

SPECIAL SECTION

Rethinking Violence with Étienne Balibar

Introduction

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ABSTRACT Violence manifests as a force that dissects: it disjoins, divides, breaks up lives and bodies, communities, the environment. It also constitutes a field of forces that theory, in its critical registers, is trying to dissect, to anatomize, to take apart, to lay open, to open up for critique and transformation, especially when violence takes hidden, invisibilized, or structural forms. As Étienne Balibar's work exemplifies, for theory to do this, it not only needs to take account of the resistance and struggles of its age; it also needs to move beyond clichés about violence as the intentional infliction of bodily harm, and beyond the widespread assumption that violence is the absolute other of politics, that politics and violence are incompatible. The commentaries in this special section further explore the theoretical space opened up by Balibar's work in light of the current conjuncture.

KEYWORDS Étienne Balibar, violence, non-violence, politics, civility

Throughout his wide-ranging work, Étienne Balibar has sought to complicate the relationship between violence and politics, highlighting the fundamental ambivalence of politics and pushing the discussion beyond the simplistic alternative between conceiving of politics and violence as either mutually exclusive or reducible to each other.

In his early work, Balibar offered a defense of proletarian mass democracy against the democratically veiled class violence of the dictatorship of the bourgeois minority.¹ He later engaged with Marxism's troubled relationship to violence—at once critically analyzed in accounts of the structural role of violence in the genesis and maintenance of the status quo and problematically rationalized in accounts of its role in the struggle of the proletariat.² More recently, Balibar has examined the

violent dynamics of our neoliberal and racist present.³ In all of these ways, Balibar’s work provides manifold resources for thinking through the imbrications of violence and politics. For Balibar, who has been at the forefront of public debates about the exclusionary logics of contemporary politics and the struggles against it in France and Europe, and increasingly also in the United States, this is not a purely theoretical argument; rather, it has immediate and significant political implications that urge us to move beyond the facile dichotomy between either rejecting or embracing violence as a means in those struggles.

The recognition of the persistence of politics, and of the possibility of resistance, even in the most adverse circumstances, as well as the existence of (colonial, neoliberal, neofascist, and other) forces and dynamics that pose a threat to its conditions of possibility, also animates Balibar’s most recent attempt to come to terms with the need to rethink politics in the face of violence. Responding to his essay “From Violence as Anti-Politics to Politics as Anti-Violence,” published in volume 3, number 3 of *Critical Times*,⁴ the contributions to this special section continue the theoretical exploration of the many ways in which violence structures our present. They suggest that politics is the always-precarious struggle to maintain its own conditions of possibility and to enable radical transformation—from the prospects of revolutionary struggle and self-defense (Vanessa Wills) to the everyday and ordinary faces of even extreme violence (Robyn Marasco), and from the theological-political intricacies of state violence and its critique (Mohamad Amer Meziane) to the power of nonviolence to initiate processes of interruption, withdrawal, and conversion (Faisal Devji).

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Notes

1. Balibar, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*.
2. Balibar, “Reflections on *Gewalt*.”
3. Balibar, *Violence and Civility*.
4. Balibar, “From Violence as Anti-Politics.”

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