VIOLENCE AS A RESPONSE TO THE IDEOLOGY OF CHOICE

Renata Salecl

INTRODUCTION

Malaise of civilization and malaise of the individual go hand in hand. Social changes thus affect the symptoms of malaise people suffer from and the new symptoms people develop, of course, affect society as a whole.¹ In the last decade, there have been many debates in psychoanalytic circles about how social changes that we experience in postindustrial capitalism affect individuals. The ideology of postindustrial capitalism has heavily relied on the idea of choice, freedom, self-determination, and endless progress.² The underside of this ideology, however, has been an increase in anxiety and in the individual’s feelings of inadequacy, and guilt for not making it in today’s world.³ Until very recently, the ideology of choice has actually functioned very well to prevent any questioning about possible social change. The individual was rather engaged in constant self-change—often to the point of self-destruction.

Jacques Lacan pointed out that the idea of self-destruction is very much aligned with how capitalism functions. In recent years there

¹ Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents (Joan Riviere trans., 1930).

² I develop this point further in Renata Salecl, Tyrannie de la Choix (2012).

has been growing interest in his thesis that he developed in the early seventies at a lecture in Milan that capitalism elevated the subject into the position of the master who does not consider him or herself anymore as a proletarian slave, but identifies with the ideology of endless possibilities, up to the point of considering everything in his or her life as a matter of choice. On top of this, the society in which he or she is living starts speeding up. The subject not only starts working longer hours and consuming more and more, but there also comes a point when the subject starts consuming him or herself. Workaholism, addiction, anorexia, bulimia, and self-cutting thus become symptoms the subject starts suffering from in the developed world. Slowly these symptoms push the subject onto various paths of self-destruction. The paradox, however, is that the subject seems to be oblivious to what is happening to him or her and continues believing in the ideology of endless possibilities.

Identification with the ideology of choice has not only contributed to the formation of new psychological symptoms where people impose particular new forms of aggression toward themselves, it has also encouraged various forms of social violence. However, when we are looking at the new forms of violence, we should not forget that denial has played an important role in the way the ideology of choice functions, which is why people continuously turn a blind eye toward social inequalities and thus forget that choice can also imply social change.

I. SELF-DESTRUCTION AND THE PROBLEM WITH ONE’S IMAGE

Looking at oneself in the mirror has never been easy. From Greek mythology we know the story of Narcissus, whose fascination with

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4 This lecture is unpublished. The main points that Lacan developed there have been analyzed in JEAN-PIERRE LEBRUN, UN MONDE SANS LIMITE: SUIVI DE MALAISE DANS LA SUBJECTIVATION (2009).
the reflection of his own image ultimately cost him his life. While Narcissus could not stop observing his reflection, today the problem is more the inability of people to observe themselves in the mirror. Those who suffer from anorexia, for example, are often horrified by seeing themselves as very fat in the mirror while in reality they might be dangerously thin.

Japanese psychoanalyst Daisuke Fukuda has noticed a very special relationship with the mirror held by some Japanese girls at a time when Japanese culture has become overwhelmingly obsessed with ideas of beauty and when young people have become more and more burdened with the image of an ideal body. One Japanese student, for example, sought psychoanalytic help because she has the urge to break every mirror that appears in her vicinity. This girl not only avoids looking at herself in the mirror, but actively engages in ruining surfaces in which she can see her reflection.

The occurrence of such a painful symptom is in a particular way linked to the changes that are happening in Japan in regard to people’s perception of their image. In recent years Japan has experienced a significant growth in the beauty industry. In many public places, Japanese girls are now flooded with free newspapers offering a complete change in their appearance. At first glance, these newspapers look like the usual fashion magazines, but actually they are full of advertising for surgical procedures with various special offers and coupons for special discounts. Thus one’s appearance more and more looks like a consumer object that one simply buys. Until recently, Japanese culture reflected the view that people need to accept their appearances. Now one’s body is perceived as a matter of choice.

The emergence of new psychological symptoms, of course, cannot be taken as something that directly reflects the changes in ideology. Thus we cannot say that Japanese girls are now

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5 Private conversation with author.
massively breaking the mirrors or are universally trying to change their bodies. Individuals always form symptoms in very individualized ways.

From our early childhood, however, the way we see ourselves in the mirror is influenced by others around us and by culture in general. When the baby goes through the mirror stage, it is essential that he or she identify his or her image via the speech of the primal caregiver. It is usually the mother who urges the baby to recognize him or herself in the mirror.

The authority figures around us (our parents) and society in general also soon start acting as particular mirrors in which we start observing ourselves. When social perceptions about body change, we also start regarding ourselves in different ways. Susie Orbach, in her book *Bodies*, shows how we perceive nakedness, weight, and beauty differently if we live in different cultural settings. However, she also points out that these settings can mark us in an unconscious way, which is why a person who in his or her early childhood has been brought up with a particular attitude toward the body might have difficulty changing when he or she starts living in a different social context. Orbach takes as an example a British man who has been raised in a tribal African culture when he was very young. In this environment it was normal to be naked for most of the day. When he later moved with his family back to the United Kingdom, he adapted to the environment and, as a businessman, he was always properly dressed in public. However, as soon as he came home from work, he quickly undressed and found it much more enjoyable to be totally naked.

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6 See JACQUES LACAN, ECRITS: A SELECTION 93–94 (Bruce Fink trans., 2002).

7 See JACQUES LACAN, LE SÉMINAIRE, LIVRE X: L’ANGOISSE (Seuil 2004)

8 SUSIE ORBACH, BODIES 8–9 (2009).

9 Id.
This man had a radically different perception about nakedness than other people in his environment because in his early childhood he was raised in society that had different standards in regard to naked bodies.

While some people can be deeply marked by the cultural imprints they received in their early childhood, others might be more susceptible to cultural changes that happen during their life span. To this point, Orbach mentions the case of Papua New Guinea, which in the past perceived as an ideal of beauty a rather shapely female body. With the advent of the international media, however, this ideal quickly changed, and in a couple of years this country, too, started experiencing a large increase in anorexia and bulimia.

In times dominated by ideology of choice, it often appears that an individual may choose a mirror in which he or she wants to see him or herself. This logic is nicely illustrated in the works of the artist Anish Kapoor, who in one of his last shows in London played with mirrors in a variety of ways. Visitors to his exhibitions at the Royal Academy in London could observe themselves in mirrors that altered their bodies in a variety of ways: some increased them, others shrunk them, still others turned them upside down. At a later Kapoor exhibition in Hyde Park people were also able to choose how to look at their surroundings through mirrors that altered it. Huge mirrors changed the reality of buildings on the edge of the park—some were inverted and others were enlarged or altered in other ways. And in a red mirror that was placed near a lake, the latter appeared totally different than in reality.

If today we often have the impression that we can alter the way we see reality or ourselves to conform to the way that we wish, this freedom paradoxically has also opened doors to new forms of

10 Id.
ignorance; thus, it often looks that in the midst of all these possibilities to alter our perceptions, we choose rather to turn a blind eye and opt for not seeing at all. Why is it that in the midst of presumably endless possibilities people opt for ignorance, especially in regard to the fact that their possibilities are actually much more limited than they think they are?

II. THE PASSION FOR IGNORANCE

When societies experience radical changes, we can also observe a change in the way people start looking at themselves. It is as if the mirror in which they have been observing themselves has changed and as a result people start looking at themselves in a different way. Let us take the case of authorities. If we perceive authorities as a particular type of a mirror that we look into on a daily basis—try to identify with them, oppose them, or search for a recognition from them—we can observe a change happening when society itself gives authorities a different role. When, for example, the ideology encourages us to stop looking at authorities but rather take ourselves as the ultimate master, we might become indifferent toward what others think about us and might also become indifferent to how our behavior affects others.

This ignorance toward others and toward society at large is today shifting to the ignorance toward oneself. Contemporary narcissism thus seems in a particular way auto-destructive. It is not that the individual is primarily centered on his or her well-being. Paradoxically, in the midst of all the information that people today have, the individual often completely ignores it.

Returning to the case of Japan, this self-destructive narcissism is seen in relation to the disaster in Fukushima.11 Among the

11 See Ogoura Kazuo, Disaster as a Mirror: The Earthquake, Japan and the World, OPINION 3/11 (May 27, 2011), http://japanecho.net/policy/0065/. Japanese diplomat Ogoura Kazuo stated that the way countries around the world reacted to the earthquake and tsunami disaster in Fukushima, and the respective related nuclear disaster, mirrors how countries see their own image. He remarked that after the Fukushima disaster,
Japanese today one can observe a radical difference between people who are extremely afraid of the effects of radiation and those who behave as if nothing happened. The latter usually do not listen to the reports, do not read newspapers, and even if, by chance, they come across information about the dangers of radiation, the latter do not touch them. Tokyo today looks as if it is divided into two completely different groups of people who live next to each other, but who behave as if they are on different planets. Those who ignore information about Fukushima radiation live as if nothing had happened. They can easily buy vegetables that have been produced not far from the destroyed nuclear reactors. Those who are aware that the contamination has extremely far-reaching consequences, and that the country will for decades need to deal with the aftermath of the nuclear radiation, often walk around town with a mask, carefully read the information about where the vegetables come from, and try to protect themselves in all kinds of ways. Many of these people also think about moving to another country.

These two groups of people do not differ in their level of education. In the group of those who行为 as if nothing happened, there are many young, educated people who spend a lot of time in front of computers and, of course, have the opportunity to inform themselves about radiation. When we are questioning the nature of their ignorance, it is worth recalling Lacan’s famous maxim that people do not have the passion for knowledge, but Europeans were primarily concerned with only themselves. Most European countries questioned how the Japanese crisis would affect their economies and whether the nuclear disaster could occur in their territories too. America was particularly concerned with freedom of information in Japan (or a lack thereof), and whether people were sufficiently informed. Only the nearby South Koreans and Chinese first demonstrated sincere concern primarily over what was going on with the Japanese population. Only later, they too started to become concerned with technical information about the reactors. The fact that nearby countries have shown more personal sympathy is, of course, linked to the fact that the disaster was perceived much more as something that affected them directly, while distant countries were quickly able to deny that something similar could happen to them.
rather the passion for ignorance. This passion leads us to close our eyes and ignore what is to be seen and comprehended.

In order to understand the nature of this ignorance, it is necessary to distinguish between ignorance and repression. When we find something very traumatic, repression usually helps to (at least temporarily) establish some distance from what is for us too painful or frightening. When it comes to ignorance, however, we deny that something is traumatic. A person behaves as if the latter does not concern him. It is almost as if we have a foreclosure at work where the subject is not marked by language. An individual thus can have all the information on the threat, but will behave as if nothing had happen. This kind of ignorance, paradoxically, can contribute to an illusionary feeling of all powerlessness.

The passion for ignorance is now appearing on a variety of levels. In spite of the continuing economic crisis, most countries behave as if it is just a bad dream from which they will eventually wake up and then again everything will be as usual. With the ongoing ecological problems that are becoming more and more alarming, we are behaving as if nothing really has to change.

Until very recently, we also had passion for ignorance in regard to raising social inequality in the developed world. The success of the ideology of late capitalism has been that it created the fantasy of possibility even in the midst of obvious impossibilities. Even very poor who have fewer and fewer choices would passionately support the idea of choice.

Louis Althusser pointed out that ideology functions in such a way that it creates the veil of obviousness. This operation has been very strong in the last years since questioning where capitalism is going and whether there is an alternative to the organization of

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12See LOUIS ALTHUSSER, LENIN AND PHILOSOPHY, AND OTHER ESSAYS (Ben Brewster trans., 1971).
society as we know it has been almost nonexistent in the public sphere.

How did the passion for ignorance manifest itself in the last years? Dan Ariely and Michael Norton conducted a study on how people perceive social inequality.\textsuperscript{13} They asked participants of a survey how much of the U.S. wealth is in the hands of the richest twenty percent of people and what would be a just distribution of wealth. People guessed that the richest twenty percent probably have about sixty percent of all of the wealth, but that the just distribution would be for them to have about thirty percent. In reality, however, the top twenty percent have more than eighty percent of the wealth.

Why do people not rebel against what they actually perceive as an unjust distribution of wealth? Why do they not, for example, more enthusiastically support larger taxes on the rich and universal health care? When presenting the results of the Ariely and Norton study, \textit{The New York Times} asked different commentators to explain the lack of people’s reactions against wealth inequality, especially since the majority of people imagine that in an ideal world the inequality would be much smaller than it is.\textsuperscript{14}

If we make a brief overview of the responses, the explanations touch on the following:

1. The United States is driven by lottery mentality, which means that people think that maybe they can still make it in the future.

2. Those who are pessimistic about their own future might

\textsuperscript{13} Michael I. Norton & Dan Ariely, \textit{Building a Better America—One Wealth Quintile at a Time}, 7 PERSP. ON PSYCHOL. SCI. 9, 10 (2011).

nonetheless harbor the belief that their kids might make it, which is why they do not want to impose high taxes on them. Here the identification with former whiz kids like Bill Gates or Steve Jobs is particularly strong.

3. People more strongly identify with those who are similar to them—like their colleagues or neighbors, which is why they also envy these people more than the super-rich. The latter are so out of reach that people do not even compare themselves with them or envy their lifestyle.

4. Many people have the feeling of guilt that they have overspent and that they are actually individually guilty for their financial troubles.

5. Many middle-class people have the impression that they actually are not doing so badly since they are in possession of many gadgets and their lives are actually better than the lives of their parents.

6. At times of crisis, there is not as much desire to have as there is desire to keep.

To the list of these responses, one needs to add an explanation of how the belief in choice has been supplemented with the idea of chance, how this has created a belief in the ideology that everyone can make it, and how in today’s society a certain democratization of luxury opened new forms of identifications that are actually preventing people from rebelling against wealth inequality in other ways than looting.

The ideology of choice relies in a paradoxical way on the idea of chance. However, chance as the underside of the ideology of choice is both cherished and perceived as something traumatic. While chance offers everyone the possibility to make it, it also presents a traumatic, uncontrollable moment that goes against the
perception of rational subjectivity on which the ideology of choice relies.

If we look at the negative part of chance, we are quickly reminded that the most random moment in our lives is the moment of death. The ritual of Russian roulette illustrates well the fact that death is always something related to chance and choice at the same time. When Jean Paul Sartre was talking about anxiety being related to freedom, he was thinking precisely about the fact that we are always free to take our own life. Albert Camus’s saying that he is often pondering if he should have another cup of coffee or he should kill himself comes to the core of this choice. In Russian roulette, we, however, make a choice and do not make it fully at the same time. We allow randomness to decide for us. We thus give mastery over our choice to something else. Randomness then becomes a new master.

Often throwing the dice at first looks like an opening to pure chance. Dice, however, soon takes over and itself becomes a mechanism of power. Let me exemplify this with a current event that I witnessed in my home. My twelve-year-old son had an extra ticket to a very desirable concert (by the musician David Guetta, whose music actually looks like a random mix of already existing music—as if he himself is a music dice man who uses randomness as a creative mechanism). By chance, there were two friends who very much wanted that extra ticket. They also wanted my son to make the decision regarding who could have the ticket. Each boy offered an explanation why he deserved the ticket more than the other one. They also searched for criteria that might help in making the decision—like who is the oldest friend, who is most supportive friend, who first said that he wants to go to the concert, etc. My son, however, refused to be the master since he knew that whichever criteria he used, he would lose the friendship of the boy.

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who did not get the ticket. The solution came when my father intervened and proposed to the boys to let dice decide. The boys agreed. At that moment, the dice became the new master. To make everything even more fair, the idea was that the dice would be thrown by my father and not by one of the boys. When the dice decided, the boys took that as a fair result. The boy who lost was reminded that dice is often used in sports and that he needed to take loss with dignity as a proper sportsman would.

A comparison can be made here with the idea of the market. The belief in the power of the market at first appears like the belief grounded in the idea of randomness. The possibility of possibility is Søren Kierkegaard’s definition of anxiety,\(^\text{16}\) which can also apply to the idea of the market. However, we deal with this anxiety by erecting choice to the pedestal of mastery. Randomness suddenly becomes something that needs to be controlled and figured out, and its potentially damaging effects (its closeness with death and annihilation) need to be prevented—which is why we have endless market analysis and risk-aversion studies.

Burton Malkiel, in his book *A Random Walk Down Wall Street*, first published in 1973, put forward the thesis that a blindfolded chimpanzee throwing darts at the *Wall Street Journal* could select a portfolio that would do as well as the experts. He stated: “Of course, the advice was not literally to throw darts but instead to throw a towel over the stock pages—that is, to buy a broad-based index fund that bought and held all the stocks in the market and that charged very low expenses.”\(^\text{17}\) The *Wall Street Journal*, however, decided to take this scenario seriously and had in the next years measured whether pure randomness works better in the


\(^{17}\) Burton G. Malkiel, The Efficient Market Hypothesis and Its Critics, 17 J. Econ. Persp. 59, 60 (2003).
domain of stock picking than choice made on the basis of professional analysis of the market. Interpreters of the results disagree over the question of who in the long term won the competition. However, the experiment showed that randomness nonetheless needs to be cherished again when dealing with the market (although in this domain the logic of randomness has almost been forgotten in the last decades). The attempts to build the best possible mechanism of prediction have clouded our minds so much that we started denying the fact that chance is actually very much at work in the market.

Investment companies started creating elaborate risk computer programs, which were supposed to clearly predict future risks of investment. The most well-known program, called VaR, was supposed to be ninety-nine percent accurate in its predictions. However, after the 2008 crisis, The New York Times wrote:

“Given the calamity that has since occurred, there has been a great deal of talk, even in quant circles, that this widespread institutional reliance on VaR was a terrible mistake. At the very least, the risks that VaR measured did not include the biggest risk of all: the possibility of a financial meltdown.”18

Paradoxically, on the one hand, we have in today’s times obsession with predicting and forecasting things that are rather random (like the market), but, on the other hand, we have a huge turn to denial. In regard to the market crisis, we have the denial of the fact that serious political changes are needed, and in regard to the ecological crisis, we deny that we have any power and believe that others should act before us.

Denial is also part of today’s consumerism. The ideology that encourages us to believe that everyone can make it in today’s society opens up the perception that everyone can also consume in an equal way. Thus, it is not surprising that some of the riots that

we have witnessed in the last year had a particular consumerist mark.

IV. PAINFUL PASSION FOR LUXURY

Looking at the faces of the young people who engaged in London riots and which were later put on the Internet by the British police, we can say that many of the rioters experienced at least temporary satisfaction from looting the shops. Theorists who have analyzed the issue of happiness in the last decade could have easily observed that happiness can be at least temporarily increased by the act of looting. The signs of obvious pleasure were everywhere on the faces of the young looters in London that were presented in the media. One young woman who clustered in her hands a bunch of shoes looked like she was experiencing a special mystical enjoyment. A young man running with a stack of jeans was caught by the camera showing a happy giggle. Another one who was carrying a bunch of sportswear also looked like he was in an elated state.

In collective violence, there is often a pleasure participants experience in transgressing the social norms. The fact that someone is part of a group often reduces anxiety and guilt, and gives the illusion of security. The feeling of elation that participants in the acts of violence experience is visible in many social rituals. Here we only need to remember the examples of throwing plates at Greek dances and various rituals of initiation (from beating up freshmen when they become members of various sororities and fraternities or in Slovenia of the mountaineers when they for the first time reach Triglav, the highest peak in the Alps, and are in a rather cruel way baptized by their pals).

Violence has in the last years also been glorified in corporations and large financial institutions. The fact that we have to destroy competition, ruthlessly search for profit, and take the scalps of our competitors has been a constant theme for some time in the
business discourse. Psychological analysis of top players in this world has also shown the lack of feelings of guilt and the lack of concern for others.\(^ {19}\) A businessman once explained to me that negotiations are easiest completed if he throws something on the floor or in any other way makes an unexpected aggressive gesture. Ironically, the behavior of rioters on the streets of London is not so different from that of those who are running the corporations that they looted, only that they expressed violence in a public sphere and they have been subject to criminal sanctions.

The London riots have also shown another similarity between the higher and lower classes— their almost religious love for luxury. During these riots, a casual observer recorded and forwarded to the media the conversation of some girls who were deciding what to steal from the shops that were broken into. One of the girls asked the other whether they should steal cosmetics from Boots (a non-expensive drug store); the girl, however, responded that it is much better to loot The Body Shop since it has more expensive products. This example shows how much even the poorest people show a desire for luxury items and how effective advertising has been in recent years.

Advertising often presented desired consumer objects with the help of the idea of transgression. Here the sellers of sports goods and casual fashion clothes have been at the forefront of creating important points of identification among the poor youth. Thus, it is not surprising that among the most looted shops in the United Kingdom were those belonging to the sportswear chain JD Sports.\(^ {20}\) In recent years, JD Sports invested heavily in a marketing

\(^{19}\) See PAUL BABIAK & ROBERT D. HARE, SNAKES IN SUITS: WHEN PSYCHOPATHS GO TO WORK (2006).

campaign to become one of the most desired brands among British youth. An exceptional marketing success came when the company began propagating “Gangster chic” and “danger wear” images. Many well-known brands were thus effectively promoting the idea that the consumer of their products is someone who goes against the regime. During the riots, the well-known retailer of denim, Levi’s, withdrew its new advertising poster, which showed the back of a young, aggressive man dressed in Levi’s walking toward a large group of police who were looking as if they were prepared for an attack. Underneath this image was written “Go forth!”

At the time of the riots, one of the most worried companies was Adidas, since a large number of rioters were dressed from head to toe in Adidas clothes. Adidas in the last few years has become famous for using in their advertising well-known rappers who have had problems with the law. Not surprisingly, many young people who were looting the stores in London looked very much like the images of the rebels featured in recent advertising campaigns.

What we experience as a luxury item or a luxury experience has changed throughout history. Luxury, however, has always been in some way linked to transgression. To perceive something as luxury, this object as an experience has to be in some way inaccessible, expensive, prohibited, or otherwise hard to get. And for one person having a desire to possess it or experience it, it is necessary that other people want it, too. James B. Twitchell, in his book on the history of luxury, points out that the first public

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22 The paradox of the London riots, however, is that large firms like Adidas quickly tried to figure out how to disassociate themselves from the rioters who were wearing their clothes, while other lesser known fashion firms were delighted with newspaper images of a rioter wearing their products. They took this as free advertising, which they were happy to get.
examples of luxury were church relics. In the Middle Ages, when churches wanted to possess some relic, they needed to steal it from another church. Even later, luxury was heavily tied to theft. The history of wars, for example, is also the history of thefts of what was at some point perceived as an element of luxury.

The perception of luxury has changed radically over the last few decades. In the past, luxury items were often associated with good quality and durability. Now, with mass production, the quality of the object has become unimportant. Now one only buys the name—a brand—and the object can easily be made poorly. The idea that the object can easily be discarded and replaced by another one has replaced the previous perception that the object’s sublime quality relies on its durability.

We started comparing brands with a lifestyle, while at the same time we also experienced some kind of democratization of luxury. In the past, there existed a hierarchy of how people acquired luxury. First the rich became fascinated by particular luxury objects, later the middle classes followed, and at the end the lower classes got the chance to experience cheaper versions of those objects. A major turning point occurred when the brands started producing a range of less expensive items that were made immediately available to lower classes. Today, if someone cannot afford a Prada dress, he or she can buy a Prada wallet or, of course, purchase a counterfeited version. The important thing is not possession of an object anymore, but identification with what this object represents—which is why the object can be fake, but the sublime quality related to its brand name can still function.

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In regard to the London riots, one might conclude that the ideology of post-industrial capitalism, which addresses the individual as someone who has endless possibilities to create a life that he or she wants and endlessly go from one “cool” object to another, contributed to people deciding to acquire those objects with acts of violence. Another way to look at the riots, however, is to consider that it is not so much that young people believe in endless possibilities and just want luxury objects now without feeling guilty that they need to pay for them, but rather that they have nothing to look forward to. Many people view the future entirely pessimistically and do not expect to live very long.25

The nihilism and self-destruction that we observed on the streets of London is another example of the destructive tendency of capitalism that Lacan talks about. Ironically, on the one hand, capitalism today advertises unlimited growth in profits and limitless consumption, but on the other hand, from those who have nothing it seems to require an extreme version of self-restraint from those who have nothing. While those who have nothing are constantly bombarded with new luxury items, they seem to only be allowed to look at them from afar—or some-times touch them in new experience-type of shops (like the famous Apple Store where people can endlessly play with new gadgets), but not take them to their poor homes.

An example of such self-restraint is a story that circulates among Montenegrin girls in regard to how they should behave with the rich oligarchs that now frequent this small Balkan state.26 When a


26 In the last few years, Montenegro has become a place where many very wealthy people from around the globe have property since the country’s ex-communist government has made it very easy for wealthy Russians, as well as other wealthy people to invest in the country.
woman encounters a rich man in one of the posh Montenegrin resorts and is hoping to have a longer relationship with him, she is advised to show a particular kind of restraint. After she has spent a night with the man, she can usually expect that in the morning the guy will leave her some cash, saying that this is for her to buy herself something nice. If the woman does not want to see the guy again, then she is advised to just take the cash and go. If, however, she hopes that something more long-term might develop between her and the man, she is advised to take the money and buy a man some luxury object—for example, a watch—and then leave that as a present for him. The man, of course, usually already has a huge collection of luxury watches, but the fact that the girl did not spend money for herself is supposed to be a sign that her interest is not primarily in the man’s money. The girl must thus go through the pain to limit her own pleasure in order to maintain the fantasy that a loving relationship may be formed.

At the end of the London riots an interesting gesture would have been for the youngsters to have brought back to the corporations the looted sports clothes, jeans, and tennis shoes, showing how strong their restraint is. One can imagine that the corporations would quickly film such new “religious” processions to use in their new marketing campaigns to promote morality, remorse, peace, and love.

Until recently, the success of ideology of choice has been that it has, on the one hand, portrayed choice as primarily an individual matter and, on the other hand, has created a perception that by making the right choices one can overcome social disadvantages. This ideology has also heavily relied on people’s feelings of guilt and inadequacy for not making it. The turn toward self-critique, self-destruction, and self-restraint in regard to abundance of consumer goods has prevented people from engaging in social critique and from attempting to think about choice as social
choice—as a mechanism that can bring about social change. Even riots that we observed on the streets of London did not question whether change is possible. However, for the social critique to be effective, it is necessary to reinterpret the idea of choice and to open up space to new visions about how society in the future needs to be organized.

Renata Salecl is Senior Researcher at Institute of Criminology, Faculty of Law, University of Ljubljana and recurring visiting professor at Cardozo School of Law. She is also visiting professor at School of Law, Birkbeck College, University of London. Her book *Tyrannie de la choix* is just published by Albin Michel (transl. Sylvie Taussig)