

**THE FATHERS ARE BACK - AND THIS TIME AS AN ANTICAPITALIST
FORCE?**

SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON MAREN ADE'S *TONY ERDMANN*

European modernity, and maybe not only, can be depicted as the story of a progressive emancipation from the Father.

Enlightenment has been often conceptualized as a titanic struggle against a threefold Patriarchal order, namely against the “holy alliance” of three powerful fathers – God, the Sovereign and the *Pater Familias* – that oppress individuals and prevent their rational capacities to unfold. And what do the French Revolution’s values of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité* represent if not the claim to equality between brothers (and, if possible, sisters) liberated from any authority except their own? European philosophical and cultural production has dealt in various ways with the promises and disillusionments inherent in the striving for a fatherless society and in those empty spaces it inevitably leaves behind.¹

German philosophy and culture in particular have been for more than 200 years obsessed with the figure of the father: the necessarily conflictual relationships between father and children, the overthrow of the former and the troubles absent fathers necessarily create have been leading motives for many reflections, from literary to psychological, from philosophical to sociological ones. Let’s think for instance of

Friedrich Schiller’s well-known play *The Robbers* (1781-2), in which the tormented relationship between a father, the old Moor, and his two sons, Franz and Karl, constitutes a crucial axis of the drama. Moor is depicted as a weak man, incapable of loving and recognizing his children, and therefore unable to handle the rivalries between them. He ends up locked up by Franz and subsequently deeply saddened by Karl’s rebel “career”; the latter disappointment will eventually cause his death.

Then, of course, consider Sigmund Freud’s work and his groundbreaking analysis of the crucial, ambivalent role of the father for the formation of the individual psyche and of the normative communal order. On Freud’s account, the son owes to the father the achievement of independent adulthood, but the price to be paid is high: In order to become like him, the son has to kill the father and take his place. In *Totem and Taboo* (1912-1913), Freud establishes a homology between the psychic-individual and the social dimensions by telling the story of the father’s “greatest defeat”, which becomes “the stuff for the representation of his supreme triumph.”² In this text, moreover, Freud introduces the expression “fatherless society”, which has been taken on several times thereafter. In an article written in 1919 (“Zur Psychologie der Revolution: Die vaterlose Gesellschaft”: On the Psychology of Revolution: the Fatherless Society) Paul Federn uses the expression

“fatherless society”, contrary to Freud, as a positive term, indicating the victory of the proletarian revolution against the traditional family and its patriarchal rule. In 1963, Alexander Mitscherlich writes a book entitled *Society Without the Father* (original title: *Auf dem Weg zur vaterlosen Gesellschaft*, that can also be translated into: *Towards a Fatherless Society*), where he nostalgically laments the loss of a world in which the father had not yet assumed the social function of exclusive breadwinner and did not have to spend so much time outside of the household in order to make ends meet. This was a (mythic) world in which the economic and the private spheres were not sharply separated, and the intimate relationships, those between the absent father and other family members, had not yet become cold and arid.

The father, and of course the family he is the head of, plays a structural role in capitalism. For example, Max Horkheimer has pointed out capitalism’s dysfunctional conjunction between an individualistic dynamic, which pushes men (fathers) to struggle for survival in the market, and the collectivist structure of the bourgeois, traditional family, which, not in spite of but precisely because of its noncapitalist logic, does function as a capitalist bedrock (“Autorität und Familie in der Gegenwart”, 1949: Authority and Family in the Present Age). In the whole western world, during the protest movements of 1968, workers,

students but also women raised claims against a wide range of capitalist and capitalist-friendly institutions (e.g. the factory, the school, the family, the cultural system), all dominated by some kind of fatherly rule. There is a lot to be said and discussed about these claims. Let me solely underline here the peculiarity of the German context in the late 1960s, in which the rebels had an additional reason for protesting and striving for radical transformation: their “fathers” had been, collectively seen, all involved in the Nazi regime. Germany after 1945 was a fatherless society not only in the sense that the war had buried a great number of fathers and men in the parental age; what is more, for those who were coming to age after 1945, to be “fatherless” corresponded to the wish of somehow getting rid of the horrors of their past.

Today western society seems to have defeated patriarchy for good. Women have massively entered the job market and the male breadwinner model has declined. As Boltanski and Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999) or Dardot and Laval in *The New Way of the World* (2014), and many others, have argued, economic production is today based on the precarization, flexibilization and mobilization of the labor force. As such, it is largely incompatible with family life, tending to discourage the youth to form strong, committed intimate bonds. This is precisely the situation in which we find Ines Conradi (Sandra Hüller),

the female protagonist of *Toni Erdmann* and daughter of Winfried Conradi, a.k.a. Toni Erdmann (Peter Simonischek). She is a cold, nervous, sullen corporate consultant, working in the Bucharest office of a big firm, and preparing a business plan for a local oil company to outsource labor. She is constantly struggling to affirm herself and to be recognized in a male-dominated environment, whose implicit and explicit sexism the director Maren Ade does tirelessly portrait from different angles – Ines, anyhow, willfully refuses to be identified as a feminist. In line with neoliberal dictates, the boundaries between labor time and leisure time are blurred: She agrees to accompany the oil company's boss's young wife on shopping on a Sunday and at a very short notice, aware of how this kind of informal (and slavish) connections are paramount for success in her business. Furthermore, she sexually bosses a co-worker around in a way that mimics the power dynamic at the office. Her father belongs to another world: Winfried is a rather ambitionless music teacher in his late sixties or early seventies. Badly shaved and shabbily dressed, with a passion for tricks and pranks, he appears as a cheerful wreck of the '68 Generation, who has not completely given up his untimely all-power-to-imagination-dreams. When he impulsively visits Ines in Bucharest, he immediately starts to worry that her daughter's absorption in the corporate world would make

her forget, or never find out, what “fun”, “happiness” and especially “humanity” mean. He decides then to intervene by building up another world, an imaginary, absurd, almost surreal one. It is not clear, and this doubt is one of the keys of the movie, whether the fictive characters and stories he sets up are aimed at exposing neoliberalism's “true face” and thus “saving” Ines's soul (and body), or at just winning back his daughter's heart and reconnecting with her.

One thing is clear though: Winfried is not an absent father, or at least he does not intend to be one anymore. He tries to act as a father by caring for and steering his daughter's life, within a narrative plot that rediscovers – and revisits – all classic topics of an intergenerational conflict that must result in reconciliation. We have all the ingredients: “the lost son”, the separation, the “heroic father”, the reunion in which the “prodigal son” ends up by somehow taking on the father's place. All these elements assume, however, queer features. The lost/prodigal son is a woman characterized by what according to traditional gender identities can be identified as masculine traits (independence, strength, control of emotions, workaholism, etc.). Moreover, she is not the transgressor who has challenged the family and societal order. On the contrary, she is the perfect champion of the current order. The separation moreover corresponds to the normal condition of many

young Europeans today, who are compelled or seduced by the globalized job market to accept jobs quite far from their place of origin. Winfried is more like an anti-hero: His clumsy attempts to destabilize her daughter's routines appear as not leading anywhere. In the very end, somehow, they do actually bring about some positive result: Ines and her father are drawn closer to each other. But the final reunion remains ambiguous. On the one hand, it suggests that Ines has learnt something from her father: that life is not to be taken very seriously after all, and that masquerades are good ways to deal with disappointing, boring, pressing realities. On the other hand, nothing is going to change for real: She has left her job in Bucharest, but she has already accepted a new position at McKinsey and will soon move to Singapore (even further away from her father's influence).

What is truly peculiar about *Toni Erdmann* is that the father does not stand in any way for the given social, political or economic order (his child does). Even more interestingly, he does neither represent an alternative, he does not suggest how things could be different or hint at possible solutions. Family relationships are not conceived of as an oasis of warmth and happiness in opposition to the economic sphere. The movie's "critique" of present-day capitalism consists in parodying it and thus exhibiting its practices as ridiculous and pointless. Toni Erdmann,

the persona Winfried plays in order to infiltrate into Ines' everyday life, claims to be a "life coach": A great part of the film's amusement consists in laughing at Toni's absurd caricatures of this neoliberal character and especially at the weird willingness of all the CEOs, managers and consultants to believe in and play along with him.

The climax of the parody is reached in the nude party scene, which many critics have praised as one of the most hilarious nude scenes ever made. It is Ines' birthday, and she has decided to throw a party: The only invited guests are her co-workers and her boss Gerald (Thomas Loibl), and its main goal is defined by Ines herself as "team-building" (remember Ines does not know or does not appreciate the work time / leisure time distinction). The day before, she had spent a particularly meaningful day with her father: First they had visited together one of the posts of the oil company her firm is helping to "modernize", and thanks to her father's warm interactions with the local workers, she had maybe begun to vaguely realize the consequences of her business plan on these workers' lives. Afterwards she crushed the house party of Toni's new Romanian friend, and unexpectedly agreed to sing Whitney Houston's *Greatest Love of All* as her father accompanies on the piano. The duet unleashes intense emotions, thus enabling father and daughter to communicate with each other in ways not otherwise possible.³ So

Ines and Winfried are already getting closer, and while dressing up for the party, she has maybe already begun to realize the idiocy of all the rules and social conventions related to her working life (that is, of her life tout court). Her decision to show up naked at the door when the first guest arrives, and later to insist on everyone's entering naked, is not a deliberate calculation or even a rational calling into question of certain conventions and rules. It is just the bodily, emotional reaction to a society which she can now for the first time see as it is: cruel, humiliating, useless, ridiculous. The exposure to her father's mocking caricatures has finally given her the strength to liberate herself from the usual meetings' routines, communication patterns, toxic norms and slogans. The moment when Winfried shows up at the party, the giant furry mask that conceals him is highly revealing. There could not be a better, graphically more dramatic representation of the contrast between the standardized and globalized business culture and those traditional societies that are seen, from the perspective of Ines & C., as pre-modern, backward and in desperate need of economic development. The Bulgarian costume, the *Kukeri*, has traditionally the function of driving away evil spirits and propitiating fertility; here, it has the effect of scaring to death Ines' boss Gerald, who, engrossed in the embarrassment for his nudity, had failed to notice the presence of the

giant hairy creature. This rare display of fatherly "heroism" does betray, albeit ironically, a traditional element: The awe-inspiring father has come to protect the exposed, vulnerable (naked) daughter from other men's possible ambushes.

This moment ends quickly and Winfried leaves the awkward party. Ines runs after him and the two reunite in a warm and liberating hug. This does not last long either, because the woman leaves almost immediately and her father is left alone trapped in the costume that has meanwhile become rather suffocating. Authority is a heavy burden and Winfried is not really up to it. Another episode of affection and affinity between father and daughter that is right away interrupted occurs in the very last scene: Ines has bashfully put on her father's fake signature dentures and a weird hat, and Winfried leaves to take a camera and immortalize this funny moment. As he had just maintained, the meaning of life is contained in unpredictable, volatile instants, which we usually do not even perceive. Capturing them may however turn out to be a hopeless undertaking. In fact, the film ends before the father returns.

Is ironic critique of capitalism a volatile moment as well? Are deep, intense emotional connections as fleeting as a hug or a laugh? Sure, turning tragedies into farces, relativizing the seriousness and heaviness

of things, emotionally and bodily connecting are precious aspects of what critical theories have called emancipation. And *Toni Erdmann* does tell us that today emancipation is badly needed. It does not tell us, however, how to do it. It would be good to have fathers – and mothers, older people, mentors, teachers – who can disrupt our routines and habits and thus help gaining an ironic and critical distance, who care for and support us while we totter, who try to remind us of the important things. But it is up to ourselves what to do next.

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¹ For a very rich overview of the issues and themes that I am going to very briefly sketch out in the first introductory part of this article, see the German collection of essays: D. Thomä (ed.), *Vaterlosigkeit. Geschichte und Gegenwart einer fixen Idee*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2010; see also D. Thomä, *Väter. Eine Moderne Heldengeschichte*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München 2008.

² S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, Routledge, London/New York 2001, p. 174.

³ In his review of *Toni Erdmann* for *The New Yorker* (21.12.2016), Richard Brody complains that Ade has emptied the father-daughter relationship of all its psychological reality. The personal story she tells “remains as schematic and impersonal as a position paper”. He adds: “the troubles that *Toni Erdmann* diagnoses are, obviously, real; the dangers that it senses are at hand; but the personal lives and motives, the needs and desires, the memories and identities of those who are at its heart, as agents, witnesses, victims, remain obscure” (<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/a-stilted-vision-of-a-declining-europe-in-toni-erdmann>). I do not agree with this critique: the interior lives of Winfried and Ines Conradi are not deeply investigated because one of the “thesis” of the movie is that current-day capitalism bans the expression of emotions, at least of

those emotions that are not functional to the economic system. Winfried’s “business” idea to hire a daughter’s double to keep him company and care for him is quite spot-on.