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Some Questions on Politics and Violence

Derrida once wrote that "non-violence in a sense is the worse form of violence," He did not say that they were equivalent, or synonymous, he said *in a sense,* which also means: in some circumstances. But then it may prove worse and more violent than open, or crude violence itself. I agree with this idea, which doesn't seem to me to take us back to some pessimistic view of human nature, but rather to warn us against the illusion that there would exist absolute ways out of the condition of violence, or absolute means to master it. The question becomes, then: how to manage with violence under its different forms, how to choose among them and counter them.

I want to confront this question with the experiences and discourses of politics. It seems that violence, be it "private" or "public," "domestic" or "international," has been reaching a degree such that the very *idea* of politics is destabilized, since this idea was always associated with an overcoming (*Aufhebung*) of violence. So had said Hobbes and Kant: "we must find a way out of it" (be it called Power, Law, or Civilization). It seems that the ambivalency of violence (not only the difficulty of identifying victims and oppressors, but the difficulty of separating the positive and the negative sides of violence) has reached such a degree that the traditional *negations of violence* (what we may call the strategy of *non-violence* and the strategy of *counter-violence*) have lost the references they need to be meaningful (some would say: "rational") political strategies.

But were these traditional strategies ever safe? Each of them could be presented as an absolute only by proving how inefficient and/or unjust the other was; and this typical "antinomy of politics" was displayed as well by State-politics and by the politics of Revolution. In both cases it culminated precisely in the definition

and use of an "antinomic" concept of politics. So the *Leviathan* was presented as the concentration of violence in one point, outside "society" and above it, which took all the evil for itself in order to free the social life from it. So as well the Revolutionary upsurge was imagined as the *last violence*, the one which by its very radicality destroys for ever (the conditions of any) violence.

Structuralist analyses of the conditions of violence could not completely free themselves, and free us from these sacred mysteries, although they approached a *finite* vision of the connection between violence and politics, which supposes not only recognizing that there are material *conditions* on which the production of violence depends, and consequently the development of liberation movements which have always already begun in the very experience of oppression, but *also* that there is an *excess*, or a supplementary effect of violence on these conditions themselves. Marx provided this structural analysis for the economic conditions of class violence. Spinoza earlier had provided it for the ideological conditions of symbolic violence (which is the one at stake, notably, in ethnic-religious conflicts). Although neither of them, it seems to me, was really able to describe the "overdetermined effects" of economy and ideology, which lay at the core of the unpredictability and apparent irrationality of violence from a political point of view, both can contribute to the emergence of an hypothetic *third strategy* (or third "negation"), which I would call *anti-violence*, i.e., the set of practices which become necessary when it appears that the "civil state" has become *more violent* than any "state of nature."

This seems to be all the more necessary to think further in an era when institutional violence, preventive repression, and the cycle of military and humanitarian interventions has reached an unprecedented level.