

Aaron Schuster
**You Can't Ask
Everyone to
Behave
Ethically Just
Like That**

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“You can’t ask everyone to behave ethically just like that,” commented an unrepentant Sepp Blatter during the recent FIFA prosecutions. This phrase is truly a bit of comic genius worthy of Sturges or Lubitsch. Of course, it is intended as a kind of excuse, of the genre, “I can’t possibly monitor everyone; there will always be the law-breaking exceptions,” and so on. But it’s practically a slip; Blatter gives away too much. It is as if he were indignant about the very prospect of demanding ethical action, as if this demand itself were the truly “unethical” thing.

What is brilliant about the line is the way it presents ethics as a shocking intrusion into the normal run of things, and by “normal run” I mean the everyday world of normalized corruption, the reign of internal transgression by which the system is able to function, and very profitably at that. There is something true about this: in Kantian terms, ethics is a brutal intrusion, a shock, a scandal, a violent derailment of business as usual. It would indeed be amazing if everyone suddenly became an ethical actor, just like that; such a mass reformation would probably occasion the end of the world.

I have just uttered corruption and transgression in the same breath, but in fact these terms should be sharply distinguished. Transgression is a modern concept; corruption, on the other hand, is an ancient one. The fact that so many radical political movements today are driven by anti-corruption speaks to the retrograde character of our times, and also to their own limits; however laudable a goal, fighting corruption is not a positive political idea. Michel Foucault wrote an essay titled “A Preface to Transgression” to clarify what was specifically modernist about the concept and to analyze the kind of subjectivity it entailed; today one is tempted to write “A Preface to Corruption” in order to get some theoretical bearings on our contemporary malaise.

So, what makes transgression a uniquely modern concept? The interesting thing about transgression is that the more one examines it, the more one realizes that it is not really possible to transgress anything. This is illustrated most spectacularly by the impasse of the Sadeian libertine; the Marquis de Sade is a particularly good instructor on this point, for his life and work were dedicated like none other to the pursuit of transgression, including the transgression of transgression itself. In his apology for crime, Sade’s Pope Pius VI explains that there is nothing wrong with rape, torture, murder, and so on, since they conform to the violence that is the universal law of nature.

The trouble is that no matter how depraved one may be, the human capacity for crime is highly limited. The human being, along with all

organic life and even inorganic matter, is caught in an endless cycle of death and rebirth, creation and destruction, so that there is no real, i.e., final, death. The true crime would be the one that no longer operates within the realms of nature but annihilates them altogether, that puts a stop to the never-ending cycle of generation and corruption once and for all. The libertine thus sets himself up as both the servant and the rival of nature. Through his mind-numbingly repetitive debauches he aims to speed up the violence of the universe to the point of its self-destruction. In this way, Sadeian libertinism also reveals the lie of accelerationism.

When I have exterminated all the creatures that cover the earth, still shall I be far from my mark, since I shall have merely served Thee, O unkind Mother, for it is to vengeance I aspire, vengeance for what, whether through stupidity or malice, Thou doest to men in never furnishing them the means to translate fairly into deeds the appalling desires Thou dost ever rouse in them.¹

Sade is a great accelerationist thinker whose speculative atrocities expose the failure of accelerationism. For the apocalypse can never be apocalyptic enough: the misery of the sadist is that his bloody deeds cannot but fall short of the diabolical command that nature instills in him. In short, the libertine is haunted by the bad infinite. His cold enjoyment is bound up with the dream of the final destruction of the system that he can never realize, and in truth does not want to, for it is the system of destruction that the sadist faithfully serves.

Sade's universe is a rather black-and-white one, wherein there is always a law to follow or break; such is the legalistic character of perversion. But what if the secret of the law was that there is nothing to conform to or serve, not even the wild law of accelerating auto-destruction? We do not know what the law demands of us; this enigma is the source of its power and also what makes it sometimes unbearable. To quote Foucault, from his essay on Blanchot:

If it were self-evident and in the heart, the law would no longer be the law, but the sweet interiority of consciousness. If, on the other hand, it were present in a text, if it were possible to decipher it between the lines of a book, if it were in a register that could be consulted, then it would have the solidity of external things: it would be possible to follow or disobey it. Where then would its power reside, by what force or

prestige would it command respect? In fact, the presence of law is its concealment.²

This is the crucial point: the law is neither within us nor outside us; it cannot be located in the interiority of conscience but neither does it reside in a legible decree from some external authority. The law draws its power precisely from the way it confuses any straightforward division of inside and outside, thus confounding our desire to know it and be able to unequivocally follow or break it. The law is the "thought of the Outside" (again Foucault), but an outside that is uneasily lodged within the inside; it constitutes the kernel of our being and yet it is withdrawn and inaccessible.

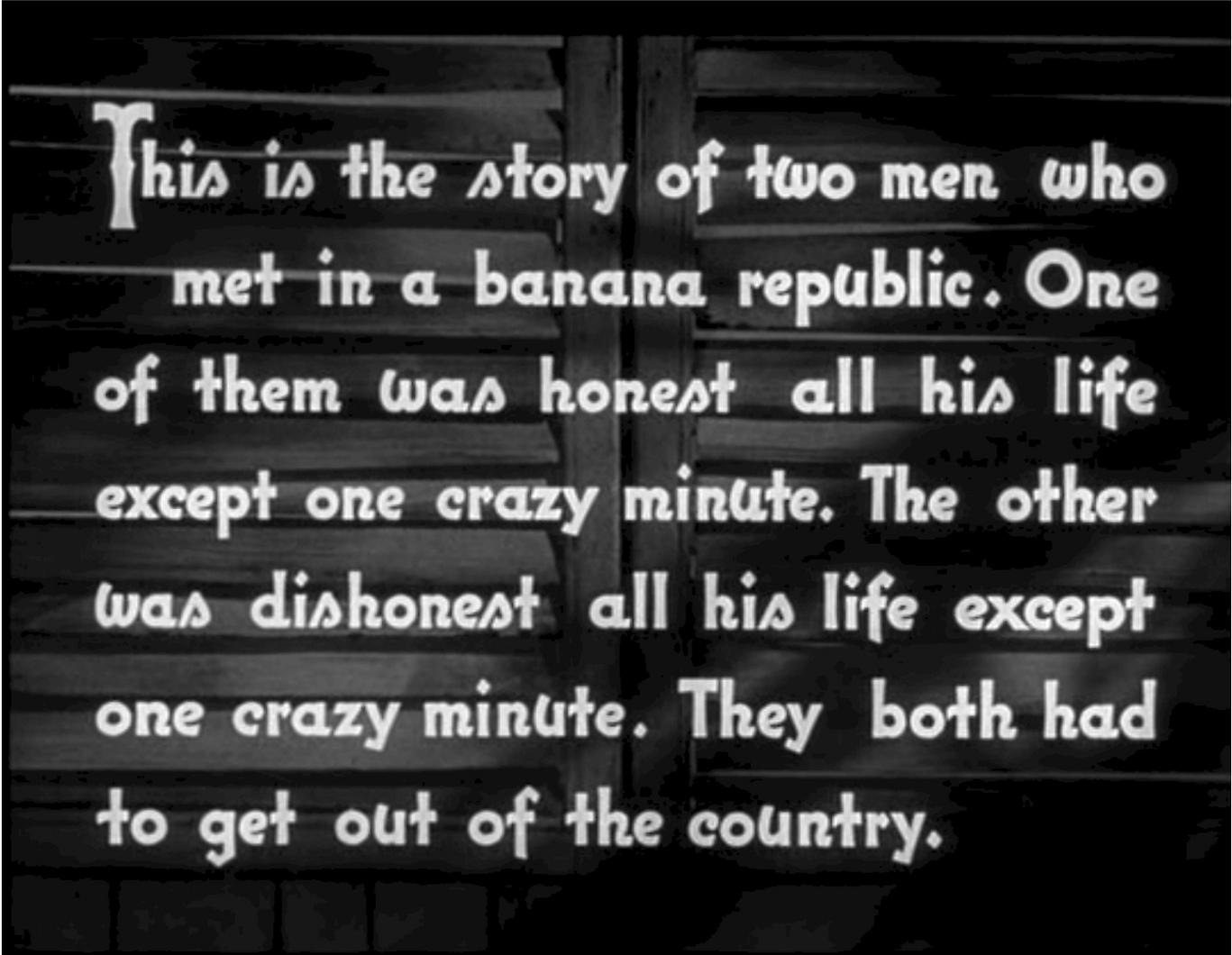
The real lesson of transgression, far from amounting to a forbidden-fruit theory of desire (we only want what we cannot have), is that in the end we can never know what exactly is being asked of us and thus we are forced to take responsibility for our desire. We are not simply subject to the law but subjects of the law, unconsciously implied and implicated in its creation. In this way the theme of transgression opened up a certain space of freedom: a strange, difficult, and even traumatic space, but freedom nonetheless.

What about corruption? Corruption entails degradation, dissolution, dilapidation, and disintegration, the worming away of being by non-being. The great philosophical reference for thinking about corruption is Aristotle's treatise "On Generation and Corruption." In order for there to be corruption there must have first been generation, the emergence of something into being; corruption is what reverses this process, undermining the integrity of the existing thing and returning it to the nothingness from which it came. Corruption by definition comes afterwards; it is a secondary process. When we speak of corruption we cannot help but presuppose a non-corrupt state, which is susceptible to degradation but nonetheless pure in itself. Corruption is related to purity like pathology is to the norm. No matter how widespread and nefarious it may be, corruption is always, by definition, the exception.

We are constantly hearing today about the "few bad apples": the price-fixing bankers, the rapist priests, the power-crazed politicians, the bribing football executives. This is a symptom of our attachment to the concept of corruption. It is as if the existence of a few bad apples were not a contingent fact but a metaphysical necessity. For if corruption were truly structural or systemic it could hardly be called corruption at all, simply because there would have been nothing with integrity from the start to corrupt. The few bad

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Preston Sturges's 1940 film *The Great McGinty* opens with a written scenario.

apples have a long future ahead. But one senses nevertheless that a state of weariness is setting in. It is getting harder to be scandalized, either by the level of corruption or by the authorities' generally weak (corrupt) response to it. If there were a contemporary Shakespeare who wanted to write a *Hamlet* for our times, he would have to say not, "There is something rotten in the state of Denmark," but, "The state of Denmark is rotten, full stop" (apologies to the Danes). Of course this would be less a tragedy than a farce.

Allow me to abruptly shift gears and turn to the topic of neoliberalism; in any case, it hardly seems possible to disentangle considerations of corruption from a reflection on our reigning political-economic ideology. The philosophical conception of the human being as a being whose existence precedes its essence, defined by its radical openness and fundamentally historical character was, for the twentieth century, part and parcel of an emancipatory project aimed against all kinds of naturalisms and identitarian politics. As opposed to having any pre-given goal or destination, human existence is always in the process of inventing itself, of becoming something other to itself, and is compelled to assume its abyssal freedom with all the risks and difficulties this entails. That conception has now been decisively reversed.

Neoliberalism can be defined, from the perspective of philosophical anthropology, as a perverse exploitation of the "indetermination" of the human being, whose flexibility, capacity for reinvention, and underlying precarity are now marshalled in the service of the market. Paradoxically, the very openness meant to combat reification has itself become the object of reification, a vector for the reduction of the human being to a manageable thing – saleable, exchangeable, and disposable. One might say that this reversal is the great corruption of our times, the hijacking of an emancipatory idea into a new form of servitude. But it also teaches an important lesson: that the indetermination of human existence is itself politically indeterminate. It may be appropriated by the Left or the Right, for a revolutionary politics or for reactionary entrenchment. And part of what makes neoliberalism so attractive is that it not only perversely exploits this indetermination or ontological precarity, it also mobilizes a powerful apparatus for reinterpreting the subject's "lack of being" and giving it a specific form: namely, debt. To sum it up in a formula, if the Freudian name for the unhinged or out-of-joint character of the psyche was death drive, then neoliberalism can be understood as a translation of death drive into debt drive, a transformation of the obstinate openness of the human being into a perpetual indebtedness. Ultimately, what the

neoliberal subject is indebted to is neoliberalism itself, which ceaselessly tells us that we should support, affirm, and even be grateful for a system that owes us nothing in return.

And this brings us back to the problematic of transgression. Instead of an anxiety-ridden confrontation with the unknown law of one's existence, the neoliberal subject find itself mired in debt and guilt (the German language conveniently collapses these into one word, *Schuld*). This terrible situation may even make life a little easier, insofar as guilt and debt provide a new iron law for existence, and it certainly makes it more profitable, especially for already rich. In fact, it is supposedly pragmatic technocrats who often blur the two, making the debt crisis into a moralistic one. The tragedy of a country like Greece is that it is caught between two corruptions: the corruption of the previous ruling class that bankrupted it and the corruption of international capital and its representatives, which want to reform it. Or in other words, between those who would corrupt the law and those who would put the law at the service of corruption.

So what about Blatter? I can imagine no better fate for him than that of McGinty in Preston Sturges's *The Great McGinty*, perhaps the greatest comedy of corruption in Hollywood cinema. The film opens with a wonderful use of the state of exception as a plot device: "This is the story of two men who met in a banana republic. One of them was honest all his life except one crazy minute. The other was dishonest all his life except one crazy minute. They both had to get out of the country." McGinty is an amoral mug who becomes a wildly successful corrupt politician; all's well that should have ended well except for that one "crazy minute" when he sees the light and tries to put an end to his organization's thieving ways.

What if Blatter's spur-of-the-moment line, "You can't ask everyone to behave ethically just like that," were to echo in his ear and, inspired by the unwitting insight contained therein, prompt him to an authentic ethical conversion? Blatter decides to clean up FIFA – and is ruined because of it. He would learn that a crooked man cannot "break good" without the most dire consequences.

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1
Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 981.

2
Michel Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought From Outside," in *Foucault/Blanchot*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1987), 33.

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