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# VIOLENCE AND OTHER NON-POLITICAL ACTIONS IN THE NEW CYCLE OF REVOLT

By Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen , 4 April 2021

Politics / Culture / Society / Theory



Image: Occupational hazard

**Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen contrasts Judith Butler's democratic analysis of Occupy in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* with the concept of permanent destitution as developed by Marcello Tari in *There is no Unhappy Revolution*, appearing in English with Common Notions this month.**

"Now comes the question of the reappropriation of violence, which the biopolitical democracies have, with all other intense expressions of life, so perfectly dispossessed"

—Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*

"Within three decades [social democracy] managed virtually to erase the name of Blanqui, though it had been the rallying sound that had reverberated through the preceding century."

— Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

The issue of the use of violence has been at the center of political discussions regarding the various revolts that have emerged since 2010 and 2011. Whether in France, where Macron and his government speak of the "violent black bloc" to discredit the protests of the Yellow Vests, or in Hong Kong where the Chinese Communist Party considers the protesters "violent, criminal and insolent", these acts of revolt do not fit neatly into the lines of traditional politics.<sup>[1]</sup> States refuse to use the term "violence" when they use coercion; "violence" is committed by "criminals" or "culprits", never by states themselves. States conceal their own use of violence behind a legislative rhetoric.

During the blockades of Buenos Aires in 2003, the president Nestor Kirchner declared: "Voting is the only concrete and legitimate way to live together in a modern and progressive country and democracy".<sup>[ii]</sup> This declaration sums up the common conception of politics as dialog and debate, resulting in the sliding of a vote into the ballot box. Indeed, most sociologists and historians agree that politics also includes strikes and protests, blockades and pickets. But certain still believe they can exclude violent events like sabotage and riots from the political field. During the London riots in 2011, several critics on the left deplored the lack of political awareness evident in the rioters; according to them, the riots and pillaging were an expression of the disappearance of politics. David Harvey wrote disdainfully that though capitalism should be put on trial for its crimes, "this is what the mindless rioters cannot see or demand."<sup>[iii]</sup>

In the following I will discuss two texts, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* by Judith Butler and *There is no Unhappy Revolution: The Communism of Destitution* by Marcello Tari. Both analyze the new movements that have appeared since the 2008 financial crisis: the Arab revolts, the riots in Greece between 2008 and 2011, Occupy in the United States, the Spanish *Indignados*, the London Riots in 2011, the movement against the raising of bus fares in Brazil, the Chilean student strikes, the movement for democracy in Hong Kong, and the waves of protests in France from *Nuit Debut* to the Yellow Vests. To their credit, the two books expand the way in which we understand the political by including acts often considered apolitical. I will concentrate on the question of violence and, following Tari, I argue that it's important to get rid of any "democratic" conception of non-violent revolts.

In her 2015 book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler offers an analysis of the occupation of squares in 2011, which includes the collective reappropriation of public spaces such as Tahrir Square in Cairo, Gezi Park in Istanbul, Central Park in Hong Kong, and Zuccotti Park in New York.<sup>[iv]</sup> The explosion of occupations can last a year or two – as many commentators noticed after the release of Butler's book in November 2015, but we must also consider the events playing out in Hong Kong, where millions of people are protesting simultaneously against the local government and the Chinese Communist Party, and Paris, where the Yellow Vest movement furthered what began as *Nuit Debut*, in order to reject any resignation or depressive lamentation that the movement to occupy public spaces has disappeared. People are always attempting to take to the streets, occupy public spaces and show their displeasure against the existing system

Though it would be imprudent to suggest a strict socio-economic causality between crisis and revolt, it is evident that this new wave of protest is linked to the financial crisis and to more long term economic developments. The financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 revealed the brutal consequences of the arrival of global capitalism after a 40 year-long crash, during which the 1% amassed wealth all while cutting expenses on social reproduction. The crisis was already there, but the popping of the financial bubbles demonstrated the enormity of the problems hidden by Western capitalist economies for four decades.<sup>[v]</sup> Nothing suggests that we won't see new occupations and protests in the coming years.

Butler's book is a contribution to the analysis of the emergence of a new movement of revolt and it's preferred action, the occupation. Butler analyses what she calls a provisional "theory of assemblies", and affirms that the plural practice of assemblies allows for the emergence of popular will outside of the institution of the political system and truly contests power's claim to being democratic. Butler shows how, "by assembly", occupations of squares claim public space against the depoliticizing strategies of privatization. The depoliticization is thus combated with "the movement of bodies, assembly, action, and resistance", which Butler proposes naming "popular sovereignty" or "we, the people". Butler uses thus her own theory of performativity to show how assemblies create a particular form of "we, the people", "suspending power structures", protesting against their precarious condition and proclaiming that the mass assembly is part of, or simply is, the People. People in assembly act collectively to defy domination.

## Non-violence

Throughout her analysis, Butler strives to describe the protests and other actions as "non-violent". The 2011 occupations of squares are characterized by non-violence, writes Butler. In effect, passing from empirical analysis to theory, she suggests that the "assemblies ... can not succeed unless they subscribe to the principles of non-violence".<sup>[vi]</sup> Butler's analysis is surprising in that many of the occupations, if not all of them, are characterized by powerful actions of physical violence where the protesters fight against the police in an effort to capture squares and strategic locations in the city. This probably appeared most clearly in Egypt and Tunisia. At Tahrir Square and in other cities in Egypt, for example, protesters battled not only with the police and Mubarak's security forces – throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails, ramming police lines with large improvised vehicles – but they also burned a large number of police stations and parliamentary buildings.

To describe these actions as non-violent is problematic: the enormous crowd at Tahrir Square in the center of Cairo assembled, cooked, discussed, and slept on-site but also set up barricades, fought the police, and destroyed street furniture and official buildings. Of course the protesters didn't have access to the same equipment as the police and

Mubarak's security forces, but they used what they had on hand as best they could, irrespective of any consideration of violence versus non-violence. As the Egyptian film-maker Philip Rizk declared: "Despite the glorification of an eighteen-day revolution as non-violent, violence has been a part of this revolution since the first stone was thrown on 25 January 2011 – followed three days later by the torching of police stations on the Friday of Rage – and until today (April 2013)."[vii]

Butler's strange appropriation of violent protests into the category of non-violence turns the occupations of squares into "democratic struggles". But, as Rizk wrote, it was not a question of democracy, contrary to Butler's assertion: the crowd of protesters who occupied Tahrir Square challenged not only Mubarak's local dictatorship, but also the entire neocolonial model whereby "foreign powers maintain their economic interests in a country by partnering with a local elite as proxy rulers". In other words, it's not solely a question of a "political" revolt, of a demand for democracy, but also, before all else, a revolutionary attack on the socio-economic reality of neocolonialism. In analyzing the occupation of Tahrir Square as an issue of political sovereignty and democracy, and in describing the occupation as "non-violent", Butler ends by subscribing to the dominant Western welcoming of the so-called "Arab Spring", according to which the protesters wanted a "democratic transition" and "political reforms".[viii]. To whitewash the protesters and present them, against all evidence, as non-violent democrats, constitutes a desperate attempt, not to mention a belated orientalism, to transform the overthrowing of pro-Western regimes into victories for the West and its "democratic values".

The description of protesters as non-violent also risks playing the game of local powers. As Abdel-Rahman Hussein wrote in "Was the Egyptian Revolution Really Non-Violent?", during the protests, Egyptian authorities described all non-state violence as having been criminally organized or simply as petty crime while trying to end the protests by reprimanding the most radical elements and in satisfying the most modest demands of the movement.[ix] In limiting revolutionary anti-colonial combat to a question of democracy, Butler dangerously tends toward reproducing the Western ideology of conventional regime change or of the "democratic transition"

### Non-violent democratic ideology

The description of the events in Cairo as non-violent raises questions about Butler's political and theoretical framework. As stated by Joshua Clover, among others, Butler seems constrained by her quasi-Arendtian understanding of democracy, whereby democracy is the touchstone of all political resistance.[x]

Democracy functions as a positive antagonism to ordinary depoliticized political regimes. Leaving revolutionary demands aside, Butler clearly sits within the ordinary ideological system, which we can call "democratism", for which democracy is a "transcendent value", as advances Clover, monopolizing the political terrain and emptying it of historical specifics. The appeal to another form of democracy is problematic and only permits the strengthening of the existing political system. Democracy has saturated every political horizon. As Mario Tronti said: "Political democracy has been realized".[xi] And this "really existing democracy" is the triumph of the economy where democracy signals the identification between *homo democraticus* and *homo economicus*. There is no consideration of historical or political-economic dimensions in Butler's analysis, to the point where we encounter an abstract political layout in which democracy is a historical invariant, and where the performative bodies in the squares who question the workings of the system only shout out for more democracy or a real democracy. Today, more than ever, democracy functions as a dominant representation, in the sense meant by Debord; an idea through which capitalist society imagines itself.[xii] Even so, it is problematic to refer to democracy as something intrinsically good – tainted by certain regimes and local variants, but essentially above critique.

The attempt to rework the privilege which Arendt gives to discourse to also include the body reproduces a distinction between political needs and actions. As if political struggle were "only cultural" and made up of bodies in movement in addition to acts of speech. Public actions of self-formation are of course very important in any political struggle – people slept at Tahrir and in doing so challenged the authorities – but to limit political resistance to such performative acts tends not only to leave aside the material conditions of the protesters but also reproduces opposition between the good, non-violent protesters and the violent bandits, in addition to neglecting structural changes on a vast scale to the general law of capitalist accumulation analyzed by Marx in *Capital* and, since, by generations of Marxists.

Butler's analysis of the new cycle of protests raises the question of violence but quickly cuts it off. If we want to understand this new wave of protests, we must rethink the notion of violence above the opposition between violence and non-violence and critique the attachment to a transcendent conception of democracy. As shown, among others, by German philosopher and councilist Karl Korsch and Angelo Tasca, Italian historian and founder of the Italian Communist Party, modern democratic nations are totally capable of becoming totalitarian in a situation of crisis and social unrest. This was the case in Europe between the two World Wars when the democratic nations of Italy and Germany repressed revolutionary movements and opted for a totalitarian clampdown to protect capital.[xiii] In times of crisis, democratic regimes have often chosen order and control – read the preservation of private

property – in order to impede all serious challenge to the dominant order. The coming to power of Trump, Salvini, and other politicians just as stupid speaks to the complete plasticity of democracy. Democracy rarely constitutes a safeguard against capitalist exploitation or what we can call, in following Žižek, structural violence; in fact, it is a very effective means of organizing the workforce including or excluding unofficial workers (*la force de travail surnuméraire*).<sup>[xiv]</sup> Politics is economic, as Marx showed in *Capital*, and all economic transactions are based on structural violence: “Between equal rights, force decides”. Any act of exchange is a residue of the original violence Marx called “primitive accumulation”.

The way that human bodies can be permanent and irrepressible sources of resistance, as Butler shows, is a very important contribution to the understanding of the subversion of so-called apolitical actions, but Butler remains attached to a liberal idea of politics – democracy and non-violence – and thus ends by restraining the expansion of politics that she herself proposed. Because she isn’t interested in the issue of the economy, she’s definitively only interested in the way that the system is managed, and not in a change of the system itself. Her political critique remains limited and describes a democratically controlled capitalism, and not the abolition of the production of commodities. The revolutionary position consists of attempting to render the state completely useless in destroying the economy.

### To destitute the state

In order to have a better idea of the role of violence in the new movements of revolt, we can now turn to the most recent work of Italian philosopher Marcello Tari, *There is no Unhappy Revolution, The Communism of Destitution*. In combining Giorgio Agamben’s analysis of the relationships between sovereignty and the life-form and the Invisible Committee’s report-backs from the pulse and flow of insurrections, Tari proposes an analysis of the new cycle of revolt as destituent revolts, that is to say revolts that have no directly political goal nor a specific program to implement.<sup>[xv]</sup> These new revolts are characterized by a refusal of politics, an abandonment of the established political system. It is a question of destituting power, to change or suspend it, not to replace it with a new government.

Tari’s analysis begins with the revolt of the *piqueteros* in Argentina in 2001, where people filled the streets in response to the country’s economic collapse. The protesters stopped commerce and the exercise of governmental power by impeding the movement and circulation of commodities, blocking access to transport routes. The *Piqueteros* organized themselves outside the traditional unions and political parties. The protesters explicitly opposed all entry into the established public political sphere and called for the end of politics rather than for a new government and new police.

The most popular slogan of the movement: *Que se vayan todos! Que no se quede ninguno solo!* (They all must go! Nobody can stay!) was then picked up and used in most of the movements of square occupations in 2011 in North Africa and Southern Europe. Tari shows the importance of the second half of the slogan, often ignored; it’s not about replacing the government, or one political leader by another. This slogan expresses the exasperation of the protesters not only against a government or certain concrete problems such as generalized corruption, but against the structure of government itself and the policies it has implemented in modern capitalist societies. As Tari shows, the slogan displays a near-naïve simplicity, but also a radical revolutionary critique: “All those in power, all the bosses, all the liars, all the politicians, all the cowards, all of the corrupt and corrupting, all must go. Get lost, you won’t be shot or guillotined. Just leave, now. This is destituent violence...”

According to Tari, the different revolts are all part of a scattered and disconnected movement, from the 2001 *piqueteros* movement up through and beyond the Arab revolts in Egypt and Tunisia, all demonstrate the desire for destitution: “clear off!” (*dégage!*) as the Tunisian revolutionaries shouted against Ben Ali. The *Indignados* in Spain, the Occupy movement and the French movements in 2016 and 2018-19 are all characterized by this anti-political gesture that refuses to settle for limited reforms in a system that’s on its last legs. “The world or nothing”, as wrote the Parisian protesters in 2016.

In the various slogans a “desire for destitution”, as Tari calls it, appears. This means a revolutionary rupture with existing society in its totality. “Nobody can stay!” shouted the protesters in Argentina in 2001. The democratic system in place with its elections, its rules, its media and its parties must go. It’s an empty vessel, a spectacle where parties face off to manage a system which has become automatic to the point where it doesn’t matter who wins anymore. Politics have mixed with the market. Contrary to Butler’s analysis, democracy today is before all else an ideology which produces consumer subjects who vote, a system that leaves no other possibilities, where we can only appear as voter and consumer. Democracy hides its true function: the production of voters who still think they decide.

Against the rituals and institutions of real democracy, its elections and negotiations, the movements of revolt have pushed the anonymous community of the streets to the forefront. A specter haunts the empty parliament. When

people are in the street, occupying squares, the government does not govern. As Tari put forward: “the revolutionary problem is thus to escape this power of being captured into a form of government”. Never enter into institutional structures but reject them.

Though these movements have not yet taken the form of an international revolutionary movement as did the proletarian offensive of 1917 to 1921, Tari sees the return of a revolutionary communism. Or, more precisely, a reformulation of communism where revolution is replaced by destitution: a communism of destitution. Revolution is no longer an issue of realizing a political project – for a long time in the 20th century the project of the Leninists and socialists was the socialization of the means of production – or the realization of something as though it didn’t already exist; communism as the completion of a political project. Destituent communism abandons the idea of realizing an ideal by action and, thus, there’s no program to put it in practice. It’s no longer a question of proposing a series of actions or institutions that follow or reinforce a communist program. According to Tari, following Agamben on this point, the revolution consists of disempowering power, rendering the functioning of politics impossible in addition to the reproduction of its laws. These new destituent revolts transgress not only laws, oppose not only the state, they exit the state and its laws. It’s not a question of critiquing or destroying existing laws in order to establish a new law. The project is a more complex operation where the law is suspended, made unreal. Through this it becomes impossible to follow laws (and equally, to break them).

## Real anarchy

Following Giorgio Agamben’s reading of Walter Benjamin, Tari affirms that it’s not a question of avoiding violence or opposing an anti-democratic system with non-violent bodies of assembly in order to realize a true democracy, as Butler maintains; it is a question of abandoning power completely, of breaking the connection between law and violence. As Benjamin showed as early as 1921 in his enigmatic (and much discussed) text “Critique of Violence”, police and politics are intermixed in the modern capitalist state. Police violence speaks to a collusion between the state formation and established power, to the imminent anarchy of the state. The violent repression of the German revolution of 1921 implemented by the social-democratic president Friedrich Ebert showed the violent and anarchic dimension of politics. It showed that the law can suspend itself in favor of a state of emergency in which it is possible to assassinate revolutionaries or shoot protesters.<sup>[xvi]</sup> In his text, Benjamin argues in favor of destitution – *Entsetzung* in German – of law and the state, this is in regard to the inactivity (*ent*) of the established (*-setzen*). The state, *Gewalt* like government, must be dismissed or destituted.

Benjamin and Tari attempt to conceive of a different violence, completely outside of or above the law. The opposition between violence and non-violence is thus replaced by the idea of a non-legal violence, a revolutionary violence that breaks free of the dialectic of “violence as the basis of a right preserving a right”, which abandons the state’s framing of violence in favor of a pure violence which finds no meaning outside of itself, highlighting the legal framework of rights through the Law. Against the pseudo-anarchy of the state, where the state of exception is always presupposed or reproduced (in a movement of “inclusive exclusion”, as Agamben calls it) Benjamin attempts to situate the actual state of exception outside of the law. As Thanos Zartaloudis writes, Benjamin wants to break out of “the continuum of the dialectic of violence within a juridical systematization of human action” and in the de-juridification of “the ethical plane of existence”.<sup>[xvii]</sup> The revolution consists of an abandonment of state jurisdiction imposed upon life. Pure violence is a break with order, a destitution of the state and history. The end of governance.

Tari attempts to think of the revolution in a new way starting from contemporary movements of revolt. The new revolts don’t aim for any economic or legal reforms. They suspend classical politics and propose a different temporality. There is no future political goal, the revolts “block the normal functioning of society”, they render society ungovernable in diving into an immediate and material transformation of the life that is lived in a capitalist city. The challenge is objective: the old revolutionary vocabulary is no longer useful and those revolting must experiment in reinventing revolution. The worker’s movement in the West and its political project have been shown to be compatible with the capitalist mode of production. Communism must thus be extracted from the ruins of real socialism, from the post-war planned state and all the groups of leftists continuing to arrange the past, who concretely hinder any real movement/struggle.

Working backwards from Butler’s democratic efforts to differentiate illegitimate violence and legitimate non-violence, Tari struggles to put forward the radical gesture present in these revolts – a gesture that cannot be contained within real democracy but which attacks this very model and its political-economic basis. We are confronted by the emergence of a recent fascism in government, and it makes no sense to try and save the existing democratic political order, as Butler proposes. This hasty analysis masks the totalitarian possibility inherent in democratic nations, the fact that their function is to regulate the labor force, to absorb or exclude migrant labor or whoever else finds themselves ejected from this model. We are already “at war” with the state.

## The counter-revolution

Since 2009-2011, we have witnessed the arrival of an expanding anti-terrorist regime which has set itself to preventing the emergence of alternatives to the existing order. The war on terror and the state of emergency were in fact already implemented, as shown by the repression at the G8 in Genoa in July 2001 where the Italian police killed a 23-year-old protester and struck hundreds of protesters and journalists. In retrospect, the crushing of Tiananmen square in 1989 appeared as the start of the organization of a new era of counter-revolution. Capital did its best to impede all revolutionary negation, in controlling migrants and smothering revolts.

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## Footnotes

[i] “Black Block : le Sénat adopte un texte des Républicains contre les violences dans les manifestations”, *Le Monde*, 23 October 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/10/23/black-bloc-le-senat-adopte-un-texte-des-republicains-contre-les-violences-dans-les-manifestations\\_5373575\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/10/23/black-bloc-le-senat-adopte-un-texte-des-republicains-contre-les-violences-dans-les-manifestations_5373575_823448.html); “Time to Stop Violence and Restore Order in Hong Kong”, *People's Daily Online*, 9 August 2019, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0809/c90000-9604626.html>.

[ii] Néstor Kichner cited in Benjamin Dangl: *Dancing with Dynamite: Social Movements and States in Latin America* (Edinburgh & Oakland : AK Press, 2010), p. 70.

[iii] David Harvey: *Rebel Cities : From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London & New York : Verso, 2012), p. 157.

[iv] Judith Butler: *Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, 2015.

[v] Cf. Giovanni Arrighi: *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Time* (London & New York: Verso, 1994).

[vi] For Butler, “strikes”, “prisoners’ hunger strikes”, “work stoppages”, “occupation of government buildings”, and “boycotts” are also non-violent; she writes: “our task is to find a way to enact antagonism through a non-violent practice”.

[vii] Philip Rizk, “The Necessity of Revolutionary Violence in Egypt” *Jadaliyya*, 7 April 2013.

[viii] For a critique of this analytical framework, see Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, University of California Press, 2013.

[ix] Abdel-Rahman Hussein: “Was the Egyptian Revolution Really Non-Violent?”, in *Egypt Independent*, 24 janvier 2012, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/was-egyptian-revolution-really-non-violent>.

[x] Joshua Clover, “Two Questions of Assembly.” See also McKenzie Wark, “What the Performative Can't Perform”, Public Seminar, June 8th, 2016.

[xi] Mario Tronti, “Towards a Critique of Political Democracy”, 2009. Online.

[xii] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Bureau of Public Secrets, 2013.

[xiii] Karl Korsch, *Marxisme et contre-révolution*, Seuil, 1975; Angelo Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism, 1918-22* [1938], Gordon Books, 1976.

[xiv] Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, London, Profile Books, 2008.

[xv] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, 1998 ; Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies (Homo sacer, IV, 2)*, Stanford University Press, 2016; Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, Semiotext(e), 2009; Invisible Committee, *Now*, Semiotext(e), 2017.

[xvi] Of course, the normalization of the murder of Black men by police in the US remains the clearest example of the state's internal anarchy. Violence against Black people is foundational to American society, not an exceptional event. But it is impossible for this to be admitted through a liberal worldview. For an analysis of this point see Frank B. Wilderson, "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal", in *Social Justice*, vol. 30, n° 2, 2003, p. 18-27.

[xvii] Thanos Zartaloudis, "Violence Without Law? On Pure Violence as a Destituent Power", in Brendan Moran & Carlo Salzani (dir.), *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*, London, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 174.

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