Imre Szeman

"Do No Evil": Google and Evil as a Political Category

> Not only does the fairy tale remain as fresh as longing and love, but the demonically evil, which is abundant in the fairy tale, is still seen at work here in the present, and the happiness of "once upon a time," which is even more abundant, still affects our visions of the future.
> Ernst Bloch, "The Fairy Tale Moves on Its Own in Time"

In his analysis of the utopian function of the fairy tale—and, indeed, elsewhere in his discussion of the category of the "not-yet"—Ernst Bloch talks directly and unapologetically about "evil." We are told that evil is abundant in the fairy tale, if not as abundant as happiness; for Bloch, evil helps show us the character of the present, while happiness shapes how we see the future. Of course, in the "once upon a time" of the fairy tale, both of these categories—happiness and evil—are played out in the past tense, with the aim of offering narrative and imaginative resources for the present so that the future might yet be different. The political operation of the fairy tale is thus to bring about a future in which evil is no longer part of the equation, having been challenged and exorcised by those interested in producing utopia out of the present's dystopia, its evil.

This temporal characterization of evil does not as yet reveal what it is, nor how we might relate Bloch's evocation of evil to its myriad other appearances in

religion and philosophy. Bloch's view of evil is idiosyncratic, though perhaps not unexpected for a thinker with Marxist inclinations: he suggests that the demons in old tales return in the present as "economic ogres" which need to be challenged and defeated. But what does it mean to take evil as an economic category in this way? The term is most commonly connected with individual ethical decisions, harkening back to the concept's religious or philosophical history, or with political and social extremes—genocide, totalitarianism, racism, state-sponsored violence, torture, the military actions of the U.S. or its "axis of evil" foes, and so on. Evil is not a term normally associated with the economic, no matter how obscene its deprivations and degradations, which today include the global ubiquity of sweat shops, the growth of new forms of slavery, the expansion of speculative economies that ignore or overlook terrible working conditions and even the very necessity of workers, or the logarithmic growth of CEO compensation in comparison to day labourers. Even with these intensified and extensified forms of what David Harvey describes as "accumulation through dispossession," to describe the economic as "evil" nevertheless sounds like a category mistake. In the case of the political or the social, "evil" is used mainly for rhetorical as opposed to metaphysical ends: after declaring this or that thing to be "evil" (which comes across as a perhaps too heavy-handed notion for a relatively secular present), what follows are sociological or political explanations for the phenomena in question. With respect to the economic, "evil" fails to generate causal explanations, despite all the human misery and unhappiness generated by contemporary economic practices. Why is this the case? One suspects that it is because it is assumed there is no account to be given—that today, we are supposed to accept that there are simply winners and losers, and that is that.

It seems clear to me that this apparent discursive limit on the concept of evil is a problem that needs to be addressed. Shouldn't we be able to follow Bloch and name today's economic ogres, too, as "evil"? Wouldn't this be a way of drawing attention to the violence of economics which two decades of neoliberal discourse has managed to normalize? Wouldn't it challenge what Alain Badiou has described as the "ethical ideology" of the liberal-humanist recourse to the discourse of human rights, tolerance and diversity—a discourse which considers material and economic issues secondarily, if at all? If it is to be used, how might such an evil be conceptualized and framed? Can a system and its effects be evil, or just rotten to the core? This may seem to be an unnecessarily abstract concern. Do we really need to stoop to "evil" to puncture a hole in today's economic and political self-certainties?

I want to provide answers to these questions by looking to a notable exception (recognized by the Wikipedia entry on the subject) to the use of "evil" to describe contemporary economic ogres. "Is Google 'evil'?" asks the title of a recent article in the business section of Toronto's *Globe and Mail* (McArthur 2006):

> Google Inc. shares roared past $500 (U.S.) for the first time Tuesday [22 November 2006], highlighting a question that is being asked with increasing regularity: How big can Google get before people see it as evil?

> It's an important public relations challenge for a company whose informal corporate mantra is "do no evil" as it expands into new and varied lines of business, both on and offline.

> Do a Google search for "evil Google" and you get 53 million results. Some sites raise fears about all the information Google gathers and retains about its users.

> Others question whether Google is becoming too dominant in too many areas.

Google's mantra "do no evil" has come under fire as a result of a number of well-publicized decisions to comply with pressure—from sources as various as the governments of China, Germany, France and Switzerland, to the Church of Scientology—to block or limit some of the results that user searches might pull up. As Google has grown in size as a corporation, with so much liquidity that it can purchase any corporate target of interest to it (e.g., YouTube or on-line ad rival DoubleClick) while fending off sizeable lawsuits (e.g., for copyright violations in the creation of Google Library), objections to its practices and decisions have grown and multiplied (see McHugh 2003; Palmer 2007). The bulk of these objections fall under the category of what Google would characterize as a kind of "pragmatic censorship"—a decision to comply with limits on searches now as a way of promoting what all tech corporations see as the long-term democratizing effect of Internet access around the world: short-term anti-democratic pain for long-term democratic gain.

But the potential "evil" of Google raised in this article and numerous others has less to do with such censorship, than with the danger of monopoly. In the vocabulary of the tech world (as reflected, for instance, in the online responses to the *Globe and Mail* article) "evil" as a category has generally been reserved for Microsoft, which is seen to have limited the marketplace of both hi-tech commodities and imaginative possibilities through its long-standing dominance of the software market. With its purchase of YouTube in October 2006, Google entered 2007 as the most visited website in the world (Graham 2006), a fact which has left many "net users uncertain about the possibilities of a new technological monopoly, and one in a corporation so recently near and dear to the hearts of many users and techies" (Kingsmill 2007: 11).

The idea that monopoly is evil certainly connects evil to economic ogres. But it does so only by further confirming the general desirability of capitalism, by means of an affirmation of what are supposedly its core values: competition, efficiency and innovation. By describing an extreme market situation—monopoly—with an

extreme term—evil—the ongoing, systemic traumas that define liberal democratic capitalism are given a free pass. Economic evil, such as it is, occurs only at the extremes of capitalism; everywhere else and in all other cases, things are fine. We can witness this kind of thinking in the text of Google's corporate philosophy (2006), where the question of evil is taken up head-on:

> 6. You can make money without doing evil.

> Google is a business. The revenue the company generates is derived from offering its search technology to companies and from the sale of advertising displayed on Google and on other sites across the web. However, you may have never seen an ad on Google. That's because Google does not allow ads to be displayed on our results pages unless they're relevant to the results page on which they're shown. […]

> It is a core value for Google that there be no compromising of the integrity of our results. We never manipulate rankings to put our partners higher in our search results. No one can buy better PageRank. Our users trust Google's objectivity and no short-term gain could ever justify breaching that trust. (Google)

It could not be more clearly stated: the making of money is not evil, and certainly advertising has no part of evil. What would be evil in this case, it seems apparent, would be to "compromise the integrity" of the search results. Unfettered competition in a free and open marketplace is the good that can be harmed by the evil of interference in the market. Which is to say: "Do No Evil" means play by the rules, such as they are.

But what of these rules themselves? And indeed, what of the idea of the "integrity" of the search results? In his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, Alain Badiou shows that in contemporary ethical ideology the identification of evil is premised on the supposition of a radical Evil. This radical Evil—which for us has come to be identified with the Nazis—takes on the status of a singular exemplary case, one simultaneously both immeasurable (unthinkable, unsayable) and yet "constantly invoked, compared, used to schematize every circumstance in which one wants to produce, among opinions, an effect of the awareness of Evil—since the only way to access Evil in general is under the historical condition of radical Evil" (63). One effect of this identification of Evil with the exemplary case, he argues, is that (as in the case of Nazism) it denies its political development and thus the possibility of actually confronting this evil in ways that might enable political change. This way of viewing evil, Badiou writes,

> is both feeble and cowardly. Feeble because the constitution of Nazism as a "massive" subjectivity integrating the word Jew as part of a political configuration is what made the extermination possible, and then inevitable. Cowardly, because it is impossible to think politics through to the end if

we refuse to envisage the possibility of political sequences whose organic categories and subjective prescriptions are criminal. (65)

Badiou's criticisms of the operations of Evil in liberal ethical ideology lead him to argue for a specific form of ethics that I do not want to advocate or confirm.[1] What I want to introduce rather is an idea of *systemic evil*—an evil that is the outcome not of a singular extreme case, but of a specific political configuration of which an account can be given and a judgement made. "Evil" always seems to speak to grand metaphysics, to a decisive break in the constitution of the real that requires patching up in order to reaffirm that real's impenetrable continuity. Can we not make use of the rhetorical force of "evil" and turn that to an interrogation of the current system of the rhetorical force of "evil" and turn it to an interrogation of the real itself—especially if it is our economic ogres to which we want to draw attention?

Let me explain what I have in mind by describing a current project of Google's that has drawn numerous objections. In December 2004, Google announced a project to digitize and make publicly available 15 million printed volumes (approximately 4.5 billion pages), primarily drawn from the libraries of Stanford University and the University of Michigan, and to a lesser degree with the Widener Library at Harvard, Bodleian at Oxford and the New York Public Library. More recently, the Bavarian State Library in Munich has also joined the project (Herwig 2007). Such a project has incredible promise. In the words of Jean-Noël Jeanneney, the president of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Google project (initially called Google Library but since given the more modest name of Google Book Search) appeared initially as

> the realization of an old dream … that a treasure trove of knowledge, accumulated for centuries, would be opened up to the benefit of all, and primarily to those whose family, sociological or geographical situation deprived them of easy access to the cultural and intellectual legacy of humanity. (Herwig 5)

The promise of easy access to the world's libraries is described by the director of the Bodleian, Sarah Thomas, as accelerating "the emergence of new knowledge tremendously" (ibid). This narrative of universal knowledge aided by technology seems hard to resist, especially as it feeds into popular discourse linking new gadgets with the perpetual unfolding of the enlightenment and the "maturity" of humanity.

Yet almost immediately significant concerns were raised about Google's project. Chief among these for Europeans was the potential for this research tool to accelerate the prevalence of English as a language of research dissemination at the expense of other languages. Given the paucity of translations from other languages into English, this has implications for the circulation of and access

to the non-English cultural resources of the world.[2] As just one of many such cases, Jeanneney offers the example of a search for Miguel de Cervantes on the Spanish version of the Google Book Search. The first five items returned in the search were in French, followed by three books in English; in the ninth and final position, a collection of excerpts is listed from *Don Quixote* in Spanish. The whole work in its original language cannot be found on the first page – the only one visited by most users of Google (Jeanneny 2007: 12).

Jeanneney's recently translated essay on Google is full of anecdotes about the problems and limitations of the online library Google intends to build. His criticisms of the project are driven by a desire to maintain global cultural and linguistic diversity, in line with UNESCO's October 2005 declaration, which states in Article 6 that "While ensuring that the free flow of ideas by word and image, care should be exercised that all cultures can express themselves and make themselves known" (UNESCO). The U.S., it should be added, is not a signatory to this declaration. Jeanneny offers a number of solutions to the current dominance of Google Book Search, including the creation of a European online library (a project currently in the works) and the promotion of engines that make their search algorithms public and give users information about the limits of their search and some idea of the "representativeness of the corpus in which it is carried out" (68).

Jeanneney never uses the word evil with respect to the Google Book Search, but he does suggest that in its hesitation to address some of the concerns of librarians, the company is not living up to its mantra to "do no evil." And on the face of it, Google Book Search seems far from evil: the bad or limited results of a Google search for information on books that have fallen out of copyright hardly comes close to the trauma of genocide in Rwanda or the torture of prisoners at Guantanamo. And yet, it would be a mistake to gainsay the potential effects of what amounts to a massive and speedy reorganization of human knowledge, at the very time that access to this knowledge through information technologies is being massively expanded worldwide. Despite the numerous competing online projects listed by Jeanneney—The European Library, the European cultural platform MICHAEL—Google Book Search is poised to become *the* site to which members of the public, politicians, students, bureaucrats and researchers will turn to access information, assuming it to be comprehensive, if perhaps not universal, notwithstanding the lack of access by students and scholars in most parts of the world to password protected research e-databases. The very size of the library makes a claim to completeness that is seductive: there are only so many of those 4.5 billion pages that one can get through in a lifetime.

What looms large, then, are the principles by which access to this information is organized for its users. The information Google provides is hierarchized according to two principles, although, of course, the precise algorithms remain secret. The

first has to do with the frequency and density of links, which means in effect—and especially in the case of what would be a relatively fixed archive compared to the rest of the Internet—that "success breeds success, at the expense of newcomers, minorities, marginals" (Jeanneny 45). The second has to do with the demands of advertisers who pay for the digitization project. Ads linked to specific books, themes or topics—Jeanneney jokingly imagines a match manufacturer linking up to Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Match Girl* (31)—have an impact on the organization and hierarchization of search results as well.

Of course there has to be a way of organizing search results of such a potentially huge archive. But once these particular principles of hierarchization, organized as they are primarily by market imperatives as opposed to those that have guided the practices of archivists and librarians for centuries, are combined with the emphasis on English texts previously mentioned, we have in effect the sanctioning of the greater importance of a specific view of the world. To give one example, Jeanneney points to Simon Schama's book on the French Revolution, *Citizens*—a market success in the U.S., but so skewed in its account that no publisher in France would consider a translation (41-42). To get an account of the Revolution only through Schama as opposed to other sources, even fictional ones like Victor Hugo's *Quatre-vingt-treize*, would be to produce a limited view of the past, just as getting an account of the Cuban missile crisis or September 11th through the most popular American sources would quickly obscure our understanding of the politics of the global present. Yet this is the direction that the "promise" of Google's Book Search is taking us.

What I take to be a kind of systemic evil here is the way in which the politics at work in this process of hierarchization are buried under the weight of pragmatics which Google—and no doubt the vast majority of its users—takes to be unobjectionable. How could one possibly dismiss the value of having access to the great libraries of the world in one's bedroom? Google has positioned its library project as the possibility of unfettered access to books as a market promise—not just because of the fact that money directly influences the importance of texts through advertising, but because of the illusion of choice combined with the attitude of "buyer beware." Google understands itself to be doing no evil because it is playing by standard social and political rules. Indeed, it imagines that it is extending these rules substantially, contributing to global democratization and the reinforcement of the rule-of-law by means of informational trickle down. As with every other aspect of social life, however, information is hardly innocent and in fact is at the heart of the political. "There can be no universal library, only specific ways of looking at the universal," Jeanneney reminds us (5). These specific ways demand explicit, ongoing public contestation and debate that necessarily involves a discussion of not only the specifics of search engine algorithms but, more broadly, of the kind of world that we want to inhabit and the futures toward which we want to work.

The case of Google points to more general conclusions about the politics of evil. It seems to me that this concept as it commonly circulates today—not in Departments of Philosophy or Religious Studies, but in online debates over Google's current corporate status—confirms the desirability and indeed inevitability of the existing state of things by insisting, as Badiou suggests, on the exemplarity of a handful of radical situations. It is this consequent denial of the structural, systemic injustice—the injustice that accumulates by a thousand cuts through otherwise seemingly banal practices and beliefs—that I reject by introducing this category of "systemic evil." It is a kind of evil that may be difficult to notice, but whose reality makes claims on us to think politics and revolution at every moment, instead of waiting for the gods to return or capitalism to collapse in on itself.

Systemic evil? Does this distort the idea of evil without accomplishing much else? One of the major political mysteries that we collectively face today is how a neoliberal rationality—"a new and virulent form of capitalism … with an even more disastrous impact on the fabric of a common life than its predecessors" (Budgen 2000: 150) has in the space of two decades become accepted as the new normal around the world. Jean and John Comaroff point to the extremity and depth of its effects:

> Neoliberalism aspires, in its ideology and practice, to intensify the
> abstractions inherent in capitalism itself: to separate labour power from its
> human context, to replace society with the market, to build a universe out
> of aggregated transactions […] Formative experiences—like the nature of
> work and the reproduction of self, culture, and community—have shifted.
> Once-legible processes—the workings of power, the distribution of wealth,
> the meaning of politics and national belonging—have become opaque,
> even spectral. The contours of "society" blur, its organic solidarity disperses.
> (2000: 305)

Evil is indeed a heavy-handed term. But what else to call a global social situation in which the human has become almost completely marginalized, an afterthought to the sublime manoeuvers of the market? What else to name a moment in which the happiness of "once upon a time" speaks not of our hopes for the future, but of our sense that things can only get worse?

Notes

1. See Nick Brown's (2004) extensive critique of the limits of Badiou's messianism and the politics of waiting for more on this.

2. In 2005, only 3.54 per cent of new adult fiction titles published in the U.S. were trans-lations. See Jascha Hoffman, "Data: Comparative Literature." New York Times Book Review. 15 April 2007. http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F50C12F 93D5B0C768DDDAD0894DF404482. Accessed 22 June 2007.

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