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Journal Article

How to cite:

Aradau, Claudia (2006). Only Aporias to Offer? Étienne Balibar's Politics and the Ambiguity of War. *New Formations*, 58 pp. 39–46.

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Version: [not recorded]

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ONLY APORIAS TO OFFER? ETIENNE BALIBAR'S POLITICS AND THE AMBIGUITY OF WAR

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Etienne Balibar's intellectual trajectory can be described as a series of post-Marxist and anti-fascist interventions in a conjuncture defined by tensions and conflicts over the fate of historical materialism, class struggle, and leftist politics more generally.¹ Faithful to an understanding of philosophy which resonates with Althusserian echoes, his interventions attempt to untie and retie the knot between conjuncture and writing, to untie the elements of the conjuncture from within the element of writing and retie the conditions of writing under the constraint of the conjuncture.² The interview with Etienne Balibar and Sandra Mezzadra published by *New Formations* engages in this double move of untying the conjuncture from within philosophy and retying philosophy under the imperatives of the conjuncture. The conjuncture addressed both in the interview and in the recent English translations of Balibar's work is that of global war, the crisis of the national social state, the fortification of borders, racism and 'apartheid'.³ Philosophically, the elements of Balibar's writing are under the influence of Marx, Spinoza, Althusser, Foucault or Arendt. Best known to the English audience through his 'fidelity' to Althusser, Balibar's recent writings on politics engage with the work Jacques Rancière, another of Althusser's students and contributors to *Reading Capital*.⁴

Unlike Althusser however, Etienne Balibar unties the conjuncture in a singular way. His is not an analysis of how power functions, not a synthesis of contradictions or an exploration of a politics of resistance. Balibar's recent work reveals political possibilities in what he sees as the aporetic constitution of the present conjuncture. To face up to the difficulties of the conjuncture, the proper philosophical position is to elucidate its uncertainties, enigmas and aporias and orient thinking towards the conditions of possibility of the future.⁵ His interventions are meant to shed light on the 'paradoxes of actuality' as he said in relation to the European constitution. Contrary to Derrida,

Balibar's aporias are not interminable resistances or remainders implied by the very experience of the impossible.⁶ Aporias are defined between necessity and impossibility, as the aporia of Europe which is straddled between the necessity of inventing new names for politics, new images of the people for a new Europe and the impossibility of reformulating the relation between ethnos (membership in a political community) and demos (the continued creation of citizenship through collective struggles).⁷

As our task is to untie and expose the elements of the conjuncture in their blockages and limitations, Balibar can reverse Marx's famous formula: we have enough transformed the world, now it is time to interpret it.⁸ It is not a break-up with Marxism that Balibar has in mind here, but a new mode of engaging with the real. Thus, an analysis of the European 'apartheid' through the tensions entailed by the absolutisation of national values, discourses of colonialism and the construction of a European identity leads to the reformulation of an anti-racist politics, a politics of active citizenship and '*residency citizenship*, i.e. political equality among residents in the generalized public space of "post-national" Europe (3).⁹ The aporia of borders as the 'non-democratic conditions of democracy' can be open to democratisation, their discretionary character placed under collective control of the people. The conditions of global war can be modified by a 'vanishing mediator', a Europe which can perform the function of translation between the cultures and languages of the world, on condition of withdrawing or disappearing in its own intervention.¹⁰

In the interview, both Balibar and Mezzadra locate the condition of war at the heart of the analysis of the present. Balibar's engagement with the concept of war is an engagement with a politics for the present, as war is both a condition of the real and a condition of politics. In the line of Hardt and Negri's global state of war, Sandro Mezzadra speaks about the ubiquity of war, its increasing role in shaping social relations within unified political spaces combined with a form of 'traditional war that develops independently of the regulations set up by international law (11).¹¹ Balibar would also speak of the 'militarisation of society' and elsewhere of the 'militarisation of politics'. In the wake of 9/11, war has become the definitory condition of our conjuncture and we are 'more and more living and thinking and acting, or reacting, under a sort of dominant pressure which comes from the vicinity of war' (11). The globalisation of real war, its

effects upon society raise the very pertinent problematique of the form of leftist politics possible under conditions of war. For both Marx and Foucault, the model of war was the imaginary horizon of politics. Yet, politics as war has also found a conservative revolutionary formulation in the work of Carl Schmitt. The interview points to the paradox of politics as war: politics proper must avoid war as its horizon, while remaining conflictual, a politics of disagreement against the other form of depoliticisation, liberal consensus. Although the interview broaches these questions of the ambiguity of war and the relation of war to politics, it does not discuss Balibar's concept of politics understood as *egaliberté* (equaliberty) and civility. His concept of politics remains however a form of conflictual politics that avoids both the dangers of war and the dangers of consensus (14). It is not simply a theoretical interest that underpins the importance of the politics of equaliberty and civility, but the fact that it is a politics to be practiced under the conditions of a global war sustained by an economic and security consensus.

Politics as war

For both Carl Schmitt and Michel Foucault, war was part of an anti-liberal critical move.¹² War can be seen as defining both the politics of the state and revolutionary or insurrectional politics. Foucault's recasting of politics as war was fundamental to the exposure of the disciplinary and biopolitical technologies that have taken hold of life rather than benign fostering of life as the ultimate value of peaceful governmentality. The warlike practices of power expose the struggles against power and challenge the legitimation of certain forms of violence by the state.¹³ The analyser of war redefines the functioning of power in liberal societies. It has lead to criticism against Foucault's supposed equation of fascist and liberal regimes. The critical import of war as an analyser is not however to show the continuity between forms of power – which would go against the grain of Foucault's analyses of discontinuities – but to expose the functioning of the supposedly peaceful liberal order. The conceptualisation of politics as war can be seen as the counterpart to the liberal ban of war outside the realm of politics. Since Hobbes, war has been banned to the international 'state of nature' where states can behave as free individuals. Peace, security and order can only be achieved through a process of

permanent ordering, regulation and normalisation of the subject. Civil peace requires not only a sovereign, but also a population trained and educated in the civic virtues of justice, gratitude and complaisance¹⁴. The Hobbesian commonwealth is ordered through disciplinary strategies that make citizens docile and abiding by the laws of civil society.

If Foucault's 'politics as war' exposes the practices of pacified liberal states, Schmitt's concept of war is the permanent horizon of politics. 'War as the most extreme political means', Schmitt argues, 'discloses the possibility that underlies every political idea, namely, the distinction of friend and enemy'.¹⁵ War is however more than the extreme possibility of the political tension. It functions as a fictional hypothesis that makes the ordering of liberal spaces possible. As Balibar has pointed out, the necessity of the state in Hobbes can only be accountable in terms of 'a permanent state of exception, a limit-experience rooted in the possibility of reversal of civil peace into violence and civil war'.¹⁶ War and violence are not simply the premises of the hypothetical state of nature, but enable the peaceful condition of the commonwealth through the permanent spectre of the exception.

A Foucauldian reading of Schmitt would see the exception, the possibility of war, as a fictional strategy that allows for the deployment of disciplinary and biopolitical technologies of power to order and regulate the population. 'Politics as war' negates the liberal relegation of war outside politics at the expense of a 'preventive counter-violence' against social struggles.¹⁷ It also negates the supposedly peaceful liberal politics of negotiation and discussion with a view to achieving consensus, as it shows civil peace underpinned by warring forms of power. The state organises another form of violence, the violence necessary to maintain or re-establish an order threatened by destruction or subversion. The entire organisation of the state can therefore be understood 'as a system of preventive defence against the mass movements that form the basis of civil wars (of classes and of religions) and of revolutions'.¹⁸

Schmitt's concept of war as the horizon of politics has opposite effects to Foucault's war as an analyser of power relations. While Foucault attempts to uncover resistance and struggles which have been silenced by the pacified liberal order, Schmitt disavows such struggles in the name of a politics that creates the political community as a homogeneous entity to confront the enemy. The 'ubiquity of war' (11) and the more

general trench war that the 'war on terrorism' has opened against migrants can be understood as a Foucauldian reading of Schmitt.¹⁹ The continuity of war in social and political life explored by Foucault does not have much purchase for a liberalism which has shed its 'pacified' technologies of power and has engaged into an indefinite war on terror. War is no longer the disavowed possibility of politics, but politics has become war in the most extreme sense envisaged by Schmitt. Politics is not warlike, but *is* war.

Politics as liberal consensus

The politics of consensus is liberalism's own answer to the dangers of war. Yet, Schmitt has shown consensual politics as cognate to politics as war through its disavowed condition of possibility. The politics of liberal consensus is on the one hand a politics of representation of interests and negotiation and on the other a politics of 'realism', of solving social problems by having recourse to the objectivity of expertise. As a politics of negotiation, liberal consensus excludes the enemies of liberalism. As a politics of management, it is subsumed to the necessity of economy or the necessity of security.

A politics of negotiation and consensus depends on the exclusion of the enemies of liberalism. Thus politics as war, the distinction between friends and enemies is the condition of possibility of liberalism. Schmitt's distinction between *hostis* and *inimicus* (enemy and foe), between properly political enemies and foes to be eliminated points to a paradox at the heart of liberalism.²⁰ A politics of negotiation or a liberal space of civil peace can only be achieved through the elimination of the foes of liberalism. The foes are the unjust enemies, bandits, pirates and revolutionaries. For both Schmitt and the liberals, those are anathema to the unfolding of a politics defined by negotiation and consensus-forming strategies. The common enemy of both Schmitt and liberalism is the one which threatens civil peace and maintenance of stability. Where Schmitt and the liberals part ways is exactly in the way they close down politics, by excluding those who threaten the order of the state and creating political enemies or adversaries. Schmitt effects this closure of politics through the idea of the homogeneous community, whose substance can vary historically from the nation-form to that of the German *Volk*, but whose homogeneity gives content to the state.²¹ Liberalism reformulates politics as a

competition between acknowledged agents and closes down politics by strategies of recognising adversaries.

Recent leftist attempts to criticise the disavowed violence of liberalism, while keeping conflict as the model of politics reproduce the exclusion of enemies that Schmitt has enacted. Agonism, as put forward by Chantal Mouffe or William Connolly, combines continual tension with respect for the adversary in a mode of ‘restrained contestation among friends, lovers and adversaries who exercise reciprocal respect and self-limitation through mutual appreciation of the problematical bases from which they proceed’.²² Yet, this is the very model of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum*, of the rationalisation and humanisation of war among sovereign states in Europe at the expense of more violent wars elsewhere. The bracketing of war is only possible due to the discovery of the New World as a ‘free space’ where the darker conflicts can be fought out with impunity. Agonism has therefore already necessarily excluded or displaced those who would not be restrained, the foes or antagonistic enemies. Agonism, just like consensual liberalism, excludes the enemies of radical democracy. It de-differentiates social struggles, including them in a pluralism of identities that could accommodate difference in a lower intensity of contestation and excludes social struggles that claim the restructuring of society and of the political space of radical democracy. Consensual politics excludes excessive or surplus interlocutors²³, as it presupposes the already given identities of the interlocutors, their existence as parties in an a priori defined political space.

Consensual politics allows us to understand the resurgence of racism in liberal societies. Racism is not the negation of liberalism, but its very condition as the ‘constitution of each individual as a threat to community [becomes] the strict correlate of the consensual requirement of a community wholly realised’.²⁴ Migrants become the radical other, those who are to be excluded from the already defined political community. Post-9/11 there has been a transformation in what Jacques Rancière has identified as the two regimes of consensual politics, economy and security.²⁵ Although the transformation has been underway for longer, the indefinite war on terror has projected it globally. The transformation is that from a consensual politics defined under the necessity of economic requirements and the necessity to respond to increasing insecurity. The managerial, expert politics that has mobilised knowledge to find answers to social problems tries now

to manage security problems. Both security and economy function as forms of depoliticisation of political action under the imperative of necessity. The global war privileges this matrix of consensual politics, a matrix focused on preventing or eliminating insecurity. Rather than a community of interest, it creates a community of fear closed upon itself. Fear against the threatening other, the one who has no place in the already defined empirical community transposes borders from the edge of the territory to the centre of the political space. It is not only external borders that keep migrants in a permanent situation of insecurity, but internal borders, the anthropological and institutional borders that turn second-generation migrants from lawful citizens into unwelcome, unintegrated and hence dangerous foreigners. Balibar is right to argue that there is no hegemonic alternative nowadays to the necessity of the market and the necessity of security (11). As the market has no outside and global capitalism has encompassed the world, spaces for alternative practices become virtually non-existent.

Politics as equaliberty and civility

The blockages of the conjuncture and the folding of politics onto the twin poles of war and consensus can however be open to another analysis. Contra the liberal tradition that privileges either equality or liberty, Balibar retrieves another tradition of thought going back to the French revolution. The Declaration of rights that founded the French modern nation-state and the institution of citizenship are based on the 'proposition of equaliberty', which considers all individuals of equal value and is open onto the idea that, at least potentially, all human beings are citizens. Equality and liberty are therefore inseparable, based on the historical discovery that 'their *extensions* are necessarily identical' or, in a more simple formulation, that the situations in which both are either present or absent are necessarily the same.²⁶ In practice, '*neither* can true liberty go without equality *nor* can true equality go without liberty'. As the equation of liberty and equality has emerged out of historical practice, there is no proof of this truth but a negative one: equality and liberty are always contradicted together. Equality and liberty are contradicted in the same situations, there can be no situations which suppress or repress freedom and do not also suppress or diminish equality. The opposite of the

proposition of equaliberty is also true: situations of constraints on freedom also mean social inequality. Unfreedom is therefore identical to inequality as freedom is identical to equality.

If Schmitt closed politics upon the substantial equality of a homogeneous community and consensual liberalism closed it upon the formal equality in front of the market, Balibar's equality represents a universal right that a form of inequality, domination or discrimination has denied.²⁷ As the right to vote for example had been equated at some point with the concrete universal of man to the exclusion of women, women have claimed for the universality of citizenship. The equality of a universal right is simultaneously the freedom to act, to resist against forms of domination. The politics of equaliberty means that rights are always gained in struggles which make visible a structural division of the community between those who are legitimate political subjects and the 'part of no part'. A politics of equaliberty introduces surplus interlocutors and conflict within consensual politics. Conflict is however not formalised war where the 'content' is irrelevant, but is informed by the unconditional principle of equaliberty.

The politics of equaliberty needs its own conditions of possibility, the universal principles of the community that can be challenged by those who have no part in politics. Yet, in the current global conjuncture, claims to equal liberty are impossible from the standpoint of the surplus or disposable people, of those whom capitalism neutralises rather than include in productive processes. New forms of trafficking in human beings or organs render impossible any claim to the right to politics through the practical impossibility for victims 'to present themselves *in person* as political subjects, capable of emancipating humanity by emancipating themselves'.²⁸ This impossibility of political action has confronted us in the recent French riots. Victims of forms of state violence, the young men of the *banlieues* could not present themselves as political subjects, capable of emancipation. The French riots have been the revealing moment of a political impossibility, of the impossible redefinition of the relation that the inhabitants of the *banlieues* have with 'their' state.

Although the riots have made visible the problem of violent stigmatisation through continuous and arbitrary police control as well as of race and class discrimination²⁹, the rioters have not formulated any direct political claim despite a

powerful malcontent. Moreover, the riots have been a form of (self-)destructive violence, as the burned cars were the hard acquired possessions of the people in the *banlieues*. One could say that these forms of self-destructive violence are indicative of the impossibility of symbolising conflicts, of the impossibility of politics proper. While a situation of domination and discrimination has been made visible, what is lacking is exactly the universal with which the young people of the *banlieues* could identify and which could redefine their relation to the French state. If the French riots have made visible a political problem, they have not opened the space of symbolisation of conflicts. This space is non-existent and needs to be discovered.

Balibar's concept of politics as civility refers exactly to the necessity of a space where conflicts can be symbolised and the universal of equality formulated. Civility is not synonymous to tolerance; it is a mode of relating to ourselves and of imagining possibilities of identification and dis-identification that would not take us to the extremes of violence. Creating spaces of civility concerns both 'the field of institutional creation, with its collective, practical dimension and its legal, symbolical one'.³⁰ If a politics of equal liberty can challenge the police state and the forms of discriminatory violence it perpetrates, a politics of civility needs to invent the fictions that define the relation between the state and its people. When this relation becomes mediated only by the police, immigration or unemployment bureaus, the state no longer appears as 'their' state although the young men of the *banlieues* belong to the people of the same country. The French riots have shown the lack of such a fiction or the lack of spaces within which these fictions could be constituted. Without the fictions that create the conditions for the symbolisation of conflicts, a politics of equaliberty cannot be articulated and the politics of war turns inwards in a revealing moment of self-destruction as the impossibility of becoming a political subject.

The French riots speak to the concern that Balibar has expressed about the possibility of political action (15). The interview has placed the question of political action in direct relation to the conditions of real global war and warlike practices on the one hand and the model of politics on the other. 'Politics as war' can no longer illuminate practices of power disavowed by an apparently pacified liberal order. It also cannot be a war that formalises the relation between friends and enemies, as such formalisation is

always already depoliticising. Yet, it must remain conflictual against the consensus of the market and of security. What politics could be practicable under the conditions of the present is an implicit thread throughout the interview and the analysis of the conjuncture. Active citizenship, the liberation of borders and labour, residency citizenship are forms of a politics of equaliberty. Although politics remains conflictual, conflict is subsumed to universal principles and ‘conditioned’ by an injunction of civility that distinguishes its process from the forms of global war. The constitution of spaces of civility and the relation to institutions remain however challenges for the ‘art of the politics’. In the interview, Balibar links political action with institutional forms, rules and codes. As the new institutions of the global order are premised on security and the market and reproduce the forms of global war, I wonder whether Balibar does not place his concept of politics in an impasse. If a politics of equaliberty can reclaim universal principles inscribed in institutions, a politics of civility needs to open a space for politics at a distance from institutions, creating solidarities and forms of organisation that can move the limits of collective power.

¹ ‘Conjuncture’ would be familiar to Althusserians as the present traversed by a play of forces, by contradictions and tensions.

² Etienne Balibar, ‘The Infinite Contradiction’, *Yale French Studies* 88, no. 1. *Depositions: Althusser, Balibar, Macherey, and the Labour of Reading* (1995), pp. 142-164.

³ Etienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London: Verso, 2002) and Etienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁴ Jacques Rancière radically parted ways with Althusserian Marxism, the concept of ideology and the idea of historical materialism as science Jacques Rancière, *La Leçon d’Althusser* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

⁵ Etienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, and Ideas. Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), 206.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias. Dying - awaiting (one another at) the ‘limits of truth’* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). Derrida’s aporias include ‘duty’, ‘gift’, or ‘decision’.

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- ⁷ Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, 9.
- ⁸ Etienne Balibar, *L'Europe, L'Amérique, la Guerre. Réflexions sur la médiation européenne* (Paris: Editions de la Découverte, 2003), 69.
- ⁹ Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, 32-33.
- ¹⁰ Balibar, *L'Europe, L'Amérique, la Guerre. Réflexions sur la médiation européenne* .
- ¹¹ Michael and Negri Hardt, Antonio, *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004).
- ¹² Miguel Vatter has argued that both Foucault and Schmitt reverse Clausewitz and define politics as the continuation of war by other means Miguel Vatter, 'Politics as war: a formula for radical democracy?' *Multitudes* 9 (2002), pp. .
- ¹³ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, trans. David Macey (London: Penguin Books, 2004).
- ¹⁴ 'Man is made fit for society, not by nature, but by education' David Burchell, 'The Disciplined Citizen: Thomas Hobbes, Neostoicism and the Critique of Classical Citizenship', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 45, no. 4 (1999), pp. 506-524.
- ¹⁵ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. Tracy B. Strong (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 35.
- ¹⁶ Etienne Balibar, 'Possessive Individualism' Reversed: From Locke to Derrida', *Constellations* 9, no. 3 (2002): 304, pp. 299-317.
- ¹⁷ Etienne Balibar, *Droit de cité. Culture et politique en démocratie* (Paris: Editions de l'Aube, 1998).
- ¹⁸ Balibar, *Masses, Classes, and Ideas. Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, 16.
- ¹⁹ Sandro Mezzadra, *Citizenship in Motion* (2004, accessed 30 November 2005); available from <http://www.generation-online.org/t/mezzadra.htm>.
- ²⁰ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 26.
- ²¹ Jan Müller, 'Carl Schmitt - An Occasional Nationalist?' *History of European Ideas* 23, no. 1 (1997), pp. 19-34.
- ²² William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 29.
- ²³ On the 'diseases of consensual politics', see Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 1995).
- ²⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 117.
- ²⁵ Jacques Rancière, 'On War as the Ultimate Form of Advanced Plutocratic Consensus', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 8, no. 3 (2004), pp. 253-258.
- ²⁶ Balibar, *Masses, Classes, and Ideas. Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, 48.
- ²⁷ Etienne Balibar, 'Violence et politique - quelques questions', in *Le passage des frontières. Autour du travail de Jacques Derrida*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (Paris: Galilée, 1994), 205, pp. 203-210.
- ²⁸ Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, 24. I have discussed the implications of a politics of equaliberty for trafficked women and migrants in Claudia Aradau, 'Security and the democratic scene: desecuritization and emancipation', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 7 (2004), pp. 388-413.

²⁹ Etienne Balibar, *Alle frontiere dell'apartheid*(Il Manifesto, 2005, accessed 10 December 2005); available from http://multitudes.samizdat.net/article.php3?id_article=2151).

³⁰ Balibar, *Droit de cité. Culture et politique en démocratie*, 15.