

# **GENERAL DESTINIES**

**GUIDO MAZZONI**

**TRANSLATED BY ZAKIYA HANAFI**

I belong to an unfortunate generation, swung between the old world and the new, and I find myself ill at ease in both. And what is more, as you must have realized by now, I am without illusions.

Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*

PLAYBOY: What things bore you?

BOLAÑO: The empty discourse of the Left. I take for granted the empty discourse of the Right.

Bolaño, Interview for the Mexican edition of Playboy, July 2003

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## THIS BOOK

This book describes some aspects of the Western form of life as it presents itself today, after the metamorphosis that over the last few decades has transformed the family, love, politics, personal relationships, class relations, ways of working, thinking, communicating, desiring, and consuming. Between 1973 and 1974, Pier Paolo Pasolini gave a name to it that has continued to thrive: anthropological mutation. Forty years later, we know that this expression indicated an unfinished event, because the process would continue to develop during the subsequent decades, taking on forms that Pasolini could not have known about. The phenomenon affects Europe, the United States, and all nations influenced by Western hegemony, but each country experiences it according to a different chronology. In Italy it went through three phases: the one Pasolini describes in his articles; the one beginning in the early 1980s, when private television channels reshaped the unconscious and the collective imagination (what we refer to today by a proper name that has become a metonymy: Silvio Berlusconi); and the one shaped between the late 1990s and the 2000s by the deep-seated changes brought about by the Internet – which as far as I know, have yet to receive the kind of thoughtful analysis they deserve.

My observations on the present issue out of ambivalence and bewilderment. These feelings combine a personal, a generational, and a cultural trait. The first has little of interest to offer. The second is expressed by the epigraph that opens this book: “I belong to an unfortunate generation, swung between the old world and the new, and I find myself ill at ease in both.” This is how the Prince of Salina responds in *The Leopard* to the Cavaliere Chevalley di Monterzuolo, the Piedmontese Secretary to the Prefecture, when he offers to nominate him as Senator of the new Kingdom of Italy. While it is true that every generation can be said to have been born between two periods, it is also true that every generation has the opportunity and obligation to reflect on its place in the historical period, and on the sense of progress or unease sparked by the change in which it participated. Anyone born in the late 1960s retains a childhood and adolescent memory of ethical, political, and psychological structures that are teetering or no longer exist today. They retain the memory of the grand politics and class conflicts of the twentieth century founded on the clash between the two models of society and personhood that vied for world domination. They retain the memory or still benefit from the social-democratic protections that the labor and unionist movement won

through a long, bloody struggle. They retain the memory of a way of living, whether working-class or middle-class, based on sacrifice, discipline, and duty: families who remained united no matter what, parent couples who suppressed their own needs because of the imperative to stay together forever, a certain atmospheric diffidence toward consumption, excess, and self-display. They grew up in a period when the society of spectacle was at a stage that appears elementary to us in hindsight – harmless and well-meaning, like black-and-white television with two channels. This was a stage when the “oneiric service industry” (as Walter Siti dubbed it) had not yet established its hegemony over the public sphere or directly seized power over it, as it did in Italy in 1994. The world they knew came prior to information technology and the psychological and social changes brought about by the Internet. Then, during their adolescence and early adulthood, they found themselves in the midst of a dizzying change that never took the form of an obvious conflict and yet had the same effect as wars or revolutions, since it was also the result of the world war that afflicted the last half of the twentieth century without ever breaking out. This metamorphosis passed on to a later epoch the historical forces that we were in time to see crystallized in the behaviors of our parents and ushered in another epoch, which we lived fully and head-on, unlike those born a few decades before us, because it was our own.

Faced with a mutation of this amplitude, concepts and passions fluctuate. The *Stimmung* permeating this book is ambivalent. But I do not want the reader to concentrate solely on resolving this ambivalence, on trying to figure out the percentage of favor and disfavor, tallying the plus and minus signs on each page and, in the process, shifting the orientation of the discourse from analysis to judgment. I am not interested in taking a position; I am primarily interested in understanding. If there is one aspect of the problem I see with clarity, it is the ineffectiveness of the categories with which we attempt to interpret the present. Anyone who grew up in a leftist culture, in one of the many discursive families making up the culture of the left – anyone who has been a reader of Karl Marx, Theodore W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Marc Bloch, or Franco Fortini, for example – senses that the concepts he or she once employed in the attempt to understand reality are no longer helpful today. But he or she would also sense that the ideas belonging to other political and cultural families, whether left or right, also slide around on the historical ground their users seek to grasp: these categories have no foothold; they belong to the past. *General Destinies* arose out of this dissatisfaction: it can also be read as a handcrafted attempt to get one’s bearings without indulging in empty discourse.

The book is composed of two related parts. They took form over the 2000s, between

the July 2001 protests at the G8 summit in Genoa, Italy, and the 2008 financial crisis. Put into writing as private thoughts in a file of notes, they became public three years ago, by chance, when I began to draft a summary of the things I wanted to talk about at a conference round table. The summary continued to expand, generating the embryo of the first chapter. A few months later I made a trip to Berlin as a guest of an Italian friend who had moved there shortly before. I had seen Berlin in the early 1990s, when it was still the allegorical city of the twentieth century, the ground where fascism, communism and the *Western way of life* had left their signs: the battlefield where the three models of society and personhood had physically clashed during the last century in their battle for world domination. In 2013 the place was unrecognizable: its tragic history had been embalmed or removed, every physical detail, from its architecture to its advertising, expressed something else, and everything in that urban landscape added to the thoughts I had put down on paper in the first chapter: everything became allegory.

The parts of this book have preserved a random, idiosyncratic aspect. If I sought a philosophical foundation for everything I tried to express, there would be no end to it: I would be devoured by the need to be systematic, by my philosophical superego. The only way out has been to accept the personal nature of these thoughts and the urgency of the motives that prompted me to write.

## **1. THE MUTATION**

### **1. THE MASSES**

Over the past fifty years, the psychic life of the Western masses has undergone an unprecedented metamorphosis. We have all been transformed and overwhelmed by it. A part of contemporary culture faithful to a heroic, masculine vision of experience and occurrence – the idea that epochal breaks appear in the form of wars and revolutions – continues to underestimate the scale of what has happened. This shortsightedness can be explicit or implicit, as it is every time we study our epoch using concepts, words, and myths that are no longer sustainable. The categories normally used to judge the present, which form the basis of our ethico-political positions on the problems of our time, today give the impression of

having no grasp on reality: either they refer to a future that no longer relates to a political project and is therefore merely the projection of a desire, or they refer to a past that will never come back. What are the most conspicuous features of this transformation? What happened?

I would begin by identifying three points of departure and a historical subject. The mutation is connected to the development of capitalism in the age of its triumph; it is personal, suprapersonal, and intrapersonal, since it has changed relations between individuals, relations between individuals and institutions, and inner mental landscapes; one aspect of the metamorphosis has to do with the forms and politics of desire. The subject that changes is the masses in Western countries and in countries under the hegemony of the Western form of life. This expression – the Western form of life – is the variant of a propagandistic category that emerged out of the bleakest period of the Cold War. It designated what liberal American democracy championed in opposition to the communist utopia of a classless society and a new human being. By defending private initiative, the American way of life created a bubble of autonomy and well-being around individuals, made an enormous quantity of goods available, and glorified the values of the middle classes.<sup>1</sup>

After 1945, in the part of the planet known in the geography of the Cold War as the West,<sup>2</sup> the American way of life expanded and transformed into a Western way of life; after 1989, it spread to the countries that lived through “real socialism.” The societies in which the Western way of life is practiced, no matter how segmented from within, no matter how covered by fault lines destined to grow wider as neoliberalism continues to chip away at what remains of the European social democracies, when viewed today from the outside with the eyes of a distant or enemy observer, can seem like unified blocks. The only global adversary of this model, Islamic fundamentalism, reminds us of this fact every day: the group that now controls an extended region of Nigeria, for example, bears the Western way of life inscribed in its name; Boko Haram means “Western education is prohibited”; “Western living is forbidden.”<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, the term *masses* designates the body of contemporary post-Fordist societies – a body reducible to neither the unity presupposed by the notion of a people nor to the internal cohesion of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century social classes. This body is composed of individuals who view themselves as purely private beings, cut off from any form of membership outside that of the *oikos*, the family. Compared to the homogeneity imposed on the traditional proletariat or bourgeoisie to turn it into a uniform entity, achieved by blurring differences, the masses possess a relatively high degree of exterior heterogeneity.<sup>4</sup> These individuals claim the right to express themselves, to make their voices heard, to distinguish themselves, to move around freely in a little sphere of subjective autonomy, but who remain united by a mindset and a system of unconscious mythologies. Observed from afar, the differences separating them appear to be minimal: if at the beginning of the twentieth century “High Street, Germany, would have marked one antipode, and Main Street, U.S.A., a far-distant other,”<sup>5</sup> today the variations all involve local color but under the surface there is an essential homology. People in Western countries share a deep resemblance: they exist inside the same mode of production, they act according to similar values, they wear the same clothes, they watch the same shows, and they worship the same heroes. Moreover, the extent to which the signs of the Western way of life have been globalized seems obvious to us now, but it should never cease to amaze us, because there is something magical about it. They are revealed to us every day in contexts that are a challenge to interpret with our second- or third-hand information. An ISIS video shows the execution of a group of Syrians faithful to Assad or too Westernized: they are made to lie down on their backs in a sort of trough and shot in the head with automatic weapons. The scene is mesmerizing in itself, but it is the details that hypnotize the viewer. For example, some of the



victims are wearing the jerseys of European soccer teams: they live swaddled in a global mythology that ISIS combats directly; they die wearing jerseys emblazoned with the names of Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, even Nani.

In effect, the term ‘masses’ designates the same entity that a portion of contemporary political thought calls ‘multitude,’ following Spinoza and Deleuze. But the terms ‘masses’ and ‘multitude’ refer to different conceptions of the entity that they name. ‘Multitude’ is used by thinkers who see in this social subject the agent of a possible transformation of the present state of things, while ‘masses’ carries with it other overtones. Its etymology preserves the idea that the entity in question is made of amorphous parts (*maza*, in Greek, is ‘dough,’ *massein* means ‘to knead dough’). It bears some of the dysphoric connotations that accompanied the word between the 1850s and the early 1900s, when the term entered into sociological thought on modernity.<sup>6</sup> These pejorative undertones were muted, though, when the expressions ‘mass society’ and ‘mass parties’ began to signify the political condition and the subjects of democracy that came into being with the ending of the nineteenth-century aristocracy and the achievement of universal male suffrage.

I use ‘masses’ because I consider it to be a more politically neutral term than ‘multitude’ and because, assuming no other conflicts break out beyond the present ones, in my view the Western interclassist body possesses no hidden progressive power. I seek to reflect on the metamorphosis that has transformed this subject, starting from two ideal-type positions that oppose each other in contemporary debates on the mutation. To bring these into focus, I turn to the first two attempts that were made to describe the metamorphosis at the time the change was taking place: the conference *On Psychoanalytic Discourse*, which Jacques Lacan held in Milan in 1972, and Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, which came out the same year. One of Italy’s greatest Lacanian scholars, Massimo Recalcati, has also compared these texts.<sup>7</sup> I will not be offering a philological study of Lacan or of Deleuze and Guattari, since this would lie outside my field of competence. More than in the texts themselves, my interest lies elsewhere: in what they have inspired as the origins, emblems, and archetypes of opposing stances in the debate on the mutation – in what they allow us to understand.

## **2. THE OBLIGATION TO ENJOY**

Lacan held the conference *On Psychoanalytic Discourse* on May 12, 1972 at the University of Milan. On May 7, after a fierce electoral campaign, the political elections were won by the

social bloc that a few years earlier had been dubbed the “silent majority” (*maggioranza silenziosa*).<sup>8</sup> The MSI (the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement) had obtained more than nine per cent of the Senate votes; its external support would be decisive for forming a government. The day of the elections, Franco Serantini, a student anarchist who had been beaten by the police two days earlier during a protest, died in Pisa; on May 17, Police Inspector Luigi Calabresi was killed in Milan. Some members of the extraparliamentary left held Calabresi responsible for the death of Luigi Pinelli, the anarchist who had been wrongly accused of the Piazza Fontana bombing that occurred in Milan on December 12, 1969. Three days later, during an interview with Calabresi, Pinelli had fallen to his death out of the window of the Milan police headquarters. Whether or not this climate had any influence on Lacan’s speech is difficult to determine; the fact that Lacan was addressing an audience of politicized young people during a tragic period of Italian history in a climate of civil war certainly held some weight.

At the end of the conference a concept emerged that was destined for success: today, said Lacan, the discourse of the master circulates in its most astute form, that is, as the “discourse of the capitalist” – as the obligation to enjoy, to sacrifice everything in the name of enjoyment.<sup>9</sup> A concept that was nothing more than an aside in the 1972 conference has in recent years become the pivotal category for a neo-Lacanian criticism of the present state of things. We find it, with very different styles and some shared aspects, in Slavoj Žižek and in Recalcati.<sup>10</sup> Although clearly separated by differences in philosophical vocabulary and in their approaches, using the language of psychoanalysis they both reformulate ideas not too distant from those we can read, filtered by a different *a priori*, in the writings of Zygmunt Bauman. Žižek reflects on the way contemporary capitalism transforms the search for pleasure into an unconscious duty, thereby replacing the traditional superego, which was repressive and censorious, with a new form of superego founded on the compulsion to enjoy. Using Lacan’s texts as the starting point for an autonomous discourse, Recalcati contrasts desire in the strict sense of the word with enjoyment. Desire seeks a form of relationship, since in essence it is always desire for/of the Other: it is responsible, it responds to the demand that comes from another being by creating bonds. Enjoyment establishes a relationship of pure consumption with the thing or person it turns to: it is irresponsible, non-belonging, centrifugal; it destroys all allegiances (to others, to oneself, to previous epochs of life), treats people like things, seeks out ephemeral intensities, consumes them, and replaces them with other equivalent intensities. In this context, psychoanalysis also works as a sort of epochal seismograph: until half a century ago, the discipline worked on the pathologies of

repression, control, and attachment; in recent decades it has worked primarily on the pathologies caused by the excessive power of the Es<sup>11</sup> – on dependencies, on inner splits, on borderline states, on depression as a response to the difficulties of accepting oneself in a social life that, by promising unlimited room for experience and consumption, makes every single finite existence seem miserable.<sup>12</sup>

In neo-Lacanian critical thought of today, the discourse of the capitalist joins with the other two concepts that Lacan came up with during those same years – *the evaporation of the father* and *segregation*. In October 1968, responding to a talk given by Michel de Certeau at the Congress of the Ecole freudienne de Paris, Lacan spoke about the effects that “universalism” (globalization) produces on the psychic life.

I believe that in our epoch the trace, the scar of the evaporation of the father, is what we could put under the category and general heading of segregation. We believe that universalism, the communication of our civilization, homogenizes relations between people. I think on the contrary that what characterizes our century – and we cannot fail to realize it – is a ramified, reinforced segregation, intersecting itself at all levels, that does nothing but multiply the barriers.<sup>13</sup>

The evaporation of the father is the premise and consequence of the discourse of the capitalist: by instituting the command to enjoy, destroying the traditional modes of the superego, the contemporary form of life sacrifices bonds to pleasure, separates people from each other, and divides them internally.

I would like to use these readings of Lacan as starting points to talk about the reality of today and to reflect on the consequences that the slackening of the superego has had on our personal and collective lives. Since the metamorphosis we are discussing acts as a sort of flow, to get our bearings I will isolate four phenomena in this continuum. I have arranged them in an order from inside to outside, from the mental to the political space.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Laura A. Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War*

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(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2008).

2 Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2006).

3 Aliyu U. Tilde, "An Inhouse Survey into the Cultural Origins of Boko Haram Movement in Nigeria," in *Gamji*. <http://www.gamji.com/tilde/tilde99.htm>.

4 On the homogeneity through abstraction that held the classes together in the 1800s and early 1900s, see Paolo Virno, *Grammatica della moltitudine. Per una analisi delle forme di vita contemporanee* (2001) (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2003), p. 120.

5 Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, p. 15.

6 William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (Glencoe IL: The Free Press 1959), pp. 22ff.; P. Simonson, *Refiguring Mass Communication: A History* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), pp. 21-22.

7 Massimo Recalcati, *L'uomo senza inconscio. Figure della nuova clinica psicoanalitica* (Milan: Cortina, 2010), pp. 36-38.

8 The expression "silent majority" was invented by Nixon and Spiro Agnew to indicate that a majority of Americans supported the Vietnam War, even though a noisy minority were protesting it. The term was imported into France in May 1968, reaching Italy soon afterwards. See Frédéric Bas, *La 'Majorité silencieuse' ou la bataille de l'opinion en mai-juin 1968, 68: Une histoire collective, 1962-1981*, edited by Philippe Artières, Michelle Zancarini-Fournel (Paris: La Découverte 2008), pp. 359-66.

9 Jacques Lacan, "Du discours psychanalytique," in *Lacan in Italia 1953-1978 en Italie Lacan* (Milan: La Salamandra, 1978), p. 48. English version: "On psychoanalytic discourse," trans. J. W. Stone. <https://www.scribd.com/document/151026214/Milan-Discourse-Lacan>. Accessed November 30, 2016.

10 Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London, New York: Verso, 2000); *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2006); "Entretien avec Slavoj Žižek. Le désir, ou la trahison du bonheur," edited by David Rabouin, in *Le magazine littéraire*, 455, July-August 2006, pp. 30-33; Massimo Recalcati, *L'uomo senza inconscio*.

11 See Recalcati, *L'uomo senza inconscio*, pp. IX and 16.

12 Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age* (1998) (Montreal & Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), pp. 53ff.

13 Discussion by Michel de Certeau, "Ce que Freud fait de l'histoire," Congrès de Strasbourg, October 12, 1968, in *Lettres de l'École freudienne de Paris 7* (1970): 84.