

UNE PETITE MORT À PLUSIEURS

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ABSTRACT · *Inserire traduzione titolo in inglese* · November 18, 1978. Over 900 U.S. citizens committed mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, with a cyanide-laced soft drink. They belonged to the Peoples Temple, a Californian church of sorts founded by Rev. Jim Jones, who led the suicidal ritual.

In Durkheimian terms, this event was not a sum of individual deaths but an assault on the social bond itself (the *Vergesellschaftung*). It was intended as an end-of-the-world apocalypse. Also, the Temple being a cross-section of American societal issues, its self-destruction enacted the phantasm of America's disintegration.

The American society reacted with an array of defence mechanisms: denial, projection, secrecy, paranoia and conspiracy theories, the Temple as a "cult". A unique text – the so-called Death Tape recording the suicide – was classified.

Rev. Jim Jones became the reassuring explanation, a deranged charismatic Pied Piper. The social stigma encysting the Peoples Temple was dislocated on its leader. It focused on his apparent panoply of alternative sexualities. Their narratives legitimised stigma as a strategy protecting America from a phantasmatic annihilation.

But stigma is double-sided. It encapsulates desire. Its grid maps an underlying system of suppressed longings. Imbued with sexual imagination through its leader, Jonestown itself coalesces the ecstasy of a maternal deadly orgasm. Its collective dying together is a *folie à plusieurs* conveying a *petite mort à plusieurs*, a «libidinal haemorrhage».

KEYWORDS · Charisma, Mass suicide, End-of-the-world, Sexuality, Stigma.

THE EVENT

I 8TH November 1978, mid-afternoon. Over 900 US citizens kill themselves in Jonestown, an agricultural settlement deep into the Guyana jungle, near the Venezuelan border. They all belong to a Californian church, the Peoples Temple, active in Los Angeles and in the San Francisco Bay Area. The settlement had started in 1974 but had accelerated abruptly in 1977 with the semi-clandestine and sudden exodus of most of the Temple's members from California.

The suicide community is eponymous, named after the founder and charismatic leader of the Peoples Temple, Rev. Jim Jones. The instrument of collective death is a cyanide-laced soft drink. The painful suffocation requires several minutes. The trigger is the arrival of a House of Congress one-man commission headed by Congressman Leo Ryan with some journalists and representatives of the *Concerned Relatives* to investigate the living conditions and possible coercion in the settlement. Some members of the community decide to leave with the visitors. An armed team ambushes the small planes on the runway. Ryan and others are killed or seriously injured.

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The «preliminary sacrifice» has taken place. The trigger is only a pretext to start the «horrifying sacrifice»,¹ the collective death already rehearsed repeatedly during the *white nights*. The community records at length their self-destruction on tape (Tape Q042, classified, officially released only several months after the mass deaths), in an eerie mix of *flatus vocis* and death-rattling. With one exception, no dissenting voices. Then silence falls on the tape, and on Jonestown. The *regressio ad uterum* reaches at last its asphyxiated soundless climax.

DYING TOGETHER AND THE VERGESELLSCHAFTUNG

A collective suicide does not have the rather banal and predictable ‘ease’ of an individual suicide. Its fulfilment requires prior preparation, several general rehearsals, effective direction and organization, leadership, a shared narrative, tools for the handling and social control of extreme emotions (dying is not simultaneous and the living see other living people suffer and die before them), efficient modes of mass death, consensus building, the imaginary management of the ‘after’ and the post-mortem memory, and the invention of its ‘historians’ (every Masada spares a Flavius Josephus). Collective suicide is a one-shot venture. It does not tolerate the trial-and-error of attempted suicide. It has the cogency of ritual and the quality of liturgy.

Mass death by mutual consent is also a fully social event from another perspective.

In 1896, the philosopher and proto-sociologist Georg Simmel published a memorable essay in Émile Durkheim’s journal, *L’Année sociologique* (I, 1896-97). Its title summarized the issue at stake: *Comment les formes sociales se maintiennent*. An issue imbued with tragedy, and the basis of all nihilistic visions of society and the *polis*, from Hobbes to Rousseau. Nothing guarantees that the sun will rise tomorrow (Locke’s *dictum*), or that a society will survive. Every individual death, every end of a generation, brings about the possibility of nothingness to come. Only a relentless strategy of self-reproduction allows a social entity large or small to attempt protecting itself from its end, but the horizon of sociological tragedy looms denied but present. Its tools: the control of bodies and their biological vicissitudes, the domination over sexuality, the modes of socially organized erotic stimulation, the processes of primary and secondary socialization, social monuments and memories, narrative cogencies, the myths and artifacts of transtemporal identities, the “system of objects”, and all the *bric-à-brac* deployed to translate « the eternal yesterday » (Max Weber’s definition of tradition) into the fragile obviousness of tomorrow.

Collective suicide parasitizes this precariousness. It is not just the death of a fragment of the social. It is an attack on the social bond as such, not a specific *Gesellschaft* or *Gemeinschaft* but the *Vergesellschaftung* itself, the very act of asso-

¹ WALTER BURKERT, *Homo Necans: Interpretationen Altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1972.

ciating. It is possible, thinkable, and achievable that the social will end, despite the pervasive panoply of manoeuvres, structures, norms, and acts it mobilizes to avoid its own demise.

The stakes are wider. A social totality, a dyad as well as an extended group, acts for its members as the form and figure of reality itself. Durkheim had understood this well in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912). In 1921, Wittgenstein stated, «The limits of my language mean the limits of my world». In 1912, Durkheim had proposed a far more fertile and powerful thesis: the social entity to which one belongs posits the boundary of reality, therefore reality itself. The perception of one's own group as a totality constructs totality as a general cognitive category, invents it, and roots it as a possible logical, historical, emotional, and indeed social, meta-whole. The We makes reality thinkable and acts as its mental prerequisite.

The consequence: the social that annihilates itself as such aims at the ontological annihilation of the social totality, that is, of reality. It literally stages the end of the world.

In Jonestown, the Peoples Temple enacts/rattles the Apocalypse. The 'church' carried it in its inner core as a self-fulfilling prophecy since Jim Jones's nuclear holocaust visions at the very origin of his congregation in 1962-64. Now it turns into both a destiny and a project. The final silence of the suicide tape evokes a reality extinguished by the cyanide suffocation of speech and voice. As in the finale of the extraordinary autistic narrative of E. A. Poe's *Masque of the Red Death*: «And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all». The *dissipatio humani generis* of some extreme psychotic delusions voids the world and becomes a reality against reality.

Even the delusional omnipotence of delirium cannot avoid the irony inherent to most human endeavours. The Peoples Temple assaults the connective core of (social) reality through its own self-destruction. It can only do this – or hope to – if it acts unanimously, without dissent nor defections. All together, a perfect group, a sociological Sphero. This turns upside down the key node of its strategy. The final act of collective suicide was meant to disintegrate the very possibility of *Vergesellschaftung*, thus of social bonding and reality. But only an adamantly cohesive and total community can annihilate itself all together. The destroyed totality triumphs as a totality in the act of destroying itself.

THE ENEMY

The North American public understood subconsciously the significance of Jonestown. More precisely, it 'sensed' a confused but catastrophic menace, with 'catastrophic' to be understood as in the mathematical catastrophe theory. According to a Gallup poll, the mass suicide on November 18 was the most followed event by Americans since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The collective deaths at Jonestown were the attempted annihilation not only of an abstract so-

cial totality but of North American society itself. A bewildering and destructive assault that generated a nearly unbearable social alarm.

Who were the dead in the jungle? Three, maybe four, different generations: 270 children and young people, old and very old, young adults and adults. Almost 80% black (« the largest peacetime massacre of black Americans », it was written). At least four different socio-economic and cultural groups: the marginal poor of the *inner cities* predominantly on welfare; the young drifters or almost drifters, high school drop outs, unemployed, often male, drug addicts, occasional or professional sex workers, homeless, petty criminals, without families; the remnants of the Californian counterculture orphaned of organised reference groups, political projects and ideologies, educated enough, in search of leaders and meaning; the children of middle-class families of professionals and sometimes professors in the Bay Area, guilty of their privileges, their wealth and their universities, semi-intellectual, often voracious for some micro-power and socially programmed to get it. Those in need of religion and god, in the often messianic and hyper-emotional styles of the Protestant denominations of the underclasses, with their paraphernalia of charisma, choral rites, and miracles. On the other hand, the meaning-hungry questing for sense and values in the more or less exotic political, religious, parareligious, and New Age supermarkets of California in those years, the confused devotees of socialism and revolution, unlettered Marxists.

The Temple had become the active container of these different 'souls'. Embedded in the Temple were the unresolved problems of American society, the class and ethnic cleavages, the social differences and tensions, the weakening of traditional worldviews and the inability to nurture plausible new ones, the changes in one's relationship with one's body and with pleasure, and the false consciousness translated as a staged guilt for what one has and is. The 'congregation' had lucidly constructed itself as a sociological, psychological-social, and political oxymoron, a synthesis of the contradictions of 20 years of political history and 100 years of social history. A symptom of a cross-section of America is a symptom of America. A sudden eruption of internal evil.

ENCYSTING THE EVIL

This epiphany of the end of the world is experienced frantically by the North American society as an anamorphosis of its own annihilation.

Hence an intense panic reaction that generates an acme of grandiose defence mechanisms.

The Americans cannot take their eyes off this evil. They follow the story with the bulimic avidity of an anguish that must not become aware of itself. And meanwhile, they build defences against this incorporation.

The first and simplest is physical. Evil must remain *extra moenia*. The bodies must be kept out of the space and off the land of America.¹ There is no Antigone

¹ An attempt is made to have them buried in Guyana, but the Guyanese government declines.

to request a burial. For a variety of reasons, many relatives of the dead refuse the bodies, and the anonymous have no relatives. The State of Delaware denies permission for burials after various local communities rebelled against accepting them in their cemeteries. The same is true for the states where the Temple members were born or lived.

Collective anguish erupts. The mass of rotting corpses laden with the *Tristes Tropiques* exotic phantasms is a carrier of disease and public health hazards. The cyanide they are imbued with can poison the environment, seep into the groundwater, and bring about mass slaughter. The graves will become *monuments*, further temples and places of gathering and worship that will attract more fanatics and dangerous lunatics. The dead of the Peoples Temple must not infect the social body physically, socially, or psychologically. Their sacred *ganz Anderes*¹ must remain Other, both foreign and alien, to guarantee and restate by contrast the purity of the American body political.

Later on, for better or worse, the bodies find locations. 412, the nameless and the by-all-rejected, in a mass grave in Evergreen Cemetery in Oakland, Bay area.

Missing funeral rites do not allow for social liturgies of the mourning process. Besides, this mass death mourning must not be worked through as a farewell. It has to be twisted socially and psychologically into support for the requested strategy of expulsion. The Temple's exodus to Guyana finds its symmetrical counterpart in the attempted expulsion of Jonestown from American society, both from its social representations and from its subconscious imagery. The Peoples Temple is not «in the American *grain*».² It cannot and must not have anything to do with America.

This rejection of an evident origin takes different paths, apparently poles apart yet converging. Four defence mechanisms are elicited to oust this evil: the paranoid discourse, the cult or sect as a negative social formation, the members of the temple as a psychopathological crowd, the charismatic leader as a deadly *deus ex-machine* and the personification of the stigma.

CONSPIRACY

Its starting point is a denial. The People's Temple did not commit suicide. It was led to its death by an organized plot.

Paranoid thinking has an extraordinary emotional and cognitive power.³ A destructive and powerful enemy induces an event through a strategy that is in-

Then begins a macabre ballet of rotten bodies (the heat of the tropics). A few perfunctory autopsies are performed on 7-8 corpses, and then the US Army transports the 900 bodies to a base in Delaware. About 500 are identified, 170 possibly, with 250 remaining unaccounted for.

¹ RUDOLF OTTO, *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, Breslau, Trewendt und Granier, 1917.

² WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, *In the American Grain*, New York, Albert & Charles Boni, 1925.

³ Two different but converging frameworks intertwine in the overall approach of the North American public opinion to the Peoples Temple&Jonestown event: the paranoid style imbuing the US po-

visible to the naive (no to the paranoid...) but rational, coherent, and goal-driven. Reality may seem chaotic, disturbing, and meaningless. The underlying conspiracy reveals its functions and meaning, explains otherwise incomprehensible aspects, sheds light on the darkness, and highlights a latent order in what is happening. Conspiratorial thinking provides significance and predictability. It appeases cognitive dissonance, alleviates anguish, and morphs it into hatred against an identified enemy.

The major and minor cliques of us society each invent their own plot around their enemy or arch-enemy. In fanzines, on radio and tv, in official statements, in assemblies and churches, in pamphlets sometimes with hundreds of pages of supporting material, in manifestos, in narratives and songs, through all the channels of fringe and mainstream social communication. Jim Jones as a CIA agent to keep tabs on a politically dangerous group of revolutionaries. The Peoples Temple was infiltrated by the CIA and the capitalist establishment to monitor and eliminate an internal fifth column of Castroists and USSR agents. Commune members had been killed by British special forces (Guyana is part of the Commonwealth) on behalf of the US government. Jonestown was a grand experiment in mass mind control through new technologies and biochemical substances. Jonestown was an experiment in the incarceration and extermination of black Americans. Jonestown was a racist massacre practicing the gradual physical elimination of all minorities not integrated into the American Dream. Jonestown as an episode of class struggle and the annihilation of the *underclass*. On the opposite side, Jonestown as a micro-enclave of the extreme right, ready to activate a fascist assault against American democracy. Jonestown as testimony to what happens when dropping out of the large established religious denominations. The failure to perform autopsies and the ensuing hastened destruction of all corpses to conceal the actual methods, dynamics and instruments of the deaths. The official US 'classified' label against the disclosure of the final suicide tape, and of most materials collected by the FBI in the commune and in the Californian Temple.

To each his enemy and to all a rationale against the uncanny. For the Peoples Temple, the constellation of conspiracies performs once again the function of a «*poor person's cognitive mapping*», as Fredric Jameson has aptly defined conspiratorial thinking.¹

litical imaginary (RICHARD HOFSTADTER, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, «Harper's Bazaar», reprinted in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays*, New York, Knopf, 1964); and the all-encompassing explanatory scope and range of everyday common sense grass roots paranoia (FREDRIC JAMESON, *Cognitive Mapping*, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson, Lawrence Grossberg, London, Macmillan, 1988; IDEM, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London, Verso, 1991).

¹ FREDRIC JAMESON, *Cognitive Mapping*, cit.; REBECCA MOORE, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, New York, Praeger, 2009, pp. 127-129, «*The Canon of Conspiracy Theories*» ???; DAVID CHIDESTER, *Salvation and Suicide. An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988.

CULT

A further reduction of complexity: the Peoples Temples as a 'cult' and the collective suicide of Jonestown as a borderline case of 'cultic culture' and of the New Religious Movements.

Feelings of fragility in its social fabric and of latent disintegration have always pervaded the North American society. Endemic anomie is inherent to the so-called American Dream, and to the myth and reality of the melting pot. The anomic angst produces hyper-identification with some collective symbols of We/America and the simultaneous efflorescence of marginal archipelagos of alternative, anti-anomic, hyper-cohesive social entities. Cults are a perennial element of America's social, cultural, political, and religious history.²

The 1960s and 1980s saw the explosion of unprecedented social, cultural, and intergenerational conflicts, from riots in urban ghettos to the middle-class youth counterculture, against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. This social dynamism translates into a jumble of fragments and of movements. It does not nurture any social and political players capable of providing unity, organization, strategy, and shared goals. The result is once again disintegration, a new anomie, the search for alternative answers, a nostalgia for the lost We, and an anguished *quest for community* to counterbalance the unbearable «lonely crowd»³ of social atomism. The micro-surrogates of the We stage their comeback: alternative communes, capsules of indigenous or imported religions, small groups and organizations ready for a *buying spree* at the overstuffed supermarket of values and worldviews, local millenarianisms against the backdrop of New Age irrationalism. The silent majority of America pretended all this was un-American, and labelled it 'cults'.

'Cults' were social entities characterized by high cohesion, extreme «ozeanische Gefühl»,³ a strong and unanimous set of values, the systematic breaking ties with the outside world and previous life, total loyalty, a compact and emotional social bonding, millenarianism and utopianism, a dominant leader-guru, total dependence on the group, belonging, brutal social control over one's life and body, membership as conversion, loss of identity and a feeling of a new beginning, and defection as betrayal.

For a healthy America, the 'cult' meant the topsy-turvy repeal of its self-image. Total institution. Deprivation of freedom and imprisonment. Taking possession of bodies and minds. Systematic indoctrination practices (brainwashing).

² BRYAN WILSON, *Sects and Society*, London, Heinemann, 1961; *Patterns of Sectarianism: Organisation and Ideology in Social and Religious Movements*, ed. by Bryan Wilson, London, Heinemann, 1967.

² DAVID RIESMAN, NATHAN GLAZER, REUEL DENNEY, TODD GITLIN, *The Lonely Crowd. A Study of the Changing American Character*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1950.

³ SIGMUND FREUD, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, London, Imago, [1929] 1946, p. 430; but also SANDOR FERENCZI, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, London (*Versuch einer Genitaltheorie*, Wien), [1924] 1989 specificare meglio bibliografia, editori ecc.: the ego in the group as a drop in the ocean.

Destruction of the family. Absolute dependence on the group and the leader. Norms, values, and lifestyles as alternatives to the American Way of Life. Tax evasion and exploitation of welfare. Chastity, promiscuity, and orgies. Loss of economic autonomy. Extremist ideologies (religious, social revolutionary), or exotic imports of alien world views. Sometimes a furthering of violence. In the background, the relentless *atrocities* of the defectors and the never-ending *deprogramming* of the brainwashed. In short, the cults are sociological embodiments of un-American evil.

The Peoples Temple became the ultimate cult figure, the perfect cult. Most 'cults' of those decades targeted specific segments of American society. The People's Temple was more ambitious, and targeted America as a whole. Its structure, identity, and worldview addressed all its hidden or explicit suffering, marginality, confusion, and/or quest for meaning and project. The Temple absorbed cleavages, conflated conflicts, and condensed oxymorons. Its sociological paradox forced it to push to the utmost the functional and structural characteristics of the ideal type of cult. This cult is even more 'cult', a cyst of total evil verified by its collective suicide. Alien, doomed to be cognitively and emotionally evacuated as the waste of an otherwise healthy social body.

PSYCHOPATHOLOGIES

Over many years, the disturbing phenomenon of 'cults' had undergone psychiatric medicalization. The followers of new religious movements, but also of closed groups of social and political protest or alternative lifestyles, embodied psychological pathologies.¹

As a suicidal arch-cult, no one more than the Peoples Temple deserves an obvious psychopathological reading: most Temple's followers were mad, or, to put it more nicely, psychiatrically compromised personalities. The most important TV anchorman of the late Seventies sets it straight: « To put it simply, a bunch of nuts ». The second most important US weekly devotes an extensive special section to the event, and comments: «Explanation for the disaster could only be drawn from the murky pathology of madness and mass indoctrination»:² a common talk to be found everywhere in the media, in instant books, and in social communication. Still 16 months after the event, this view was reiterated by the ponderous *Jonestown Follow-up Report* of the House of Congress Subcommittee on International Operations: «Jonestown has become synonymous with

¹ Psychiatrist John Clark, an authoritative institutional expert on cults, epitomized the common sense 'scientific' pathology approach: «their minds are split... The same changes [*in their attitudes and behaviours*] can result from disease processes and are seen as evidence of injury. Their highly manipulated minds are effective only under total control and are less able to manage the unexpected without resorting to psychosis, suicide, or uncontrolled violence towards others» (D. SHUPE ANSON JR., DAVID BROMLEY, *Shaping the Public Response to Jonestown: Peoples Temple and the Anticult Movement*, in *Violence and Religious Commitment: Implications of Jim Jones's People's Temple Movement*, ed. by Ken Levi, University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982, p. 123).

² TOM MATTHEWS *et al.*, *The Cult of Death*, «Newsweek», Dec. 4, 1978, p. 40.

a unique type of collective madness » [State Department Jonestown Document 2424, March 4, 1980].

900 American citizens leave California to turn breathless through self-administered cyanide in the jungle of Guyana. What could they be if not mentally ill? The expulsion of the Jonestown scandal reaches its climax: the suiciders are pushed not just into otherness but out of humanity, literally dehumanized. « They were not fully functioning human beings, but split personalities, diseased, injured, brainwashed, and subject to a total control under which they disappeared as independent human agents responsible for their actions».¹

THE CHARISMATIC LEADER

Paranoid thinking, total worship, collective madness. The last link in the construction of disavowal and in the expulsion of evil from us society is still missing. It is up to Jim Jones to close the circle of stigma without redemption. He will do it with his body. With his sex.

Alongside two-cents sociology and mass psychopathology, another simpler meta-explanation is ready. The founder and leader of the Peoples Temple is the primary demiurge of the cult, the organizing principle of its life and worldview, and the *deus-ex-machina* of its collective suicide. Jim Jones becomes the key to understanding a social group that acts as a mere prosthesis of his ego. The Peoples Temple simply mirrors its leader. The pathology of the Temple expresses the psychopathological personality of the Reverend. The outcome – a mass slaughter – verifies an individual psychosis that has become the psychotic structure of a social entity.

The leader-group relationship that enabled this osmosis is defined by another common-sense, self-evident category. Jones was a *charismatic leader*. His hold over the Temple members, their awe and loyalty unto death, derived from this mysterious yet all-powerful ensnaring derived from charisma, a *causa sine causa* self-explanatory and unanalysable. An opaque mix of characteristics, manipulative strategies, seductions, violence, falsifications, and rhetorical skills condenses inexplicably in a single individual, resulting in extreme forms of dominance.

Society, history, and context disappear. The collective narrative focuses on Rev. Jim Jones as the latest variant of the *Rattenfänger von Hameln*. His childhood, his life, and his sex behaviour.

THE POLYMORPHOUS PERVERT²

Already in the very first days after the suicide, then in a fast crescendo, the *atrocious tales* around Jim Jones as a polymorphous pervert, the details, the recordings,

¹ DAVID CHIDESTER, *Salvation and Suicide*, cit., p. 31.

² An obvious reference to Freud's definition of sexuality, which he tongue-in-cheek limited to infantile sexuality.

the episodes.¹ In the press, in instant books, on TV, in the accounts of the very few survivors and true believers left in California, in the testimonies of the *defectors*, the stigma labels:

- *compulsive philanderer*, since forever, blatantly, cruelly;
- *gigolo*: he prostitutes with mature, rich women to fund his church (his sex as a bodily device for the group's survival);
- *sexual predator*: the relentless subjugator of all the young, somehow attractive, *white* women of the Temple, whom he kept bound to himself in the leadership roles of the organization; the user of their bodies for numberless episodes of 'sacred prostitution' in the service of the Temple (to entrap enemies or followers of little faith; with members of the Guyana government to gain favour and special concessions, or block unwanted visitors...);
- *mating organizer*: couples were often separated and/or forced into divorce if one element of the couple was to become Jones's sexual partner; in Jonestown, the autonomous sex life of a believer was made difficult or impossible by the allocation of communal sleeping quarters; one person, Patty Cartmell, was the fucking secretary in charge of the leader's sex agenda;
- *castrator*: generalized periods of enforced chastity for the Temple members, with only Jones allowed sex; the daily assertion that males, particularly younger ones, were latent homosexuals and/or incapable of giving pleasure to a woman; the direct sexual humiliation of males perceived as rivals during ceremonies of erotic degradation in public Temple assemblies
- *sex therapist*: a variant of the *Rois thaumaturges*;² sex with Jones as education or discovery of a pleasure never experienced before; as a revelation of one's hidden and always 'unorthodox' sexual identity; as a 'cure' for the desire to separate from the group and 'betray'; as therapy for disobedience, deviance, rebellious attitudes, acts of detachment and independence, thoughts of desertion or complicity with external enemies;

¹ The sexual atrocity tales can be found in almost all mass media accounts, pamphlets, books, and films dealing with the mass suicide. A few references: JEANNIE MILLS, *Six Years with God: Life Inside Reverend Jim Jones's People's Temple*, New York, A & W Publishers, 1979; TIM REITERMAN, *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His People*, New York, Dutton, 1982; ETHAN FEINSOD, *Awake in a Nightmare: Jonestown, the Only Eyewitness Account*, New York, Norton, 1981; PHIL KERN, DOUG WEAD, *People's Temple, People's Tomb*, Plainfield, Logos International, 1979; MIN S. YEE, *In My Father's House: The Story of the Layton Family and the Reverend Jim Jones*, New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981; CHARLES A. KRAUSE, *Guyana Massacre: The Eyewitness Account*, New York, Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1978; MARSHALL KILDUFF, *The Suicide Cult: The Inside Story of the Peoples Temple Sect and the Massacre in Guyana*, New York, Bantam Books, 1978; GEORGE KLINEMAN, *The Cult that Died: The Tragedy of Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple*, New York, Putnam, 1980; DEBORAH LAYTON, *Seductive poison: a Jonestown survivor's story of life and death in the Peoples Temple*, New York, Anchor Books, 1998; JAMES RESTON JR., *Our Father Who Art in Hell: The Life and Death of Jim Jones*, New York, Times Books, 1981; plus nearly all the newspapers, magazines, and TV/Radio coverage of the event.

² MARC BLOCH, *Les Rois Thaumaturges. Étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale, particulièrement en France et en Angleterre*, Strasbourg-Paris, Istra, 1924.

- *divine phallus*, extraordinary in size and performance, envied by all males and females; all males and females try to lurch at it; limitless giver of limitless pleasure, but for the sake of the cause and not for pleasure itself; Aaron's rod dedicated to the miracle of guaranteeing the *Vergesellschaftung* and holding the *Gemeinschaft* together; discloser of latent gender truths and denied desires behind the flatness of sex identities and 'normality'; metamorphic; catalyst of the *metanoia* inherent to charisma;
- *methodical bisexual*: male for both males and females; indifferent to the diaphanous boundaries of biological identities; omnipotent manipulator of all possible bodies; a Sphero of sex; an androgynous Eros who hopes to bypass Penia; the bodily expression of the social totality that Jones is or embodies in his person/group;
- *cruising hustler*, seeking casual sex in San Francisco gay cinemas; arrested, he barely escapes both prosecution and publicity;
- *sodomite homosexual*: he obsessively pursues active anal contacts with the males of the Temple, describes them in detail at group assemblies and Planning Commission meetings (the internal governing body), has them described in detail by the sodomised; talks insistently about anal intercourse and offers it relentlessly; he depicts anal sex as ugly, dirty, contagious, repulsive, a sacrifice to save souls and to convert to the community;
- *voyeur*: openly aroused when followers recount in detail their sexuality in public assemblies; when they mimic or perform public sexual activities requested by Jones or some of his lieutenants; when women expose their menses and have to offer themselves for public oral intercourse by reticent and submissive males;
- *sadist*: he humiliates with ferocious pleasure; he forces intimate public confessions and bodily self-degradation; he indulges in creating punishment devices; he looks forward having young girls and boys, but also adults, publicly whipped (preferably on the buttocks) or force to swallow back their vomit;
- *deadly HIV/AIDS infector*: the accelerated physical degeneration of his body and health shows all the symptoms of the sin/gay illness.

In the post-event narratives, an undifferentiated libidinal flux emanates from the charismatic leader. It pervades the Temple and bounces back towards its leader, magnifying his sexual power and his function as a total sex provider to his followers. According to the mass stories, a limitless libido indifferent to boundaries and norms coalesces in Jim Jones. It impregnates the community, organizes its life, shapes its organization, hierarchies, modes of social control, the timing and rituals of its bodies, the administration, enforcement and denial of pleasure, and the roles and gender identities. The Temple is described as a vast erotic matrix in which the sexual density of the polymorphous pervert makes the usual social forms and relational structures fluid and insubstantial. The sexualized body of the leader literally embodies the social bond and embeds it in relationships and phantasms of flesh. His body or phallus anoints his followers with the fusional

cohesion and oneness required for the unitary self-annihilation of the Temple through death by mutual consent.

Such a twisted sex community could have been a paradoxical phalanstery, but its narrative as a phalanstery would have reframed the deadly Temple into a utopia of sorts. Instead, here is a silent would-be organization concocted for the death project of an unlimitedly perverted Pied Piper. Not the 'Fay ce que voudras' of an Abbaye de Thélème in the lush jungle, but a Silling Castle in a tropical Black Forest. This is how the collective imagination deconstructs and reconstructs Jonestown when it faces the sociological terror of an assault on the very essence of its social bond and on its *Vergesellschaftung*.

STIGMA, OR THE TURN OF THE SCREW

There is still one last turn of the screw.

In *Massenpsychologie und Ich-analyse* (1921), Freud wondered about the psychological bond between the leader and his 'mass'. How comes this consensual subjection of a group to an individual to whom the group itself invents extraordinary abilities and characteristics? What is the power of a charismatic leader made of? Freud's answer is subtle. The leader is powerful because he enshrines in himself the life of his group. He masters its existence, makes it live, and holds it together. He achieves this through the horizontal bond among the group members, enabled by their common identification with him. However different they may be, they all share the same object of love and ego-ideal. The leader binds them through himself by becoming what each follower dreams or fears to be. Infinitely multifaceted while pretending to be one and compact, the leader builds his power on desire and identification, on the coalescence of individual desires in his own blank-screen person.

The leader performs as the container-mirror of his 'subjects', the embodied geometric locus of the social and psychological personae of each and all. A body-cosmos that organizes, encompasses within itself, and enacts the otherwise unspeakable and unrecognizable body-chaos that every womb or gut is. The charismatic leader internalizes and reveals the unsaid truth of his group. He pushes into the limelight what its members can hardly utter, say, imagine, or desire. A *Facteur de Vérité* (Derrida) that both conceals and betrays.

The impassioned erotic narrative in which the American collective imagination rewrote Jim Jones and the dead of Jonestown was meant to stigmatise, i.e. repel, the monstrous anguish of the event. Ironically, it reveals the collective web of repressed desires and fantasies that cannot be thought of, even less verbalized or acted out. The polymorphous-perverse leader invites the polymorphous-perverse children to follow him where there are no boundaries, denial turns into endeavour, and terror necessarily coexists with attraction. Jim Jones, as an explanatory principle, betrays with unusual intensity the ambivalence hidden in rejection, in distancing, and in the avoidant disavowal that we have seen at work in the reactions to this collective suicide. Everyone is also the polymorphous per-

vert of unlimited and sadistic desires, a ravenous Eros. Everyone is also a slaughterer of blacks, a wilful exterminator of useless old people, a rapist of anuses, a slayer of children who exact love and a future, a craver for domination and the power of death, and a cyanide choker of Others who press at the city gates.

The strategy of stigma morphs the sexual misery of the many into the « libidinal haemorrhage » (Freud on narcissism) of the few. The collective suicide of Jonestown as a *petite mort à plusieurs* is the simultaneously anguished and intensely ecstatic reversal of an extreme *folie à plusieurs*.

Stigma takes us *here*, to the riverbank, where we watch with envy and a reassuring distance the *Narrenschiff* we ourselves invented, laden with eerie sounds, sex, and freedom, flowing past us and going. Towards what? The current pushes her through the milky water towards the maternal white vortex that has already swallowed Gordon Pym and so many other pilgrims of the social unconscious. The final silence of Jonestown ushers us into the uterine *thalassa Thalassa*,¹ where the primordial fusion of the Origin voids the possibility of both sign and voice. There, a maternal breast unlimitedly turgid and poisonous awaits our fellow travellers, nostalgic for ecstasy but locked in frozen desires. «Mother, mother, mother, please, mother, please» is the anguished but fascinated *ololyghé* Jim Jones utters towards the end of the suicide liturgy. A plea to a mother to die with her child. Also, a desperate invocation to the phantasm of a deadly mother's breast. The *regressio ad uterum*,² i.e. death as being-unborn and a quest for the deaf blindness of origin, at last brings about the silent Realm of the Mothers.

An ur-archaic outcome, longing for the timeless Emptiness that *preceded* Chaos.³ The Greek myths grappled at length with this Origin, sensed its *Todesfuge* and strived to defuse it by enacting it into words and narratives. Later on, 230 years ago, an intrepid traveller dared venture again into the Realm of the Mothers, and provided a more unflinching final comment (J. W. Goethe, *Faust II*, Act One, Finstere Galerie):

MEPHISTOPHELES
Göttinnen thronen hehr in Einsamkeit
Um sie keinen Ort, noch weniger eine Zeit;
Von ihnen sprechen ist Verlegenheit.
Die Mütter sind es!

¹ SANDOR FERENCZI, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, cit.

² ERNST JONES, *On 'Dying Together', with Special Reference to Heinrich von Kleist's Suicide*, in *Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis*, v. 1, London, Hogarth Press (ed. riv.), 1951, pp. 9-15; IDEM, *An Unusual Case of 'Dying Together'*, in *Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis*, cit., pp. 16-21.

³ Cfr. JEAN PIERRE VERNANT, *L'Univers, les Dieux, les Hommes. Récits grecs des origines*, Paris, Seuil, 1999, p. 17: «Qu'est-ce qu'il y avait quand il n'y avait pas encore quelque chose, quand il n'y avait rien? [...] Au tout début, ce qui exista en premier, ce fut Béance [...]. Qu'est-ce que la Béance? C'est un vide, un vide obscur où rien ne peut être distingué. Espace de chute, de vertige et de confusion, sans terme, sans fond. On est happé par cette Béance comme par l'ouverture d'une gueule immense où tout serait englouti dans une même nuit indistincte. À l'origine donc, il n'y a que cette Béance, abîme aveugle, nocturne, illimité».

FAUST (*aufgeschreckt*)

Mütter!

MEPHISTOPHELES

Schauderts dich?

FAUST

Die Mütter! Mütter! -'s klingt so wunderlich!

MEPHISTOPHELES

Das ist es auch. Göttinnen, ungekannt

Euch sterblichen, von uns nicht gern genannt.

Nach ihrer Wohnung magst ins Tiefste schürfen,

Du selbst bist schuld, daß ihrer wir bedürfen. [...]

FAUST

Nur immer zu! Wir wollen es ergründen:

In deinem Nichts hoffe ich, das alles zu finden.

Beyond the multilayered and blurred frames of stigma, at last the Faustian core of the Jonestown final project: through Nothingness, the Whole.

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