Florian Arnold

The Dialectics of Dis-Obedience

Notes from the Crystal Palace

> "To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an ecstasy, a moral exhibitionism that we very much need."[1]

One of the central questions of modern democracies can be formulated as the paradox of how to serve freedom. Inherent in this paradox is a tension in which, depending on one's situation and disposition, one must always find anew the right balance between obedience and disobedience to the rules set by the sovereign. This tense question of freedom shows itself all too easily in the context of our quarantine routine, as we can simply look at those attempting to escape, committing misdemeanors or even breaking the law, who try to attract attention. Today, one cannot talk about the subject of (dis)obedience without coming across the global phenomenon of the so-called 'Querdenker', literally "those who think across (or laterally or transversally)". In the middle of the 19th century, the movement named "Freigeister" was still committed to a liberal-democratic agenda and saw itself supported by a broad consensus in the bourgeoisie, but already appears to Friedrich Nietzsche only as philistine folklore of old revolutionaries, to whom he opposed the immoral aestheticism of a future generation of "freie Geister", "free spirits". According to Nietzsche, this rare type of people is characterized by a pronounced individualism and a radical self-enlightenment which no longer bow to any idols, be they fellow human beings, the state, or even God himself. Against this background, the fact that today a wide variety of groups unite under the banner of 'Querdenker' may at first seem like another chapter in the successful modern history of individual self-assertion: For is it not basically still the state authority, which today again shows its ugly face, hidden behind care and welfare, only to rob its citizens of their most elementary rights, and some even of their livelihood? Is it not the first duty of citizens to resist and to serve their own freedom as well as the freedom of all by defending it against police restrictions in public? Are we not already living in a digital dictatorship by design, established by the controlling mania of the elites, who today use the new media of a barely visible algorithmization to make us slaves? In short: Is the modern state of today not merely the citizen-friendly side of a global biopolitics, whose profiteers remain themselves invisible—a conspiracy?

1 Benjamin, Walter: Der Sürrealismus. Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz. In: id.: Gesammelte Schriften, vol. II, 1, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt a. M. 1977, p. 295–310, here p. 298.

On the following pages I will take this basically paranoid view seriously, in order to illuminate its dark motives—behind it—as inevitable consequences of the modern dialectics of dis-obedience. What was described as a tension in the introduction has, with the development of our 'algorithmic culture', grown into an actual dialectic in which the role of design can no longer be underestimated. Design, however, means here a certain mindset, which functions as a motor of modernization, on whose material and idealistic effects both its proponents and its critics still draw from today.[2] In order to understand the nature of this mindset, I will start with the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. Here we will highlight certain essential features of modern thinking, which would, however, remain unrecognized in its Janus-facedness, if we did not at the same time step into an equally famous 'underground' of St. Petersburg. Fyodor M. Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* shows the dark side of a glorious rationalism and its creative optimism, as it were the underworld to this earthly paradise. Only this dialectical transition from light to shadow makes it possible to gauge the dangers modern citizens face when they obey the state laws of freedom or follow the wild call of liberty.

I. The Great Exhibitionism

It was not the first industrial and commercial exhibition on the island, but it was the first on a global scale that Queen Victoria and Prince Albert ceremoniously opened in London's Hyde Park on May 1, 1851. And in fact, the organizing committee had managed to set up an internationally attended and respected show of performance. Prince Albert himself had made it his task to bring the technical and artistic progress to England, to both represent the status quo as well as possible ways into the future. Thus he declared at a preparatory banquet: "Gentlemen,—the Exhibition of 1851 is to give us a true test and a living picture of the point of development at which the whole of mankind has arrived in this great task, and a new starting point from which all nations will be able to direct their further exertions."[3] A certain sense of mission that speaks from these words was hard to ignore even for contemporaries.

2 For a detailed account of this mindset, see Florian Arnold: Logik des Entwerfens. Eine designphilosophische Grundlegung, Paderborn 2018.

3 Martin, Theodore: The Life of His Royal Highness the Prince Consort, Volume 2, New York 1877, p. 201–8, esp. 205.

The fact that this project was realized in England may hardly come as a surprise regarding its pre-eminence as an industrial nation as well as a trading and colonial power. In this format of a Great Exhibition that still travels around the world today as "Expo," the British sporting spirit of performance, competition and spectacle made its appearance in another arena, albeit initially as a kind of home match for the hosts (with about half of the exhibition space reserved for representatives of the Commonwealth). But other nations and principalities also took up the challenge and provided the showcase of a globalized industrial capitalism with all kinds of goods from their own production. During the almost five months of the exhibition, the approximately 6 million spectators walked along ranges of Indian spices, American agricultural machinery, or French haute couture. Yet, the real event and the most dazzling symbol of the entire occasion remained the exhibition building itself: the Crystal Palace.

This building had already been celebrated by contemporaries as an architectural wonder of the century, and even after its successor building fell victim to a fire in 1936, it was none other than Le Corbusier who wrote an epitaph for this building or this type of building. The historical significance of the Crystal Palace lay not just in the building itself, but in the sophisticated design concept that was extremely variable in scale: Joseph Paxton, its architect and at the time of its construction already a wealthy railroad shareholder and entrepreneur, was an inventive and experimental gardener to William Cavendish, the 6th Duke of Devonshire. Paxton at this time was already known (not least to the royal couple) for designing impressive green houses. Accordingly, the architecture of the Crystal Palace looked like an oversized greenhouse that could not only be easily erected and dismantled again, moreover it impressively symbolized the prosperity of modern life in an artificial atmosphere specially designed of glass and cast iron: "That with the Crystal Palace a revolution had taken place in the field of architecture was immediately recognized by clear-sighted contemporaries. The purely functionalist aesthetics of the building, the lavish use of the materials glass and iron, which until then had been considered luxurious, and the facilitated dissolution of limited space that this made possible, the interweaving or interpenetration of interior and exterior, thus also became the paradigmatic form of modern building."[4]

4 Quoted from Lange, Wolfgang: "Kristallpalast oder Kellerloch? Zur Modernität Dostojewskijs". In: Merkur 40 (1/1986), p. 14–29, here p. 17 (translation by the author).

Above all, the use of glass on such a massive scale turned into the expression of a modern mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. In the end, its effects could not hide the fact that the boundary between inside and outside continues to exist, even when an envious or pitying glance penetrates the façade. Even if one might believe in enlightenment and transparency,[5] the glas still just reflects one's own milieu. No other material like glass is able to make visible through its semi-permeability what Peter Handke once put into the formula of the inner world of the outer world of the inner world: that the asymmetry between one's own inside and the other's outside is never cancelled for the observer, but can only be determined from a higher vantage point.

If this still relates to the horizontal separation of spaces, insiders and outsiders, then a vertical isolation can also be studied at the Crystal Palace, which in turn relates to the biotope of humankind as such in contrast to our 'natural' environment. As Peter Sloterdijk once described it in the course of his literary inspection of the "world interior of capital," an entry into the interior of the Crystal Palace is at the same time accompanied by the promise to turn the inhospitable outside more and more into a homely self-enclosure: "With its erection, the principle of the interior crossed a critical threshold: from then on, it meant neither the bourgeois or aristocratic dwelling nor its projection into the sphere of urban shopping arcades, rather, it set out to transpose the outside world as a whole into a magical immanence transfigured by luxury and cosmopolitanism. Having been converted into a great greenhouse and an imperial museum of culture, it betrayed the contemporary tendency to turn nature and culture together into indoor affairs."[6]

Whereas Walter Benjamin, against whom the side blow "of urban shopping arcades" is aimed here, had only recognized a gigantic Parisian passage in the Crystal Palace, Sloterdijk, on the other hand, sees in it the concept of "kosmos" renewed. Even if transcendent assistance has failed us, the natural neediness and cleverness of humankind now puts into action what, as an

5 Cf. ibid., p. 19: "What the crystal palace with its transparent walls promised aesthetically corresponds to the utopia of the bourgeoisie, the dream of an outwardly universalistic and inwardly transparent society, a society in which the gloomy arcanum of the old world would be illuminated by the radiant light of the Enlightenment and neither the individual with his drives and desires nor society with its political and economic institutions would any longer have anything to hide."

6 Sloterdijk, Peter: Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals. Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung, Frankfurt a. M. 2005, p. 266 (translation by the author).

extension of our own comfort zone, tends towards an infinite expansion. Admittedly, to speak with Benjamin: Even if "the world exhibitions are the pilgrimage to the commodity as fetish", a "people's festival" of capital, a transfiguration of "the exchange value of commodities",[7] all these descriptions still only highlight rather arbitrary features of that all-embracing development, which shapes the overall constitution of the modern life-world: "The world exhibitions [do not simply] build up the universe of commodities",[8] instead the crystal palace exhibits by itself the world itself—as a 'universal' commodity, as the one comprehensive, 'turned-into-one,' immanent good of human-creative self-transfiguration. What is fetishized here, not unlike in Marx, is at last man's labor and creative power itself—hence the "Great Exhibitionism".

The fact that it is possible to exchange at all, and not just to consume, is precisely one of the achievements of an inner-world expansion that relieves itself of the wear and tear of a hostile environment. It allows to take part in a general metabolism without losing shape, and it does so via an artificial membrane that enables reproduction of one's own system according to one's own rules, i.d. via autopoiesis.[9] If one wants to call it luxury, then one should call this the relative surplus of an absolute luxury of survival. To propagate, on the other hand, the standards of a mere use-value would mean to be blind for the tendency inherent in the use of things itself to build up into ever more complex artifacts that inevitably participate in a general exchange of resources and materials. Exchange as opposed to use or consumption instead means postponement, differentiation, mediation, and refinement. Basically, it organizes the luxurious life of a deficient human being, a being that cannot leave anything in its natural place, since it does not possess a natural place itself, but must first establish "its own nature".

7 Benjamin, Walter: Das Passagen-Werk. Erster Band, Frankfurt a. M. 1983, p. 50 (translation by the author).

8 Ibid., p. 51.

9 Cf. Fyodor M. Dostojewski's remarks on his own imprisonment at a Siberian labor camp: "Those convicts who knew no trade tried, nevertheless, to earn a few copecks occasionally in different ways. Some bought and sold things which nobody but a prisoner would ever have thought of selling or buying, or even of calling things. But the convicts were poor and very practical, and could turn even a filthy rag to some account." (Dostojewski.: Buried Alive or Ten Years of Penal Servitude in Siberia, London 1881, p. 25.)

You may call this either a luxury economy or an economy of scarcity, anyway, in the Crystal Palace exchange as the substitution of nature and culture is expressed in the purest degree, literally in the sense of crystallization: "For Plato, the crystal was the embodiment of the idea immersed in matter. Since the 19th century has chosen the crystal as the symbol of an order of reason arising naturally from history, not only a homogeneous world society spanning the entire globe is emerging, but also the horror of what Gehlen will then sarcastically call 'cultural crystallization'—the fear of a time without history."[10] No less paradoxically than a spiritualized nature or a naturalized spirit, in the crystalline structure of the Crystal Palace a structure of space-time comes to light, which already grasps the brilliance of the beginning of modern history in the perfect symmetry of a petrified, eternal duration. Thus, from now on, it seems only possible to repeat on a large scale what has already taken shape on a small scale, in the microcosmic dimensions of the World Exhibition: the optimistic, enlightened cosmopolitanism of a technical utopia.

II. Bourgeois Babel

"The immense town, for ever bustling by night and by day, as vast as an ocean, the screech and howl of machinery, the railways built above the houses (and soon to be built under them) the daring of enterprise, the apparent disorder, which in actual fact is the highest form of bourgeois order, the polluted Thames, the coal-saturated air, the magnificent squares and parks, the town's terrifying districts, such as Whitechapel with its half-naked, savage and hungry population, the City with its millions and worldwide trade, the Crystal Palace, the World Exhibition. [...] You look at those hundreds of thousands, at those millions of people obediently trooping into this place from all parts of the earth—people who have come with only one thought, quietly, stubbornly and silently milling round in this colossal palace; and you feel that something final has been accomplished here—accomplished and completed."[11]

Among the contemporary critics of the World Exhibition building, which had migrated from Hyde Park to Sydenham in the same year to be rebuilt there in 1854 on an even bigger scale, Fyodor M. Dostoevsky was at

10 Lange, Kristallpalast oder Kellerloch? p. 21.

11 Dostoevsky, Fyodor M.: Winter Notes on Summer Impressions, Richmond 2008, p. 48f.

once the most tartly and the most sharp-sighted. When Dostoyevsky set out on his first trip to Europe via Paris, London, Geneva and Italy in 1862, the disillusionment that set in was almost indistinguishable from the ardor that was to find literary expression a year later, after his second trip to Europe. The results were his *Winter Notes of Summer Impressions*. One can hardly call it a travel diary, rather a reckoning in retrospect, which Dostoevsky wrote under the impressions he had gained of Western Europe. Above all, London, even before Paris, had shown itself as the epitome of a new world of droning machines, starving people and dark powers, with the Crystal Palace in the center like a newly constructed tower of a bourgeois Babel, erected with diabolical skill—nota bene a completed tower: " It is a biblical sight, something to do with Babylon, some prophecy out of the Apocalypse being fulfilled before your very eyes. You feel that a rich and ancient tradition of denial and protest is needed in order not to yield, not to succumb to impression, not to bow down in worship of fact, and not to idolize Baal, that is, not to take the actual fact for the ideal..."[12]

One sees Dostoevsky wrestling with words imposed by this "grandeur of the idea"; provoking in him the anxious question, "Can this [...] in fact be the final accomplishment of an ideal state of things?"[13]—And yet, at the same time, these doubts express a missionary tone that pervades his Slavophilic utterances throughout the decades, even where, at the end of his life, in his celebrated Pushkin speech, he passes from condemnation to reconciliation.[14] However, for him there is no doubt about one thing: the Crystal Palace as a symbol of technical progress remains a cathedral of idolatry that gathers people under the sign of Baal.

12 Ibid., p. 50f.

13 Ibid., p. 50.

14 ...a reconciliation, of course, that goes beyond the internal rift of the pro-Western and the folk factions among the Russian intellectuals, aiming at a fraternization of a pan-European civilization. Thus, among other things, the speech states: "And in course of time I believe that we—not we, of course, but our children to come—will all without exception understand that to be a true Russian does indeed mean to aspire finally to reconcile the contradictions of Europe, to find resolution of European yearning in our pan-human and all-uniting Russian soul, to include within our soul by brotherly love all our brethren. At last it may be that Russia pronounces the final Word of the great general harmony, of the final brotherly communion of all nations in accordance with the law of the gospel of Christ!" (Cf. Fyodor M. Dostoevsky: Pushkin Speech, June 8, 1880 at the Meeting of the Society of Lovers of Russian Literature. Source and Translation: https://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/DstF.Puw.lct.htm#DstF.Puw.lct (February 5, 2021).

It is easy today to take offense at this tone, which is itself demonic, and Dostoevsky himself does so in the following passage. But a reply that follows in turn tells us more clearly what fascinates and repels him at the same time: "All right, [...] let us admit I had been carried away by the decor; I may have been. But if you had seen how proud the mighty spirit is which created that colossal decor and how convinced it is of its victory and its triumph, you would have shuddered at its pride, its obstinacy, its blindness, and you would have shuddered, too, at the thought of those over whom that proud spirit hovers and reigns supreme."[15]

Dostoevsky is talking about "pride", "obstinacy", and "blindness"—but what precisely is meant by this? What is this "mighty spirit", apart from its demonization, which in Dostoevsky's eyes drives those governed by it into the delusion of a consummate sinfulness? The wider context of these records reveals it: When Dostoevsky lashes out in a sweeping blow aimed at Paris, Heidelberg, and London alike, uniting their contrasts and transitions on a spectrum between the "calmness in order" on the one hand and the "harshness" of contradictions on the other, he hits a sore spot of the Western mind. With Herbert Marcuse one might call it its "repressive tolerance"—a repressive tolerance of a social technology fine-tuned down to the individual souls: "And what regimentation! Don't misunderstand me: I don't mean, so much, external regimentation, which is insignificant (relatively, of course) but a colossal internal, spiritual regimentation, having its sources in the very depths of the soul."[16]—This is true of Paris and Heidelberg, but at the other extreme no less true of London, insofar as it is the same matter of creating "some sort of community and to settle down in the same ant hill; even turning into an ant hill seems desirable—anything to be able to settle down without having to devour each other—the alternative is to turn into cannibals."[17]

In other words: Dostoevsky sees the western principle of individualism already as having failed, where it knows to preserve its specimens only by a total, external and internal regimentation, in the 'stahlharten Gehäuse der Hörigkeit' (Max Weber), "the adamantine casing of obedience", so that they do not endanger themselves continuously. But what would an alternative to this look like? Is there a possibility to assert one's own individual will without doing violence to others or even to oneself?

15 Dostoevsky, Winter Notes, p. 51.

16 Ibid., p. 48.

17 Ibid., p. 49.

III. The Phantasmagoria of Reason

We approach an answer to this question by consulting another of Dostoevsky's texts, which refers to the Crystal Palace once again, although this time on a more fictional than biographical level. It is the *Notes from the Underground* published in 1864, and so in the same period of the *Winter Notes* and his first two European journeys. Consisting of two parts, the first (to which we limit ourselves) presents a literary confession. Its anonymous author bears traits of Dostoevsky himself, even if the later declares his disagreement with the character at the very beginning in a preamble named: "Under the floorboards". According to this preamble, Dostoevsky gives a psychological outline of a "representative of the recent past", of that the nihilistic generation to which Dostoevsky himself belonged before he found himself in front of a court of indictment for political activities, was pardoned shortly before his execution, and then spent several years as an inmate of a labor camp in Siberia. It is probably not completely wrong to assume that Dostoevsky's experiences had influenced what was on his in mind, when he wrote down his Notes from the Underground.

The decisive occasion nevertheless for this may have been his London impressions, which were further strengthened while he read the contemporary novel *What to Do?* by Nikolai G. Chernyshevsky from 1863. In this famous book Chernyshevsky took up the utopias of Fourier's early socialism and spun them into new literary visions of the future for a revolutionary Russia.18 Dostoevsky in turn designed his Notes as a half-concealed polemic against Chernyshevsky's enterprise, which, after his conversion, seemed to him like a dangerous import of Western European fashions and their underlying nihilism. The tone therefore is harsh, but in the context of the rather association-like ramblings of its fictitious author, it blends into a sometimes sarcastic, profound to abysmal, almost delusional flight of thought, whose

18 Cf. Lange, Kristallpalast oder Kellerloch? p. 19: "The utopian potential of the Crystal Palace was grasped and literarily exploited in the Fourier-inspired circles of the Petersburg intelligentsia. Grouped around Nikolai G. Chernyshevsky, this circle of utopian socialists instinctively recognized that the contours of an ideal future society were beginning to appear on the glistening façade of the Crystal Palace. Since they knew from Fourier the importance of architecture in the construction of a society, it is not surprising that they believed that with this building, even better than with those sketched by the master himself, they could realize the idea of the phalanstère, the living, working and entertainment place for the envisaged social associations, the phalanges."

vanishing point is an unspecified "Crystal palace". Detached from its contemporary context, this building has already become a symbol. Even more: the Crystal Palace forms the sore point of the narrator, who is sick of the present, and incites him to sustained assaults of his imagination against this modern bulwark of utopian-utilitarian reason. It is significant that the narrator's Crystal Palace increasingly becomes a phantasmagoria emerging from his own dwelling cave, an obsessive conceit of modern reason, a surface reflection of his own subliminal projections. But of his projections alone?

"You believe in a crystal building, for ever indestructible—that is, one at which you can neither furtively stick out your tongue nor secretly cock a snook. But the reason perhaps that I'm afraid of this building is just because it is made of crystal, is for ever indestructible, and it would be impossible to stick one's tongue out at it, even furtively. [...] Let it even be that the crystal building is a figment which, according to the laws of nature, is not supposed to exist and that I have only invented out of my own stupidity and because of the archaic, irrational habits of our generation. But what do I care that it is not supposed to exist? What does it matter so long as it exists in my desires or, rather, exists while my desires exist?"[19]

What comes to light in this passage grants insight into an underlying connection.[20] A stronger contrast than that between a Crystal Palace flooded with light and a stuffy dwelling hole can hardly be imagined, and yet it is precisely through this that the actual ambivalence in the ideals and wishful thinking of the anonymous author's generation is revealed. In relation to the faith of his contemporaries, however, he expresses a certain apprehension that leads to the following: He seems to fear an ultimate transfer of his *idée fixe* into reality, an indestructible realization of utopia, before which his own wishes could then only admit defeat and retreat into the underground of his pitiful apartment. Because the victory would not belong to his fantasy or desires, but their opposite, a reason realizing itself in total through a more and more reasonable reality.

Yet what would be so bad about that? The anonymous author speaks of a "figment", of the fact that this "crystal building" is perhaps not intended by the "laws of nature" at all, and thereby resumes remarks earlier in the text which had stressed an irrefutable lawfulness of reason, a certain "de-

19 Dostoevsky, Fyodor M.: Notes from the Underground, Richmond 2011, p. 32f.

20 Cf. Lange, Kristallpalast oder Kellerloch? p. 29.

ductive logic"[21]. We will now see how he tries to keep apart total reason and subversive fantasy, and how in doing so, he makes sure that both unite again under ambivalence mentioned above. This ambivalence, however, ultimately concerns nothing other than the question of the relationship between freedom and necessity, arbitrariness and regulation, namely in the course of the dialectics of dis-obedience.

IV. Pandemonium

The first passage, in which the Crystal Palace appears by name, can still be seen in the context of an ironic demonstration of scientific-technical progress, through which irrationalism, according to the hopes imputed to the directly addressed reader, would evaporate in the new world to be created. In the unlikely event that "common sense and scholarship have entirely re-educated and directed human nature along normal lines", then "human beings will stop making mistakes *voluntarily* and, so to speak, naturally, will no longer want their free will to operate against their normal interests".[22] "And not only that; at that time, you say, acquired knowledge will itself teach human beings (though this is a luxury, in my view) that in fact they have neither will nor whim of their own and never have had, that they are something like a piano key or an organ stop; and that, over and above this, there are laws of nature in the world so that everything they do is done not at all because they will it, but spontaneously, in accordance with the laws of nature. Consequently, all that is necessary is to discover these laws of nature and human beings will no longer be answerable for their actions and it will be very easy for them to live. [...] And then—it's still you speaking—new economic relations will arise, all ready-made, also calculated with mathematical accuracy, so that all kinds of questions will vanish in an instant, simply because all kinds of answers will become available. Then they will build a crystal palace."[23]

If there was any doubt which spirit exactly Dostoevsky had in mind when he demonized it and identified it with Baal, it becomes clear in this passage that it is about the famous demon of Laplace, which—with the help of a perfect analysis of present causalities—would be able at to predict the future.

21 Dostoevsky: Notes from the Underground, p. 22.

22 Ibid., p. 23.

23 Ibid., p. 23f.

It is the spirit of the positivist science of the 19th century, but expanded into the sphere of social welfare, which then would also be based on natural laws and a "mathematical accuracy" in organizing human life. The historical consequences of this doctrine, for example in the form of dialectical materialism, are well-known and still seem to be at work today, mutatis mutandis, in the reflections of a so called "solutionism"[24] that now tackles the imponderables of life with probabilistic extrapolations and digitally optimized equipment. No less well-known today is the criticism leveled against it. What makes Dostoevsky's anonymous critic from the underground worth mentioning, however, is his understanding of resistance, a certain form of irrationalism that unites voluntarism and vitalism in an attack on common sense and scientific reason.

Thus, in the very paragraph, after deriding the crystal palace as wishful thinking, our author turns the table by emphasizing two things: the threat of boredom in the midst of a normalized world, standardized down to the last detail, and the stupidity and ingratitude of man: "I, for example, wouldn't be at all surprised if, in the midst of all this reasonableness that is to come, suddenly and quite unaccountably some gentleman with an ignoble, or rather a reactionary and mocking physiognomy were to appear and, arms akimbo, say to us all: 'Now, gentlemen, what about giving all this reasonableness a good kick with the sole purpose of sending all these logarithms to hell so we can live for a while in accordance with our own stupid will!'"[25]—That the author describes this behavior in advance as stupidity and ingratitude does not matter, since he understands himself as this "gentleman" from whom he differs only in the one respect that he considers himself too weak to tempt his equals, who are no less repugnant to him than the positivists of the opposite party, to this *acte gratuit*. The lack of this degree of philanthropy or misanthropy which is no longer confused by itself, should not, however, prevent his brothers in spirit precisely from sticking out their tongues, to put it mildly, at the Crystal Palace through political or artistic terror. Dostoevsky's *Demons* testify to the former, modern shock aesthetics from Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* up to the actions of the French Surrealists to the latter. What both have in common, however, is that they oppose a well-intentioned reasonableness with the malice of one's own will and thus drive a wedge into the idealistic harmony of intelligence and will that ultimately blows it apart.

24 Cf. Morozov, Evgeny: To Save Everything, Click here, New York 2013, Chap. 1.

25 Dostoevsky: Notes from the Underground, p. 24.

For, as the author suggests, it is by no means a lack but a surfeit of insight, in the impossible choice between a knowing will and a willing knowledge, which make us consciously choose the impossible itself—precisely to demonstrate the impossibility of choice. Thus, the choice as such is subverted and only the decision as such is willed; the will wants only itself and becomes decisionism.

What is to be thought of this, the author of these notes from the underground already expresses with the first sentence: "I am a sick man…a spiteful man".[26] And what is to be understood by this is revealed by a deliberately placed phrase, an inconspicuous invocation, which always appears exactly in those passages concerned with the absurdity and abysmalness of the will itself in opposition to reason: another demon is meant, the adversary par excellence, the "Devil". After mentioning the "gentleman" who casts a different shadow in this light, the author goes on to discuss this "silliest reason"[27] of the human creature:

"One's own free and unfettered desire, one's own and wildest whim, one's own fantasy, worked up sometimes to the point of madness—this is the very thing omitted, the most advantageous advantage which doesn't fit any classification, and against which all systems and theories are continually smashed to smithereens. Where do they get it from, all these wise men, that human beings need some sort of normal, some sort of benign desire? Why should they necessarily imagine that man necessarily needs some sort of reasonably advantageous desire? All that man needs is desire that is independent, whatever the cost of this independence and wherever it may lead. Well, and desire—the devil only knows what that is…"[28]

The chapter breaks off. But the attentive reader has understood at this point, just by this act of interruption, by the blowing up of the logic of the sentence, that only the devil knows what he wants, what we want, what wanting is supposed to want in the first place—even if the following chapter starts again with an interruption, the fictitious objection of the reader: "Ha, Ha, Ha! But, you know, there is if you like really no such thing as desire […]. Science has by now succeeded in analysing human beings into their constituent parts to such an extent that we now know that desire and so-called free will are nothing but…"[29]—At the latest with this diabolic joke, however, it becomes

26 Ibid., p. 7.
27 Ibid., p. 24.
28 Ibid., p. 25.
29 Ibid.

clear that the very belief in the devil itself is taken by the devil and that he is therefore still at work where we deny it. But what shall we do now with this willful confusion? The author himself starts again: "That's how I myself meant to begin. I admit that it frightened me, even. I was just about to shout out that desire depends on the devil knows what, and that we have to thank god for it under certain circumstances. Then I suddenly remembered about science and... shut up."[30]

This silence, however, is eloquent, insofar as it is about the beginning of the human will: what the author suffers from, what his malice is ignited by ("I am a sick man...a spiteful man."), is, as is hardly surprising for Dostoevsky, the biblical Fall. The fact that we have to "thank God for it under certain circumstances" gives the matter another interesting twist: what exactly should we have to thank God for? For the fact that through God we could come into temptation at all, into the diabolical temptation to possess a wicked, unfavorable will of our own after having eaten from the tree of knowledge?—That seems all too circumstantial, I suppose. Or rather for the fact that he had created us in the beginning as paradisiacal beings, which were expelled for some reasons, with the result that we are still longing for our lost paradise and now try to restore it by recreating it on earth... "Then I suddenly remembered about science and... shut up."

Would the Crystal Palace therefore be basically willed by God? Or is it nevertheless a testimony of a Baal cult, a Babylonian building and thus ultimately of the devil? Do we have to see in it the last consequence of the fall of man, as it were the original sin of human freedom? Or quite the opposite, the scientific-technical attempt to undo our fall and with it the 'stupid ingratitude' of freedom? How does the doubtful paradise of the Crystal Palace relate to its underworld impressively described by Dostoevsky? Do they really represent diametrical or merely dialectical opposites? Last but not least: Is it possible at all to persist in one's own viewpoint after the fall and resurrection, so to speak?

30 Ibid. The original translation by Kyril Zinovieff and Jenny Hughes wants to have it: "I was just about to shout out that desire depends on who knows what, and that this is probably just as well." But as it looks like, and as the German standard translation suggests ("Ich wollte gerade ausrufen, daß das Wollen weiß der Teufel wovon abhängt und daß wir dafür unter Umständen Gott danken müssen [...]."), Dostoevsky is playing with words here in the sense that it is good as it is. Remember Gen. 1, 10ff.: "and God saw that it was good."

V. Nihilist Confession

To venture deeper into this religious confusion would lead us too far. Instead, let us take another look at the Crystal Palace itself by remembering a phrase that Dostoevsky had already used in his *Winter Notes* and that comes to the fore again in the Notes from the Underground, the "anthill":[31] "These honourable ants started off with an anthill and will probably end up with an anthill, which is a great tribute to their constancy and positive attitude. But man is a creature both frivolous and myopic and, perhaps like a chess player, he likes only the actual process of achieving and not the goal itself. But who knows (there's no guarantee), it may be that the entire earthly goal which humanity is striving towards consists solely in maintaining without a break the process of achievement—in other words, in life itself and not, properly speaking, in the goal which, of course, must be nothing but twice two is four, that is, a formula; and twice two is four is no longer life, gentlemen, but the beginning of death."[32]

While the "anthill" in the *Winter Notes* still represented the mocked goal of human striving to escape the threatening violence of social cannibalism, here, on the other hand, it is encountered precisely in its unattainability for humankind, who utterly lacks the instinctive constancy and the unclouded sense of reality of an ant. If human striving were nevertheless to come to its end, for instance in the Crystal Palace as global structure, it would mean death rather than life—at least for our author. "At least, man has always somehow been afraid of this twice two is four, and I'm afraid of it now. But man does nothing but try to find this twice two is four. He crosses oceans, sacrifices his life in that search; but to find it, to really track it down, he is, honest to God, somehow afraid. For he feels that as soon as he does find it, he will have nothing left to search for."[33]

Thus we seem to have reached a dead spot—and not only regarding the underground or the Crystal Palace: Is the freedom of striving driven only by the fear of reaching some God-willed or God-damned goal; by the fear of seeing it finally fulfilled instead of eternally unfulfilled; therefore by the fear of finitude inherent in all life and striving? But what then is this striving good for, what does its fear testify to, if not to that rebellion which represents the

31 See the quote above.

32 Ibid., p. 31.

33 Ibid.

actual hubris against the course of things—or, to speak with Dostoevsky: to the deepest and hopeless sinfulness of wanting to uphold one's own life against its divine destiny? "How can you after all resist the temptation to congratulate him on the fact that all this has not yet come about and that desire still depends on the devil knows what…"[34]—But what can this will then want in the end, except itself, except a devilish self-will that would rather have a cushy number than do things by the book (especially the Book)?

"Now I ask you: what can you expect of a man who is a creature with such strange qualities? Cover him with all the good things of the world, […]; give him such material riches that there'll be nothing left for him to do but sleep, eat cakes and busy himself with making sure that world history goes on for ever—and then, even then, out of sheer ingratitude and a desire to slander you, he will commit some nastiness. He'll put even the little cakes at risk and will deliberately express a desire for the most pernicious nonsense, for the most counter-productive absurdity, for the sole purpose of adulterating all this positive reasonableness with his own pernicious, fantastic element. In fact, it is precisely his fantastic dreams, his exceedingly vulgar stupidity, that he wants to preserve, just in order to confirm for himself (as if it mattered) that humans are still humans and not piano keys […]. And that's not all: if he ever really turned out to be a piano key, and even if you could prove it to him mathematically and by natural science, even then he won't become reasonable, but on the contrary will deliberately do something purely out of sheer ingratitude, really just to have his own way. And should he turn out not to have sufficient means to do it, he will invent destruction and chaos, devise various torments and end up getting his own way."[35]

What speaks from this tirade is the unconditional will to will, the phantasm of freedom against every higher necessity and reason. The one who speaks is the underworldling, the undergrounder, the adversary, the grumbler before the lord. The lord, however, is easily confused with the readers, before whom this hellish theater takes place as both a fictional chaos of destruction and torment, and real self-destruction and self-torment. In other words: We attend the mental contrition of a profane sinner who is no longer able to believe in God, the devil or himself and for this very reason, out of the most wanton despair, does it nevertheless, by wringing this belief from himself out of pure malice against goodness and his own last vestige of reason. In

34 Ibid., p. 29.

35 Ibid., p. 28f.

a word: We encounter a nihilist—who holds on to the nullity of his own will in order to be able to want anything at all, except the sober nothingness of not wanting anything anymore. He confesses and we are supposed to absolve him—or are we supposed to absolve him at all? Who could still do it?... How much can you need a God?

VI. The Dialectics of Dis-Obedience

At this point, we leave our "caveman"[36] and instead ask ourselves: What does this tell us?—With regard to our question about the dialectics of dis-obedience, the relation of Crystal palace and its underground, and finally the phenomenon of the "Querdenker", well, quite enough.

With this fictional character Dostoevsky has created a special type of human being which is only partially congruent with his own convictions as he has made clear from the beginning: The Crystal Palace and its underground are both expressions of the same self-will, which, on the one hand, no longer knows what it wants, except that it wants (Underground) and which, on the other hand, only wants what it can no longer want in the end, but must want (Crystal Palace). In both cases, however, it is a will to will that, on the one hand, consumes itself in its own negativity without coming to an end and, on the other hand, cancels itself out by its own positivity because it has already come to an end.

In contrast, it is now easy to understand why both ultimately remain phantasms, as the opening quotation above has already suggested: the one is a phantasm of strict necessity and the other of an arbitrary freedom. From this perspective, the Crystal Palace and its underground do not only behave like action and reaction, but as a regular interaction, in which on the first level, that of the Crystal Palace, reason seems to have achieved full control over the whims of fantasy; whereas on the second level, the critique and negation of the first, fantasy conducts itself in an unruly manner that is averse to any reason. The more arbitrary the fantasy, however, the more thoroughgoing and comprehensive its control by reason, so that the whole relationship threatens to escalate further and further.

The phantasmatic nature of this relationship only becomes clear when it is compared in a more circumspect way with the reality of the crystal palace

36 Ibid., p. 29.

and its underground. For neither a total law of reason can be thought of, as it is imagined by our author in his delusion of a demonic determination à la Laplace, nor would it be possible to assert one's freedom in any sense—instead of in mere nonsense—by the cultivation of mere caprices, by an absolute, diabolical or divine arbitrariness or even by a nihilistic chaos. Only if there is a certain belief in the phantasm of total reason, in the natural lawfulness of scientifically founded social technologies, both by its advocates and its critics, only there the latter fall into a crypto-religious resentment of rule-obeying and become martyrs of arbitrariness, apostles of the arbitrary.

Against both exaggerations, however, it is worth noting that the actual domain of human action always shows both moments at the same time: It is characterized by an ambivalence of reason and fantasy, law and arbitrariness, in the sense that it is structured by path dependencies of contingent courses. It is true that reality could always be a different one, but only in looking back and forth to future and past possibilities. This possibility space can indeed widen or narrow depending on the situation (and this is exactly what design as a "transcendental practice"[37] works on); however, to want to transform it into the extremes of a Crystal Palace or a cave-like underground dwelling would probably amount to either letting it implode or explode, in any case to de-realizing it rather than realizing it.

Since there is neither a formula which is able to dissolve the whole world into an equation according to the pattern "two times two equals four" (for logical-mathematical reasons alone), nor a confession (even in the sense of a *credo quia absurdum*) that already suffices to testify freedom, the unflinching belief in the world as a Crystal Palace seems to be more an expression of an obsessive-compulsive disorder as the Underground is an expression of a paranoia, than an actual solution or redemption. Ultimately, it is and remains a belief, which at first would not be a problem, but can become a pathological one if this belief, in appealing to a higher lawfulness of reason or to the divine power of grace, considers itself instead to be infallible knowledge. In the one case, one confuses one's own tics with the ticking of the world, and in the other, one projects the self-centeredness of one's own phantasmagoria of violence and arbitrariness, control and oppression onto a hostile outside world that seems to persecute one all the more angrily for the less one is willing to follow its rules.

37 Cf. Arnold, Florian: Logik des Entwerfens, p. 341ff.

But how can one escape these pitfalls of a will mercilessly pursuing itself instead of becoming an automaton or anarchist? If we hold on to a concept of contingency qua forced freedom of decision-making, then finally also the nihilistic social technology of the Crystal Palace as much as the religion of freedom from the underground can teach us something about dealing with contingency: What the dogma has always been for the priests, the algorithm is for the social engineers of today. Both, unless they are confused with the necessity of mathematical laws or the freedom of divine chaos, guide a contingency-conscious practice and theory. They are characterized by the fact that, once they are set, they have validity within the framework thereby set and can claim a kind of inner consistency for themselves; beyond that, however, they remain adaptable, even revocable.

With regard to our introductory question, how one should serve freedom, the examination of Dostoevsky's foresighted double scenario Crystal Palace/Underground gives us a deeper insight into the dialectics of dis-obedience taking place under our own eyes. Admittedly, the circumstances are different, some would say tightened, others loosened: the disciplinary society in the sense of Michel Foucault has long since become a digital control society in the sense of Gilles Deleuze. Normally we live under conditions of a 'voluntary self-control'. We feel an inner force to freely determine ourselves and, conversely, feel free from being forced by others—at least in principle.

However, in the subsoil of this outdated glass structure, as it were, the state of exception already lays in wait for its rule. If we look at the current conditions, we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation, quasi in a regulated exception, in a quarantine, in which all inhabitants of the Crystal Palace are called upon to crawl into the cellar vault of this gigantic community building as if into their own crawl space. That thereby some "Querdenker" get oblique, stupid, and ungrateful thoughts lies, as we have seen, in the nature of things and stems from the fact that one prefers to persecute one's own paranoia in projections upon the others. To thereby confuse one's own readiness for violence with that of the state is just the normal result of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Whoever thinks of himself as a god, together with the associated privileges of freedom, knowledge and omnipotence, can of course only think of the others as poor devils—or as ones even richer than oneself... In contrast, serving freedom today means trusting the algorithms and dogmas of our society to a certain extent, in order not to become deranged or, in the worst case, fatally ill as a result of one's own willfulness.

VII. An Uplifting Speech at the End

If we return from here to the *Winter Notes*, Dostoevsky makes his own proposal how to escape the fatal extremes of this dialectics of dis-obedience. At first glance, it should not be surprising that his answer turns out to be all too missionary in terms of his Slavophile agenda, and yet there are aspects pointing towards the future even after the end of the Soviet Union of the 20th century and today's Russia. Dostoevsky evokes the ideals of the 18th-century French Revolution in order to accentuate the ideal of fraternity in addition to the ones of freedom and equality. In the *Notes from the Underground,* we witnessed what happens when one isolates the three values and, moreover, invokes one only to the harm of the others: a senseless insistence on the individual freedom of the will ultimately runs the risk of ending up in the underworld; but also the one-sided emphasis on the equality of all particular interests, which would have to place themselves unconditionally at the service of the construction of a collective crystal palace, does injustice not only to the individual, but in the end also to society. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, demands that these fatally isolated ideals of a free or equal will be formed into a whole by a supposedly instinctive brotherhood of the Russian people, a fraternity that does not even shy away from a voluntary self-sacrifice:

> "[N]ot only should one not lose one's individuality, but one should in fact, become an individual to a degree far higher than has occurred in the West. You must understand me: a voluntary, absolutely conscious and completely unforced sacrifice of oneself for the sake of all is, I consider, a sign of the highest development of individual personality, its highest power, highest self-possession and highest freedom of individual will. Voluntarily to lay down one's life for all, be crucified or burnt at the stake for the sake of all, is possible only at the point of the highest development of individual personality."[38]

And in the same context we find the following:

> "But how can there possibly be any brotherhood if it is preceded by a distribution of shares and by determining how much each person has earned and what each must do?"[39]

38 Dostojevsky: Winter Notes, p. 68.

39 Ibid., p. 71.

In the eyes of Dostoevsky, of course, there is no possibility that would lead to true brotherhood in the manner of a material socialism, except via a Russian socialism of souls, so to speak. Not already the will, but first of all the willful self-sacrifice of the will, not its rationalization and technical regimentation, but its martyrdom proves to be the true basis of community building—if one follows Dostoevsky transrational and transnational agenda.

As we have pointed out, Dostoevsky's answer has an unmistakably Christian touch, in that the fall of man is overcome only with the birth, death and resurrection of Christ in eternity and consequently at least in principle by the congregational life here on earth. Only in the sign of this brotherhood will freedom and equality unite to form the harmony of (a) family. But again, this might be slightly too much to ask: after all, every family celebration, above all Christmas, can become the hour of birth of the most renegade hate....

What can be learned from this, nevertheless, results from "a voluntary, absolutely conscious and completely unforced sacrifice of oneself for the sake of all", from the "highest self-possession" and "highest freedom of individual will". Whether it is important here to "become an individual" may be debatable; perhaps it simply expresses a becoming that opens up in the space of possibilities—why not also one to renounce strict individuality. What remains remarkable about these considerations is that they describe a self-regulating process of asceticism, at the end of which stands the willful sacrifice of that will to the will, which at the end can want nothing except itself, and that means having arrived at the bottom of itself: precisely a meager nothingness, tired of itself.

Perhaps the actual idea of asceticism consists in 'letting things be'—in an indissoluble double sense. To let things be: one's own will as well as that of the others, one's own reason as well as that of the others; the crystal palace as well as its underground. Maybe even to let it be well.—But thank God only the devil knows how...

Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* from 1864 is not only one of the most famous and influential novels of Russian literature in Europe but is itself essentially shaped by experiences that Dostoevsky wrote down after his first trip to Western Europe in 1862. The first part in particular takes up a phenomenon that was of decisive importance for the history of design: Joseph Paxton's glass-and-iron construction, which was erected on the occasion of the first London World's Fair in 1851: the so-called Crystal Palace as an architectural symbol for an enlightened new type of man, dedicated to materialism and science. What Dostoevsky takes offense at here can most easily

be summed up in the formula of optimistic regulatory thinking, which from then on was to be exemplary for the fate of modern governmentality. What he opposes to this is a pessimistic cultural critique, which for its part is interspersed with clear ambivalences, but which, not least because of this, raises the critique of progress to a new level of debate: Against the "two times two equals four" of a smooth rationalism, a voluntaristic irrationalism is brought into position, which exposes the abysses of the *condition moderne* and turns the epochal picture into a real panorama.

The question of algorithmization in the sense of a social technology, as it becomes thematic again today, is thus not only revealed in its historical path dependency, but also reveals itself at the same time as bound in an inescapable dialectic of obedience and disobedience: How far can the rationalization of society be advanced before, with Dostoyevsky, the shift towards a conscious irrationalism of the mere act of will, out of protest, of the fanatical anti-reflex, finally of the radical negation of every form of social regulation threatens? The question at the bottom of this modern problem is: Is there a resentment of following rules? Furthermore, what does freedom mean as autonomy in this context? Especially today, in the midst of our "algorithmic culture", this underlying dialectic of (dis)obedience seems more effective than ever.

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