

5 Theses on the Politics of Cruelty

Hostis

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1. *The politics that seduces us is not ethical, it is cruel.*

We contrast the politics of cruelty to the politics of ethics. Ethics goes all the way back to the Greeks, whose ethics was the study of 'the good life.' Our interests do not lie in being better than our enemies. There is only cheap satisfaction in telling yourself that you have more exciting sex, stronger friendships, or fiercer personal convictions. The point is not to be better, but to win. Perhaps this leaves a bad taste in some mouths. However, we ask: is ethics not just a last resort for the impotent? Are ethical people what is left after struggles collapse into impossibility, futility, or counterproductivity

If abandoning ethics leaves one disturbed, it is because ethics is a wholly personal affair. To be ethical today is not even reformist – it is politics rendered as fantasy, a live action role play of those who 'mean well.' The sphere of ethical life is a world of braggarts and bullies looking for others to affirm that they have made the right personal choices. Ethics valorizes the virtue of activist intentions while leaving the systemic destruction of globally-integrated capital intact. In other words, it is fueled by the elitism of 'being better than everyone else.' And the problem with elitism is that it plunges us back into the milieu.

Cruelty has no truck with the individualism of ethics. It does not guide political action with virtue or best intentions. We are not looking to win the respect of those we wish to defeat. Ethics is the trap laid for those who walk the earth searching for respite from the destruction and violence of capital and the state. There is no use in making peace with an enemy whose realized interests entail your subjugation. There was nothing 'ethical' about the colonial world. And as Fanon reminds us, it

could only be destroyed by giving up on an 'ethical' method. It is in this sense that a politics of cruelty picks up the old adage that one must 'destroy what destroys you'.

2. *Few emotions burn like cruelty.*

It is already old wisdom that emotions are at stake when we talk about becoming 'politicized.' Emotions are what render the speculative and abstract into a lived reality. Winning is not simply a question of having the right ideas or right principles, this is why we define politics as the transformation of ideas into a whole mode of existence where one's principles are at the same time one's impulsion toward the world. If the politics of cruelty follows from the belief that we must destroy what destroys us, the emotion of cruelty is revenge. Only this taste for revenge offers resistance to the voices of this world that tell us to put up with the daily violence done to us. To feel cruel is to know that we deserve better than this world; that our bodies are not for us to hate or to look upon with disgust; that our desires are not disastrous pathologies. To feel the burning passion of cruelty, then, is to reclaim refusal. We refuse to compromising ourselves and the million tiny compromises of patriarchy, capitalism, white-supremacy, heter/homo-normativity, and so on. As such, the subject of cruelty no longer convinces themselves to love the world or to find something in the world that redeems the whole. Simply put: the subject of cruelty learns to hate the world. The feeling of cruelty is the necessary correlate to the politics of cruelty; learning to hate the world is what correlates to the political task of destroying what destroys us all. And as we already noted, it is because these two principles have a long history behind them that a politics of cruelty does not posit itself as a novelty: *The Women's Liberation movements are correct in saying: We are not castrated, so you get fucked.*

3. *Those motivated by cruelty are neither fair nor impartial.*

Fairness is the correlate to the 'ethics-as-politics' paradigm. Why? Because fairness suggests that we relate to everyone in the same way. There is nothing about this world that encourages universal fairness or acting according to mutual support of any and all interests. Rather, we live in a world where everyone is pitted against each other – we have a structurally determined interest to be mean and to succeed at the expense of others. Fairness, as it currently exists, is the fairness of neoliberal competition; a state sponsored 'state of nature'. Impartiality is the counter-tendency to the subject of cruelty. Unlike the cruel subject who understands that there can be no agreement made between capital and its dispossessed, the impartial subject furthers the myth that agreements can and should be found between the two parties. Impartiality is the idea that power is symmetrical and that a social contract can give this symmetry its proper force through law.

We know that we are in the midst of a civil war. We act as partisans. And as in any war, we have friends and enemies. For our enemies, we have nothing but

disdain, hatred, and cruelty. Our only engagement with them is when it strategically advances our side in the conflict. For our friends, we extend care, support, and solidarity.

Some say that capital and the state operate through cruelty; and contrary to their cruelty, our struggle is to take the higher ground. This is to misunderstand what few things are unique to our position. Our enemies must reproduce their bases of power, which is takes a costly investment in corrupt political systems, crumbling industrial infrastructure, and expensive wars of ideology. As anarchists, we do not need to reproduce much – we do not need to justify our actions, we do not need to be consistent in our activities, and we need not defend any of the institutions of this world. To limit ourselves even more than our enemies by following the narrow path of ethics is to give up our only advantage.

4. Their actions speak with an intensity that does not desire permission, let alone seek it.

There is a qualitative difference between the cruelty exercised by us and the cruelty of capital and its State(s). In the United States, there is the idea that the 18th amendment guarantees the protection of citizens from ‘cruel and unusual punishment.’ This was to juridically curtail the power of the State over and against its citizenry. But due to the explicitly bourgeois heritage from which it emerges, this guarantee against *State-cruelty* only goes as far as the eyes of the State can see; that is, only insofar as two isolated individuals are coming into conflict with one another, and where the State intervenes impartially as the mediating third term. It is in this way that the curtailing of *State-cruelty* remains within the logic of recognition: metrics of intelligibility only pertain to situations of isolated actions. State recognition ignores situations of collective antagonism. What is more, is what we gain via the channels of State recognition (e.g., desegregation in the 1950’s) was already being eroded through other State sanctioned economic mechanisms (e.g., redlining as early as the 1930’s). The conclusion should be obvious by now: State-recognition is nothing more than the continuation of war by other means.

Thus, if our politics of cruelty seeks to destroy what destroys us coupled to its subjective correlate of revenge – which means our learning to hate the world while staving off the internalization of those norms which teach us to hate ourselves – then it is clear that our *political-cruelty* cannot treat the state and capital as reliable sources for recognition since what we want and need cannot be tolerated by globally integrated capital and thus pre-emptively renders us all variations of pathological, trouble-making, hysterical, killjoys alike.

5. While social anarchism sings lullabies of altruism, there are those who play with the hot flames of cruelty.

Altruism comes in at least two variants. The first is already well known; the emphasis on collectivist ethics that diffuses any antagonism through its criteria of

absolute horizontalism. The second, more insidious, is a zealous altruism; here the emphasis is placed on the absolute destruction of the individual put in the service of actualizing an Idea. These are not the actions of the dispossessed. Rather, it is the altruism of an anarchists crucifixion. If the latter at least agrees that struggle is an ineluctable fact of politics, the zealous altruists weakness still lies in his belief that to engage in *civil war* means to burn out in the process. For every form of communal horizontalism that defers the moment of attack there is a correlating tendency to collapse heroism and martyrdom. Additionally, it is true that we have said that our political-cruelty seeks to destroy what destroys us. However, this does not necessitate the assertion that real transformation means our own self-destruction. There is a world of difference between converting structural oppression into a fight for abolition and identifying existential abolition as the proper means toward the abolition of capital as such. In a word: “Even if we had the power to blow it [the State] up, could we succeed in doing so without destroying ourselves, since it is so much a part of the conditions of life, including our organism and our very reason? The prudence with which we must manipulate that line, the precautions we must take to soften it, to suspend it, to divert it, to undermine it, testify to a long labor which is not merely aimed against the State and the powers that be, but directly at ourselves.”

That said, the first iteration of altruism should not be given scant attention precisely because of its prevalence. In place of weaponizing our feelings of cruelty, social anarchism substitutes a straight forward Habermasianism sutured to the mantra of ‘returning to a class based analysis’. This helps some sleep at night. Contra these political sedatives, we again confront the history and cruelty of our politics. What is at stake is the feminist lesson we must never forget: that the personal is political; that few emotions burn and catalyze collective insubordination like those of pain, vengeance, and cruelty. The lesson is that the efficacy of political-cruelty lies not in the never ending reflections and discussions on what pains us; rather, that emotions such as cruelty are what constitute the armature of our collective antagonism.

A Brief Note For Enemies And Allies

We could care less about those whose politics amounts to being a good ‘friend’ to those who struggle, or being a good ‘ally’ by reading up on the history of people of color, queers, and so on. A politics of cruelty is not a politics of friendship; since we do not see a softer world here because sociability has its cruelties, friendship has its rivalries, and opinion has its antagonisms and bloody reversals.

Friendship is already too Greek, too philosophical, and too European for our politics of cruelty. In its place, we should reinvigorate the politics of the Guayaki in Paraguay or the many tribes in that territory known as Zoma. That is, political cruelty does not seek to be included into the universality proposed by the history

of Western capitalism and instead seeks to find the means of escaping from a universality that was never ours from the start. For those who would prefer reductive formulations, we could say that while the West continues its process of inclusion and expansion, our political-cruelty maintains its relation to the Outside.

To our enemies who get off on finding contradictions that abound in this politics of cruelty we say to them ‘all the better!’ For them, whose desire is to be the intelligible subjects of globally integrated capital, these contradictions are mere impasses on their road to being exceptions to the rule. **To our allies**, who opt for a politics of cruelty, we say ‘savor these supposed contradictions!’ From the point of view of political-cruelty a contradiction simply means that we have a weapon with more than one side.

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