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Disagreement: Dissent Politics and the War in Sierra Leone
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Observers often characterize the war in Sierra Leone as a crisis of youth. Understanding that crisis in political terms can be quite challenging. Applying the writings of theorist Jacques Rancière to events in Sierra Leone, I suggest a different understanding of politics, one that allows us to consider the violence of this war as a form of political speech.

Introduction

On 23 March 1991, a band of armed dissidents invaded eastern Sierra Leone, inaugurating a civil war that many observers attribute to a crisis of youth. The iconic figure of the heavily armed, alienated young male now signifies for many a culture of barbarism, history’s “first man,” employing indiscriminate violence to satisfy his wants and needs. Elsewhere, militarized youth are portrayed as pawns in the shadow economies of diamonds, drugs, and weapons, manipulated by elites in a system of patronage and patrimony, one that excludes or exploits society’s most marginal members. Without the benefit of familiar, largely Cold War–era political rhetoric and categories of discourse, it can be difficult to think of Sierra Leone’s combatants as subjects capable of political action. In this essay, I analyze this crisis of youth in light of a larger theoretical interrogation of the contemporary political landscape. Drawing on the political theorist Jacques Rancière’s notion of politics as dissensus, I suggest that we consider the war in Sierra Leone as a violent, and ongoing, post–Cold War political project. The violence these combatants employed can be understood as a form of political speech. Beyond simply proposing war as a form of discourse, however, I suggest that we recognize within this violence a quest for recognition as political speakers. I maintain it is a political project, which often results in messages that are unclear, with meanings that are subject to multiple interpretations and future retranslations.

My effort here is to introduce a heuristic for understanding the politics of a traumatic, violent period in contemporary West Africa—one in which “politics” can be difficult to locate and is too often entirely deleted from observers’ accounts. The violent recent history of the region is increasingly
less anomalous on the world stage. New forms of sovereignty, citizenship, and statehood, divergent and unstable modes of participation in the global economy, and alternative and often frightening manners of communicating political projects are not unique to West Africa, and they are generating modes of conflict that seem especially brutal or bizarre. The unfamiliar “rules” of many of today’s conflicts make them easy to dismiss or caricature—as irrational eruptions of violence without logic or purpose, as inevitable side effects of globalization, and as moral failings to be explained away with reference to “evil” or “hate.” Framing contemporary violence by reframing so fundamental a concept as the political is an effort to guard against erasing the meaning of violence in its emergent forms.

I write as an anthropologist and draw on my ethnographic fieldwork in the region, but this is less a thick description of Sierra Leone’s war than a work of political philosophy. It is meant to offer a framework for approaching some of the more baffling and disturbing ways the war manifested what Achille Mbembe (2003) has called the African postcolony’s “necropolitics.” My intention is to map a direction for thinking about events that present themselves [or are presented to us] as unthinkable. This is a project that I see as complementary to, but nevertheless distinct from, the tasks of exploring emic categories of political thought, or of providing a frontline ethnography of the conflict zone. (For regional examples of both kinds of writing, see Abraham 1978; Ferme 1999; Henry 2000; Murphy 1990, 1998; Peters and Richards 1998; Richards 1996; and Utas 2003.) The anthropological emphasis here is directed toward cultural critique—toward interrogating the categories by which violence is translated, and through which it can be silenced.

In what follows, I begin by laying out the events of the decade-long war in Sierra Leone, a war that saw the advance of rebel forces across the country, a short-lived military junta, the rise of a pro-government militia, and the spread of fighting back across the border and throughout the region. I then outline the theoretical framework through which Rancière addresses those who propose that we are witnessing the end of politics. In contrast to the consensus model of political action, in which some discourse is classified illegitimate and therefore apolitical, Rancière suggests that politics is fundamentally a struggle for recognition, and therefore inherently an act of dissensus and violence. By tracing some of the ways that combatants have been accounted for in the literature on Sierra Leone, I investigate how Rancière’s thought might be useful in furthering our understanding of the problems of violence and post cold-war politics in an African postcolony. Finally, I turn to an arena in which the question of political speech and the authenticity of discourse have come to the fore in Sierra Leone: the Special Court for war crimes and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
**War in Sierra Leone**

With support from Charles Taylor, Liberia’s rebel leader and later president, approximately 100 guerrillas with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) entered Sierra Leone through the eastern Kailahun District in 1991. Their stated objective was the overthrow of the All People’s Congress (APC) government.\(^1\) Taylor’s involvement with the movement, the presence of foreign mercenaries in the RUF ranks, and the viciousness of attacks on civilian targets led many Sierra Leoneans (and a few outsiders paying attention) to question the political motives of the RUF. Suspicions about these motives grew when the RUF continued its campaign, even after an April 1992 coup had replaced the APC with a military government, the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC).

By the end of 1994, the RUF had launched attacks in the north, northwest, and east of the country. Much of the violence during this period was the work of so-called “sobels” (soldier-rebels), soldiers of the state army who had either disguised themselves as RUF rebels to attack civilian targets, or used the pretext of an RUF presence to loot or extract contributions for the war effort.

Elections in 1996 brought to power the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) and President Tejan Kabbah. Wary of the army, the SLPP leadership relied for security functions on a militia that came to be known as the Civilian Defense Forces (CDF). The CDF was a collection of irregular units of “hunters” and semifessional veterans of the Liberian conflict, some trained by Executive Outcomes, a South African security outfit. These hunter-militias achieved a certain international notoriety for their practice of initiating members with rites designed to make their bodies bulletproof. Although active throughout the conflict, bands of organized hunter-irregulars achieved enough prominence under the SLPP to be considered a threat by the military, which in May 1997 staged a coup and invited the RUF to join in a junta government. The alliance between the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and the RUF lasted until early 1998, when a combined force of CDF and West African peacekeepers (Economic Community of West Africa Ceasefire Monitoring Group) reinstated Kabbah and his government.

Much of the fighting was done by young men, and the use of child-soldiers was a feature on all sides of the conflict. Especially among the CDF, participation in the militia became intertwined with practices of initiation into manhood—though for all the factions participation in the fighting was often bound up with notions of masculinity. The war was widespread and long enough that most Sierra Leoneans experienced it directly, and virtually every aspect of life was affected by what became a *habitus* of war.\(^2\)

Officially, the fighting in Sierra Leone ended in January 2002 with the completion of the disarmament phase of a U.N.-supervised campaign to demobilize combatants from the AFRC, the CDF, and the RUF. As the RUF suffered setbacks in Sierra Leone, and because the end of the war
provided few peacetime opportunities for CDF members, a significant number of irregular combatants joined the renewed fighting in Liberia or went on to labor as mercenaries in other West African states. Following them as they traveled was an increasingly standardized media image of Africans in conflict: civilians maimed by young rebels, hunters adorned with magical protections, blood diamonds, drugs, and “ancient tribal hatreds.”

A Different Politics

The beginning of Sierra Leone’s civil war coincides with a global shift in political thought. The fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the cold war seemed to inaugurate the hegemony of market-based, neoliberal democracies. Drawing explicitly on Hegel’s writings on history as a teleological progression toward the “last man,” observers such as Fukuyama (1992) and Kaplan (1994) suggested that human governance had reached its ideal form. There is no longer a need or a desire for revolution in the classic sense; utopian political projects seem to have disappeared, and with them the impetus to rewrite the basics of the social contract. Critics who might once have advocated profound transformations in the political landscape now devote themselves to deciphering why certain “failed states” do not function properly according to the normative neoliberal model. Fixing those problems, tinkering with the glitches, is all that’s left for “politics.” This premise lies at the heart of many representations of Africa after the Cold War, and Sierra Leone in particular. Failing to discern a recognizable political form (the classic Marxist revolutionary insurgency, for example), theorists presume the absence of politics.

I want to propose another possibility. Certainly, there has been a shift in the projects undertaken by guerrilla movements in Africa. The “revolutionary” in the RUF notwithstanding, movements across Africa have largely abandoned the utopian projects of establishing or overthrowing Marxist or even “softer” African socialist regimes. They focus on the more limited goals of establishing sovereign enclaves (often around areas of potential resource extraction), or reforming the state in meaningful but not profound ways (ending corruption, for example). At times, control of the state appears to function more as an entrepreneurial strategy than an end in itself (Reno 1998). But if such movements are not “political” in the sense that we recognize from Cold War political theory, it does not mean they have no politics at all; rather, as Antonio Negri has argued, they may well signal “a new transcendental of the political” (Negri [1996] 2003:197, emphasis in original). To understand what this might mean for the violent factions of Sierra Leone, I draw on the definition of politics put forward by Jacques Rancière.

Rancière’s interlocutors are those who propose that we have reached the “end of politics” or “the end of history.” With the passing of the Cold War and its utopian projects—what Rancière calls “the promise”—these
theorists argue that managing unequal access to power no longer seems to be about fundamental transformation or refashioning; rather, they presume a state of equality, the market-based, liberal democratic polis, in which any difference or division is reduced to mere competition (Rancière 1995:101). All that is left is to negotiate the competition over resources, whether they be considered too many (as in Collier 2000; de Soysa 2000) or too few (as in Homer-Dixon 1999; Kaplan 1994), and to compromise on the minor issues for which there are opposing views. Politics is therefore the process of building a consensus among subjects debating recognized issues or objects.

In contrast to the consensus model, for Rancière disagreement is the essence of politics. He proceeds from Aristotle’s Politics. On the one hand, the imminent capacity for politics is what distinguishes the human from the animal; by nature, human beings are political beings. On the other hand, politics is a contingent demand, based on the need to mediate between those who possess and others who do not, those who may speak as citizens and those who are kept silent or go unheard (Rancière 1995:26). What is at play in politics is not opposing views on the same object, but a fundamental dissensus regarding the ability of the other to speak and the objects to which they refer. Political discussion is therefore not only communication regarding a disputed topic, but the effort to create “a world in common,” so that “words may be audible,” “objects may be visible,” and “individuals themselves may be recognized” (2000:116). Elsewhere, Rancière defines the aporia at the heart of politics this way:

We should take disagreement to mean a determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying. Disagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness. (1999:x)

Politics, in short, is the effort to communicate not only a viewpoint or position, but to create a subjectivity, to be recognized as a speaking subject and understood as such. It is an effort to carve out a common sphere of discourse and bring to visibility subjects and positions excluded from the naturalized order of things. “It is,” in Ranciere’s words, “the construction of a paradoxical world that relates two separate worlds” (2001: 24). One of the central implications here is that defining what constitutes legitimate political argumentation is itself a political act—this is the essence of Rancière’s critique of the “end of politics” framing (see in particular Rancière 1995, chapter 1). Rancière later identifies the order that sets the limits of “legitimate” political discourse as “the order of the police,” suggesting not only
the exclusion of certain speech but the classification of certain speakers as illegitimate and dangerous (2001:20; 1999, chapter 2).³ For Rancière, the ability to communicate—the first move toward political speech—is a moment of violence. Visibility and audibility as political subjects are predicated on an inaugural rupture, a moment of differentiation or declassification (1995:85). The order of the police creates a community of speaking beings and those outside that community who cannot be heard, clearing the ground for recognition and for locution by some and the marginalization and silence of others. Political action is aimed at destabilizing that order and creating new separations and alignments. Subjectivity is constituted in these separations. This “violence,” as Rancière calls it, “has nothing to do with counting dead and wounded,” at least not necessarily. In Sierra Leone, however, the “violence” of politics took its most brutal, extreme form—making it perhaps easier to recognize a community of actors, but harder to understand what they are saying.

**A Crisis of Youth**

The literature on Sierra Leone almost invariably casts the conflict in terms of a crisis of youth. A headline in *The New York Times Magazine* reads “Sierra Leone Is No Place to Be Young” (Goodwin 1999), while *The New Republic* calls the country a “teenage wasteland” (Hammer 1995). Academic treatments of the war tend to be less poetic, but no less concerned with the status of youth. In this section and the one that follows, I examine this crisis in contemporary Sierra Leone and consider how it is treated in the various literatures on the conflict. At the extreme are works that take for granted the end of politics (and thereby accept without question “the order of the police”) by reducing the war to monolithic cultural or economic determinism and therefore the meaning of politics to the art of consensual negotiation. Much scholarly writing on the war has taken aim at these extreme cases. I would suggest that Rancière’s dissensus approach to politics offers a useful supplement to those analyses interested in the logics of violence—but wary of explaining away the volatility and instability of the postcolonial crisis.

My ethnographic work among the pro-government CDF militia largely supports the idea that the crisis of youth is a compelling framework for understanding the conflict in Sierra Leone (see, for example, Hoffman 2003).⁴ There was a marked lack of hostility on the part of the rank and file in the CDF (again, primarily young men in their late teens to late twenties) toward their RUF counterparts; many, in fact, had served at one time in the RUF. There was general agreement that RUF tactics had gone too far (especially during the junta period, in which the RUF and AFRC forces had been aligned), but there was also agreement that the grievances that propelled Foday Sankoh and his followers to invade the country had been legitimate (compare Richards 1996:177–178; Peters and Richards 1998). In
the run-up to elections in 2002, a group of CDF men barracked in Freetown suggested to me that the only national figure capable of bringing legitimate reform was RUF leader Foday Sankoh—and that if they voted at all, it would be to cast their ballot for him. Rhetorically, CDF fighters often referred to themselves as “rebels,” collapsing the distinction between themselves and the RUF—a politics of naming echoed by the non-combatant populace, who refer generically to the fighting as the “rebel war.” If there was a marked lack of hostility toward the RUF, by the final years of conflict the tension between the CDF leadership and the majority of combatants was evident. From the latter’s viewpoint, this was the result of greedy elders’ refusing to pass the youth their due. CDF personnel in Freetown and Bo openly complained that government allowances of rice were “eaten” (stolen) by the CDF hierarchy, and when he denied any wrongdoing, National Public Relations Officer Charles Moiwo, deputy to CDF leader Sam Hinga Norman, was beaten by disgruntled ex-combatants. Conversations about the war with ex-combatants often included some form of commentary on the misbehavior of those in the gerontocracy.

The written material produced by the factions similarly portrays the origins of the conflict as a movement of alienated, disenfranchised youth against a greedy, elderly elite, and offers a vision of postwar Sierra Leone as a new political environment more open to youth. The RUF’s manifesto *Footpaths to Democracy* (Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone 1995) quotes Franz Fanon in its prologue: “Each generation must out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it.” Its opening line suggests that for Sierra Leonean youth, that mission is a youth-led reform of the state: “We can no longer leave the destiny of our country in the hands of a generation of crooked politicians and military adventurists. . . . It is our right and duty to change the present political system in the name of national salvation and liberation” (Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone 1995:7). An internal report written in 2000 by a committee to restructure the CDF highlights a sense of their own outsider status when, in tracing the history of the movement, it states that:

On Thursday, June 9, 1997, a small man—Mr. Eddie S. Massallay—in a very small but loud voice, shouted from the Mano River Bridge, in the Pujehun District, in the Southern Region, “I crave the indulgence of every Civil Militia: Tamaboroh, Kapras, Gbethis, Donsos, Donsuras, OBHS, Kamajors, etc. to take their fighting equipment and to say no to the AFRC fugitives and join me at the Mano River bridge by breaking through whatever defenses these AFRC usurpers may put up.” [Republic of Sierra Leone Civil Defense Forces 2000:8]

The image of the “small man” shouting in a “small but loud voice” references the so-called “big-man” mode of governance, a colloquialism for patrimonial, gerontocratic rule. Similarly, the following poem, from a CDF
statement of standards and values, implies a need not just for restitution of the government, but for reform of the political landscape based on a shared marginal positionality:

This time around as Sierra Leoneans,
We need no discrimination,
No harrassment [sic],
No victimization,
No intimidation,
No domination,
Be you RUF, AFRC, SLA [Sierra Leone Army], CDF or Bandits,
All we need is to stand for Democracy and to
Rebuild our war-ravaged Sierra Leone. [Republic of Sierra Leone Civil Defense Forces 1999:7]

If there is consensus that the conflict in Sierra Leone constitutes a crisis of youth, it is nevertheless unclear how we should understand its politics. There have been compelling analyses of the political climate [especially among student radicals] out of which certain important RUF figures emerged [Abdullah 1998; Rashid 1997; Richards 1996] and genealogies of the conflict in terms of more localized preceding political contests. Anthropologists have explored how the war reflects a logic of power [see, for example, Ferme 1998, 1999, 2001; Ferme and Hoffman 2004; Leach 2000; Richards 1996; and Shaw 2002a]. Nevertheless, the failure on the part of the factions to articulate a coherent political agenda renders this a difficult landscape in which to locate political action in any recognizable sense.

Outside the Political

As Ibrahim Abdullah points out, the RUF manifesto contains nothing more than vaguely socialist platitudes, and certainly nothing that might be considered a coherent platform (Abdullah 1998; compare Bangura 1997). The same might be said for the CDF, whose mantra, We Fight For Democracy, refers to no specific definition of that term, and whose members were rarely able to offer one when asked. Conservative commentators have therefore tended to see the war in Sierra Leone, and wars elsewhere in Africa, as the result of an eruption of primitive tribal hatreds, in which young men are driven to violence because of irreconcilable ethnic differences. Such “culturalist” explanations are typified by Kaplan’s infamous “coming anarchy” thesis, in which the world is increasingly divisible into the separate domains of the First and Last Man. The dilution of religious values, rampant criminality, ecological scarcity, disease, drugs, and weapons all crystallize in the form of the young male bandit-warrior, programmed for violence. Paul Richards (1996) has effectively critiqued Kaplan’s conclusions regarding
Sierra Leone, pointing out the highly primitivizing assumptions from which Kaplan proceeds and his mischaracterization of both youth and contemporary forest ecology in Sierra Leone. Although there is now a cottage industry within the academy built around the critique of Kaplan’s work, it bears repeating here; a similar “logic” has come to the fore in justifying all manner of military action in the wake of the events of 11 September 2001, and has justified non-intervention in African conflicts ranging from Rwanda to Liberia.

More compelling than the paradigms of New Barbarism (Richards’s term for this school of “culturalist” frameworks) is an alternative explanation for the roots of conflict: a crisis of youth brought on by the failures of the patrimonial patronage networks which characterize the exercise of power in the postcolony. In the immediate postcolonial period, and through the duration of the cold war, the machinations of the former colonial powers and the competing superpowers meant that state resources need not come from the efficient collection of state revenues; rather, elites could rely upon the patronage of external bodies—what Bayart (1993) calls “strategies of extraversion.” As a result, there was no imperative to develop an internal revenue-generating structure, and every reason to weaken the infrastructures of the modern nation-state by rewarding clients with proliferating government posts and making the collection of ostensibly public rents a largely private affair (Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Bratton and van de Walle 1997, chapter 2; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Reno 1995, 1998). The basic services and requirements of the bureaucratic state therefore lie largely beyond the reach of those unable to collect rents from dependents or parlay relationships with elites into favors or debts. A precarious and unstable system, patrimonial networks are excessive in their appetites, displays, and paranoia (Bayart 1993; Mbembe 1992; Toulabor 1994). They are perpetually in crisis (Mbembe and Roitman 1995; compare De Boeck 1998; Ferguson 1999). With the end of the Cold War and even the tenuous guarantee of external supports, a crisis within the patrimonial system made elite holds on power even more precarious. The upshot is a perceived failure of the system, exacerbating the already marginal position of those at the bottom—the youth.10

William Reno has examined how, with the end of the Cold War, the exploitation of natural resources replaces the patronage of external state powers, creating a “warlord politics” in which youth participation in the economy becomes synonymous with participation in the violent shadow networks of transnational trade and a perpetual state of low-intensity conflict. Few, if any, opportunities exist outside the trade in resources, and control of that trade lies with factional leaders prepared to use violence to secure their share (Reno 1998, 2000, 2002). Abdullah has analyzed how disenfranchised youth serve as a lumpenproletariat, an underclass easily manipulated by leaders who promise rewards for their violence (Abdullah 1998; Abdullah and Muana 1998; compare Bangura 1997; Kandeh 1999). With particular emphasis on the RUF, Richards, drawing especially from Mary Douglas’s work on the epistemology of institutions (1986), maps the
development of an internal logic to the violence of the conflict. He suggests
that the organization was guided by “movement intellectuals” (1996:174),
whose relative isolation in the forest allowed for a certain enclavization—
the molding of a sense of exclusion, minimal education, and egalitarian
ideals into a logic of grievance and violence which set out to “confront the
murky magic of patrimonial power with the unsubtle obviousness of an
elementary subtraction sum” (1996:176). Although many RUF combatants
were forcibly conscripted, they found in the movement an appealing alterna-
tive to the frustrated opportunities—particularly in education—of a failing
patrimonial system in which they have no place.

Despite the obvious importance of understanding the vicissitudes of
the patrimonial system and the crisis it precipitates for those at its margins,
there is a risk inherent in such a framing: that of overvaluing the economic
in what are complex social relations and eclipsing political and other con-
cerns. Classifying the demographic that constituted both the RUF and CDF
as lumpenproletariat, for example, amounts to a rejection of those actors’
political subjectivity. For Marx, the lumpen were those unable to be mobi-
lized for participation in the workers’ revolution. They constitute instead an
underclass, “a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all sorts, living
off the garbage of society, people without a definite trace, vagabonds, gens
sans feu et sans aveu [people without hearth and without home]” ([1850]
1974:52). The argument for construing African civil wars—Sierra Leone’s
included—as apolitical, raw economics reaches its apogee in Paul Collier’s
work. Collier sets up a now familiar binary opposition between “grievance”
and “greed”—hatreds, perceived inequalities, and revenge motives on the
one hand, and the naked pursuit of wealth on the other. Inevitably, the latter
dominates: “The true cause of much civil war is not the loud discourse
of grievance but the silent force of greed” (2000:101). This framework has
no room for politics, which it reduces to propaganda (often “objectively”
disprovable) and then dismisses as “good public relations,” meant to garner
external support and bolster internal morale (2000:92).

As easy—and therefore as tempting—as such arguments are, they
offer no way to account for the content of much of what happened in the
war. There is nothing in an economically deterministic explanation for
the fighting that can account for the strategy of systematically amputating
civilians’ limbs. Even such seemingly unambiguous actions as Operation
Pay Yourself, the infamous 1999 RUF looting campaign, is only partly
explicable in economic terms. More is needed if we hope to analyze the
mutilation and rape that accompany such combat strategies. To account
for the bullet-proofing of combatants’ bodies, we cannot reduce wartime
encounters to purely economic forces, and while categorizing the demo-
graphic of youth that made up the irregular forces as lumpenproletariat
makes a certain sociological sense, refusing them any political subjectivity
is tautological. As rabble, they are incapable of politics; incapable of poli-
tics, they are therefore rabble: any activity in which they are engaged must
be essentially meaningless because every activity in which they engage is
essentially meaningless.
There is no question that the RUF invasion and the actions of the CDF in Sierra Leone have an economic component, even an economic logic. As Bangura asserts, however, “violence does not have only one logic, but several” (1997:130). Rancière’s definition of politics opens new spaces for analyzing the crisis of youth. It offers a way to consider the violence of these movements as a form of political speech and an unfinished political project.

Rebel Politics in Sierra Leone

Richards’s interpretation of the RUF use of violence, and particularly the amputation of civilians’ limbs, comes closest to reading the conflict politically along the lines suggested by Rancière. Richards suggests that the conflict be considered using the tools of discourse analysis, because war “itself is a type of text—a violent attempt to ‘tell a story’ or to ‘cut in on the conversation’ of others[,] from whose company the belligerents feel excluded” [1996:xxiv]. What Rancière’s framing of the political adds is that simply because the violence of the conflict is a text does not necessarily suggest that it is easily translatable. In other words, it may not be possible to interpret its meaning in any satisfying one-to-one analysis, suggesting that act X equals message Y. Violence constitutes a form of communication, to be sure, but its content, like the act itself, may be messy, unclear, and indeterminate. It is that way to its “authors” as well as its audience. As an attempt to create a common language or sphere of discourse, it is to some extent exploratory and experimental, its exact meaning unknown to anyone until some point in the future, if at all. The process of settling on the meaning of violence—its translation—may itself then be the site of politics, as interlocutors contest meanings and define not only their speech, but themselves.11 As other commentators on the African political landscape have observed, the meaning in events is rarely fixed at the moment of their occurrence; rather, their significance is forever subject to negotiation, deconstruction, reinterpretation, and redeployment.12

“Reading” violence such as that of the amputations in this light sets aside the question of whether it is rational or irrational and whether it reflects a legitimate political position. Instead, it offers a political explanation for this act of violence able to account for the multiple (and excessive) meanings attributed to it by various audiences. It suggests an effort to create a space of recognition as political interlocutors, at once speaking to multiple communities and searching for recognition as legitimate speakers. For example, combatants in West African conflicts have come to recognize the importance of the role that strategic manipulation of international interventions—by the United Nations, nongovernmental organizations, and the global media—can play in determining the outcome of local conflicts. They have used increasingly dramatic displays of violence to achieve recognition as serious forces deserving of attention and respect.13 On one level, then, amputations represent a kind of speech comprehensible to an international
community—a language of African atrocity demanding intervention. At the same time, the victims of squads charged with amputations were frequently instructed by RUF commandoes to seek remedies from the government. Take the case of Mustapha, a farmer from Kono, whom the RUF, after they had cut off his arms, told to get new hands from the president. Here we might read this detail much as Richards does, suggesting that the project is one of forcing the government to recognize its failures and the betrayal of its promise to provide for its citizenry. For the civilian populace at large, the political message may well be the staging of a logic of power, as suggested by a CDF commander in Bo when he argued that the best way to garner the people’s support was to demonstrate to them that the government could not protect them. Those with the power to kill are the only ones with the power to protect [Hoffman 2004; compare Ellis 1999; Moran 1998]. For the amputees themselves, the intended message of amputation may have been the message interpreted by Jalloh, a farmer from Koinadugu—that the rebels represented an inhuman and capricious authority, more powerful than the government, capable of all manner of punishment and to which the government was powerless to respond:

I begged them, asking “What did I do? I am a civilian.” They said “You used these hands to vote for Kabbah, now we’re going to take them off.” . . . God gave me these hands, not Tejan Kabbah. Pa Kabbah cannot give me back my limbs.\textsuperscript{14}

The meaning of the violence of amputations—its “translation”—changed for at least some of the amputees themselves over time. By the end of 2003, when residents of the Aberdeen Road amputee camp in Freetown were resettled, many had ironically become breadwinners for a network of dependents, their wounds a source of income through NGO and international donor support. The politics of meaning-construction extended to the use of artificial limbs; recognizing that their continued support depended on the display of their wounds, some of the camp residents refused to wear prosthetic limbs—a source of frustration for many in the NGO sector.

Each of these messages, and more, are contained in the moment of violence and in its aftermath. Some may be revealed only as the subject of amputations is revisited again and again within everyday discourse; others may be clarified as Sierra Leoneans and the world sift the history of the conflict for metanarratives and morality tales. What is important is that the politics of the actions not be dismissed because their messages are not immediately evident. To forego the difficult work of translation in favor of reducing these “speakers” to either primitive irrationalists or cogs in an economic wheel leaves too many facets of their activity unaccounted for—not to mention repeating the very exclusion of political subjectivity that led to the atrocities in the first place.

A second point of analysis follows from the first. There is something in the nature of the violence committed by irregular troops in Sierra Leone
that needs to be accounted for. Much of it, especially that committed against civilians, was done at close proximity with low-technology weapons: light armaments, cutlasses, machetes, knives. Any accounting for this violence needs to include its phenomenological dimensions, the physical experiences of contact and combat. The rank and file of both the RUF and the CDF shared a certain masculine pleasure in being “rebels,” slippery figures at the margins between village and forest, order and chaos. The use of drugs and alcohol, an emphasis on the hardness of the body, and the performance of violence as a unit of comrades all suggest that some of these acts cannot be understood without accounting for the physical experience of performing them. In short, some aspect of the infliction of violence may be communicative but not translatable, political but uncodified: politics “is comprised of a surplus of subjects that introduce, within the saturated order of the police, a surplus of objects” (Rancière 2000:124). To some extent, that surplus may be a language exclusive to the body—and in this case, to the body violently engaged.

I have suggested that the violence committed by irregular combatants needs to be understood as part of an unfinished political project. The wartime events of Sierra Leone remain as floating signifiers to be reinterpreted and parsed again and again. In keeping with Rancière’s notion of dissensus as the essence of politics, these negotiations and translations constitute a continued political project. I conclude by briefly taking up a significant arena in which this political future is being carried out: the conduct of the so-called accountability institutions, the Special Court and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

**Spaces of Consensus**

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1315, passed on 14 August 2000, established a Special Court to be jointly administered by the United Nations and the government of Sierra Leone. It is intended to prosecute “persons who bear the greatest responsibility for serious violations of international humanitarian law and Sierra Leonean law” since the signing of a short-lived peace accord in late 1996 (Statute of the Special Court for Sierra Leone 2000). Initial estimates were that the court would prosecute between fifteen and thirty persons (Penfold 2002; Zacklin 2000). By mid-2003, indictments had been handed down against RUF leader Foday Sankoh, CDF head and former Deputy Minister of Defense Chief Sam Hinga Norman, AFRC leader Major Johnny Paul Koroma, Liberian president Charles Taylor, and a handful of other factional leaders and figureheads. A second body, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) originated with Article XXVI of the Lomé Peace Agreement, signed on 7 July 1999. Unlike the Special Court it had no powers of prosecution; its mandate was to “address impunity, break the cycle of violence, provide a forum for both victims and perpetrators of human rights violations to tell their story and get a clear
picture of the past in order to facilitate genuine healing and reconciliation” [Truth and Reconciliation Act 2000]. Where the Special Court targets for prosecution those who bear the “greatest responsibility,” the TRC targets for confession those who committed the majority of the violence.

Despite their differing emphases, the institutions rely on a similar logic: the negotiation of a singular narrative of history. For the Special Court, that narrative is constructed according to the rules of evidence and governed by juridical process; for the TRC, an ideal narrative model functions as the guideline for selecting a limited number of case studies to be presented in a public forum and therefore to serve as a collective trauma story for the nation [Mattorollo 2001]. In theory, these institutions would seem to offer a platform for the negotiation of Sierra Leone’s political future. By imposing an artificial arena of discourse in which the role of speaking subjects is predetermined—the witness box for the Special Court, the testimonial forum for the TRC—it would appear that the accountability institutions solve the problem of recognition. In Rancière’s terminology, they carve out a “world in common,” in which political speech will be recognized as such, by actors authorized to speak.

There is a danger that to conceive of the Special Court and the TRC this way (and this is undoubtedly the way their promoters see them) is still to presume that consensus is the ultimate ground of politics: it proposes that state sanction, in the sense of official recognition, constitutes speakers as equals capable of negotiation over predetermined objects or issues in dispute. Yet the ideal of an impartial bureaucratic apparatus serving as a neutral zone of discourse is not a given in Sierra Leone, where public pronouncements of consensus are always already subject to questioning and deconstruction for their hidden levels of truth.16 Even the U.N. imprimatur is not a guarantee of neutrality for most Sierra Leoneans, who consider the bureaucracies of the United Nations and international NGOs to be as easily manipulated by those in power as the infrastructure of their own state. This, simply, is the nature of power. Like theories of the end of politics, which accept the “order of the police” to be foundational, the idea that the accountability institutions will serve as the neutral foundation of a postwar future serves only to depoliticize the conflict itself. The result, to return to Rancière, is “the madness which our time identifies with a reasonable and easy democracy that harmonizes state initiatives with the natural tendencies of productive society, with its efforts and desires” [1995:105–106]. In other words, proponents of the accountability institutions risk ignoring the political concerns that began this war in the effort to impose on the nation a naturalized version of history favored by those in power, those able to speak as and for the state.
Conclusion

In his writings on politics, Rancière argues that “the essence of equality is in fact not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with the controversial figures of division” (1995:33). What I have suggested in applying this formulation to the war in Sierra Leone is that we recognize the violence of the conflict as a type of political speech aimed at declassifying the orders of patrimonial privilege and exclusion. That movements of irregular combatants find common ground against a given order without necessarily establishing a utopian project as their goal is not a sign that they lack political subjectivity. Their messages may not be particularly clear, but to insist on clarity before we recognize them as political actors is to misunderstand the essence of politics. One consequence is that we will then fail to recognize why ex-combatants, and Sierra Leoneans more generally, are unlikely to be satisfied by the accountability institutions of the Special Court and the TRC. As international institutions from the United Nations to multinational NGOs increasingly undertake the reform of African civil society along the now dominant neo-liberal democratic model, a narrow interpretation of the political is likely to exacerbate, rather than curtail, conflict. If these institutions fail to bring lasting peace to Sierra Leone, some will read their failure as yet another manifestation of the inherent instability of Africa; others will see in it the inability of these institutions to contain the purely economic forces that led to conflict in the first place. Both conclusions will continue to obscure the political projects at work in the disagreements to come. “Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong” writes Rancière (1999:27). That violence is one of the last domains of such political activity does not bode well for Sierra Leone, or for other contemporary spaces in which there is an impetus to combat the order of police, an impetus likely to grow as the hegemonic authority of a global empire (Hardt and Negri 2000) expands its efforts to classify all activity as either legitimate or illegitimate according to its own logic. If we continue to deny violent dissensus as a form of politics, we shall be in no better position to comprehend what those speaking the language of violence are saying.

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NOTES

1. The stages of the war in Sierra Leone are the subject of an important and growing body of scholarly literature. Among the texts that deal with aspects of the conflict covered here, see Abdullah (1998); Abdullah and Muana (1998); Ferme (2001); Ferme and Hoffman (2004); Leach (2000); Muana (1997); Opala (1994); Reno (1998); Richards (1996); Zack-Williams (1997); Zack-Williams and Riley (1993).

2. The term “habitus of war” I borrow from Shaw (2001).

3. Rancière rarely refers directly to Foucault, a thinker more familiar to anglophone social theorists, though Foucault’s influence is evident. Nevertheless, there are important differences. For example, Rancière undertakes a project less totalizing than Foucault’s, one in which it is possible to arrive at variations in the order of policing and variable manifestations of politics, power, and resistance. In a discussion of what constitutes political action, Rancière summarizes this difference when he writes that “while it is important to show, as Michel Foucault has done magnificently, that the police order extends well beyond its specialized institutions and techniques, it is equally important to say that nothing is political in itself merely because power relationships are at work in it” (Rancière 1999:32). Rancière seems to be taking aim less at Foucault himself than at those who, in the wake of Foucault, divine resistance, and therefore politics, in every encounter.

4. It is important to note here that “youth” in much of Africa tends to be a more elastic concept than simple chronological age. It implies, rather, a dependent status, extending to those who find themselves without sufficient means to provide for dependents of their own (Murphy 1980; Utas 2003).

5. In prison at the time of the elections, Sankoh was not allowed to run as the RUF candidate for president. It is impossible to know how likely such a vote would have been in any case. Some of the same individuals that argued they would vote for the RUF later participated in pro-SLPP rallies and demonstrations, though often after receiving incentives from SLPP leaders for doing so. Regardless, what I find most significant here is the fact that CDF combatants would even express a willingness to support the leader of the faction with which they were ostensibly at war.

6. The same set of grievances led to the NPRC coup in 1992 (Opala 1994) and in the immediate aftermath of the war to attacks on senior RUF commanders by their subordinates.

7. A copy of Footpaths to Democracy was given to me by a CDF member, who presented it to me in the context of a discussion about the problem of corruption in Sierra Leone. This suggests that class and generational fault-lines had, at least by the late stages of the war, become as significant as sectarian divisions.

8. Useful here is the debate set off by Paul Richards’s Fighting for the Rainforest (1996). See in particular Abdullah (1996); Bangura (1997), and the 1998 postscript to Richards’s book. For the CDF, there may be links to a longer-term political project, most notably through academic Alpha Lavalie, an important figure in the first days of the mobilization of Mende irregulars and an early casualty of the war (see Lavalie 1985). Here, too, the link is suggestive, but does not adequately account for the organization over the longue durée. I am grateful to William Reno for referring me to Lavalie’s writings.

9. The Ndogboyosi rebellion in the Pujehun District, discussed by Kandeh (1999) and Richards (1996:22), was frequently mentioned by informants during my ethnographic work in the region.
10. Although I am glossing over them here, there are important differences in the ways in which different writers on the Sierra Leone political system understand patrimonialism and its attendant crises. For a few examples from this literature, see Bangura (1997); Kandeh (1999); Richards (1996); Zack-Williams (1999).

11. I am drawing here from Thomas Keenan’s (2003) efforts to sift through various ways of thinking about the violence of 9/11 as a form of speech, and to understand (following Rancière) what type of translation might be required to understand that speech. Keenan suggests, as I am doing here, that the political message of the act may not be in the act itself, but in this subsequent moment of translation. One has only to consider the way the events of 9/11 have been interpreted and reinterpreted to justify subsequent and at best tangentially related wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to see how the political meaning of events are often undecided until well after their physical occurrence—or sometimes, as Slavoj Žižek demonstrates, well before they occur (Žižek 2002).

12. For only a few of many possible examples, see Ellis (1993, 1999); Piot (n.d.); Shaw (2002b); White (2000).

13. This was made most evident to me in conversation with members of the CDF who were preparing to join forces with Liberian rebels after the war in Sierra Leone. They suggested that the best way to succeed in attracting assistance to rebuild after a Liberian war was to inflict more damage and employ more dramatic violence than the RUF had in Sierra Leone; otherwise, they would not be taken seriously, and would hence be ignored (Ferme and Hoffman 2004; Hoffman 2003).

14. The extrahumanness of the rebels is a point further discussed in Henry (2000).

15. This course of analysis strikes something of a middle ground between Richards’s argument regarding RUF violence and the critique made by Bangura, who pointed out that simply because an act of violence is rational from the actor’s viewpoint does not mean it is not barbaric (Bangura 1997:123).

16. For more on the idea that public pronouncements need to be further sifted for meaning, see Ellis (1999:13); Ferme (1999, 2001); Murphy (1990, 1998).

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