

Bang Bang ... A Response to Vincent W.J. Van Gerven Oei

Jeremy Fernando

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On 22 July, 2011, we were confronted with the horror of the actions of Anders Behring Breivik. The instant reaction, as we have seen with similar incidents in the past—such as the Oklahoma City bombings—was to attempt to explain the incident. Whether the reasons given were true or not were irrelevant: the fact that there was a reason was better than if there were none. We should not dismiss those that continue to cling on to the initial claims of a wider Jihadist plot behind the actions of Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols as Islamophobes (or merely lacking common sense): for, it is often easier to rely on reason—no matter how fictional—than not to have anything to cling on at all. In many ways, it is even better if the reason is fictional: for, if grounded in a certain fact, or reality, it can then go away. However, if it is in the realm of the imaginary, it is then always already metaphorical: thus, can be applied to any and every situation. And it is this, if we echo Friedrich Nietzsche, that gives us our “metaphysical comfort”; that we can know what is going on.

This is why conspiracy theories are so popular: underlying them is the logic that someone—no matter how implausible—is in control of the situation. One would rather believe that all acts of terror stemmed from Osama bin Laden (and the narrative worked even better when he was in a ‘cave in Afghanistan’) than if they were the actions, and decisions, of singular individuals. For, if there is a head organizing everything, it can be cut off; there is no controlling a mass of singularities. As Jean Baudrillard continues to teach us, the term ‘mass’ is not a concept. It is a leitmotif of political demagoguery, a soft, sticky, lumpen-analytical notion. A good sociology would attempt to surpass it with ‘more subtle’ categories: socio-professional ones, categories of class, cultural status, etc. This is wrong: it is by prowling around these soft and acritical notions (like ‘mana’ once was) that one can go further than intelligent critical sociology. Besides, it will be noticed retrospectively that the concepts ‘class’, ‘social relations’, ‘power’, ‘status’, ‘institution’, and ‘social’ itself—all these too-explicit concepts which are the glory of the legitimate sciences—but also only ever been muddled notions themselves, but notions upon which agreement has nevertheless been reached for mysterious ends: those of preserving a certain code of analysis. To want to specify the term ‘mass’ is a mistake—it is to provide meaning for that which has none.¹

And it is this lack of meaning—this nothingness of not only the mass, but our inability to know in general—that truly scares us. For, if we are never able to legitimately make a generalizing statement, this suggests that we can never actually posit beyond a singular, situational, moment. Hence, we can never claim to know anyone: at best, we can only catch momentary glimpses.

It is for this very reason that the insanity plea Breivik’s lawyer will attempt is the one that horrifies us the most. For, if Breivik is insane, this foregrounds our inability to understand, know. And as Aristotle has

¹ Jean Baudrillard. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*. Trans. Paul Foss, John Johnston, Paul Patton, & Andrew Berardini. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007. p. 37.

taught us, it is more important that something is plausible than if something were probable—in this context, we would rather have Breivik as a calculating mass murderer than someone who was completely out of his mind.

This is especially ironic in the light of the fact that none of us would say that we have any similarity with Breivik. If that were so, the declaration that he was mad should be no more than a logical consequence. However, we also want Breivik to be accountable for his actions. And in order for that to be so, we need him to be of sound mind. But if that were true, we can then no longer distinguish ourselves from him.

And it is precisely this that scares us.

For, we are horrified not when there are abnormalities to our way of life. There are usually two different reactions to this—either oppose and destroy it; or subsume it under the dominant logic. We see this most clearly in reactions to immigration: there are either calls for immigrants to ‘pack up and leave’ or pseudo-liberal notions of ‘we are all alike’. Both of which are merely version of “all men are brothers”—the brutal translation of which is that you are my brother if you live the same way as me; otherwise not only are you not my brother, you are also potentially not part of mankind (you might as well be, to echo Giorgio Agamben, *bare life*). This is played out in our age of what is commonly termed *post-political bio-politics*—an instance of horribly awkward theoretical jargon that Slavoj Žižek channeling Agamben unpacks rather elegantly: “*post-politics* is a politics which claims to leave behind old ideological struggles and, instead, focus[es] on expert management and administration, while *bio-politics* designates the regulation of the security and welfare of human lives as its primary goal.”² Žižek continues:

Post-political bio-politics also has two aspects which cannot but appear to belong to two opposite ideological spaces: that of the reduction of humans to ‘bare life,’ to Homo sacer, that so-called sacred being who is the object of expert caretaking knowledge, but is excluded, like prisoners at Guantanamo or Holocaust victims, from all rights; and that of respect for the vulnerable Other brought to an extreme through an attitude of narcissistic subjectivity which experiences the self as vulnerable, constantly exposed to a multitude of potential harassments [...] What these two poles share is precisely the underlying refusal of any higher causes, the notion that the ultimate goal of our lives is life itself. That is why there is no contradiction between the respect for the vulnerable Other and [...] the extreme expression of treating individuals as *Homini sacer*.³

This is why the ones that are harshest towards new immigrants are the recently naturalized citizens of any country. For, if there is no longer any “ideological struggle” and all life is reduced to mere automaton-living, there is the realization that we are all the same—not in a tree-hugging hippie sense—but that the immigrant is the same as us precisely because we are all immigrants. And since all nations, and by extension peoples in a nation (especially those who believe in the notion of nationality, and national identity), have to find some manner, no matter from where or what it is, to distinguish themselves from those around them, the other (in spite, and especially in the light, of its absence) is the most crucial aspect of the discourse of nationality. More precisely, in the interests of what Baudrillard calls “preserving a certain code of analysis” (nationality in this case), what has to be maintained is the absolute otherness of the other.

Very rarely is Boris Johnson right: “it is not enough to say he is mad. Anders Breivik is patently mad.”⁴ However, much like Breivik in his manifesto, he should have stopped whilst he was ahead. By attempting

² Slavoj Žižek. *Violence: Six Sideway Reflections*. London: Profile Books, 2009. p. 34

³ Ibid: 35-36.

⁴ Boris Johnson. “Anders Breivik: There is nothing to study in the mind of Norway’s mass killer.” *The Telegraph*. (25 July, 2011); <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/borisjohnson/8658872/Anders-Breivik-There-is-nothing-to-study-in-the-mind-of-Norways-mass-killer.html>

to diagnose Breivik—“the fundamental reasons for their callous behavior lie deep in their own sense of rejection and alienation. It is the ideology that gives them the ostensible cause ... that gives them an excuse to dramatize the resentment ... and to kill.”—Johnson falls into the same trap that he accuses others of: “to try to advance any other explanation for their actions ... is simply to play their self-important game.” More crucially, and this is the point that Johnson completely misses, attempting to rationalize Breivik’s actions—to rehabilitate reason—is a desperate attempt at maintaining his otherness.

In fact, we’ll end up going one step further, insist on Breivik’s sanity, put him on the stand, and hope that he will display such a difference from all of us that we can rest safe that we are unlike him and his kind. That, in itself, is a dangerous game to play. One should not forget that the turning point in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is in the central part of her novel where she lets the monster speak. At that moment, the monster moves from an ‘it’ to a fully subjectivized person; with his own stories, historicities, emotions, and so on. In Slavoj Žižek’s reading of *Frankenstein*, this is the moment where “the ultimate criminal is thus allowed to present himself as the ultimate victim. The monstrous murderer reveals himself to be a deeply hurt and desperate individual, yearning for company and love.”⁵ But, in the case of Breivik, this goes beyond just a risk of us feeling for him: for, no right-minded person should ever deny another the opportunity to put forth her or his own case. The problem lies with us trying to deny the madness of Breivik’s act by putting him back under reason. The problem is in our inability to differentiate the act from the person; the singular from the universal.⁶ In our desperation to preserve the notion that we are rational beings incapable of becoming monsters, we’ve had to deny the meaninglessness—in the strict sense of it lying outside of reason—of Breivik’s act; we’ve had to “provide meaning where there is none.”

For, if this act were a moment of madness—a moment that comes from elsewhere—we cannot say that it will not descend upon us one day. If Breivik’s actions were that of a sane person, one who is in control of his being, his self, we can then locate the otherness in his being. More importantly, this would allow us to distinguish ourselves from that said being. Breivik’s sanity is the only thing that allows us to say that ‘this act of terror is borne out of one with an ultra-right ideology’; and ‘since I am not of that ideology, I would never do such a thing’. By doing that, we attempt to protect ourselves by claiming that people who share Breivik’s ideology are foreign to us, other to us. However, if Breivik’s act was a moment of insanity, his otherness is no longer locatable: and the notion of ‘us and them’ shifts from a geographical, physical, religious, or cultural notion, to one in the realm of ideas.

And this is what truly scares us.

For, if what is foreign is not phenomenological, then it cannot be seen, detected, sensed. Anders Behring Breivik, Timothy McVeigh, and Terry Nichols, terrify us not merely for the fact that they were white in a white society, but more pertinently that their skin color did not matter: we would not be able to spot them even if they were blue, even if they were right next to us, even if we had known them all our lives.

Even as we are grappling with holding Breivik accountable by declaring him of sound mind, what truly terrifies us is that deep down we know that Breivik’s act is a moment of madness; beyond all comprehensibility. And this means that we would not be able to spot the idea; even if it were in our heads at this very moment. We have gone to lengths to rehabilitate Breivik, McVeigh, Nichols, and such perpetrators of massive incomprehensible violence, in order to preserve our difference from them. What we have really been trying to deny is the fact that everyone, at any given moment, could have a moment of madness. And this is the true radicality of Mary Shelley: in allowing us to momentarily enter the head of the monster, she shows us not just the fact that he is like any one of us, but that any one of us could, in the right (or wrong) circumstance, be like him.

⁵ Slavoj Žižek. *Violence: Six Sideway Reflections*. London: Profile Books, 2009. p.39.

⁶ What is killing us is the notion that Breivik’s act is beyond reason, beyond knowing, outside understanding itself. This is why Boris Johnson’s plea was for us to ignore Breivik as a madman. But to do so, Johnson conflates the notion of the act and the person; the singular and the universal. This is exactly the same gesture as insisting on his sanity: the ‘madman’ is merely the absolute other, one that we are not.

Perhaps here, there is a lesson to be learned from Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. The most dangerous thing that one could do on Elm Street was to mention Freddy's name—once you had knowledge of him, you were open to the possibility of a visit during your dreams. This suggests that Freddy is a combination of externalities (after all, when you die, he survives) and your self (if you have never heard of him, he cannot come for you). In this sense, Freddy would be the manifestation *par excellence* of what Avital Ronell calls a “killer text”—it is one's relationality with the text (and the ideas, notions, in the said text) that opens oneself to it, to the lessons of the text, to being changed, affected, even to the dangers of the text. After all, one should never forget Plato's warning that ideas can corrupt, can be perilous. To compound matters, as Ronell reminds us, “the connection to the other is a reading—not an interpretation, assimilation, or even a hermeneutic understanding, but a reading.”⁷ Thus, in attempting to differentiate ourselves from Breivik by concocting some reason(s) why we are not like him, we have done nothing but read him, open a connection to him.

*Bang bang, he shot me down
Bang bang, I hit the ground
Bang bang, that awful sound
Bang bang,
my baby shot me down.*

“Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)”
Sonny Bono, 1966.

This is the part that we all know and remember. Whilst never quite remembering that this is a song that is not so much about violence, love, but about remembering. For, after the bridge comes the accusatory stanza: “Now he's gone, I don't know why/ And till this day, sometimes I cry/ He didn't even say goodbye/ He didn't take the time to lie.” *Bang Bang* is a game that the two lovers used to play; and all she has now is the memory of the game to remember him by. And the only reason she has to recall this game is: he never provided her a reason for his leaving, his death. Not that she will, can, ever get that satisfactory answer.

This is precisely the game we are playing with Anders Behring Breivik. Even though he has left a 1500 page manifesto, even though we will allow him to use the court-room as his platform, we will continue screaming at him “tell me why ...” For, what we want him to say is that we are not like him: what we really want him to do is, “take the time to lie ...”

Perhaps here, we should allow the echo of the *infans* to resound in *baby*. As Christopher Fynsk reminds us, the *infans* is one that is pre-language, pre-knowing, pre-understanding: it is the very finitude, and exteriority, of relationality itself.⁸ And thus, it is a position of openness to the fullness of possibility—and nothing else. This would be, in Ronell's terms, a “connection to the other” that knows nothing other than the fact that it is a connection.

The true horror of 22 July, 2011, is the fact that it is not Anders Behring Breivik who is mad, but the act itself that is. And this is precisely why only “my baby” that could have “shot me down.” For, it is an act that is from beyond, a sheer act of madness that—as Plato warns us—is whispered into our ears (and can so easily be mistaken for inspiration, and even wisdom), an act that can both seize, and cease, us at the same time. And what can this utter openness to an other, the other, be but a moment of love, a true ‘falling in love’. At the moment of whispering, nothing can be known as we are babies as our baby shoots us down ...

Hence, all attempts at analyzing this event (including this one) are not only futile, but border on the farcical. The real tragedy is that we forget that all of us have the possibility of becoming Breivik.

⁷ Avital Ronell. *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989: 380.

⁸ Christopher Fynsk. *Infant Figures: The Death of the Infans and Other Scenes of Origin*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000.

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