

# From Violence as Anti-Politics to Politics as Anti-Violence

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**ABSTRACT** This article discusses violence in its intrinsic relationship to politics. This conjunction of politics and violence is not just a special feature of our historical experience; rather it can never be separated from it, albeit with distinct forms and to different degrees. Starting from situations embodying extreme violence, or cruelty, and contrasting them with a politics of civility, this article argues that if we want to define the conditions and the goals of politics, it is not enough to just be mindful of violence, or to see it as a central problem for politics. What we need is a new foundation for politics, arising from the consideration of extreme violence. Extreme violence, therefore, is not one question among others for politics; it is the question where the possibility or impossibility of politics is at stake.

**KEYWORDS** violence, politics, civility, cruelty

My subject is violence in its intrinsic relationship to politics, therefore also to the “city” and public space, with each of the two sides putting limits on the other, but also intruding into it. Like so many of us, I became aware that this conjunction of politics and violence is not just a special feature of our historical experience; rather it can never be separated from it, albeit with distinct forms and to different degrees. As my teacher Louis Althusser once wrote, this kind of experience calls for a “thinking at the extremities” (*penser aux extrêmes*).<sup>1</sup> This is not just a methodological choice; it is the necessity imposed by the thing itself. What are these “extremities”? They are situations embodying extreme violence, for which in a previous collection of essays I chose the name “cruelty,” hypothetically contrasting it with a politics of civility.<sup>2</sup> My thesis holds that if we want to define the conditions and the goals of politics, it is not enough to just be mindful of violence, or to see it as a central problem for politics. What we need is a new foundation of politics, arising from the consideration of extreme violence. Extreme violence, therefore, is not one question among others for politics; it is the question where the possibility

or impossibility of politics is at stake, and thus a question of life or death. This is not to say that this issue will replace every other question of economy or culture, law or justice; but it must “overdetermine” all of these matters, revealing the antinomic determinations that make them, in a sense, as Arendt proposed, “groundless.”<sup>3</sup>

Before I explore this thesis further, however, some preliminary remarks are in order. I want to indicate the epistemological and semantic distinctions that I think are required here. First, I want to reject a thesis that is often considered crucial by political philosophers, namely the claim that politics and violence are antithetical terms, which are to one another what a rational end is to an obstacle to its realization, because politics is on the side of law and violence is a perversion or an element of irrationality. With Machiavelli and several others (Weber, in particular), I contend that violence is not the other of politics, which would mean that politics, in fact, takes place and is organized *outside* the realm of violence. This does not mean that politics is *merely* the expression of violence, or to put it in inverted Clausewitzian terms, as Foucault once proposed, that politics is “the continuation of violence [war] by other means.”<sup>4</sup> It means, however, that whenever politics tries to use violence or to transform it, it can never hope to transcend the realm of violence, or remain unaffected by its effects, under the protection of an ideal essence. Many questions of principle are at stake here, of which I consider only a few aspects.

First there are anthropological questions—perhaps even theological ones. If it is true that violence dooms politics, this could be because politics always takes place in the realm of evil, testifying to the condition of dereliction in which the human species and the societies into which it is divided are plunged as a consequence of their original sin. This kind of representation can be secularized, leading to a notion of violent finitude conceived as a general anthropological condition: the Hobbesian “war of all against all,” to which I will return. The chain of consequences is more or less fatal, but it can never be entirely avoided because this originary condition takes us from vulnerability to subjection, to power and excessive power, to cyclical violence, to cruelty. If a point of arrest, or reversal, or bifurcation, is to exist, it must therefore be conceived (as in Hobbes and others, through to Weber) as an institution or an artificial invention that turns violence against itself, in the form of counter-violence. This appears as a pragmatic equivalent of the theological idea of evil in the realm of history and experience. However, history and political experience already suffice to let us ask a different question, one concerning the contamination of the “ends” of politics by its “means.” Officially, the ends of politics, even when they are not entirely “pure,” are always noble: what they announce is justice and peace, which as such are opposed to violence. By contrast, the means of politics may involve the necessity of implementing violence, or they even *must* include it, because justice and peace do not exist spontaneously, or they can emerge only if existing powers and interests are confronted on their own terms. But experience

teaches us that means in turn become ends or become substituted for ends when it appears that these ends exist only in relation to their means, or as long as those means are effective. Above all—this was a lesson taught unmistakably by Gandhi—means produce a transformation of the ends to which they apply, and they condition or “create” the subjects who implement them in their own “image.” They create violent subjects. This is what leads me to assert that violence can’t be simply the other of politics, unless we want to imagine a politics without powers, power relations, inequalities, conflicts, or interests, which would be tantamount to a politics without politics. In the real historical process of politics, violence is always part of the conditions, just as it is part of the means and therefore is part of the ends of politics, because there is an immanence of ends to means, or a becoming immanent of the ends to the means, not the reverse. Accordingly, we must acknowledge that there is a fundamental ambivalence in politics; its relationship to violence is a consequence and a signal of this ambivalence. From here we move to the necessity of discussing degrees and modalities of violence within the practice of politics. A phenomenology of violence (including extreme violence) becomes a crucial part of every genuine concept of the political. And the name *civility*—which I invoked as a possible antithesis to *cruelty*, which generically subsumes many varieties of “anti-violent” forms of politics that seek to control the effects of violence within its very implementation—will designate not so much a metaphysical antithesis (a risk I always perceive to some extent in the idea of “non-violence”), but rather a mobile and metamorphic contradiction, a second-order conflict. Violence can be, therefore, either “civilized” or “barbaric.” I am perfectly aware that there is something impossible, however, in this depiction of a “process of civilizing violence,” not only because we observe in practice that those who claim to be most “civilized” are in fact the worst barbarians (witness the whole history of colonization), but because the idea runs against every “normal” experience. I submit it as an aporetic starting point, to begin thinking at the extremities, that is, shifting from one extreme to the other, in order to engage with politics from the inside of its contradictions and transformations.

At this point, I need to make a second preliminary distinction: violence and extreme violence are qualitatively distinct. Again, there is no question of distributing each of these into neatly separated boxes, using typologies so as to ensure that “extreme violence” remains a “state of exception” from which we are protected by “normal” politics. On the contrary, my aim is to understand what takes place when violence falls into the extreme, most of the time unexpectedly and unpredictably, from within a state of apparent normality. It is to try to think of a political civilization powerful enough to keep violence from falling into its extremities (or what a certain theological-political tradition—associated with Carl Schmitt—called a *katechonic* function).<sup>5</sup> In *Violence and Civility*, I tried to give

criteria for this limit, which of course are not quantitative; they do not refer to a measure of suffering or magnitude of destruction, but rather to patterns of situations in which human beings are deprived of the conditions under which they can individually and collectively resist, act, and handle their own life. I suggested three of these criteria:

- (1) situations in which the possibility of resisting excessive power or violence itself is annihilated;
- (2) situations in which self-preservative instincts—those that make it possible to find life, even if it is very difficult or painful, preferable to death—are reversed; and
- (3) situations of radical de-utility, not in the limited sense used by economists who calculate the minus value represented by some production or consumption factors, but in the “absolute” sense that refers to a violence without any other “goal” than its own perpetuation, one that thus annihilates the adapted use of things and persons.

These are rather indeterminate criteria indeed, and they are not mutually independent. I will focus on the first of these criteria, to discuss its problems and possible uses. I speak of problems, because the idea that every possibility of resistance is destroyed in a situation of extreme oppression or brutalization means that agents, humans who could influence their own life and history, are transformed into victims so impotent that they become like things. This is how Simone Weil described violent death in war in her beautiful essay on Homer, *The “Iliad,” or, the Poem of Force*.<sup>6</sup> But does this limit exist? Even if not, trying to approach the point where it would become thinkable may be a way to define where the possibility and impossibility of politics really lie.

I say that we cannot be certain that this limit does exist for several reasons. First, because resisting excessive power is always a complex capacity for humans, one that combines the life-preserving instincts and the capacity to imagine the future. It is rooted in the body as well as in the soul. Ancient Stoic philosophy explained that even a slave under torture can preserve in his soul the certainty that he is morally free, but conversely Foucault described the soul as a “prison of the body.”<sup>7</sup> As we try to describe situations of extreme violence and how they affect their victims, we observe that a bottom line is reached when every possibility of rescue or even every possibility of calling for help is suppressed, when there is no longer any solidarity. But we also observe that, in some sense, it is always too early to decide that no rescue will arrive, or there will be no combination of internal or external forces which, separately, resist violence and therefore could unite against it. Spinoza described a maximum of compressibility in human life, which

he related to the fact that no individual lives a completely isolated life, with no support from others.<sup>8</sup> This seems to harbor invisible possibilities, which a politics of anti-violence will seek to uncover and mobilize. We may go one step further, trying to problematize a symbolic limit that is difficult to define in an adequate manner, but also impossible to ignore: many of the extreme forms of political violence, especially when they are based on extermination processes, are not only aimed at suppressing actual resistances and lives; they also try to ensure that the memory of the victims and their possible rehabilitation is annihilated in the future. This raises the question of survival and survivors in the broad sense (not just from the point of view of genealogy). When it comes to destroying human groups, what must be dismantled is also the memory of what they have been, the mere fact that they existed once. Here, as before, we observe that there is no general rule, and we can speculate that what is almost possible may not be, in fact, absolutely certain. Again, we are trying to identify limits, and how they are crossed.

The limits are multiple, in fact: we continuously discover new figures, which increase our feeling that extreme violence concentrates in itself all the indeterminacies affecting the very definition of “politics.” Extreme violence affects individuals together with their environments, their “loved ones”; it is crucially micropolitical in Foucault’s sense. But it also arises as something inevitable and uncontrollable when masses are mobilized, beneath or beyond visible power structures. To use Jacques Rancière’s words,<sup>9</sup> extreme violence generates great distributions of the sensible, but it is also what reveals the very ambiguity of the notion of the sensible (or the perceptible), including the distribution of what can be said and communicated: some of its forms are clearly hyper-represented in the media, but we have reason to believe strongly that whatever is hyper-represented is also dissimulated or distorted, whereas other forms of violence which are more secret or less “exceptional” are essentially left invisible, are unsayable even for their victims. For a very long time, this was (and perhaps remains) the case for “domestic violence,” which can be extreme. In this abstract way, I want to evoke another kind of indetermination articulated with ambivalence in situations of extreme violence: it is always very difficult to know exactly where a threshold of annihilation for possibilities of resistance can arise, in which location in the body or the soul, where in the intimacy of the self or the external life of a collective subject it resides. There is no unquestionable sign that allows us to decide when resistance was simply suppressed in a relationship of forces, when the possibility of using material defenses has become too unequal, or when we must speak of the acceptance of domination, the subjection to symbolic violence, sometimes called “voluntary servitude” (a problematic expression indeed). Similarly, current debates about the meaning of sacrifice and martyrdom, for instance with respect to suicide bombings, also have to do with how to discern a form of political resistance that is constrained by an absolute “dis-

symmetry” of forces from a falling into the trap of mimetic violence that draws both victims and executioners into the same abyss. I give all of these examples to show how problematic the distinction is, but I am not trying to suggest that a political distinction between violence and extreme violence is meaningless. I think that it is a real problem, but one that lacks any general solution and therefore calls for a specific discussion of every “case” by actors and spectators who must speculate on its meaning. In this spirit, I want now to discuss three questions that have acquired a certain urgency in the places where we live and work.

In the first place, I want to discuss the extreme violence of capitalist globalization. Two questions in one are articulated here. The first regards capitalism as such: can we say that it always involves not only the violence that is linked to exploitation and the various forms of subjection needed for it, but also, over and above this violence, an extreme violence that actually destroys the lives of humans whose work is necessary for its development (and that therefore it is also in a sense self-destructive)? The second question regards globalization more precisely: does it introduce something that was not already included in historical capitalism, something that is in excess with respect to its logic? Marx already indicated very clearly the economic roots and social consequences of the extreme violence involved in capitalism, although he could see only some of its consequences for the institution of the political, as they emerged in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. They can be summarized with two categories: overexploitation and permanent “primitive accumulation.” As for the extreme violence involved in globalization, which perhaps results from the crossing of a qualitative threshold rather than an absolute innovation, I will say that contemporary developments have increased and made interdependent two processes: the destruction of the planetary environment (which can hardly become labeled a form of “creative destruction” any more), and the transformation of what Marx called a “real subsumption” of the labor force under the capitalist social relation into what I (with some others) have called a “total subsumption” of our existence, including consumption, health care, education, affective life, and generally speaking all the functions of upbringing and individualization of human beings under capital, especially in the form of their incorporation into the circuits of finance capital. This is more or less what neoliberal economists euphemistically call the emergence of “human capital” as a broad field of investment. Let me add a few more words on this transformation. Many Marxists (including Marx himself in some passages) tended to believe that, when the exploitation of the labor force takes the form of wage labor, which means that a contractual relationship and apparently “free” bargain takes place between the capitalist and workers, it must obey certain “rules” for the protection of labor and the recognition of the person of the worker, which impose a measure of “normality” on the labor process. The truth is, however, that such normality exists only in a temporary and localized

manner, wherever organized class struggles impose limits on exploitation, banning more violent forms, and forcing capital to adopt other modalities of economic development, which allow the access of the workers to mass consumption, to social services, and to professional education, and which require collective bargaining. But as soon as this struggle is weakened or interrupted, wild forms of overexploitation that threaten the physical and moral integrity of workers immediately return, sometimes taking new forms imposed by new technologies, which are no less destructive than the old ones. Add to this that overexploitation never ceased to exist in the larger space of the capitalist “world economy” (suffice it to think of the extreme violence suffered by women and children employed in Bangladesh or Pakistan). This leads us to what could be called protracted primitive accumulation. At the end of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx wrote a section to dismiss imaginary accounts of the origin of capital in individual abstinence, showing that it resulted historically from the violent expropriation of small producers, followed by the punishment of the poor and nomads, in order to coerce them into industrial labor (Foucault’s “punitive society”). However, the sense was common among Marxists that such ultra-violent processes characterized only a transitional phase separating the “old world” of pre-capitalist societies from the “normal” conditions of bourgeois societies. Later Marxists, from Rosa Luxemburg to Immanuel Wallerstein and David Harvey, would show just the opposite: this bloody violence, whether entirely non-judicial or legally enforced by the state, is permanent in the history of capitalism. It is one of its necessary modes of accumulation that, depending on the period considered, is differently distributed between the “core” industrial regions and the colonized “periphery.” For this reason, we must speak of a permanent primitive accumulation, which is not “primitive” at all, except in its ideological representation. Today we see clearly that it can produce a kind of second-degree “colonization” within the old industrial metropolises themselves, putting an end to the systems of social protection and integration that had been acquired, giving way to forms of mass precariousness, which can be compared to a “second wave” of proletarianization. Throughout the planet, we now find detachments of “disposable humans,” an expression that Bertrand Ogilvie uses to name those individuals produced by society only to be used as a cheap labor force and thrown away after usage in the converging forms of physiological misery, endemic war, and sometimes genocidal violence.<sup>10</sup> This is also what in a powerful essay Saskia Sassen has called “expulsion”: capitalism creates overpopulation only to eliminate it or its “surplus.”<sup>11</sup> However, as I said a moment ago, a difference is created here by globalization in its current stage: “primitive” accumulation destroys and kills personal affiliations, group solidarities, and professional ties that granted individuals security, but current globalization systematically destroys the environment itself. In fact, this began long ago; it was an important aspect of colonization and was also involved in

the productivist modes of industrialization. But before the current stage, this process did not yet threaten the stability of ecosystems or the geological regulations and the diversity of life on earth. We know that this violence against nature is also an extreme form of violence against humans, one that affects their ways of life, their residence in certain regions of the planet, their cultural identity, and ultimately their survival. Globalization is also a huge transformation of the sources of accumulation of capital and forms of subjection of individuals, taking advantage of the flexibility and fluidity of financial capital to exploit humans as both producers and consumers, as a labor force and as those with the capacity to suffer, to have pleasure. It therefore invades their most basic needs and desires. Elsewhere, I wrote that “utilitarian” violence is probably no less ferocious than “totalitarian” violence, even if it has different intentions and different authors who remain essentially anonymous.<sup>12</sup> The “utilitarian” extreme violence that paradoxically relegates millions of human lives to a condition of “de-utility” is not formally a “sovereign” violence; it is rather a quasi-sovereign form of violence. Its organizers exist in the form of economic and administrative networks rather than monarchic or presidential rulers, and above all its mechanisms of subjection permanently incorporate the very needs and desires of those they tend to eliminate. For this reason, it can be called also extreme alienation.

But perhaps there is a deployment of extreme violence that produces the elimination of humans that is even more perverse, in the sense that it creates a “gray zone” where individuals are not distributed in a preestablished or predetermined way, among the two categories of victims and executioners. This is also the reason why they are inaccessible to “humanitarian” military interventions (which most of the time make conflicts worse rather than anything else). I am referring here to forms of so-called “communitarian violence,” whether these take place within or between “communities” (religious, ethnic, or racial), a category which no doubt is extraordinarily vague and disputable, but increasingly difficult to dismiss. In my book, I called the extreme violence of capitalism and financial globalization ultra-objective, because it transforms its victims into disposable utilities, and locates responsibilities at the level of anonymous processes of accumulation. On the other hand, I suggested that communitarian violence is a form of ultra-subjective violence, because characteristically what takes place here is not really an intensification of feelings of sympathy and antipathy linked to the institutions of belonging and membership in collective identities. Rather, beyond these, a substitution takes place that gives rise to an obsession with group “purity,” which is by definition inaccessible and therefore must be “verified” through the elimination of those who bear whichever mark of difference and alterity, but which also subjects its organizers and executioners to terror. This is a speculative description, through which I want to indicate the degree of alienation of the subject where communitarian violence



is rooted, namely in the complete incorporation of persons (the “I,” the “thou”) into a fetishized or mythical “we” (the famous “friend-enemy” relationship). This is what makes it possible for us to observe a “family resemblance” between processes of purification (or “cleansing”) carried out here in the name of religion (or anti-religion) and those carried out there in the name of race or ethnic identity. These criteria can be combined, of course, as in the case of Rohingya people and others in this moment, who are targeted as Muslims and as allegedly alien populations. The same is rampant in Europe on an even broader scale. We must invent a methodology to better analyze what crystallizes these heterogeneous processes, but also, beyond any determinate socioeconomic causality, suddenly produces the murderous actions in which those who kill and rape are no longer able to suspend their inclinations, even at the cost of their own consummation. For us Europeans, this question has become a burning one ever since the wars in Yugoslavia, or the racist assaults on migrants, whereas xenophobia had been officially banned after the tragic experiences of the twentieth century. More generally, we observe everywhere in the world, both “old” and “new,” formerly colonized and colonizing, that wars of religion, however overdetermined by other factors, are becoming more frequent than ever.

For my part, I never thought that a simple explanation or typology could be applied here. In *Violence and Civility*, I inserted some diagrams that essentially seek to suggest that there is an intrinsically aleatory character to the combinations and the formations of “communities” through violence. We must begin, it seems to me, with a reflection on this constitutive uncertainty, asking questions to which there will never be any clear-cut answers. First, we must ask if there will ever be, essentially, any such thing as pure communitarian hatred, which could be isolated from other heterogeneous factors, particularly those economic factors that arise from exploitation, domination, and expropriation. Notice here that the hatred of the other always affects the “expropriators” as well as the “expropriated.” But as much as I believe that reductionist methodologies, according to which wars of religion or racial persecution can only result from displaced economic conflicts and contradictions, are totally insufficient, I am also convinced that extreme communitarian violence never exceeds its own “normal” limits simply because an internal logic of identitarian fantasy or ideological fanaticism pushes it in that direction. Massacres and persecutions are mounted on another stage; at least the so-called “thresholds” of intolerance between populations are never crossed without a detour through the other scene. This is what we observe at this moment in Europe, where we see a combination of unemployment, fear of professional disqualification, obsession with security, and phobic reactions to cultural and religious difference incarnated in refugees and migrants. Essentially, I mean that an overdetermination of factors is always required, and the composition of these factors is never the same. But a

second element of uncertainty and irrationality is added, one that comes from the fact that communitarian violence is always reactive. This is a perilous consideration: what I mean is that communitarian violence is certainly attached to the institutions of the common, or it exists virtually wherever the multiplicity of individuals and groups is reduced to an ontological “we” in the figure of a transhistorical unity. This is why the noble attempts of some contemporary philosophers to think “being in common” as a “community without community,” without a substantial or imaginary principle of unity, remain so problematic politically. But this is too abstract to account for the transgression toward extreme violence: there must be something like a fantastic threat against the community, which can be based in real processes of decomposition of the traditional forms of solidarity and membership (already very violent), but which transposes them into a phantasy of invasion or contamination. We may then observe a chain of mimetic reactions, especially when communities that are persecuted as “minorities” themselves begin to look for internal traitors, or unacceptable moral and cultural deviants in their midst. In other terms, what seems proper to the form of community is a singular capacity to transmute into intensified murderous instincts all the exclusions that are sometimes produced elsewhere, or to which they are subjected. As if a community were both something that involved a lack of existence and coherence and therefore must continuously look for “supplements” of reality, unity, and identity, and something that paradoxically found this supplement by subtracting, even amputating, a part of itself that would be in excess: the heretic, the internal enemy, the traitor, the alien, the minority, the deviant. I repeat: this logic cannot work in isolation, but it is also irreducible to other determinisms.

I will summarize all of this by saying that we observe a superposition and continuous movement of exchanges, within an economy of generalized violence, of capitalist violence that is “liberated” from its social regulations, and communitarian violence and counter-violence that fantastically exacerbates its own insecurity, its being increasingly exposed to difference and dissidence. This situation resembles a classical Hobbesian “state of nature,” except that the ingredients are not ideal; they are empirical and observable, and in fact they are not natural, but completely historical and sociological, albeit escaping the accepted “laws” governing the composition of groups. What the traditional picture of the Hobbesian “state of nature” was calling for in order to regulate violence was the authority of the state, as a universal juridical system and a capacity to “monopolize” the instruments of coercion and force. This was the figure of a public power, which could be not without flaws or be diverted from its official function, but appeared as the main instrument with which citizens might collectively regulate social contradictions and “neutralize” ideological passions. One needs to proceed very carefully here: I certainly do not mean to exclude the possibility that the state can play this role, or

that we may need to use its power in emergency situations, or to counteract certain forms of vested domination, particularly because I perceive that certain questions are urgent: how to transform or transmute public powers so that they can operate not only at the national level, but also at a transnational or cosmopolitical level; and how to achieve revolutions that do not suppress the state, in an anarchist manner, but incorporate in its institutional mechanisms of democratic self-limitation? Precisely for this reason, however, it seems important to me to show that the state is itself a factor of extreme violence. As a consequence, its intervention frequently does not reduce violence; on the contrary, it adds a degree of intensity to it, and above all it makes it irreversible or “inconvertible” (an expression, borrowed from Hegel, that I used in my book). Once again, we confront an intrinsic ambivalence of the elements that push violence, a necessary element of politics, into an extremity that makes politics itself impossible.

To reach my main point more directly, I will leave aside the question of “micro-powers” and their forms of everyday cruelty, to which Foucault particularly attached himself: the cruelty of prisons, tribunals, even hospitals, schools, not to mention families. Rather, I will consider the capacity of micro-powers to reveal and multiply the violence that properly belongs to the state as a centralized and legitimate unit of power. We must start again from the consideration of this unity to understand why today the idea of sovereignty is not eliminated from the representation of the state and its operations, despite every “secularization” and “decentralization” of the political, and why state power has a tendency to intensify its own violence both when it is powerful and when it is impotent; and, no less importantly, why the propensity of the state toward extreme violence tends to be reproduced in the very forms and forces that challenge its power, which particularly means attempts at revolution. My first thesis asserts that—in accordance with the ancient mythologies of sovereign power—the “conversion” of violence into law, or institutions, always involves an antithetical movement that redoubles but also contradicts it, whereby law is converted into violence. We are tempted to believe that this takes place only in exceptional circumstances such as war, subversion, or terrorism, but historical experience rather shows that the exception is expanded and banalized, so that the micro-powers and macro-powers of the state are continuously invading the rule of law and using it, in fact, to abolish it. There is no legal conversion of violence without a violent conversion of law. This is clearly visible in our “postdemocratic” states in Europe today.

Why this evolution? Again, we are tempted to invoke common sense, which is not completely wrong: the Weberian and Hobbesian “monopoly” of the state remains contested, in fact, as long as there are conflicts that it is not able to settle because it is at the same time a judge and a participant. Such are the class struggles

and other struggles around “moral” values and the education of individuals. This could almost be a definition of “class struggle,” valid in our time: a class struggle is a struggle in which the state cannot be neutral or stand above the conflict. It can only pretend. The operations of the sovereign are therefore imperfect and not “absolute,” and there must be a tendency to look for additional powers, which are the visible marks of absolute sovereignty. But the most visible of these marks are forms of violence and transgression. This is very clear in Machiavelli’s description of the necessary cruelty of the Prince. However, I believe that this idea remains insufficient, or that it should be pushed further, until we ask the question of the cruelty of the state, whose causes do not lie in its power, but rather in its impotency. Several contemporary phenomena call our attention in this direction, particularly the increasing disproportion between the capacities of the state to implement its policies and the capacities of the financial markets and their operators to ignore and maneuver around these policies. Elsewhere, I suggested that the syndrome of the “impotence of the all-powerful” is an essential determinant of the institutional racism that we can observe in our democratic states, visible, for instance, in persecutions against migrants or Roma peoples.<sup>13</sup> But I now want to propose another idea: if the state is relatively unable to control the activities of citizens (or some of them), this directly generates a specific violence in the state. The most common, but also most surprising, form of this violence is the vengeance of the state against those who defy or ignore it. We must take care not to attribute imaginary “intentions” and psychological motives to the structures and institutions of the state here, but on the other hand we can not lose sight of the incongruous fact that a juridical and institutional machine that is impersonal always tries to enact vengeance, beyond the law itself, against the rebellions that it confronts. Once again, we can say that this arises from a phantasy, but we are forced to admit that there are collective and administrative phantasies, so to speak, “without a subject,” phantasies that nevertheless evoke an ultra-subjectivity of the state in a spectral manner. If this is a real phenomenon (think of Guantánamo, or the punishment of “terrorists” including the Rote Armee Fraktion in Germany, and so on), we may really speak of a pathology of power inherent in the state form. This leads us to discuss revolutionary violence as a mimetic phenomenon with respect to state violence, something that I believe no longer needs to be demonstrated. Tragic experiences have shown that this usually leads to the recuperation of revolutionary aspirations in the service of a direct or indirect restoration of the state. But what is perhaps more interesting is the fact that the mimetic phenomenon arises at the same time from the two opposite sides: it arises from the power of revolutions, which try to match the “monopoly of legitimate violence” of the state (its “conservative” violence, according to Benjamin)<sup>14</sup> with a monopoly on subversive (or “divine”) violence;

and it arises from the lack of power of revolutions, when they prove unable to politically overcome internal and external obstacles, generically labeled “counter-revolutionary forces,” which lead them to suppress the very same people they seek to emancipate, a tragic combination of mimetism with the state and “communitarian” violence.

Having too little space to try to develop the counterpart—what I have tentatively called a strategy or politics of anti-violence or civility, I will end in a very allusive manner. Let me return to my first proposition, when I said that extreme violence was a question of life and death for politics. There seems to be a tautology in this formulation: if extreme violence takes place, politics may disappear, or perhaps it has already disappeared, unless it finds resources for its own resurrection when it reaches the limit. This would mean, rather, that individuals and groups are able to recreate politics, and to recreate themselves as political subjects, political actors. We are reminded of the celebrated verses in Hölderlin’s poem “Patmos”: “Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / das Rettende auch” (“But where danger threatens / That which saves from it also grows”).<sup>15</sup> This formula clearly has a messianic dimension, which I want to avoid here, because I believe that it is not danger as such that hypothetically and miraculously generates the advent of redemption or a redeemer. It can only be a combination of reflection and passion, understanding of the situation, awareness of what is at stake, the capacity to decide, and collective solidarity—in short, what in similar circumstances Machiavelli would call “virtue” in the ancient sense, or action in the strong sense, which he knew was extremely unlikely. However, such virtue or capacity for action becomes visible only after the event, through its own effects; therefore we are taken back to the question: was there ever civility in history, in the form of revolutions, institutional foundations, mediations, hegemonies, always singular? I venture to say yes, even that it has always existed since there has been politics, in forms that can not be imitated but remain a source of inspiration. We can see, however, that such forms or “strategies” always involve a paradoxical condition: they must presuppose their own result, meaning they must count on forces whose condition of possibility is their own becoming, as if they anticipate their own realization. Which also means: they run the risk of wrong timing and objective, which practically means the risk of aggravating the situations of violence. This is the absolute difference between politics of civility in history and the implementation of the law, the following of a rule, whether established or imagined. Politics is always aleatory. It does make plans or “projects,” but is never planned.

To this general speculative thesis, I will add another determination. It is useful here to retain the typology of forms of extreme violence that I proposed before. Therefore, I suggest that strategies of civility are the exact counterpart of the dominant modalities of extreme violence. Thus, if capitalism in the moment

of its financialized globalization produces a reversal of utility into a radical form of “de-utility,” we must try to elaborate a politics of use and uses, which is not only an “economy” of natural and technological resources, but a way of using (or using well) human beings themselves, as bodies and souls.<sup>16</sup> Therefore it is not so much a question of abstractly respecting their persons, as indicated in Kant or in famous, universal Declarations of Rights, which have their value. It is rather, in the spirit of Spinoza’s formula, that “nothing is more useful to man than man”: for every human being, there must be the possibility of making her supremely useful, of “making use” of her possibilities.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, if forms of communitarian violence, with their multiple causes and circumstances, always involve an intention to “purify” a common identity, we must imagine policies that are not only in favor of difference, but in favor of hybridity or metamorphosis, providing means to take distance even from commitment itself, or the “faith” and the convictions without which there is no real political practice. On this specific point, we can see perfectly why the proposition must be circular: because the very obstacle that needs to be overcome in common is the primacy of the One. However, we also know that this primacy is constantly challenged by incoming external elements, “strangers” who, so to speak, offer us civility as a possibility, through their mere presence. Finally, if the mimetic violence of the state and revolutions produces the abyss into which attempts at “changing the world” are lost, we can say that disturbing the specular relationship between state and revolution, finding a line of escape for revolutionary politics that involves its own “civilizing process,” is another way of naming this circularity. Which could also be formulated in the language of the conduct and use of conflict. The “mortal threat” of extreme violence for politics is not the threat of conflict as such, even “radical” conflict. On the contrary, it is the threat of the annihilation of conflict and the possibility of using it in order to remove economic and social obstacles, to change relations of forces. We must therefore expand democracy itself, trying to find the “just measure” of agonism and antagonism between the purely cosmetic forms of representative pluralism, where interests are reduced to opinions, and the nihilistic modalities of civil war. Of course, what I am suggesting here is not a simple reversal of Kantian formulas, where “perpetual peace” arises from the implementation of hospitality and commerce. I am not proposing that we replace this with the idea of “perpetual conflict,” as it were. I am trying to find a subtler idea whereby civility emerges as a capacity to act within conflicts and upon them, a capacity to take part in conflicts in such a manner that their conditions are transformed. This is where the possibilities for establishing communication between individual reflection and commitment and the construction of a collective power are at stake, as are the possibilities for reversing voluntary servitude into the empowerment of individuals acting against the status quo and fatality.

Taking these expressions together, are we not precisely approaching a definition of politics, or a way of “practicing” it, not as a mere contingent use of violence, but as a conscious form of “anti-violence”?

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#### **Notes**

1. Althusser, “Soutenance d'Amiens,” 133.
2. Balibar, *Violence*.
3. See the discussion of the “abyss of freedom” in Arendt, *Life*, 207.
4. Foucault, *Society*, 165.
5. See Schmitt, *Nomos*, 60.
6. Weil, *The “Iliad,” or, the Poem of Force*.
7. Foucault, *Discipline*, 30.
8. See Balibar, *Masses*, 32–35.
9. Rancière, *Politics*.
10. Ogilvie, *L'Homme jetable*.
11. Sassen, *Expulsions*.
12. Balibar, *Violence*, xiii, 155.
13. See Balibar, “De la préférence nationale,” 109; and “Populism.”
14. Benjamin, “Critique.”
15. Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, 245.
16. I am thinking of Giorgio Agamben's recent book *The Use of Bodies*.
17. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Sch.Pr.18, IV, 164, translation modified.

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