3 Of Colonialism and Corpses: Simone Weil on Force

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In his acceptance speech for the 1957 Nobel prize in literature, Albert Camus, who was one of Simone Weil's first translators and her literary executor, described the "insane history" of a "time of catastrophe" marked by the World Wars. This catastrophic time, which Simone Weil (1909–43) described in 1939 as colored by a common and "predominant feeling of … some danger," shaped all of Weil's writings as she sought to both address and respond to its definitive events.[1] Her writings, published at the time in primarily leftist and labor journals, were directed to specific communities in which she moved or had some intellectual affinity. She participated in syndicalist labor movements, joined an anarchist militia in the Spanish Civil War, became a member of the Free French in World War II, and drafted what became *The Need for Roots*, which was intended as a blueprint for the reconstruction of France at the close of the war. The piece for which she is possibly best known, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, was published in 1940 as the Germans marched into Paris and began their occupation of France. Mary Dietz calls it a "lament upon the awful and immediate reality of war in her own time."[2]

Weil's analysis of war, power, and force did not begin in 1940. Indeed, she claimed that she had been preoccupied by war since 1914 when, as a small child, she donated to the relief efforts for soldiers at the front.[3] But, it was in the early 1930s that she began first to explore the use of force in her writings on colonialism. Like all of Weil's positions, her take was a "composition on a multiple plane."[4] She recounts that her consideration of colonialism began with the strange juxtaposition of reading reports on the French massacres in Indochina and, at the same time, witnessing the preparations for and subsequent holding of the 1931 Colonial Exhibition

[1] Simone Weil, *Selected Essays* (1962; repr., Oxford University Press, 2015), 178.
[2] Mary G. Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988), 86.
[3] Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters*, ed. Richard Rees (1965; repr., Oxford University Press, 2015), 171.
[4] Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (1952; repr., London: Routledge, 2002), 214.

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in Paris. Weil wrote that it was at the Exhibition, the last that "feted the accomplishments of colonialism," where for the first time she "felt and understood … the tragedy of colonization."[5]

In the scholarship on Simone Weil, her emphasis on colonialism is still not yet fully integrated into analyses of the use of force nor, more generally, as another source of her reflections on the concepts which adumbrate her work.[6] Processes that she identified as constitutive of colonialism's brutality – uprooting, loss of the past, degradation of labor, and the pursuit of unlimited profit and power – inform her thought. As Dietz points out, the hallmarks of Weil's concerns are "the meaning of individual freedom in the modern collectivity, the nature of community in the nation state, and the political and social possibilities for an end to the affliction and oppression of the human condition," each of which directly implicates colonialism and empire.[7] In this chapter, I propose to explore the relationship of colonization to her concept of force and her exposition of rights – to draw out the ways in which her argument that force turns "man into a thing" is born out of her earlier analysis of how in colonial wars "we first of all reduce whole populations to slavery, and then we use them as cannon fodder."[8]

I argue that this accomplishes three things. First, Weil provides an analysis of modernity and the rise of totalitarianism that specifically centers colonialism as fundamental to each and, consequently, to any analysis of international politics. Second, she develops her theories through her own political engagement and activism in the context of her time, negotiating and unsettling the governing intellectual, social, and political expectations – as articulated through gender, certainly, but also no less so through the complex intersections of class and religion. Accordingly, her politics and her scholarship continue to challenge a disciplinary post-1945

[5] Patricia A. Morton, "National and Colonial: The Musée des Colonies at the Colonial Exposition, Paris, 1931," *Art Bulletin* 80.2 (1998): 357–77 (357); Simone Weil, *Simone Weil on Colonialism: An Ethic of the Other*, ed. J. P. Little (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 47.

[6] See Thomas Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 321; Jane Doering, *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 197–209; Inese Radzins, "Simone Weil's Social Philosophy: Toward a Post-Colonial Ethic," in Pamela Anderson (ed.), *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (London: Springer, 2009), 69–84; Richard Fletcher, "Blood Is Flowing in Carthage: Simone Weil between Force and Colonialism," *documenta* 14.4 (2017).

[7] Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, 31.

[8] "To define force – it is that x that turns anybody subject to it into a *thing*. Exercised to the limit … it makes a corpse out of him." Simone Weil, *War and the Iliad*, ed. Rachel Bespaloff, trans. Mary McCarthy (1947; repr., New York Review of Books, 2005), 3; Weil, *On Colonialism*, 49.

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positioning of colonialism as peripheral to the development of international thought, and further confirm the significance of "historical women" in the field.[9] Third, Weil's own reckoning with the tumultuous politics of her time can animate contemporary analyses of force as understood and enacted in complex and critical ways.

Before directly taking up the role of colonialism in Weil's writings, I want to note that Weil's work suffers from general neglect in certain forms of political thought "despite thought provoking, masterful, even extraordinary work"[10] that has been subject to engagement by other notable theorists, such as Iris Murdoch, Emmanuel Levinas (who reserves especial scorn for her critique of Judaism), Giorgio Agamben (who wrote his dissertation on her thought), and Roberto Esposito (who calls her one "of the most radical thinkers of the twentieth century"[11]). Although only Simone de Beauvoir knew her personally, Hannah Arendt admired her shrewd analyses of labor, and both were impressed with the acuity of her thought. Indeed, all three women proudly identified as political thinkers offering sophisticated reckonings of and in "dark times."

There are surely reasons we can marshal to explain why Weil remains a "pariah" or a "lonely figure" for certain forms of political thought: the putative peculiarity of her personality combined with her stringent asceticism has overwhelmed attention to her thought, the explicit foregrounding in her later writings of her conversion from an agnostic Jew to Christian, the incomplete and idiosyncratic nature of her work, and the way in which her work was first circulated. And, yet, none of these are satisfactory. Indeed, the question of why Weil remains a "lonely figure" should itself motivate attention to Weil worthy of the complexity and contradictions which her work and life exemplified.

[9] Lucian M. Ashworth, "Feminism, War, and the Prospects for Peace: Helena Stanwick (1864–1939) and the Lost Feminists of Interwar International Relations," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13.1 (2011): 25–43; Patricia Owens, "Women and the History of International Thought," *International Studies Quarterly* 62.3 (2018): 467–81; Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

[10] Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, xiii.

[11] Roberto Esposito, *The Origin of the Political* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), xi. I am not arguing that because three prominent men are interested in her work, so too should we be. I am arguing that her influence on each of them is elided, ignored, and, at the worst, her thought subsumed as theirs.

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"I am tired of talking to you about myself, for it is a wretched subject"

Weil was adamant that her life embody a way of being "excruciatingly identical with her ideas."[12] A prime example is her refusal to eat more than those whom she identified as the worst off, to the point of facilitating her own death, as is her theorization of affliction rooted in her own experiences of acute pain and suffering. The very notion of an ascetic with a conversion experience, much less one who straightforwardly accepts that "Christ himself came down and took possession of me," banishes her from certain definitions of political thought, while her brazen joke that she was really an "anti-Semite" during the rise of Nazism troubles convention and comprehension.[13] Weil's vitriol toward Judaism is well documented and distinctly disconcerting, as she brooked no moderation in light of the growing persecution of Jews and, in fact, did not cease when forced to flee France with her family. Notably, she was equally damning of some of the protocol and history of Christianity at the same time, claiming that the "Thomist conception of faith implies a 'totalitarianism' as stifling as that of Hitler, if not more so."[14] Weil's criticism of both was rooted in her revulsion toward dogma and the blind celebration of collective belief, as well as any notion of a "chosen" people or rule by divine right. Nevertheless, her critique was vitiated by her startling disregard of historical context, as her damnation of Christianity neither incited nor legitimated similarly horrific repercussions.

As a result, Simone Weil inspired equal parts awe and antipathy. Even one of her most ardent admirers and translators, the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz, wrote that she lived a life of "deliberate foolishness."[15] Others, such as T. S. Elliot, equally fascinated with her austerity and self-mortification in pursuit of God, believed her to be a Christian mystic – no less than a "potential saint."[16] In contrast, her strongest critics wrote that, at the very least, she was advocating a dangerously anti-political "rule of the saints."[17] "[Her] ideas … so clearly without substance, mere

[12] Susan Sontag, "Simone Weil," *New York Review of Books*, February 1963. The quotation above which opens this section comes from Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (1951; repr., New York: Perennial Library, 2009), 3.

[13] Weil, *Waiting for God*, 27; Simone Petrement, *Simone Weil: A Life* (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 554.

[14] Simone Weil, *Letter to a Priest* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 23.

[15] Czesław Miłosz, *To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001), 251.

[16] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, viii.

[17] Connor Cruise O'Brien, "The Anti-Politics of Simone Weil," *New York Review of Books*, May 12, 1977.

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vaporous and platitudinous musings," are made all the more "pernicious because, couched in an archetypal (or stereotypical) religious vocabulary, they cannot fail to exert a powerful appeal."[18] A "Holy Fool" she may well have been for some, but "she deserves better of us than to be made into a Patron Saint of symposiums on literature and religion in the little magazines."[19] More critically, her work demands it.[20]

First, Weil herself refused to think or write in these sorts of dualisms. Even as the sheer power of her personality is unmistakable throughout her writings, and her own experiences ground her thought, it was her desire to abstract and impersonalize the body and the person, not to foreground them. It is no small irony that the Christian mystic preferred androgyny, answered to Simon, and repudiated her identity as a Jew all in an effort to impersonalize, deracinate, and de-emphasize the body and the self. It is our *impersonal* characteristics held in common which were to be the source of our obligation and alliances, not those which were distinct to individuals.

Second, the characterization of Weil as either a spiritual or a political thinker ignores her own claim that her thought was "indivisible."[21] Such a characterization institutes an opposition not only into her writings, but also into the very concepts – political and spiritual – which Weil saw as fundamentally and necessarily integrated in any effort to think through "the dilemma of worldliness."[22] Weil was excruciatingly careful to underline the liminality of words and was exacting in her critique of how "words with capital letters" miscue and misrepresent the complexity of the world.[23] She held that "by the power of words we always mean their power of illusion and error," thus we must guard against their ability to "stupefy the mind."[24] The wariness with which Weil approached words adorned with capital letters influenced her analysis of the success of totalitarianism. As did Arendt, Weil identified how the spread of propaganda and reliance on slogans induced a "terrible fatality" through the promulgation of "the big lie," itself an abstraction made possible by the stupefied mind and the "sullen complicity" of the majority.[25] Weil was adamant. Words cannot function as abstraction; they must lose their

[18] Joyce C. Oates, *The Profane Art* (New York: Dutton, 1983), 148.
[19] Isaac Rosenfield, "Simone Weil as Saint," *Partisan Review* 18.6 (1951): 712–15 (713).
[20] Helen M. Kinsella, "Simone Weil: An Introduction," in Felix Rösch (ed.), *Émigré Scholars and the Genesis of American International Relations: A European Discipline in America*? (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 176–94.
[21] Weil, *Seventy Letters*, 196. [22] Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, 22–23.
[23] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 156. [24] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 33, 170.
[25] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 102; Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 377.

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adornments so that we may attend to what they reveal, not conceal.[26] Accordingly, what Weil offers is a different valuation of the relation of the political and the spiritual, forcing a reworking of each such that neither is seen as the other's "complementary antagonist."[27]

Relatedly, it is important to remember that Weil died at the age of thirty-four with, comparatively speaking, very few of her writings published. Her early death resulted in a disorderly distribution of her writing, beyond those found in the labor/leftist journals of her time. Two of her most systematic works, *Oppression and Liberty* and *The Need for Roots*, were not published till after her death, respectively, 1955 and 1949 in France, and 1958 and 1952 in the United States, some years after she wrote them. She was not able to account for the true extent of Nazi atrocities and the fall of imperialism, which would have surely affected her initial thinking on the perils of totalitarianism, the inequities of power and force, and the legacy of colonialism and its effect upon political thought and action. Her first longer translated works were guided by her family, a Dominican priest, and a Christian philosopher. Consequently, her writing was introduced into wider circulation as if it were naturally divided into two set categories and two set time frames; namely, spiritual (e.g., *Gravity and Grace*) or political (e.g., *The Need for Roots*) and before or after conversion. Her death prevented her from challenging such distinctions, much less completing any unfinished pieces. This left most of her work to be distributed "piecemeal" in form and substance, a consequence she had feared.[28]

Thus, third, when reading Weil, we do well to remember that we are reading nascent and evolving articulations of her thought which, is itself, as many have noted, disorienting in its singularity and its form. Maurice Blanchot captured it as "thought often strangely surprised."[29] Nonetheless, it made an impact. Mary McCarthy recalls that her translation of Weil's *The Iliad or the Poem of Force* ended her thinking in opposites.[30] Weil herself describes her thought as proceeding through contradictions. "Contradiction and analogy" compose the world and our understandings of it, as is made most evident in "the knots of necessity and impossibility" which make up our existence.[31] Thus, while

[26] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 237. [27] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 156.
[28] Weil, *Seventy Letters*, 196.
[29] Maurice Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation* (1969, repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 106.
[30] Deborah Nelson, *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 15.
[31] Simone Weil and Arthur Wills, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* (London: Routledge, 1976), 45–46.

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"everything" may be related, it is not that "everything" is coherent, symmetrical, or unified. Rather, "contradiction alone is the proof that we are not everything."[32] She thought to the edges of aporia – that is, "neither this nor that" but "both this and that" – while never ceasing to answer what she identified as her abiding question: what are the causes of social oppression? Iris Murdoch, who was deeply influenced by Weil, held that consideration of Weil both required and effected the breakdown of "political categories."[33] Weil too was clear – her thought, and she herself, did not fit.

> To consent to being anonymous, to being human material (Eucharist); to renounce prestige, public esteem – that is to bear witness to the truth, namely, that one is composed of human material, that one has no rights. It is to cast aside all ornament, to put up with one's nakedness. But how is this compatible with social life and its labels?[34]

Her own self-fashioning and her scholarly capaciousness are, as these highly charged assessments suggest, deeply unsettling. Weil's rejections and reworkings of the certainties of binary oppositions (e.g., Simon or Simone) and taken for granted categorizations (e.g., Jewish or Christian) illuminate her own recognition of her lack of "fit," while equally reflecting her deeply held philosophical conviction that the imposition of and reliance on preconstituted categories did more to conceal than to reveal a world produced and held in common. Her method takes the form of ceaseless questioning of received wisdom or conventions of thought – holding both "all this might not be true" and "all this might be true" simultaneously. This mitigates the desire for absolutes in either regard, for they risk blind belief or an arrogant self-deception. Thus, to read Weil is to take seriously her own notation that to "receive" her work "calls for an effort," one which "consists of suspending *our* thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready," and a willingness, "on pain of sinking into confusion or apathy … [to] … call everything into question again."[35]

In what follows, I seek to render Weil's arguments in their full complexity, without erasing their contradictions or shaping them into a more palatable or conventional form – as much as we might wish for such a concordance. Weil's brief against colonialism and the harms it demands amplifies in sharp terms both the destruction it wreaks and, potentially,

[32] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 95.
[33] Iris Murdoch and Peter Conradi, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Allen Lane, 1998), 159.
[34] Weil, *The Notebooks*, 217.
[35] Weil, *Seventy Letters*, 196; Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty* (1958; repr., Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 37.

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the limits of politics. For insofar as she is able to argue politically for a progressive emancipation for those colonies, she ultimately grounded her argument in a source of obligation which is external and transcendent to politics itself.

"This civilization we are so proud of has done everything it could to conceal the fact [that] we cannot be guiltless of a single one of Hitler's crimes"

In her last piece of writing, *The Need for Roots*, Weil identified France's 1871 defeat in the Franco-Prussian war as the moment France renounced its aspiration to more than bellicosity and "conquering."[36] Instead, France began "thinking only of carving out for herself … black or yellow human flesh and obtaining … the hegemony of Europe."[37] Weil refers to this as a self-inflicted "moral injury," the effects of which, she argues, are clearly seen in France's concession to Hitler in 1940. Abandoning its revolutionary claim to "liberty, equality, fraternity," and further soiling the very meaning of such concepts in its turn toward conquest, France had corrupted its own soul, relinquished its own unique vocation and, thus, the true sources of strength from which to challenge Hitler.[38] The result, as she acerbically noted, is that "a number of Frenchmen, having found it perfectly natural to talk about collaboration to the oppressed natives of the French colonies, went on making use of this word without any trouble in talking with their German masters."[39] Weil consistently called out the brazen hypocrisy of France's imperialism, asking "how many men have we deprived of a fatherland whom we now compel to die in order to preserve ours[?]"[40] She also saw France's occupation as an example of the wisdom of karma.

Karma is significant here not as we commonly understand its use today, but as an "idea … which is identical to the notion, sadly forgotten by us, of the Greek idea of nemesis, meaning the automatic punishment of *excess*."[41] Karma underlines and exposes the hubris inherent in believing that the search for power and the use of force can escape limits; that one is unlimited in all things. German occupation of France is karma in

[36] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 195. The quotation above which opens this section comes from *The Need for Roots*, 282.
[37] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 195.
[38] We see this charge in practice when publicizing France's violation of its own claim to represent liberty, equality, and fraternity became a major element in the strategies of Algeria's national liberation movement.
[39] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 271. [40] Weil, *On Colonialism*, 78.
[41] Weil, *On Colonialism*, 78, emphasis added.

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the simplest sense since Germany now applies "colonial methods of conquest and domination" to the European continent.[42] It is also karma in a more complex sense. France's dedication to its imperial power in an unceasing search for more – more land, more resources, more influence – deforms power to an end unto itself. According to Weil, power is initially understood as a "means of action" toward a desired end. Inherently unstable, comparative, and self-destructive, power itself can never be wholly obtained and, therefore, there is "never power, but only a race for power."[43] In the pursuit of empire and in its aftermath, France became the "plaything of the instruments of domination" it helped to manufacture, since those who "give themselves up to it … must sacrifice" not only others, but also their own.[44] When power becomes an end unto itself in the hopeless attempt to make it absolute, the exaltation of war and of conquest, and the justification of each, becomes the leitmotif of politics. Yet, as Weil observes, it remains that within that system the "seed of death" is planted in the "necessarily limited character of the material bases of power and the necessarily unlimited character of the race for power."[45] She thought that eventually the finite material basis for power would cause the "series of massacres" to end, but until then, absent the dissolution of all states among other profound changes, it is ceaseless.[46]

Throughout her writing on colonialism, Weil details (as did Luxemburg and Arendt) how it is abetted by a fundamental belief that there is no limit to exploitation or consumption, human and material, in the pursuit of power. The materialist expansionism of colonialism *requires* an unmitigated use of physical force, i.e., "the force that kills," and the degradation of people into "living corpses" or "featureless human matter," i.e., "the force that does not kill just yet."[47] What ensures the initial success of colonization, on the one hand, is the ruthlessness of its practices, which include the literal and figurative uprooting of an entire people and the exploitation of both the land and the people as mere resources for imperial expansion, and, on the other, the "lies" of Christianity and the propaganda of reactionary and quotidian ideas about inherent superiority. "Missionary zeal has not Christianized Africa, Asia, and Oceania, but has brought these territories under the cold, cruel, destructive domination of the white race, which has trodden down everything."[48] To tread down everything, in pursuit of what she later calls "ersatz greatness," requires a particular

[42] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 199. [43] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 67.
[44] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 69. [45] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 75–76.
[46] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 140; Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 116–20.
[47] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 201; Weil, *War and the Iliad*, 4.
[48] Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 17; see also Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 287.

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synchronization of force and ideology – as exemplified by National Socialism but whose origins lie in imperial Rome and are traceable through the thirteenth-century Catholic Church.[49]

What stands out in Weil's writing is the culpability of the white race writ large for the extermination and enslavement of other races. She was clear. It is the "white man who has carried the disease" and has "everywhere destroyed."[50] Further, what is striking, is that she made no attempt to argue that colonization was in any case undertaken for the true benefit or protection of the colonized. To her, that was an outright falsehood. If by chance any progress occurred, "it is not because of this frenzy" of colonization, but "in spite of it."[51] Moreover, the metrics of any such progress were arguably suspect, as inevitably the destruction of culture leads to the destruction of a people and vice versa, so for whom is progress made? Damningly, she posited that if there were to be any consistency at all in this line of reasoning, then it would have to follow that "if Germany, thanks to Hitler and his successors, were to enslave the European nations and destroy most of the treasures of their past, future historians would certainly pronounce that she had civilized Europe."[52] Similarly, in her letter to the Minister of Propaganda in 1939, Weil called him out for his claim made in a radio address that the colonies were committed to France by "bonds other than those of subordination and exploitation."[53] Weil argued that there were no bonds of kinship or affection, and it was implausible to suggest otherwise, for "we have killed their culture" and tortured them for fighting for their freedom when, in fact, freedom which "lives in the soul of all men" is exactly what should be defended.[54] That France cannot identify its affinity with the colonial struggle for independence, but instead suppresses it precisely when fighting against Hitler, is evidence of the corrosive and self-destructive effects of the race for empire. Although the blame lies with the white man and the white race, the effects extend beyond the colonized, reverberating upon all, and deforming the commitment to liberty. Colonization turns all individuals into a certain form of "inanimate chattel" in service to power.

Interestingly, both she and Arendt (who, like Weil, also used a distinctly non-Western concept, boomerang, to question the effects of colonialism and its redounding upon the metropole) refer to T. E.

[49] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 217, 97; Weil, *Waiting for God*, 81–82; Weil, *Selected Essays*, 101–102.

[50] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 80, 51.

[51] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 51–52.

[52] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 124.

[53] Weil, *On Colonialism*, 78.

[54] Weil, *On Colonialism*, 78.

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Lawrence's writings, his published letters, and *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* to consider these claims. Both viewed them as tragic expositions of his actions and as attempts to disavow celebrations of his heroism. Each found evidence of the deformations of self which imperialism exacts. In his desolatory struggle to reconcile his exploits, "having used men as material … to be grinded to his own ends," while simultaneously reckoning with his own role as "but a function," Lawrence exemplifies the corruption of ends into means.[55] Thus, for Weil, he is the epitome of the "authentic hero," for he "knows the whole extent of the empire of might and at the same time despises it."[56] Moreover, he expresses how the particular practices of colonization threaten to ruin one of the ways in which power and force can be challenged; namely, through a rootedness (spiritual and material) in one's world.

One of the concepts that takes shape throughout Weil's writings is that of uprootedness, which is the annihilation of forms of rootedness in one's world necessary for existence and resistance. Uprooting encompasses the extermination of people, encampment and forced removal, and displacement from the land, all of which cause utter desolation. The desolation derives from physical suffering and material loss, as well as what Weil identifies as loss of the past. Loss of the past has two effects which undermine the capacity for resistance and righting the world. First, uprooting violates a grasp of temporal limitations through its obliteration of the past which, in part, helps to buttress the belief in infinite future expansion necessary to maintain empire. As knowledge of the past helps to remind us, death is a limit beyond which one cannot go – an obstacle to the unceasing pursuit of more. Second, the past provides a reckoning with and rooting in a sense of continuation that is fundamental to the capacity to imagine oneself as both part of a collectivity and as possessing a future: "A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of the community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future."[57] Destroying the past, uprooting, destroys the potential for recognition of oneself in a community which possesses a future and, thus, erases potential resources with which to confront

[55] Weil quoted in: Louis Allen, "French Intellectuals and T. E. Lawrence," *The Durham University Journal* 60 (1976): 52–66; Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Company, 1979), 221.

[56] Weil, *Seventy Letters*, 93; Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks* (London: Routledge, 1998), 116.

[57] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 43.

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colonialism. Colonialism and conquest bring "social death" which, as we shall see, is almost, but not quite, worse than death itself.[58]

Weil's views on colonialism evolved as she detailed her understanding of its effects on the colonies and France, but her first introduction to the hypocrisies and atrocities of the French colonial regime came in 1931 at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris. Nicknamed Lyauteyville after one of the main organizers and its Commission General – the French counter-insurgent strategist, decorated hero of the war in Indochina, Proconsul of Morocco, administrator in Madagascar, Marshal Hubert Lyautey – it was everything such a nickname insinuates. She referred to this formative experience in her later writings and, specifically, Lyautey's letters from the French colony of Madagascar, as unwittingly making explicit the analogies between "Hitlerism and colonization."[59]

An unabashed celebration of French imperialism, the Exhibition was described by a contemporary report as a testament to "French genius and its manifestations across the World."[60] More accurately, colonies were vital economic, labor, and military resources for France both during World War I and, significantly, during the Great Depression. During World War I, some 100,000 colonial soldiers died while over 200,000 were drafted to work in France's factories to support the war effort. The colonies functioned as an imperial "fall back." Recognizing this, Lyautey organized the Exhibition to advertise the putative beneficence with which France had "civilized" its colonies, and to thus generate a greater sense of national pride in its colonial strategies and in its colonial possessions. The overall political goal, of which the Exhibition was just one part, was the acceptance and adoption of a notion of a fully unified French empire – with the express purpose to ensure continued investment in keeping the colonies as such. The Exhibition was also an effort to resituate colonial policy more broadly in response to what "the former Minister of Colonies Albert Sarraut called a 'moral crisis, crisis of domination, crisis of authority' of colonization, referring especially to the rise of nationalist movements."[61]Unsurprisingly, nowhere to be seen in the official exhibit was the violence, exploitation, or atrocities of colonization policies and practices. Instead, in the words of one glowing review at the time, it was a paean to "all the white men … (who have shed) … blood in jungles and on snow fields … to conquer those outlandish beasts, and 15,000 assorted yellow, brown, and black barbarians."[62]

[58] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 80. [59] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 202.
[60] Quoted in Morton, "National and Colonial," 357.
[61] Quoted in Benoît de L'estoile, "From the Colonial Exhibition to the Museum of Man," *Social Anthropology* 11.3 (2003): 341–61 (345).
[62] "Paris 1931: Colonies on Show," *Fortune* 3.5 (May 1931): 140.

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Although it is unknown whether Weil visited the Counter Exhibition mounted in protest or participated in the critiques launched by the "surrealists, socialists and communists" and expatriate "African, Maghrebian and Indochinese activists," she was shaken and shamed by her experience at the Exhibition.[63] Chastising those who were "mindlessly indifferent to the suffering caused by the regime thus symbolized," she questioned how they could ignore the hypocrisy of a regime that proudly claimed its civility and magnanimity while murdering and starving those over whom it ruled. Most specifically, she had in mind the 1930 Yen-Bay massacre in Indochina. Although only six French soldiers were killed when Communist-aligned Vietnamese troops in the French military mutinied, the manner of their death, by traditional swords, and what it demonstrated about French control of their troops, incited a severe response on the part of the French colonial administration. Two commissions sentenced fifty men to death and forty-six to hard labor, the latter of which a French minister, in a public parliamentary hearing, "characterized as a death sentence merely delayed." These sentences were delivered under a special commission's "exceptional jurisdiction … circumventing native tribunals, civil courts, or any local appeals process," and were followed by generalized repression and unmitigated violence against the population.[64] For Weil, the violence, the scale of retribution, and the denial of recognition of the suffering of the people – and of their right to rebel – was unsupportable. As she wrote repeatedly, France had no right of conquest. Equally, what troubled Weil was that to bring the French colonies into view in France – to "remind France" that the colonies existed and exacted an atrocious toll – it took blood "hitting the headlines" and even then it was not always assured.[65]

"Why am I being hurt?"

In 1934, seeing only the twin choices of dictatorship and a naïve socialist-communism, both of which she found suspect and oriented equally toward war, the latter "believing it to be for the sake of liberty, the proletariat etc.," she wrote to a student that "it was [her] firm decision

[63] Weil, *On Colonialism*, 9; Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude & Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 38. There is much to be explored about Weil's relation to the thought and politics of this movement.

[64] Martin Thomas, "Fighting 'Communist Banditry' in French Vietnam: The Rhetoric of Repression after the Yen Bay Uprising, 1930–1932," *French Historical Studies* 34.44 (2011): 611–48 (628–29).

[65] Weil, *On Colonialism*, 41.

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to take no further part in any political or social activities, with two exceptions; anti-colonialism and the campaign against passive defence exercises."[66] Her concern at the time was that the rising fascism of Europe was being met with a dubious militarism and nationalism, which were themselves integral to the success of fascism and, prior to that, to colonialism. She believed that both social and economic life were increasingly directed, controlled, and subordinated to preparation for war, which increased the power of the state and led toward a "totalitarian form of social organization."[67]

She did not hold true to this pledge in an absolute sense, as she actively backed workers' strikes and sit-ins, and was a fully fledged supporter, and occasional member, of the more radical syndicalist trade unions. She argued that war was premised on the continued exploitation of all workers, colonial or not. War promised no change and, in fact, threatened the possible gains made by the workers, as the "craze" for money making and for weaponry were two sides of the same coin. Underlying Weil's critique was her continued frustration with the labor movement to think beyond the "lure of the pay packet" to more wholly address the conditions of labor.[68] She saw very clearly, and was often disappointed by this same lack of clarity in the labor movement, the link between colonial exploitation of labor and domestic factory work – "a difference of degree, not of nature."[69] In each, the worker is denied autonomous thought and action, the foundation of liberty, and is increasingly enslaved to the mass centralization of state and capital power. For Weil, the separation of domestic and international politics was artificial, designed to undermine solidarity and acute comprehension of the costs of capitalization and of war.

It was her own year of factory work, begun in 1934, which led Weil to question her original belief that "nothing on earth can stop man from feeling himself born for liberty" – for factory work indeed accomplished just that.[70] She conveyed the horror of "the bitterest and most unexpected" lessons of her time in the factory: "oppression, beyond a certain degree of intensity, does not engender revolt but, on the contrary, an almost irresistible tendency to the most complete submission."[71] Factory work oppresses the body and obliterates the capacity to think. The inability to think or to act, itself a form of self-destruction, is further

[66] Weil, *Seventy Letters*, 8. The quotation above which opens this section comes from Weil, *Selected Essays*, 30.
[67] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 116.
[68] Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 111; Weil, *Seventy Letters*, 38.
[69] Weil, *On Colonialism*, 28.
[70] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 83.
[71] Weil, *Seventy Letters*, 35.

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compounded by the seeming lack of attention or indifference on the part of those who know of or witness it. Not only is one made a "slave," with "body and soul in pieces," but also one is rendered irrelevant. "One finally gets a clear idea of one's own importance. The class of those *who do not count* – in any situation – in anyone's eyes – and who will not count, ever, no matter what happens."[72]

In 1937, Weil wrote an article excoriating the French public and the Popular Front, an alliance of socialists, communist, and labor movements, for ignoring the plight of workers in Tunisia until the murder of twenty striking mine workers. The article trenchantly outlined possible reasons for the ignorance and indifference displayed by the French – distance, racism, and minimization – concluding that the truth is that "the tragedy … is not really very gripping" until there is blood.[73] The "pitiless severity" with which the colonial "oppressor" treats the colonies is of no real interest to the French or to the Popular Front not only because of these reasons, none of which she finds credible, but also because suffering reduces one both to invisibility and to mute despair.[74] Crucially for Weil, the communication and reception of suffering is one means to alleviate or to reduce it.

Thus, when the daily life of the majority is composed of "hopeless resignation, exhaustion [and] slow death," which does not register, neither does the inexorable decay of their existence.[75] Indeed, as she continued in the article, "it does not register" to the degree that death without blood does not even "count: they aren't real deaths."[76] The "most refined cruelty on a vast scale and the brutal manipulation of human beings as so much raw material" is commonplace and continues without comment unless, and only then, the violence is so spectacular and bloody as to spark interest.[77] For Weil, the profound quotidian suffering experienced unseen and unvoiced not only resonated with her own experience of factory work (which she does not make equivalent to either the harms of colonial labor or colonization but saw as part of a whole), but also goes beyond suffering and becomes what she calls affliction (malheur).

Affliction is a complicated term in Weil's lexicon and, like many of her concepts, begins to take on multiple meanings as her thinking progresses. Affliction is defined as "the event that has seized and uprooted a life directly or indirectly in all its parts, social, psychological and physical … there is not really affliction unless there is social degradation or the fear of

[72] Simone Weil, *Formative Writings, 1929–1941*, ed. Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina van Ness (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 225.
[73] Weil, *On Colonialism*, 42.
[74] Weil, *On Colonialism*, 43.
[75] Weil, *On Colonialism*, 42.
[76] Weil, *On Colonialism*, 42.
[77] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 206.

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it in some form or another."[78] The dimension of social degradation is what sets affliction apart from suffering, for social degradation exacerbates the isolation and humiliation of being set apart from the world. It is an attenuated "form of death," the experience of which can turn something yet alive "into a thing."[79] Tracing the evolution of her analysis of colonialism through that of her own experience with factory work, the descriptions become more acute as she herself felt what she had previously only imagined. Marking this movement through her thought, we see how the social death of conquest and colonialism is the attenuated death of affliction, while the transformation of something yet alive into a thing echoes with her descriptions of individuals becoming mere matter under conditions of colonialism. In one of her more vivid descriptions of affliction, she writes: "pulverizing the soul; the man who falls into it is like a workman who gets caught up in a machine. He is no longer a man but a torn and bloody rag on the teeth of a cog wheel."[80]

Affliction is different from suffering because it obliterates the person as such, robbing them of the capacity to speak and to be heard which, recursively, sinks them into "a state of dumb and unceasing lamentation."[81] In her evocative renderings, the afflicted stutter, gasp for breath, and plead in vain in a court of law – as did those in the Yen-Bay uprising – "stammering before the magistrate," reduced to mute cries as if their "tongue has been cut out."[82] This description, of course, resonates with all of her writings on the experiences of colonialism and the reduction of the afflicted to non-beings not only in form, but also in voice and deed. Importantly, for Weil, it is not that the afflicted are wholly absent voice, it is that the capacity to hear – to make one's appeal audible – is deformed, and thus the appeal is unregistered. And, while there are those able to rise up (as in the miners' strikes), this momentary interruption does not fully alter the prior conditions. It is here that one wonders what Weil would have made of the national liberation and decolonization movements which followed World War II.

"This obligation is an unconditional one"

Considering the full horrors of affliction, how does the transfiguration of things into human beings, and human beings as means into human

[78] Weil, *Waiting for God*, 67–69.
[79] Weil, *Waiting for God*, 68; Weil, *War and the Iliad*, 3. [80] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 27.
[81] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 11. [82] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 11, 28.

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beings as ends, occur? [83] Although for Weil her absorption into the state of affliction occurred most poignantly in her factory work, she does not discard labor, as her careful study of it in *Need for Roots* evinces.[84] Instead, she carefully delineates how labor undertaken with consent, and with individual and collective recognition of the dignity of the self, "offers humans the opportunity to realize freedom in the confrontation with necessity and time."[85] The emphasis laid on necessity and time hearkens to her critique of colonialism, specifically power (which acknowledges no limitations) and uprootedness (which destroys a notion of chronological time in its obliteration of the past). Labor properly understood does not dominate but mediates the limits of the material world, while through its accordance with temporal rhythms – of seasons, of the day, of the body, and of life itself – labor literally roots one in the world in a consensual relationship. "Freedom derives from consenting spontaneously to that which necessity obligates."[86] In Weil's lexicon, labor reflects and produces "men and not things." Weaving her very pragmatic historical analysis of totalitarianism and its antecedents, Weil offers a plan to right human relationship with the world, to link labor to what she calls "reality, the truth, and the beauty of this universe and with the eternal wisdom which is order in it."[87] But what would prompt this transformation in labor which is, itself, an assurance of liberty? What facilitates the recognition of the dignity of self?

Her response? Complicated, as is her wont. She recognized the need for rights – which she describes as part of the "middle values" along with democracy and personality – but they are not enough. She saw rights as a pragmatic and necessary step in the emancipation of the colonies, and to possess citizenship is, in theory, to guarantee the right to consent, or not, to state actions.[88] However, rights are secondary to obligations. Rights

[83] The quotation above which opens this section comes from Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 5.
[84] Nevin writes that Weil's unpublished reading notes demonstrate a debt to E. H. Carr's *Conditions of Peace*, which was published in 1942. He tracks the lines of influence such as their shared belief in wars as moral as well as material catastrophes, and in the limitations of recourse to rights.
[85] Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, 68.
[86] Esposito, *The Origin of the Political*, 2.
[87] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 17.
[88] Weil believes that France should relinquish the colonies. However, because of her critique of power and of her concern with the link between nations and war, she is less forceful in her advocacy for the colonies to become nations, which just draws them into the endless race for power. Her earlier work in this regard is less than satisfying as she bends the question of independence to the strategic necessity of war against Germany and to the will of the French people.

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are, in fact, "ludicrously inadequate" for most situations, and rights can be used for good or bad purposes, whereas obligation is always good.[89]

To understand this, and to think through its implications for colonialism, it is first necessary to understand that for Weil in "all the crucial problems of human existence the only choice is between supernatural good on the one hand and evil on the other."[90] Rights, as a "middle value," are something which "hang in the air" between supernatural good and evil, dependent as they are upon a "notion of exchange" or a "sharing out" and a "measured quantity."[91] Often subject to debate and, she claims, issued in a tone and a point of contestation (which rights for whom and when), rights have a "commercial flavor."[92] What this "bargaining spirit" of rights does is denigrate the individual as it predicates its delivery on the "social privilege" attached (e.g., middle class or wealthy), such that the full expression of rights relies on the degree of social privilege held. Indeed, the substance of human rights comes from those men who, due to their social privilege and fluency with power, have the "monopoly on language."[93] Those who experience the ravages of affliction through exploitation and degradation may issue a "cry of protest from the depth of the heart," but their cries are lost in the "shrill nagging of claims and counterclaims."[94]

If this is true, then those who are in most need of attention are the ones whose address is least likely to be voiced or heard, for it is precisely the cry from the heart which is almost impossible to hear; while to engage in claims and counterclaims presumes a valid, and thus audible, voice. When the assurance and protection of rights becomes an accounting problem, dependent upon hierarchies of privilege, it follows that those who do not "count," in either the sense of being identified as valuable or in being able to govern the count, are by definition denied the rights needed the most. The social and political sorting of individuals according to whether they "count for something … or count for nothing" is, for Weil, one of the sources of affliction which cannot be resolved by rights. Rights, the petition for and the delivery thereof, depend on personal attributes of the person – the political and social condition of their belonging to a community, as Hannah Arendt also argued.[95] As such, they are useless to those whose very need results from their social degradation, exclusion, and silencing.

[89] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 21, 24.
[90] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 23.
[91] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 33, 18.
[92] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 18.
[93] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 22.
[94] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 21.
[95] Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism.*

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For this reason, Weil introduces her notion of obligation. Obligation is prior to attributes, for it is given through a transcendent faith in the longing for good which all of humanity shares.[96] Obligation is a form of compassion which allows for recognition of the other's "own misery."[97] Obligation is not reducible to the particularity of the person; it is impersonal. If rights cannot respond to the derealization of the individual – because they are intimately linked to the specificity of that individual – obligation may. When the French public disregards the plight of the colonized, as exemplified by the 1931 Colonial Exhibition, the massacres in Indochina, and the repression in Tunisia, they are in essence stating "you do not interest me." As such, the French are "committing a cruelty and offending against justice" in the most profound sense of rejecting the obligation to find, in what at first is made to appear as "featureless human matter," the person to whom recognition and succor is owed.[98]

Obligation is equally the limit on the use of force; namely, that one does not exercise the power one has but, rather, quietly stills it in reference to the suffering of the other. Rights are an illusion, a form of consolation, that inure one from the true suffering of the other and of the "luck" by which we presume ourselves free of such pulverizing, degrading forces. Obligation gains its strength in the humbling recognition that individual attributes, prestige, or being among the "counted," do not defend against affliction. As she wrote:

> To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself: I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstance over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself … it could happen at any moment that I might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort.[99]

In this, recognition of affliction does not succumb to the belief that those are miserable because, as she put it, in reference to the French attitude toward colonial sufferings, they are "not of the same species" and in no way "like us."[100] Instead, it is precisely because the afflicted are potentially us at any and all times that requires recognition and response and, yet, may make it almost impossible. Obligation is unconditional and eternal. It is realized only with difficulty, for it demands not only an openness to and affirmation of the vulnerability of the other, but also to the presence of an eternal and transcendent love which Weil variously

[96] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 169. [97] Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 209.
[98] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 9, 201. [99] Weil, *Selected Essays*, 27.
[100] Weil, *On Colonialism*, 43.

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names as the Good and God. Obligation is "founded on something … whatever it is … [that] does not form part of our world."[101]

Conclusion

The rejuvenation of labor, taken together with the prioritization of obligation over rights, forms the constellation of Weil's seemingly dissonant take on righting the world and preventing, if possible, the seemingly inevitable victories of the likes of National Socialism. As a whole, labor and obligation depend on a great host of related and involved concepts, such as attention, compassion, education, and one which is yet more difficult to grasp, decreation. Yet, as much as Weil's purchase on the plight of her contemporary condition, her diagnosis and her response, is striated by her encounter with the divine, it is equally and firmly rooted, both in her sense of the word and of the world, in the most essential of human petitions: *why am I being harmed*? For her, reformation of labor and the introduction of obligation respond to this question when, properly undertaken and properly understood, they set the context for recognizing individuals as sacred unto themselves rather than commodities in a transactional exchange. While we may disagree with its source, we might abide by Weil's injunction that obligation is "always the human being as such," the adherence to which begins as a first step when no one suffers from hunger in any of its myriad manifestations.[102] Lest we dismiss this as merely spiritual, note that for Weil the provision of food to the hungry requires a complete revolution.

Weil's sense of the counted and uncounted prefigures Jacques Rancière, and her critique of rights that of Arendt, while her astute and unsparing analysis of race and power in the pursuit of colonialism sets her apart from many of her contemporaries. That she saw Hitler clearly as an effect of colonization and imperialism in spirit and practice alone should suggest the value of her thought. Her grasp of the perils of colonialism unsettles and overturns not only the narratives of colonialism and nationalisms of her time, but it can also inform our own. Her insistence that there is an intrinsic link between domestic and international politics, as expressed through socio-material conditions of labor and exploitation resulting in affliction, counters solely structural or state-based analyses of power and of force. That she was so bold and unconventional as to explore the role of spiritual belief in political practices

[101] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 5. [102] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 5.

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challenges us all to rethink the distinction of the spiritual and political by which a certain version of political and international thought proceeds.

Certainly, if we accept a definition of political thought as that of a "critical practice … commensurate with both the political desire that incites it and the world it describes and seeks to transform," then Simone Weil should no longer be a lonely figure in the field of political thought and might take her place in international thought as well.[103]

[103] Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 17.

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