Literature, Violence, and Politics

"Binding violence": at once a name for a violence that sutures frayed political borders, and a crisp formulation of the premise of this book.

The literary visions under review here represent violence as binding a political community together when its borders are in crisis; violence, rather than political reason, is woven into and bound to the fragile determinations of political membership. The texts I examine offer us insights into the violent fabric of autonomous political life and its inextricable relation to the travails of imagination; imagination, in its turn, bears the imprint of violence. Benjamin's concern about the possibility of a nonviolent regulation of conflict in his 1921 "Critique of Violence" challenges us to ask whether we can summon the power of imagination for the task of reducing violence in human social interaction. The ways in which violence is inter-tissued into society speak to how we envision its possibility; any configuration of society depends on the successful avoidance of absolute violence—that is, the violence of extermination. Politics is one form of praxis that binds and is bound by violence; the literary imagination is another. I do not wish to make a metaphysical claim about violence as a constant of that elusive entity "human nature"—an entity that nonetheless underlies most intellectual efforts to imagine the possibility of human change.[3] Rather, my reflections in this book are prompted by literary visions of the centrality of violence for determining the texture of politics and literature. As we inhabit a world permanently threatened by self-destruction, my interpretations are guided by the imperative of expanding our capacity to conceptualize the problem of violence, and to read politically not only literary texts but also the fictions that give meaning to violence in social life. I examine literary works as both embedded within and struggling against the political imagination of their times—a political imagination that both shapes and is shaped by political action.

Introduction

Literary imagination, violence, and political life are the three axes that organize my readings of Sophocles' *Antigone* (ca. 442 B.C.E.), D. A. F. de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom (Cent vingt journées de Sodome*, 1785), and Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat (La fiesta del chivo*, 2000). The readings in this book propose that the political imagination of these texts grants violence the role of instantiating a new political membership when the borders of a given political constituency have been thrown into crisis. Thus I call these texts *fictions of political origins*: they do not effect critiques of existing societies, as, for instance, the genre of political satire would do, but rather offer literary imaginings of the inauguration of political worlds out of a background of civic dissolution. In the texts I review, membership, which is probably the most properly political question for an autonomous polity, is not represented as predicated upon figures of reason, agreement, contract, or kinship. Nor is it predicated, in accord with the Freudian model, upon the task of mourning the murder of an all-powerful father, a mourning that would establish the law that binds a new community of brothers by prohibiting violence. Rather, a specific kind of violence, which I have chosen to name *binding violence*, clarifies the new borders of the autonomous collective. This violence does not subdue an enemy but exterminates it. It targets not the external invader or the enemy that belongs to a social category—a group already defined along the lines of gender, class, race, or ethnicity, for instance. It is a violence that targets an internal enemy carved out of a previous community of friends: it transforms the brother, the citizen, the daughter, the ancestor, into an enemy. As such, this enemy signifies a crisis of limits: as the figure of an interior transformed into an exterior, it preserves its interiority at the same time that it becomes foreign, assuming a liminal position that comes to define the outside and the inside. The creation and elimination of this enemy figures the temporary fantasy of a binding of the community.

This book argues that the particular representation of the link between violence and membership in these fictions of political origins is a literary symptom of a *formal* foundational problem constitutive of an autonomous sphere of the political. Implicit in this argument is the notion that such literary symptoms may appear when political autonomy becomes the dominant imagination of a given era. In an autonomous political sphere, membership is not given, but it must be defined. If "we" give ourselves our own rules, who are "we"? While any given resolution of this question occurs within a specific historical situation, its internal formal paradox remains an enigma: if "we" govern, who would want

to be excluded from this "we" on the basis of consensus? In democratic theory, a democratic solution for the definition of the demos has yet to be found. In the texts under review, violence determines membership at the hour of political refoundation. I have read this representation of violence as an invitation to take seriously the call for a democratic imagination so as to face the paradoxes involved in all attempts to fix the limits of the autonomous demos.

I argue that this "literary knowledge" can expand the range of names we use to account for violence. To a certain extent, my interpretative gesture methodologically hinges upon a political allegory. Nonetheless, I see the link between violence and membership as echoing the conflict that drives allegorical representation as such. If allegory is the tension between a desire for the closure of the gap between sign and reality and the realization that this gap is impossible to close, binding violence represents the desire for, and failure of, a similar closure in terms of the system we identify as an autonomous political community, which we can rephrase as the desire and impossibility to close the gap between the universal abstract ideal of equality (universal political membership) and its concrete determinations. Ultimately, these questions are bound to lead us to yet another problem, which will be directly raised in my reading of Antigone's politics: if the borders of the demos were to be eliminated, and universal equality realized, would this mean the end of politics? Without claiming that these questions entirely account for the texts' construction, this book argues that they speak to our political life and its ways of thinking through violence.

Politics

The political life to which I refer is primarily a theoretical sphere, whose basic meaning is a vision of the collective; it stands in contrast to images of isolated human existence—for instance, hermetic life, or what at several stages in modern political theory is envisioned as a state of nature. Whether the collective is considered to be a fact of human existence or a relational fiction, it is determined, though not exhausted, by the imaginative articulation of the contingency of human interaction and its violent forms. All communal life entails such imaginative articulations; political life is a specific configuration of a collective's relation to violence, to the most extreme expression of power.

My readings in this book concern a historically bound imagining, widely shared in the "modern West," of what political life should aim to achieve, or should rely on, in order to cope with the contingency of human interaction:

autonomy. The normative space of politics for the modern West—if not its definition proper—is a self-governed collective, whose members control their destiny in communal processes of negotiation. This ideal of an autonomous society—one of the meanings of modern sovereignty—is to be contrasted with that of a *heteronomous society*, in which communal decisions are imagined as being made by external or extrahuman agents, such as divine entities.[4] I thus relate the texts that I examine in this book to a tradition whose ideal is popular sovereignty. This involves both popular decision-making and the setting of limits to the ever questioning self-instituting activity resulting from universal participation, a participation that radicalizes the contingency of political life. Modernity's critics have shown us, however, how the setting of limits relates to a competing image of modern political sovereignty—namely, autonomy's ghostly other, domination: both control over others and the setting of limits upon the influence of others.

I wish to clarify my reference to the "West," since I do not aim to establish any factual specificity of its geohistorical limits, so much as the operational extent of its "fiction," strictly linked to the image of political autonomy and its dual conceptions of sovereignty. To identify the actual borders of the "West" is futile after five hundred years of European colonialism and amid the current globalizing phenomena. The "West" has always had porous borders, though culturally construed as having an identity on the basis of establishing its "other"—a Eurocentrism that has been thoroughly deconstructed throughout the twentieth century. I use the term "West" throughout the book for its practical convenience as it situates the texts under review in a political tradition of thought that became dominant within the geopolitical space of the European capitalist colonial powers born after the fall of feudalism. Within this tradition, the tension between autonomy and domination was displayed on a global scale, as "the West" was exported in response to capitalism's increasing need for a universalism that could facilitate its expansion.[5] Especially relevant for my overview is the fact that after the Renaissance, and particularly after 1789, this tradition constructs its ancestry by recovering what it can and what it wants of ancient Greek democracy (the period between the eighth and fifth centuries B.C.E.), as the cornerstone of Western modernity's political self-understanding. In this book, ancient democracy, particularly as discussed in my reading of *Antigone*, appears as the birth of politics according to the Western fiction. While I strongly agree with the argument that the fabrication of ancient Greece as ancestor to the West served European cultural and economic interests,[6] I do not

engage in discussion about whether democracy actually started in Greece or whether the West comes indeed from Greece. Instead, I use this fictional political ancestry as a "generative grammar" that yields the images of autonomy and domination that articulate modernity's political action, violence, and literary representation.

In terms of its vision of community, the political imagination of autonomy most radically entails the principle of *equality* (whether in its ancient, or modern liberal and radical formulations) as the basis of a new political binding, and thus, of society's unlimited capacity to judge its own foundational premises critically. Once bloodlines, kinship, or religious and aristocratic privilege cease to be legitimate binding principles, establishing differential participation in decision-making, the crucial question of how to articulate difference must be radically reimagined in a society of "equal and free rivals," as the members of the newly inaugurated Greek democracy in ancient times considered themselves. One can say that the fundamental gesture of the Greek "invention of politics" was a movement of inclusion: an expansion of the sphere of public decision-making to all propertied male members of the demes.[7] I follow Christoph Menke in identifying the signature of political modernity in the appropriation of the idea of equality.[8] This meant then, as it does now, "the dissolution of all markers of certainty [generating] a fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law and knowledge, and [. . .] of relations between *self* and *other*," as Claude Lefort puts it (*Democracy and Political Theory*: 19). For lack of a "natural" order, this kind of politics deals with contingency by way of structuring conflict. The violence of such structuring conflict is often seen as the struggle between constituted and constituting powers; its famous modern theoretical formulations range from the classic Marxist class-conflict to Walter Benjamin's law-making and law-preserving violence, to Laclau's and Mouffe's "political antagonism," to Rancière's "disagreement," to name but a few.[9] Underlying all formulations lies the concept of a society that has granted itself the capacity to undo its institutions; thus some famous pronouncements about the "suicidal nature" of democracy, ranging from John Quincy Adams's "there was never a democracy yet that did not commit suicide," to Jacques Derrida's "democracy has always been suicidal."[10] A tragic predicament, one could say: to protect democracy against its others is to suspend its self-questioning, so that in preventing its suicide, we may assassinate it.

The principle of equality inaugurates a particular anxiety in this type of political sphere: one of its central activities—if not the central one—is the resolu-

tion of its own definition of membership. This entails articulating equality and difference, rendering members equivalent to one another, not identical. Ideally, democracy's inclusive principle posits that political virtue is human: no social determination, such as class, gender, or race, can limit participation. Logically speaking, the political space that opened up in ancient Greece would seemingly entail the dissolution of its own borders: the closure that signals the birth of the polis entails an exclusion that collides with democratic inclusiveness. Simply put, the binding together of the city as a distinct city goes against the principle of equality. However, popular sovereignty must have a people. The question that follows is: if the constitution of the demos cannot be consensual, then how are its decisions democratic? In Ian Shapiro's words, "[Q]uestions relating to membership seem [. . .] prior to democratic decision-making, yet paradoxically they cry out for democratic resolution" (*Democracy's Edges*: 1); Alan Keenan fully expands this paradox into several formulations: to name but one, the conditions of autonomy's permanent uncertainty rule out the possibility of full political autonomy, given that the definition of who and what the community is, can only be nonautonomous (*Democracy in Question*: 33). An originary violence, or at least arbitrariness, insinuates itself here as establishing the demos, whose borders need not be only cleared but also defended at all times. We might summon here Michael Mann's controversial thesis about modernity and a "dark side of democracy."[11]

Another way to phrase this problem is to recall what Menke refers to as the dialectics of equality (*Reflections of Equality*: 2–48). Modernity's political imagination can be read in terms of the vicissitudes and questioning of the concept of equality. Equality's internal mandate is equal treatment to every individual, but that depends on the existence of different individuals, and implies a limiting description of an "equal individual." Insofar as it cannot be abstract, equality produces inequality: it depends on its other. In ancient times, social equality was not at stake, so the determinations of the only existing form of equality—political equality—were supported by social categories. The modern radicalization of equality, which began in the Renaissance but exploded in 1789, brought the universalization of political equality (and set the conditions for the political demand for social equality), basing its support on the new category of "humanity." This universalization made any of its concrete determinations necessarily a problem. Menke extracts from this modern experience two dominant versions of the politics of equality, phrasing them in terms of the opposition between Babeuf and Marx: the "utopian," striving toward perfect

equality, and the "subversive," demanding that existing social inequalities be addressed (ibid.: 154–76). If I am allowed to modify Kant's famous phrase, modernity finds in the dialectics of equality a "limit of political reason alone," taking political reason to mean the deliberation with which democracy is usually associated.[12] This is a limit that compels us to ponder whether there are specific forms of violence that emerge as a symptom of the failure of political reason to arbitrate what, from the point of view of equality, of a "political reason alone," constitutes the arbitrary limits of equality. For lack of a democratic solution for membership, the political articulation of equality and difference might generate specific economies of violence in any given era.

The "dark side" of an originary violence defines, in the fictions of political origins under review, the borders of the polis of Sophocles' Creon and Antigone, of the society of equals of Sade's libertines, and of the new nation of Vargas Llosa's dictator. The chronological sequence of these texts follows a well-known Western narrative about the history of political autonomy. While most of Western history has not been democratic, these texts were written in times dominated by the democratic imagination. The Sophoclean tragedy belongs to the ancient Athenian experiment usually identified as the "invention of politics," haunted nonetheless by the limitations it placed upon citizenship since Cleisthenes uncoupled it from kinship to link it to territorial residence. Athens experienced sequential crises in defining political membership: in Peter Riesenberg's words, the definition of citizenship became *the* central institution of the Athenian constitution (*Citizenship in the Western Tradition*: 22). Some six years before *Antigone* was staged, for instance, Pericles passed a law in 451–50 B.C.E. restricting citizenship to the offspring of Athenian parents; after the Peloponnesian War, oligarchs proposed restricting citizenship to three thousand on one occasion, and to "those who fought for this democracy" on another.[13]

The Sadean "friends in crime," in turn, emerge during a time that has been called the "reinvention of politics," and Vargas Llosa's dictatorial nation is imagined in our times, labeled "the third wave" in the experiment of democracy.[14] The "second birth" of democracy entailed the 1789 universalization of equality based on the doctrine of human rights and the category of humanity. The "third wave" is the most recent of the vicissitudes of the universalization of equality, marked by the imperative "democratization" both of the European communist bloc and the globe: the last two decades of the twentieth century alone saw eighty-one countries across the five continents move from different forms of authoritarianism to democratic forms of government.[15] The paradox

here is that the global rhetoric of universal democratization accompanies the increasing homogenization of culture and politics, resulting from the needs of capitalist development in our age of mediatization. On the one hand, democratic multiplicity is seen as the remedy to the twentieth century's legacy of totalitarianism; on the other, the demise of the socialist alternative has resulted in the imperative of a global economic homogenization that equals democracy with liberalism and market economy, and labels all forms of opposition to the latter as "nondemocratic."

The spirit in the air can be found in formulations such as Shapiro's "the democratic idea is close to non-negotiable in today's world" (*State of Democratic Theory*: 1), an ironic expression of our predicament, since negotiation is the lowest common denominator of democracy. To use Ignacio Ramonet's felicitous phrase, we seem to inhabit an era of "pensée unique."[16] Paradoxical as this era is, I see this third wave as a "re-invention of democracy," which debates the *meaning* of democracy after several failed incarnations in the last two centuries. While these three phases concern democratization, the first two open a public space in opposition to its absence in aristocratic regimes. In contrast, the absence in the third moment is different: a loss in meaning of certain forms of democratic participation within the confines of modern states. Contrary to the previous moments, the problem is not the absence of the political space of democracy but rather a distance between democratic ideals and their real manifestations (both in their social and liberal versions) in modern nation-state formations, and more recently, in processes of high control of participation related to the overpowering mediatization of society. This entails asking, for instance, if the articulation of social with political equality is unfinished business, still achievable within our (state) institutions—to recall Sade's famous expression to his contemporaries, "yet another effort if you would become republican"—or if these institutions are inherently inadequate for that task. This is the loss of meaning that in my view propels contemporary thinkers to reread the democrats of the past, ranging from the ancient Greeks to philosophers such as Spinoza, and that contributes to the current evaluations of the limits and internal contradictions of both liberalism and Marxism, being carried out in an array of disciplines. At stake is perhaps not the "true" meaning of democracy but rather the meaning of our loss, which guides our need to reinvent democracy.

Advancing some of the theoretical assumptions that I treat later on in this introduction, I wish to clarify that I read the texts studied here as symptoms emerging from times when democracy is reconfigured without claiming any

historiographic unity. My study claims to be neither an empirically based historiography nor a philosophy of history. It does not argue that these three "waves" of democracy are identical or on any teleological continuum, or that these texts mean the same in the context of each of these historical waves. It argues that these texts share symptoms of political anxieties produced by explosions of the democratic imagination. The historical contextualization that I embark upon in each chapter has the methodological purpose of enabling me to read texts as symptoms of their times. Summoning historical context, which is inescapably a construction from the perspective of the present, in order to perform a symptomatic reading instead of a historiographic construction, is a way of avoiding the dilemma of being caught between a history that is either inaccessible or merely a projection of our contemporary situation. I emphasize the relation between the texts' political imagination and a set of formal questions surrounding political autonomy brought about by democratization, though embodied in historically specific regimes of power and concrete forms of human interaction. Traces of a democratic imagination, and its anxieties about the relation between democracy and violence, appear in these texts almost as an "ideologeme,"[17] which leads me to ask: how could these three explosions of democratic imagination not have left traces on any cultural production of these times? This hypothetical assumption might be, for an ideology upholding the "autonomy of aesthetics," one of the sacrileges of political allegory; to become a materialist historical analysis proper, another volume of thorough archival research into the changing cultural and economic practices of these times would be needed. In this respect, one would even have to revise the standard periodization I have followed by alluding to the three phases above, a periodization that, like all periodizations, both enables and occludes historical analysis. For example, I believe that the hopes and some of the realities of the fleeting first half of the year 1917 in revolutionary Russia could be included as one of these phases. The present book works more along the lines of what Cornelius Castoriadis named the "imaginary institution of society," to be contrasted with its historical specificity at any given time.[18] Texts produced in periods of high democratization can be read as symptoms of democracy's anxieties about its relation to violence, democracy's ghostly other.

Violence

Violence in this book is considered in relation to an autonomous political life and the latter's articulations of the demos's abstract equality and its