



Unplugged - Two days, one night, or the objective violence of capitalism

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"Two days, one night" or the objective violence of capitalism

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Violence is omnipresent in the Dardenne brothers' film *Two Days, One Night*. But does the violence lie with the characters, willing to sacrifice one of their already vulnerable colleagues, or does it lie with the system, which forces them to make an impossible choice where everyone, ultimately, has something to lose? Using the works of philosopher Slavoj Žižek as a framework, I shall attempt to ponder this question of violence and how it might be overcome.

MORAL DILEMMA AND REDEMPTION

The position of having to make an impossible choice, in which the characters of the movie are placed, could not, under current labour law, occur in France, Germany or Belgium. In this small or medium-sized enterprise (SME) of seventeen employees, including one working under a fixed-term contract, the workers are asked by their boss to decide by vote whether they would prefer to receive a €1000 bonus, or to reinstate Sandra, a permanent employee due to return to work after long-term sick leave (the two options being irreconcilable for economic reasons related to international competition). Indeed, according to employment regulations, the dismissal of an employee cannot result from such a choice. Moreover, in reality it is the fixed contract position that would be eliminated in such a case, a solution which Sandra's boss only considers at the very end of the film.

However, this situation of being forced to make a choice, though fictitious, does refer to an already large number of cases in which employees have been placed in such a dilemma and made directly responsible for solving such a problem. For instance, in France, in 2004, the German Bosch group asked its employees to vote between a reduction in wage costs or 400 job cuts. The 2013 National Inter-sectoral Agreement (ANI), or "competitive employment agreement", allows employers to negotiate with their employees whether to increase working hours without increasing wages, or to cut wages without reducing working hours. Thus, in 2015, the management executives of the Smart factory of Hambach (Moselle) organized a referendum in which its 800 employees were asked to vote for or against a proposal to increase their working hours (i.e. to work 39 hours a week and be paid for 37) in exchange for guaranteeing their jobs until 2020. Such situations are likely to become more common in France, as the government wishes, through the new labour law, to give more weight to local agreements at company level than to sector-wide agreements and legal codes, and to encourage the widespread use of company referendums. Such local arrangements risk creating the situation described in the film. The film can therefore be understood as a fiction built around a very simple plot line, which strongly brings to light the implications of the practical application in the workplace of a neoliberal paradigm based on deregulation and individual choice, and the way in which workers may confront it.

The movie could at first be perceived as conveying a message about individual morality. Indeed, the decision each of Sandra's colleagues faces can be understood as a moral dilemma which conflicts personal interests with values of solidarity. The movie shows individuals absorbed by a pressing need to earn money, some having to moonlight at weekends to make ends meet; some with materialistic motivations, such as wanting home improvements, to buy new household appliances or a bigger house (such as Sandra and her husband, for whom moving back to social housing is out of the question); and some with problems such as an unemployed spouse, debts or school fees to pay. But, beyond the diversity of these individual situations, the movie paints the portrait of an individualized and weakened contemporary subject. The film depicts a range of possible responses, which often affect the workers' families, to an extremely

difficult moral dilemma: from support, avoidance, denial, remorse, ambivalence, and finally to violence. This violence can be direct, in the form of criticism of Sandra, for instance for "asking us to give up that bonus we so badly need for our children", or for "taking our bonus from us"; or in the form of a physical attack, when someone attempts to hit her. But it can also be more subtle, as when a coworker disqualifies Sandra by mentioning the depression she went through and his doubt as to her ability to work again.

The series of scenes in which Sandra meets with each of her colleagues to ask them what they have decided, does seem to reduce the situation to a direct face-to-face in which one of the two characters necessarily loses something. But each face-to-face interaction also serves as an opportunity for the characters to identify with each other, in terms of the co-worker imagining Sandra's risk of losing her job on the one hand, and Sandra's understanding of her colleague's personal reasons for wanting to receive the bonus on the other. Exhortations to "put yourself in my shoes", for instance, punctuate all these sequences, and each party has the same argument: the need for money, either the salary or the bonus. "I'd like you to vote for me; we need my salary", "without my salary, we can't make it", Sandra repeats, which meets responses such as: "I can't, I need my bonus". This confinement within a closed-door encounter during which, through a mirror effect, Sandra and a co-worker are set up to identify with each other, makes it difficult to condemn their decisions (except in the case of the few who respond malevolently). Sandra frequently responds with "I put myself in their place: one thousand Euros", "I understand, don't apologize", "that's too bad for me but I understand" when people try to apologize or ask her to "not take it the wrong way". When the reasons given for preferring to receive the bonus are "understandable" and human, the only argument likely to make them change their mind seems to be one of a moral nature, arguments that counterbalance the others based on values of solidarity, which invariably involve some form of sacrifice.

Analysed from this perspective, the movie can be seen as depicting Sandra's journey to redemption. The beginning of the movie describes a woman in a state of vulnerability, who relies on drugs to cope, is about to give up everything, including life, but who gradually starts fighting back (beginning with her meetings with co-workers), and in so doing regains health and dignity. Initially beset by a feeling of loneliness, she realizes that she is loved and supported by her husband, but also by some colleagues. When Sandra's boss eventually proposes to reinstate her once one colleague (who had voted for her reinstatement in the second round) employed on a short-term basis has completed his contract, she is faced with the same dilemma with which she has relentlessly confronted her colleagues. Sandra then makes the decision to leave the company and the final scene shows her beginning her job hunt and moving on.

OBJECTIVE VS. SUBJECTIVE VIOLENCE

This initial interpretation of the movie might suggest that the only right choice to make when faced with such a dilemma is to choose the option that involves sacrificing oneself in the name of solidarity. The idea being that this self-sacrifice allows subjects to keep their dignity — even if this means losing their money or job — and keeps them from behaving like the bastard the system relies on to survive. The movie can thus be seen to be teaching the ethic of reciprocity: "Treat others as you wish to be treated", "Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you".

But this limited interpretation of *Two Days, One Night* would not seem to do justice to the Dardenne brothers' work overall. The first of their films that met with international success and recognition, *Rosetta* (1999), portrays a young woman desperate to find a job and a way out of poverty, following a first failure which was

the result of an injustice. Despite Riquet being the only person to have given her comfort and support, Rosetta betrays him to his boss in order to get his job. The point of the movie is not to condemn Rosetta, but to question the system that causes the characters to go to such lengths. Similarly, *Two Days, One Night* shows the system to create situations in which everybody loses. This "system" is not referred to directly, but is implicated, for instance, in the references to the competitive situation and financial difficulties in which the company finds itself, as well as the pressure the company's management is under. This pressure is passed down to Sandra's colleagues who are forced to make a difficult decision within a short timeframe. The cinematic technique of repeated close ups of characters' faces during their one-to-one confrontations with Sandra conveys the strain of their struggle with this. Because Sandra's appeal to her co-workers takes place outside working hours (please see Gazi Islam below for more on this), the fiction of common objectives around work is dissolved, and all that remains is a fight for the job (de Gaulejac, 2014).

One can infer from this analysis that the only way out would be to challenge the rules of the system, by, to begin with, refusing to be placed in this dilemma. Although they understand that the rules are unfair, no one directly disputes them. When Juliette one of Sandra's colleagues, who supports her from the start, calls on the managing director of the company to hold a new vote, she contests the validity of the first poll's results, but not the principle of the vote itself. Whatever their ultimate choice, the characters implicitly agree to participate in what philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2009, p.2) refers to as "objective" violence. Objective violence is "systemic", cannot be attributed to an identifiable agent or agents (e.g. global poverty or the sexism embodied in some habitual forms of language), and exists insidiously and almost invisibly within the system and "the 'normal' state of things" (Slavoj Žižek 2009, p.2).

According to Žižek (2009), "subjective" violence, however, is more immediate, physical and can easily be attributed to a specific agent (subject) or agents (States, groups, etc). One example of subjective violence in the movie is a fight initiated by a son against his father because he chooses to support Sandra. Subjective violence produces a sense of horror, revulsion and fascination, and, above all, disrupts a "zero level" of violence. Thus, subjective violence is seen to disrupt the normal state of things, whereas objective violence remains within it, and is thus, barely visible or recognizable, while, ironically, simultaneously working to sustain the illusion of the existence of the zero-level. Žižek compares objective violence to the "dark matter" of physics, a major constituent of the universe, which seems undetectable but which is the only explanation for certain gravitational effects on visible matter. Similarly, objective violence is the only way to make sense of outbreaks of subjective violence which otherwise seem irrational and gratuitous. Žižek argues that such violence has, with global capitalism, come to occupy an unprecedented central place in our society. Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than any direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their 'evil' intentions, but is purely 'objective', systemic, anonymous. Here we encounter the Lacanian difference between reality and the Real: 'reality' is the social reality of the actual people involved in interaction and in the productive processes, while the Real is the inexorable 'abstract', spectral logic of capital that determines what goes on in social reality. (Žižek, 2009, p. 11)

One aspect of the fundamental violence of capitalism is that it creates a social space experienced as "worldless", in the sense meant by Alain Badiou, which is a space in which the subjects are no longer endowed with the mental representation that helps them make sense of the world they live in. 'Perhaps, it is here that one of the main dangers of capitalism should be located: (...) it sustains a stricto sensu 'worldless' ideological constellation, depriving the large

majority of people of any meaningful cognitive mapping. Capitalism is the first socio-economic order which detotalizes meaning' (Žižek, 2009, p. 67). Capitalism deprives individuals of the cognitive references that could provide a framework of intelligibility. Thus, objective violence must be understood as what, within this system, prevents the subject from contesting or actively resisting it (see Yoann Bazin below). The Dardenne brothers' movie shows how the objective violence of capitalism creates an internal struggle between employees in the same team. It creates in them a sense of guilt which they try to justify (—"understand my situation"), or deflect by blaming Sandra, who takes on much of the responsibility: "It's my fault; I'm the one who causes this violence", "It is because of me that they are prepared to get into a fight".

THE POSSIBILITY OF A POLITICAL COMMUNITY?

However, the film seems to outline the beginnings of a possible shift beyond this boxed-in position. First, each of the characters eventually expresses some opposition. Sandra, who eventually rejects the rules of the game she initially thought "normal", overcomes her sense of guilt and refers to the responsibilities of her superiors in the matter: "I'm not the one who decided that you would lose your bonus if I stayed"; "It's not my fault that they force you to choose." She overcomes her fear, confronts her foreman and makes him face up to his actions: "You called them on the weekend; you tried to scare them" (it is almost regrettable that she accuses him of being "heartless", because this continues to situate the problem at the level of the subjects' identification with others, of individual choice and subjective violence, rather than at the level of objective violence and political struggle). Eventually she opposes her boss altogether by refusing his offer.

Some opposition also emerges among those of Sandra's co-workers who publically support her even though the vote is secret. Their choice to forgo their anonymity and accept the consequences possibly creates the conditions for the birth of a political community. This is what one of the final scenes, when Sandra meets her waiting colleagues in the factory's canteen to say goodbye, seems to suggest. Sandra no longer addresses individuals one by one, but faces a group of people who have dealt with a difficult choice in a similar way. This shared experience, which they will always have in common, makes their choice collective, rather than individual, and marks the possible beginning of a community. They no longer face Sandra alone, but instead she seems to have been the condition for their coming together, and it is a group that she leaves behind and feels bonded to: "I will never forget what you did for me". The seeds of this outcome can be found in other scenes in the movie. For instance, when Sandra's colleague, after being confronted by her, becomes conscious of the need to make choices and stop being a victim, thus decides to leave her husband; and then, when the same colleague unexpectedly offers her support, it inspires Sandra to choose to fight for herself. Other examples occur when another colleague reminds Sandra that she once took the blame for a mistake he had made during his trial period, and when Sandra realizes that another colleague is "afraid of Jean Marc [the foreman], just like me". All these moments posit the possibility of building a human community endowed with selfawareness, made of bonds, relationships, reciprocity, with a common memory and a common history; all conditions for the formation of a political community.

In this regard — the link between the ability to fight and building a community — *Two Days, One Night* can be compared to Mark Herman's movie *Brassed Off* (1997). When a group of miners is rendered helpless in the face of the closure of their pit, a prospect which threatens their identity and their sense of belonging to a community, the characters focus on saving their colliery brass band at all costs and participating in a national music competition. While this objective may seem futile in the context of a struggle for the survival of their livelihood, it becomes a symbolic challenge, and while the mine is eventually closed, their community, symbolized by the band they belong to, remains, and this belonging is itself an

act of affirmation of their fidelity to their political struggle. As one of the miners puts it, "when there's no hope, only principles remain". In this respect, Žižek (1999: 472) notes that fidelity to such principles keeps the political subject, a subject that belongs to a community, in existence. In the Dardenne brothers' movie, hope, and the potential creation of a new, symbolic community, stems from the characters' fidelity to the ordeal they go through and to what develops between those who support Sandra. Those who choose to keep their bonuses, however, are left alone to face a world that remains unchanged for them, and in which there is no possible mediation.

But another possible outcome can be illustrated by the film directed by Gustave Kervern and Benoît Delépine, *Louise Michel* (2008). When the workers of a factory in Picardy discover with dismay that the factory has been relocated overnight, despite the efforts and concessions they had been making for years, they meet at a local coffee shop and decide to pool their small severance pay to hire a hit man to kill the boss. One of the workers, Louise, takes it upon herself to find a suitable professional — Michel, who has never actually killed anyone before — and together they set off in search of the unscrupulous boss. But as their adventure unfolds, they discover that the man they have just killed was not the person responsible but merely the executor of a decision made in a company which itself was owned by another company, and so on. This leads them into an endless series of murders. When they identify the "real" boss, hiding in Jersey, they appear to have reached the end of their search. But it turns out that this boss is in fact under the thumb of an American pension fund, and so the series of murders continues.

In this caustic movie, the main theme, which is the difficulty of identifying, and thus resisting, the ultimate source of power and responsibility, goes hand in hand with the reactions this causes: initial acceptance, resignation and apathy, which give way to a form of violence which, because it remains non symbolized, can become radicalized and directed towards all those who, at some time or other, have played a part — inadvertently or not — in the system. This subjective violence, terrifying and visible, emanates from the objective violence of the system, which had been invisible and is suddenly revealed for what it is. ! Although this is a fictional case, the gap between fiction and reality may not be that narrow. For instance, in France and other countries, recent outbreaks of anger and violence have followed sudden announcements of factory closures or mass layoffs. A human resources director of Air France once had his shirt ripped off his back, for example, and there was an explosion of violence in 2009 when some employees of a Continental plant in France heard that a court of justice had rejected their request for the suspension of the plant closure procedure, which resulted in the immediate destruction of the Sous-Préfecture 2. In the years prior to this outbreak, the factory's employees and trade unions had made a number of concessions and accepted significant pay cuts in the hope of saving the site. As in the *Louise Michel* film, the ultimate outbreak of destructive violence was the outcome of a long period of acceptance of and participation in the system. The sense of having been fooled, and of being personally affected, can generate a level of anger that can no longer be mediated or controlled. It is as though the objective violence (Žižek, 1999, 2009) which for years was directed from within the system is transferred to the employees themselves. What will the Two Days, One Night employees who choose to sacrifice Sandra for their bonus do when their turn comes around?

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