



Ethics: An Impossible Politics—Perversion, Law and Racial Difference

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Abstract

This paper takes the removal of the Colston statue in Bristol in the summer of 2020 and the accompanying Black Lives Matter protest as a political setting which can help us explore the radical political potential of Ari Hirvonen’s work. In this intervention I return to some of the themes that his work continuously engages with (such as the question of the limits, transgressions of law, and ethical acts), and re-think them in the context of racial justice. This think-piece opens with reconsideration of ethics and politics drawing on Hirvonen’s brilliant readings of the Antigone and his last book *Ethics of Tragedy*. By reading transgressions of law as forms of (productive) perversions, this intervention, explores ways in which a different kind of politics might emerge. If in most of his works, Hirvonen saw radical democracy as a vehicle for socio-political transformation, his last work, I argue, moves towards radical even revolutionary transformations. Here I propose to read actions taken by the contemporary racial justice groups as an attempt to embody ‘perversion as rebellion’ or perversion as resistance (both ideas found in Hirvonen’s work).

Keywords Resistance · Ethics · Racial justice · Protest · Hirvonen

Antigone’s ethical act is risky, unconditional, and it suspends the social and legal order. An ethical act includes a potentiality to undermine the logic of social, political and economic necessities as an intervention that radically changes the co-ordinates of what is possible and impossible. (Hirvonen 2020, p. 173).

People can campaign for the removal of a statue but what happened yesterday was a criminal act and when the criminal law is broken the police has to hold to account those responsible. [...] The PM absolutely understands the strength of feeling, but in this country we settle our differences democratically and if people wanted the removal of the statue there are demo-

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cratic routes which can be followed. (Prime Minister's official spokesmen, June 8, 2020)

Edward Colston was a seventeenth century slave trader, whose statue was toppled in the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests in Bristol (UK). Large crowds gathered on June 7 2020 to protest the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed African-American man, who was killed in the hand of the Minneapolis police. During the protest Colston's statue was pulled down, dragged into the harbour and thrown into the waters just south of a bridge named after the formerly enslaved Bristol resident Pero Jones. Some called this an act of poetic justice (Choksey 2021), others, such as the Office of the British Prime Minister at the time, Boris Johnson, saw it as a criminal act (Eyres and PA 2020). The tearing down of the statue followed years of campaigns against the public display of an individual who provided transport of about 85.000 Africans into slavery and was responsible for the death of more than 19,000 men, women and children (Nasar 2020). A removal of a statue of this slave trader from the public space during racial justice protests constituted, no doubt, an ethical act, but can it be compared to ethical acts of the kind that Ari Hirvonen recognised in the *Antigone*? And if so, what are the frameworks within which such acts for racial justice can become acts of radical ethics? Has the removal of Colston in any way undermined the social, political and economic logics of the contemporary world, and alter that which we imagine as possible? Hirvonen (2020 p. 173) sees ethical acts precisely as moments of interruption, when the limits of our social realities are exposed and the possibility of a different world emerges.

How might this context help us understand Hirvonen's work and celebrate its radical political potential? The questions of racial justice in itself alludes to a number of themes that guided Hirvonen's work. For example, the transgression of limits, be those the limits of law or ethics, or questions about social and racial justice, the possibility of political action and resistance. In this intervention I return to some of the themes that his work continuously engages with (such as the question of the limits, transgressions of law, and ethical acts), and re-think them in the context of my own work, which concerns questions about resistance and racial justice in particular in the context of anti-colonial/de-colonial struggles.

This think-piece returns to Hirvonen's brilliant readings of the *Antigone* and *Hamlet* as well as his final book the *Ethics of Tragedy*. The ideas in his work draw out transgressions of law which at the same time stand as perversions, re-affirmations of the symbolic order as well as possibilities of its radical (re)opening. His interventions (often inadvertently) propose ways which might lead to a different kind of politics, a kind—which in Hirvonen's vision—was one of radical democracy (at least as an idea). Essentially—rather optimistically and no doubt somewhat naively—I propose to read actions taken by the contemporary racial justice groups as an attempt to embody 'perversion as rebellion' or perversion as resistance (both ideas found in Hirvonen's work). Perversion as politics tests the limits of the socio-political order and opens up a quest for the emergence of a different ethics and symbolic world.

Ethics: an impossible politics

Ethics and universal norms such as human rights or racial justice make sense at the level of the form (as ideational structures) yet when uttered politically they crumble. Perhaps this is also the reason why Hirvonen's work reminds us of the impossible demand put on the principles of humanity or human rights in contemporary capitalist society where political and economic decisions are guided by measurements rather than normative ideals. In this process of comparison, human rights, justice and even ethics lose their ability to act politically, and entice radical transformative changes in the society. For example, in the *Ethics of Tragedy* Hirvonen states that 'the capitalist realism could be described as the dissolution of the transcendental, the withdrawal of the political, the homogenisation of all spheres of life, and the elimination of all alterity'. (2020 p. 4).

So then how can we account for difference (alterity) when alterity itself is fundamentally lost in capitalist frame? Here, Hirvonen points to Lacan and in particular the formation of fantasies. Invoking Lacan's discourse of capitalism—though there is an on-going discussion whether or not this in fact is one of Lacan's main discourses (Lacan 2007)—Hirvonen (2020, pp. 7–9) shows how the (impossible) fulfilment of desire is a central driver of this discourse. The dissatisfaction of the subject is recuperated in the capitalist discourse. The master signifier—here being the Market—functions as the truth for the divided subject to whom it answers with a promise of satisfaction. Thus within the capitalist discourse there is a sense of completeness, the lack appears as if it is no longer lacking; as a result, desire is transformed into a series of demands which can be easily satisfied (Zevnik 2022, pp. 33–43). Finally, this satisfaction mops up any possibility of acting otherwise, be that by challenging the capitalist reality or by imagining different intersubjective relations. Any kind of difference or deviation from the 'normal behaviour' risks that the newly established series of demands remain unsatisfied. Any significant shortcomings arising from the nature of the capitalist system itself are addressed within the same frames of capitalist desire. This circular process presents challenges to not only actions but also imaginaries—acting or thinking outside those frames is deemed impossible.

What are the consequences of such political reality for the notion of rights? The constitutive antagonism of politics rests precisely on the realisation that every attempt to absolve society from injustice leads into abyss, not only because every solution is temporary, but mostly because every attempt to overcome this antagonism overlooks the lack of foundations constituting the social. In other words, ethical norms and legal rules create an illusion that politics with its means can overcome injustice in a society; but actually believing that political means will bring to life a perfect society rests on the assumption that shared moral principles are anchored in some material or mythical source which will reveal itself once the time is right (Šumič-Riha 1995, pp. 60–66). Now, in the capitalist society, as we can extrapolate from Hirvonen's work, the mythical source is substituted with the market and a never-ending circulation of desire/satisfaction.

So how to think ethics in a capitalist socio-political realm and how to account for difference when considering ethical act? Hirvonen in *Ethics of Tragedy* states that such ethics is beyond moral legality or the concept of the good that would be actualised in the norms and commandments of the moral law. Instead, returning to Lacan, ethical dimension ‘overlaps with an affirmation, with the subject itself claiming for itself the structure of its desire’ (Hirvonen 2020 p. 16). Hence, ethics is about the irreducibility of a subject that configures its own destiny.

Alenka Zupančič, a philosopher whose work significantly influenced Hirvonen’s thinking on ethics, makes a distinction between moral law and ethics even clearer. She states that:

What philosophy calls the moral law and, more precisely, what Kant calls the categorical imperative is in fact nothing other but the superego. [...] This judgement provokes an “effect of disenchantment” that calls into doubt any endeavour to base ethics on foundations other than “pathological”. (Zupančič 1998 p. 41)

Hirvonen and Zupančič both hint at the need to think transformative ethics in relation to desire, but that is not our desire or the desire of the subject but rather the logic of desire as such. If we were to think of ethics in relation to individual or social desires then the outcome would be quite different. For example, ethics based on individual desires would revolve around those demands that subjects create to distance themselves from the impossibility of ever failing the fundamental desire. Whereas ethics in relation to the logic of decide concerns the subject at the ontological level.

So what is the desire that Hirvonen and Zupančič have in mind and how it links to politics of resistance or to political acts which have the capacity to break with the logics of capitalist life? Hirvonen claims that Lacan’s interpretation of *Hamlet* is the interpretation of desire: Hamlet confronts his truth, that is, the truth of his desire. No more attempts to fulfil the gap in the symbolic world or the lack in his being through identifying himself with absolute sovereign figures. Further, as Hirvonen (2015 p. 215) writes:

Lacanian *Hamlet* is not merely a touchstone of psychoanalysis. Perhaps, it also indicates that desire – the paternal metaphor, law, lack, gap – is necessarily and intimately linked to the possibility of resisting politics based on the idea of absolute fullness of the people, community or nation. The desiring subject that confronts its truth is a subject that stands their fundamental lack and nothingness, that does not seek totalitarian figures embodying the imaginary phallus (Lacan (2013 p. 416) draws a parallel between Claudius and Hitler).

Actually, as Hirvonen points out, Lacan finishes his *Seminar VI* in praise of perversion as resistance. Desire is extravagant and ‘elusive to anything that wants to master it’ (Miller 2013). The desiring subject is thus not totally subjected to the preformed norms. Lacan takes up the circuit between, on the one hand, conformism, and on the other hand, perversion as resistance (Hirvonen 2015, pp. 213–5).

Lacan gives perversion ‘the value of a rebellion against the identification which assures the maintenance of the social routine’ (Miller 2013). The perversion represents at the level of the subject ‘a protest against what the subject goes through at the level of identification in so far as that identification is a relation that establishes and organises social norms of subject’s different functions’ (Lacan 2013 p. 569). It is then in the dimension of desire that we encounter protest, but only if the subject’s desire is subject’s relation to its being. Hirvonen continues the theme of desire as transformative in *Ethics of Tragedy*, where he says that no desire is without the law — ‘So, desire is law’ (2020 p.171). Even in perversion that seems to be a subversion of the law, desire ‘is in fact truly and verily the support of law’ (Ibid.).

The kernel of (racial) jouissance

However, some caution is required here as it is through Kantian moral imperative through which Lacan introduces the figure of a pervert (here a pervert is a subject of perversion). Firstly, the subject following Kantian moral imperative assumes the position of a pervert (Zupančič 2011 p. 60). They hide their actions behind the moral imperative and their duty to follow what the moral imperative orders them to do. The subject ‘justifies [their] actions by saying that they were imposed on [them] by an unconditional duty, [they] hide behind the moral law and present [themselves] as the ‘mere instrument’ of its Will’ (Zupančič, 2011 p. 60). The Kantian moral subject is thus a pervert who hides enjoyment derived from the betrayal behind a supposed respect for the law. Secondly, the common good is made in the image of the person who is recognising and sharing that good. The sharing of good comes ‘naturally’ or rather ‘it is in the nature of the good to be altruistic’, as Lacan (1992 p. 186) states. Further, the good that is shared or acknowledged as an asset of a good life in a community is of a particular kind. It is, as Lacan (1992 p. 187) continues: ‘the good of others provided that it remains in the image of my own’. The later realisation bears great political significance. If good is always made in the image of the subject recognising it, then the good that is shared is likewise a reflection of subject’s desire. Or to put it differently, the (racialised) neighbour (a figure who is the recipient of ‘our good’) received that which the subject offering the act of charity recognises as good (or in need). This point is very straightforward and easily translated in modern political discourse. Think of human rights discourse in relation to post-colonial, Global South or feminist struggles. The observations of the western subjects (or international organisations) concerning the struggles for emancipation or human rights breaches taking place in the so-called countries of the Global South follow that same logic. We judge others’ situation according to our expectations and knowledge. What it means to live a humane life and whether others live life worthy or unworthy of a human being, whether others’ rights are violated or not is judged on our image of humanity, good life or rights.

Similarly, the struggle for racial justice is placed in relation to the question of the common good only that in this case the other or a racialised neighbour is not somewhere remote, away from us, hidden from our view, but here, amongst us, sharing

the same political space. The good then does not act as something that needs to be ‘exported’ to the ‘unfortunate suffering others’, but as that which needs to be shared in the space where this good is thought to already exist. The exclusion of the racialised neighbour from the shared political space initially comes as a surprise for the ethical subject. By offering actions of support and solidarity, the ethical subject aims to include the racialised neighbour in the idea of the shared good. The scale of BlackLivesMatter protests in the aftermath of George Floyd killing, for example, are a testimony to that (Zevnik 2023a). A simple statement ‘black lives matter’ which aims to reaffirm the place of ‘black lives’ in contemporary politics is only one example of an attempted inclusion of the racialised neighbour into the shared idea of the common good. However, the moment peaceful protests turn to violence and statues symbolising black oppression are toppled, the narrative changes (Hesse 2017). ‘This is not how we do things here’ suggests that despite ‘our’ efforts, the racialised neighbour, does not share or understand the common good. Further, if neighbour’s plea for a more just society is recognised, the path on which that should be achieved is not one of protest or violence. As Boris Johnson said ‘The PM absolutely understands the strength of feeling, but in this country we settle our differences democratically and if people wanted the removal of the statue there are democratic routes which can be followed’ (Eyres and PA 2020). In other words, the position of a pervert can be exemplified here as ‘I understand your plea, but you should not go about achieving it by breaking the law’. In other words, the recognition of the other and the ethics that underpins their demand, are only supported for as long as actions with which these ethical demands are to be achieved can be placed within the existing symbolic order or power relations.

The interplay between desire and the image in which the racialised neighbour is being judged is at the heart of the liberal conception of rights and racial justice. Lacan said that one’s desire is always the desire of the other (Lacan 1998). Or, the moment of tension is the moment when two desires are met in contradiction. That is when the other does not correspond with the image we have of them. Who then is the other (racialised neighbour), which we can tolerate? Zupančič (1998) gives a modern example of the aforementioned moral imperative. Instead of asking to love your neighbour as yourself, the modern imperative, she states, calls for the recognition of the Other. No longer is there the need to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’, the modern mantra is that the other has the right to be different. ‘Admittedly’, as Zupančič (1998 p. 43) writes: ‘this commandment does not require that we love this other, it is enough that we tolerate[them]. [...] But] what happens if this other is really the Other, if [their] difference is not only ‘cultural’, ‘folkloric’ but a fundamental difference’. Are we still to respect [them], to love [them]?’.

The psychoanalytic ethics begins precisely at the moment of radical difference. Lacan would see this encounter as an encounter concerning our *jouissance*. By definition *jouissance* is in itself strange, other and dissimilar; it is not the Other (or the neighbour) who makes it disruptive. But, as Zupančič (1998, pp. 43–44) puts it:

I do not experience *jouissance* as ‘strange’ and ‘dissimilar’ because it is the *jouissance* of the Other, but [...] that is because of this *jouissance* that I perceive my neighbour as (radically) Other and ‘strange’. Moreover, it is not sim-

ply the *jouissance* of the neighbour [...] that is strange to me. The kernel of the problem is that I experience my own *jouissance* as strange, dissimilar, other and hostile.

In other words, it is my experience of something within me, that I find hostile and that in turn I externalise and recognise it in the image of the Other (my neighbour). Psychoanalysis intervenes in the field of politics at the level of *jouissance*. In contrast to traditional ethics which aims to build a model upon which ethics can be thought and ethical acts performed and judged, the psychoanalytic accounts consider ethical that which addresses subject's repressed material, and deals with moments in which it comes to surface.

Psychoanalysis proposes to politically and socially manage *jouissance* in two ways: it attempts to manage it through the institution of law and through the structures of ethics or moral imperatives. However, the deadlock it often encounters is how to strike a balance between pure legality (that is actions which follow the law) and a blind following of the moral imperative (or that which the subject considers to be good). If the subject follows either of the two to the very end, their actions can never be deemed just or ethical but end up being perverse. Slavoj Žižek gives a good example of blindness to rule-following. He writes: 'Sorry, I know it was unpleasant, but I couldn't help it, the moral law imposed that act on me as my unconditional duty!' (Žižek 1996 p.170). 'I'm really sorry, but you broke the law. I sympathise with your struggle but that is not how we do things here' to perhaps somewhat unkindly paraphrase the message Keir Starmer, the leader of the British Labour Party, sent out after the toppling of the Colston statue (Eyres and PA 2020). The blind following of the moral law without any consideration of the greater good does not constitute an ethical act; and neither does a situation when one follows the law while being fully aware that the law itself comes short in mastering/addressing the ethical problem at stake. Actions that exercise no moral judgement are no ethical acts, but acts of perversion for they pass on the responsibility for the actions taken onto some external non-existing 'third party' who cannot be held accountable.

The type of discourse where I use my duty as an excuse for my actions is perverse in the strictest sense of the word. The subject attributes to the other (to the duty or to the Law), the surplus enjoyment that [they] find in [their] actions: 'I am sorry if my actions hurt you, but I only did what the Other wanted me to do, so go and see Him if you have any objections'. In this case the subject hides behind the law. (Zupančič, 1998 p. 49)

The subject also transgresses the law in order to defend a greater good—this links to the idea of a *superego* that is central to perversion. Lacan, in his first seminar on Freud's technique, explains the *superego* as both 'the law and its destruction. As such, it is the speech [word] itself, the commandment of law [...]. The law is entirely reduced to something which cannot even be expressed, like the *You must*, which is speech [a word] deprived of all meaning' (Lacan 1991 p. 102).

Superego is thus a double-layered function of law. It shouts void commands that must to be obeyed while upholding the reverse or the hidden side of law (that is the prohibition the subject internalises). The perversion of law is complete only in the

face of the superego. The common good, as Žižek (2002 p. 30) sees it, is in a direct opposition to law, an argument also Hirvonen (2020) makes in his final work. To put it differently, the universal ideas of rights are only upheld if underpinned by the superego. Only with the superego the subject recognises these ideas as universal or good, yet it is also for the superego that the subject wishes to transgress them.

In perversion the subject gets rid of the feeling of guilt through self-instrumentalisation, in as far as he truly sees itself as a pure instrument at the hands of the Other (Zevnik 2013). Guilt and responsibility for enjoyment or transgression turn here into a sign of strength. However, not only is perversion used to reaffirm the blind following of the law, the structure of law is itself not devoid of perversion. In that law anticipates resistance to it and incorporates these deviations into it, not by legitimising the deviation but by using it to strengthen itself. Antigone, as Hirvonen (2020 p. 93) shows, is a figure embodying such necessity of legal perversion. ‘That is, law includes its own perversion. Creon’s sovereignty, authority and law would be already invested in Antigone’s perversion and violation of Creon’s law’ (Hirvonen 2020 p. 93). With her actions Antigone not only breaks the law, she also affirms Creon’s sovereign power and law. In fact power and law’s validity are sustained by actions such as Antigone’s.

The roots of perversion: I support your struggle, but not when you transgress the law

Such a reading of perversion provides an excellent way into our consideration of the extent to which the unsolicited removal or damages to statues of colonialism can constitute ethical acts and acts of resistance. We already stated that ethics and resistance are linked if or when resistance is understood as an attempt to break with the deadlock of capitalist logics driving contemporary social and economic order. Further, resistance, if it is to open up the possibility of a different ethical or social order must transgress these laws and expose the underlying perversions which sustain it. In the removal of the Colston statue, the first transgression takes place in the context of the protest for racial justice. The protestors have committed a criminal act by damaging and removing the statue. A ‘criminal act’ at first appears as an act of emancipation and celebration, but in its aftermath those involved are investigated and charged with criminal damages.

The call for law and order in the aftermath of the Bristol protest is clear. Politicians across the spectrum called for respect of law and order, as something demanded by its constituents, not themselves. A Tory MP said that: ‘If there’s one thing my voters can’t stand, it’s rioting. To them, it’s an anathema to the democratic process.’ They said their inbox was full of messages and it is clear that ‘People don’t want soft-touch policing’ (Stewart and Proctor 2020). They speak of horror at the lack of law and order and care for others by those breaking pandemic lockdowns. We can read the call for ‘law and order’ as something demanded by the constituents not them, the MPs. They present themselves as the extensions of the peoples’ wills and in doing so, they remove themselves from taking any responsibility. But what might taking responsibility in the context of support or refusal to legitimate the

removal of the Colston statue look like? The public was divided on the actions taken in Bristol and while many did not support the removal of the statue, they might well agree with the plea for racial justice and inequalities that the pandemic brought to light. The Government report on how the pandemic hit low-income and minority and marginalised communities more than others resonated amongst the British public with the exposed inequalities deemed unacceptable (Gov.uk 2020). By presenting themselves as extensions of people's wills the MPs position themselves as not in opposition to the now acknowledged injustices and inequalities that the pandemic revealed about British society (Zevnik 2023a), but equally not in support of political actions that took over British cities in early June 2020. Yet, a response to the transgression of the protestors appears univocal, there is no place for violence and law-breaking in a democratic society. As Johnson said, 'this is not how we do things here' (Eyres and PA 2020). The positionality of the MPs overwhelmingly focuses on the breaking of the law and violence that took place during these protests, the existence of racial inequalities, in contrast, remained unaddressed. What we mean by that is despite disagreement with the protests the MPs did not deny the existence of inequalities. In doing so MPs assume the position of a pervert, they leave an open space for the acknowledgement—if needed—of the existing inequalities.

The second transgression which would appear as necessary is somewhat different and yet it hinges on the in-between position that MPs adopt. The British Government and its political institutions do not break the law but aim to create new ones in support of political party project. These laws depart from the emerging normative framework of racial equality, an expression of which is also the toppling of Colston. Years leading up to the events of the summer of 2020 saw a number of campaigns pushing to acknowledge and speak about the legacies of British colonialism. Debates about the persistent institutional racism of British social and political institutions, and research into the socio-economic conditions of different ethnic groups began to push for investment into ethnically minoritised communities. Such investments were perceived by some as coming at the expense of the 'left-behind' or poor white working class. Anti-racism, however, became one of the key political ideals. The BLM protests of 2020 were in a way a culmination of the ongoing debates about racial justice. The newly emerging anti-racist political sentiment acknowledged that racism and racial inequality are much bigger problems than it perhaps appeared ten years ago. However, not everyone has bought into this 'new' political narrative.

The second transgression then remains a transgression of law, however, it is primarily a transgression of the new anti-racist sentiment. It is a sentiment which includes a racialised neighbour. Social movements and campaigns managed to redraw the limits of political field, as Hirvonen calls it, re-defining the premises of inclusion of some and the exclusion of others. The new moral sentiment, is of course, supported with a set of anti-racist laws and universal ideas of dignity and human rights. However, the British Government and its political institutions have been successfully re-writing some of these laws. For example, questions were raised whether it should be allowed to teach critical race theory in schools, or what contextual information needs to be provided alongside any of these topics. Similarly the use of materials compounded by groups such as Black Lives Matter is limited in educational institutions. The UK Government extended police

powers by criminalising protests and demonstrations practices that are deemed too disruptive, such as blocking roads and other critical infrastructure (Syal 2021). Further, the new policing bill severely impacts the life-style of Romani and Travelling communities drawing new divisions between already marginalised groups (Zevnik and Russell 2023; Westwater 2021). Deservedness further cuts across groups that are already politically racialised. If the first transgression aims to remain ambivalent to the ethical ideal which includes a racialised other; the second transgression rests precisely on its denial.

Finally, the transgression of law is tied with enjoyment. The ‘stand-off’ between those who broke the law by toppling the Colston statue (or any other statue), going out and protesting in support of anti-racist politics, and others who see these actions as a lack of law and order, lenient policing, wilful disregard for the other, is marked by the question of *jouissance* (Lacan 1990; 2007). It is assumed that by breaking the law with protests and destruction of public property those engaged in these activities enjoy—they have access to *jouissance*, which others—obedient voters suffering from protestors’ excesses—had to give up on to be part of the common good. A plea for a stronger application of law and order acts as a mask for a sacrificed *jouissance*. This perceived lack of *jouissance* experienced by the law-abiding citizens is then reclaimed by actions such as the call for more stringent rules and penalties for those who do not obey the law, or others whose actions, lifestyles or cultures are somewhat foreign (Zevnik 2023b). The inclusion of the racialised neighbour in the common good can only happen if and for as long as that neighbour abandons all its racialised neighbourly differences and stops enjoying. If it does not, or worse, is found to be fooling the ‘generous gestures’ of inclusion, then the racialised neighbour needs to be punished for offences it has done, or its actions need to be criminalised to stop their source of enjoyment. If that difference persists, the neighbour enjoys, and the common good as it is known by the ‘concerned voters’ is put under threat. Here, we finish with Nedoh’s observation about the social impact *jouissance* can have in contemporary society. He states that ‘a difference between subjective and necessary transgression is defined by the place of *jouissance*’ (Nedoh 2021). On the one end subjective *jouissance*, which can be linked with anti-racist protests, and on the other end, objective or necessary *jouissance* embodied in the regressive politics of the British state or the ‘concerned voters’. The difference between the two is that the latter, the necessary transgression, is based on the rejection of the subjective *jouissance*. However, *jouissance* in this rejection does not just disappear, but instead becomes an object of envy. Those who feel somehow taken advantage of by the new anti-racist politics envy the protestors, the racialised others, or the refugees and immigrants, as Hirvonen (2017) shows, access to this subjective *jouissance*. ‘They can enjoy, and they do so at my expense’, to paraphrase the libidinal economy of ‘concerned voters’. Further, the rejection of subjective *jouissance*, does not leave the ‘concerned voters’ without any *jouissance*. Theirs is in fact absolute—the excessive *jouissance*—as it continuous to support laws which protesting and racialised others act against, laws that continue to deny the existence or equality of racialised others.

Conclusion

Finally, what does perversion reveal about the ethical acts and the possibility of challenging the limits of the existing political/ethical space? The transgression of law through acts of criminal damage constitutes a legal transgression, which the protestors see as justified and supported by the plea of anti-racist future. In contrast, others who say that protestors must be held accountable for criminal damages to the public property re-affirm the validity of the existing law, but in doing so they put a stop to the emergence of a new anti-racist future which includes the racialised neighbour. A new common good which has been gaining traction in political discourses over the past ten years. Equally, these ‘concerned voters’ re-affirm the validity of the common good which excludes any difference, and re-affirms commitment to a ‘concern voter’ fearful for its privileged rights. Similarly, these regressive actions put in motion a re-inscription of the legal order with laws and police powers which target racial difference. These laws, under the pretext of universality and equality, target practices that a ‘concern voter’ considers deviant. It creates categories of deserving and undeserving cutting across racial and ideological divides (Zevnik and Russell 2023). The self-identified deserving enjoy the common good and protection from undeserving through means of new laws which can be unequally applied to ethnic minorities, travelling communities as well as anti-government protestor.

Thus thinking the radical potential of perversion or perversion as resistance through the frameworks of ethical acts—as Hirvonen (2020) suggested we do—leaves us in two different spaces. One is that which reveals the perversion of sovereign power. In it, the sovereign power in capitalist societies appears ‘absolute’ (as Creon in the *Antigone*), though there might well be multiple centres of these ‘absolute power’. The Government—one such centre of power—appears as if it can pass laws that discriminate or limit freedoms, all to minimise disruption to the everyday life of the ‘concerned voters’. These laws, while infringing upon ethical commitments to equality openly put some at more harm than others, but the exposure of these harms, as in Creon’s case, as Hirvonen (2020 p. 93) alludes to, only affirms the authority of these new laws. In contrast the social movements with its actions began changing the existing sentiments and morals (common sense) in the society. In that, they transgressed some of the laws and morals, without punishment. In the case of the Bristol Four, the four people who were call to court for causing criminal damages to the Colston statue, were in 2022 cleared of any charged by the jury at the Bristol Crown Court (BBC 2022). The decision spurts reaction from the Government and then Attorney General Suella Braveman who called for a legal clarification seeking explanation about the application of law to protests and the implication that this decision might have for future cases. Despite the acquittal the Government and the prosecution insisted that a removal of the Colston statue was a criminal act and that a jury was influenced by the information or news that they received outside the courtroom (BBC 2022). Initially, the removal of Colston was hardly more than a progressive move, but with the intervention of the law—first, the criminal charges, secondly,

the jury decision and finally, the reaction of the Attorney General at the time—the removal of Colston achieves a level of perversion. It is in the second move (the decision of the jury) that we can begin to think about perversion as a rebellious act and ethics as a radical political act, as the act which can disrupt the logics of capitalist sovereign power. Ultimately, what made the removal of the Colston statue an ethical act, was not the removal itself (though that was significant and no doubt an act of poetic justice as Choksey (2021) wrote), but the recognition of moral and ethical commitments that underlined these action, the anti-racist sentiment, that overpowered the otherwise crude application of law. Criminal damages might well have appeared but those are insignificant when compared to the legacies and histories that the statue represented.

Hirvonen's call to turn to perversion as a form of resistance indicates how we might begin to think about political and radical action in capitalism where sovereignty or sovereign power seems to be both dispersed and congregated in what appear like petit sovereigns (Primer Ministers, Ministers or Attorney Generals and others). Perversion demands a transgression of limits—it is for that reason that law offers a particularly potent field within which radical acts can be considered. While these acts in itself might not lead to revolutions or immediate social transformations, they begin to expose the ridiculous site of sovereign power. Finally, Hirvonen's turn to perversion as a way into radical politics in his final work represents, I think, a break with his earlier thinking. The *Ethics of Tragedy* does not make a radical departure from Ari's earlier thinking about political transformation. However, in this work, the concern about the changing social realities instigated by capitalism begin to push Ari away from radical democracy—a form of resistance or alternative social imaginary that he continuously returned to when thinking about change. It was never revolutions, but a progressive movement that will transform the society, however, the *Ethics of Tragedy* seems to abandon some of that progressive democratic thinking, and opens space for radical disruption.

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