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THE FORCE OF NONVIOLENCE

An Ethico-Political Bind

Judith Butler



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"Situating non-violence at the cross-roads of the ethical and political, *The Force of Non-Violence* brings into focus the ethical binds that emerge within the force field of violence. Non-violence is very often misunderstood as a passive practice that emanates from a calm region of the soul, or as an individualist ethic with an unrealistic relation to existing forms of power. This book argues for an aggressive form of non-violence that struggles with psychic ambivalence and seeks to embody social ideals of inter-dependency and equality. Only through a critique of individualism can the ethical and political ideal of non-violence be understood in relation to the ideal of equality and the demand for grievability. In this psychosocial and philosophical reflection that draws upon Foucault, Fanon, Freud, and Benjamin, Butler argues that to oppose violence now requires understanding its different modalities, including the regulation of the grievability of lives. The book shows how "racial and demographic phantasms" enter into the rationale for inflicting state violence and other modes of "letting die" by investing violence in those who are most severely exposed to its effects and subjugated to its lethal power. The struggle for non-violence is found in modes of resistance and movements for social transformation that separate off aggression from its destructive aims to affirm the living potentials of radical egalitarian politics"-- Provided by publisher.

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Political Philosophy in Freud: War, Destruction, Mania, and the Critical Faculty

I fear I may be abusing your interest, which is after all concerned with the prevention of war and not with our theories. Nevertheless, I should like to linger for a moment over our destructive drive, whose popularity is by no means equal to its importance.

Sigmund Freud to Albert Einstein, 1932

In his “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” written in 1915 and in the midst of the First World War, Sigmund Freud reflected on the bonds that hold a community together, as well as the destructive powers that break those bonds.¹ By the time he developed the “death drive,” first in

1 Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 14, London: Hogarth Press, 1915, 273–300.

1920² and then more fully in the following decade, he had become increasingly concerned with the destructive capacities of human beings. What he calls "sadism," "aggression," and "destructiveness" came to be primary representatives of the death drive, which received its most mature formulation in *Civilization and Its Discontents* in 1930.³ What he had called an "unconquerable part of human nature" in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* ten years earlier here takes on a new form as Freud develops a dualistic metaphysics, counterposing Eros, the force that creates ever more complex human bonds, to Thanatos, the force that breaks them down. A durable political form presumes that social bonds can remain relatively in place; but how, then, do politics deal with the destructive force that Freud describes?

Freud's reflections on World War I led to successive insights on destructiveness. In 1915, Freud had not yet introduced the notion of the death drive—of which one of the primary aims would be the deterioration of social bonds—but he did register an impression of overwhelming and unprecedented human destructiveness in his time:

The war in which we had refused to believe broke out and brought—disillusionment. Not only is it more bloody and more destructive than any war of other days, because of the enormously increased perfection of weapons of attack and defence; it is at least as cruel, as embittered, as implacable as any that has preceded it. It disregards all the restrictions

Abbreviated "SE" in subsequent citations.

2 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE vol. 18, 1920.

3 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, SE vol. 21, 1930.

known as International Law, which in peace-time the states had bound themselves to observe; it ignores the prerogatives of the wounded and the medical service, the distinction between civil and military sections of the population, the claims of private property. It tramples in blind fury on all that comes in its way, as though there were to be no future and no peace among men after it is over. It cuts all the common bonds between the contending peoples, and threatens to leave a legacy of embitterment that will make any renewal of those bonds impossible for a long time to come.⁴

Freud's remarks are noteworthy for many reasons, chief among them the sense of a shift in the history of destructiveness: destructiveness has not been known quite like this before. Although the development of new weapons has made the destruction greater than in previous wars, the level of cruelty strikes Freud as the same, suggesting that the problem is not that humans have become more cruel, but that technology has allowed that cruelty to produce greater destruction than before. A war without those weapons would cause less destruction but would engage no lesser amount of cruelty. So, if we are tempted to say that cruelty is itself augmented by technology, Freud appears to resist that view: destruction takes on new and historically variable forms, but cruelty remains the same. Thus, human cruelty alone does not account for all destructiveness—technology exercises its agency as well. But the distinctly human capacity for destructiveness in human beings follows from

4 Freud, "War and Death," 278–9.

the ambivalent psychic constitution of the human subject. The question of what can be done to check destructiveness thus engages ambivalence and technology, especially in the context of war.

Although it is commonly supposed that war making is the specific activity of nations, the blind rage that motivates war destroys the very social bonds that make nations possible. Of course, it can fortify the nationalism of a nation, producing a provisional coherence bolstered by war and enmity, but it also erodes the social relations that make politics possible. The power of destruction unleashed by war breaks social ties and produces anger, revenge, and distrust ("embitterment") such that it becomes unclear whether reparation is possible, undermining not only those relations that may have been built in the past, but also the future possibility of peaceful coexistence. Although Freud is clearly reflecting on World War I in his remarks above, he is also making claims about war in general: war "tramples . . . on all that comes in its way." Here, he is suggesting that breaking down the barriers that keep inhibitions in place is, in fact, one aim of war—military personnel have to be given license to kill. Whatever the explicit strategic or political aims of a war may be, they prove to be weak in comparison with its aims of destruction; what war destroys first are the very restrictions imposed on destructive license. If we can rightly speak about the unstated "aim" of war, it is neither primarily to alter the political landscape nor to establish a new political order, but rather to destroy the social basis of politics itself. Of course, such a claim may seem overstated if we believe, for instance, in just wars—wars waged against fascist or genocidal regimes in the name of democracy. But even then, the explicit goal

of war waging and the destructiveness unleashed by war are never quite the same. Even so-called "just war" runs the risk of a destructiveness that exceeds its stated aims, its deliberate purpose.

Indeed, whatever the public and stated aims of war may be, another aim is always also at work, one that Freud refers to here as "blind fury." Moreover, this fury, motivating and even unifying a people or a nation at war, also tears the people and the nation apart, working against whatever intentional, self-preserving, or self-enhancing aims they may have. This sort of rage aims, first and foremost, to overcome existing inhibitions and restrictions imposed on destruction itself, to break social bonds—understood in part as blocks against destruction—in favor of increased destructiveness, and to reproduce destruction into the foreseeable future, which may turn out to be either a future of destruction or a way of destroying the future itself. It is from within the stated local and provisional aims for war making that another aim, or indeed a "drive," can take hold—a destructiveness without limit. Even as a group or a nation may achieve temporary cohesion in war, rallying behind its explicit aims to defend the country or to destroy the enemy, something can form—or take hold—within that rallying that exceeds any of those explicitly acknowledged aims, breaking not only the social bonds of the groups targeted by war but those of the groups waging war, as well. The idea of "blind fury" that Freud takes from Greek tragedy prefigures what he would come to call the "death drive" just five years later. Already in 1915, what concerns him is the power that the death drive assumes, once it is amplified with destructive technology, to wreak destruction across the world, and to destroy the very social bonds

that have the power to keep destructiveness in check. By 1930, Freud would become more explicitly concerned with the possibility of genocide, as evidenced in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. There, he writes:

The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct [*Trieb*] of aggression and self-destruction [*Agressions und Selbstvernichtungstrieb*]. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man.⁵

In the 1931 edition, he appended a line to that paragraph calling upon “eternal Eros . . . to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary,” noting that no one can foresee how successful that effort will be. Freud was clearly looking for a possibility to counter the horrific destructiveness that he saw in the First World War and that he sensed was returning to Europe in greater proportions in the 1930s. Freud does not turn to history or to empirical examples in his effort to understand destructiveness, but to what he calls the “drives”—a move that seems speculative at best. So why look to the life of the drives? For Freud, the conscious reasons for acting that groups give to themselves are not the same as the underlying motivations that guide their action.

5 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 145.

As a result, reflection on how best to avert destruction must do something other than provide an argument acceptable to rational thought—it must somehow appeal to the drive, or find a way of working with—and against—that propulsive destructiveness that can lead to war.

One skeptical position toward drive theory results from a mistaken translation of Freud's "*Trieb*" as "instinct." Although *Instinkt* and *Trieb* are both used in Freud's work, the latter appears more often, and the death drive (*Todestrieb*) is never "the death instinct." The James Strachey translation of the *Complete Works* consistently renders both terms as "instinct," giving rise to a biologicistic understanding of the term in English-language literature and, in some cases, a view that drives, in Freud, follow a form of biological determinism. Freud makes clear, in an essay entitled "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" ("*Triebe und Triebchicksale*," better translated as "Drives and Their Destinies"), that the drive (*Trieb*, meaning "push") belongs neither exclusively to the realm of biology nor to a fully autonomous psychic domain; rather, it functions as a threshold concept (*ein Grenzbegriff*) between somatic and ideational spheres.⁶

Until 1920, Freud maintained that psychic life was governed by pleasure, sexuality, or libido, and it was only when he encountered forms of war neurosis that he began to consider that there were symptoms characterized by compulsive repetition that could not be explained by wish fulfillment or a drive toward

6 Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," SE vol. 14, 1915, 121–22: "An 'instinct' appears to us as a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic." In German: "So erscheint uns der 'Trieb' als ein Grenzbegriff zwischen Seelischem und Somatischem." Sigmund Freud, *Psychologie des Unbewussten*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1982, 85.

gratification. So, it was in the wake of war that Freud began to formulate the death drive, prompted as well by his consideration of forms of destructiveness, particularly those with a repetitive quality (what he would later refer to as "non-erotic aggressivity" in *Civilization and Its Discontents*).⁷ It was in the first formulation of the death drive, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that Freud sought to find an explanation for forms of repetitive behavior that did not appear to serve any wishes. He had encountered patients suffering from war neurosis who relived traumatic scenes of violence and loss in ways that bore no clear resemblance to forms of repetition accounted for by the pleasure principle. Not only was there no apparent satisfaction linked to this repetitious suffering, it progressively deteriorated the condition of the patient to the point of imperiling the organic basis of the patient's life. At this stage, Freud developed the first version of the death drive, according to which the organism seeks a return to its primary inorganic state, a state relieved of all excitation. Indeed, every human organism seeks to return to this origin, such that the trajectory of a life turns out to be no more than a "circuitous route toward death."⁸ As much as there is something in humans that seeks to fulfill wishes and to preserve its own organic life, there is also something that operates to the side of wish fulfillment, seeking to negate the organic conditions of life, whether that life belongs to another, to oneself, or to the living environment in its dynamic complexity.

What difference does it make that Freud now posits another tendency within the human psyche that seeks

7 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 120.

8 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 38.

to return it to a time before the individuated life of the human organism? His reflections on destruction focus on the possibility of the destruction of other lives, especially under conditions of war, in which the technology of weaponry amplifies the powers of human destructiveness. Those who suffered war neurosis were living out the psychic consequences of war, but they also became the occasion for Freud to consider how destruction works not only against others, but against oneself. War neurosis continues the suffering of war in the form of traumatic symptoms characterized by relentless repetition; one is bombarded, attacked, under siege—all metaphors of war that continue in the post-traumatic scene. Freud identifies this as the repetitive character of destruction. In the patient, it eventuates in social isolation; more broadly considered, it not only serves to weaken the social bonds that hold societies together, but also takes form as a self-destruction that can culminate in suicide. Libido or sexuality has a reduced or vanishing role in this form of destruction, and the social bonds without which political life proves impossible are shredded in its midst.

Toward the end of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud asserts not only that every human organism in some sense seeks its own death, but that this tendency cannot be derived from the sexual drives. The evidence for the death drive, he argues, can be found within sexual sadism and, more generally, within the phenomenon of sadomasochism.⁹ Although

⁹ Freud's theorization of sadomasochism seeks first to explain the phenomenon through recourse to the theory of libido in "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" (1915), but it is revised in light of the death drive in

the sexualization of the death drive can subordinate its destructiveness to what Freud regards as the non-destructive aims of sexuality, the death drive can come to predominate—a situation illustrated clearly with sexual violence. Both self-destruction and the destruction of the other are potentially at work within sadomasochism, suggesting for Freud that a drive separate from the sexual drive can nevertheless operate through it. Fugitive and opportunistic, the death drive seizes upon sexual desire without properly or explicitly making itself known. A sexual relation that begins with the desire to join together becomes interrupted by myriad forms of self-destruction that seem manifestly counter to the stated aims of the lovers. The disconcerting quality of acts that are clearly self-destructive, or that destroy the bonds that one wants most to keep, is but one ordinary form of wreckage by which the death drive makes itself known in sexual life.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud once again introduces sadism as the “representative” of the death drive, but in this late work he links the death drive more explicitly with the concepts of aggression and destructiveness. This can be understood as the second, or later, version of the death drive. Aggression is no longer understood as operating exclusively in the context of sexual sadomasochism, for, as Freud remarks, “we can no longer overlook the ubiquity of non-erotic aggressivity and destructiveness.”¹⁰ Freud is registering the escalation of bellicosity and nationalism across Europe, as well as the strengthening of anti-Semitism. These

Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) and then in “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (SE vol. 19, 1924).

10 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 120.

forms of aggression are not linked with pleasure or with the satisfactions that belong to pleasure: "This aggressive instinct [drive] is the derivative and the main representative of the death instinct [drive] which we have found alongside of Eros and which shares world-dominion with it."¹¹ Even though what he now calls "Eros" and "Thanatos" do not usually occur separately, they nevertheless have contrary aims: Eros seeks to combine or synthesize separate units within society, bringing individuals together into groups, but also bringing groups together in the service of larger social and political forms. Thanatos drives those same units apart from one another as well as each unit apart from itself. So, in the very action that seeks to establish and build a social bond, a counter-tendency exists that just as readily seeks to take it apart: I love you, I hate you; I cannot live without you, I will die if I continue to live with you.

Freud has two different ways of approaching this problem in relation to love. On the one hand, Freud insists throughout his work on the constitutive ambivalence of all love relations. This becomes clear in his chapter on "emotional ambivalence" in *Totem and Taboo*,¹² but also in "Mourning and Melancholia," where the loss of the loved one is coupled with aggression.¹³ On that model, love is itself ambivalent.¹⁴ On the other hand, "love," another name for "Eros," names only one pole in the polarity of emotional ambivalence. There is love and there is hate. So, either love

11 Ibid., 122.

12 Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, SE vol. 14, 1913.

13 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," SE vol. 14, 1917, 248-52.

14 Ibid., 250.

names the ambivalent constellation of love and hate, or it is but one pole of that bipolar structure. Freud's own position seems itself to be ambivalent, perhaps rhetorically yielding further proof of his claim. Indeed, the paradoxical formulation is never fully resolved in his writings, remaining fecund throughout. It surfaces symptomatically in the late work: love is that which binds one person to another, but love, by virtue of its inherent ambivalence, contains the potential to destroy social bonds. Or, at least, if it is not love that destroys those bonds, there is a destructive force that is in love or attaches itself to love—one that moves human creatures toward destruction and self-destruction, including the destruction of that which they most love.

The fact that Freud's view remains unsettled on the question of whether love contains or opposes this destructiveness is a sign of a problem that continues as he attempts to think about not only intimate relations of love, but the psychology of the mass and its destructive potential. Is the destructive capacity to be found within the bonds that hold such groups together—a sort of destructive tie—or is it rather a power that "cuts all the common bonds"—an anti-social impetus that tears at social relations?

What within the psyche militates against this cutting of social bonds? In Freud's view, groups can either destroy their internal bonds, or they can direct their destructiveness toward other groups; both forms of destructiveness, he worries, are assisted by an inhibition of the critical faculty. So, the task that emerges for Freud, in his writings on group psychology, is to strengthen the inhibiting power of this critical faculty. Whereas love is sometimes identified as the counter-force to destruction, at other times it seems it is

this "critical faculty" that is most important. In his 1921 monograph *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, the "critical faculty" describes various forms of deliberation and reflection; however, the next year, in *The Ego and the Id*, the critical faculty becomes associated with the "super-ego," a form of cruelty unleashed upon the ego. Eventually, the super-ego will come to be identified as "a pure culture of the death drive," at which point the way to counter destruction is through deliberate forms of self-restraint, that is, by directing destructiveness against one's own destructive impulse. Self-restraint is thus a deliberate and reflexive form of destructiveness, directed against the externalization of destructive aims.¹⁵ In other words, the check against unleashing destructive impulse, which in its earlier iteration could have been described as an "inhibition," is set up as a psychic mechanism bent on cruelty once Freud introduces the super-ego. The task of the super-ego is to direct its destructive power against its destructive impulses. The problem with this solution, of course, is that an unbridled operation of the super-ego can lead to suicide, converting the destruction of the other into the destruction of the self. On the one hand, the "critical faculty" seems attentive to the consequences of action, monitoring forms of expression and action to prevent injurious consequences. On the other hand, as an expression of the death drive, its aim is potentially destructive of the ego itself. A moderate form of self-checking can explode into unrestrained suicidal self-beratement, but only if the death drive itself remains unchecked. Paradoxically, this means that the critical agency

15 Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, SE vol. 19, 1923, 53.

upon which one relies to check destructive impulse can become an internalized instrument of destructive impulse, imperiling the life of the ego itself. Thus, the self-preserving tendencies of Eros have to be applied to the death drive as a check on its destructive operation. If the super-ego works destruction against the ego in order to inhibit the latter's destructive expression, it still traffics in destruction, but the imperiled object is no longer the other or the world, but the ego itself. Thus, the critical faculty is of limited use in checking destruction, since it cannot check the destruction that operates through its super-egoic form. For that, a countervailing force is needed, one that pursues self-preservation and, more generally, the preservation of life. Is that force to be called love, or is it mania? Does it involve dis-identification, or the adoption of a neurotic position that establishes a critical distance from the sadistic exhilarations that run through society?

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, written a year or so before the development of the theory of the super-ego, Freud asks: What is the mechanism by which the dis-inhibition of cruelty takes place? How do we account for its workings? When we say that a "wave of feeling" passes through a crowd, what do we mean? Or, when certain kinds of passions that would otherwise remain unexpressed are "unleashed" in a crowd, how do we account for that expression? Does "unleashing" mean that a desire was always there, but that it was simply held in check? Or is "unleashing" always structured, thus giving form to the desire or rage as it emerges? If we say that an elected official has licensed a new wave of misogyny, or that he has made widespread racism permissible, what sort of agency do we attribute to him?

Was it there all along, or has he brought it into being? Or is it that it was there in certain forms, and now his speech and action give it new ones? In either case, impulse is structured either by the power by which it is "repressed" (which designates and shapes it in some way) or by that power by which it is "liberated" (which endows it with specific meaning in relation to the prior repression). If we were simply to accept a hydraulic model—one that holds that a quantity of "energy" is released when inhibition is lifted—then the impulse is the same whether it is inhibited or expressed. But if it matters through what means the inhibition has been enforced, and if that means crafts the content of the repressed, then the emergence of the formerly inhibited impulse does not simply push aside the inhibiting force; rather, it wages an orchestrated attack on that form of power, debunking its reasons, its legitimacy, its claims. The impulse that emerges is thus worked over by interpretations, and so there is no raw or unmediated energy to be subjected to the mechanisms of prohibition or license. This impulse has actively contested the moral and political claims that have informed and supported the inhibition; it has worked assiduously against the critical faculty—not just against moral judgments and political evaluations, but against the general character of reflective thought that makes both possible. The impulse seeks to disperse and nullify moral self-restriction, itself the basis for what Freud comes to call the "super-ego." It may seem that against such a challenge to the super-ego, the task is to shore up moral restrictions, especially those that the self imposes on itself. But once it becomes clear that the super-ego is itself a potential force of destruction, the matter becomes more complex.

Freud puts the matter this way:

The excessively strong super-ego which has obtained a hold on consciousness rages against the ego with merciless violence, as if it had taken possession of the whole of the sadism available in the person . . . What is now holding sway in the super-ego is, as it were, a pure culture of the death drive, and in fact it often enough succeeds in driving the ego into death.¹⁶

What, if anything, checks the merciless violence of one part of the self unleashed against another? Freud finishes that sentence by claiming that one way to thwart the success of self-destruction is for the ego to “fend off its tyrant in time by the change round into mania.”

Freud here references his 1917 work “Mourning and Melancholia,” where he seeks to distinguish between “mourning,” which implies a wakeful acknowledgment of the reality of a lost person or ideal, and “melancholia,” which is a failure to acknowledge the reality of loss. In melancholia, the lost other is internalized (in the sense that it is incorporated) as a feature of the ego, and a form of heightened self-beratement reenacts—and inverts—at a psychic level the relation of the ego to the lost other. The recrimination against the lost person or ideal is “turned round” against the ego itself; in this way, the relation is preserved as an animated intra-psychic relation.¹⁷ Even in that essay, Freud makes clear that the hostility unleashed against the ego is potentially fatal. The scene of

¹⁶ Ibid., translation modified.

¹⁷ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 251.

melancholic self-beratement thus becomes the model for the later topography of super-ego and ego.

Melancholia is composed of two opposing trends: the first is self-beratement, which becomes the signature action of "conscience"; the second is "mania," which seeks to break the bond to the lost object, actively renouncing the object that is gone.¹⁸ The "manic" and energetic denunciations of the object, the ego's heightened efforts to break the bond to the lost object or ideal, imply the desire to survive the loss and not to have one's own life claimed by the loss itself. Mania is, as it were, the protest of the living organism against the prospect of its destruction by an unchecked super-ego. So, if the super-ego is the continuation of the death drive, mania is the protest against destructive action directed toward the world and toward the self. Mania asks: "Is there any way out of this vicious circle in which destructiveness is countered by self-destructiveness?"

Too often, the path is traced from melancholia to the super-ego, but the countervailing tendency, mania, may hold clues to a different kind of resistance to destruction. The manic force that seeks the overthrow of the tyrant is in some ways a power of the organism to break what have been regarded as sustaining bonds of identification. The organism is already a threshold concept where the somatic and psychic meet, so this is not a purely naturalistic upsurge of rebellious life. *Dis-identification* becomes one way to counter the powers of self-destruction and to secure the living on of the organism itself. To the degree that mania breaks bonds, dis-identifies with the tyrant

18 Ibid., 253-5.

and the subjection that tyranny requires, it takes on a critical function—engaging and seeking to resolve a crisis, taking distance from a form of power that threatens the life of the organism. The super-ego is a psychic institution, in Freud's view, but as an institution, it also takes on a social form; thus, tyranny relies on psychic subjection at the same time that the super-ego absorbs forms of social power such as tyranny. The struggle of the critical function is to break with bonds that have secured one's own destruction without precisely replicating the social form of destructiveness from which one seeks emancipation. The criticism of the tyrant, therefore, is, or can be, an exercise of a critical faculty that is directed against the super-ego without replicating its life-threatening version of "criticism."

Mania proves to be the only hope for prevailing against the suicidal and murderous aims of the unbridled super-ego that would, unleashed, judge the ego unto death, since only with that power is it possible to break with the tyrant, and with the logic of the tyrant that has become the structure of subjectification.

I surely do not want to champion mania, but only to insist that it does offer a cipher for understanding those "unrealistic" forms of insurrectionary solidarity that turn against authoritarian and tyrannical rule. The tyrant, after all, is an anthropomorphism sustained by networks of power, and so its overthrow is manic, solidaristic, and incremental. And when the head of state is himself a tyrannical child who throws fits in all directions, and the media follows his every move with rapt attention, a great space is opened up for those who might build their networks of solidarity,

who might "break free" of the fascination with his strategic ways of losing control. To the degree that those who follow the mad tyrant identify with his willful disregard for law, and for any limits imposed upon his own power and destructive capacity, the counter-movement is one that is based on dis-identification.¹⁹ Those forms of solidarity are not based on identification with the leader, but with a dis-identification that operates under the signifier of "life" but is not for that reason reductively vitalist: its stands for another life, future life.

Identifications are generally regarded as important for empathy and the perpetuation of social bonds, but they also imply destructive potential, and they permit destructive acts to be undertaken with impunity. It is no doubt important to consider the various forms of internalization that are sometimes too quickly called "identification." The internalization of the lost other or ideal, in the case of melancholia, preserves and animates a form of hostility that has the power to destroy the living organism itself. So, even as the super-ego checks the externalization of destructiveness, it remains a potentially destructive instrument that can come to serve the very murderous purposes it is meant to check in the most self-destructive way, namely, through suicide. The moralistic conclusion of Freud in this context is that the super-ego will always be a weak instrument with which to enforce a check on violence, unless we opt for the *violence of the super-ego*, however fatal that may prove, over

19 See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

its alternative, externalized expression. But mania, evidenced in the manic desire to live, is a cipher that presents us with another possibility. It is not a model for action—the task is not suddenly to become manic, as if that would translate directly into a form of effective political resistance. It would not. Mania overestimates the power of the subject and loses touch with reality. And yet, where do we find the psychic resources for taking leave of reality as it is currently established and naturalized? The “unrealism” of mania suggests a refusal to accept the status quo, and it draws upon, and intensifies, a desire to live on the part of one who is battling against forms of heightened self-beratement. That same self-cruelty or self-destruction can be provisionally ameliorated, as well, through falling back upon the social solidarity of failure—in which none of us lives up to the ideal, and this shared failure grounds our solidarity and sense of equality. That amelioration of super-egoic violence proves to be provisional when a group formation fails to organize and contain that hostility, and it can assume a fatal form. Moreover, there are group formations that mobilize that destructive hostility toward an external enemy, at which point the destruction of life, even the mass destruction of life, becomes possible. Identification can imply destructive potential when a group forms bonds of identification that depend upon the externalization of its own destructive potential. Those others with whom the group dis-identifies come to embody that destruction in spectral form—the one that is, as it were, on (disavowed) loan from the original group. But identification does not have to work that way. When, for instance, dis-identification indicates the emergence of a critical capacity that breaks with forms of tyranny, it works with its own

powers of destruction, understood as the purposeful dismantling of a tyrannical regime.²⁰ This can, and does, happen within the solidarity of sentiments, but even that is never a perfect mode of identification: ambivalent bonds that are nevertheless necessary for alliances, and that are mindful of the affirmative and destructive potentials that follow from that vexed relation. When dis-identification interrupts the fascinated subjection to the tyrant, then dis-identification is at once manic and critical.

If the super-ego is prized as the only possible check on destructiveness, then destructiveness returns to the subject, but imperils its existence. In melancholia, hostility is not externalized, but the ego becomes the object of potentially murderous hostility, one that wields the power to destroy the living ego, the organism itself. But mania introduces this unrealistic desire to exist and persist, the one that seems based in no perceptible reality and has no good grounds for being so within a particular political regime. On its own, mania can never become a politics without becoming a dangerous form of destruction, but it introduces a vigorous "unrealism" into the modes of solidarity that seek to dismantle violent regimes, insisting, against the odds, on another reality.

Checking Violence

Freud and Einstein are both concerned with what checks destructiveness: whether another drive can triumph over the death drive, whether the check requires an intensification of

20 Ibid.

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conscience. For the most part, we have been left with two alternatives. One claims that we must educate ourselves and others into forms of conscience that inculcate the moral revulsion against violence. The other holds that we must foster bonds of love in order to defeat the death drive in its mechanical persistence. But if conscience can support social bonds that are nationalist, fascist, and racist, how can we rely on conscience to check violence? Obedience to a tyrannical power often requires, and enforces, a form of the subject whose self-subjugation becomes a moral imperative. To throw off tyrannical control risks the dissolution of that subject form, especially when it has become instated in super-egoic form. If we could turn to love and simply fan its flames so that it becomes the more powerful force, we would have a solution. But love, as noted above, is defined by its ambivalence, structured by the oscillation between love and hatred. The task appears to be finding a way to live and act with ambivalence—one where ambivalence is understood not as an impasse, but as an internal partition that calls for an ethical orientation and practice. For only the ethical practice that knows its own destructive potential will have the chance to resist it. Those for whom destruction is always and only coming from the outside will never be able to acknowledge, or work with, the ethical demand imposed by nonviolence. That said, violence and nonviolence remain issues that are at once socio-political and psychic, and the ethical reflection on the debate therefore must take place precisely at the threshold of the psychic and social worlds.

That very problem emerges in the correspondence between Freud and Einstein in 1931–32, the years directly preceding Hitler's rise to power and their subsequent exiles

from Austria and Germany, respectively.²¹ Einstein writes to Freud to ask him how humankind can become delivered from "the menace of war."²² Lamenting that the fate of humankind is in the hands of "a governing class" that is "craving for power" and "hostile to any limitation of national sovereignty," Einstein appeals to Freud as someone whose "critical judgment" is most important at this time in which world war once again threatens Europe. He asks whether there is a basis in the drives that constitute human psychic life for a political arrangement that could serve as an effective check on war. In particular, he asks whether it might be possible to establish an association or a tribunal that could check the destructive power of those drives. Einstein first identifies the problem as destructive drives, but he also interrogates the issue at the level of political institutions, calling for nations to cede their sovereignty to an international body that would demand a commitment to preventing war and guaranteeing international security. This political goal can only be achieved if human beings are the kinds of creatures capable of constituting, and submitting to, international authorities that have the power to prevent war. If there is a tendency or drive that undercuts that capacity, then averting war may well be impossible. Clearly having read Freud, Einstein asks whether human beings have within them "a lust for hatred

21 Einstein departed Germany in 1933 and Freud left Vienna in 1938. Their correspondence can be found as "Why War?," SE vol. 22, [1933], 195–216. In 1931, the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation invited Einstein to engage in a dialogue with a thinker of his choice on the topics of politics and peace, and he chose Freud, whom he had met briefly a few years before.

22 Einstein to Freud, "Why War?," 199.

and destruction,” and whether this can be “raise[d] . . . to the power of a collective psychosis.” So, though he wonders whether the destructive drives can be contained, he also wonders whether human practices or institutions can be cultivated that would increase the possibility of preventing war. He notes that violence can take the form of wars between nations, but also that of civil wars motivated by religious zealotry, as well as that of “the persecution of racial minorities.”²³

Freud warns that he has no practical proposals, but his remarks do elaborate a political position. His first proposal is to replace a distinction Einstein makes between right and power with one between right and violence (“right” translates *Recht*, which in German means legal order and even justice). In Freud’s account, conflicts between persons and groups traditionally have been resolved through recourse to violence, but this has happened less regularly as group formations have changed. He notes that “a path was traced that led away from violence to law” when “an alliance of many weaklings” overcame the strength of the single man or leader.²⁴ In this way, he writes, “brute force is overcome through union” or what he also calls “the power of a community.” In his view, “the superior strength of a single individual could be rivaled by the union of several weak ones”; and later he elaborates: “In order that the transition from violence to this new right or justice may be effected . . . the union of the majority must be a stable and lasting one.” To do this, a psychological condition has to be met: “the growth

23 Ibid., 201.

24 Freud to Einstein, “Why War?,” 205.

of . . . communal feelings which are the true source of its strength."²⁵

Writing to Einstein a full decade after *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud now conjectures that the community is held together *not* by their common subordination to an ideal leader, but precisely through their explicit power to overthrow a tyrant or authoritarian ruler, and to establish common and enforceable laws and institutions in the wake of that overthrow. In order to overthrow the tyrant, and to break with attachments based on the love of the tyrant, perhaps some form of mania is required. Can mania take form within those "communal feelings" and "emotional ties" that are required to achieve that goal? The answer seems to depend on how we interpret the "community of interests."²⁶ Freud's wager is that as power (not violence) is transferred to ever-larger combinations, group members are increasingly enfranchised and more inclined to act from sentiments of solidarity. Einstein talked about the obligation of each nation-state to surrender its sovereignty to a larger international body. Freud also imagines the distribution of power beyond the model of sovereignty. As the community and its powers of self-governance expand and become increasingly distinct from, even opposed to, the individual ruler, "the sentiment of solidarity," expressed in a set of laws both self-legislated and self-restraining, is relied upon to check destructiveness. The ongoing problem, however, is that violence can erupt within the community, for instance when one faction pits itself against another, or when the right of

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

rebellion is exercised against the state or the international body that limits the sovereignty of states.

The limitation on violence seems to coincide, for both Freud and Einstein, with the limitation of state sovereignty within a broader internationalist frame. This move takes aim at the anthropomorphism of power that constitutes sovereignty itself. In the early 1930s, both Freud and Einstein understood nationalist fervor to lead to outbreaks of violence, though neither could fully see the forms of state violence in fascism and Nazism that would materialize in the next few years. The international body or "tribunal" they both imagined was to some degree represented by the League of Nations in the early 1930s, but that institution hardly constituted an ultimate power, since state sovereignty could not be effectively checked by existing institutions. Without the power of enforcement, such a body lacks the sovereign power it requires to prevent war. The conclusion, therefore, was that the ceding of sovereignty in favor of international relations was the only path to peace. Einstein, who called himself "immune from nationalist bias," thought that the risk of an international institution was worth taking: "The quest for international security involves the unconditional surrender by every nation, in a certain measure, of its liberty of action, its sovereignty that is to say, and it is clear beyond all doubt that no other road can lead to such security." He then continues to remark upon the failure of this effort, which "leaves us no room for doubt that strong psychological factors are at work."²⁷ For Freud, the question was how best to understand sentiments of solidarity if and

27 Einstein to Freud, "Why War?," 200.

when they oppose the tyrant, that is to say, if they are not based on identification with that anthropomorphic figure of unchecked power. Of course, mania is one way of taking issue with reality—that is why it belongs to the circuit of melancholia. Mania acts as if it were an unconditioned freedom, only to return to the problem of a conditioned life. But what decides that condition? And what follows once the existing conditions for exercising freedom are called into question? Some fleeting glimpse of utopia follows—transient, of course, but not for that reason without political potential.

Freud's final effort to ascertain ways to prevent war takes him on a train of thought unpursued in his reflections on group psychology: the first course he explores requires a resistance to the exhilarations of nationalism; the second makes a call to heed the "organic" basis of our nature as human beings. Lastly, he makes a strong case that there are only two ways to counter the propensity for war: the mobilization of "Eros, its antagonist," and the forming of communal forms of identification.²⁸ To this end, Freud speculated that an evolution of the masses may be possible through education and the cultivation of solidaristic sentiments of a non-nationalist sort.²⁹ The ideal condition would be one in which every member of a community exercises self-restraint, and does so precisely by recognizing that the preservation of life is itself a good to be valued in common. Freud's ideal of a community, one whose members are equally bound to impose self-restraint in

28 Ibid., 212.

29 On Freud's resistance to nationalism and Zionism, see Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance*, London and New York: Verso, 2007, 17–38.

the name of the preservation of life, opens the possibility of a democratization of critical judgment and critical thought that does not rely on the extremes of super-egoic self-flagellation to arrive at a moral position. Does he, in the end, offer a convincing response to the skeptical position that the destructive powers of humans are so profoundly inscribed in the life of the drives that no political arrangement can effectively check them? On the one hand, Freud argues that we must rally behind love, which builds and preserves social bonds, and behind identification, which builds and preserves sentiments of solidarity, over and against hate (or Thanatos), which tears at social bonds in wild and mindless ways. On the other hand, he has time and again underscored the fact that love and hate are equally constitutive dimensions of the drives, and that it is not possible to eliminate destructiveness simply by amplifying Eros. It is not only that we must sometimes *aggressively* defend our lives in order to preserve life (the aim of Eros); we also have to commit to living with those toward whom we maintain intense feelings of hostility and murderous impulse.

In his discussion of identification and melancholia, it is clear that all love relations contain ambivalence, pushed in two countervailing directions understood as the propulsions of love and hate. So, "love" names one pole in the oppositional relation of love and hate. But it also names the opposition itself, lived out as emotional ambivalence and its vacillating variations. One can say, "I love you and so do not hate you," but one can also say that love and hate are bound together, and this paradox is what we include under the name of "love." In the former formulation, love is unequivocal; in the latter formulation, love does not escape ambivalence. Is there

something about the rhythm, however jarring, established between these two formulations that constitutes a broader concept of love for Freud?

There seem to be two consequences, then, of Freud's views on destructiveness and war that are opened up but not precisely pursued. The first is that a corrective to forms of accelerated nationalist sentiment is precisely ambivalence, the "tearing" at the social bond that follows from a mindful self-distancing from its exhilarations and hostilities—and from the restrictively nationalist framework. One might, at the same time, love a country and dissent from its nationalist fervor; that would activate ambivalence in the service of a critical reflection on the possibility of war and a refusal to partake in its excitations. The second consequence would be to rally hatred against war itself. Freud offers this indirectly, in his letter to Einstein, in his own rhetoric. For instance, he writes, "The basis for our common hatred of war . . . is that we cannot do otherwise than to hate it. Pacifists we are because our organic nature wills us thus to be."³⁰

This is a sweeping and suspect claim, to be sure. So what is Freud doing when he writes in this way? On the one hand, he has told us that the death drive is an "unconquerable" dimension of our organic lives; on the other hand, there seems to be a drive toward life, or a vitalistic drive to live—one that seeks to overthrow the threat to life itself. Only one part of our organic nature wills us to be pacifists, the part that would value the sentiments of solidarity: those that seek to overthrow the forces of destruction and the anthropomorphic fascination of tyrannical power. So, he is effectively calling

30 Freud to Einstein, "Why War?," 214.

upon, or calling to, that part of our organic natures that could be pacifist if it were to gain power over destructive impulses, subordinating the latter to the aims of collective self-preservation.

Freud calls on organic nature to manifest its necessary pacifism, but this can only happen where the "growth of culture" has produced a resentment against war and the felt sense of its intolerable character. It is thus only an *educated* organic nature that discovers that war sensations are no longer thrilling, because only through an educated optic can any of war implies, something that proves unbearable for humans to accept in light of their own organic life. On the one hand, it is organic life that makes us pacifists, since at least some part of us does not will our own destruction (when we are not under the dominant sway of the death drive). On the other hand, we only come to understand the consequences of the destruction of organic life through a cultural process that allows us to see and consider this destruction, and so to develop a revulsion against destruction itself. In the end, Freud hopes that another vicissitude of organic life will have the final say against the death drive, whose aim is the destruction of that very life, and that various forms of organic life will come to be understood as connected through relations of dependency that extend throughout the living world. In this way, his is a politics of and for the living organism, even if the organism is sometimes swayed by the circuitous or destructive path toward death. Hatred is never fully absent, but its negative power can become focused as an aggressive stance against war, one form of destruction pitted against another—a view that would be compatible, for instance,

with an aggressive form of pacifism, what Einstein himself called "militant pacifism."³¹

Gandhi, too, seemed to be engaged in his own drive theory in a similar way when he remarked, "I have found that life persists in the midst of destruction and, therefore, there must be a higher law than that of destruction."³² He relates this as well to "the law of love." Whatever form this "law" may take, it also seems to take form in the rhetorical appeal to the law, the petition to avert destruction. It may not rest upon a discoverable law; rather, it is, like the demands of organic nature, a political and ethical rhetoric that seeks to compel and persuade in the direction of nonviolence, precisely on those occasions where the full lure of violence is registered.

Freud's appeal to nonviolence operates, as well, in a psychic and social field where actions are pulled in countervailing directions. Whatever "law" imposes itself against violence is not a law that can be codified or applied. It structures the appeal itself, the address to the other, the ethical bond presupposed and enlivening through that appeal. Further, that does not mean that there is no place for destruction, in the sense of breaking with subordination or dismantling an unjust regime. The subject who is obedient

31 See Albert Einstein's interview with George Sylvester Viereck in January 1931, where he claims: "I am not only a pacifist, but a militant pacifist. I am willing to fight for peace. Nothing will end war unless the peoples themselves refuse to go to war. Every great cause is first championed by an aggressive minority." In *Einstein on Peace*, Otto Nathan and Heinz Norden, eds., Pickle Partners Publishing, 2017, 125.

32 Mahatma Gandhi, "My Faith in Nonviolence," in Arthur and Lila Weinberg, eds., *The Power of Nonviolence: Writings by Advocates of Peace*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2002, 45.

to a murderous form of power enacts that violence against itself, setting up that political power as the structure of the super-ego, an internalized form of violence. The limit point of the super-ego is the destruction of the ego and of the living organism itself (suicide or murder), but the form of aggression that Freud imagines, at the end of his correspondence with Einstein, is of a different order. When he remarks that the only hope for prevailing against the tyrant is the mobilization of mania (leveling plaint after plaint, until numerosity overwhelms sovereign power), he offers us a glimpse into those forms of insurrectionary solidarity that turn against authoritarian and tyrannical rule, as well as against forms of war that threaten the destruction of life itself. The hatred directed against war is perhaps like the mania that alone has the strength to free the subject from the tyrant; both break with nationalist and militarist forms of social belonging through turning one sense of the critical faculty against another. The critical faculty that becomes animated in the name of a democratization of dissent is one that opposes war and resists the intoxications of nationalism, turning against the leader who insists that obedience to a war-mongering authority is obligatory. In this way, Freud imagines the democratization of critical judgment based on sentiments of solidarity, one that turns against that life-threatening form of aggression, including its critical manifestation. Aggression and hatred both remain, for sure, but they are now directed against all that which undermines the prospect of expanding equality and which imperils the organic persistence of our interconnected lives. But nothing remains guaranteed, for the death drive appears, as well, to be part of organic life; so, if the organic turns out to be driven by the duality of life

and death, that should hardly come as a total surprise. The struggle that constitutes us as political creatures is the one we continue, without a perfect conscious understanding, in the practices of life and death, despite our occasional admirably decisive efforts at vigilance.