

5 Theses on the Politics of Cruelty

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

We contrast the politics of cruelty to the politics of ethics. Ethics goes all the way back to the Greeks, whose ethics was the study of 'the good life.' Our interests do not lie in being better than our enemies. There is only cheap satisfaction in telling yourself that you have more exciting sex, stronger friendships, or fiercer personal convictions. The point is not to be better, but to win. Perhaps this

leaves a bad taste in some mouths. However, we ask: is ethics not the last of the impotent? Are not ethical people all that is left after struggles collapse?

If one feels disturbed when denuded of ethics, it is because ethics is a wholly personal affair. To be ethical today is not even reformist – it is politics rendered as fantasy, a live action role play of those who 'mean well.' The sphere of ethical life is a world of braggarts and bullies looking for others to affirm that they have made the right personal choices. Ethics valorizes the virtue of activist intentions while never getting around to the systemic destruction of globally-integrated capital. In other words, it is the feel-good elitism of 'being better than everyone else' without any of the risk of putting an end to what is bad. And the problem with elitism is that it plunges one back into the milieu. Our cruelty has no truck with the individualism of ethics. It does not guide political action with virtue or best intentions. We do not look to win the respect of those we wish to defeat. Ethics is the trap laid for those who walk the earth searching for respite. But there is no use in making peace with an enemy whose realized interests entail your subjugation. There was nothing 'ethical' about the colonial world, yet it professed to being the most ethical system on the planet through educating the natives, advancing civilization, and the like. As Fanon reminds us, colonialism could not be

destroyed with the 'ethical' method of 'being more royal than the queen' by protesting that Africa was the cradle of civilization, that Europeans should learn from the natives, or that Western education had something to offer. Fanon instead argued that decolonization begins with a violent curettage from all things colonial – good, bad, or otherwise. It is in this sense that a politics of cruelty picks up the old adage that one must 'destroy what destroys you'.

2. Few emotions burn like cruelty.

It is already old wisdom that emotions are intrinsic to 'politicization.' Emotions are what render the speculative and abstract into a lived reality. Winning is not simply a question of having the right ideas or right principles. This is why we define politics as the transformation of ideas into a whole mode of existence. In that way, one's principles become one's impulsion toward the world. If the politics of cruelty follows from the belief that we must destroy what destroys us, then the emotion of cruelty is revenge. Only this taste for revenge offers resistance to those who tell us to put up with the daily violences done to us. The feeling of cruelty is a direct effect of the knowledge that we deserve better than this world; that our bodies are not for us to hate or to look upon with disgust; that our desires are not disastrous pathologies. To feel the

burning passion of cruelty, then, is to reclaim refusal. We refuse the million tiny compromises of patriarchy, capitalism, white-supremacy, heter/homo-normativity, and so on. As such, we refuse to love the world or to even find something in the world that redeems the whole. Simply put: the subject of cruelty learns to hate the world. The feeling of cruelty is the necessary correlate to the politics of cruelty; learning to hate the world is what correlates to the political task of destroying what destroys us all. And as we already noted, it is because these two principles are the culmination of long history that a politics of cruelty is not some passing novelty: The Women's Liberation movement is correct in saying: We are not castrated, fuck you!¹

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

Fairness is the correlate to the 'ethics-as-politics' paradigm. Why? Because fairness suggests that we relate to everyone in the same way. What an idiotic idealist projection. There is nothing about this world that encourages universal fairness or acting according to mutual support of all interests. Empire encourages

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minnesota University Press: Minneapolis, 1983), 68.

fairness only to dull the cutting edge of our divergent interests. The resulting impartiality is the idea that power is symmetrical and that the law is there to establish a virtuous social contract between equal parties. Impartiality is thus deployed to neutralize the subject of cruelty. While the impartial subject furthers the myth that agreements can and should be forged, the cruel subject understands that there can never be peace between Empire and the dispossessed.

We know that we are in the midst of a civil war. We act as partisans. And as in any war, we have allies and enemies. For our enemies, we have nothing but disdain, hatred, and cruelty. We engage with them when it strategically advances our side of the conflict. For our friends, we extend care, support, and solidarity. Some say that capital and the state operate through cruelty, with the implication being that our role in the struggle is to take the higher ground. This is to misuse the few advantages we inherit from our position of inferiority. Our enemy's greatest weakness is that they must reproduce their bases of power, which is takes a costly investment in corrupt political systems, crumbling industrial infrastructure, and expensive wars of ideology. And these systems maintain appearances through consistency, such as law's promise to be enforced equally no matter what. Our greatest advantage, then, is to act *inconsistently*; which is to say, as

anarchists. We spread anarchy with that understanding that we do not need to reproduce much – we do not need to justify our actions, we do not need to be systematic in our activities, and we need not defend any of the institutions of this world. So if ethics represents a guarantee to act consistently one way even when it does not benefit us, we refuse it. Never think that your innocence is enough to save you. There are no awards for consistency in civil war, only the fruits of acting cruelly enough to realize your interests.

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

There is a qualitative difference between the cruelty exercised by us and the cruelty of Capital and Empire. In the United States, there is the idea that the 18th Amendment guarantees the protection of citizens from "cruel and unusual punishment." This was to juridically curtail the power of the State over and against its citizenry. But due to the explicitly bourgeois heritage from which it emerges, this guarantee only goes as far as the eyes of the State can see; that is, only insofar as two isolated individuals are coming into conflict with one another, and where the State intervenes impartially as the mediating third term. It is in this way, the most traditional

method for curtailing cruelty is to invite the State to appear and threaten to act even more cruelly. Such State recognition is not only blind to situations of collective antagonism, it loudly announces that it will not tolerate acts of antagonism (Nixon stoically refusing to listen to Vietnam War protesters, Obama denouncing Black rebellion). What is more, whatever we gain via the channels of State recognition (e.g., desegregation in the 1950's) was already being eroded through economic mechanisms (e.g., redlining as early as the 1930's). The conclusion should be obvious by now: State-recognition is nothing more than declaring surrender in the middle of a war continued by other means.

If we intend to destroy what destroys us through revenge - which means learning to hate the world instead of ourselves - then it is clear that our political cruelty cannot treat *any mediating other* as a reliable source for recognition.

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

Altruism comes in at least two variants. The first is already well known – it advocates a collectivist ethics that diffuses antagonism through a criteria of absolute horizontalism. The second, more insidious, is a zealous altruism; the

individual is offered as sacrifice in the service of actualizing an Idea. These are not the actions of the dispossessed. Rather, it is the altruism of an anarchist crucifixion where selflessness and selfishness intersect. If the latter at least agrees that struggle is an ineluctable fact of politics, the zealous altruists weakness lies in their belief that *civil war* entails burn out. Such self-sacrifice all but guarantees failure; but it makes failure all the sweeter, 'because at least they tried.' For every form of communal horizontalism that defers the moment of attack, there is a correlating tendency to collapse heroism and martyrdom.

It is true that we have said that our political cruelty seeks to destroy what destroys us. However, this does not entail our own self-destruction. There is a world of difference between converting structural oppression into a fight for abolition and identifying existential abolition as the proper means toward the abolition of capital as such. In a word: "Even if we had the power to blow it up, could we succeed in doing so without destroying ourselves, since it is so much a part of the conditions of life, including our organism and our very reason? The prudence with which we must manipulate that line, the precautions we must take to soften it, to suspend it, to divert it, to undermine it, testify to a long labor which is not merely aimed against

the State and the powers that be, but directly at ourselves."²

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

A Brief Note For Enemies And Allies:

We could care less about those whose politics amounts to being a good 'friend' to those who struggle or a good 'ally' by reading up on the history of people of color, queers, and so on. A politics of cruelty is not a politics of

² Deleuze, *Dialogues II*, 138.

friendship; since "We do not see a softer world here because sociability has its cruelties, friendship has its rivalries, and opinion has its antagonisms and bloody reversals."³

Friendship is already too Greek, too philosophical, and too European for our politics of cruelty. In its place, we should reinvigorate the politics of the Guayaki in Paraguay or the many tribes in that territory known as Zoma. That is, political cruelty does not seek to be included into the universality proposed by the history of Western capitalism. Cruelty instead seeks escape from a universality that was never ours from the start. For those who would prefer reductive formulations, we could say that while the West continues its process of inclusion and expansion, our political cruelty maintains its relation to the Outside.⁴ **To our enemies**, who get off on finding

³ Deleuze & Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 88.

⁴ Today the crisis deepens since the progressive subsumption of the Earth to the full body of Capital reaches an apex even capitalists could not have dreamed up. Namely, "There are parts of most countries, particularly in the global south, in which the state never had much interest. They might be deserts, they might be swampy, they might be 'empty quarters' as they're called, but they'd be areas in which the population is relatively thin, it doesn't produce much in the way of important resources of trade... In British and French colonial rule these areas were ruled indirectly by appointing some native chief over

contradictions that abound in this politics of cruelty, we say to them 'all the better!' For them, whose desire is to be the intelligible subjects of globally integrated capital, these contradictions are mere impasses on their road to being exceptions to the rule. **To our allies**, who opt for a politics of cruelty, we say 'savor these supposed contradictions!' From the point of view of political cruelty, the best part about a contradiction is that we can use both sides to our advantage.

them and making sure they didn't cost the metropolitan country any money. The areas that were valuable economically as export zones, tax fields and so on, were ruled more or less directly. What's interesting (...) is that in the late twentieth century it seems that there's scarcely a part of the world that doesn't have some capitalist return that can be realized providing that this area's made accessible and resources can be extracted from it." James C. Scott, <http://www.gastronomica.org/an-interview-with-james-c-scott/>.