

global

uncivil

war

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It's been less than a year since we wrote and self-published *The Savage Peace*, and we are already questioning some of its premises, or at least the way in which they were presented there. In writing the book, we tried to trace a genealogy of civil war and its continued importance and usefulness to a political understanding of the modern world, while keeping its paradoxical form constantly, doggedly (ok, maybe even obnoxiously) in sight. We wanted to demonstrate that the tendency, especially of the Left, to automatically fall back on a historical narrative of *democratization* or *revolution* was based on a number of troubling prerequisites we wanted to challenge. Whether or not you think of historical struggle through the lens of civil war, democratization, or revolution affects in large part the way in which you conceive of the functioning and politico-judicial foundation of international and civil institutions; it alters or problematizes political claims of legitimacy of the police and even the state itself; and, on a more local/interpersonal level, it affects our libidinal and psychical investments in the activity of politics and the subjects involved therein. What follows here are a number of thoughts, problems, concerns, and complications that we've seen or picked up on since we released the book and tried to use civil war as a paradigm to organize our thoughts and actions. It may seem like a strange gesture to release an addendum to a self-published book very few have read, but it's clear in any case that the ideas contained therein are intended to be tried out and explored as pathways. Given that premise, we see it as imperative that we present some of the pathways and the forks in the road these ideas have led us to.

Civil war has never been pinned down legally, despite frequent attempts by jurists, sovereign powers, and political theorists since Rome's Republican era over 2000 years ago. These actors have primarily tried

and failed at codifying the following problems seen to be internal to civil war: whether it is a problem of the city or of the home, or a mixture of the two; whether it needs to involve some amount of physical coercion or force, or if it can also occur through language or in the minds of citizens; whether it concerns two or more parties, and, related to this, whether these parties must be attempting to take over the government; whether it only concerns those contained within specific sovereign limits or the whole of “humanity;” and whether it pertains solely to those already considered citizens, or those who, through violence or other means, could become citizens, or at least political subjects. Indeed, in our view, it is precisely because the concept is a paradox and has always been one that we find it useful. The combination of historical centrality and structural lack of definability opens up the supposedly autonomous domain of law to broader problems of citizenship, domesticity, war, (and later) risk management and policing, and it does so *from within* the paradigmatic forms of our political history itself — the citizen, the city, the home, and even humanity itself are, through the lens of civil war, seen as *structurally inconsistent and contested forms*.

I.

Given that we still stand by that thesis, what’s questionable about the term? We decided to write this addendum after a number of experiences challenged our ideas of the *language* of civil war, or at least the effects of the language, and the ways in which one might try to explicitly utilize it. In the Summer of 2017, we,¹ along with the other two current members of the Belli Research Institute, were

1 This isn’t the royal “we,” nor a number of personalities, but the split up, schizophrenic “we” that expresses our incompleteness, and an expression that nothing “we” do is a result of an individual acting in the world, but of multiplicities plugged into a certain frequency.

invited to speak at two events, one in Chicago and one near Seattle about the concept of civil war. We attempted to formally structure these talks, which we called “Civil War as a Political Paradigm,” to allow for as much disagreement and debate about even our most basic statements by encouraging the audience to interrupt us in various ways. We wanted the format of the talk to highlight the part of the civil war concept we found most interesting and immediately comprehensible, namely the fact that irresolvable conflicts exist in various groups, and the different ways we deal with them (ignoring, accepting, discussing, burying, denying). In this, we failed. At least part of that failure arose out of the various understandings — and, in our view, misunderstandings — of what we were trying to problematize with this word. Yet we see such misunderstandings as interesting problems in themselves.

We choose to make use the word first and foremost due to its structural connection with some of the most basic terms of the Western political imagination: civility, citizen, civilization, and civil society, as well as war. In opposition to these terms —as we indicated above and will deal with at greater length in later sections— civil war is *essentially* problematic, by which we mean that it has always been contested. One could certainly make the case that “citizen” or any of the others above is also a contested term (and we certainly agree with this), but “civil war” is a preferable gateway into those problems, since it is both unambiguously a problem for Western political theory, and also central to its operations. These concerns all belong to what one might call the political and juridical aspects of civil war. Going into the talks, we assumed that the audience would not be uniformly interested in questioning the legal categories of citizenship nor the history of Western political theory. Instead of offering a dry and sterile account of the evolution of

the Greek *stasis* into *bellum civile* and what it means for a political paradigm, we wanted to offer as little information about what concretely we would talk about as possible, and try to guide people into experiencing some amount of discord among themselves and see how it got handled in the moment. We wrote up a corny and vague description,² created a complicated handout with instructions on how to disrupt the talk (it included, among other options: playing a song over us, shouting at us, shooting at us with a slingshot), and hoped a lot of people came and acted in surprising ways.

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Instead of beginning by talking about the Greeks or the legal history of “civil war,” we started with a few direct experiences we had previously had wherein one group instrumentalized the language of “democracy” and “unity” to dominate the actions of another group during an intense public event. One example was a group of protesters in St. Paul who chanted “Unity!” over the chants of a smaller faction that had broken off in a move to silence them, thereby utilizing a word implying a collective will to prevent the expression of different perspectives. We referred to these as incidents in a “civil war,” hoping that the language would be heard as dissonant and that this dissonance would provoke thought. We wanted more than anything to ground the concept by encouraging people to think of examples where this management of difference and disagreement occurred and to create a discussion around how we handle these events.

This didn’t happen in the way we intended. In Chicago, quite a few people did show up, certainly more than we expected. Perhaps due to our inexperience with and general anxiety around speaking, we had

2 We are truly horrible at summaries and descriptions. Just look at what we wrote up for the blurb for *The Savage Peace*.

difficulty not relapsing into the examples we'd thought up previously, and were unable to achieve the results we desired. A lot of the talk ended up looking like primarily a small number of men (including the two in our group) debating the finer points of our "argument," with two other women occasionally chiming in, and waiting for us Main Speakers to supply answers to questions. It seems to us in retrospect that there was some basic confusion around exactly what we were talking about. Some thought we were only talking about the historical concept of civil war, some thought we were talking about the way "radicals" should imagine conflict, others thought we were solely talking about interpersonal strife and how it gets resolved. This confusion is certainly a part of the concept itself, as it refers to all of these, and more, at once. So we may have had too much on our plate, since, while we did want to focus on the interpersonal or local playing out of conflict, we also didn't want to *reduce* it to that, nor convince anyone that that lens is the "correct" interpretation. By the very end, a larger portion of the room had understood what we were going for and had begun to chime in with a number of interesting and ambiguous examples of conflicts and their resolutions. This earlier reticence to speak on the part of those outside the small group of men was, beyond being just the playing out of masculine overconfidence in public spaces, perhaps also a result of the arrangement of the room. We three were seated on a couch facing the rest of the room. This was a limitation of the room itself we had not foreseen, as we intended to sit in a circle to encourage participation.

Yet, at our talk in Seattle, where we were able to sit in a circle, we had similarly disappointing results. If the problem in Chicago was both a lack of participation and the presence of multiple asymmetrical registers, in Seattle, we saw the presence of a conflict so specific that it was opaque to the majority of the audience,

and also the expression of a number of ideological positions, which were impossible to discuss on account of their rigidity and circularity. Many voices, no conversation. While more members of this audience seemed to grasp the idea and were ready to discuss specific events, a number of men chastised us for not towing a Marxist line of interpretation, some even charitably “translating” our language into a more palatable Marxist dialect. One man, with the tone of someone who believed they were reconciling two groups of scuffling children, spoke up and stated that it seemed like we were “really talking about the ‘state’” when we spoke about those who use the language of democracy to silence their enemies. Another man, quite irate, grumbled that it seemed like this civil war thing didn’t “have anything to do with the working class revolution.” “No, it doesn’t” we told him, provoking furrowed eyebrows on a number of 30-something-year-old very serious Marxists. Some called us “identitarians,” another said something or other about Hegel and Stalin, which we didn’t understand at all, and yet another accused us of nihilism. Besides all these, there were two in the group who right then and there had a fight about a public space in a nearby city and whether its atmosphere was welcoming or not to certain groups. It was very clear none of this could be resolved in any simple fashion, by simply making one change or another, nor by apologizing to anyone, so we used the opportunity to take a smoke and bathroom break. In an unexpected sort of way, this turn of events did demonstrate the validity of our concept, since, despite everyone being present because they are interested in “radical” ideas of some sort, the presence of hidden conflicts haunted us all, and it was revealed that we were really speaking different languages, and coming to the circle with incompatible presuppositions.

It's amazing anyone wanted to talk to us at all after this. Needless to say, there were certainly some who *really* did not want to, but we welcomed the paradox nonetheless, and invited those who wanted to come to a smaller talk the next day. This talk was a pleasant break from the previous two. The smaller size meant we were able to clarify some of the misgivings and misunderstandings people had the day before. We found out that a group had come the year before to give a talk on a similar theme and were rude and aggressive. One criticism we heard was that it seemed like speaking about "civil war" left no room for talking about patriarchal and white supremacist violence, and, at its worst, could even be used to cover up these powers, performing the exact gesture of forgetting/denying we were trying to highlight in our talk. The book most people there were familiar with on the theme of civil war, *Intro to Civil War* by Tiqqun, is virtually silent on these topics.³ Further, our talk was scheduled at the same time as another that focused on "care," which, because it temporally competed with ours, created a war/care binary and made our theme appear by contrast as if it were about "violence" or "aggression," given the presence of the word "war." Not being aware of these previous understandings, we were quite baffled by some of the responses we received the day before. This smaller talk allowed us to clarify that it is precisely conflicts around gender, race, and concrete, lived, local issues that we wished to discuss under the umbrella of "civil war." Some assumed because of the term, and the problems listed above, that we would be interested in discussing the tired idea of "class war," that we would be defending an "attack by any means necessary" approach, or that we were either attempting to avoid or sacralize identity and its relation to struggle. These associations and presumptions are real, and ought to be taken seriously.

3 As opposed to the one we used to think about civil war, *The Divided City* by Nicole Loraux, which more or less centers on this gesture.

Our talks, while failures, did reveal something important to us: despite the commonalities of groups that come together to create something or talk with one another, we speak in radically different registers, and gather with radically different understandings of the world, and we can't understate these differences. We can't assume they are merely the inessential and sweep them aside in broad strokes. We have to face them head on, even if that entails the feeling of loss or failure.

II.

10

Some of the tendencies and problems we encountered at the talks came into focus in distilled form in David Armitage's new book *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* and Patricia Owens' response and addition to it "Decolonizing Civil War." Armitage's book is the longest and most sustained attempt at a genealogy of civil war in the academic anglophone world we are aware of, and worth engaging with to point out its shortcomings and for its wealth of citations.

Armitage begins his book by countering and qualifying the optimism of those who pronounce that global warfare is on the decline by interjecting that, while this is true for war between states, intra-state warfare, or civil war, is on the increase. Although there are quantitatively less incidences of violence on the global scale, the increase in cases of civil war also means that we are seeing a more heart-wrenching, long-lasting, disorienting, and emotionally damaging kind of violence. In Armitage's words, civil war represents "the

most destructive”⁴ form of war. To this end, he fondly quotes Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman who famously said that “war is hell,” but adds that “surely the only thing worse is *civil war*.”⁵

Much of his research reaffirms our central thesis: civil war has been both extraordinarily generative for the Western political tradition, but simultaneously a source of constant problems it has never been able to work through. It functions like a cipher. It cannot consistently hold onto any political meaning, yet we require it to make sense of politics, to differentiate between other political categories. Civil war has always been in the paradoxical position of naming the war between citizens while also being the lens through which one can establish political legitimacy at all. Armitage successfully demonstrates that the problem of civil war has in no way receded from its political importance in his two last, and most profound, sections “Worlds of Civil War,” and “Civil Wars of Words.” He argues there that the concept of civil war, despite still being contested and indefinable, continues to haunt global politics in two major ways. First, it is used by states to avoid conflicts they do not want to be involved in, and also, paradoxically, to intervene in crises when they have no legitimate legal grounds to do so. Civil war in the first sense is named to exempt oneself or one’s political constituency from guilt or involvement. Inversely, civil war can be used affectively to proclaim that because such-and-such a political situation is so dire and chaotic, our state is justified in intervening. Western states continue to mobilize this discourse at strategic moments to either avoid taking or as an excuse to take a decided, public, stance (or deliver aid) in myriad conflicts in the Middle East and

4 Armitage, David. *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas*. Pg. 8.

5 Ibid. Pg. 8

Africa (most recently in Syria, but also continually in Somalia, for instance), despite the long and well-documented role of Western intervention in the formation of those conflicts. “Civil war,” in these examples is a strategic cipher capable of imparting the opposite meanings: “that’s a civil war, *and thus their problem,*” and “*we must, on humanitarian grounds, intervene* because it is a civil war.”

Second, civil war is a decisive concept of international governance agencies and humanitarian organizations, because its application or non-application to a specific crisis can determine the legitimacy of an uprising and thus whether or not these international agents will get involved in aid, or allocate resources and funds. On this international level, it can — Armitage cites Libya in 2011-12 as an example — grant political status and legitimacy to forms of conflict that otherwise might be seen as a mere rebellion or insurrection, and not qualified for the international protections of combatants, and the penalties for those who violate the laws of war.

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There is little to disagree with in this account of civil war’s continued importance for international relations and laws of war. It’s in how Armitage begins his book (and how this beginning affects his overall outlook) that troubles us. Armitage, after considering the differences between the Greek concept of internal war, *stasis*, and the Roman one, *bellum civile* (civil war), ultimately chooses the latter as his foundation, claiming that *stasis* belongs to an altogether different tradition. What he attempts by doing so is, in our view, an act of “civilizing civil war,” a process he himself ironically critiques in his chapter on the American Civil War. His stated reason for doing so is that we borrow the term directly from the Romans, along with the

primary way in which we imagine the words that make it up (Civil and War). The Greek term seems too foreign, and too bound to its time and place. *Stasis*, in Armitage's account, refers solely to a world in which wealthy male Greek householders would gather in a public place to do politics; *stasis* was what happened when that particular relation was destabilized and subjected to war or at least disruption. We, on the other hand, like the Latins, see ourselves as citizens bound to a polity, who, in civil war, take up arms against each other. Later translations of *stasis* into *bellum civile* are anachronisms, in Armitage's account.⁶

Political theorists deal heavily in images. More exactly, they deal in images that represent or perform the very acts of politics itself. The spatial boundaries of sovereignty were seen for millennia in the paradigmatic image of Romulus erecting walls around the city of Rome; while Remus' leap over that wall was the basic act of transgressing sovereignty. Armitage ignores a whole tradition (largely going by the name of *stasis*) that saw "civil war" in images of women rising up against colonial rulership, of slaves picking up stones and speaking in public, and of the moral decay of the slaveowners and their civilization that came out of these riotous events.⁷ Instead, Armitage sees "civil war" in the Strong Man and Dutiful Citizen Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon, military regalia all around, armed and ready to kill opposing armies for his claims of rightful rulership. By beginning with this closed notion of politics and citizenship, and a militaristic notion of war, Armitage prioritizes a Eurocentric formulation of politics that cannot take into account how profoundly civil war destabilizes our sense of belonging. While the Greek term effectively destabilized

6 Ibid. Pg. 44

7 This is from the account of Thucydides, who recorded in a few pages the events of the riots in Corcyra in Book 3 of *The History of the Peloponnesian War*.

the relation between who qualifies as a citizen — or even a human — and who was mere property, the Latin term ideally implies that we already unproblematically can see who is a citizen and who isn't, who belongs and who doesn't. All conflicts that occur are thus strictly between the men.

III.

14 Patricia Owens' solution, in her friendly critique of Armitage's book, "Decolonizing Civil War," is only partly satisfactory. She first succinctly identifies the problem with Armitage's "civil war:" civil war has been called the worst, most gut-wrenching, form of war because it is represented as a war *between brothers*. "Brothers," for the West connotes not just that the conflict occurs in close proximity to the household, but specifically, that it occurs between people who are already considered worthy: male, and already qualified as citizens. She writes: "Class, civilizational and gendered hierarchies were foundational to the very concept. Hence to fully understand civil war's generative powers we must account for the constitutive exclusions and inclusions of those whose struggles elite Europeans refused to recognize as co-belligerents or eligible for 'civilian' protection."⁸ David Armitage offers, in short, a pre-civilized version of "civil war," one where the civilizing process is already internally complete and unrelated to this horrifying thing called "civil war," and which says little about its supposed "outside."

8 Owens, Patricia. "Decolonizing Civil War." Pg. 3

Arendt begins her book *On Revolution* by immediately differentiating it from civil war and *stasis*. On this distinction, Owens and Armitage are in agreement. But Arendt's account goes on to discuss and center the American and French revolutions, thus silently circumscribing the bounds within which revolution can occur strictly as relations between those already qualified as citizens/civilized. Armitage was greatly indebted to Arendt for making his distinction between revolution and civil war. He claims that revolutionaries are those who merely present themselves as the founders of something new within a civil war, hence the latter term is the foundational one, and destabilizes the first.

This is the line of argument we took up in Part One of *The Savage Peace*. We did so in order to show that there were agents with little to no legitimacy fighting at the same time and for drastically different aims than the revolutionaries proper: slaves, housewives, natives. Armitage, like Arendt, doesn't go that far, still favoring his "already-included" subjects. Owens holds both Armitage and Arendt accountable for this Eurocentric prejudice, and offers a novel solution: what if, instead of the French and American revolutions, we use the Haitian Revolution as a paradigm? She offers the new image of the slave-revolt-turned-revolution. Would this not also characterize the political capacity of the non-included (non-civilized, non-citizen, or non-human) to transform themselves? In her eyes, this "successful slave revolt would undermine Armitage's central claim"⁹ that revolution is just a repackaged civil war. She peremptorily excludes the possibility that the Haitian Revolution could be seen as a civil war appropriated and narrativized as a revolution

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9 Ibid Pg. 5

by reminding us that “if we are to adopt Roman categories at all, then Haitian’s were engaged in a *servile* war,” which is qualitatively different from a civil war and presents fewer difficulties in their eyes.

While this solution satisfactorily brings to the fore the humanizing/dehumanizing or politicizing/depoliticizing relation that lies at the empty core of Western politics, it still doesn’t escape the other problem associated with the revolutionary tradition: the fact that it absorbs the asymmetrical parties — the various *différends* — and gradients of a conflict and represents them in a simple binary (revolutionaries vs. the old order). While we can’t speak about the intricacies of the Haitian Revolution, it seems clear to us, even on the surface, that the events were not as simple as the term “revolution” tends to imply. This is largely a problem of the function of words: it is simply too easy for us to imagine that the “revolution” represented all those whom we see now in hindsight as “revolutionaries” and, in this way, to lose sight of the asymmetries and conflicts that existed among them. In the process, we lose valuable lessons and tend to oversimplify our present circumstances, overstating the binary conflicts we can extract from situations.

16

IV.

Armitage’s arguments hinge on the theses that the Greek and Roman concepts are fundamentally different, and, further, that we stand firmly in the Roman tradition. He justifies his distinction in four tightly interrelated points: 1. *The question of forms of belonging*. *Stasis* represented those conflicts that occurred between those considered “Greek,” and thus concerns a hereditary or even ethnic form of conflict, whereas *bellum civile* concerned war between citizens in the political sense. 2. *The question of*

the “space” of civil war. The Greeks organized politics according to a fundamental division between the household, *oikos* – where the house-holding men organized their property (including slaves, wives, and children) in the most economical way possible – and the city, *polis* – where the worthy, economical men would meet and decide on the shape and future of their union. *Stasis* was a “war between households” in Armitage’s eyes and thus not a political war, while the Romans imagined it as two actually political groups vying for control of the state. This also includes the problem of scale. The Greek city-states were simply too small, and their notion of citizenship too limited, to imagine the kind of macro conflicts we associate with a civil war. 3. *The question of militarization*. The Greek *stasis* represented in large part a “state-of-mind” as opposed to an actual war between armed parties. He cites Thucydides here who emphasizes the moral decay of intracity conflict over any actual fighting. Calling the Greek “*stasis*” a “civil war” seems misguided in this light, because it remains a question whether it was a “war” at all if it did not require that military standards be raised and arms be leveled against the enemy. 4. *The question of its entrenchment in politics/history*. This is the most subtle point of distinction. The Greeks imagined their forms of politics and belonging as a body, with many of the biological metaphors that come with that representation. *Stasis*, for them, was like a disease in the body, and one that they could structurally not do away with. The Romans, on the other hand, tended to view *bellum civile* as a curse haunting history.

17

His first point that *stasis* is “hereditary” while civil war is “political” is contradicted by the most historically well-known passage on *stasis*, and one which Armitage himself quotes from: Thucydides’ third book in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. The *stasis* he describes there is one in which a colonized people,

the people of Corcyra, exploit the chaotic circumstances of the war between the two great colonial powers Athens and Sparta. In this section, women and slaves throw stones, and the women speak for the first and only time in Thucydides' entire history. In the West, to be capable of speech is historically the prerequisite to being a political subject. The Greek paradigm of civil war, *stasis*, occurs along political lines, and concerns the question "who is capable of living a political life?"

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This undermines Armitage's first two lines of distinction at once: not only does the image of the woman or slave becoming political agent through effective action not concern who is Greek and who isn't, it also clearly demonstrates that the Greek version of civil war is not merely *between* householders, but complicates the distinction between who runs the house (and is thus "political") and who gets ruled (or is merely "domestic"). This relation is part of all the civil wars Armitage later describes as paradigmatic of his Latinized concept, but most clearly for us in the American Revolution and American Civil War, when, as Mill put it, what was at stake was millions of enslaved people who were "human beings, entitled to human rights."¹⁰ Armitage quoted Mill there without grasping the fact that it was within civil war that these peoples' humanity was at stake, and that *it was through the conflicts themselves* (slaves joining the British or rebelling during the American Revolution; slaves fighting for their freedom or escaping during the Civil War; or native tribes using the war as an opportunity to rebel on their own terms), and not on account of a legitimate legal process, that their status as people would be decided. Instead, he sees all this as a "by-product" of the real content of civil war: civilized men fighting with weapons.

10 Armitage, David. *Civil Wars. A History in Ideas*. Pg. 174

Armitage seems to think that civil war must include “real” fighting, i.e. bloodshed, death, guns, and military regalia. Appian and Lucan are his poets of choice when it comes to the images that accompany civil war. Appian, like Armitage, makes the distinction between civil disturbance and civil war, writing that a civil war took place when “Open revolts took place against the republic and large armies were led with violence against their native land. . . They attacked it as if it were an enemy city.”¹¹ Appian’s influence on later war theoreticians is indisputable, but, this choice similarly betrays his prejudice. Armitage only looks for his imagery in the sphere he already proclaimed to be the special terrain of civil war: bloodshed, and binary acts of violence committed by militarized bodies. He only looks for his evidence in authors who write about military conflicts.

He maintains this false distinction for the period between the Roman Republic and the late 20th century, when he suddenly admits of a “civil war of words,” wherein it could be said that the words one chooses to use to describe a conflict could be said to be part of the conflict itself (e.g. with Libya and the UN above). He even calls to mind multiple other forms of civil or internal conflict that don’t necessarily include violence, namely, in addition to *stasis*, the Chinese *nei zhan*, and the Arabic *fitna*, saying nothing about the former, but adding that the latter can mean *discord*, *temptation*, *anarchy*, *civil strife*, or *division*, before excluding any further consideration of either due to their “obscurity.” Armitage is not ignorant to the fact that war or strife need not be the internecine catastrophe marked by physical force, swords, guns, or killing. If he had chosen a broader, less militaristic notion, perhaps he would have included passages using war

11 Ibid. Pg. 49

language in novels of the infidelity of wives (the civil war of the family and lovers), in memoirs of mental illness (the civil war of the mind set against parts of itself), in histories of religious heresies (the civil wars of Christianity, Judaism, Islam), in fearful letters written between slaveowners worried about an uprising (the civil war concerning the humanity of slaves). For Armitage, these can only be metaphors derived from Caesars heroic battles, but, if civil war originally means conflict, strife, division, or discord, then we can unproblematically proclaim that these are civil wars in the original sense, and the armies duking it out in the city are in this light an appropriation of civil war, merely one possibility among many. But the colonial, civilized mindset is lacking creativity; because the colonizer achieved his goals through spilling blood and enslaving his enemies, *he cannot* see that his generalized aggression and hostility towards living things represents one way of living in the world and handling conflict among others.

20

Finally, there is the question of whether civil war is a disease or a curse. *Stasis* was very clearly thought of as a “disease,” while *bellum civile* was, at least in the Roman literature, referred to as the “curse” of civilization. In fact, *stasis* was another word for disease, and still persists in medical terminology to this day meaning “a stoppage of circulation” in phrases like “stasis of the blood” or in classifications like “stasis ulcer.” *Stasis* was thought of as an internal, inherent process to politics where elements (slaves, for example) cease to operate correctly and the circulation of power is blocked. And there was no cure for this disease, only medication and management. The curse, on the other hand, can return and strike at any moment, disrupting the day-by-day routine and setting brother against brother. They likened this curse to a natural disaster as in the poems of Tacitus (“The history on which I am entering is full of disasters”) or

Florus (“The rage of Caesar and Pompey, like a flood or a fire, overran the city”). This moves the event outside and represents it as a force that strikes the otherwise perfect city; it reproduces a strong City/Nature or Civilized/Non-civilized binary. This is clear in the descriptions by Horace, who bemoans the fact that “harsh Fate . . . drives the Romans, and the crime of fratricide since Remus’s blameless lifeblood poured upon the ground— a curse to generations yet unborn.” It is Fate, that cruel god, who enters from the divine Supernatural Realm to set us against our brothers.

Though it seems small, there is a world of difference between the representation of strife as an outside curse and as an internal disease. The first performs a closing off of the boundaries of civilization by announcing that the only thing that can threaten its identity comes from outside. The curse reinforces the solidity of the political union being cursed, because it assumes that the union is real, and internally peaceful, i.e. operational. The incurable disease, however, posits the imperfection of the body in question, and points to the process of its own establishing as the cause of its recurring trauma. The disease places the body in question, opens it up to the outside, and denies any possibility of total health or prevention. Normative politics, in this light, is the permanent medicalization of the diseased body. The Romans did in fact think of civil war as a curse, but Armitage is incorrect in assuming that this representation won out over the idea of the internal disease, and it suffices to point to a number of quotations he himself included to demonstrate this. In every section of his book past the beginning on the Romans, he quoted political theoreticians referring to civil war as a “disease:” in the 17th century, Whitney calls civil war an “intestine strife,” and Hobbes similarly refers to them as “Intestine Broils,” while De Mably, nearly 200 years later,

assures the reader that “civil war is sometimes a great good” because it can provide the impetus to remove the diseased limbs of the body politic as a surgeon would remove the diseased limbs of the individual’s body.

22 Given that Armitage’s Latinized “civil war” cannot be so cleanly distinguished from the more complicated *stasis*, one must conclude that his preference was an attempt to “civilize” the term, to reel it in away from the dark borders of civilization and settle it as an accidental conflict between brothers. He says as much himself in the most revealing sentence of his book: “Alas, the treatment of non-European peoples became quite another matter; a toxic by-product of this effort was the opening gap between those who were to be dealt with humanely and those who were not, the latter not even considered human.”¹² What for him is merely a “toxic by-product” of the effort to “civilize” conflict is for us the whole core of the problem of “civil war.” It is precisely his militaristic, civilized, presentation that allows him to exclude the horrifying possibility that perhaps the mechanism with which Western civilization establishes its own authority and legitimacy is broken, and never actually worked; that, in fact, the West has only violence, forgetting, lies, and negativity at its disposal for convincing itself it truly is “civilized” and its outside “barbarous;” that “civilized” stands for nothing other than a deep emptiness and a hopeless struggle to climb out of it, all the while naively believing in one’s own eternal superiority.

12 Ibid. Pg. 171

V.

There are and will be those who have questioned why one would spend so much time with Greek and Roman concepts to begin with, and seemingly arguing for one's conceptual priority over the other. Why look to these slaveowners for anything at all, especially tools for understanding our world? One response would be to point out that we who borrow from the Western political lineage uncritically appropriate concepts from that tradition without paying much attention to where the concepts came from and how they've been used. The most common term, in our experience, is "democracy," which has undergone many ironic twists and metamorphosed from a favorite term of slaveowners to being a core concept in the political lexicon of the marginalized. The same has happened with "humanity," "citizenship," "rights" and others. More importantly, "civil war" has a special status in that it has always been a problem at a much deeper level than any of the others. It's fair to say it's the most contested term in our political lexicon. Possibilities lie dormant in this fact. If there is something that the West wants to avoid in the term, maybe that's because there is something dangerous in it. We could ask activists, radicals, and dissidents at this point: why do you give such credence to those concepts the preeminent political theorists of the West have happily fostered, and dismiss those they clearly perceive as unruly and threatening?

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A second response could be that paradoxical formulations are necessary for a non-totalizing politics. Because a paradoxical formulation cannot be satisfactorily completed, it can prevent its user from elevating one or another subjectivity as *the paradigmatic* political or revolutionary subject. It forces its user to stay

firmly situated in the process of politicization and its effects. We found “civil war” to be one such formulation. However, we did not fully account for the power of psychic investment in the representations of seemingly familiar words. This is the only thing that can explain the fact that, even after giving an account of the tumultuous history of the word, and clearly indicating that it does not essentially concern physical force, one could still hold onto simple images of bloodshed, guns, and infighting. We don’t have a satisfactory answer to this problem. One could, as we tried to, intentionally apply the term to situations where it sounds dissonant and ill-fitted. In our talk in Washington, we talked primarily about small, interpersonal conflicts as a paradigm of civil war. The risk here is that this usage can be interpreted as a metaphor or allegory, as opposed to the primary concept itself, so that one hears merely “our conflict with each other is like a civil war, but without all the guns and bloodshed.” One person present at our talk later said that one of their greatest fears was the possibility of “civil war.” The danger of a militarization of the representation of struggle or an aggressive understanding of conflict —of the prioritization of physical damage over the usage of words or the construction of space— looms large here.

Alternatively, one could adopt a foreign word like *stasis*. Very few people have the same psychic or libidinal investments in *stasis*, which on the surface makes this solution attractive, but, on the other hand, even if one were to explain the structural connection to words like “state” or its continued use in medical formulations like “stasis of the blood,” one would still have a hard time demonstrating the stakes involved in the concept. The solution we — at the time of this writing — propose is simply to add a prefix to the already fa-

miliar term “civil war” making it simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar: “uncivil war.”¹³ Uncivil war centers the decentering mechanism of civil war, making the inessential marginalia the problematic essence of the civilizing process.

What does civil war, or uncivil war, still have to offer us? The whole purpose of the book, and of discussing shared political concepts, is to problematize the way we think with our concepts, in a passive way. One doesn't bring up the term “democracy” every time they decide to undertake a political project with others, but it informs the way they go about acting within that project. In the back of their mind, they see and act out the classic images of democracy, whether in its direct or representative form, and measure their activities against these primordial ideas. It's the tendency to produce collective safety nets and existential securities we intended to challenge. It seems we are incapable of eradicating these images completely, so instead we tried to construct a tripping machine. Just as the political images form and begin to run along, our machine trips them so that they land on their faces.

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Uncivil war is not a thing, not resolvable, and has no existence. It is enough for us to attack ourselves at the foundation, to take our leave, and begin. But begin what?

13 We borrow this term from St. Augustine who referred to civil war as “civil, or uncivil, war” in *City of God*.

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