cioma Schönhaus. Schönhaus is a Jew, and as a young man in Germany during the Nazi period, he was a member of a persecuted group. Like many victims of Nazi persecution, in 1941 he was faced with the question, Should I obey the order to report for deportation, or should I go underground?

This question was all the more difficult for many people because the order to report for deportation was usually not addressed to individuals, but to whole families. In many families, the older members were inclined to report for deportation, because they believed in law and order, and hoped things wouldn't turn out so bad. Meanwhile the younger family members had a clearer idea that the destination was death. This situation was apt to tear families apart. In any case, younger people were more likely to go underground while older people were deported to Theresienstadt or Auschwitz.

Schönhaus worked in a factory and obtained a certificate from his employers that he was needed there. His parents had nothing like that, and they decided to submit to deportation. Schönhaus said, 'I won't do that. You have to understand, I'm staying here.' At first his employer's word was sufficient, but just a few weeks later the Gestapo ordered him again to report to the central collection point for deportation. He decided to go underground.

At that time, and in the years that followed, there were several thousand people living underground. They were able to survive with the help of social networks – not the kind called by that name today of course, but informal aid organizations in which people provided those who were being hunted with places to hide, food, and other necessities, often at the risk of their own safety.⁴ Of course many of those who lived underground, called *U-Boote* or 'submarines', were caught, some of them because of informers: people who were themselves at risk of deportation were hired by the Gestapo to search systematically for other 'submarines' and betray them. They were called *Greifer*, or 'catchers'.⁵

Once he decided to go underground, Schönhaus escaped discovery by a spectacular strategy: He *didn't* hide. He didn't even try to keep a low profile. Schönhaus did the exact opposite. He had money to spend, since he earned a living by forging passports and fencing the furnishings of vacated homes. He wore elegant white suits, which he had tailor-made; he went to the leading Nazis' favourite bars and restaurants; he had sexual affairs with the 'Aryan' wives of officers who were at the front; he bought a sailboat and took them sailing on Wannsee lake; and so on. With incredible cunning, he ensured his survival by behaving counter-intuitively, turning other people's expectations to his advantage.

He was a gambler, and he played the game so seriously that he didn't want to forge his own passport: he wanted to obtain an original, watertight, perfectly authentic ID. And he did – he only had to complete the original document with his

false name and his real photo. From that moment on, he was perfectly safe from the Gestapo. But on the first day he had his new ID, he lost it in a tram.

Because the document bore a fictitious name, the police discovered when it was turned over to them that no such person existed – that the man in the photograph must be a forger, a criminal, a fugitive. ‘Wanted’ posters went up immediately. What did Schönhaus do? He disguised himself as a tourist, with short trousers and a neckerchief, got a bicycle and panniers for his luggage, and pedalled away on a summer holiday. He cycled the length of Germany to Vorarlberg in Austria, then one night near Feldkirch he crossed the border into Switzerland. He survived.

Schönhaus’s story shows how a totalitarian society like Nazi Germany, in spite of its secret police, radical violence, surveillance and scrutiny, contained social spaces where survival was possible. The networks in which Schönhaus participated as a forger, the relations he entered into, illustrate that even a totalitarian society like those we have known offers niches that are not visible to the regime. Private spaces that could be used for clandestine purposes, to live outside the society. No one survived alone: everyone who was saved or managed to escape did so with the help of social groups, social relations. In other words, private spaces that are inaccessible to outsiders are essential for a person’s ability to avoid persecution under totalitarian conditions.

Today, Schönhaus would not survive.

There are no more hidden niches. All areas of society, all its spaces and niches are open to the light of day. As a result, not only can no one escape, but there is no resistance.

Notes on Chapter 1: Surveillance

- ¹ Odo Marquard: *Skepsis in der Moderne: Philosophische Studien* ['Skepticism in the modern age: philosophical studies']. Stuttgart 2007: Reclam.
- ² Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom*. New York 2010: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 212.
- ³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/how-one-stupid-tweet-ruined-justine-saccos-life.html>.
- ⁴ Mary Jalowicz Simon, *Gone to Ground: One Woman's Extraordinary Account of Survival in the Heart of Nazi Germany*. Trans. Anthea Bell. London 2014: Profile.
- ⁵ Doris Tausendfreund, *Erzwungener Verrat: Jüdische 'Greifer' im Dienst der Gestapo 1943–1945* ['Coerced betrayal: Jewish Greifer in the service of the Gestapo, 1943–1945']. Berlin 2006: Metropol.