The Review of Politics 78 (2016), 141–145.
© University of Notre Dame
doi:10.1017/S003467051500090X

Violence and Civility

Elizabeth Frazer

Étienne Balibar: *Violence and Civility: On the limits of Political Philosophy.* Trans. G. M. Goshgarian. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. Pp. 232.)

Étienne Balibar: *Violence et civilité: Wellek Library Lectures et autres essais de philosophie politique*. (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2010.)

The Wellek Library Lectures from which these two books developed were given in 1996. The English version (2015) translates the material of the lectures that address the themes of "the conversion of violence," in particular in the philosophies of Hobbes and Hegel, and of "inconvertible violence." "Inconvertible violence" signals those forms and practices of violence that annihilate possibilities of resistance, that cannot be arrested by political power and transformed into civil and social exchange. The French version (2010) includes a second part made up of further essays—on Clausewitz, Marxism, Lenin and Gandhi, and Schmitt and Hobbes—in which Balibar continues to wrestle with the categories "violence" and "politics" and the complex, elusive relationships between them.

For many political philosophers and traditions of political thought these two are distinct. Social contract theories and the like tell the story of the possibility of our controlling violence, putting it into the hands of responsible state officers, and securing the civil and social life of the polis, with violence ritualized in sport, practiced in military and police service, and limited in war. Violence is converted into civility and politics. A problem with this picture is that the violence lives on in "civil" relations too, and in the structures of the civil inequality of market relations and ethnic divisions. Indeed, many theorists and thinkers understand civility and forms of nonviolence or antiviolence to be "the worst kind of violence" (1)—in addition to the injury of congealed violence we have the insult of concealment. Societies, as much as states, generate what Balibar calls "ultrasubjective violence," which erupts when individuals are commanded by an obsession with their identities, and "ultraobjective violence," in which human beings are reduced (by other human beings) to superfluity (74). These two forms of violence feed and overdetermine each other, and issue in cruelties that mock "civility." They raise the awkward question whether we are in the realm of the inhuman, or the "human, all too human" (130). They also raise the question

Elizabeth Frazer is Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, OX13UQ (elizabeth.frazer@new.ox.ac.uk).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467051500090X Published online by Cambridge University Press

whether we are here confronted with the limit, the exhaustion, of politics, or whether we are confronted with the condition of politics, that which makes it possible, and hence can never be banished (65).

So perhaps politics and violence should not be thought of as distinct. According to Marxist revolutionary theory, they are implicated in and imbricated with one another—and, in some versions, will be overcome together. Marxism envisions revolutionary political organization and uses of violence in order to defeat the dehumanizing violences of capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and the political violence of the state and its associated pathologization of social life, and to open the way to a new time when the individual can be simultaneously in community with others and autonomous, in social relations dedicated to the meeting of human needs. Again, this picture is premised on the convertibility of violence: the brutality of child labor, forced displacement of populations, and capitalist exploitation, converted first into organized class struggle, and then into a community of needs and production. And of course our hoping for the best here has to be tempered by our preparation for the worst—for the degeneration of revolutionary violence into authoritarian terrorism.

Ultraobjective, ultrasubjective, terroristic, and authoritarian violences, whether we think of them as human or antihuman, threaten to be "inconvertible." The cases of ferocious and merciless cruelty in conflict, excessive frenzy in war, that first brought Balibar to the considerations that frame the essays in these books were the atrocities and genocidal actions and practices of the Yugoslav conflicts. But the analysis, obviously, could equally well take as its starting point either earlier or later episodes of organized and disorganized torture, of vivid spectacular atrocities whether based in bodily and mental frenzy or in ordered discipline, of collective, genocidal, annihilatory efforts. The questions he begins from are these: Are such kinds of atrocity—even in theory—convertible to politics? Are they beyond the limit of political philosophy? Are they beyond the limit of any possible encounter between politics and violence?

In the end Balibar's conclusion—as much as his introduction—is very inconclusive. Politics, when it encounters extreme violence, is confronted with the conditions of its own possibility, and of its impossibility. Politics, the displacement of violence, a deliberate, human antiviolence, is not rare, but it is precarious. Politics is the solution to violence, but we are confronted with spectacles of violence that politics cannot address, let alone transform. To the extent that states, governing authorities, and societies are generated by extreme violence, they can turn to forms of counterviolence which themselves become extreme and inconvertible, and all of us are enrolled in extreme violence before we know what's happening (xiii). To the extent that we associate politics with violence, and view institutions, offices, laws, governments, territories, and even societies as so much frozen violence, then we can think of politics as one of the worst forms of violence. But to the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467051500090X Published online by Cambridge University Press

extent that we let go of the hope, the possibility, the promise of politics, then there is nothing confronting the violences.

Readers should not go to these books, then, in order to find solutions to the now commonly addressed (in political theory at any rate) puzzle of how politics and violence are articulated with one another. Balibar's last word is that the debate with violence is interminable (149). Nevertheless, his analyses of various such articulations are illuminating and helpful; the essays are valuable readings of named authors; and further, together, they valuably contribute to a certain reframing of the basic problem of political philosophy. Twentieth-century political philosophy was dominated by a "war of the gods" (25)—a titan clash between ideologies of citizenship, justice, and authority, such as conservatism, liberalism, feminism, anarchism. Political philosophy in our time has focused on change—on revolution, reform, on evolution, most notably the possibility of transformation of various forms of injustice (inequality, subordination, deprivation) to justice and freedom. It has focused on what we may permissibly do when what we do affects others or affects all.

More recently, however, the focus in political philosophy has turned more to the possibility of politics itself—the nature of political power, what we might possibly mean by politics, how we think of politics in relation to economics and technology, culture and religion, to intimate relationships and kinship. It's interesting that Balibar's English-language title speaks of the limits of political philosophy, while the French locates his essays "in" political philosophy. Reading canonical political philosophy with these problems in mind reveals a ubiquitous uncertainty. Hobbes, and readings of Hobbes, hesitate between seeing violence as the last resort of sovereign justice and seeing it as the permanent condition, and limit, of state order (27). Hegel works out a scheme for the conversion of "atrocious unreason" into reasonable authority but there is violence, and sacrifice, in this overcoming, and of course he is uneasily aware of the violent exclusion and exploitation of civil society (43). Clausewitz shows both war as the instrument of politics and politics as the instrument of war (*Violence et civilité*, 212). Marxism is paralyzed by the endless negotiation of force and law (10) and Marx is seemingly unaware of the violence implicit in communitarian affiliation (12).

These essays are terrific studies of reflexive uncertainty about what politics is and can be. We have the Aristotelian account of our human capacity collectively to decide how to organize and regulate common affairs, and furthermore to decide (without using violence) how to decide (97). We have the Spinozan theme of humanity and individuality as "an incompressible minimum" that even extreme violence cannot obliterate (138). In these and other constructions politics is "antiviolence," to be contrasted with nonviolence and counterviolence alike. But, on politics, Balibar ends with Weberian pessimism and defiance, on a tragic note: the power of politics is always its own undoing because of the propensity to perversion of authority, resistance, and revolt (150).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467051500090X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Balibar throughout focuses on the phenomenology of politics and violence, the ways in which our reflexive consciousness and experience, our understanding and articulations, our lives, constantly pull and push politics and violence together. He seeks to go beyond the Hegelian and the Marxian themes of overcoming and sublation of dialectically opposed *contraries*. But his representation and analysis of the troubling, seemingly inconvertible violences that motivate the essays—the Nazi extermination programs, the atrocities of the Yugoslav and other European wars—and the less vivid but nevertheless haunting visions of Aristotelian or Enlightenment civility—definitely push us toward an oppositional picture of politics on the one hand and violence on the other, notwithstanding that all the action, and all the philosophical knots, are at the difficult place of encounter between the two, and the site of the possible transformation of one into the other.

The weakness of this attempt to grapple with what is, undoubtedly, a difficult issue, is in the lingering idea that there is violence, and there is politics as a possible—fragile, elusive—solution to violence. Undoubtedly, as Balibar's textually detailed readings and essays in political theory show, this is the story we retrieve from traditions of political thought and theory. Politics is a highly contested and multivocal concept, variously constructed, and there is hardly a consensus about the concept, or the phenomenon, in philosophy. For some thinkers, in the Machiavellian and Weberian tradition, politics is the domination of rulers over territory and people, with political power being the specific formation of economic, physical, legal, ideological, and other resources that are brought to bear in the construction of legitimate and enduring institutions. For others, in the Aristotelian tradition, politics signals the interactions between free individuals with their capacities to order kin, social and economic relations, and the institutions of deliberation, legislation, administration, and government that they build. In some versions these processes and relations are or can be more or less consensual and rational; in other versions they are competitive and antagonistic. Politics to some extent displaces, and to some extent transforms and reinstitutionalizes, violence. "Politics" is a complicated, dissensual and difficult term just because of its implicatedness in and with violence, even as it is positioned as "antiviolence" (16).

All this is illuminating, and helpful. But a weakness of Balibar's essays is that by contrast "violence" tends to be presented as something we all "get." From the congealed violence of the structures of inequality that follow from initial brutal expropriations, to the atrocities of twentieth century wars and conflicts, to the civilized violence of popular culture and sport, we all know what we are talking about, and we know how violence threatens to defeat politics. Certainly, this simple account is all square with canonical political theory, with its allusions to the violence of "polecats" and the wilderness, to the pain and confusion of pitched battle, and to the need for us to have effective police protection against marauding despoilers of property.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467051500090X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Balibar makes some brief allusions to difficulties. For instance, twentieth-century theories of symbolic violence focus on the way that individuals embody symbols, come to symbolize in their bodies subordination and superordination (in particular in relations of gender, race, class) and to interpret—or to contest—and to live perpetrations and sufferings of injury and violence that proceed from the norms that govern those subordinate and superordinate positions (83). This points to a phenomenological, and critical, approach which would problematize violence, its possibilities, its conditions, the complexity of the subject who is entrained and motivated to perpetrate domination, or atrocity. Violence isn't as straightforward as either the polecats and thieves, or, indeed, the perpetrator of atrocity who leaves us wondering whether he is the apotheosis or the negation of humanity.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467051500090X Published online by Cambridge University Press