

Jon Beasley-Murray
University of British Columbia
jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca

Presented at III Seminario Crítico-Político Transnacional
“Pensamiento y terror social: El archivo hispano”
Cuenca, Spain
July, 2016

“Life During Wartime: Infrapolitics and Posthegemony”
(with a coda of eleven theses on infrapolitics)

Why stay in college? Why go to night school?
Gonna be different this time.
Can't write a letter, can't send a postcard.
I can't write nothing at all.
--The Talking Heads

In what is no doubt the most famous theorist of war's most famous claim, Carl Von Clausewitz tells us that “war has its root in a political object.” He goes on: “War is a mere continuation of politics by other means. [. . .] War is not merely a political act, but a real political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means” (119). There is, then, for Clausewitz an essential continuity between war and politics; they share the same rationality and ends. And this notion has in turn led many to think of politics, reciprocally, as a form of warfare. The German theorist Carl Schmitt, for instance, defines politics in suitably martial terms as a clash between “friend” and “enemy”: “The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy” (*The Concept of the Political* 26). Moreover, this invocation of the term “enemy” is scarcely metaphorical. Schmitt argues that “an enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity” (28), and he further qualifies the particular type of enmity involved in political disagreement in terms of classical theories of warfare: the political enemy is a “public enemy,” that is a *hostis*, as opposed to a “private enemy.” He quotes a Latin lexicon to make his point: “A public enemy

(*hostis*) is one with whom we are at war publicly. [. . .] A private enemy is a person who hates us, whereas a public enemy is a person who fights against us" (29).

Likewise, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci also calls upon the language of warfare to describe political activity, which he classifies in terms of the "war of manoeuvre" by which a political party bids for influence among the institutions of so-called civil society, and the "war of movement" when it is in a position to seek power directly from the state. Indeed, the notion of an essential continuity between armed violence and civil dispute informs Gramsci's fundamental conception of "hegemony," which characterizes politics in terms of a combination of coercion and consent, the attempt to win or secure power alternately by means of force or persuasion. War is politics, politics is war: the basic goals and rationale are the same, we are told. It is just the means that are different.

Yet if we read accounts of warfare from those who actually fight it, a very different picture emerges. Take the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39. At first sight, this should be an especially good example of a war that had politics as its object. After all, the motivations for the military uprising that led to the war seem clearly and self-evidently political: an attempt by right-wing forces to bring down the Popular Front government that had won power in the election of February, 1936. As Paul Preston puts it of the situation in Spring of that year, "The left had won despite the expenditure of vast sums of money" on the part of its opponents. "Because the election results represented an unequivocal statement of the popular will, they were taken by many on the right as proving the futility of legalism and 'accidentalism.'" And if politics failed, then thoughts turned to war in the drive to pursue the same ends by other means: "Henceforth the right would be more concerned with destroying the Republic than with taking it over. Military plotting began in earnest" (83).

Moreover, once the initial uprising failed and as the war developed, it was seen by many worldwide as a particularly pure political cause. With the direct intervention of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy on the Nationalist side, thousands of volunteers from France, Britain, North America and elsewhere flocked to Spain to fight for the Republicans as a way to stem the rise of right-wing extremism in Europe. By contrast, then, the Second World War that followed shortly afterwards seemed to much of the left to be fought for rather mixed motives, despite the aura of a justified struggle against

Fascism that has enveloped it. If the French, British, and Americans had really cared about this cause, they would have intervened in Spain where the political stakes were so much clearer and more obvious. If there was any twentieth-century war that was directly political, surely it was this one, not least for the international fighters (and technicians, medical personnel, and so on) who came unbidden purely out of their noble beliefs and sense of solidarity with the Spanish people.

But how then to explain the account of perhaps the most notable of these volunteers, George Orwell, who came to Spain as he was already establishing himself as no doubt the foremost English political writer of the time. Orwell tells us in *Homage to Catalonia* that "the political side of the war bored" him (208). Moreover, he tells us of his initial impression of the situation in Catalonia that "the revolutionary atmosphere of Barcelona had attracted me deeply, but I had made no attempt to understand it. As for the kaleidoscope of political parties and trade unions, with their tiresome names--PSUC, POUM, FAI, CNT, UGT, JCI, JSU, AIT--they merely exasperated me. It looked at first sight as though Spain were suffering from a plague of initials" (197). Now, it is true that Orwell changes his views, and his account is in large part the story of his politicization as he realizes that, in his words, "everyone, however unwillingly, took sides sooner or later" (198). *Homage to Catalonia* is, as much as anything, the tale of how and why Orwell took the side he did, and began to view the array of political acronyms as more than just some alphabet soup.

For it turns out that the war did indeed have everything to do with politics--"it was above all things a political war" (197)--and so boredom or disinterest in the political become no longer viable options. But even so, Orwell remains strangely ambivalent about it all. He tells us, at the start of an extended disquisition on the internal struggles on the Left, between Anarchists, Trotskyites, and Communists, that "if you are not interested in the horrors of party politics, please skip." Moreover, as he notes, he separates out the analysis from the memoir "to keep the political parts of this narrative in separate chapters" precisely so that the uninterested reader can pass over them and continue following Orwell's personal account of the war unperturbed. In other words, in this conflict in which "everyone" has to take sides, the reader is absolved from this responsibility. Orwell recognizes that politics has an important role in the conflict, but is uncertain as to where or how exactly it fits. In fact, in later editions of the book the

"political" chapters are relegated to appendices, pushed even further to the margins of the main narrative. At one at the same time, then, the book both directs us to the centrality of political disagreement and aspires to shield us from it.

It is better then to think of *Homage to Catalonia* not so much as a political book but as an *infrapolitical* book, in the sense that it is about what is simultaneously a necessary link and an absolute breach between war and politics. The Spanish Civil War is at the same time a thoroughly political war and absolutely non-political at the same time. The "horrors" of politics are both inevitable and to be avoided if at all possible. In short, what emerges here is less a simple continuity between war and politics, than a fracture that leads to and is reflected in the strange, fractured form of Orwell's own account. It is in that fracture that we see the struggle played out between politicization (taking sides) and commonality (the "common decency" for which Orwell originally came to fight [197]). These, then, are the stakes of the war: not so much politics *per se* than rather the infrapolitical question of how politics takes root or takes over on the one hand, or breaks down and dissolves on the other. For politics is not a constant, a seamless continuity that merely takes up different means to the same ends depending on circumstance, as Clausewitz, Schmitt, and Gramsci would have it. If Orwell is to be believed, politics lurks everywhere but fits uneasily even in this most political of wars.

The leap to the political has sometimes to be resisted, even if at other times it is to be welcomed. But, against the trend to see politics automatically fully installed everywhere (according to the doctrine that everything is always already political), for Orwell there is nothing less natural in the world. Which is why he ends his book, suppressing his own qualms, with a call for England to wake up from its "deep, deep sleep" even if that awakening threatens what ultimately Orwell (the fundamentally conservative "Tory anarchist" as he once called himself) most loves about his country: "the railway-cuttings smothered in wild flowers [. . .] the barges on the miry river, the familiar streets, the posters telling of cricket matches and Royal weddings, the men in bowler hats [. . .] the red buses, the blue policemen" (196). Politics threatens all this habitual familiarity, but in the end Orwell thinks or hopes that the risk is worth it.

We see a similar uncertainty about politics in many other accounts of the Spanish Civil War, all of which attest to the conflict's infrapolitical dimension, or perhaps more generally to the fact that the more fundamental continuity is not so much between war and politics as between war and *infrapolitics*, the border or fracture (or leap as I have

also been calling it) between something that it is not innately political and something that is. The one depends on the other: there is no politics without infrapolitics, in that this latter provides the affective preconditions or conditions of possibility for the political, which in turn shapes and sets limits to the infrapolitical habitus. But the connection between the two is neither automatic nor pre-determined. There is always some violence (symbolic or other) in the passage between them, and tales of life during wartime register this violence often with special clarity and precision.

Take what is otherwise a very different account of the Spanish Civil War, Camilo José Cela's *San Camilo*, 1936. Cela's book was published in 1969, long after the war's conclusion, and so lacks Orwell's campaigning edge. In any case, Cela's politics are much more ambiguous. (Orwell is often ambivalent, but never ambiguous.) Cela fought on the Nationalist side during the war, but in its aftermath frequently clashed with the censors of Franco's regime. In some ways, *San Camilo* is his attempt to come to terms with the conflict, from his position as probably Spain's most renowned post-war writer (he would go on to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1989). At the same time, it is notable that in the book's epigraph he castigates above all "the adventurers from abroad" who took part in the war, including no doubt Orwell, depicting them as "Fascists and Marxists, who had their fill of killing Spaniards like rabbits and whom no one had invited to take part in our funeral." So far, so unambiguous, but things soon shift as soon as the novel proper opens.

It begins with a mirror, and consistently returns to this same site of reflection and self-analysis. At first, the mirrored gaze brings familiarity, perhaps a sort of relief: "A man sees himself in the mirror and even feels comfortable addressing himself in a familiar way" (3). But it is not long, as the mirror motif recurs in the sprawling stream of consciousness that constitutes the narrative, before the reflection provokes a real ambivalence, the mirror seeming to exert a strange hold on a spectator who cannot bear to look but cannot turn away either: "Look at yourself in the mirror and escape from the mirror, it's like a gymnastic exercise, look at yourself in the mirror, escape from the mirror, look at yourself in the mirror, escape from the mirror and so on until you can't take it any more" (34). And why? Why "are you scared to look at yourself in the mirror? Yes, you're scared to look at yourself in the mirror, are you afraid of finding the mark of the murderer on your forehead or on your cheeks?, yes, you're afraid of finding the

mark of the murderer on your forehead or on your cheeks" (49). Here as elsewhere, in the novel's insistent repetitions and reiterations, we end up circling around a crime, a crime in which all subject positions are confused as we are both victim and victimizer, murderer and murdered, the dead and the damned. For we are both perpetrators and bystanders to a history that could not take place without us, but which we barely notice, or only indirectly. We are too close to the scene of the crime either to avoid its implications (and our complicity) or to understand them: "Seen from close up history confuses everyone, both actors and spectators, and is always very tiny and startling, and also very hard to interpret" (61).

The crime in question, and the history that follows, concern some of the events immediately leading up to the outbreak of the civil war: the assassination of the Republican policeman Lieutenant José Castillo by the right-wing Falange, and murder in revenge of the rightist politician José Calvo Sotelo by Castillo's comrades. Not that, as Cela portrays the events, at the time the responsibility for these deaths is clear. The novel repeats all the various stories that circulate around and try to explain the violence: "Listen, couldn't he have been hit by a taxi as he was crossing the street?" (68). Meanwhile, off stage, something larger is brewing: "They say there is going to be a military coup to guarantee law and order and to save the Republic" (68). No wonder that fear stalks Madrid.

But none of this is shown directly or straightforwardly. For everything is at the margin of the narrator's own concerns and preoccupations: about his friends, his girlfriend, his anxieties about sex and health and the everyday. In short, this is less a political novel, because the politics is so very opaque and confused, than an infrapolitical tale *par excellence*. Cela's interest is less in the political shenanigans and conspiracies, or even the broad structural tensions and open conflicts, that lead to the violence of the war itself, than in everything that is not directly political but without which politics itself would be unthinkable, unworkable. Hence also the novel's meandering, nonlinear, repetitive style, a monologue that belongs to no one single individual but which presents the fragmented reflection of an uncertain, ambivalent multitude that at any moment (by the magic of political transformation) will be cast as two great forces--Fascist and Loyalist, right-wing and left--that are supposedly mutually incommensurable. Cela writes against that political fiction, with all its

reductiveness, to give us instead a more complex (non)narrative glimpsed in a distorting mirror for which we are inevitably always on both sides of the divide.

At the end, however, things change, as in the novel's epilogue centre stage is suddenly given to the narrator's uncle, one tío Jerónimo, who speaks in praise of a very religious conception of *patria* or fatherland that is, we are told, "more permanent than the nation, and more natural and flexible, fatherlands were invented by the Great Creator, nations are made by men" (357). In short, in this epilogue the novel shifts from a stress on infrapolitics to an avowed *antipolitics* whose (in fact, merely disavowed) political investments are clear. For Jerónimo is less opposed to politics *per se* than he is to the liberal institutions that he--like Franco--is quite prepared to sacrifice for the greater good of a notional "fatherland" whose purported legitimacy and authority are given by God himself. Hence the novel's rather chilling final lines, declaring that "this is but a purge of the world, a preventative and bloody purge" (366). The novel has made a leap to the political, to the politics of antipolitics, which is prepared to lay waste all that is before it.

Here, then, unlike in Orwell, the transition to the political is indeed portrayed as capture, as an attempt to eliminate the multitudinous polyphony that had previously characterized the narrative. The epilogue betrays the novel, perhaps in both senses: it both reveals something about it that had remained hidden, and it goes against its spirit, its sprawling promiscuity and diversity. Never believe that the political can save us. Indeed, sometimes it is precisely the opposite. For the life of the city in Cela's portrayal had come from an anonymous multitude, a collectivity that fucks and shits and fights and stumbles and give a substance to the novel that makes, by contrast, the transcendent fatherland peddled by the epilogue seem a paltry fiction indeed.

But all this is at stake in the civil war whose outbreak Cela's novel charts, and whose troubled unfolding is the focus of Orwell's memoir. Less a struggle between Left and Right than the attempt to impose and sustain these political categories. It is civil war that, as Giorgio Agamben suggests (though he does not use these terms), functions as the threshold or hinge between infrapolitics and the political. Moreover, Agamben points to the ways in which civil war has become now global, infesting itself in everyday life under the name of terrorism: "Global terrorism is the form that civil war acquires," he tells us, "when life as such becomes the stake of politics" (18). So there is no point denying civil war, or trying to exclude it from the political order. We need

rather to recognize that order's indebtedness to it, and--as Orwell suggests--pick one of the many sides (who says there should be just two?) that any such conflict opens up. For this is the very paradigm of the political, of the perpetual emergence and dissolution of political activity as such.

coda: eleven theses on infrapolitics

1. Infrapolitics is not against politics. It is not apolitical, still less antipolitical.
2. There is no politics without infrapolitics
3. It is only by considering infrapolitics that we can better demarcate the terrain of the political *per se*, understand it, and take it seriously.
4. The interface between the infrapolitical and the political cannot be conceived simply in terms of capture.
5. Only a fully developed theory of posthegemony can account properly for the relationship between infrapolitics and politics.
6. Infrapolitics corresponds to the virtual, and so to habitus and unqualified affect.
7. The constitution (and dissolution) of the political always involves civil war.
8. Biopolitics is the name for the colonization of the infrapolitical realm by political forces, and so the generalization of civil war.
9. But neither politics nor biopolitics have any predetermined valence; biopolitics might also be imagined to be the colonization of the political by the infrapolitical.
10. None of these terms--politics, infrapolitics, biopolitics, posthegemony--can have any normative dimension.
11. Hitherto, philosophers have only sought to change the world in various ways. The point, however, is to interpret it.

works cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm*. Trans. Nicholas Heron. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015.
- Cela, Camilo José. *San Camilo, 1936: Vísperas, festividad y octava de San Camilo del año 1936 en Madrid*. Madrid: Alianza, 1974.
- . *San Camilo, 1936: The Eve, Feast, and Octave of St. Camillus of the Year 1936 in Madrid*. Trans. J. H. R. Holt. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.
- Clausewitz, Carl Von. *On War*. Ed. Anotol Rapoport. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982.
- Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*. London: Penguin, 2013.
- Preston, Paul. *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution, and Revenge*. Revised and Expanded Ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.
- Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political* Trans. George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.