

The “We” in a State of Becoming

Comments on Étienne Balibar

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In their *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels write:

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible.

Of course, in the beginning, this cannot be effected except by means of despotic inroads [*despotischer Eingriffe*] on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production.¹

It is a striking passage that puts especially sharply a point they drive home over the course of their preceding dialogue with an imagined bourgeois interlocutor. That interlocutor repeatedly challenges communism on the basis of its irreconcilability with capitalist ideals of property, individuality, and freedom. It is impossible, Marx and Engels readily admit, to justify communism on this ethical basis, one that feigns neutrality and yet codifies, protects, and represents as universal the special interests of a small economic elite. The bourgeois state and its official morality are organized in such a way as to stand in opposition to the interests of the masses. As such, there are definite limits to the capacity of the masses to exercise their will in and through the apparatus of the state. Insofar as the laws of civil society are “but the will of [the capitalist] class made into a law for all,” they themselves constitute, for Marx and Engels, a kind of undemocratic bourgeois despotism.² What rises up against it can, from a bourgeois point of view, then only appear as itself unjustified, unjustifiable, and despotic.

I turn to this passage because of its especial relevance for thinking through Étienne Balibar's observations about politics and violence in his essay "From Violence as Anti-Politics to Politics as Anti-Violence." It particularly helps us to think through Balibar's insight that the analytical power of our theorizing is needlessly compromised if we proceed uncritically from the assumption that politics and violence are to be counterposed to one another as essentially irreconcilable opposites. Rather, Balibar suggests, politics and violence must be thought *with* one another as, in many cases, mutual conditions of possibility *for* one another, each of which shapes the appearance *of* the other. Balibar writes that he wishes to reject "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."³ He writes shortly later, "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."⁴

Of course, the point of Marx's and Engels's refusal to entertain bourgeois moralism is not to launch some principled defense of despotism as such, but rather to reveal the essentially tyrannical nature of capitalist rule and to counter it with a genuinely democratic mass rule. But this assertion of mass interests and mass rule cannot occur within the "normal" political avenues of the capitalist state. It must appear then, as aberrant and criminal, and as an occasion for the legitimate display of official "law-keeping" violence through the deployment of police, military, prison, and so on as a reaction against it.

The question, then, for those who seek to challenge bourgeois rule and demand an economic reordering that would violate the protections of capitalist property and "freedom," is whether they will shrink back in the face of official state violence against them, or engage in practical self-defense, meeting it with defensive force. The further question, which Balibar presents to us quite clearly, is whether the violence of the capitalist state, which frequently takes on the form of what Balibar calls "extreme violence," is so overwhelmingly determining of even the resistance against itself, that attempts at "counter-violence" are themselves doomed to reproduce a state and state violence similar to those that they seek to abolish.⁵ In other words, is the nature of the capitalist state such that attempts to transcend it must necessarily be "despotic" not in Marx and Engels's *ironic* sense, but rather in the sense of themselves being essentially partial, particular, subjective, "groundless," and ultimately, ineradicably, violent—even "extremely" so? Or put even more simply: is violence always a trap?

To address this question in a brief space, I will focus my attention on two core themes in Balibar's essay. The first is the dialectical relationship between means and ends. The second is the question of objectivity, universality, and justification. (None of these three terms appears in Balibar's essay—but they are at stake in questions of "groundlessness," "group 'purity,'" the "we," and "conflict.")

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels offer the following explanation for why revolutionary activity is the only means by which human emancipation can be achieved:

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.⁶

Balibar is more skeptical of the capacity of revolution to effect a radical transformation of human beings and their circumstances, and speaks of “revolutionary violence as a mimetic phenomenon with respect to state violence.” Confronted with its own impotence to fully dominate its subjects, the state, Balibar writes, “tries to enact vengeance, beyond the law itself, against the rebellions that it confronts.”⁷ (We may be reminded here of Marx’s observation that “the civilization and justice of bourgeois order comes out in its lurid light whenever the slaves and drudges of that order rise against their masters. Then this civilization and justice stand forth as undisguised savagery and lawless revenge.”)⁸

On the model Balibar presents, this official vengeance in turn weakens and undermines the strength of revolutionary movements, instigating their degeneration into destructive infighting, which Balibar describes as “a tragic combination of mimetism with the state and ‘communitarian’ violence.”⁹

The lesson here appears to be that insofar as the state is essentially violent and is sufficiently willing to use violence to suppress dissent, would-be dissenters are moved to resort to defensive violence against it. And here, one may worry, is the trap. Violent means, Balibar writes, citing Gandhi, “create violent subjects.” Perhaps so, but we must ask, just as we asked of Marx and Engels’s reference to “despotic inroads,” violent in what way, and from what point of view?

Balibar is of course quite correct to point out that those who take up revolution as their end, and who take up revolutionary means of attaining that end, cannot themselves stand apart from the very process that they set into motion, and cannot emerge at the end unchanged by the history they have created. But is it in fact true, as he seems to suggest, that those who take part in defensive violence in the course of revolution are always changed for the *worse*? I am thinking here of such revolutionary moments as the Haitian Revolution, or of other quasi-revolutionary moments such as the overthrow of chattel slavery in the United States; in both cases, enslaved and oppressed people took up arms and played a central and profoundly transformative historical role. Incomplete as such revolutionary trans-

formations may be, can it truly be said that what they produced—both in terms of historical circumstances and the human beings who emerged from those circumstances—was not something profoundly new and developed in a positive direction?

There is also the admittedly difficult to ascertain counterfactual consideration: what further undesirable alterations to human beings come from *refraining* from revolution? Why compare the outcome of revolutionary change to the status quo ante, as though what gave rise to popular resistance were not itself often a process of rapid degeneration and decline, which revolutionary movements seek to arrest and divert in more positive directions? (The rapidly unfolding and accelerating process of climate collapse provides us with one key example of this. Without radical and decisive social transformation on a global scale, we know which way our presently homicidal and suicidal path leads us.) To raise these questions of course is not by itself decisively to refute Balibar's suggestion that revolutionary violence is necessarily mimetic of state violence and therefore destined to reproduce it in its destructiveness. But it is to problematize the selection of points of comparison, which Balibar brings to bear on the question of whether revolution need be trapped in mimicry.

As I noted earlier, part of what is at stake here is a question of justification and of the possibility of assuming an objective perspective. I am put in mind of a recent, very striking remark "tweeted" by US Democratic Party presidential candidate, Joe Biden: "Violence of any kind is wrong; those who commit it should be caught and punished."¹⁰ The statement is notable for numerous reasons, chief among them that as a statement about Biden's attitude toward violence, it is plainly and obviously false. The former vice president of the United States of America absolutely does not believe that "violence of any kind is wrong." But he likely does believe that violence that flouts or undermines the state's "rightful" *monopoly* on violence is always wrong. Indeed, Biden's statement itself counterposes "violence"—anarchic, wrong, criminal—with "punishment"—orderly, proper, legal.

Balibar, of course, provides us with tools to correctly describe this kind of hypocritical bourgeois posturing that clumsily attempts to cover over the inherent "extreme violence of capitalist globalization."¹¹ Yet, as theorists of resistance, we must also ask: is the difference between what bourgeois leaders consider "despotic," "violent," and beyond the pale of civil society when done by oppressed people, and what the oppressed consider "despotic," "violent," and unjust when carried out by the rulers, merely a "groundless" distinction between one group's means to power and another's? Balibar's insistence that violent revolutionary uprisings must assume the form of mere mimesis seems to suggest this.

So I will conclude by returning to the question of the transformative effects of revolutionary means, drawing this together with Balibar's discussion of purifi-

cation and “oneness,” which appears toward the end of his essay. Balibar writes, “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.” He continues, “the very obstacle that needs to be overcome in common is the primacy of the One.”¹²

The point, obviously, is very well-taken with respect to the examples Balibar foregrounds, cases of religious, racial, and ethnic “cleansing” and persecution. However, there is a crucial distinction to be made between such cases, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the Marxist aim of abolishing the present state of affairs, in which human beings confront one another as exploiters and exploited, and of producing a state of affairs in which human beings recognize one another truly as members of one species, in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”¹³ The latter vision is not one in which certain persons are “purified” from society but rather one from which certain oppressive and exploitative *conditions* have been removed, conditions that prevent both unity *and* the flourishing of individual difference and of what Balibar calls “hybridity” and “metamorphosis.” In fact, it is only this latter kind of “purification” that can abolish the conditions that produce the former. It must be stressed that outside the realm of abstraction, actually existing revolutionary struggles can at times contain elements of both kinds of aim; part of what must be worked out in these cases is an internal struggle between them, the outcome of which is no doubt conditioned by the broader context of state repression, but by no means a foregone tragic conclusion.

Balibar concludes by affirming the need for “anti-violent” politics that are essentially prefigurative through and through: if what we want is a society that respects plurality and difference, he argues, then our means must themselves be principled respect for all plurality and difference. Oppressive state violence should be met, then, not with self-defense (destined, he warns us, to devolve into mimetic communitarian violence), but with more and broader civil dialogue and civic engagement. Who partakes in that dialogue and engagement? A “we” that Balibar invokes especially in these concluding passages: “We must therefore expand democracy itself . . .”¹⁴

And yet such a “we” exists today only as an ethical phrase. Balibar’s strategy presupposes as already existing what it purports to create: a global human community that, both theoretically and practically, recognizes its communal species-flourishing as its highest end. The “we” who would take part in such discussion and negotiation—and not seek to thwart, disrupt, and silence it at every turn—refers to those whose interests are not served by the status quo, and who are dissatisfied with it. That is not everyone.

Those who oppose such dialogue and such social transformation have demonstrated very clearly the lengths to which they will go to prevent its occurrence. (Consider, for example, the experiences of many a worker who has sought to initiate dialogue among her fellows about forming a union.) And so those who wish to create democratic transformation cannot avoid the real, practical circumstance that humanity today is separated into mutually opposing forces, one of which seeks to thwart mass movements and democracy at every turn.

Perhaps it is true that in the face of oppressive state violence, self-defense is a trap that throws revolutionary movements into a downward spiral of mimesis. I do not think so; but if it is true, then that is a tragedy even deeper and more intractable than Balibar suggests. It is not that skepticism about prefigurative politics (in which the end is its own means) fails to recognize the value of the kind of human community that Balibar proposes as an end of politics. Rather: such skepticism recognizes this, but also acknowledges that such a community simply does not yet exist to be the means of its own realization. What we have instead is communal strife and existential fracture that cannot be fully resolved in dialogue or thought, and it is in these nonideal circumstances that revolutionaries and other partisans of social transformation — themselves of course also flawed, nonideal, and in need of transformation — must intervene.

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Notes

1. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 6:504.
2. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 6:501.
3. Balibar, "From Violence as Anti-Politics," 385.
4. Balibar, "From Violence as Anti-Politics," 385.
5. Balibar, "From Violence as Anti-Politics."
6. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 5:53.
7. Balibar, "From Violence as Anti-Politics," 395.
8. Marx, "The Civil War in France," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 22:348.
9. Balibar, "From Violence as Anti-Politics," 396.
10. Biden, "This cold-blooded shooting."
11. Balibar, "From Violence as Anti-Politics," 389.
12. Balibar, "From Violence as Anti-Politics," 397.
13. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 6:506.
14. Balibar, "From Violence as Anti-Politics," 397.

Works Cited

- Balibar, Étienne. "From Violence as Anti-Politics to Politics as Anti-Violence." *Critical Times* 3, no. 3 (2020): 384–99.
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