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Nolen Gertz

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on War, Virtual War and Human Security**

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Politics, the Political and Violence

Javier Franzé

Abstract

This paper deals with the relation between politics, the political and violence. The tradition of western political theory has tended to reduce politics to the State and dissolve violence in political ends. This tradition was broken by Weber and Schmitt. Their reflections allow for the linking of politics and violence, and for thought on politics beyond the State. Nevertheless they are not enough to elaborate a concept of politics that fully recognizes its relationship to violence. The conceptual distinction between politics and the political, is consolidated in contemporary political theory through authors like Lefort, Rancière and Bourdieu. It resolves some of Weber and Schmitt's insufficiencies, but not all, some of which are quite relevant. One is the relationship between the political and violence, which I wish to analyze. We can formulate two questions on this: is it true that conceiving politics as something not reduced to the State: 1) ends up omitting violence which is also present in the political, as if the only violence were that of the State; and 2) downplays the monopoly of legitimate violence as a characteristic trait of politics? These problems open other questions as: is violence a physical objective phenomenon or a symbolic and subjective one?

Key Words: Politics, political, violence, state, Western tradition, Weber, Schmitt, Lefort, Rancière, Bourdieu.

1.

The tradition of western political theory has tended to reduce politics to the State and dissolve violence in political ends. This tradition was broken at the beginning of the XX century by Weber and Schmitt¹. Their reflections allow for the linking of politics and violence, and for thought on politics beyond the State. Nevertheless—as you will see—they are not enough to elaborate a concept of politics that fully recognizes its relationship to violence.

The conceptual distinction between politics and the political is consolidated in contemporary political theory through authors like Lefort², Rancière³, Bourdieu⁴ and others. It resolves some of Weber and Schmitt's insufficiencies, but not all, some of which are quite relevant.

One is the relationship between the political and violence, which I wish to analyze here. We can formulate two questions on this. Is it true that

conceiving politics as something not reduced to the State: 1) ends up omitting violence which is *also* present in the political, as if the only violence were that of the State?; and 2) downplays the monopoly of legitimate violence as a characteristic trait of politics?

2.

I will now quickly point out the relevant and insufficient elements of Weber and Schmitt's concepts of politics.

Weber's reflection constitutes a reference point for a concept of politics because of its non-normative components (pre-eminence of the means over the ends) and anti-metaphysical components (the world as a place devoid of meaning, a non-essentialist concept of man, unfounded values).

His weak point is in the reduction—although with shades of meaning⁵—of politics to the State and the absence of a clear concept of violence. Weber identifies violence mainly as physical, however he does not neglect to recognize the existence of spiritual violence (seeing oneself as obligated to do something undesirable under the threat of violence). Nevertheless, his concept of violence is mainly physical, given that spiritual violence is a consequence of physical violence, and not vice-versa.

Carl Schmitt's reflection represents a rupture within the Weberian break with tradition. Schmitt breaks the mutual identification of politics with the State by forming the concept of the political. What is interesting about Schmitt is that he defines the political as something that goes beyond the State; however it grants violence a decisive place—as expressed in the state *ius belli*—since it is what sustains and carries out the friend-enemy distinction. This converts the State into a political association that is not exclusive, yet is paradigmatic. In short, it allows for the contemplation of politics beyond the State, not reduced to it, although *also* present within it.

The insufficiencies of Schmitt's conception would be: a) it stems from an essentialist concept of man; b) it does not carry with it a clear concept of violence, or rather, it associates violence with physical harm⁶; c) violence appears as something exceptional in the political (yet essential, precisely because of this); d) violence only appears on the vertical axis, from top to bottom (State-society), there is no horizontal axis; e) and finally, his concept of the political does not reflect the tension between the fight for and creation of meaning (the political) and the crystallization and reproduction of this (politics).

3.

Now I am going to describe the traits that are common to the reflections of Bourdieu, Lefort and Rancière on the political and politics, in order to analyze how they can be useful for us when contemplating the

relation between politics and violence. For lack of time, I will not, of course, be able to go into detail on the analysis and description of each author individually.

These traits are: 1) they conceive politics as a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the State. Politics does not occur in a place, space or field, but rather it is coextensive to 'the social', ubiquitous. Furthermore, since politics is what gives shape and meaning to society itself, it really does not circumscribe it, but rather, floods it. In other words, it lies on a different level, immensurable. It forms society. 2) Political order is a symbolic order. Material things do not possess intrinsic meaning that alone produces a distribution of power and organization. It is the meaning given to things that creates order. What things symbolize is what grants power to those who possess them. 3) The political phenomenon can be analytically divided into two moments: the fight for and creation of meaning (the fight for power), and the reproduction/crystallization of meaning (institutionalization). Lefort calls the first one the political and the second one politics; Rancière, respectively, comments on police and politics; and Bourdieu, in turn, distinguishes between the political field and the State field.

4.

I will now analyze the impact of this separation between politics and the political on the relation between politics and violence. We have formulated two questions: if the conception of politics as something not reduced to the State leaves out the monopoly of legitimate violence as a characteristic trait of politics and if the violence present within the political itself has been pushed into the background.

Here I must differentiate Bourdieu from Lefort and Rancière. For Lefort and Rancière, politics as well as the political seem to exist without the presence of violence. Since these authors conceive political order as a symbolic order, and politics as a fight for meaning in a contingent world, this particularly stands out because it implies the affirmation that this fight and the imposition of meaning do not entail violence at all. In this fight, the difference of symbolic power (that is to say, the power to create, classify, give shape to: to name) would not entail violence. Also, the State does not appear associated to violence in these thinkers; nevertheless, it is for them the paradigmatic headquarters of politics, that is to say, in charge of maintaining, reproducing and defending crystallized order.

Bourdieu's case is different. For him, symbolic violence is a central element of social and political order. Furthermore, the distinction between politics and the political—between the state field and the political field—while breaking the mutually exclusive assimilation between politics and the State, does not exclude the State as an element of the political. For Bourdieu, the decisive political fight is for the power of the State, not defined as a

monopoly of legitimate physical violence, but rather as a monopoly of legitimate physical and *symbolic* violence. According to Bourdieu the fight for meaning implies an imposition, that is to say, violence over the agents, although with their consent.

Bourdieu, in contrast to Lefort and Rancière, contemplates politics and the political without losing sight of the violence found in the political, as well as that present in politics.

Nevertheless, his reflection has some elements that are unsatisfactory for contemplating the relationship between politics and violence. These are, first, the concept itself of violence and its implications. And, second, what we could refer to as the axes of violence.

On the concept of violence, some authors like Philippe Braud⁷ have criticized Bourdieu because they understand his concept of violence as one based on an external perspective, that of the investigator, who decides what is violent, why an action is considered violent and when the agent is a victim of violence.

Let us not forget that for Bourdieu violence is as such because the agent internalizes social order. Social order is sustained because it tends to give the agents a sense of meaning. Therefore they perceive it as *naturally* ordered, and not as a contingent human product. Hence, they tend to accept their position. This process is not necessary, nor is it irreversible, nor is it a problem of consciousness or unconsciousness. For Bourdieu, the agent is an accomplice because he is active, for knowing (although in a naturalized way) or not knowing (the true contingent character) the order. This is linked to the concept of *habitus* that we cannot develop here.

For Braud, on the other hand, one cannot decide when an action is violent from an external position. Braud adopts a subjectivist conception, according to which violence does not exist until the actor declares himself a victim or affirms having suffered from it. Not adopting this perspective, affirms Braud, leads one to fall into the notion of false conscience; in a quasi-metaphysical concept of the individual and his freedom; and turns into an objectivist concept and, in short, paradoxically positivist concept of violence, contradictory to the symbolic violence said to be sustained.

For Bourdieu, since the agent suffers symbolic violence with his complicity, it does not concern an *external* imposition, nor is it about perceived harm, but rather quite the opposite. Violence is suffered, but the agent does not consciously recognize it as such. That is why this violence is so powerful and effective.

For Braud, as well as for Bourdieu, violence basically consists of harm to one's own meaning or symbolic dimension. Both coincide in that they go beyond a materialistic concept of violence, stemming from a positivist perspective. According to this concept, violence exists when there

is physical, objective and measurable harm done to a thing or person. The symbolic concept of violence, on the other hand, seems to be richer and more complex: it is not the physical harm, but rather violence eradicates in the significance this action has for the receiver.

Each position proposes questions on this topic.

Braud's position does not allow for the defining of the State as a monopoly of legitimate violence, nor does it affirm that violence is specific to politics. Violence depends on whether or not someone feels like a victim. Furthermore, this subjectivist concept of violence seems defenceless against the symbolic power of political order, which -at least in the Western world- has tended to dissolve violence in political ends. In short, the subjectivist conception of violence closes the door to thought on an order or activity that functions with violence, and only addresses the actors or individuals that suffer from it.

Bourdieu's position, in contrast, allows for the definition of politics as a monopoly of symbolic violence. However, it obligates the acceptance of an objectivist point of view, not referring to false conscience, as Braud upholds, but rather a concept of human beings or of human freedom, *for all individuals and for all time*, beyond the individuals themselves. Bourdieu's position, in short, assumes a concept of the human being and human freedom. This does not seem to be consistent with the notion itself that order is symbolic, one human construction of meaning, among others. If the meaning is contingent, the idea of freedom and man are as well.

The other shortcoming of Bourdieu's position is, as we have said, that of the axes of symbolic violence. For Bourdieu, this violence is fundamentally something that occurs between those who dominate and those who are dominated, or between the state field and other social fields. If political order is symbolic, politics is not reduced to the state field. Society is a fight for meaning and violence is harm done to the meaning itself, thus the axes or circuits of this violence must be multiple and not only from top to bottom. In summary, violence can *also* exist among agents situated at the bottom, without great symbolic capital. The harm done to the meaning itself comes from another meaning or vision of the world, which is not necessarily always the hegemonic one.

In this sense, Bourdieu, would once again paradoxically reduce, if not politics, violence to the State, seemingly detecting political violence exclusively in the state monopoly of it.

5.

Lefort, Rancière and Bourdieu's reflections have been analyzed with the aim of responding to some of the shortcomings in the conception of politics passed down from Weber and Schmitt, concerning the relation between politics and violence.

These reflections do not resolve the shortcomings that we have posed. However, they are useful for demonstrating certain tensions that—at least for now—seem logically inevitable among the traits that are considered specific and key to developing a consistent concept of politics.

The concepts that seem to form part of a logical tension that threatens their compatibility are: 1) not reducing politics to the State and recognizing the monopoly of legitimate violence as an exclusive and therefore specific trait of politics; 2) characterizing symbolic violence as a specific trait of *the logic* of politics and a non-essentialist focus, which obligates the formulation of non-objective concepts of neither man, nor violence; 3) the distinction between a moment of struggle and creation of meaning (the political) and another of crystallization/reproduction of meaning (politics), and a non-essentialist concept of society.

A. Tension between the political and the monopoly of legitimate violence

This concerns not reducing politics to the state, but, at the same time, that this ‘non-reduction’ not be done at the cost of forgetting violence. That is to say, the concept of the political, as different from politics, does not lose sight of the fact that the concept of politics, still in this reductionist vision that assimilates it to the state, contributes the characteristic and defining trait of politics: the legitimate monopoly of violence, the only one valid throughout society.

This is the problem found in Rancière and Lefort’s reflections. Thus, they do not seem to construct a concept able to recognize the specific traits of politics (this argument is not possible to develop here due to lack of time and space).

One complementary problem is not reducing violence to state violence. That is to say, how to identify *all* violence existing in politics (all its axes, not only the vertical one), without losing the *state* specificity of politics, in the sense that it is the only valid one in the whole society.

This question appears in Bourdieu’s reflection, which seems to only see violence in the main relation of domination, as if its concept of power were still a debtor to the classical one criticized by Foucault, in which power is on top of the vertex of society, as a limited and circumscribed place. If violence is related to the fight for meaning, then it is not reduced to the top-bottom, dominator-dominated relationship, there must also be a horizontal axes, ‘internal’ in society—especially in democratic societies of the masses.

B. Tension between violence as a distinctive trait of politics and a non-objectivist concept of man and violence

This is the problem that Bourdieu’s reflection poses, especially due to his concept of violence. In order to assign violence to political logic, that is to say, to an impersonal dynamic, it is necessary to define violence beyond

the perception that the subjects have of it. This would entail being able to decide that something is violent for a human being, beyond his or her perception, which implies a transcendent concept of man and of violence.

In turn, the other option, embodied by the subjectivist perspective of violence that Braud suggests, impedes the characterization of politics as such by violence. There is no way to assign any violence to *the logic* of politics since this does not exist until someone feels like a victim.

C. Distinction between a moment of struggle and creation of meaning (the political) and another of crystallization/reproduction of meaning (politics), and a non-essentialist concept of society

A theoretical price the distinction between the political and politics pay is to assume the political fight for meaning as being *permanent* logic of society. This is equivalent to assuming a social dynamic, which clashes with a reflection which stems from society as a construction, and not as an entity full of inherent meaning. In this sense, the way Weber contemplates the relation between bureaucratization and politics can be productive. Weber has a concept of man as the creator of meaning and of politics as an activity which keeps the discussion on values alive, but does not therefore conceive them as something set, as a given, but rather, it depends on their social construction. That is to say, both politics and man can be governed by bureaucratic logic, which supposes the acceptance of politics as a technical question (means-ends, no ends discussion).

In this sense, Rancière's reflection seems to include the problem better than Lefort and Bourdieu's, in that it recognizes the transformation of politics (the political) in police (politics), and in his conception politics is exceptional, which allows for the thought that the fight for meaning is not an inherent human trait.

6.

The general conclusion that can be derived from these three difficulties is that there is room for the search for a theoretical way to solve them. Otherwise one would fall into a de-politicizing concept of politics. However, now de-politicization would no longer come directly from the negation of the political character of creation, fight and crystallization of meaning, but rather from the indirect route of the invisibilization of its violent character. On the other hand, if the political is the constitution of society, the concept of violence and of man would remain de-politicized if they are presupposed to have inherent content, that is, if they are thought of as objective and transcendent to the meaning with which the political configures society.

Notes

¹ J Franzé, *¿Qué es la política? Tres respuestas: Aristóteles, Weber, Schmitt*, Catarata, Madrid, 2004, pp. 159-231.

² C Lefort, 'Democracia y el advenimiento de un "lugar vacío"', in *La invención democrática*, Nueva Visión, Buenos Aires, 1990, pp. 187-193.

³ J Rancière, *El desacuerdo: Política y filosofía*, Nueva Visión, Buenos Aires, 1996, pp. 35-81.

⁴ P Bourdieu, *Propos sur le champ politique*, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, Lyon, 2000, pp. 49-80.

⁵ In short, Weber does not sustain that the only place for politics is the State, however that politics, sooner or later, converges into the State. It goes towards it because it is the place where its main instrument is found: the monopoly of violence (M Weber, "Politics as a vocation", in *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*, H H Gerth & C Wright Mills (eds), London, Routledge, 1997, p. 95).

⁶ Here we can formulate a distinction. In relation to war, Schmitt's concept of violence comes closer to physical violence when dealing with the possibility of being dead, and to symbolic violence when dealing with killing. Schmitt criticizes liberalism for sustaining that the rule of law is based on respect for individuality, for human privacy, while Schmitt affirms that such a thing does not exist when the State is the owner of the physical life of the individuals, which is expressed in that it can send them to kill and die in war (C Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007, pp. 97ff.).

⁷ P Braud, *Violencias Políticas*, Alianza, Madrid, 2004, pp. 177-240.

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