



Children of Men, or, Europe: The Finite Task

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The Im/Possibility of Europe

In his monograph *Europe, or the Infinite Task* (2008), Rodolphe Gasché presents a philosophical concept of Europe, indebted to Derrida, that strikes me as both absolutely irrelevant and absolutely essential to analyzing some contemporary political im/possibilities of Europe. In this essay, I will try to unpack this paradoxical assessment in dialogue with Gasché and Alfonso Cuarón's film *Children of Men* (2006), which I interpret as the political unconscious of Gasché's book. I will argue that Cuarón's film and Gasché's concept of Europe are structured around the disavowal of political movements that make strong partisan demands—the very sort of collective political action that is necessary to create another Europe without messianism.

Gasché argues that Europe is more than a particular place with its own culture, language, ethnicity, nationality, or politics. In a move that both weakens and strengthens his argument, Gasché brackets the question of what Europe *is* for the sake of articulating the concept of Europe, the norm or ethical project of Europe—the *possibility* of Europe. As concept, norm, project, or possibility, "Europe" names the "infinite task" of openness, responsibility, and hospitality to the other:

the name for a region or thing that still remains, and will perhaps forever remain, indeterminate. The name itself names Europe's origin in a movement of departure from everything native. It also establishes what the "essence" of Europe is: a relentless uprootedness that is always glancing far into the distance, being always already ahead of itself with the other. [...] As a name, *Europe* then designates "nothing" but an originary separation from the native, a fundamental openness to the world, and an originary transcendence toward what it is not. (Gasché 2008: 14)

The other can be understood concretely as a member of a non-European culture, but the concept can also signify radical historical change, the Event. In each case, Gasché stresses the other's irreducibility to existing knowledge and expectation. For to know the other in advance is to demote the other to what is already intelligible, and thus to turn otherness into sameness.



Since the task of examining its knowledge and expectations is infinite, Europe is always open to further reevaluation of itself; Europe is always in *progress*. Other Europes are, for Gasché, the future and promise at the heart of the concept of Europe. Europe is the infinite task of becoming other Europes through the encounter with the others *of* Europe. Strictly speaking, there can be no “refugee crisis” in Europe, for that narrative relies on a false image of an initially stable European self-identity that is then disrupted or contaminated by the other: “the borders of Europe, rather than being confines within which a pre-assumed essence can unfold, must be rethought as limits that are always already crossed or as a horizon that is always already perforated” (Gasché 2008: 16).

Gasché’s argument grates against the humanities’ focus on Europe’s colonialism and the suspicion that universality obliterates difference. But in my view, the main problem is not Gasché’s Eurocentrism but the fact that his concept of Europe is so *eccentric*, so outside the center, so marginal to the real politics of European nations. I have to wonder how long concepts can be shielded from facts before this shielding becomes obscene, since the shield is also against the particularity of suffering, and is thus a betrayal of the very responsibility to the other that the shielded concept was supposed to articulate and champion. The concept or norm of Europe is so detached from barbed wire and drowned refugees, from Brexit and Greek austerity, from populist racism and the cynicism and opportunism of neoliberal elites, that I feel it is only right to be ashamed of it. Yet to complete the thought, I must come back around to the concept of Europe, for it is for the sake of an open and hospitable Europe that I critique fortress, racist Europe. To think with Gasché is ultimately to arrive at precisely this sort of Derridean aporia or double bind. I’ll come back to the aporetic quality of Gasché’s thinking later, since it is central to my critique of his concept of Europe.

I want to turn now to *Children of Men* not simply to illustrate Gasché but to expand on the stakes of his argument. Although director and writer Alfonso Cuarón adapted *Children of Men* from P. D. James’s novel of the same name, he uses the novel’s central premise—a future of global infertility—as a speculative excuse to tell a story about contemporary immigration, an issue that is secondary in the novel. Indeed, the shift of focus creates an apparent incongruity in the film’s plot between the fact that humans can no longer reproduce, which has inspired a general existential despair, and the fact that Britain has become the last functioning government in the world and transformed into a police state that brutally oppresses refugees. But the incongruity is actually a key to understanding the film’s politics. In *Children of Men*, global infertility is an anti-Event, a science-fictional “novum” or “new thing” (Suvin 1979) that distinguishes the film’s world from our current consensus reality while also ensuring that *further eventual transformation cannot occur*. As we will see, global infertility makes political struggle pointless.



The film's focal character, Theo, must transport Kee, an African refugee and the world's first pregnant woman in decades, to the boat of the Human Project, an ambiguously defined collective of scientists whose existence is in doubt until the very last frames of the film. In bleak contrast to Gasché's Europe, *Children of Men* thus depicts radical *closure* to the other. It is a science-fictional future whose margin of difference from the present is, sadly, razor thin. What the film shows in a minimally hyperbolic form is the apotheosis of fortress Europe, set in a part of Europe that not so long ago voted to break from the European Union in a referendum that, to a significant extent, was fueled by right-wing, anti-immigrant nativism. Science fiction indeed.

Theo's and Kee's journey from London to the coast must circumvent not only the British police but the radical political group known as the Fishes. The film's handling of this group is of supreme significance, not only for an evaluation of the film itself but also for thinking about Europe and what it would mean to have hope for Europe's future possibilities. While viewers might feel vaguely sympathetic to the Fishes' pro-refugee cause in the beginning of the film, Cuarón ultimately represents them as brutal instrumentalists who commit what liberalism regards as the elemental sins of political fanaticism: they are absolutely faithful to an abstract cause and are willing to use violence to defend it (Toscano 2017). In an interview, Cuarón claims to be sympathetic to Marxism but also describes it pejoratively as an "ideology" with which he is "tainted" (Riesman 2017). The Fishes are also "tainted." Cuarón makes this point as morally unambiguous as possible when the plot reveals that the leader of the Fishes killed Theo's wife, herself a Fish, in order to subvert the original plan to deliver Kee to the Human Project. Instead, the Fishes want to use Kee and her baby to rally mass support for a revolutionary uprising against the state. To use Gasché's language, the Fishes' error is their failure to encounter Kee and her child as others. Recall that for Gasché, Europe can be responsible to the other *as other*, and thus as more than repetition of the same, only insofar as it encounters the other as singular and unexpected: the other is "foreign in unpredictable and incalculable ways—an other, in short, who, or which, is significant in more ways than just being the commencement of my own self" (Gasché 2008: 299). Conversely, the Fishes incorporate Kee and her child into an already existing political program, which itself purports to know, in advance, the exact nature of the political problem as well as its solution, which is to be carried out with ruthless consistency.

We see the Fishes' ultimate failure in what I regard as one of the most powerfully messianic scenes in recent Anglophone cinema. In a desperate final attempt to find the Human Project, Theo and Kee arrange to be caught by the police and sent to Bexhill, a refugee prison camp on the coast. Kee's daughter is born in prison, just as the Fishes arrive and the awaited uprising begins. After one of the stylized long takes for which Cuarón has become renowned, Theo, Kee, and the baby are caught in a firefight between the Fishes and the military. The baby's cries slowly draw the combatants' attention, and



in sheer wonder at the miracle of life, the fighting stops (fig. 1). It is an amazing utopian moment when the absurdity of violence and death becomes so clear that it even stops war. Walter Benjamin's messianic now-time (*Jetztzeit*) has broken into and interrupted ordinary time. For Benjamin, now-time is a rupture in the smooth progression of history that brings time to a standstill. Now-time is both "a messianic arrest of happening" and "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past." In the stillness of now-time all previous history is condensed "in a tremendous abbreviation" (Benjamin 2003: 396). As a figure of now-time, Kee's daughter brings the war to a standstill. She embodies all of history up to this moment "in a tremendous abbreviation," but she also breaks the causal chain of events that produced the dystopian world. The child announces that something radically new is possible, a change of course, a reinvention of the world—in a word, hope. It is an allegorical moment of Europe's genuine encounter with the other, embodied in a black refugee child who breaks open the horizon of intelligibility and calls forth other Europes.

Who should betray this utopian moment but the Fishes? One of them fires on the awestruck soldiers and causes the war to resume. For the Fishes the messianic stoppage of European history was simply a chance to get a cleaner shot at the enemy. In other words, the Fishes treat the child as a mere tactical advantage in their political project. Instead of engaging in a radical reconsideration of that project, and thus a true encounter with the openness of the future, they simply double down, treating the child as a tool. From a Benjaminian perspective, the Fishes can be read as correctly seizing the "revolutionary chance" offered by now-time. Their reward within the logic of film, however, is to be destroyed when the military calls in jets to bomb Bexhill and crush the uprising.



Figure 1. The child stops the war. Screenshot from *Children of Men*.



Given the way *Children of Men* kills off the Fishes, I have to wonder about the left's enthusiasm for the film. Slavoj Žižek, for example, praises the film in his commentary in the DVD's "Special Features" as "the best diagnosis of the ideological despair of late capitalism." I agree, but I must point out that *Children of Men* helps to *reproduce* this despair by symbolically destroying the left in a particularly poignant way. What we see in Bexhill is the possibility of a different kind of universality than the one championed by Gasché: the *universality of struggle*. Bexhill is a world prison, a prison for the world as a world of refugees, a world in which the condition of the refugee has been universalized. As the young Marx once said of the proletariat, the refugee has become the bearer of Kant's categorical imperative, for what the refugee demands is what she is denied, the universal dignity of the human. We get glimpses of a refugee international. One moment we see an image of Lenin in a Russian refugee's home, the next we see jihadis, and in the very next sequence, we see another group flying a French flag, recalling the spirit of the French Revolution and the commune (figs. 2-4). To be sure, Theo, Key, and the baby merely pass through these movements without any substantive interaction with them. The movements remain in the background, which Cuarón uses throughout the film as a domain of indirect storytelling that fills in the details of the diegetic world (e.g., an earlier scene in which a German refugee can be overheard complaining that she must share a cage with a black man). Whatever it is that unites the movements in Bexhill goes unrecognized by the focal characters and is left to viewers to ponder. What can so-called radical Islam possibly share with the radical left, especially since Islamism has arisen in the ashes of political contexts in which the left has been defeated (Kosmoprolet 2018)? Might the jihadis in the scene instead represent readers of what Shadaab Rahemtulla calls the "Qur'an of the oppressed," a version of Islamic scripture that foregrounds the Qur'an's resources for anti-racist and anti-imperial thought (Rahemtulla 2017)? We cannot say. Viewers can only surmise that the movements in Bexhill share the *negative* goal of defeating the state. Beyond this, their combination resembles the "sack of potatoes" that Marx described as the result of the "simple addition" of one group of social actors to another (Marx 1852).

But while the universality of struggle in Bexhill is only negative, it is a universality nonetheless. It is still remarkable that all of these people are on the same side. This condensation and negative unification of struggles, in which some sort of politicized Islam is at least strategically aligned with communism and the commune against a fascist, anti-refugee police state, is for me just as powerful a utopian figure, just as unexpected and full of weird possibility, as the scene with the baby.



Figure 2. Lenin in a refugee's home in Bexhill. Screenshot from *Children of Men*.



Figure 3. Jihadis in Bexhill. Screenshot from *Children of Men*.



Figure 4. Liberté, égalité, fraternité in Bexhill. Screenshot from *Children of Men*.

But in the figural economy of *Children of Men*, the destruction of the one is the political price of the other. The miraculous cessation of time by the birth of the other is a powerful figure of other Europes precisely because the film murders the unique political collective that could create other Europes unmiraculously. *Children of Men* does not simply leave the question of the *positive* universality of struggle in Bexhill open-ended—it suggests that the question itself is false.

After Theo, Kee, and the newborn baby flee the scene, they eventually make it to the ocean, where they await the Human Project boat. The explosions in the background assure us that the uprising failed and that radical action is pointless. And while the film does eventually provide closure by giving us some brief shots of the arrival of the Human Project boat, suggesting that at least Kee and the baby will be rescued, I interpret the ending as a non-closure, a figuration of Europe's infinite task. The misty ocean represents the wide-open indeterminacy of Europe's future, beyond the solidity of land and of that which is intelligible in advance as a program or platform. As such the ocean is an ideal space for awaiting the arrival of the other and the Event—a waiting that Derrida describes as being “without a horizon of the wait,” and that is paradoxically directed toward “the event that cannot be awaited *as such*, or recognized in advance..., the event as the foreigner itself, her or him for whom one must leave an empty place, always, in memory of the hope” (Derrida 1994: 81-82). I think this is an apt assessment of the cultural politics of *Children of Men*: it produces the “memory of hope,” a future that we paradoxically experience, after the film ends, as the past, so that the viewer, suspended in the present as if floating in the sea, without horizon or direction, experiences hope as



simultaneously past and to come. The viewer is denied the symbolic fulfillment of hope and is given instead its infinite promise.

I respect the messianism of this gesture and the Derridean refusal to show something better, a positive alternative. This refusal does not have to be interpreted as cynicism but rather as respect for the radical otherness of possibility, the singularity and unpredictability of the future as Event. Surely the scene in which the child miraculously stops war also speaks directly to our sense of political powerlessness whenever we wonder how any number of real wars and other political conflicts can possibly end. But I'm also suspicious of messianism, which owes its power precisely to its disempowerment of action. *Children of Men* is symptomatic of ideological despair, as Žižek claims, but it also mystifies this despair by compensating for it with a politically alienated messianism. The film identifies the universality of struggle with murderous instrumentalist violence. As long as the left sees its choice as either the Fishes or the ocean, determinism or indeterminacy, dogmatism or openness, ruthless calculation or messianic waiting, it will remain unable to imagine other forms by which it can change the world through collective political practice.

In the contemporary conjuncture, to focus on the concept of Europe is the most irrelevant and most essential task. Irrelevant: in practice, the dominant nations of Europe care about the *borders* of Europe, not its infinite task. Essential: the concept of a better Europe is what enables us to make this very critique. I've tried to show that the messianism that fuels *Children of Men's*—and indirectly, via Derrida, Gasché's concept of Europe—is in part a consequence of a political imagination that is so haunted by the idea of fanaticism that it cannot imagine the collective, principled political agency necessary to create other Europes without miracle. The film shows the political unconscious of Gasché's "infinity," "openness," "event," "indeterminacy," and "aporia": the appeal of these concepts is proportional to skepticism toward determinate political movements that make strong partisan demands and are unwilling to wait interminably before they are met. Terry Eagleton once quipped that Derrida's event is "a perpetual excited openness to the Messiah who had better not let us down by doing anything as determinate as coming" (Eagleton 1999: 87). Europe doesn't need a messiah; it needs mass political movements that develop a concrete, alternative vision of society that can challenge both the racist right and the technocratic elitism of the center and liberal left. There is probably more eventual power in the demand that asylum seekers be allowed to fly to Europe, so that they aren't condemned to drown, than in an infinitely deferred openness to further discussion, or hand-wringing about the "aporias" of honoring asylum commitments. Perhaps what Europe needs is fewer infinite tasks and more finite ones.



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