Review

Violence and civility: On the limits of political philosophy

Étienne Balibar, trans. G.M. Goshgarian
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The publication of Étienne Balibar's 1996 Wellek Library Lectures delivered at the University of California, Irvine, is long overdue. *Violence and Civility*, originally published in French in 2010, offers a fascinating lens on the development of Balibar's thought as well as a prescient intervention into ongoing debates in political theory. Balibar examines the limits of political theory's various attempts to police the boundaries of the political as a space free from violence by way of careful and insightful readings of Hobbes, Hegel, and Marx. These lectures track the antinomies and paradoxes intrinsic to such attempts in order to argue that the boundary separating political power and violent force is anything but unproblematic. Rather, it is a boundary that needs to be perpetually renegotiated if the precarious space of politics is not to be undone by the extreme violence it threatens to unleash. Balibar proposes that countenancing violence demands something more than a moral discourse of nonviolence that disavows the prevalence of state, structural, and identitarian violence in the contemporary world. It demands novel strategies of "civility" or what Balibar calls "antiviolence."

The distinction between *nonviolence* and *antiviolence* constitutes the lectures' central rhetorical ballast and its richest theoretical contribution. Balibar begins by examining the antinomy characterizing modern conceptions of politics as nonviolence. Nonviolence, understood as the reduction or elimination of violence, is a basic condition of civil society. Citizens only enjoy freedom and equality where they are not subject to coercion and threats from one another. However, the condition for securing this nonviolence is the state's monopoly of what Balibar calls *counterviolence*, namely a violence used to punish and control outbreaks of violence. What the need for counterviolence reveals is that the work of securing nonviolence is never complete. Acts of violence are ever-present possibilities in civil society that demand ever-greater uses of state counterviolence to police and control. The state of nature,

in short, is not something left behind by entering civil society. An irreducible remainder of nature carries over into civil society through the body of the sovereign who, according to Hobbes at least, forever remains outside the civil condition. “In the final analysis,” Balibar observes of the contractualist tradition, “state power can keep the peace in the social body only if it is virtually at war with it” (p. 32).

Balibar describes this vicious circle of the use of counterviolence in order to secure nonviolence, an end that always recedes and so justifies further escalating modes of violence, as the antinomy of the monopoly of the use of force. Rather than ask what principles might justify this spiraling extension of state violence, Balibar asks: “under what conditions can we think a politics that is neither an abstraction from violence (‘nonviolence’) nor an inversion of it (‘counter violence’)” (p. 22). Antiviolence is the alternative that escapes this antinomy of turning away from violence or paying it back. The prefix *anti* signifies a mode of “facing up” to the problem of violence, not its simple negation (p. 24). Antiviolence is the condition of possibility for a revolutionary politics of emancipation, a conception of politics Balibar examines further in his recent *Equaliberty*.

Balibar begins a long dialectical road to giving some substance to the notion of antiviolence through a rich and provocative reading of Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* and *Philosophy of Right*. Hegel proposes a dialectical path out of the Hobbesian antinomy of nonviolence and counterviolence with his claim that the state’s violence can be historically rationalized and ultimately “converted” into political power. Through the hierarchically structured institutions of ethical life – the family, the market, the state – counterviolence is given rational form and purged of its coercive character. Balibar pursues this line of interpretation through a close engagement with primary sources, but this strategy of “converting” violence, one that Balibar reveals to rely on an eschatological conception of historical progress, finds echoes in autonomy-based conceptions of democratic legitimacy from Rousseau through Habermas. What the conversion thesis obscures, however, are the myriad ways that the violence characteristic of the liberal state and capitalist economy exceed subjective intentions or political control. The “extreme violence” unleashed by xenophobic nationalism and global capitalism’s production of disposable populations are excesses that cannot be converted into political power without remainder. Rather, they are forms of dehumanizing violence that risk collapsing the space of politics itself.

Readers of Balibar will be familiar with this category of extreme violence from *Politics and the Other Scene*, a collection of essays from the 1990s that should be read as a partner piece to *Violence and Civility*. The decade’s humanitarian catastrophes in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, along with its globalization debates, provide the horizon for Balibar’s study of extreme violence, or what he alternatively calls “cruelty,” even if these contexts are only noted in passing. Nevertheless, Balibar’s characterization of excess violence as a systematic form of social death anticipates

more recent debates about the character of violence and disposability under global neoliberalism. Consider how Balibar's claim, "[o]ur world is one marked by an explosion as well as the radical inequality of the forms and experiences of death itself," tragically rings even more true some twenty years later (p. 26).

Extreme violence is characterized by the imbrication of two irreducible modes of cruelty, ultra-objective violence and ultra-subjective violence. Balibar delves into Marx's *Capital* and Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* in the third lecture in order to reconstruct a materialist phenomenology of ultra-objective violence as a form of structural violence emanating from capitalism's relations of production. Capital produces a disposable reserve army of labor, as Marx famously argued, but the violence engendered by reproduction and accumulation exceeds the rationality of profit seeking. From the production of disposable populations to colonial accumulation, capital pursues an excess of violence. A similar excess can be found in the ultra-subjective violence that demonizes alien Others as monsters fit for extermination. Like capitalism's systematic and structural modes of violence, ultra-subjective violence stemming from "an idealization of hatred" exceeds subjective intentions as well (p. 60). At the root of the excessive cruelty of ethnic hatred and genocidal violence is an economy of libidinal investments and fantastic projections. Balibar represents the interaction between these two modes of ultraviolence, driven by the dialectic of capital's reproduction and fantasies of political sovereignty, through the diagram of the Möbius strip. The ultra-objective violence of capital turns over into the ultra-subjective violence of nationalism, and vice versa, but neither mode can be simply reduced to the other. Racism, and its irreducibility to either economic or psychological causes alone, illustrates the dialectical interdependence of these modes of violence.

Balibar describes this Möbius strip as "a metaphor for the *political closure* that results from the continuous passage from one form of violence to another" (p. 95). Antiviolence is the disruption of the circuit of extreme violence that opens up the possibility for politics as a collective project of emancipation. The fourth and final lecture returns to the topic of antiviolence in terms of the aporetic relationship of the politics of emancipation and the politics of civility. Here – in the potentially most generative but least developed dimension of the lectures – Balibar finally comes to the question that has haunted both this volume and his larger project of the democratic reconstruction of Marxism; namely, the meaning of revolutionary action today (to borrow Sheldon Wolin's formulation).

Revolution, defined as "the idea of a collective political movement intent on transforming structures of domination that will not disappear spontaneously," is a violent affair (p. 103). Emancipatory struggles for freedom and equality, what Balibar elsewhere refers to with the portmanteau *equaliberty*, involve seizing power from the powerful, and so the likelihood of violent conflict. However, Balibar does not simply accept the old Marxist truism that violence is the midwife of history. From Engels through Trotsky, the Marxist tradition conceived of class

terror as the negation of negation – a surgical use of counterviolence to abolish the violence of capitalist society and usher in the nonviolence of socialism. Balibar points to the shortsightedness of this Hegelian faith in the convertibility of violence as one of the great lessons to be drawn from the collapse of the Soviet Union. State communism failed to grasp the theoretical or practical challenges of controlling the spiral of violence unleashed by the dialectic of revolution and counterrevolution. Reconsidering the history of revolutionary violence in the post-Soviet moment poses the urgent question of “how to ‘civilize’ a revolutionary moment from within, how to introduce the antiviolence that I call civility into the very heart of the violence of a social transformation” (p. 103).

Civility is not a mode of moral etiquette or *politesse*. It “designates the political action” that responds to extreme violence (p. 23). Balibar chooses the term because of its polysemous signification of both citizenship and mores. There is no “a priori strategy of civility” (p. xii). Rather, it is a civic practice that must be constantly recreated and innovated. The final lecture does not provide much in the way of examples of such strategies, however. In their place, Balibar returns to commentary on Hegel and others to articulate a needful distinction between civility from above and civility from below. Hegelian ethical life represents one mode of civility as antiviolence. It is a hegemonic civility imposed from above in order to tame the potentials for violent disorder by normalizing political order. Emancipatory civility, by contrast, is found in democratic insurgencies that struggle to sustain an uneasy tension of identification and disidentification with the political identity that bind them. An insurgent multitude asserts its maturity to act as the collective agent of its own emancipation by remaining tragically aware of its nonidentity. Or to use the language of *Politics and the Other Scene*, it is a political movement aware of the *ambiguity* of identity, forever caught between the dangers of a solidarity built on exclusive identifications and a postmodern particularism that hollows out the possibilities for collective action.

Balibar’s exemplar for theorizing the ambiguous antiviolence at the heart of revolutionary politics is Rosa Luxemburg. Luxemburg’s critiques of Lenin’s contempt for “bourgeois” democracy illustrate the revolution’s perpetual need for “a *representative moment*” that allows the revolution to maintain critical distance from its own collective identity (p. 104). Acknowledging the ambiguity of collective identities, Balibar seems to suggest, opens the way for an antiviolent revolutionary consciousness concerning the limits of political mastery over violent means. This will not be a revolutionary struggle that justifies its use of terror by appeal to the laws of history. It will rather be a struggle for equaliberty that remains tragically aware of its inability to speak for the universal without remainder, and so exercise moderation in the use of force. This line of flight out Bolshevism to Luxemburg ultimately brings Balibar to find an unlikely ally in Max Weber. *Violence and Civility* leaves its readers with the questions: “How can the balance between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility be democratically

shared? Which are the forms of collective power (even insurrection) that make it possible for classes, peoples, multitudes to reflect on the consequences and aftereffects of their own ‘social movements’ when they confront a violent social order or a legal state of injustice?” (p. 148).

These questions better mark the beginning of an inquiry than the conclusion of one. Pursuing them further might put pressure on Balibar’s axiomatic presumption concerning the alleged violence of nonviolence that frames this book. *Violence and Civility* provides a strong warning about the dangers of moralizing nonviolence without an attention to the deep and enduring ways that violence permeates our political world. But it stops short when it reduces nonviolence to simply a moral stance. The transnational politics of nonviolent resistance developed over the course of twentieth and twenty-first centuries provides a different road for working the intervals between a politics of emancipation and a politics of civility. From Mohandas Gandhi through Gene Sharp, theorists and movements of nonviolent resistance have pursued Balibar’s closing questions concerning how to mobilize collective power in a manner that attends to its own aftereffects in bold and innovative ways. As Reinhold Niebuhr explained in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, an earlier attempt to civilize Marxism’s revolutionary politics from within, nonviolence provides a purer vehicle of justice than violence by shorting the circuit of resentment, animosity, and hatred that lead conflicts to spiral out of control. Balibar has begun to broach a deeper engagement with the politics of nonviolence in a recent essay on Gandhi and Lenin that is included in the French edition of *Violence and Civility* but, unfortunately, excluded from this translation. Pursuing strategies of civility to democratically renegotiate the boundaries of violence and politics remains a pressing question today. Looking beyond the canon of western philosophy to the transnational archive of nonviolent resistance movements, however, may provide a richer resource for giving substance to the challenge of civilizing emancipatory politics from within.

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