

The Politics of Potentiality: Problematizing Positive Peace

Antoine Bousquet
(Birkbeck, University of London)
a.bousquet@bbk.ac.uk

Abstract

Johan Galtung introduced in the 1960s the notion of “positive peace” in an attempt to overcome the perceived limitations of the conceptualisation of peace as the absence of war. Peace became defined no longer as merely the cessation or absence of armed conflict (now declassified to “negative peace”), but as the eradication of less apparent forms of violence referred to as structural violence. Such forms of violence were to be sought in the economic, social, and ideational structures which prevent the full realisation of human potential. The transformation or elimination of these structures has hence become the avowed goal of many theoretical and practical exercises in peace-building. However, such efforts all too often presume that human potential is an unproblematic category when in fact it is necessarily historically constructed and contingent as well as inherently contested. Indeed, human potentiality is the site of political and ideological dispute, the very ground of conflict which thus resurfaces at the heart of Galtung’s theoretical edifice for the establishment of a permanently pacified world.

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The purpose of all war is peace.

Saint Augustine

Johan Galtung's landmark article *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*, published in 1969, was a bold attempt to think beyond the existing understandings of peace which the author deemed unsatisfactory. Galtung viewed the term of peace as excessively vague and poorly defined, often little more than a broad aspiration, and thus in need of conceptual clarification. He would however take as his starting point the common statement that "peace is the absence of violence." Recognising that in itself this offered little clarification ("a clear case of *obscurum per obscurius*"), he would direct his theoretical efforts at the meaning to be attributed to the term of violence – "everything now hinges on making a definition of violence."¹ It is from here that Galtung significantly departs from traditional understandings of violence and therefore peace, thereby engendering a highly influential body of work that has earned him a unique place in the field of peace studies and a wide echo beyond it.

For one, Galtung is keen to distance himself from the notion of peace as the cessation or absence of armed conflict between sovereign nations, as it is commonly understood in International Relations. In a later piece, Galtung argues that:

'war' is only one particular form of orchestrated violence, usually with at least one actor, a government. How narrow it is to see peace as the opposite of war and limit peace studies to war avoidance studies, and more particularly avoidance of big wars or super-wars (defined as wars between big powers or superpowers), and even more particularly to the limitation, abolition or control of super-weapons. Important interconnections among types of violence are left out, particularly the way in which one type of violence may be reduced or controlled at the expense of increase or maintenance of another.²

So if peace is to remain "the absence of violence" and yet not be reduced to the mere prevention of war, "an extended concept of violence is indispensable."³

Galtung thus establishes early on the crucial foundational postulate of his theoretical framework: "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realisations are below their potential realisations."⁴ Through

¹ Johan Galtung, *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research* (Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 6, No. 3., 1969), pp.166-7

² Johan Galtung, *Cultural Violence* (Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 27, No. 3., 1990), p. 293

³ Johan Galtung, *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research* (Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 6, No. 3., 1969), p.168

⁴ Johan Galtung, *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research* (Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 6, No. 3., 1969), p.168

his explicit reference to the somatic and mental, Galtung ensures that effects both on body and mind are considered so that violence is not reduced purely to its physical dimension. The most crucial move however is the proposal of a potential state of realisation of human life which violence is seen as preventing – “*violence is here defined as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is.*”⁵ All impediments to human potential that are deemed preventable and avoidable are hence labelled violence and peace research becomes “the systematic search for conditions of human fulfilment.”⁶

Galtung makes an important further distinction between two types of violence: direct or personal violence in which there is an actor or subject committing the violence, and indirect or structural violence in which no such actor can be found.⁷ The former refers to both the immediate use of force or psychological techniques to inflict somatic or mental harm as well as the wilful denial of human needs (water, food, air, etc.) and freedom of movement (imprisonment, paralysis). As for indirect or structural violence, Galtung relates it to the distribution and use of available resources and what instances of starvation, disease, or general oppression would be prevented by another distribution.⁸

Galtung’s expanded notion of violence allows him to claim that peace as usually construed in terms of the cessation or absence of direct violence is merely “negative peace” in the presence of an enduring structural violence. “Positive peace” can therefore only be achieved when both direct violence and structural violence are eradicated. Since positive peace will only be realised when the gap between the actual and potential levels of human realisation is closed, it becomes necessary to define exactly what this potential might be at a given time. Galtung offers that:

The potential level of realisation is that which is possible with a given level of insight and resources. If insight and/or resources are monopolised by a group or class or are used for other purposes, then the actual level falls below the potential level, and violence is present in the system.⁹

⁵ Johan Galtung, Violence, Peace, and Peace Research (Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 6, No. 3., 1969), p.168

⁶Johan Galtung, ‘Errata: Violence, Peace, and Peace’ Research Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 7, No. 3. (1970), p.243

⁷ Although Galtung does also distinguish other dimensions of violence – such as between intended and non-intended, or between manifest and latent – he insists that “the choice here is to make the distinction between personal and structural violence the basic one” and this remains his main theoretical contribution. (p.173)

⁸ To direct and structural violence, Galtung adds in subsequent work a third dimension of violence, that of “cultural violence”: “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimise direct or structural violence.” In charging certain ideas or values with masking the reality of violence (“cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong”), Galtung problematically assumes that there is an objective set of values or norms available from whose standpoint a legitimate judgment can be cast upon on all others.

Johan Galtung, Cultural Violence (Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 27, No. 3., 1990), p. 291

⁹ Johan Galtung, Violence, Peace, and Peace Research (Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 6, No. 3., 1969), p.169

This article will argue that, notwithstanding the purity of his intentions, Galtung's attempt to establish human potential as the guiding principle for the definitive organisation of society along peaceful lines is deeply flawed. Human potential is not only fundamentally indeterminate but also at the very heart of political agonism that is beyond any form of final resolution. Galtung himself demonstrates a flickering awareness of these problems and has the honesty to raise them, however briefly, in his work but unfortunately shies away from facing the full brunt of their challenges to his theory.

Galtung does broach the issue that the achievable somatic potential of humans will vary according to the time we live in (due to the evolving state of technology, healthcare, resources...) but is comfortable in treating it as merely a technical question to be determined by scientific analysis (our "given level of insight"). A greater unease is in evidence when he raises the question of contested understandings of potentiality and which he is only too happy to promptly sidestep:

The meaning of 'potential realisations' is highly problematic, especially when we move from somatic aspects of human life, where consensus is more readily obtained, to mental aspects. Our guide here would probably often have to be whether the value to be realised is fairly consensual or not, although this is by no means satisfactory. For example, literacy is held in high regard almost everywhere, whereas the value of being Christian is highly controversial. Hence we would talk about violence if the level of literacy is lower than what it could have been, not if the level of Christianity is lower than what could have been. We shall not try to explore this difficult point further in this context, but turn to the dimensions of violence.¹⁰

What Galtung fails to directly confront the fact that human potential – that is the value of different and frequently contradictory realisations – is always being contested and thus can itself be the source of conflict and violence, however defined. Human potential is therefore not only historically and socially contingent in the sense that material resources can evolve in such ways that physical life is extended and rendered less precarious but also in that our very ideals of human realisation are inextricably bound to the contemporary culture from whose cloth they are woven. Thus each epoch sees its dominant conceptions of human potential embodied in its contemporary ethico-politico-legal order, a status quo that becomes the site of contestation for competing understandings of potentiality.

We can therefore outline a *politics of potentiality*, understood as an agonistic form of politics in which the stakes are the meaning to be given to human self-realisation and the identity of the forms of life that are entitled to it. Rather than being liable to an objective or scientific determination, human potential is an inherently politically charged referent and subject to conflicting views resting upon distinct and often contradictory postulates for which there is a scant, if any, means of adjudication. Such positions articulate themselves in the main political theories and movements of their time but also manifest themselves through specific issues such they do with abortion, euthanasia or the rights of children and animals. This article will first examine the role of human potential in a variety of political theories before turning to the contested discriminatory and

¹⁰ Johan Galtung, Violence, Peace, and Peace Research (Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 6, No. 3., 1969), p.169

exclusionary distinctions drawn to determine which beings are eligible to realising their potential. The piece will conclude that human potential is itself intrinsically open-ended and the recognition of its particular instantiations at the very heart of political agon, thus precluding it from ever being the objective yardstick Galtung would like to see it be for the purpose of determining the peaceful organisation of society.

The Contest over Human Potentiality within Political Theory

Far from being a new idea introduced with Galtung's work, the notion of human potential has long been circulating within discourses articulating visions of the optimal arrangement of social life. While we generally find within these discourses that its exact contours are left open through a celebration of the diversity and richness of human abilities, claims over human potential are nevertheless central to their arguments, not least when indicting existing societies or alternative political visions for thwarting such a potential.

Thus it is with the stated goal of fully accomplished individuals in accordance with their true nature that are issued calls to reform or transform a society or political community deemed to impede such a realisation. With the exception of those creeds or philosophies that view the path to self-realisation through a withdrawal of the individual from society into a life of contemplation or hermitage, human potentiality is generally seen as only liable to being actualised within an appropriately organised collectivity. In *Monarchy*, Dante argued that "the highest potentiality of mankind is his intellectual potentiality" and that, "since that potentiality cannot be fully actualised all at once in any one individual", "there must needs be a vast number of individual people in the human race, through whom the whole of this potentiality can be actualised."¹¹ Hence for Dante this actualisation is only to be achieved through the establishment of a peaceful universal secular empire ("temporal monarchy") under which individual potential can flourish.

A wide range of ethical and political claims about the social order to be sought and defended are similarly grounded in specific understandings of human nature and of the potential that is purported to be immanent to it. Indeed, any political theory with designs on governing reality systematically advances its own vision of society with the claim that it will permit the fullest possible realisation of its members. This is as true of liberalism as it is of Marxism and fascism, probably the three most influential political ideals of the past hundred years. Crucially, the radically different models of societies they proposed were premised on distinct understandings of the nature of humans and thus drew different conclusions as to the reasons for which their potential has been thwarted, as well as to the means to be employed to actualise it. These contrasting visions have fiercely contested one another, frequently treating their adversaries' prescriptions as responsible for humanity's stunted condition. Political struggles are therefore, inter alia, competing claims to best understand and represent human potential.

¹¹ Brown, Nardin & Rengger, *International Relations in Political Thought*, p.200

For liberalism, the fullest achievement of human potential is served by the establishment of a bundle of individual rights and freedoms in accordance with a universally shared reason. In his highly influential text in the canon of liberal thought, *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill cites approvingly the Prussian polymath Wilhelm von Humboldt:

“the end of man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal or immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole;” [...] therefore, the object “towards which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts, and on which especially those who design to influence their fellow-men must ever keep their eyes, is the individuality of power and development;” [...] for this there are two requisites, “freedom, and a variety of situations;” and [...] from the union of these arise “individual vigour and manifold diversity,” which combine themselves in “originality.”¹²

Mill opposes what he sees as “Calvinistic” theories of human nature according to which humans should only seek to uniformly conform to the strict duties imposed by divine will and shun any forms of individual self-expression and self-gratification. “Many persons, no doubt, sincerely think that human beings thus cramped and dwarfed, are as their Maker designed them to be; just as many have thought that trees are a much finer thing when clipped into pollards, or cut out into figures of animals, than as nature made them.”¹³ Through the vehicle of horticultural metaphor, Mill argues that what seems natural and divinely sanctioned to the proponents of such a view is in fact an artificial stunting of human potential and that its true fulfilment in accordance with God’s will is only possible by providing the conditions for the unfettered blossoming of human capabilities. “If it be any part of religion to believe that man was made by a good Being, it is more consistent with that faith to believe, that this Being gave all human faculties that they might be cultivated and unfolded, not rooted out and consumed, and that he takes delight in every nearer approach made by his creatures to the ideal conception embodied in them, every increase in any of their capabilities of comprehension, of action, or of enjoyment.”¹⁴

Mill’s notion of liberty is to be instantiated through the laws and rules that permit the constitution and defence of a sphere of personal autonomy in which human beings in their rich diversity can fully develop their own “individuality” or “originality.” We find here the widely held liberal principles of freedom of opinion, speech, worship, and assembly insofar as they do not do harm to the autonomy and welfare of others. Society must be accordingly organised in such a way as to create a space for individual self-rule and self-expression for all its members. As Bikkhu Parekh has pointed out, for liberals “the individual is conceptually and ontologically prior to society [...] a ‘master’ of

¹² John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1879). Accessed from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/347>

¹³ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1879). Accessed from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/347>

¹⁴ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1879). Accessed from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/347>

himself or herself, owning his or her body and having proprietary rights over its constituents.”¹⁵

In contrast, Marxists and various other socialists have argued that these liberal rights are not only insufficient steps on the path to achieving the full realisation of human potential but in some cases even enter into direct conflict with it, above all the right to private property.¹⁶ In a commentary on *Elements of Political Economy* by James Mill, the father of John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx developed the notion of alienation by positing that since human nature is inherently social, inauthentic relationships to the world and between individuals produces an oppressive society from which humans beings are as necessarily estranged as they are from their true nature:

Since human nature is the true community of men, by manifesting their nature men create, produce, the human community, the social entity, which is no abstract universal power opposed to the single individual, but is the essential nature of each individual, his own activity, his own life, his own spirit, his own wealth. [...] It does not depend on man whether this community exists or not; but as long as man does not recognise himself as man, and therefore has not organised the world in a human way, this community appears in the form of estrangement, because its subject, man, is a being estranged from himself. [...] To say that man is estranged from himself, therefore, is the same thing as saying that the society of this estranged man is a caricature of his real community, of his true species-life, that his activity therefore appears to him as a torment, his own creation as an alien power, his wealth as poverty, the essential bond linking him with other men as an unessential bond, and separation from his fellow men, on the other hand, as his true mode of existence, his life as a sacrifice of his life, the realisation of his nature as making his life unreal, his production as the production of his nullity, his power over an object as the power of the object over him, and he himself, the lord of his creation, as the servant of this creation.¹⁷

This enslavement to reified objects is that of all living in capitalist societies, be they members of the bourgeois or proletarian classes. Thus they all share, whether they are aware of it or not, a common interest in the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by what Marx and Engels referred to in the *Communist Manifesto* as “an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”¹⁸ The ultimate ambition of Marxism was to be the disalienated human being, a master of its own productive forces, freed from the mist of false consciousness, and living fraternally in a classless society of collective ownership.

¹⁵ Bikkhu Parekh, ‘The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy’ *Political Studies* XL Special Issue (1992), pp.161-162

¹⁶ Indeed, John Stuart Mill had specifically singled out arguments against private property as being opinions that could be tolerated but only as long as they did not constitute immediate summons to action against it. “An opinion that corn-dealers are starvers of the poor, or that private property is robbery, ought to be unmolested when simply circulated through the press, but may justly incur punishment when delivered orally to an excited mob assembled before the house of a corn-dealer, or when handed about among the same mob in the form of a placard.”

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1879).

Accessed from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/347>

¹⁷ Karl Marx, Comments on James Mill, *Elements of Political Economy* (1844)

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/james-mill/index.htm>

¹⁸ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto in Robert Tucker (ed.), The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972), p.353

In *Literature and Revolution*, Leon Trotsky famously heralded the “reshaping of man” that would be made possible by the advent of communism. If “the nature of man himself is hidden in the deepest and darkest corner of the unconscious, of the elemental, of the sub-soil”, it is this primal realm that communist man would uncover and master. “Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman.”¹⁹ This new superman will not only gain control over the most murky psychological springs of his actions but also bend his corporeal shell to his will: “he will try to master first the semiconscious and then the subconscious processes in his own organism, such as breathing, the circulation of the blood, digestion, reproduction, and, within necessary limits, he will try to subordinate them to the control of reason and will.”²⁰ A new era of almost unlimited human potential will be inaugurated: “the average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.”

In no less a millenarian fashion, the heralds of fascism also believed they would give rise to a “new man” that would unlock the full potential of humanity. This new man would be virile, physically strong and morally hardened. Drawing on a potent brew of social Darwinism and European malaise, the fascists argued that this potential could only be actualised by ridding societies of the decadent bourgeois values and Marxist political subversion that were seen to be corrupting Europeans in the early twentieth century. The revolutionary process of social upheaval and the recasting of national communities within all-encompassing machineries of state geared towards the conduct of war were thus only means to that particular end. Robert Ley, head of the Germans Labour Front (the Nazi regime’s trade union organisation), expounded this view in a 1938 speech:

There is one thing we must understand if we are to comprehend the greatness of this time: we are not dealing with a new state system, or a new economic system. We are not dealing with anything external like the building up of the army, or the economy - it comes down to the renewal of man, the individual man. Human beings are being transformed. Do you believe that an idea has ever achieved this ever before? The renewal of human beings manifests itself in the fact that this idea is actually able to transform the most intimate aspects of human lives. National Socialism has the power to free the German people, the individual German, from the injuries inflicted on him which has been preventing him from performing his task. That is its ultimate, its greatest achievement.²¹

Human fulfilment is here to be found through the absolute commitment to the service and defence of a united and discipline national community, even at the expense of one’s life if necessary. In this view, liberal individualism only promotes atomised meaningless existences while Marxist egalitarianism promotes degenerate sickly natures at the expense of pure healthy ones.

One could develop the above account further but this brief discussion has hopefully already established that views on human potential, the obstacles to its realisation and the

¹⁹ Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch08.htm

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Roger Griffin, *Fascism*, (Oxford University Press, 1995), p.142

means to overcome them not only abound in the writings of political theorists, and by extension in the practice of political actors, but also differ considerably and constitute key political battle lines. While the exact contours of such actualised potential remain vague and indeterminate in most of these theories, their proponents are much clearer about how existing social arrangements or beliefs impede its realisation. The promise of a final liberation of human potential is the ultimate legitimation for their respective calls to reform or revolutionise society accordingly, if necessary through violence. A politics of potentiality thus always pits the proponents of distinct and incompatible views of human nature against one another, with little hope of any future definitive consensus. Galtung all too quickly glosses over this under the pretence that human potential is liable to be determined objectively, that “empirical data, carefully collected and skilfully analysed, could somehow be used as arbiters among competing ideologies.”²² Yet, as Galtung is evidently aware of but ultimately occludes, such an approach becomes increasingly fraught as soon as one departs from the narrowest of somatic considerations. Furthermore, it is not merely the nature of human potential that is contested within the politics of potentiality. At stake is also the very identity of those entitled to the full actualisation of their immanent potential and the different qualifications attached to certain human groupings.

The Minority Principle: Of “Children, Fools, and Mad-men”

In political theories such as those discussed above, the subject whose human potential is to be realised remains in the main abstract and unspecified. It is necessary to unearth some of more peripheral discussions within political theory as well as actual social practices to draw out the various exclusions or qualifications that attach themselves to the definition of this subject. The manner in which distinctions are thereby drawn among categories of humans obeys a similar principle across different groups, the template for which is the treatment of children. Indeed, it is by reference to the archetype of a human being to whom is attributed an immanent potential in accordance with his nature that the figure of the minor is derived. The distinction is founded on the ground of the deficiencies attributed to the minor relative to the major, the resulting difference in potential demanding a different set of rights and socio-political arrangements that include, among other things, placement under the tutelage of a major. The stratification of political being is therefore produced in accordance with what we might call a *minority principle*.

Thus, in his *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke qualified his pronouncement that “all men by nature are equal” (Sec. 54) with the statement that children “are not born in this full state of equality, though they are born to it” (Sec. 55). Consequently, the parents exercise “a sort of rule and jurisdiction of them” for the length of their minority or “nonage.” Locke thereby sets out the conditions under which the individual deemed to

²² Quoted in Peter Lawler, “Peace Research and International Relations: From Divergence to Convergence” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* Vol.15, No.3 (1986), p.372

For Lawler, Galtung is a positivist in the Comtean vein who sees the normative framework for progressive reforms as “generated out of an apparently ideologically-neutral research programme.” (p.373)

be in “the imperfect state of childhood” shall live: “whilst he is in an estate, wherein he has not understanding of his own to direct his will, he is not to have any will of his own to follow: he that understands for him, must will for him too; he must prescribe to his will, and regulate his actions” (Sec.58).²³ The minor, entitled to certain rights and exempted from other responsibilities, is therefore not recognised the autonomy that a full member of the community is accorded and through which the full extent of human potential is liable to be realised. Such a state is however only temporary since the child will, under normal circumstances, become a “free man” entitled to all his rights upon reaching adulthood. The exact threshold at which majority is attained varies culturally and historically but such a threshold exists in virtually all human societies, even if it is not necessarily framed in the language of rights and responsibilities and enforced through its related institutions.²⁴

It is immediately obvious that this minority principle has a much broader applicability than to children strictly defined and has been deployed in relation to other groups of individuals, with in many instances the potential for eventual majority being either entirely ruled out or perpetually deferred. For one, this will concern those individuals that are deemed to be mentally incapacitated or deficient, as Locke puts it himself:

If, through defects that may happen out of the ordinary course of nature, any one comes not to such a degree of reason, wherein he might be supposed capable of knowing the law, and so living within the rules of it, he is never capable of being a free man, he is never let loose to the disposal of his own will (because he knows no bounds to it, has not understanding, its proper guide) but is continued under the tuition and government of others, all the time his own understanding is incapable of that charge. And so lunatics and idiots are never set free from the government of their parents; children, who are not as yet come unto those years whereat they may have; and innocents which are excluded by a natural defect from ever having; thirdly, madmen, which for the present cannot possibly have the use of right reason to guide themselves, have for their guide, the reason that guideth other men which are tutors over them, to seek and procure their good for them (Sec. 60).²⁵

Thomas Hobbes articulated the same idea when arguing that “Children, Fooles, and Madmen that have no Reason, may be Personated by Guardians, or Curators.”²⁶ In modern societies, this application of the minority principle to individuals found incapable of autonomous judgment, and thus of achieving the full potentiality of the norm, is enacted through medical and legal institutions and mechanisms tasked with determining their aptitude and implementing the necessary tutelary measures.²⁷ These are frequently deployed against (but “in the best interests of”) the practitioners of “deviant behaviours” deemed to not belong to the accepted register of human potential, the content of which

²³ John Locke, Second Treatise of Government <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/trgov10.txt>

²⁴ There are frequently intermediate stages on the way to full majority such as the age of criminal responsibility, the age of sexual majority, or those at which prohibitions on purchasing and consuming certain products and services (e.g. alcohol, tobacco, age-rated cultural goods) or entering into contractual relationships (e.g. financial services, employment) are lifted.

²⁵ John Locke, Second Treatise of Government <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/trgov10.txt>

²⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Everyman, 1968), p.219

²⁷ Michel Foucault has of course written extensively about the normalising power of psychiatric science in this respect. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the College De France, 1973-1974* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

can vary considerably over time and space (see the changing status of homosexuality within psychiatry for example).

This same principle can also be found at work in the legitimization of slavery or colonisation, with minority status here attributed to entire ethnic or cultural groupings. A common justification of the African slave trade or European colonisation relied on the claim that the subjugated groups were composed of uncivilised “childlike” peoples to be placed under the guardianship of mature societies best placed to inculcate them with the religion or education that might one day warrant their emancipation. While a strong critic of slavery, John Stuart Mill nevertheless endorsed the idea that certain races can be found to be, at least temporarily, in a state of minority akin to that of a child:

Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign. It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children, or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. For the same reason, *we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage.*²⁸

As Mill was himself well aware, women were also long excluded from full civic rights in Western liberal societies on the grounds that they were similarly irrational and childlike and that their exclusion from the public sphere was in accordance with their nature as mothers and carers. If for Kant the Enlightenment was synonymous with “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity”²⁹, it was also certain that “woman, regardless of age, is declared to be immature in civil matters; her husband is her natural curator.”³⁰ More recently, a report of the NGO Human Rights Watch spoke of the condition of women in Saudi Arabia as being akin to that of “perpetual minors” irrevocably placed under the guardianship of their male relatives.³¹ Even where formal equality in civil liberties has been achieved, pointed critiques have continued to be directed at the enduring power exerted by men over women. Carole Pateman has thus notably argued that the apparently gender-neutral liberal social contract theory that constitutes individuals as autonomous subjects freely consenting to their forms of government is founded on a dissimulation of the continued exclusion and subjugation of women within a patriarchal social order.³²

The intent of this brief overview of the various applications of the minority principle is not primarily to denounce the ways in which it has, to contemporary eyes, been abused. Rather it is to underline the arbitrary and historically contingent character of the

²⁸ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1879).

Accessed from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/347> on 2007-10-31 [my emphasis]

²⁹ Immanuel Kant Hans Siegbert Reiss (ed.), *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.54

³⁰ Immanuel Kant, Robert B. Loudon & Manfred Kuehn (eds.), *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.103

³¹ “Perpetual Minors”, Human Rights Watch (April 19, 2008)

<http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/04/19/perpetual-minors>

³² Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988)

boundaries drawn to delimit the beings whose potentiality is to be privileged. Few would deny that there are at least some individuals whose age or mental faculties prevent from assuming the full rights and responsibilities that normally accrue to members of a given society and are thus best placed under some form of guardianship. What is however inherently contested within the politics of potentiality is where such lines are to be drawn, which criteria can legitimately be employed, and which institutions or individuals are to be empowered to enforce them.

Potentiality and Liminal States of Being: Of Abortion and Euthanasia

While the minority principle serves to differentiate between different groups of humans and determine their respective entitlements accordingly, it still generally includes them within the broader category of humanity. When we turn our attention to the outer thresholds of human existence, it is to the very question of the minimal criteria to be met for the recognition of a human life whose potential of realisation is to be upheld that we are confronted. Again, far from being the conceptual touchstone from which the optimal ordering of society can be objectively determined, human potential is at the centre of socio-political antagonism, as can be seen from the highly contentious issues of abortion and euthanasia.

Abortion is still entirely proscribed in some parts of the world and remains controversial in many of the societies that have legalised it. At stake are two competing claims with respect to the realisation of human potential, one centred over that of the foetus and the other over that of the pregnant woman. The right to life of the child-to-be is pitted against the right of the woman's sovereignty over her body – a tension which remains necessarily unresolved since these two potentials cannot be simultaneously reconciled.

Galtung does in fact briefly discuss abortion in the footnotes of one of his articles and in which he tries to square this circle:

My own position, not very original, is this: the foetus is life, hence sacred. Everything possible should be done to avoid a situation where life is destroyed, wilfully or not. After all alternatives have been exhausted, the decision belongs to those who created that life, generally a woman and a man, with veto power to the woman and right of consultation to the man.³³

Galtung's "unoriginal" stance is nothing else than that generally adopted by liberal Western societies which have legalised abortion but restricted its use within certain legal and medical frameworks. If such a solution might appear to balance the rights of foetus and genitor(s), in effect it does not resolve in any way the inherent tension but simply constitutes a status quo around which antagonistic positions are staked out.

Across all the societies which do authorise abortion, we find a bewildering array of legislative and regulatory frameworks that determine the necessary conditions for such a procedure to be authorised. While in some countries abortions can be performed upon the

³³ Johan Galtung, *Cultural Violence Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27, No. 3. (Aug., 1990), pp. 304

simple request of the pregnant women, in others a variety of medical and social factors have to be placed in the balance such as whether the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest or whether it poses a risk to the life or physical and mental health of the woman or even that of her pre-existing children.³⁴ However, regardless of the exact dispositions adopted in a given jurisdiction, these are all tantamount to making choices as to the human potential that is to be prioritised. Abortions permitted on the ground of foetal impairment additionally point to the play of processes of normalisation according to which certain forms of life are deemed worthy of achieving their potential while others are not, more of which will be said below in relation to euthanasia.

For the overwhelming majority of cases, abortion is restricted to a limited period of gestation, the range of which is again highly variable across societies. One set of arguments over the appropriate cut-off centre on the question of when a foetus can be deemed to be a human being or at least entitled to a right to existence to by virtue of its potential to become one. One well-known stance on this is that human life starts at the moment of fertilisation and that abortion is therefore always illegitimate and even perhaps tantamount to murder. This view has also informed the debate surrounding the ethics of stem-cell research with President Bush announcing in 2001 that the United States would not fund research into new stem-cell lines created from human embryos. He justified the decision on the grounds that:

Research on embryonic stem cells raises profound ethical questions, because extracting the stem cell destroys the embryo, and thus destroys its potential for life. Like a snowflake, each of these embryos is unique, with the unique genetic potential of an individual human being.³⁵

Beyond this polar position, we find a range of viewpoints that draw on existing medical knowledge (the legitimacy or accuracy of which is itself frequently the subject of fierce dispute) to determine the first moments of human existence, whether it is defined by the implantation of the embryo in the womb, the first heartbeats of the foetus, the detection of cerebral activity or the constitution of a nervous system capable of feeling pain.³⁶ The recognition of the beginnings of human life is not necessarily synonymous with the legal status of personhood with its attendant entitlement to rights but it nonetheless structures the debate surrounding abortion to a great extent.

Another line of argument sidesteps some of the thorny issues surrounding the identification of the beginning of human existence by relating the known survivability of

³⁴ The notion of mental health is particularly malleable and in some countries covers abortions which would be elsewhere classified as motivated by the pregnant woman's personal choice. The same can be said of the "socioeconomic" grounds invoked in the legislation of a number of countries such as Britain or Japan. 'World Abortion Laws 2009 Fact Sheet' Center for Reproductive Rights

http://reproductiverights.org/sites/crr.civicactions.net/files/documents/pub_fac_abortionlaws2009_WEB.pdf

³⁵ White House Press Release (August 9, 2001) <http://usgovinfo.about.com/blwhrelease16.htm>
President Obama repealed the Bush executive order in March 2009.

³⁶ One should not underestimate the role of various imaging techniques in shaping public perceptions of the permissibility of abortion by reference to the degree of resemblance of a foetus to a newborn baby. Although arguably less "scientific" than other developmental measures, the emotional affect of such images is undeniably powerful.

a premature birth to the authorised gestation period for abortion. Presently, the generally recognised age of viability is around 24 weeks of gestation and it was on that basis that the legal limit on abortion was lowered from 28 to 24 weeks in Britain in 1990. However premature births as early as 21 weeks have been known to survive exceptionally and future medical advances will likely see the outer limits of survivability pushed further back. Indeed some foresee the invention of an artificial uterus that will in the future dispense entirely of the female organism for gestation.³⁷ On the basis of the sole logic of survivability, such a technology would presumably entail the outlawing of abortion.

We see here that the rapid development of medical technology is creating new ethical problems by allowing for new extremities in the forms of human life that are sustainable. Not all are however necessarily deemed to be worthy of existence, as can be seen with the equally vexed question of euthanasia. Indeed, the case made for euthanasia rests on the notion that certain states of being present such an irrecoverably degraded or limited actuality relative to our understanding of human potential that the cessation of life itself can therefore legitimately be brought about through either the appropriate use of lethal means or the withholding of necessary medical treatment. A significant distinction can be made between voluntary euthanasia where it is conducted with the consent of the individual concerned and involuntary euthanasia where such consent is absent. I will here leave aside the former (sometimes referred to as assisted suicide) since, assuming consent is given freely and in the full knowledge of all the relevant facts by an individual mentally and psychologically competent to do so, it can credibly be argued to restore to individuals a control over their fate that disease or physical disability may have otherwise deprived them of.³⁸

Where consent cannot be given, as in the case of infants, the mentally incapacitated or the unconscious, and where no prior wishes on the matter have been recorded, the individual's freedom of choice cannot be invoked to justify euthanasia. A decision has to be made that, in the absence of any reasonable expectation of an improvement in its conditions of existence, the extinction of any potential inherent in such life, even if it is merely the potential to further endure or persist, is to be preferred. Although euthanasia remains heavily legally circumscribed in most jurisdictions, it is *de facto* exercised with common 'Do Not Resuscitate' (DNR) orders that require that no attempt be made to revive a particular patient whose heart has stopped. Among the reasons that motivate a DNR order are the unlikelihood of success, the patient's previously expressed wishes, and – most importantly for our purposes – the medical judgment that a thus resuscitated patient would suffer from an unacceptably poor "quality of life" (a DNR order thereby being in the patient's "best interest").³⁹

³⁷ Henri Atlan, *L'Utérus Artificiel* (Paris: Seuil, 2005)

³⁸ There is of a course a (mainly religious) moral argument against the voluntary termination of one's existence in any circumstance but in all but a few jurisdictions unassisted and uncoerced suicide is no longer considered a crime. Most of the objections to the legalization of voluntary suicide rest upon concerns over whether the necessary conditions for informed consent can be reliably guaranteed and over the potential for the abuse of vulnerable individuals it might invite.

³⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/euthanasia/overview/dnr.shtml>

Euthanasia has increasingly been the subject of high-profile legal wrangles and intense public debate. The case of Terry Schiavo, an American woman diagnosed to be in a “persistent vegetative state” since 1990, was a source of particular fierce controversy until her death in 2005 through the authorised withdrawal of life support. A lengthy legal battle opposed her husband who petitioned for euthanasia and her parents who opposed it, with State government, U.S. Congress and President all intervening in what became a highly charged *cause célèbre*. In 2009, the British High Court weighed in to authorise doctors’ removal of a ventilator supporting the life of a nine-month-old with severe ailments on the advice of doctors but against the wish of the parents, invoking the child’s impoverished quality of life.⁴⁰

In allowing for the extension of life beyond that which was previously possible, medical technoscience is raising difficult questions about which forms of human life are to be considered dignified enough to be allowed to exist. Is euthanasia to be viewed as violence against the realisation of a certain human potential according to normalising imperatives or does the maintenance of life beyond certain thresholds represent a greater violence? The criteria of survivability which some might wish to apply to this question is clearly insufficient since virtually all human life requires to be supported in some way by the society by which it is surrounded. Human life *per se* has no real autonomous state of existence; it is constituted, moulded and sustained by a mesh of forces (natural, social, economic, technological, etc.) or, more precisely, by the different assemblages of objects that allow it to persist and manifest different expressions of its potential. The field of potentiality is therefore always determined by the existing state of social development, notably but not limited to the dominant forms of medical knowledge and technology. It is thus within this field that ethico-politico-legal struggles are waged, the transient outcomes of which determine the manner in which potentiality is to be actualised, the forms of human existence to be sustained and the beings to privilege when arbitrating between conflicting potentialities.

Humans-to-be: Accounting for the Potentiality of Future Generations

If liminal states of being are a growing concern within the politics of potentiality, another set of debates summons the spectre of humans yet to be even conceived. Indeed, arguments over the preservation of the environment and living conditions increasingly invoke the rights of future generations to the same planet as their forefathers. It has been proposed that the current lifestyles and rates of resource depletion of contemporary societies will come at the price of the deprivation of human beings yet to come. To put it in Galtung’s terms, presently living human beings are imposing structural forms of violence on future generations through the wasteful consumption of non-renewable resources, environment degradation, and general neglect of the conditions necessary for the flowering of human potential.

⁴⁰ Parents lose fight to keep alive chronically ill son 'Baby OT' The Independent 22 March 2009
<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/parents-lose-fight-to-keep-alive-chronically-ill-son-baby-ot-1651307.html>

This notion has been central to debates surrounding sustainable development and intergenerational equity. The economist James Tobin is generally credited with having introduced the concept of intergenerational equity in its modern form in a 1974 article on institutional endowments: “the trustees of an endowed institution are the guardians of the future against the claims of the present. Their task is to preserve equity among generations.”⁴¹ The Brundtland Commission tasked by the United Nations to address the problem of environmental deterioration and natural resource depletion defined sustainable development in 1987 as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”⁴²

This general principle has since diffused widely and become one of the central ways in which many key political debates are framed today. From its initial focus on the environment, sustainable development rapidly expanded to include the broadest notions of economic, social and political forms of sustainability. In 1997, the General Conference of UNESCO adopted a “Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations towards Future Generations” which insisted on the necessity to “make every effort to ensure, with due regard to human rights and fundamental freedoms, that future as well as present generations enjoy full freedom of choice as to their political, economic and social systems and are able to preserve their cultural and religious diversity” (Article 2). The “conditions of equitable, sustainable and universal socio-economic development of future generations” should be preserved (Article 10) and “the nature and form of human life must not be undermined in any way whatsoever” (Article 3).⁴³ Six years later, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights linked the promotion of human rights and the safeguarding of the environment, an announcement applauded by the United Nations Environment Programme’s Executive Director for whom “people can only achieve their full human potential when their natural environment is robust and respected.”⁴⁴

The operationalisation of such a framework is obviously fraught with difficulties since, aside from the aforementioned issues of defining human potential, it entails making estimations of, among other things, future population growth, the impact of present lifestyles, technological development, and the length of time over which inclusion of future generations should stretch. Nevertheless its effect has been to powerfully promote the idea that humans that are yet to come into existence are already entitled to a number of rights that protect the realisation of their potential. Perhaps most crucially for our purposes, it also entails that it will in all likelihood be necessary to sacrifice the potential realisation of present humans for the protection of those of the future. Such a tension is at the centre of public debates and negotiations over climate change with the predictions of

⁴¹ James Tobin, “What Is Permanent Endowment Income?”, *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (May, 1974), p.427

⁴² Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm>

⁴³ “Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations”, adopted on 12 November 1997 by the General Conference of UNESCO at its 29th session <http://www.unesco.org/cpp/uk/declarations/generations.pdf>

⁴⁴ “UNEP applauds environment decision by Commission on Human Rights” <http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=312&ArticleID=3971&l=en>

future catastrophe pitted against the cost of reduced economic growth and development in the present.

Breaching the Species Barrier

So far, we have been essentially concerned with the potentiality of human beings, even though it has raised complex issues regarding the minority status of certain humans and the liminal boundaries of humanity. Yet the politics of potentiality also increasingly involves calls for the recognition of the potential and rights of explicitly non-human beings. This is reflected in the present debates surrounding animal rights and that will in the future perhaps extend to intelligent machines.

Since the publication of his seminal *Animal Liberation* in 1975, the philosopher Peter Singer has been one of the figureheads of a growing movement calling for the extension of human rights to animals.⁴⁵ Such demands are typically legitimated by attacking the conventional rigid distinctions drawn between human and non-human beings and which animal liberationists frequently refer to as “speciesism.” Inherited in the West from Judaeo-Christian theology and either legitimised or simply assumed in subsequent philosophical writings, speciesism consists in reserving rights and subjectivity to human beings while treating all other sentient beings as objects “who in law are still simply things, items of property, and can be bought and sold, and even killed at the absolute discretion of the owner.”⁴⁶

Singer has made the ability to feel pain into the main criteria for awarding rights to animals, arguing that attention to suffering cannot legitimately discriminate between species any more that it can do so between humans on the basis of skin colour or gender. The criteria of rationality, self-awareness or language which are usually invoked to draw a line between human and non-human animals are held to be unsustainable since we are willing to extend rights to humans that clearly lack such attributes to an even greater extent than certain animals, as in the case of the newborn and the cognitively impaired.⁴⁷ In developing this logic to its ultimate conclusion, Singer provocatively concludes that “if a right to life must be based on the capacity to want to go on living, or on the ability to see oneself as a continuing mental subject, a newborn baby cannot have a right to life.”⁴⁸

Singer’s utilitarian approach directly echoes that of its founding figure, Jeremy Bentham, who was himself an ardent defender of animal rights. Explicitly drawing parallels with the black slave trade, Bentham also sought to challenge speciesism using similar arguments:

⁴⁵ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Random House, 1975)

⁴⁶ Peter Singer, Rights for Chimps (The Guardian, July 29, 1999)
<http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/19990729.htm>

⁴⁷ If in the case of the former, one might retort that there is innate potential for the development for such capacities in the individual, there are obviously many cases of the latter that will show no such promise.

⁴⁸ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 171

What [...] is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or, perhaps, the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, "Can they reason?" nor, "Can they talk?" but rather, "Can they suffer?"⁴⁹

In practice, Singer and other supporter of animal rights have tended to focus on great apes (chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orang-utans) as the thin edge of the animal rights wedge since it is with respect to this group that the most persuasive case can be made against speciesism. Singer has argued that the "basic rights" of life, liberty and the prohibition of torture should be granted to the great apes and "all beings who show intelligence and awareness (including some level of self-awareness) and who have emotional and social needs."⁵⁰

There are significant philosophical differences within the animal liberationist movement, with Singer's utilitarianism notably opposed by advocates working within a Kantian vein of ethical thinking. While willing to derive practical rights from a consideration of the interests of animals, Singer is firmly opposed to the theoretical framework of abstract rights. This is in direct contrast to Tom Regan's explicitly anti-utilitarian perspective according to which non-human animals should be granted moral rights by extending to them the inherent value we place on human life, in line with the Kantian injunction to treat individuals as ends in themselves.⁵¹ However here again Regan rejects the habitual exclusivity of such recognition to humans on the basis of their presumed status as rational beings by pointing to the inconsistency with regard to our treatment of infants and the cognitively impaired. So while proponents of each approach may differ in their philosophical grounding of ethics, they all agree that the same guiding principles should apply equally across the species boundary and deploy similar arguments to problematise the established restrictions in the identity of rights-holders.

The full reach of this extended membership of rights-holders remains undetermined and is subject to competing claims, with perhaps as the most all-encompassing position the view that the entire biosphere taken as a single homeostatic organism (the "Gaia hypothesis") should be endowed with its own right to existence.⁵² Johan Galtung did in fact eventually suggest adding "the rest of Nature" as another sphere which may be subject to violence and argued for the necessity of striving for "ecological balance." While he recognized the difficult issues his proposals raised, he again mentions them only to immediately marginalise them in the rest of his analysis:

There are difficult and important questions, such as 'balance for whom?' For human beings to reproduce themselves? At what level of economic activity and what numbers? Or, for the

⁴⁹ Jeremy Bentham, *Theory of Legislation*, 2nd Edition (London, 1871)

<http://www.animalrightshistory.org/animal-rights-romantic/ben-jeremy-bentham.htm>

⁵⁰ Peter Singer, Great apes deserve life, liberty and the prohibition of torture (The Guardian, Saturday May 27 2006) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/may/27/comment.animalwelfare>

⁵¹ Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (University of California Press, 1983)

⁵² David Pepper defines "bioethic" as "an ethical principle which holds that the biosphere has intrinsic value. It therefore has a right to existence for itself, regardless of its usefulness or otherwise to humans." David Pepper, *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.328

'environment' (what an anthropo-centric term!) to reproduce itself? All parts, equally, at what level, what numbers! Or for both?⁵³

A nascent and analogous debate surrounding the status of robots and the increasingly sophisticated Artificial Intelligences (AI) that control them can be found to be emerging. A 2006 report commissioned by the British government's Office of Science suggested that calls for human and citizen rights to be extended to robots might one day be made.⁵⁴ The South Korean government announced in March 2007 that it was drafting a Robot Ethics Charter that would decide ethical boundaries guiding the development and application of robots as well as the reconstruction and destruction of robots.⁵⁵

It has been suggested that there if is a case for animal rights, it could apply equally to artificial intelligences, were they to develop a sufficient degree of self-awareness and autonomous purpose.⁵⁶ Experiments which are seeing animal (and maybe tomorrow human) neurons being grown and grafted on to robots to control their interactions with the world further complicate the issues by blurring the line between the biological and mechanical.⁵⁷ It may even be that robots will eventually be able to lay a claim to greater rights than those granted or being contemplated for animals, should their self-awareness and emotional intelligence match that of humans. There are current attempts to develop AIs with a capacity for ethical behaviour, notably for the purpose of autonomous operation on battlefields.⁵⁸ While it is in all likelihood a distant prospect and perhaps even a fundamental impossibility⁵⁹, in the eventuality of the emergence of an AI truly capable of thinking and acting ethically we may have to rethink our relations to an entity capable of a mode of engagement with the world we have until now deemed to be the unique preserve of human beings. If we should maintain a healthy scepticism towards the wildest predictions of over-enthusiastic technologists, debate over the status of such machines is nonetheless likely to grow as they increase in sophistication and our interaction with them deepens in this century.

'What can a Body do?'

In a 1976 lecture to the *Collège de France*, Michel Foucault proposed that Clausewitz's famous dictum could be inverted to read that "politics is the continuation of war by other

⁵³ Johan Galtung, 'Cultural Violence' *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 27, No. 3. (Aug., 1990), p.292

⁵⁴ "Robots could demand legal rights" *BBC News* 21 December 2006

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/6200005.stm>

"A.I. Law: Ethical and Legal dimensions of Artificial Intelligence" *The Sigma Scan*

<http://www.sigmascan.org/Live/Issue/ViewIssue.aspx?IssueId=485>

⁵⁵ "Robotic age poses ethical dilemma" *BBC News* 7 March 2007

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/6425927.stm>

⁵⁶ David J. Calverley, "Android Science and Animal Rights, Does an Analogy Exist?" *Connection Science* Vol. 18, No. 4 December 2006

⁵⁷ "Rise of the Rat-Brained Robots" *New Scientist* 13 August 2008

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg19926696.100-rise-of-the-ratbrained-robots.html>

⁵⁸ P.W. Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century* (Penguin, 2009)

⁵⁹ Kaag, John and Kaufman, Whitley (2009) 'Military frameworks: technological know-how and the legitimization of warfare', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22: 4

means.”⁶⁰ By this he meant that peace is merely the ratification of the relationship of force left in the wake of the last actual war and that political power practices “a sort of silent war to reinscribe that relationship of force, and to reinscribe it in institutions, economic inequalities, language, and even the bodies of individuals.” But such a process is not simply one of uncontested subjugation since, as in any war, it encounters opposition and resistance:

Within this “civil peace,” these political struggles, these clashes over or with power, these modifications of relations of force – the shifting balance, the reversals – in a political system, all these things must be interpreted as a continuation of war. And they are interpreted as so many episodes, fragmentations, and displacements of the war itself. We are always writing the history of the same war, even when we are writing the history of peace and its institutions.⁶¹

Foucault’s vision of politics is therefore inherently agonistic, a form of low level war waged through all the discourses, laws, practices, institutions and material arrangements that constitute a given social order.

This view was already in evidence in a famous 1971 debate between Foucault and Noam Chomsky. During this exchange, Chomsky insists on the need to “draw the connections between a concept of human nature that gives full scope to freedom and dignity and creativity and other fundamental human characteristics, and to relate that to some notion of social structure in which those properties could be realised and in which meaningful human life could take place.”⁶² In other words and echoing Galtung, once we have established the fundamental characteristics of human nature, we can define an organisation of social life which best permits the expression of these characteristics – in Chomsky’s case, a form of anarcho-syndicalism. Foucault immediately objects to any attempt to ground a political program on a settled notion of human nature:

If you say that a certain human nature exists, that this human nature has not been given in actual society the rights and the possibilities which allow it to realise itself [...] doesn't one risk defining this human nature which is at the same time ideal and real, and has been hidden and repressed until now - in terms borrowed from our society, from our civilisation, from our culture?⁶³

What Foucault is pointing to is the fallacy of seeking a radical transformation of society on the basis of an understanding of human nature that will be inevitably conditioned by the character of the very society which such a project is attempting to transcend. By way of substantiation, Foucault notes that late nineteenth and early twentieth century socialism whose notion of the disalienated society which was to follow the overthrowing of capitalism ended up adopting bourgeois sensibilities to the forms of family, sexuality and aesthetics to be privileged in such a collectivity.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.15

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.16

⁶² Michel Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits I, 1954-1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p.1365

⁶³ Michel Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits I, 1954-1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p.1366

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits I, 1954-1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 1366

Chomsky's subsequent affirmation of the requirement that political action should be directed towards the creation of a just society by referring to an abstract and ideal notion of justice is met by a similar move in which Foucault subordinates justice to power:

The idea of justice is itself an idea that has been invented and put to work in different types of societies as the instrument of a certain political and economic power, or as a weapon against this power. [...] The very notion of justice functions within a society of class as a claim made by the oppressed class and as a justification on the side of the oppressors.⁶⁵

In the absence of any definitive understanding of human nature or of the values that should govern society, the invocation of justice is ultimately a weapon in a war to promote a particular social order. In the end, "one wages war to win and not because it is just."⁶⁶

It should be immediately apparent that calls to peace and calls for justice are interchangeable in that they both consist in incantatory demands for the bridging of the gap between reality and a proclaimed set of values. Just as any social order legitimates itself by claiming itself to be the embodiment of a certain ideas of justice or peace, resistance to such an order requires undermining and challenging such a claim. The notion of structural violence repressing human potential serves exactly this function within Galtung's work – indeed, it is early on made synonymous with "social injustice."⁶⁷

In the final instance, Galtung's elaborate reconceptualisation of violence and peace serves to legitimate the desired social order of his choice, one that would be characterised by a strictly "egalitarian distribution of power and resources" and that he explicitly equates with social justice.⁶⁸ My intent here is not to polemicise over the intrinsic desirability of such an arrangement over another; indeed, the present article points to the lack of any firm ground from which to make such an argument. We have seen that the understanding of human potential that would serve as a yardstick for equality is inherently contested, as is the membership of those beings entitled to such a status. Yet there is a way in which Galtung's deeply held egalitarianism appears in direct tension with the very idea of potentiality.

Kenneth Boulding has notably taken Galtung to task over the latter's embrace of the scientific notion of entropy as a useful metaphor for the desirable organisation of society. In thermodynamics, entropy is defined as the degree of disorder or randomness within a system, understood as the degree to which the uneven distribution of temperatures necessary for motion or transformation has dissipated. In other words, the more entropy increases, the more potentiality for change is reduced. For Boulding:

⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits I, 1954-1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), pp.1372-3

⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits I, 1954-1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p.1371

⁶⁷ Johan Galtung, *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research* (Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 6, No. 3., 1969), p.171

⁶⁸ Johan Galtung, *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research* (Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 6, No. 3., 1969), p.183

Because of his passion for equality, his hatred of hierarchy, dominance, top dogs, and anything which looks like oppression (much of which is praiseworthy), Galtung identifies entropy as a symbol of goodness and regards negentropy [negative entropy], that is, structure, improbability, and potential, as evil. Galtung is all for the increase of social entropy so far as that means destruction of organization and hierarchy, the dissipation of wealth, and the reduction of everything to a dead level. It would almost seem as if Galtung would regard the last ultimate whimper of the universe, according to the second law of thermodynamics, in which all things are at an equal temperature and equally distributed throughout space so that nothing more can conceivably happen, as the ultimate heaven, or perhaps one should say Nirvana, towards which all this uncomfortable and unequal structure of stars and planets, life and society, will eventually move.⁶⁹

Has Boulding uncovered here the gaping nihilism at the heart of Galtung's system? That the radically equal distribution of resources and power to which Galtung tends as the highest value over and above the realisation of any putative human potential, however determined, is itself the very exhaustion of all potentiality? One is reminded of Nietzsche's indictment of egalitarianism as "a principle hostile to life, an agent of the dissolution and destruction of man, an attempt to assassinate the future of man, a sign of weariness, a secret path to nothingness."⁷⁰ Ultimately, it is as if in his desire to extirpate all conflictuality, or even tension, from society, Galtung risks negating life itself.

Gilles Deleuze was fond of asking the question he took to be central to Spinoza's philosophy: "What can a body do? We never know in advance what a body can do. We never know how we're organized and how the modes of existence are enveloped in somebody."⁷¹ In this, Deleuze was asserting the open-endedness and indeterminacy of being against any attempt to define or foreclose the potentiality of any body, be it human or other. So while any social order rests on representations of realisable potentialities and of the bodies to which they apply, these are inherently contingent and impermanent and beyond which lie vast uncharted continents of possibility and open planes of being. By definition unforeseen and unanticipated, new modes of existence are realities upon themselves. But their recognition within our ethico-politico-legal orders passes through the agon of the politics of potentiality where established representations of being are challenged, unsettled, and displaced. In the course of such struggles, new ways of defining, bracketing or restricting potentiality may surface and diffuse, perhaps even come to rule. None, however, are ever liable to provide more than fleeting respites from the clamour of battle.

⁶⁹ Kenneth E. Boulding, "Twelve Friendly Quarrels with Johan Galtung" *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 14, No. 1. (1977), p.79

⁷⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Second Essay, §11

There are certainly, if most likely unwitting, Nietzschean undertones to Boulding's observation that "a passion for equality as such can easily lead into the hatred of the rich without any love for the poor."

Kenneth E. Boulding, "Twelve Friendly Quarrels with Johan Galtung" *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 14, No. 1. (1977), p.79

⁷¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cours Vincennes : Ontologie-Ethique* - 21/12/1980

<http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/texte.php?cle=190&groupe=Spinoza&langue=2>