*Identity and the Politics of Civility*:
*A Review Essay of Étienne Balibar's* Violence and Civility *and*
*Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp's* Violence, politique et civilité aujourd'hui

Étienne Balibar, *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Philosophy*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian, Columbia University Press, 2015, 232 pp., $30.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780231153980.

Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp, ed., *Violence, politique et civilité aujourd'hui: La Turquie aux prises avec ses tourments*, L'Harmattan, 2014, 76 pp., $16.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9782343030364.

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In *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Philosophy*, which comprises reworked versions of his 1996 Wellek Lectures at the University of California, Irvine, Étienne Balibar attempts to think through the consequences of an aporia that lies at the heart of modern Western political practice and reflection. On the one hand, the idea that violence can and must be eliminated "is a constitutive element of our idea of politics" (2). This idea is expressed especially clearly in the early modern social contract theories that posit a state of nature—a state of affairs in which persons engage "with one another only in terms of the degree of force each has"—which must be left behind and replaced by the political state, characterized as the "union of a multitude of human beings under laws of right."[1] But on the other hand, history strongly suggests that we do not know how to do this. Our best efforts to eliminate violence from political life have never entirely succeeded, and in fact have often contributed to the production of even more violence. This, Balibar thinks, is a genuine aporia in the sense of the term suggested by its etymology: there really is no way out of it. Nonetheless, we must discover a way of maneuvering within the aporia, since renouncing the political project altogether is obviously not an option. Neither, of course, does it make sense to continue to pursue the political project in accordance with the same old models. Balibar's primary goal in *Violence and Civility* is to argue that the best response to the aporia

[1] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 456 [6: 312; 313]. Page numbers in brackets refer to those of the Akademie Edition.

consists in what he calls a politics of civility, which aims not to suppress all violence, but rather to exclude the extreme forms of violence that render politics impossible. Balibar has developed many of the central ideas of *Violence and Civility* in other texts, most importantly in some of the essays collected in his *Politics and the Other Scene*, but in no other text has he presented his argument so coherently and so comprehensively.[2] This makes *Violence and Civility* an ideal beginning point for anyone approaching Balibar's political philosophy for the first time. As he often does, though, Balibar develops his argument through close readings of important texts from the history of philosophy. Because these readings are so detailed and so interesting in their own right, it is easy to miss the forest for the trees, losing sight of the thread of argument that runs through the text. In what follows, then, I will attempt to state the argument of the text as straightforwardly as possible.

Balibar's argument in *Violence and Civility* can be understood as divided into three main parts. First, on the basis of his readings of Hobbes and Hegel, Balibar shows the different ways in which modern political theory and practice have failed to eliminate violence, leaving a remainder that he characterizes as "extreme violence." Second, he describes the two heterogeneous forms that extreme violence takes—what he calls ultraobjective and ultrasubjective violence—and attempts to trace the genesis of each. Finally, he suggests the broad outlines of a politics of civility that would function to exclude both of these forms.

The idea that politics emerges as a response to the problem of violence is associated most closely with the work of Thomas Hobbes. As is well known, Hobbes characterizes the pre-political state of nature as a "war of all against all."[3] Because the condition of persons in the state of nature is one of near equality, such that anyone would have a reasonable fear of being killed by anyone else, it is unlikely that the war of all against all would end with a decisive victory. The condition of war, then, would be likely to continue indefinitely. But this is intolerable. By what Hobbes calls a law of natural necessity, all persons strive to preserve their own lives, and what this obviously requires is that they do everything in their power to exit the state of nature. The only way to do this, Hobbes thinks, is for everyone to surrender his or her "right to all things,"[4] establishing a commonwealth whose sovereign possesses what will later be called a "monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force."[5] But this Hobbesian strategy, which Balibar characterizes as a strategy of counterviolence, does not so much eliminate violence as displace it. The Hobbesian state, Balibar argues, "can keep the peace in the social body only if it is virtually at war with it. The state is the bosom enemy of the society it protects" (32). Because the primary function of the state is to eliminate violence from society, it must be constantly suspicious of its own members. It thus "'interpellates individuals as subjects' (potentially violent, deviant, or rebellious individuals) in order to protect them against their own passions…" (32). As such, it is constantly haunted by the possibility of the return of the violence it strives to repress.

The second major strategy for the elimination of violence—which Balibar characterizes as the strategy of conversion—is exemplified most clearly by Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. On Hegel's account, violence is meaningful through and through. Its meaning

[2] Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. Christine Jones, James Swenson, and Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002). Hereafter POS. See especially chapters 1 and 7.

[3] Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. and trans. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 30.

[4] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Revised Student Edition, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 92.

[5] Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation" in Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 78.

derives from the process of history, which just is the process of its conversion into legitimate, rational authority. At each stage of history we find a contradiction between infinite freedom and its finite instantiation in political institutions. These contradictions are resolved by "world-historical individuals" who advance the process of history by violently destroying inherited social and political structures. From the point of view of the existing structures, the actions of such world-historical individuals look like crimes. But a broader view reveals the deeper meaning of these crimes, which consists in their realizing the purposes of reason, effecting more legitimate political orders. As Balibar notes, though, we can no longer sustain this kind of historical optimism (49). We have good reason to doubt that violence is always meaningful, that destruction is always more basically construction; as Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and many others have taught us to see, there are forms of inconvertible violence that persist beneath the surface of official political representation (50). And as the twentieth century has definitively shown, history is characterized less by a progressive conversion of violence than by a cyclical return of apparently atavistic forms of cruelty (63).

Balibar's point in reviewing the two strategies is not merely to demonstrate that they have left a certain amount of violence unsuppressed or unconverted. Of course no state has completely succeeded in eliminating every sort of violence, including everything from violent crime and economic domination to bullying and microaggressions. Instead, Balibar wants to draw our attention to the ways in which the two strategies have failed to eliminate, and have even contributed to, the specific form of violence that he calls extreme violence. What makes this form of violence so important is that it undermines "the conditions of possibility of politics, beginning with the very possibility of struggle or agon" (142). One kind of extreme violence—what Balibar calls ultraobjective violence—"reduces human beings to the status of things that can be eliminated or instrumentalized at will in a world of commodities" (141). The classic example is the industrial reserve army described by Marx, a mass of proletarians whose labor is not needed but whose very superfluousness is valued by the owners of the means of production for its role in keeping wages low. Other examples include victims of epidemics and natural disasters in the global South and the Latin American *poblácion chatarra* or "junk people" who "have no place in the national and international plans for production and exchange."[6] The other kind of extreme violence— what Balibar calls ultrasubjective violence—treats individuals and groups as "incarnations of evil, diabolical powers that threaten the subject from within and have to be eliminated at all costs, up to and including self-destruction" (52). This kind of violence, Balibar thinks, has its origin in the community's having adopted an absolutely reified, fetishized identity, such that its most pressing imperative is to exclude any sort of otherness even at the price of its own destruction (60). The target of ultrasubjective violence is conceived not as a mere thing but rather as an implacable enemy whose very existence constitutes a mortal threat. Of course the most prominent example of this is Nazi Germany and its relation to its Jewish population. Both ways of engaging with others—as things to be managed and as incorrigibly evil threats to collective identity—foreclose the possibility of a genuinely political relation. In neither case do we deal with others, in Rawls's memorable phrase, as "self-originating sources of valid claims."[7] There is no space left open for anything like cooperative, open-

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[6] Bertrand Ogilvie, "Violence et représentation: La production de l'homme jetable" in *L'homme jetable, Essai sur l'exterminisme et la violence extrême* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2012), 128. Quoted in Balibar, 56.

[7] John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980): 543.

ended deliberation concerning the terms in accordance with which people will live together. The relation of extreme violence is rather the non-political relation of pure domination.

Although Balibar believes it is valuable for purposes of analysis to treat ultraobjective and ultrasubjective violence as two distinct kinds, he also believes that they are intimately connected, like the two sides of a Möbius strip (72-73). In our dealings with others, we often find the two forms passing into each other in a way that seems entirely natural. I believe the Syrian refugee crisis provides a contemporary example of this. On the one hand, we in the West tend to view the crisis as a kind of natural disaster whose consequences must be managed. The refugees themselves are viewed as a burden to be borne (or to be resisted). For the most part, we do not view the refugees as making legitimate claims that we are obligated to take seriously; especially in Europe, they are present simply as a mass of humanity that must be dealt with in one way or another. But on the other hand, the refugees are also treated as dangerous enemies. In the United States, for example, thirty-one governors have refused to allow Syrian refugees into their states, citing concerns that the refugees will commit terrorist acts. Given the very rigorous vetting process that all refugee applicants go through in the United States, the likelihood that admitted refugees will commit acts of terrorist violence is quite low. The very pervasive fear of violence seems to have its basis, then, simply in the fact that the refugees are Muslims and that "we" are most decidedly not. The very presence of "them"—including even young orphans—is a threat. Despite the fact that being a mere thing is incompatible with being a subject with evil intentions, we slide back and forth between these conceptions with very little difficulty.

Stated somewhat schematically, the task of politics, on Balibar's account, is to prevent the extreme forms of violence from coinciding, to ensure that they "are separated by a distance that prevents individuals and groups (or 'societies') from being caught in the trap represented by the ideological deliriums of identity or economic and ecological disasters" (96). This conception of politics is explicitly opposed to the Aristotelian conception. For Aristotle, politics is "the common praxis of citizens" for whom matters of necessity are no longer the most pressing. Freed from the concerns of "the production and reproduction of life and the means of subsistence," citizens are able to work together toward establishing the conditions necessary not merely for life but for the good life (97). For Balibar, on the other hand, politics must not be oriented first and foremost by any kind of ideal, but rather by a concern to preserve its own eminently fragile conditions of possibility; its primary concern must be to maintain "the precarious gap between the heterogeneous forms of extreme violence that threaten it with collapse from within" (98).

This, of course, brings us to the $64,000 question: how, precisely, do we do this? How do we keep extreme violence at bay, thus preserving the conditions of possibility for politics? Balibar's answer, developed in Chapter 4, is that we must practice what he calls a politics of civility. Balibar never explains precisely what he means by civility other than to say that it is the sort of politics whose aim is to resist extreme violence. Instead of providing a single, coherent theory of civility, Balibar unpacks the meaning of the concept by describing three different examples of it. The first of these, which he calls the strategy of hegemony, is based largely on the idea of *Sittlichkeit* that Hegel develops in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. One of the most important roles of the state, on Hegel's account, is to provide a stable framework within which individuals can be recognized in their various identities. An individual has a "natural" identity based on his kinship relations, but he also has a more freely chosen identity based on the place he occupies within civil society. And at the highest level of abstraction, the individual is conceived as a citizen. These identities acquire social stability in the constitution, which officially recognizes them. Because all identities are

socially mediated, individuals are present within the state neither as self-identical, natural things nor as radically other to the constituted community.[8] For the strategy of hegemony, then, it is the mediation of identity that preserves the space of politics against the two forms of extreme violence. Balibar is suspicious of this strategy, though, because it requires the normalization of individuals' identities and because the processes of normalization unavoidably entail a certain degree of violence (113-114). He is more optimistic about the other two examples of the politics of civility: the majoritarian and minoritarian strategies. The former is an emancipatory strategy undertaken by various groups within society who are subjected to the domination of an oppressive minority. These heterogeneous groups work together to create a "people" that is "capable of yoking the emancipation of each of its component parts to the service of their common liberation" (109-110). Although Balibar believes that majoritarian movements are necessary for preserving the conditions of possibility of politics, he also recognizes their dangers. Most importantly, majoritarian movements run the risk of mimetically reproducing the ultrasubjective violence of the state apparatuses they oppose, viewing their perceived enemies as mortal threats to be eliminated (118). This is why a minoritarian strategy is equally indispensable. This strategy, inspired by the ideas of deterritorialization and becoming that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari develop in *A Thousand Plateaus*, calls not for the creation of new, revolutionary identities but rather for a fluidification of identities. This strategy helps to prevent the formation of the kinds of rigidified identities that give rise to the desire to violently exclude perceived others. But Balibar worries that this strategy valorizes the deracination that already results from processes of economic globalization, which act on human beings as if they were mere things. To go too far in fluidifying identity, then, would be to run the risk of reproducing ultraobjective violence. The politics of civility thus requires a balance between the majoritarian and minoritarian strategies.

Is this response to the problem of extreme violence satisfactory? I suspect that many readers will be convinced by Balibar's careful, detailed accounts of the aporia of politics and of the dangers of ultrasubjective and ultraobjective violence, but will find his proposal for a politics of civility considerably less compelling. I would like to focus specifically on three potential worries. First, it seems that Balibar has drawn his picture of the politics of civility in such broad strokes that it ends up raising more questions than it answers. How can we tell, for example, whether our political practices are striking the right kind of balance between identification and disidentification? How can we know when it is appropriate to run the risks associated with each? How do we know when we have gone too far in one direction or the other? Following Deleuze and Guattari, Balibar seems to suggest that political actors require phronesis in order to judge well in these matters (124). In the absence of at least a little more contentful guidance, though, it is not clear that phronesis can carry the burden it is being asked to carry. Indeed, it appears as if the invocation of phronesis functions more to highlight the problem than to resolve it.

Second—and this is closely related to the first worry—who are the "we" who pursue the strategies of civility? It is "we," presumably, who must carefully steer the course between ultrasubjective and ultraobjective violence, preserving the fragile conditions of possibility for politics. But this "we" is not given. It is not a national "we" or a class-based "we." It is not even the thinner post-national "we" of Habermasian constitutional patriotism. It is essential

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[8] I should state explicitly here that this is my own construction of Balibar's argument. At no point does he explain precisely how the recognition of social identities within the state contributes to the exclusion of the extreme forms of violence.

to Balibar's proposal that the "we" not be given, that its sense should remain in question. But this seems to undermine the sense of common purpose that is necessary to motivate individuals to share the burdens and benefits of coordinated action.

The third concern one might have about the politics of civility is that it sets the bar too low. Balibar offers no prescriptions for bringing about forms of political life in which we would finally be able to realize our highest aspirations. His politics is oriented less by the pull of positive ideals—of the Good or the Just, for example—than by the imperative to keep at bay at least the very worst forms of violence. This fundamentally defensive conception of political action does not seem very inspiring. Even if we grant that the conditions of possibility for politics are fragile and that we must take great care to preserve them against the threats of extreme violence, we might still insist, following Aristotle, that the real business of politics is to promote the conditions within which human beings will be able to flourish. To aim lower than this is to undersell the power of political philosophy.

I believe that Balibar has the resources to respond to all of these worries. The response to the first and third worries would be broadly the same: if one accepts the premises contained in what I have called the first and second parts of Balibar's argument, then one is committed to accept a somewhat deflationary version of the politics of civility. Most importantly, Balibar believes that the project of politics really is aporetic: we must eliminate violence, but we do not know how. Despite our best efforts, he thinks, we will always be forced to reckon with a certain quantity of inconvertible violence. In an interview from 2005, Balibar characterized his commitment to the aporetic nature of politics as a kind of skepticism: "it is the profound conviction that practical solutions in politics as well as in life cannot be anticipated by theory."[9] The philosopher is simply not in a position to lay down a definitive set of prescriptions that activists could rely on in their efforts to establish just political orders. According to Balibar, the political philosopher should do "exactly the opposite," working to undermine the "illusionary element of certitude" that theory tends to provide.[10] Because we have no access to a God's-eye view of political dynamics, we must do our best to invent solutions case by case. Balibar offers as an example the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There is simply no hope for a genuinely just solution to this conflict, he thinks. Nor is it likely that either side will achieve total victory as defined by its own aims. On the one hand, the Israelis must recognize that the Palestinians are not going to leave voluntarily and that exterminating them or maintaining them in the position of second-class citizens is not a viable long-term strategy. And the Palestinians must recognize that the Israelis are not going to leave either. Political philosophy cannot point the way to an ideally just and non-violent solution to this impasse: "something has to be *invented* and that's why Palestine is so important."[11] This uncertain work of invention is an essential part of the politics of civility.

The response to the second worry—the one concerning the identity of the "we" who pursue the politics of civility—relies on ideas that Balibar develops in more detail in other texts. In his "Three Concepts of Politics: Emancipation, Transformation, Civility," Balibar argues that "every identity is *ambiguous*…. Every individual combines several identities, which are unevenly significant, unevenly conflicted."[12] This fact is simply irreducible. We have identities linked to gender, ethnicity, religion, occupation, sexual preference, language, etc.

[9] Diane Enns, "A Conversation with Étienne Balibar," *Symposium: The Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 9 (2005): 392.
[10] Ibid., 391.
[11] Ibid., 390.
[12] Étienne Balibar, "Three Concepts of Politics: Emancipation, Transformation, Civility" in Balibar, POS, 28.

Social conflict often crystallizes around these different identities. Which identities are most salient and which remain in the background is determined to some extent by these conflicts, which of course change over time. Every society, then, must develop means of regulating these identity-based conflicts. For the state to try to resolve the conflicts by imposing from the top down a single, homogeneous identity on the entire population would be to run the risk of ultrasubjective violence. And to try to resolve the conflicts by promoting a "'postmodern' utopia" of freely floating identifications would be to run the risk of ultraobjective violence.[13] The politics of civility, which attempts to preserve the space between these two extremes, has no choice then but to learn to live with the ambiguity and open-endedness of identity.

<p style="text-align:center">2.</p>

Another recently published book, titled *Violence, politique et civilité aujourd'hui: La Turquie aux prises avec ses tourments*, picks up on many of these themes, demonstrating the real difficulties that arise in applying the politics of civility to concrete cases. The book was published in conjunction with a major conference, held in May of 2014 in Istanbul, which was devoted to Balibar's *Violence and Civility* and to developing the political, philosophical, and anthropological implications of its leading ideas. The book comprises three essays: "Les luttes cloisonnées contre le pieuvre: les luttes anti-militaristes et féministes en Turquie" by the sociologist and political activist Pinar Selek, "L'autoritarisme et la violence: La Turquie face à ses démons" by the economist and columnist Ahmet Insel, and "Violence et politique: quelques questions" by Étienne Balibar. (The essay by Balibar is the first chapter of *Violence and Civility*.) Although the former two essays do not make explicit reference to Balibar's work, they develop many of the same themes, focusing specifically on violence and civility in the Turkish social and political context.

Insel's and Selek's essays both give special emphasis to the problem of identity and its relation to violence. Insel's essay focuses on the violence that is produced as a consequence of the Turkish state's attempt to impose a unified, homogeneous identity from the top down. Since the establishment of the republic in 1923, Turkey has been strongly committed to the fusion of the state and the nation. The founding principle of the new state, inscribed on the wall behind the Speaker's desk in the Grand National Assembly, is that "sovereignty unconditionally belongs to the nation." Because of its obsession with national unity, Turkish society has had a very difficult time accepting internal differences (39). But the republic has been multiethnic and multireligious from the very beginning, and so it has always had to deal with difference one way or another. It has tended to do so by treating those who did not conform to the dominant Turkish identity with suspicion. Opposition to dominant norms, according to Insel, has tended to be viewed as a kind of incipient treachery (37). In Balibar's words, the state acts as the bosom enemy of the society it claims to protect, interpellating minority and non-conforming subjects as "potentially violent, deviant, or rebellious individuals." Viewing these subjects as threats to its very existence, Turkey has consistently pursued a policy of pre-emptive violence, including torture, abuse of the judicial process, and deportation (40). This violence has been carried out in successive waves against non-Muslim populations, against Kurds demanding state recognition of their ethnic identity, against Alevis who have resisted assimilation into Sunni Islam, and against socialist and democratic political movements (40-41). Insel believes that these authoritarian tendencies have become

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[13] Ibid., 29.

even more pronounced since 2002, when the socially conservative and nationalist AKP came to power. The fact that the AKP has consistently won parliamentary majorities since then suggests that the state's commitment to national unity and homogeneity has broad popular support. This, of course, is worrying. But Insel is also cautiously optimistic: he believes that demands for pluralism, for increased rights of political participation, and for a decrease in social violence are becoming progressively stronger in Turkey, and that such demands will be the key to effecting the transition to a more genuinely democratic society.

In order to bring about the more democratic future that Insel envisions, it will be necessary to pursue the delicate balance of identification and disidentification that characterizes Balibar's politics of civility. And this brings us to Pinar Selek's essay, which highlights both the necessity and the difficulties of achieving such a balance. Selek emphasizes the way in which the model of Turkish identity that has been promoted since 1923 has been explicitly militaristic and that this has gone hand in hand with a conception of the identity "woman" that has been oppressive for Turkish women. Because the military functions as a masculinizing institution, and because militaristic values have traditionally enjoyed such great prestige, women in Turkey have been treated as second-class citizens: they can be recognized as patriots in their service to the republic, but in their private lives they remain subject to their fathers or husbands (23). To pursue the emancipation of women, then, feminists have attempted to undermine the officially promoted conception of womanhood. One valuable way for feminists to do this, according to Selek, would be to form alliances with the anti-militarist movement. If it is true that the dominant masculine values of the state are closely connected with certain militarizing practices, then the feminist and anti-militarist causes should overlap (21). But as Selek points out, cooperation, when it has existed at all, has been difficult. The anti-militarist movement has tended to focus its attention on conscientious objectors while the feminist movement has focused too narrowly on women's rights, so that the two groups have consistently proceeded along their own separate paths (27). They have been unable, in other words, to form a "we" with an identity sufficiently contentful to create a politically effective sense of solidarity. If each group identifies too closely with its own most pressing concerns, then the alliances essential to the majoritarian strategy remain weak. On the other hand, the groups' most pressing concerns are connected to their given identities, from which they have good reason to resist disidentifying too much. As Balibar has suggested, it seems there can be no successful negotiation of this tension between movements of identification and disidentification without the exercise of phronesis.

I believe that *Violence, politique et civilité aujourd'hui: La Turquie aux prises avec ses tourments* will be valuable for anyone interested either in contemporary Turkish emancipatory movements or in concrete applications of Étienne Balibar's political philosophy, and in particular his conception of a politics of civility. The essays are written in a straightforward, relatively jargon-free style that should make them accessible to intelligent and motivated undergraduates. I would not characterize the book as essential reading for scholars in politics, philosophy, Middle Eastern Studies, or sociology, but I nonetheless recommend it highly.

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