Politics on the Borders of Normality

BERNHARD WALDENFELS, Ruhr – Universität Bochum

Translated by Antonio Calcagno

In the following considerations 9/11 is present, not as it were as what happened on this date, a kind of black Whitsun miracle to be understood according to the adage: the Un-Spirit (Ungeist) blows where it wills. This event, however, probably has something of a garish flash to it that illuminates the political landscape. All at once, one sees more clearly. A philosophy of the political could be seen as contributing to the fact that not all can be completely covered by the dust of public opinion and politico-military planning.

My considerations will be accompanied by references to the writings of Jacques Derrida, which from the 1980s onward have been marked by a new disquiet. This has much to do with politics, albeit not in any absolute fashion. Performative texts like the book on law, the constitution, or religious texts refer not only to different readings; their potential lies in the fact that they give rise to normative regulatory practices. They demand their own form of deconstruction. Misreading and désrèglement must have something to do with one another, but they are not identical. Here I will make passing references to what I have discussed elsewhere on the question of what deconstruction can extract from itself.

Like Derrida, I am convinced that globalization, which has stepped away from different cultures and national idioms, is responsible for a leveling form of a general making-common (Verallgemeinerung), the requirements of which necessitate further deconstructive surveying. To these idioms also belong the opposites of East and West, which simply do not leave Europeanization behind. The specters of Marx will disappear just as little over night as those of Thomas Hobbes.1

Normality, which concerns me here and which is to be strictly distinguished from normativity, means more than the regularity and frequency associated with the latter, and it means more than that which will always happen again.2 It is connected to the modern concept of an order, which is (es gibt) and which could be other. Orders possess a contingent origin, which Husserl and Heidegger described as a foundation (Stiftung). One can with Cornelius Castoriadis or Hannah Arendt completely affirm that Athens was not only the founding place of philosophy but also the place of a new form of politics, which also bears a Greek name, and not without reason. Indeed, one must add in the same breath that the birth of politics, understood in its philosophical
sense, was covered over and partially obscured. It is different than what Solon understands by his laws and what Thucydides understands by his histories. This covering over, which remained in Plato and Aristotle as the one sought-after Good, was prevalent for a long time, but it is also the case today, especially when discussing the good life or the common good.

I doubt that this idea of an all-encompassing good can further serve as a global political leit-idea (*Leitidee*). This is the case because of its philosophical implications. What its immediate existence opposes is its own contingency, namely, the fact that every order arises equally as a potentiality. This can be clearly seen in the founding act of a constitution (*Verfassungsgehen*). When constitutional declarations in the first person plural are formulated, such as “We, the People of the United States … do ordain and establish this CONSTITUTION of the United States of America,” or like the Japanese, “We, the Japanese people, do proclaim that the sovereign power resides with the people and do firmly establish this Constitution,” they open a gap between the “We” that speaks and the “We” that is mentioned in the declaration. One can express this in linguistic terms: the expressing (*enonciation*) is not part of the expression (*énoncé*), just as the speech act does not belong to that which is spoken about. The famous “JE est un autre” (I is an other) directly precipitates a “NOUS sont autres” (WE are others).3 The mistake occurs because it is evident that the use of “We” refers to a collective insofar as it is a hypostasis that precipitates a powerful effect. So writes Jorges Semprun, who was awakened from his revolutionary slumber in Buchenwald.4 “‘WE,’ ‘FOR WHOM’ we established basic words of a language from wood out of a funeral pyre and who prepared scaffolding for the guillotine.”4 For Derrida, who is very close to Pascal on this point, this means that the foundation of any legal order in which a force of law resides can no longer legitimize itself. When there is order, so there is law. When Derrida refers to law that is concomitant with every legal pronouncement based on certain manners, that invents new things out of a legal order, and when law is not simply employed as a form of an available legal pronouncement,6 this can also be applied to political decisions in which the actual political order is implicit in the game. No existing order stands on secure ground.

The gap that opens in the foundation-event (*Stiftungsereignis*) produces a difference between what is normal, which happens according to an existing order, and the anomaly, which remains disenfranchised from that order. The event of the foundation of an order, which always remains separated from the existing states of an order, belongs to the anomaly. Such a radical anomaly I designate as the extra-ordinary (*Außer-ordentliche*), understood in the literal sense of the word. Thinkers like Max Weber, who subscribe to this notion of the political in both its narrow and broad senses, raise such questions as “How and in which way is one order opposed to another?” This is the question of political power. Another question comes to the fore: In which ways is the extra-ordinary announced, and how is it allowed to show itself? These show themselves in the desiderata of a phenomenology, genealogy, or deconstruction of the political through which the process of normalization is knowingly carried out as a process and is therefore scrupulously monitored.

All of this means that the political insofar as it is in accord with other forms of order remains under the *Leit*-difference (*Leitdifferenz*) of the ordered/extra-ordinary. The extra-ordinary denotes an empty place, which can never fill itself by a political or politically active instance. This empty place lies in a place of advent because an actual foundation is usually not past; it is not finished. The emptiness of this place seduces one to build surrogates and usurpations; this belongs to the destiny of the political.

II

I place the surrogates that fill the empty place under the rubric of normalcy. Here I place all attempts to try and fix what normality is from within. This indicates a primacy of the normal case that lies in opposition to extremism, which seeks to act extremely outside normality and to posit the extreme case as equally enduring. If we examine the tradition of political philosophy, we see a certain polarization. There are those like Aristotle and Locke who tend toward normalcy, and there are those like Plato and Hobbes who proceed to the most extreme point, the former from the death sentence of Socrates and the latter from a wolf-like enmity among human beings. The most extreme point is not remiss to include murder, war, force, and the power of eros or the godly, but these are included insofar as eros is taken to mean more than simple sexual satisfaction and religion more than simple civic religion. Indeed, we remain in the present.

One can distinguish between different varieties of normalcy. The first I take to be traditionalism. One defends the normality of longstanding traditions, individual ways of life or ethnic customs. One arranges oneself according to what is proper, in what is native for oneself, in that which is brought to oneself, in order to determine whether one can measure if one’s life is good or bad. In this case, being traditional is not so traditional. Insofar as the call to a named tradition can be legitimate without falling into a vicious circle, traditions are set out as an inevitable process of erosion, and they are only valuable insofar as they can be stopped from eroding away. Opposite to traditionalism is functionalism embodied
in systems, which any order establishes. The main thing here is that the system functions smoothly. The difference between functional/dysfunctional becomes a *leit*-difference as it can be formulated in systematic, theoretical terms. An intimate proximity to technological and economic calculation arises from this, which has a tendency to absorb the specifically political with all of its incalculability and imponderability. It therefore binds itself to a predilection for concrete, procedural solutions that are clearly decidable when it comes to deciding between a legitimate and illegitimate authority. Contingency becomes acceptance; everything can be wholly other (*ganz anders sein*) from the present here and now to the unending visions of the joyful future-looking biotechnologist.

The third type of normality is normativism (*Normativismus*). It is not satisfied with itself, with the traditions that it immediately loves or any of the codes it follows. It is satisfied, however, with establishing legal or moral ground rules and fundamental rights through which normalization enforces certain limits. All the modes of reason and all rational acts that reside in the normative are normal in this emphasized sense. This is so because a metapolitical character does not reside in the disposition of political decisions. The weakness of this normative, ordered normalcy lies in another fact, namely, that it has no motivational power that extends in and from itself. It also has no stirring power of invention, distancing it from technology. The specific domain of the political moves in the shadow of the juridical, where a moral universalizing legal measure that rests in a general making-common of all the requirements of validity remains attached to forensic thinking. This also applies to the establishment of a rule of life.

This so belongs to the polarization of the political and its inevitable factionalizing struggles that the varieties of normalcy attack and supplement one another. This happens insofar as there is a radicalization of traditionalism through technological demands, but also because pressures for public accountability are hindered. Traditionalism's ready motivating and coalescing powers are turned upside down. These powers cannot be obtained from moral and legal maxims. It would not be remiss here to speak of a large coalition of normal reason or a cohabitating of differently oriented traditionalists, functionalists, and normativists. One must ask only if such a coalition has clear deficiencies.

On the whole, one could say that in Western postindustrial societies the tone is being set more and more by the offshoots of systematic functionalism, and one can point this out in the process that has been designated as globalization. It seems as if the world-revolutionary swing in techno-economy has wandered away. By contrast, there is a tendency in post-communist societies to make up for a decline of fraternalizing ideologies (*Verbrüderungsideologie*) through the later decline of nation-

alistic and ethnocentric traditionalism. This is what Ivaylo Zhepolovski calls a monarchical discourse. New and old traditionalisms degenerate into a fundamentalism when a steadfast foundation, which has long crumbled throughout the course of modernization, is sought in tradition proper. Fundamentalism signifies a denial of contingency.

Thus we approach the polar opposite of each normalization, namely, extremism. Terror as the outermost form of power generally posits a radical form of the anti-political in which common goals are given up and common rules are repealed. The peculiarity of the new terrorism lies in its hybrid form. It exercises terror according to all the rules of technology and at the same time mobilizes religious forces in the form of a readiness to self-sacrifice, which flies in the face of all modern forms of self-preservation and enlightened self-interest. The war of all believers against all non-believers, which is described as having a purifying and saving effect, does not stop at the fighter alone. The back door of the refusal to serve in the war, which Hobbes clearly understands as an individual's desire for self-preservation and protection of one's own welfare, remains closed. This results in an inviolability that does not arise from the command of attention. Rather, it grows out of defenselessness. Hegel's master-slave dialectic suddenly reads differently if the rationalization process is abruptly interrupted. Here, the danger originates insofar as terror accepts the ways of the mirror images of anti-terror such that the world of evil shifts to the other side and the crusades, which our Western side knows all too well; they are now being led again in the reverse direction. The union of East and West that defends against what is called terrorism leads in the long run to an unholy alliance if the borders are blurred between political opponents, insurgents, and freedom fighters; they will be treated as anti-human. As John Locke notes in his *Second Treatise of Government* (III, 16), these mortal enemies will view one another as lions or wolves that seek to destroy. No death penalty is required here. A self-defense is sufficient, which no longer is a defense against someone, but is rather a defense against what one could understand as wild animals. Such a picture of one's enemy belongs in the old political *bestiarum*, which always delivers more and new explosive materials to the collective imagination.

### III

The question may be asked, what would politics look like if it were not only a limited, load-bearing, normal politics that does not flee into a murderous alternative of all or nothing? Even this question leads us on the road to a politics that is not within borders, but rather is on the borders of normality. It avoids depreciating the difference between
ordered and extraordinary in one direction or another, or even sublating them. Given that this difference is not symmetrical, politics cannot become a pure balance or a politics of balance as the followers of post-history maintain. Politics will not be without drama.

When discussing the borders of politics one asks about the type of borders being considered. How can borders that are not even sublated through this thinking be thought without sinking to the level of actual relations? The answer: while one does not think of them as some thing that would stand in the way of another thing, and while one moves through thinking and acting, this is carried out in borders and shows itself as such before it is made into an object of thematic consideration. In this sense, it requires a phenomenology of the border or a deconstruction of all statements that have borders as their theme. Thinking about borders will always be indirect.8

Accordingly, one must distinguish between two forms of drawing borders. The first form is a pure demarcation that separates one thing from another, and this is done in and through the medium of a third that unites, for example, both East and West. The mediating third can appear as a comprehensive whole to which the differentiating object can orient itself. It can also appear as a universal law according to which the differentiating object submits. Politically, this means that one acts from the perspective of a humanity to which belong human reason and all members of the human species. One can also refer to human rights to which all types of reason are subjected. Such an inclusion means that an order knows no outside with the exception of the un- or non-human. Apart from this exception that separates the positive from the negative, borders appear only as inner borders that carry within themselves a definite universe. This, however, leads to the already mentioned aporia of a self-revolving order.

The second form of drawing borders refers to inclusion and exclusion. It separates inner from outer and, provided that we play a role in this separation, that which is proper to us is separated from the foreign. That which is my own or proper to me (Eigenes), which affects me before any identification with myself or ourselves, is not simply distinguished in terms of that which is proper to oneself and that which is foreign. Rather, it is separated. What evades its own access is not only different; but is elsewhere, inaccessible in its accessibility, not belonging in its belonging; it is simply strange in the most radical sense of this word. Foreignness or strangeness begins at home, in one’s own body, in one’s own language and culture. Because every order is selective on account of its contingency, no one is wholly whom he or she is, and no one or nothing is completely in its place. A politics on the borders of normality would be a politics that does not extend itself into the domain of a power rooted in the infinite. Rather, the more space the political leaves open in itself and empties out for the apolitical,9 always in order to take possession of an empty place, the more a respective order arises and the more effects it can have.

This can be clarified by employing Derrida’s distinction between justice and law as developed in Force of Law. He writes:

[There is] a distinction between justice (which is infinite, unpredictable, recalcitrant against every rule, the symmetry that lies beyond the foreign, heterogeneous and heterotopy) and its being exercised in the form of the law, legitimacy or legality (adjustable and capable of making bylaws, computable, a system of regulated, registered and encoding regulations).10

There arise two extreme forms that correspond to this already mentioned linguistic differentiation. Justice without law—this would correspond to a saying without something being said, an extra-ordinary thing without order. Law without justice—this would correspond to something spoken without speaking, which would settle positively as a normative power of the factual. A justice that does not carry us to a higher world, often because our world is in question and our world-belief in a type of “ethical epoché” is suspended, is not thinkable as in-finite in Levinas’ sense when this is understood as a violation of finite orders, a violation that these very orders assume. Without the abutment of the normal, i.e., the normal in all its forms, infinite justice would escape in a moral netherworld, incubating its own forms of power that would announce themselves in apocalyptic scenes of decay.

The foreign claim, which crosses over all regulations, brings with it an administering of justice that brings the undecided into play, and it depends on inventions. These inventions, however, are distant from free-floating constructions; they themselves have the character of an answer. I would express this in the following way: we do not invent that to which we respond, however we certainly do invent what we answer.11 This responsive difference marks the crossroads where normality and anomaly, regularity and irregularity, meet without becoming one. The undecidability in all decisions, the indeterminability in all determinations, and the unexpected in all expectations open a space for phenomena of the border, including gift, hospitality, promise, or forgiving. It covers all economic, juridical, and political regulations, which makes transgressing all borders undeconstructible. Politics that moves out from a foreign claim to which justice can give no fair distribution of rights, duties, and opportunities is conceivable only as a double-play that is a joining-in-play whose very playing out, while it concomitantly deviates from the rules of
the game, it transgresses. This means that nobody belongs to it fully and completely, including the most bourgeois of all citizens, and nobody is completely excluded, even the terrorist. Such a politics of the border urges us towards durable improvisation because politics is haunted by the foreigner who is never totally incorporated into it. The weapons of a politics that tries to ward off permanently the foreign and the possible enemy inevitably turns within itself. Not only does an art of reason exist but also an insidiousness of power.

bernhard.waldenfels@ruhr-uni-bochum.de

Notes

1. This article stems from a lecture that I gave entitled “The Monstrous Discourse: The Balkans and Europe, The Deconstruction of the Political,” which was delivered at Sofia in November 2001. The lecture was later published in German in Divinatio (Sofia), Dossier: Jacques Derrida, Vol. 15, 2002.

2. See my earlier work, Grenzen der Normalisierung: Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden, [Limits of Normalization: Studies on the Phenomenology of the Foreign] Vol. 2 (Frankfurt am main: Suhrkamp, 1998). Also see Chapter VI of my Grenzen der Modernisierung [Limits of Modernization] (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2001). [Translator’s note: Note that Fremd in German can be translated as strange or foreign. There is no exact equivalent for the German in English. I have opted to translate Fremd as foreign, but one should also think of foreign as having the sense of strange.]

3. Translator’s note: The French here is not grammatical. The first person singular and plural subject pronouns are conjugated with third person singular and plural forms of the verb to be. This ungrammatical shift in language is done to show Waldenfels’ point.

4. Translator’s note: Buchenwald was a Nazi death camp but it also means a beech-tree forest; hence, the discussion of wood in the next sentence.

5. Welech ein schöner Sonntag! (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 219.


7. Translator’s note: The German here is Regelfalles, which also indicates the default case.


9. This is not to be confused with the unpolitical; the alpha privatum stands in for what remains blank, but it acts as that which is left blank.

10. Gesetzkraft, 44ff.

11. One can also refer to my basic statements in Antwortregister (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994).