

review: Étienne Balibar reading Jacques Derrida Violence, Cruelty, Property, Sovereignty

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Étienne Balibar, *Equaliberty: Political Essays*, translated by James Ingram, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014. Paperback. 376 pp. \$25.95. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5564-9

Étienne Balibar, *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Philosophy*, translated by G.M. Goshgarian, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. Hardcover. 232 pp. \$30.00. ISBN: 9780231153980

In 1989, Jacques Derrida was interviewed by Michael Sprinker on the subject of political and theoretical Marxism. On this occasion, he was led to clarify his intellectual relationship with Louis Althusser and his disciples. Derrida explained that he was experiencing a feeling of uneasiness during ‘the big Althusserian moment’, a feeling which eventually evolved towards relative proximity:

From that standpoint, the way in which the discourse of certain Althusserians (Balibar, Macherey, Rancière) later broke open undoubtedly moved us closer together. I feel closer to Balibar’s discourse and interests today than to the very blunt discourse of that period. What happened following the big Althusserian moment (that is, after 1966-68) at least virtually moved me closer to all of them because they were themselves obliged to complicate their discourse. (Derrida, 2002b, 169)

The fact is that Jacques Derrida and, most notably among the ‘Althusserians’, Étienne Balibar became visibly closer in the years

preceding this interview and, perhaps even more significantly, the following ones. They shared public appearances and discussed each other's work in published writings more and more regularly until Derrida's death. One may venture many interpretations for this late proximity, although, in the 1989 interview, Derrida seemed quite confident in the matter: however one reads his above remark, it clearly suggests that this late convergence resulted from a modification in Balibar's and the Althusserians' discourse rather than his own. I will not discuss Derrida's interpretation or try to settle this question in this book review; rather, I will try to explain why the proximity between Balibar and deconstruction was only 'relative' or 'virtual' in 1989, and why it remains so today.

In *Equaliberty* and *Violence and Civility*, Balibar pursues his efforts to rejuvenate classical theoretico-political concepts — such as 'equality', 'freedom' and 'citizenship' in *Equaliberty*; 'power', 'violence' and 'civility' in *Violence and Civility*. He does so in view of revitalising democratic theory: Balibar's explicit purpose is to 'democratize democracy' (2015a, 119) by unpacking the theoretical and practical contradictions underlying the democratic tradition and by highlighting the dialectical and dynamic character of these antinomies. While deconstruction is an important point of reference in both books, Balibar engages with a wide range of authors across disciplines, from political theory, continental or analytic philosophy, to sociology, social sciences, international relations, postcolonial theory, and so on. This theoretical eclecticism is never detrimental to Balibar's undeniable argumentative rigour, which certainly constitutes his forte: he is an excellent reader, and, in the best cases, his inclusiveness allows rich and unexpected discussions between Derrida and authors who were until now neglected by 'deconstructive' literature.

Yet one cannot help but wonder whether it is possible to simply showcase Derrida's notions and analyses in the course of general theoretico-political arguments, and whether deconstructive readings may be used as theoretical 'findings' among others in the essay-like presentation of these discussions. The main risk in such reappropriation would be a certain theoretico-political formalism, leading Balibar to simplify, normalise and systematise Derrida's notions in order to make them fit classical debates in political philosophy and social theory¹ — debates concerning, in *Equaliberty*, individualism and property, and, in *Violence and Civility*, the multilayered problematic of sovereign power, law and constraint, and authoritarian violence. In this book review, I focus on these arguments in order to highlight Balibar's usage of Derridean texts and notions, and to bring out the specificity of his project in contrast to deconstruction.

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Equaliberty collects essays spanning twenty years focusing on the constitutive antinomies of democratic citizenship. Balibar notably analyses the contradictory unity of principles such as 'freedom' and 'equality', and formalises the incompatibility *and* inseparability between 'extensive' and 'intensive' conceptions of universality. In practice, such antinomies translate into a continuous 'dialectic of insurrection and constitution' (Balibar 2014, vii). In this book, the most substantial

¹ Balibar is explicitly aware of this risk — for instance, in *Equaliberty*: 'Can one thus simply (too simply, no doubt) connect some of the major themes of Derrida's work? I am not certain' (Balibar 2014, 90). In the French version of the text, this remark is followed by an amusing footnote, omitted in the English version: 'I must be honest and say that Derrida himself was probably perplexed [by my undertaking], if one judges by his "grunt" when he heard the original version of this development' (Balibar 2015b, 117; my translation).

engagement with Derrida appears in the course of an essay on the notion of property, wherein Balibar analyses Macpherson's concept of 'possessive individualism' (Chapter 2: *Ibid.*, 67-98). Here again, Balibar aims to emphasise the concept's historicity and constitutive tensions in order to avoid its ideological and institutional petrification. After having traced its theoretical premises in Locke's thought, Balibar turns to Rousseau, Marx and Derrida in order to substantiate a potential 'reversal of possessive individualism'. In a relatively straightforward manner, Balibar locates this potential reversal in Rousseau's analysis of 'dispossession', Marx's notion of 'expropriation of the expropriators', and in Derrida's 'ex-appropriation'. Here is how Balibar describes his own understanding of Derrida's notion:

I confess that I have long found the expression 'ex-appropriation', constantly used by Derrida (in *Spurs*, *Margins of Philosophy*, *Glas*, *The Postcard*, *Specters of Marx*, and *Given Time*) enigmatic, despite — or perhaps because of — its affinities with certain common formulations in the mystical tradition. It is, obviously, an oxymoron that takes in its way the negative logic of 'X without X' or 'X that is not X', whose origin, we know, is in Blanchot. Ex-appropriation would thus be a 'property without property', a property that does not appropriate without expropriating, a process of appropriation whose object or effect is indefinitely frustrated. (Balibar 2014, 87)

There would be a lot to say about Balibar's lexicon. In his reading of Derrida, he systematically emphasises motifs of contradiction and negativity ('oxymoron', 'negative logic'). He describes ex-appropriation as 'a unity of opposites' (*twice*: *Ibid.*, 93 and 94), as 'a critical, paradoxical figure' (*Ibid.*, 92), or 'as a negative characteristic that affects the subject' (*Ibid.*, 93). Balibar also stresses what he interprets as an influence of 'negative theology' on Derrida (invoked in an endnote: *Ibid.*, 311). But can ex-appropriation be reduced to a 'negative' motif? By suggesting that it signifies an 'indefinitely frustrated' 'effect or object', Balibar seems to ignore the fact that Derrida's deconstructive

reading of ‘appropriation’ (for instance in *Spurs*, 1978) subverts and exceeds the onto-logics of effectivity, of dialectical position/negation, of subjectivation/objectivation, and of individuality or ipseity as power-to-be-oneself. Who would be the ‘subject’ of such ‘frustration’? And what of the excessive, *affirmative* dimension of ‘ex-appropriation’?

Even more symptomatic is Balibar’s attempt to reinscribe Derrida’s notion of ex-appropriation within a genealogy (Rousseau, Marx) without accounting for the irreparable rupture which deconstruction strives to instantiate: certainly, Balibar is right to say that ‘Derrida would not have been possible without Rousseau and Marx’ (79) — but the reference to the im-possible, beyond the possibility of a traditional genealogical reading, is equally important for deconstruction. And this remark does not concern only the ‘events’ known as ‘Derrida’ and ‘deconstruction’, but also those that bear the name ‘Rousseau’, ‘Marx’, and even ‘Balibar’ — which should challenge the formal protocols of a theoretical-political argument founded on a genealogical historiography. As will appear below, this genetic motif also confirms the dependence of Balibar’s theoretical-political discourse on a metaphysics of presence, be it under the form of an agonistic dialectics.

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I now turn to *Violence and Civility*. The bulk of the book consists of Balibar’s 1996 Wellek Library Lectures, originally published in French in 2010. Although the book is dedicated to the memory of Derrida, it does not include any continuous discussion of Derridean notions. Nonetheless, Balibar makes multiple references to Derrida’s corpus, and the introductory essay ‘Violence and Politics: Questions’ (1-17) is an expanded version of a paper delivered at the 1992 Cerisy conference ‘Le passage des frontières: Autour du travail de Jacques Derrida’ (see

Mallet 1994). In this essay, Balibar takes his departure from Derrida's 'Violence and Metaphysics' (Derrida 2001, 97-192), and in particular the following quote: 'Non-violence is, in one sense, the worst kind of violence' (Balibar 2015c, 1). In isolating and highlighting this quote in the form of an exergue, Balibar suggests that his engagement with Derrida is justified by a shared suspicion of the notion of nonviolence. However, for Balibar, this suspicion is immediately translated into theoretico-political terms. It entails the idea, ubiquitous in *Violence and Civility*, that politics can and should remain conscious of its irreducibly violent character in order to avoid or repel the most extreme forms of violence, thematised by Balibar as 'barbarity' or 'cruelty':

We must issue a call to arms (of which there are many kinds) when necessary in the name of equality and freedom. But we must arouse ourselves against the possibility that politics of emancipation and transformation that combat barbarity produce other forms of barbarity. In other words, we must take risks and know which risks we take. This is the nexus that—with the limited instruments of philosophy—I wanted to elucidate philosophically while I was writing these essays, and composing them into a book. (Balibar 2015c, xv)

The irreducibility of violence entails what Balibar calls a 'politics of the tragic': a self-critical politics, requiring a 'politics of civility' or 'antiviolence'. This implies a constant and aleatory negotiation, itself violent, between 'power' and 'violence', which Balibar conceptualises as 'a latent dialectic or a "unity of opposites"' within the German notion of *Gewalt* (Balibar 2009, 101).

With all these concepts in place (power, violence, *Gewalt*, cruelty), it becomes easy to see why Balibar could refer to Derrida's essays such as 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"' (2002a, 230-298) or 'Psychoanalytic Searches the States of Its Soul: The Impossible Beyond of Sovereign Cruelty' (2002d, 238-280) — which he does in several places. However, here again, these references to Derrida are

incorporated within classic theoretical-political discussions on the nature of violence, power and sovereignty, and this contextualisation results not only in eroding the force and scale of Derrida's deconstructive analyses (of Montaigne, Pascal, Benjamin, Nietzsche, Freud, and so forth), but also in producing reductive misinterpretations of Derridean motifs — such as 'force of law', 'cruelty', *Gewalt* and, quite simply, 'violence'.

A telling illustration may be found in Balibar's analysis of 'the antinomic nature of sovereignty' (2015c, 77). Here, Balibar describes sovereignty as 'an "excessive" (hence perverse) figure of the power of law or of the power legitimized by law'. In Balibar's account, the constitutive inadequacy of sovereignty may lead to excessive manifestations of power under the form of 'cruelty', a claim that Balibar sustains by invoking 'a philosophical tradition embracing Hobbes, Weber, Schmitt, Benjamin, and Derrida, but also Freud and Lacan'. The idea is that 'this inadequacy (or failing) must constantly be compensated by a supplement of the *Gewalt* of law over the "ordinary" exercise of it' (Ibid., 77-78). On the same pages, Balibar explicitly articulates this analysis with Derrida's essay 'Force of Law' and the reflection on performative violence it contains (Ibid., 78-79). Referring to Derrida's notion of 'supplement', Balibar claims that 'the scheme of the reciprocity of power and the law breaks down or must be reestablished by a supplement of law, a supplement of power, or both' (Ibid., 78).

This phrasing suggests that the 'supplement' is understood by Balibar as a pre-deconstructive concept; however, according to Derrida (1997, 167), supplementarity testifies of an 'originary *différance*' unsettling the position, limits and articulation of 'concepts' such as 'power', 'violence', *Gewalt*, 'law', 'legitimacy', and so forth. Indeed, Derrida's reflection on

performative violence cannot be reduced to a theoretico-political diagnosis concerning ‘cruel’ or violent manifestations of sovereign power, at least not in the traditional sense of the term: beyond the limited scope of political theory, Derrida points to a universal structure of law, to an originary performativity which interrogates the circumscription of sovereignty as a specifically ‘political’ concept and challenges the possibility to discriminate once and for all between ‘cruel’ (or ‘perverse’) manifestations of sovereignty and the ‘ordinary’ exercise of power.

Such discrimination (ethico-political in essence) is always possible, of course — but can it found itself on a ‘phenomenology of cruelty’ or a ‘phenomenology of extreme violence’ such as claimed by Balibar (2015c, 69 and 127)? Balibar’s phenomenological gesture is all the more problematic because, even though he frames his politics as non-foundationalist (Ibid., 146-147), he explicitly anchors them in a (pre-deconstructive) representation of ‘the historical present’ (Ibid., 35). As such, Balibar does not account for all the trappings uncovered by Derrida’s ‘economy of violence’ in his reading of Levinas (Derrida 2001, 97-192), nor for his deconstruction of phenomenology’s persistent dependence on a metaphysics of presence (starting, for instance, with Derrida 1973 — but the motif of the *phainesthai*, just like that of violence, is virtually limitless within Derrida’s oeuvre).

The same type of questions may be raised in relation to ‘cruelty’: while Balibar constructs his concept of cruelty explicitly with reference to Derrida’s ‘Psychoanalytic Searches’, he immediately reduces it to a pre-deconstructive concept, identified as ‘a capacity for destruction’ or ‘power to destroy’ (2015c, 59-60 and 143), and proceeds to inscribe it within an onto-phenomenological discourse. By contrast, Derrida demonstrates, in the wake of Nietzsche and Freud, the irreducible

character of cruelty, suggesting that it be a non-delimitable ‘concept’ without contrary (Derrida 2002d, 271). And, in the same text, Derrida *also* contends that the to-come of (psychoanalytic) deconstruction (just like the event ‘itself’) be located ‘beyond any seeing, any visibility, any phenomenality’ (Ibid., 254) — and, he adds, ‘[p]erhaps beyond any cruelty’ (Ibid., 278). Indeed, if the event ‘might’ be cruel (Ibid., 254), such cruelty cannot be thought within the realm of ‘the possible’, of life as self-protective and self-sustaining, that is, within an economy of ‘organic life’ based on what is deemed to be biologically *possible* (Ibid., 274). Beyond this economy of power and possibility, Derrida postulates an undecidable and inappropriable cruelty exceeding *sovereign* cruelty and the primacy of principles — that is, ‘pleasure’, ‘reality’, ‘power’, ‘death’, inasmuch as these are stabilised and ontologised under the form of ‘principles’ or ‘drives’ (Ibid., 280). Derrida thus emphasises the eventness of ‘an im-possible life’ without presence, and from which *present* life (and ethics, or politics), life ‘as such’, may be thought and becomes possible (Ibid., 276). The ‘originary affirmation’ of the impossible offers itself, perhaps cruelly but *without fault* (Ibid., 280), before and beyond any phenomenological or theoretical reconstruction. This is perhaps where the distinction lies between Derrida’s deconstructive ‘economy of violence’ and Balibar’s ‘economy of violence and cruelty’ (2009, 99): ‘The differance (with an *a*) is an economy that counts with the aneconomic’ (Derrida 2002b, 171).

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Such notions challenge the type of reasoning put forward by Balibar — and beg a more general question: is it possible to simply pick and choose deconstructive notions out of Derrida’s sizeable oeuvre? Certainly, it *is possible*, and I am not trying, here, to sacralise

deconstruction by immunising it against the economy of argumentation and all forms of transformative or ex-appropriative readings. But the risk is to approach Derrida as a mere toolkit provider, another supplier in theoretical *bricolage*, without taking seriously the fact that every single tool provided by the philosopher is susceptible to put the whole house of ‘theory’ at risk by threatening its very foundations — and here, we are talking about the house of political theory, which is not *any* house, any *oïkos*. The complexity of Derrida’s differential ‘economy of violence’, his reference to ‘ex-appropriation’ or his reinterpretations of ‘force of law’ and ‘cruelty’ make these notions very difficult to simply use within a so-called ‘theoretical-political’ debate on the nature of ‘individualism’ or on the ‘violence’ of sovereignty — quite simply because these deconstructive notions are meant to first and foremost interrogate the performative violence, the originary performativity of the theoretical gesture itself, starting with its anchorage within disciplinary borders, its recourse to canonical political texts, the repertoire of actors, objects or themes it concerns itself with, and more generally the reductive contexts (linguistic, institutional, and so forth) wherein these debates may emerge. This list should of course remain indefinitely open, because such opening is also thematised within the notions we are talking about here.

The powerful singularity of Balibar’s work, evident in these two major books, resides in his capacity to masterfully inhabit the categories of political theory in order to highlight their inner contradictions and aporetic dimension — which Balibar encapsulates in another important book, *Citizenship*, as “the aporia of conflictual democracy” (2015a, 83-101). In practical terms, this gesture translates into Balibar’s promotion of a democratic ‘agonism’ (2015c, 142-149; see also 2015a, 89-98), which brings him close to contemporary thinkers such as Rancière,

Laclau, or Mouffe. This is why, fittingly, the dominant influences of *Equaliberty* and *Violence and Civility* are to be found in Machiavelli (especially through Althusser's radical re-interpretation), Weber, Arendt or Foucault — rather than in Derrida.

Indeed, despite his acknowledging of the irreducibility of violence, Derrida cannot be considered as an 'agonist' in theoretico-political terms: in its traditional form, the notion of 'agon' suggests a conceptualisation of power and conflictuality 'as such' — a conceptualisation which remains ontological and overly 'recognisable', defined through a political hermeneutics of power or an onto-phenomenology of violence and cruelty. Now, the 'violence' that Derrida speaks about exceeds a mere agonistics or conflictuality in onto-political terms. Rather than simply highlighting or redoubling theoretico-political categories and their internal contradictions, antinomies, or 'points of heresy' (Balibar 2014, 107), deconstruction *also* suggests an affirmative departure from these categories (power, violence, sovereignty, equality, freedom, democracy, citizenship, etc.) — out of faithful unfaithfulness, but beyond dialectical 'contradiction' (Derrida 1981, 72-79). Indeed, what Derrida calls a 'general agonistics' (1979) exceeds traditional theoretico-political categories. It supposes the 'generative force' of a spacing (1981, 106-7), a disseminating force of differential repetition, of deconstruction (Ibid., 85), and the originary 'might' or potency (or *puissance*: Derrida 2006) of an excessive event irreducible to onto-phenomenological models (be it under the form of oppositional logic, or of dialectical reconstruction).

Nothing illustrates this difference better than *Violence and Civility's* dazzling conclusion, wherein Balibar muses on the 'essentially tragic dimension of politics' (2015c, 147). In four gorgeous pages, he proceeds to modernise Max Weber's seminal text 'Politics as Vocation' in order

to make it compatible with a regenerated democratic aspiration, more conscious of its ambiguous relationship to violence understood as ‘the *diabolical* element of power’ (Ibid., 150). This final emphasis on the tragedy of politics is anything but a stylistic affectation: it perfectly espouses Balibar’s general concern with the aporias and contradictions of our hyper-violent times, which calls for ‘a politics of the tragic’ instantiated in the *Krisis* of our present. However, as a young Derrida wrote in ‘The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation’: ‘What is tragic is not the impossibility but the necessity of repetition’ (2001, 313) — and in this necessary iterability, in this ‘repetition of difference’ (Ibid., 316), the tragic contradiction is already exceeded, and opens itself to the messianic, to the im-possible beyond of an event older and greater than the presence of the present.

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