

# Shedding Our Skin, Dropping Leviathan's Armour:

A Meditation on the Spirit of Disrespect and the Crisis of Civilization

by Adrian Ivakhiv \*

In the beginning, was  
the seed:  
the cosmic egg.

Beginnings are useful, because they contextualize change. Once upon a time, there was changelessness. A point at which the nothing and the All were One, but which contained all possibilities. All-potent. All-promising.

And then, the Big Bang. The Great Beginning. Movement. Dynamism. The great unravelling of energies and of differences, the cosmic dance, gushing outwards, issuing forth Force only to integrate inwards again into crystallized Form. The out-breath of the universe becoming the in-breath of the infinitely many smaller universes it gave birth to.

And then, one day, *we* enter the myth. Accompanied by Choice. "We" here can take as the definition of ourselves those beings that have so altered their surroundings that evolved, instinctual relations no longer speak through us, and, as a consequence, we are somewhat lost, uncertain as to what we are to do. But this lostness registers with us only as a vague premonition, and we continue as if all were as it should be (though our myths betray us). We sense the existence of different possibilities, between which we must choose, or else be led blindly. To help ourselves choose, we posit the existence of Good and Evil.

But hold: rewind . . . Good and Evil are surely subjective concepts, relative, dependent on many things. Depending on our questions, the answers float somewhere between the poles of a continuum; they make up a complementarity, not an irreconcilable dualism.

Let us propose the Good. Human beings, ourselves and others, living in relatively harmonious communities (being social animals) with each other, with the biosphere of living beings, with the cosmos around us, in relations of mutual respect, respectful of the mysteries and ultimate unknowability of the Selfhood of Others, the Mystery of all Other, of Being, of Life. (Is this idealism? Of course, but without ideals there is no sense of direction or of value.)

Let us then look around ourselves, and observe. It is not so, says the world. Life is not easy; it sometimes seems a burden. We must work to survive. Some succeed, others fail. Some succeed at others' expense. Humanity succeeds at nature's expense. Humanity learns to dominate its world. Some of us learn to dominate others (according to our physical abilities, our social status, our sexual or racial identities, our economic means); we create institutions of domination. Relations revolve around manipulation, objectification; they are no longer founded on respect, on the acceptance of mutual mystery, but are ordered according to their use and value for the subject. (We can ask: am I respectful of the mystery, the sacredness of the people I live with and encounter in daily affairs? Is a corporation, a state, an institution respectful of the mystery and sacredness of those with whom it deals, the humans, animals, plants, the biosphere of life, the earth and

\* Adrian Ivakhiv is engaged in cross-cultural studies of human/environment relations, as they express themselves through myth, ritual, cosmology, religion, and the arts. He also co-edits *Terminus* magazine, plays and writes music, and helps run something called the Avant-Garde Ukrainian Theatre, a group with more fans in places they've never performed than in those they have.

water and fire and air?)

Now we have Good and Evil. But Good, as an ideal, is unattainable. Because desires contradict. Because respect of another's sacred selfhood requires one's own vulnerability, one's own sacrifice. The wolf seems to care little for the selfhood of the caribou, which run in what appears to be fear from their predator. There is apparent conflict, contradiction. Polarity, dynamism. A dance of energy, to and fro, with parts feeding off other parts, all weaving its own kind of natural logic and beauty. Life and Death. And through it all, the continuity of Life.

The dance can be one of ongoing change, vitality, exuberance, celebration. Or its vitality can become locked up, frozen, institutionalized into repetitive patterns of behaviour, such that the identities tighten, close in, formalize, become fixed and restrictive, and the selves floundering within the identities begin to come apart, to fragment, disassociating that which fits their identities from what doesn't. Troubled by their inner confusion, they begin to clutch at the straws offered them. The person stops being a deep mystery, a conscious human being whose essence is found in the freedom between various possibilities, and becomes a Worker, a Boss, a Servant, a Slave, a Wife and Mother, a Criminal, a Schizophrenic, a Sinner. And these crippling dimensions, crippling because they curb the flowering of the person's developmental potentials, are passed on through social and cultural institutions, through the canalized locks of repetitive imitation, each generation moulding the next in its own image.

Fredy Perlman, in a torrent of historical passion entitled *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan*<sup>1</sup>, called this Life-Ordering and Life-Controlling, Dominating, Civilizing, Structuring, Power-Wielding force in history "Leviathan."<sup>2</sup> Leviathan, the Earth Plunderer, the Community Destroyer. I will be nice and call Leviathan the Spirit of Disrespect. Of course, this hardly does justice to Leviathan's vehemence, when "His" Spirit combines with the fanatic's energized, desperate Misunderstanding of Self and World, to launch His crusades, His wars, exterminations and genocides.

The ways of Leviathan disconnect, they close off from experience, from the sharing, mutually respectful, mutually vulnerable, commonwealth of interpenetrating Selves. They build edifices, fortresses, and bask in their own self-proclaimed glory. Their goal is Power, Control, the Domination of the Other, and of the World. The Spirit of Disrespect emerges often unwittingly, as a response to a worse enemy, as a defense. The virus of Power, once unleashed (and, historically, it seems to have emerged as a result of ecological "caging" in the Mesopotamian river valleys, in the Nile region, the Indus, and elsewhere<sup>3</sup>) spreads easily. Once it contacts a human community, it is difficult to extricate. Defense against an aggressor requires the adoption of similar methods. Walls created to keep the enemy out, in time, create social institutions for their own maintenance, social levies, professionalization, bureaucracy. Gradually, the stratified empire-states spread and grow, their tentacles and entrails cannibalizing more and more of the humanity in their midst.

The formerly free members of human communities become Leviathan's inmates. "The armour once worn on the outside wraps itself around the individual's insides. The mask becomes the individual's face."<sup>4</sup> The once free development of humans in communities that cherished the life around them, that communicated with their relations ritually, and recognized their place within the whole, becomes crippled. Seemingly harmless agriculture, domestication, the control of other life forms for our benefit, private property, the accumulation of surplus capital, all increase the fear of the Other, the fear of the Wild and Untamed, counterpoised against the arrogant

Ego. A somatic, emotional, intellectual and psychic rigidity sets in and becomes the character armour of individuals, of social institutions, of ideologies. Human society becomes schizophrenically disconnected from the Biosphere of Life, unable to communicate any more with the shared consensus of the living commonwealth around it. It begins to talk only to itself, mainly through commands, decrees and proclamations, and eradicates whatever it cannot comprehend.

This is the Evil, the Failure, the Unwholeness in our way about the world. But the Good, the Ideal, exists, because in some form its elements have been felt and experienced, at one time or another. Sharing, respect, love, awe, wonder, felicity, genuine relationships that touch on the immense, unfathomable, unbounded depths within and between selves, between friends and relations -- these all exist. On rare occasions, we still experience them. Perhaps they were once the prevalent state of being, says a voice filtering through the noise. The voice speaks of the "original affluent society" of gatherer-hunters, where gathering and hunting were not economic chores, but were the joyful activities of life interpenetrated by the stories, the celebrations, the rituals, that animated the world and its co-celebrants. Myths tell us, with greater persistence, of the "golden age."

The memory of the Good gives birth to resistance, in various forms, against Leviathan's pretensions. But the inmates, maimed and crippled by generations of life surrounded and defined by the Spirit of Disrespect, have not found it easy to walk away and create the Good from the ground up. Their armour doesn't come off. "Segments of the decomposed worm remain scattered over the countryside, and each segment tends to recompose itself into a complete worm. . . . The segments are like machines. If they've merely been abandoned and haven't rusted too badly, they can be oiled and put back into operation by any good mechanic."<sup>5</sup> The ways of society, its culture, develop over many generations, and likewise, a culture free of Leviathan's deformations requires many generations of cultivation.

Resistance has taken the form of solitary or small group withdrawals, of massive rebellions, of carefully planned and strategized revolutions, of haphazard and spontaneous upsurges of violent emotion and aggression. The attempts at resistance are not the Good fighting the Evil. They are more often instinctive reactions, humanity's ecological response against Leviathan's repressive order. Some of the reactions are less coherent than others; some lead to worse ends than the order they toppled. (Many make the mistake of localizing the blame in too small a frame. Marxism generally reduces the problem to economics, treating the ethical and ideological as merely the "superstructure." Religious and psychological stories tend toward the opposite, advocating a personal salvation that expects social transformation to come about as a result of changed consciousness, ignoring how the consciousness is shaped by institutions. Still others search for scapegoats elsewhere: in religion, or in males' inferiority complex that comes about with the realization of their marginality in the perpetuation of the species. But these, perhaps unfairly, ignore the ecological limitations that gave birth to hierarchy and power institutions in the first place.)

And so the stories of resistance emerge, incomplete as they are, alongside and in between all of the stories churned out by the Leviathanic organism in its ongoing myth-making enterprise -- its proclamations about human "progress," used to justify all the wars and battles, the repression and persecution -- all in the name of the "national interest" or some other social god, always demanding allegiance towards the common good, however it be defined by Power.

It has been left to the storytellers and artists and the less visible

maintainers of the wisdom tradition, the gnostics of the soul, to continue cultivating the Spirit of Reverence in small enclaves, hidden from Leviathan's gaze, in individual lives. The prophets (Blake, Thoreau, and the countless others) have proclaimed it aloud, occasionally reawakening a memory of it for others.

Today there are not *many* Leviathans, but one Immensity, whose estate has become the whole planet. The tentacles of this many-headed colossus stretch into every available, unclaimed space, subjugating and devouring the Biosphere in manageable chunks, and defecating out bits and pieces of real estate property, statistics on paper, commodities, fashions and fetishes, consumer goods and consumers themselves; and behind it all -- the spectre of war, the threat of the Enemy, abstracted and projected onto some racial or political or religious group against which we must defend ourselves with our precious slogans and flags. Leviathan's human form, the Corporate-Industrial Class, are all of us, to the extent that we participate in the buying and selling of the planet and of our own and others' Being. In the interstices of corporate-industrial consciousness, between Leviathan's winding entrails, lives and breathes the planetariat, the sparks of free, human Community, Life in all its sacredness and mystery mutually affirmed and respected by all its constituent beings.

Stuck as we are on this battlefield between the Divine and the not yet conscious, human as we are with a taste of our immense power, homeless as we are having long ago broken out of our evolutionary, eco-geographic perimeters, we can safely assume that the battle between the two Spirits will continue. Leviathan's grasp has become so all-encompassing that it endangers the future of all life. Yet the conditions today are not those of the past. No matter how sharp the incisors with which Leviathan had been extricated from a community, there were always fresh, still untouched frontiers for Him to wind His way into. Today, those frontiers have diminished; there is no place left to run -- not for Leviathan, not for us. With the planetisation of the Beast, the bull of His Power can be faced squarely and grasped by its horns. Yet His cages are built and will not go away, His armour will persist, and again it may be the ecological conditions of the planet's finitude that press this armour down onto our bodies, preventing an easy return to the free flow of Life.

For my own sake, I would be happy to express the Good, and to do it in the critically multi-dimensional way that makes it dangerous to Leviathan. Only a Spirit of Disrespect coherently contributes to its own future, the future of Community, Sacredness, and Life. It is by loosening the screws that hold Leviathan's armour in place, but loosening them all at once, so that His energy cannot relocate in other niches, that takes place the Healing of the World. . . .

\* \* \*

A Self-Critical Note on Sources and on Metaphors:

"Leviathan" and His constituent parts have been analyzed for as long as there has been some awareness of there being a problem at all. Modern, relatively comprehensive analyses of a socio-political character appear in the writings of Andrew Bard Schmockler, Murray Bookchin, Michael Mann, Marilyn French, Lewis Mumford, Frederick Turner, Fredy Perlman, and, to some extent, in the critical traditions of various "isms" and critical theories every good academic knows of. And then there are those of a more philosophical character, the spiritual critics of Leviathan, the insightful healers of humanity's psychological and spiritual wounds, whose tradition extends from well before Lao Tzu to our own century's prophets and soul

attendants, those like Carl Jung, Martin Heidegger, G.I. Gurdjieff, Wilhelm Reich, Martin Buber, Theodore Roszak, Susan Griffin, Starhawk, Mircea Eliade, to name just a few.

The very need to use language, however, jeopardizes the thoughts of anyone wishing to speak of the "Spirit of Disrespect." The use, in this essay, of terms such as "Leviathan," "tentacles," "entrails," "the Beast," conjure up a particular set of images, a lens of metaphors through which to view the world. Their power is somewhat removed from the realities they point toward. Language is a medium whose apparent instrumentality pretends to a neutrality that doesn't exist; it is forever being used to manipulate emotions and responses. My point is not to apologize, but rather to underline my awareness of the need for the critical reading of texts. One might ask, for instance, need we resort to metaphors such as "tentacles" and "beast" that reflect a fear of the worm-like and slimy animal nature that is within us, but that we perceive as being other?

Extreme usage of language tends to divide readers into camps -- those familiar with the usage, and who "agree" with it, are emotionally empowered by it; those unfamiliar with it think it extreme, absurd, or even dangerous. The ability to see things from different points of view is made possible by a familiarity with different and contrasting descriptions of the world, and it is this flexibility in the capacity to describe the world that loosens the grips of the "armour" that maintains the world as it is. A metaphor is a way of describing the world (and, more dangerously, of constructing our world); we must learn to "unglue" ourselves from our metaphors, and for this reason, the above mediation should be seen as an exercise in seeing the world through a particular set of lenses, and its validity should be judged by the validity and pragmatic usefulness of the lenses it provides.

#### Notes

1. Fredy Perlman, **Against His-Story, Against Leviathan** (Detroit: Black and Red Press, 1983).
2. Perlman follows, and, at the same time, subverts Thomas Hobbes' notion of "Leviathan." In his work entitled, *Leviathan*, Hobbes discusses "leviathan" as a positive socializing force, while Perlman considers it negative.
3. See for example, Micheal Mann, **The Sources of Social Power: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760** (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
4. Perlman, p. 38.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 43-45.

