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**FOREWORD: THE DARK MATTER  
OF VIOLENCE, OR, PUTTING  
TERROR IN PERSPECTIVE**

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From time to time, a book appears about which we can say: we were not waiting *merely* for a book like this; this is *the* book we were waiting for. Sophie Wahnich's *In Defence of the Terror* is such a rare book: it cuts into the very heart of today's ethico-political predicament. How can a book about the French Revolution do this?

When, in 1953, Zhou En Lai, the Chinese premier, was in Geneva for the peace negotiations to end the Korean war, a French journalist asked him what he thought about the French Revolution; Chou replied: 'It is still too early to tell.' The events of 1990 proved him spectacularly right: with the disintegration of the 'people's democracies', the struggle for the historical place of the French Revolution flared up again. The liberal revisionists tried to impose the notion that the demise of communism in 1989 occurred at exactly the right moment: it marked the end of the era which began in 1789, the final failure of the statist-revolutionary model which first entered the scene with the Jacobins.

Nowhere is the dictum 'every history is a history of the present' more true than in the case of the French Revolution: its historiographical reception has always closely mirrored the twists and turns of later political

struggles. The identifying mark of all kinds of conservatives is a predictably flat rejection: the French Revolution was a catastrophe from its very beginning. The product of the godless modern mind, it is at the same time to be interpreted as God's judgement on humanity's wicked ways – so its traces should of course be kicked over as thoroughly as possible. The typical liberal attitude is a more differentiated one: its formula is '1789 without 1793'. In short, what the sensitive liberals want is a decaffeinated revolution, a revolution which does not smell of a revolution. François Furet proposed another liberal approach: he tried to deprive the French Revolution of its status as the founding event of modern democracy, relegating it to a historical anomaly. In short, Furet's aim was to de-eventalize the French Revolution: it is no longer (as for a tradition stemming from Kant and Hegel) the defining moment of modernity, but a local accident with no global significance, one conditioned by the specifically French tradition of absolute monarchy. Jacobin state centralism is only possible, then, against the background of the 'L'état c'est moi' of Louis XIV. There was a historical necessity to assert the modern principles of personal freedom, etc., but – as the English example demonstrates – the same could have been much more effectively achieved in a more peaceful way... Radicals are, on the contrary, possessed by what Alain Badiou called the 'passion of the Real': if you say A – equality, human rights and freedoms – then you should not shirk its consequences but instead gather the courage to say B – the terror needed to really defend and assert A.

Both liberal and conservative critics of the French Revolution present it as a founding event of modern 'totalitarianism': the taproot of all the worst evils of the twentieth century – the Holocaust, the Gulag, up to the 9/11 attacks – is to be sought in the Jacobin 'Reign of Terror'. The perpetrators of Jacobin crimes

are either denounced as bloodthirsty monsters, or, in a more nuanced approach, one admits that they were personally honest and pure, but then adds that this very feature made their fanaticism all the more dangerous. The conclusion is thus the well-known cynical wisdom: better corruption than ethical purity, better a direct lust for power than obsession with one's mission.<sup>1</sup>

Wahnich's book systematically undermines this predominant *doxa*. In a detailed historical analysis of the stages of Jacobin Terror, she first demonstrates how this Terror was not an uncontrolled explosion of destructive madness, but a precisely planned and controlled attempt to prevent such an explosion. She does what Furet wanted to do, but from an opposite perspective: instead of denouncing Terror as an outburst of some eternal 'totalitarian' which explodes from time to time (millenarian peasants' revolts, twentieth-century communist revolutions . . .), Wahnich provides its historical context, resuscitating all the dramatic tenor of the revolutionary process. And then, in a detailed comparison between the French revolutionary Terror and recent fundamentalist terrorism, she renders visible their radical discontinuity, especially the gap that separates their underlying notions of justice. The first step towards correct politics is to break with false symmetries and similarities.

However, what is much more interesting is that, beneath all these diverging opinions, there seems to be a shared perception that 1989 marks the end of the epoch

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1 Recall how, decades ago, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, one of the US foreign policy ideologists, drew a distinction between Rightist authoritarianism and Leftist totalitarianism, privileging the first: precisely because Rightist authoritarian leaders care only about their power and wealth, they are much less dangerous than the fanatical Leftists who are ready to risk their lives for their cause. Is this distinction not at work today, in the way the US privileges a corrupt authoritarianism in Saudi Arabia over Iran's fundamentalism?

which began in 1789 – the end of a certain ‘paradigm’, as we like to put it today: the paradigm of a revolutionary process that is focused on taking over state power and then using this power as a lever to accomplish global social transformation. Even the ‘postmodern’ Left (from Antonio Negri to John Holloway) emphasizes that a new revolution should break with this fetishization of state power as the ultimate prize and focus on the much deeper ‘molecular’ level of transforming daily practices. It is at this critical point that Wahnich’s book intervenes: its underlying premise is that this shift to ‘molecular’ activities outside the scope of state power is in itself a symptom of the Left’s crisis, an indication that today’s Left (in the developed countries) is not ready to confront the topic of violence in all its ambiguity – a topic which is usually obfuscated by the fetish of ‘Terror’. This ambiguity was clearly described more than a century ago by Mark Twain, who wrote apropos of the French Revolution in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*:

There were two ‘Reigns of Terror’ if we would but remember it and consider it; the one wrought murder in hot passion, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other had lasted a thousand years; . . . our shudders are all for the ‘horrors’ of the minor Terror, the momentary Terror, so to speak; whereas, what is the horror of swift death by the axe, compared with life-long death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heart-break? . . . A city cemetery could contain the coffins filled by that brief Terror which we have all been so diligently taught to shiver at and mourn over; but all France could hardly contain the coffins filled by that older and real Terror – that unspeakably bitter and awful Terror which none of us have been taught to see in its vastness or pity as it deserves.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, New York: Random House, 2001, p. 114.

Does not the same duality characterize our present? At the forefront of our minds these days, ‘violence’ signals acts of crime and terror, let alone great wars. One should learn to step back, to disentangle oneself from the fascinating lure of this directly visible ‘subjective’ violence – violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts. A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance: the ‘objective’ violence inscribed into the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems. The catch is that subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero-level of ‘civility’. It is seen as a perturbation of the normal, peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent in this ‘normal’ state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as being subjective violence. Systemic violence is thus something like the notorious ‘dark matter’ of physics, the counterpart to an all-too-visible subjective violence. It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be ‘irrational’ explosions of subjective violence. Let us take a quick look at some of the cases of this invisible violence.

The story of Kathryn Bolkovac,<sup>3</sup> recently made into a film (*The Whistleblower*, dir. Larysa Kondracki, 2010), cannot but terrify any honest observer. In 1998 Bolkovac, a US police officer, successfully applied for a place in the UN’s International Police Task Force in Bosnia-Herzegovina – under the auspices of a prominent

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3 See the review of Bolkovac’s book, *The Whistleblower*, in Daisy Sindelar, ‘In New Book, Whistle-Blower Alleges US, UN Involvement in Bosnian Sex Trafficking’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 9 February 2011, at [rferl.org](http://rferl.org).

defence contractor, DynCorp – and upon arrival, was assigned to a task force that targeted violence against women. Still new to this position, Bolkovac began to follow up leads which exposed a local sex-trafficking ring, apparently run by the Serbian mafia and dealing in very young girls from former communist-bloc countries – some of these girls were no older than twelve. But another link quickly surfaced: the girls' johns seemed to include UN contractors in Bosnia, and possibly some of Bolkovac's colleagues. Moreover, there were strong indications that UN personnel colluded with or even helped operate sex-trafficking rings in the region, and saw a profit from it.

Shocked by her findings, Bolkovac filed a series of reports with her superiors, but they were all either shelved or returned to her as 'solved'. Nothing was done, and nothing changed – until Bolkovac was demoted and then sacked for 'gross misconduct', well before her contract was up. Finally warned that her life was in danger, she was reduced to flight and left Bosnia with her investigative files and little else.

Bolkovac proceeded to sue DynCorp for 'wrongful termination', and the suit was decided in her favour. As a result, DynCorp dismissed seven of its contractors in Bosnia for 'unacceptable behavior' and publicized changes to its screening protocols. But this sex-trafficking scandal does not seem to have tarnished the company. DynCorp has continued to net massive State Department contracts, despite accusations of criminal misconduct in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. For example, a US diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks cites DynCorp personnel who were seen taking drugs and hiring 'dancing boys', a polite name for underage male prostitutes (and DynCorp is in Afghanistan, we should note, to train the new Afghan police corps).

The *New York Times* reviewer granted that *The Whistleblower* tells a story so repellent that it is almost

beyond belief.’ However, in an incredible ideological *tour de force*, the same reviewer went on to denounce the film’s very truthfulness as the cause of its aesthetic failure: ‘*The Whistleblower* ultimately fizzles by withholding any cathartic sense that justice was done, or ever will be done, once Kathryn spills the beans to the British news media.’<sup>4</sup> It is true, I suppose, that in real life we are far from the ‘cathartic sense’ of films like *All the President’s Men* or *The Pelican Brief*, in which the final disclosure of political crimes brings a kind of emotional relief and satisfaction . . .

And is not the lesson of Libya after Gaddafi’s fall a similar one? Now we have learned that Gaddafi’s secret services fully collaborated with their Western counterparts, including participating in programs of rendition. We can perhaps discern this kind of complicity between ‘rogue states’ and the Western guardians of human rights at its most radical in Congo. The cover story of *Time* magazine on 5 June 2006 was ‘The Deadliest War In the World’ – a detailed report on how some 4 million people have died in Congo over the last decade as the result of political violence. None of the usual humanitarian uproar followed, just a couple of reader’s letters – as if some filtering mechanism blocked this news from achieving its full impact. To put it cynically, *Time* picked the wrong victim in the struggle for hegemony in suffering – it should have stuck to the list of usual suspects: Muslim women and their plight, the oppression in Tibet . . . It is Congo today which has effectively re-emerged as a Conradian ‘heart of darkness’, yet no one dares to confront it. The death of a West Bank Palestinian child, not to mention an Israeli or an American, is mediatically worth thousands of times more than the death of a nameless Congolese. Why this ignorance?

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4 See Stephen Holden, ‘American in Bosnia Discovers the Horrors of Human Trafficking’, *New York Times*, 4 August 2011.

On 30 October 2008, the Associated Press reported that Laurent Nkunda, the rebel general besieging Congo's eastern provincial capital Goma, said that he wanted direct talks with the government about his objections to a billion-dollar deal that gives China access to the country's vast mineral riches in exchange for a railway and highway. As problematic (neocolonialist) as this deal may be, it poses a vital threat to the interests of local warlords, since its eventual success would create the infrastructural base for the Democratic Republic of Congo as a functioning united state.

Back in 2001, a UN investigation on the illegal exploitation of natural resources in Congo found that conflict in the country is mainly about access to and control and trade of five key mineral resources: coltan, diamonds, copper, cobalt and gold. According to this report, the exploitation of Congo's natural resources by local warlords and foreign armies is 'systematic and systemic', and the leaders of Uganda and Rwanda in particular (closely followed by Zimbabwe and Angola) had turned their armed forces into armies of business. The report concludes that permanent civil war and the disintegration of Congo 'has created a "win-win" situation for all belligerents. The only loser in this huge business venture is the Congolese people'. One should bear in mind this good old 'economic-reductionist' background when one reads in the media about primitive ethnic passions exploding yet again in the African 'heart of darkness'... Beneath the facade of ethnic warfare, we thus discern the contours of global capitalism.

Today's capitalism likes to present itself as ethically responsible; however, its 'ethical' face is the result of a complex process of ideological abstraction or obliteration. Companies dealing with raw materials extracted and exported in suspicious conditions (using de facto slaves or child labour) effectively practise the art of 'ethical cleansing', the true business counterpart to



ethnic cleansing: through reselling, etc., such practices obscure the origins of materials which are produced under conditions unacceptable to our Western societies.

There definitely is a lot of darkness in the dense Congolese jungle – but its heart lies elsewhere, in the bright executive offices of our banks and high-tech companies. In order to truly awaken from the capitalist ‘dogmatic dream’ (as Kant would have put it) and see this other true heart of darkness, one should re-apply to our situation Brecht’s old quip from *The Threepenny Opera*: ‘What is the robbing of a bank compared to the founding of a new bank?’ What is the stealing of a couple of thousand dollars, for which one goes to prison, compared to financial speculations which deprive tens of millions of their homes and savings, and are then rewarded by state help of sublime grandeur? What is a Congolese local warlord compared to the enlightened and ecologically sensitive Western CEO? Maybe José Saramago was right when, in a 2008 newspaper column, he proposed treating the big bank managers and others responsible for the meltdown as perpetrators of crimes against humanity whose place is in the Hague Tribunal. Maybe one should not wave this proposal off as a poetic exaggeration in the style of Jonathan Swift, but take it seriously.

Taking into account this violence which is part of the normal functioning of global capitalism also compels us to throw a new light on its opposite, revolutionary terror. One should in no way cover up the harshness of the early Bolshevik rule – the point is elsewhere: precisely when they resorted to terror (and they often did it, openly calling the beast by its name: ‘Red Terror’), this terror was of a different type from Stalinist terror. In Stalin’s time, the symbolic status of the terror thoroughly changed – terror was turned into the publicly non-acknowledged, obscene, shadowy supplement to official discourse. It is significant that the climax of terror (1936–37) took place after the new

constitution was accepted in 1935. This constitution was supposed to end the state of emergency and mark a return of things to normality: the suspension of the civil rights of whole strata of the population (kulaks, ex-capitalists) was rescinded, the right to vote was now universal, and so on and so forth. The key idea of this constitution was that now, after the stabilization of the socialist order and the annihilation of the enemy classes, the Soviet Union was no longer a class society: the subject of the state was no longer the working class (workers and peasants), but the people. However, this does not mean that the Stalinist constitution was a simple hypocrisy which concealed the social reality. To the contrary, the possibility of terror is inscribed into its very core: since the class war was proclaimed to be over and the Soviet Union was conceived of as the classless country of the People, those who opposed the regime (or were easily presumed to) became no longer 'class enemies' in a conflict that tore at the social body, but enemies of the People – insects, worthless scum to be excluded from humanity itself.

And far from concerning only the twentieth century, this topic retains its full actuality today. Alain Badiou recently proposed the formula of 'defensive violence': one should renounce violence (i.e. the violent takeover of state power) as the principal *modus operandi*, and rather focus on building free domains at a distance from state power, subtracted from its reign (like the early *Solidarność* in Poland), and only resort to violence when the state itself uses violence to crush and subdue these 'liberated zones'. The problem with this formula is that it relies on the deeply problematic distinction between the 'normal' functioning of state apparatuses and the 'excessive' exercise of state violence. Is not the first lesson in the Marxist notion of class struggle – or more precisely, on the priority of the class struggle over classes as positive social entities – the thesis that 'peaceful' social life is itself sustained by (state) violence, i.e.

that ‘peace’ is an expression and effect of the (temporary) victory or predominance of one class (namely the ruling class) in the class struggle? What this means is that one cannot separate violence from the very existence of the state (as the apparatus of class domination): from the standpoint of the subordinated and oppressed, the very existence of a state is a fact of violence (in the same sense in which, for example, Robespierre said, in his justification of the regicide, that one does not have to prove that the king committed any specific crimes, since the very existence of the king is a crime, an offence against the freedom of the people). In this strict sense, *every* violence of the oppressed against the ruling class and its state is ultimately ‘defensive’. If we do not concede this point, we *volens nolens* ‘normalize’ the state and accept that its violence is merely a matter of contingent excesses (to be dealt with through democratic reforms). This is why the standard liberal motto apropos of violence – it is sometimes necessary to resort to it, but it is never legitimate – is inadequate. From the radical emancipatory perspective, one should turn this motto around. For the oppressed, violence is always legitimate (since their very status is the result of the violence they are exposed to), but never necessary (it is always a matter of strategic consideration to use violence against the enemy or not).<sup>5</sup>

In short, the topic of violence should be demystified: what was wrong with twentieth-century communism was not its recourse to violence per se (the violent takeover of state power, terror in order to maintain power), but rather the larger mode of functioning which made this kind of violence inevitable and legitimized (the party as the instrument of historical necessity, etc.). In 1970, in the notes of a meeting with President Richard Nixon on how to undermine the democratically elected Chilean government of Salvador Allende, CIA Director

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<sup>5</sup> I owe this idea to Udi Aloni.

Richard Helms wrote succinctly: ‘Make the economy scream.’ Top US representatives openly admit that today the same strategy is being applied in Venezuela: former US Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger said on Fox News that Chávez’s appeal to the Venezuelan people

only works so long as the populace of Venezuela sees some ability for a better standard of living. If at some point the economy really gets bad, Chávez’s popularity within the country will certainly decrease and it’s the one weapon we have against him to begin with and which we should be using, namely the economic tools of trying to make the economy even worse so that his appeal in the country and the region goes down . . . Anything we can do to make their economy more difficult for them at this moment is a good thing, but let’s do it in ways that do not get us into direct conflict with Venezuela if we can get away with it.

The least one can say is that such statements give credibility to the suspicion that the economic difficulties faced by the Chávez government (major product and electricity shortages nationwide, etc.) are not only the result of the ineptness of its economic policies. Here we come to the key political point, which is difficult to swallow for some liberals: we are clearly not dealing here with blind market processes and reactions (say, shop owners trying to make more profit by keeping some products off the shelves), but with an elaborate and fully planned strategy – and in such conditions, is not a kind of terror (police raids on secret warehouses, detention of speculators and the coordinators of shortages, etc.), as a defensive countermeasure, fully justified? Even Badiou’s formula of ‘subtraction plus only reactive violence’ seems inadequate in these new conditions. The problem today is that the state is getting more and more chaotic, failing in its proper

function of ‘servicing the goods’, so that one cannot even afford to let the state do its job. Do we have the right to remain at a distance from state power when state power is itself disintegrating, turning into an obscene exercise of violence so as to mask its own impotence?

Instead of a simplistic rejection of violence and terror, one should thus first widen its scope – learn to see violence where the hegemonic ideology teaches us to see none – and then analyze it in a concrete way, detecting the potential emancipatory use of what may at first appear to be purely reactionary militarism. Let us take, from the sphere of great art, Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, a play so exclusively focused on its hero’s militaristic-aristocratic pride and contempt for ordinary people that one can easily see why, after the German defeat in 1945, the Allied occupation powers prohibited its performance. Consequently, the play seems to offer a rather narrow interpretive choice: what are the alternatives to staging the play the way it is, i.e. to surrendering to its militaristic anti-democratic lure? We can try to subtly ‘extraneate’ this lure by way of its excessive aestheticization; we can do what Brecht did in his rewriting of the play, shifting the focus from the display of emotions (Coriolanus’ rage, etc.) to the underlying conflict of political and economic interests (in Brecht’s version, the crowd and the tribunes are not lead by fear and envy, but act rationally in view of their situation); or, perhaps the worst choice, we can over-play pseudo-Freudian stuff about Coriolanus’ maternal fixation and the homosexual intensity of his relationship with Aufidius. However, in the recent cinema version of the play, Ralph Fiennes (with his scenario writer John Logan) did the impossible, thereby perhaps confirming T. S. Eliot’s famous claim that *Coriolanus* is superior to *Hamlet*: Fiennes broke out of this closed circle of interpretive options, which all introduce a critical distance towards the figure of Coriolanus, and

*fully asserted* Coriolanus – not as a fanatical anti-democrat, but as a figure of radical Left.

Fiennes's first move was to change the geopolitical coordinates of *Coriolanus*: 'Rome' is now a contemporary colonial city-state in crisis and decay, and the 'Volscians' Leftist guerrilla rebels organized in what we call today a 'rogue state'. (Think of Colombia and the FARC, the 'revolutionary armed forces of Colombia' holding a vast territory in the south of the country – if only the FARC had not been corrupted by drug-dealing.) This first move echoes in many conspicuous details, like the decision to present the border between the territory held by the Roman army and the rebel territory, the place of contact between the two sides, as a lone access ramp on a highway, a kind of guerrilla checkpoint.<sup>6</sup>

One should fully exploit here the lucky choice of Gerard Butler for the role of Aufidius, the Volscian leader and Caius Martius's (i.e., Coriolanus's) opponent: since Butler's greatest hit was Zack Snyder's *300*, where he played Leonidas, one should not be afraid to venture the hypothesis that, in both films, he basically plays the same role of a warrior-leader of a rogue state fighting a mighty empire. *300*, the saga of the troop of Spartan soldiers who sacrificed themselves at Thermopylae to halt the invasion of Xerxes's Persian army, was attacked as the worst kind of patriotic militarism with clear allusions to the recent tensions with Iran and events in Iraq. Are things really so clear, however? The film should rather be thoroughly defended against these accusations: it is the story of a small, poor country (Sparta) invaded by the vast armies of a much larger

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<sup>6</sup> One can dream further here: what about fully exploiting the accidental fact that the film was shot in Serbia, with Belgrade as 'a city that called itself Rome', and imagining the Volscians as Albanians from Kosovo, with Coriolanus as a Serb general who changes side and joins the Albanians?

state (Persia). At the time Persia was much more developed than the Peloponnese, and wielded much more impressive military technology – are not the Persians' elephants, giants and flaming arrows the ancient versions of today's high-tech weaponry? A programmatic statement towards the end of the film defines the Spartans' agenda as standing 'against the reign of mystique and tyranny, towards the bright future', which is further specified as the rule of freedom and reason. It sounds like an elementary Enlightenment programme, and with a communist twist! Also recall that, at the film's beginning, Leonidas rejects outright the message of the corrupt 'oracles' according to whom gods forbid the military expedition to stop the Persians. As we later learn, these 'oracles' who were allegedly receiving the divine message in an ecstatic trance were actually paid off by the Persians, like the Tibetan 'oracle' who, in 1959, delivered to the Dalai Lama the message to leave Tibet and who was – as we learn today – on the CIA payroll.

But what about the apparent absurdity of the Spartan idea of dignity, freedom and reason being sustained by extreme military discipline, including of the practice of discarding the weakest children? This 'absurdity' is simply the price of freedom – freedom is not free, as they put it in the film. Freedom is not something given; it is regained through a hard struggle in which one should be ready to risk everything. The Spartans' ruthless military discipline is not simply the external opposite of Athenian 'liberal democracy': such discipline is democracy's inherent condition, and lays the foundations for it. The free subject of reason can only emerge through ruthless self-discipline. True freedom is not 'freedom of choice' made from a safe distance – a consumer's choice. True freedom overlaps with necessity; one makes a truly free decision when one's choice puts at stake one's very existence – one does it because one simply 'cannot do otherwise'.

When one's country is undergoing a foreign occupation and one is called on by a resistance leader to join the fight against the occupiers, the reason given is not 'you are free to choose', but: 'Can't you see that this is the only thing you can do if you want to retain your dignity?' No wonder that all the early modern egalitarian radicals – from Rousseau to the Jacobins – admired Sparta and imagined republican France as a new Sparta: there is an emancipatory core in the Spartan spirit of military discipline which survives even when we subtract all the historical paraphernalia of Spartan class rule, ruthless exploitation of and terror over their slaves, etc. Even Trotsky called the Soviet Union in the difficult years of 'war communism' a 'proletarian Sparta'.

So it is not that soldiers are the problem per se – the real menace is soldiers *with poets*, soldiers mobilized by nationalist poetry. There is no ethnic cleansing without poetry – why? Because we live in an era which perceives itself as post-ideological. Since great public causes no longer have the force to mobilize people for mass violence, a larger sacred Cause is needed, a Cause which makes petty individual concerns about killing seem trivial. Religion or ethnic belonging fit this role perfectly. And this brings us back to *Coriolanus* – who is the poet there? Before Caius Martius (aka Coriolanus) enters the stage, it is Menenius Agrippa who pacifies the furious crowd which is demanding grain. Like Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, Menenius is the ideologist par excellence, offering a poetic metaphor to justify social hierarchy (in this case, the rule of the senate); and, in the best corporatist tradition, the metaphor is that of a human body. Here is how Plutarch, in his *Life of Coriolanus*, retells this story first reported by Livy:

It once happened . . . that all the other members of a man mutinied against the stomach, which they accused as the only idle, uncontributing part in the whole body,



while the rest [of the members] were put to hardships and the expense of much labour to supply and minister to its appetites. The stomach, however, merely ridiculed the silliness of the members, who appeared not to be aware that the stomach certainly does receive the general nourishment, but only to return it again, and redistribute it amongst the rest. Such is the case . . . ye citizens, between you and the senate. The counsels and plans that are there duly digested, convey and secure to all of you your proper benefit and support.<sup>7</sup>

How does Coriolanus relate to this metaphor of body and its organs, of the rebellion of organs against their body? It is clear that, whatever Coriolanus is, he does not stand for the body, but is an organ which not only rebels against the body (the body politic of Rome), but abandons its body by way of going into exile – a true *organ without a body*. Is then Coriolanus really against the people? But *which* people? The ‘plebeians’ represented by the two tribunes, Brutus and Sicinius, are not any kind of exploited workers, but rather a lumpen-proletarian mob, the rabble fed by the state; and the two tribunes are proto-Fascist manipulators of the mob – to quote Kane (the citizen from Welles’s film), they speak for the poor ordinary people *so that the poor ordinary people will not speak for themselves*. If one looks for ‘the people’, then, they are rather to be found among the Volscians. One should watch closely how Fiennes depicts their capital: a modest popular city in a liberated territory, with Aufidius and his comrades in the uniforms of guerrilla fighters (not the regular army) mixing freely with commoners in an atmosphere of relaxed conviviality, with people drinking in open-air cafeterias, etc. – in clear contrast to the stiff formality of Rome.

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<sup>7</sup> *Plutarch’s Lives of Illustrious Men*, vol. 1, trans. J. Dryden et al., New York: American Book Exchange, 1880, p. 340.

So yes, Coriolanus is a killing machine, a ‘perfect soldier’, but precisely as such, as an ‘organ without a body’, he has no fixed class allegiance and can easily put himself in the service of the oppressed. As was made clear by Che Guevara, a revolutionary also has to be a ‘killing machine’:

Hatred [is] an element of the struggle; a relentless hatred of the enemy, impelling us over and beyond the natural limitations that man is heir to and transforming him into an effective, violent, selective, and cold killing machine. Our soldiers must be thus; a people without hatred cannot vanquish a brutal enemy.<sup>8</sup>

There are two scenes in the film which provide a clue for such a reading. When, after his violent outburst in the senate, Coriolanus exits the large hall and slams the doors behind him, he finds himself alone in the silence of a large corridor, confronted with an old tired cleaning man, and the two exchange glances in a moment of silent solidarity, as if only the poor cleaning man can see who Coriolanus is now. The other scene is a long depiction of his voyage into exile, done in a ‘road movie’ tenor, with Coriolanus as a lone Rambler on his trek, anonymous among the ordinary people. It is as if Coriolanus, obviously out of place in the delicate hierarchy of Rome, only now becomes what he is, gains his freedom – and the only thing he can do to retain this freedom is to join the Volscians. He does not join them simply in order to take revenge on Rome, he joins them because he belongs there – it is only among the Volscian fighters that he can be what he is. Coriolanus’s pride is authentic, joined with his reluctance to be praised by his compatriots and to engage in political manoeuvring. Such a pride has no place in Rome; it can thrive only among the guerrilla fighters.

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<sup>8</sup> Che Guevara, ‘Message to the Tricontinental’, in *Guerrilla Warfare*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998, p. 173.

In joining the Volscians, Coriolanus does not betray Rome out of a sense of petty revenge but regains his integrity – his only act of betrayal occurs at the end when, instead of leading the Volscian army onto Rome, he organizes a peace treaty between the Volscians and Rome, breaking down to the pressure of his mother, the true figure of superego Evil. This is why he returns to the Volscians, fully aware what awaits him there: the well-deserved punishment for his betrayal. And this is why Fiennes's *Coriolanus* is effectively like the saint's eye in an Orthodox icon: without changing a word in Shakespeare's play, it looks specifically at us, at our predicament today, outlining the unique figure of a radical freedom fighter.

So, back to Wahnich's book: the reader should approach its topic – terror and terrorism – without ideological fears and taboos, as a crucial contribution not only to the history of the emancipatory movements, but also as a reflection on our own predicament. Do not be afraid of its topic: the fear that prevents you from confronting it is the fear of freedom, of the price one has to pay for freedom.