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Sovereign Destruction: On Life and Death in Politics

Abstract: Achille Mbembe and Adriana Cavarero offer two very profound neologisms –*necro-politics* and *horrorism* – that can equip one with a better understanding of life and death in the modern political community or sovereign unit (as in the case of the nation-state). If one goes through the rupture of thinking modern sovereignty following the Foucaultian inversion of war as the continuation of politics by other means, the place of violence is inevitable. What is considered as sovereign order in the same time is the place that was violently occupied, upon which was decided that will represent the constitution of power and the rule of a figure that in modern perspective is the rule of body politic i.e. of the sovereign. Thus, what was emphasized as a concern regarding modern sovereign rule opting towards material destruction of human bodies and populations, most certainly helps to explain contemporary political violence. Also what else is recognized are all other forms of war, all its extensions in every political community, since what war bears is not always and only terror, it is horror above all as an even more profound and at the same time excessive violence that spreads over war scenes.

Keywords: necropolitics; horrorism; violence; sovereignty, multitude

Introduction

In politics, the interest in life and death is linked to violence and the possibility of injury. The bodies that are exposed to injury or the defenseless ones are in fact markers of the political space that reflects itself in an alternative state colliding and maintained by politics, that is the state of war. To understand the complicated relation between these two conditions and how they are maintained, how they lend each other their mechanisms of operation and extend to the sphere of life and death, it is needed to allocate the following: how bodies exposed to political power of death transform the social bonds between them, which takes place under such political power, or *necropower*.

The body that is vulnerable and can be killed is always and in advance part of a multitude of human, peripheral bodies that formulate the space of governing – of them and through them. The constitution of that space implies the dislocation of political capacity, from the multitude of peripheral bodies to one,

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central, sovereign body or *body politic*.[1] The loss of political significance, therefore, is relational and presupposes the existence of a relation of domination, when one becomes the object of another's power. The sovereign relation – despite the insisting of some authors – is not monolithic, it transgresses every social bond and apart from the one of enmity, other social bonds are torn or immunized when acts of violence evoke the state of war, and when a relational power of dominance is established i.e. when one is the object of another's deadly power (*necropolitics*).

Although the formal flow of violence in the community is vertical: from the sovereign to the multitude, from the sovereign decisions to the life and death of the peripheral bodies, it is necessary to historically contextualize this relation. To further recognize all forms of violence that come out of the formal relation of the constitutive violence and enter other, adapted spaces of domination, of inflicting injury, and finally inflicting death. However, it is important to focus our attention on the sovereign relation or the original relation of the sovereign order when establishing the power and life on which it operates. Why? In the sovereign relation or through the position of the sovereign, two principles of political violence are revealed. These two principles through their contingency and elasticity become active in every form of violence, namely, sovereign violence and any other violence is unilateral and asymmetric; the victims find themselves in a situation of passivity and political helplessness, the violence is coming only from one side and the victims position is not equal but asymmetric in relation to the power that is established over their life, which is also able to eventually take it away from them. The critical reflections on contemporary political violence therefore must lead to refocusing the attention on *body politic*, political representation and the original sources of sovereign power in the political community. In that sense, it is important to recognize and call out the arrangement of the forces in the political community, in a way that allows for the localization of the exposed life, the places of belonging and the social bonds, as well as of the attack on them and the destruction of simply being and being in a community. "The necrocapitalist capturing of the social space implies new modes of governmentality that are informed by the norms of corporate rationality and deployed in managing violence, social conflicts, fear, and the Multitude."[2]

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[1] I use *body politic* following the work of Ernst H. Kantorwicz in *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), which delimited the significance of majesty's body politic as a corporeal site of his office and the divine right to rule (Ernst H. Kantorwicz, *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval Political Theology* /Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016/). In a more updated manner, I use much of Boyan Manchev's [Боян Манчев] reasoning on *body politic* in *The Logic of the Political* [*Логика на политическото*, 2012] such as: "one that figures the formless through the *logos* and by that claims the rule and the political order, but also itself as a sovereign political subject" (Боян Манчев, *Логика на политическото* [*Logic of the Political*] /София: Изток–Запад, 2012/, 65); "universally functioning organism in the midst of a passive substance or potentiality (force) that is without form and organs, pure violence without use" (ibid., 74). Author's note: the translation from Bulgarian in English is mine.

[2] Marina Gržinić, Šefik Tatlić, *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 24.

Multitude

The British historian of law Frederick William Maitland, in his work and especially the essay *The Crown as Corporation* (1901), made an exceptional contribution to the research of *body politic*. Stressing the medieval thought of understanding the nation as a body made up of many human, physical bodies that carry the head of the King, Maitland evokes the famous illustration of the cover of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (made by Abraham Bosse). This bodily sketch of the distribution of force in the political community or simply put, the beheading of the multitude and thus the dislocation of political capacity solely to the head of the sovereign, according to Maitland, reveals something shockingly important. "It is true that 'The people' exists, and 'the liberties of the People' must be set against 'the prerogatives of the King'; but just because the King is not part of the People, the People cannot be the State or the Commonwealth."[3]

Due to the stabilized relation between the sovereign and the sovereign order, as well as the dissemination of sovereign power outside, in and through the law, it is necessary to examine why the transfer of political capacity to the king's head cannot coincide with political representation. Regarding the political representation, similar to Maitland, (just because the King is no part of the People, the People cannot be the State), through the interpretation of the illustration for *Leviathan* (1651), Giorgio Agamben proposes one useful dilemma: what happens to the constituting part of the *body politic* or to all the small physical bodies of the multitude, after the one elected to be sovereign takes over the entire political capacity? How political representation is possible, if a multitude of small physical bodies exists until the single body is assembled where the crown is held? The political representation is an optical contraption, Agamben says: "At the very instant that the people chooses the sovereign, it dissolves itself into a confused multitude."[4] This dissolved multitude (*dissoluta multitudo*) immediately occupies the place of the people who elect the sovereign, and its political force, which is then taken away, transferred and distributed through the body of *body politic*, remains alive only as a tension between the multitude and the sovereign. Following Hobbes's logic Agamben points out: the multitude has no political significance, it loses it in order to establish the state. This perspective, which shifts the understanding of the political community and sovereign power, becomes crucial when we begin to examine the state of war. *Homo homini lupus*, namely, is not a state that takes place before the election of the sovereign, and ceases when the *body politic* is formed, on the contrary, the transformation that occurs and relates to the multitude of physical bodies that shape the central body whose head bears the crown, follows a different course.

The organization of the multitude before the establishment of sovereign power is not necessarily situated in violence, but violence begins with the dislocation of

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[3] Frederic W. Maitland, "The Crown as Corporation," in *State, Trust and Corporation*, ed. D. Runciman, M. Ryan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 38.

[4] Giorgio Agamben, *Stasis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 44.

political capacity, the activation of the tension between the sovereign and the people and the distribution of forces in the political community, which is guided by the principle of exclusion, and not equality. The entry into the social state, in the state, or in the power of the crown, organizes differently the relations in the multitude, through the state of war and through the imperative of security – social bonds are being occupied, as previously the physical bodies were constrained in the final assembly of *body politic* and as, of course, the multitude was excluded of the head. Such occupation in the context of violence has numerous consequences and perhaps the most severe of them: the multitude has no political significance which implies that it has been stripped of the possibility for politics, the space of politics is irredeemably and in the same time a space of war. As Agamben points out, "civil war [*stasis*], Common-wealth and state of nature do not coincide, but are conjoined in a complicated relation."[5] Lastly, this conjointment appears, is maintained and depends on the sovereign, the place of the sovereign decisions and the sovereign power.

Necropower

Michel Foucault makes a very important inversion of the Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz's view that politics is a continuation of war by other means, in order to show that war is a "principle that allows us to understand the order, the state, its institutions, and its history."[6] This means that to have political power is to "perpetually use a sort of silent war to re-inscribe that relationship of force, and to re-inscribe it in institutions, economic inequalities, language, and even the bodies of individuals."[7]

Power, adds Foucault, is a continuation of war, so if one takes into account that power in itself contains every relation of force, including the relations of violence, then which or who's power can be considered a continuation of the war, also considering the distribution of forces in a political community with a binary structure? The answer to this question reveals a certain asymmetry, which again brings our attention to the different distribution of the political power of the central body or *body politic* as opposed to the peripheral, physical bodies. The political capacity of the crown and whatever head that wears it creates a dynamic between the sovereign and the multitude that is a dynamic of domination, occupies the space in which what is common should circulate between the peripheral, physical bodies. Hence, the answer to the question whose political power contains the continuation of power as war is interwoven with the fact that both political power and war are continuations of the relation of dominance, in this case, the relation established by the sovereign that dominates the political reality.

The sovereign order, as suggested above, is asymmetrical. The relation or the tension between the sovereign and the multitude is a relation of domination. However, introducing and maintaining violence in the political community has been

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[5] Ibid., 53.

[6] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2003), 47.

[7] Ibid., 16.

supported already by roman formalism. Namely, the thread that sustains the position of the sovereign, supporting the continuity between his political power and the war is represented by the right to kill or to let live (*patria potestas*). The lives of the peripheral bodies become disposable before the political power of *body politic* and the decisions about their life or death are made from the position of the sovereign; however, since he cannot give life, all political rationality in the sovereign order is organized around the possibility of life being taken. Although Foucault (1975–76) focuses mainly on administrating life (biopolitics), as well as on activating a governing technology that affects the realm of the living (biopower), it is clear that the limit of the sovereign power is death. "The sovereign exercised his right to life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing; he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was able to require."[8] Following Foucault's line of thought, Achille Mbembe will notice the contemporary transformation of biopolitics into *necropolitics* and of biopower into *necropower*. In the attempt to locate the life and death of the human (peripheral) body in the sovereign order, which as such is being constituted through the model of war, and then also through the right to kill, Mbembe concludes: "to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power."[9] Mbembe finds the conceptual framework given by Foucault with biopolitics and biopower not sufficient for understanding the material destruction of human bodies and populations as operations of the so-called vertical sovereignty. Thus, he introduces the term of *necropower* in order to create awareness of the "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death"; he also introduces *necropolitics* in our modern world where the "weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds."[10] Often, the right to kill or the transformation of contemporary politics into *necropolitics* (and of the power into *necropower*) is rarely perceived as an ongoing, stabilized state. Namely, there is resistance to the recognition of it as a rule of the contemporary political space. But assuming it is true that "political power cannot find any other reliable foundation for itself than in threatening the security of its subjects,"[11] and then the *necropower* only indicates a strong radicalization of all possible situations arising from the threat to the security of the entities for which it decides. From US high schools to Sudan, from the Neapolitan baby gangs to Gaza, from Parisian *banlieues* to Fallujah, from the Italian-Libyan border to Yemen. The desire to avoid death is political. Through it, the peripheral bodies are constantly looking to get back their political capacity; however, the immunizing political rationality of the sovereign is calculated in all practices of submission. The asymmetry between the two positions – that of the central and the peripheral body, or perhaps more accurately: the helpless and the armed body,

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[8] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 136.

[9] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, 1 (2003): 12.

[10] Ibid., 39–40.

[11] Achille Mbembe, "Sovereignty as a Form of Expenditure," in *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*, ed. T.Hansen, F. Stepputat (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 154.

becomes actual again. It is important not to think of death only in the final moment of physical death, but death begins when the desire to avoid it is being threatened. In addition, the asymmetric relation between the point of power and the point of the exposed life, should be further clarified – it is contingent, it goes outside the formal relation (e.g. with the state) and by circling through the sovereign order, it activates all the apparatus of force, creating all the circumstances of violence. Hence, that relation is not ahistorical.

Every time and everywhere an escalation of violence can be recorded, politics becomes 'work of death'. In everyday life, in the radicalized version of the threat to the security of the subjects, there is the possibility that someone can be killed by someone else. This possibility, as Mbembe underlined, spilled over terror, panic and horror, has a clearly defined function in the sovereign order or the sovereign destruction of all social bonds, except that of enmity. "It is this bond of enmity that justifies the active relationship of the dissociation of which war constitutes a particularly violent version. It is also this bond of enmity that allows the routinization of the idea that power cannot be acquired or exercised except at the price of someone's life; and that, ultimately, the death of the Other is the precondition for the constitution of a political community."[12]

Defenseless

The replacement of politics with the state of war, the exposure of life to the power of death, the destruction of the social ties and their reduction to the relation of enmity, or overall sovereign destruction raises several questions about the natural state of the multitude. Namely, does *homo homini lupus* reflect the dynamics between human bodies, their vitality and their social connection in the absence of or in the presence of the crown and the sovereign rule? The assumption that anyone can be killed by anyone else in the community is introduced by the sovereign and his crown, and the multitude that is dissolving for the sole purpose of constituting the *body politic* remains a multitude of defenseless, and finally, a multitude of those who do not operate with the deadly apparatus and do not have weapons. The fear of death that precedes the constituted political community or the social situation, does not disappear, on the contrary, it is transformed into a mechanism of governance, and at the same time into a mechanism for controlling social bonds. Hence, "the ontological status of humans is in fact a constitutive vulnerability, especially when understood in corporeal terms."[13] The vulnerability of the dissolved multitude whose political capacity is dislocated towards the head that generates the dominant political rationality, which moves from the head of the sovereign to the head of anyone who temporarily realizes the relation of domination, who even possesses weapons, is therefore the vulnerability of the defenseless. The injury (*vulnus*) of every peripheral body makes it exposed

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[12] Ibid., 156.

[13] Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 20.

and helpless before the *necropower*, it carries the call for care, for the dependence on the other. This exposure disarms the body (as a corporeal stake in the community), it cannot defend itself, rejecting the situation in which death can occur, standing unprotected before the decisions on life and death. There is a line that is crossed when the injured body becomes a dead body, and according to Adriana Cavarero, it is precisely that line which formulates the difference between terror and horror. She recognizes the need for the neologism *horrorism* precisely because of a certain model of horror that can encompass the numerous forms of political violence in our contemporary life, so that the ontological status of the victim who before being a killable, lives as a vulnerable body, is respected. Moreover, the coincidence between the vulnerable and the helpless is the result of a series of acts, intentional and planned, aimed at bringing it about. Several peculiar aspects of *horrorism* are thereby fully disclosed. "The center of the scene is occupied by a suffering body, a body reduced to a totally available object or, rather, a thing objectified by the reality of pain, on which violence is taking its time about doing its work."[14] Recalling Mbembe's words, we can conclude that this work, which is a work of contemporary politics, becomes also a work of death or *necropolitics*. *Horrorism* is showing us how death formulates power or *necropower*, in the same manner, over life, and over death, making the dissolved multitude more manageable to be governed – as a multitude of defenseless. But why is terrorism's logic of the attacker and the target insufficient?

The loss of political capacity while dissolving the multitude in the final formulation of *body politic*, from the aspect of what Cavarero calls *horrorism* or the continuation of violence in the everyday life of a possible war, is shown in the following situation: everyone is a good victim and everyone is part of the abstract representation of community violence; the enmity loses its political qualities and goes beyond the logic of terrorism, according to which the act of violence sends a political message. Anyone can be an enemy and anyone else's death can have the fate of a victim by accident. The peripheral bodies, whose corporeality is calculated (and thus depoliticized) in the formulation of *body politic*, which see the attack on their social bonds primarily as an attack on the desire to avoid death, become anonymous before the *necropower* and the idea of their everyday life is destabilized in the realm of *horrorism*. The material destruction, in this sense, is a continuation of the sovereign logic – when the multitude ceases to have political significance, after the choice of the sovereign; for the reason that this is not a matter of political loss, but of anonymous corpses that enter the content of that what Martin Heidegger called "fabrication of corpses."[15] The area of social bonds or that of everyday life is under attack, taken over by the continuation of war, even the future is considered under the danger of death: existential uncertainty is related to the radicalized possibility of violence, through "the perpetual threat of attack in the marketplace and in the home, where we ought to feel most alive."[16] "It

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[14] Ibid., 31.

[15] Martin Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 53.

[16] Stuart J. Murray, "Thanatopolitics: On the Use of Death for Mobilizing Political Life," *Polygraph* 18 (2006): 208.

befalls the defenseless person today to get killed because she happens to pass through some crowded places, ones chosen by her killers [...] It is the defenseless person without qualities, interchangeable and random, who takes the center of the contemporary stage on which specialists in violence against the defenseless perform."[17]

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[17] Cavarero, *Horrorism*, 74.