

## REVIEW

**Frédéric Gros, *States of Violence: An Essay on the End of War* (London: Seagull Books, 2010), ISBN: 978-1906497187**

The contemporary landscape of violence, if there is hope of breaking its hold on us, must be reconceptualized. To that end, in his provocative undertaking *States of Violence*, Frédéric Gros provides us with a philosophical and historical analysis of the transformations in war which have led us to our current predicament—one that is defined by the new powers of security and intervention, as well as the perpetual image of suffering. The broad reflections of philosophy, Gros writes, help to establish a starting point: they delineate for us, by abstracting ethical principles from the inherent conflict of war, the transition from a time in which those principles were still viable to the present day in which they are being quickly destroyed. Making his point boldly, Gros contends in his opening remarks that morality originates in “the clash of battles” and that it is a “universalization or spiritualization of the ethic of the warrior.” (4) Such quotes immediately set the mood for much of what follows in *States of Violence*, a book equally as unsettling as it is hopeful in its unflinching genealogy of modern atrocities.

Examining the historical shifts and nuances of the warrior ethic, which always pertain to the ethical structuring of the self in relation to death and violence, Gros begins with the myth of chivalry. Whether discussing the knights of the Middle Ages or the heroes of the *Iliad*, a code of conduct and bravery are invented as the conditions of excellence. The ethic of the noble fighter is in this way predicated upon courage, glory, loyalty, exemplary actions, aristocratic privilege, rivalry with a respected equal, and a sense of justice and honor. Considered on its own, death is rather meaningless. Embraced as a challenge or higher calling, it becomes the condition for a spectacular moment on the battlefield. The ethical principle, in this case, gives form to fury by means of heroic distinction: “The warrior thus consents to live and to die in accordance with the form of a narrative, gaining the right to become a name, to have renown.” (11) Because of a glorious accomplishment, the unity of the subject is crafted out of its own resilience. The name of the warrior is remembered for having finished what he set out to do, for keeping an oath despite the obstacles and dangers. This implies neither a Cartesian *cogito* nor a Kantian subject, but only a subject faithful to his promises: “The unity of the responsible subject is here the fruit of clear will and strength. I am the same and the same I will remain—this is the promise of

the warrior.” (18) What this great deed often requires is a worthy adversary, someone who is of equal stature and nobility. In this respect the mortal path of self-realization is bound up with a need for mutual recognition, without which the warrior’s boasts ring hollow: “It is necessary to find an adversary of one’s own quality and strength; otherwise, there will be only unworthy victories.” (21) We therefore observe in this first construction of violence, one of five analyzed by Gros, an active relation to death shaped by the values of a specific moral sensibility.

Drawing from the likes of Plutarch, Plato, and Aristotle, and momentarily turning away from his allusions to Jünger and Nietzsche, Gros engages with the sociohistorical phenomena supporting the Greek phalanx. Replacing the Homeric duel, in which personal dignity and honor are of the utmost importance, the morality of the citizen-soldier embraces the interdependence of the entire formation. This marks a shift in both the strategy as well as the underlying ethical position of that strategy: standing firm, rather than surpassing oneself in nobility and excellence, is the new development in moral phenomenology. While quoting Seneca, Gros eloquently shows how the stoic perspective in battle transcends fear without resorting to mere impassivity. Holding firm in one’s place does not equate with being detached or dispassionate, but underscores the virtues of courage and firmness in facing the blows of misfortune: “To endure does not mean to have no feelings—it is to feel without allowing your feelings to distract you, and to stand firm.” (35) Contrasted with the chivalrous warrior, whose unity of self was created out of an oath, the constancy of the hoplite is defined by his place in the phalanx, marching alongside his comrades in compact ranks. He may very well be afraid, but he overcomes this fear for the sake of what is good and for the sake of the city. To do this, he must first triumph over his own weaknesses: passions, desires, fears, impetuosity, and so forth. Standing firm therefore implies self-mastery and self-respect, a deepening of one’s moral experience through patience and fortitude in the face of danger. And ultimately this courage was strengthened by the solidarity of the group: standing firm is necessary when running from the enemy immediately leaves others in the phalanx exposed and unprotected. Remaining at one’s post is crucial when the shields and spears of the troop create a unified wall of attacking and defending, and for this reason holding firm and remaining a master over oneself is at the same time a formidable social ethic: “What binds [this living solidarity] together is concern for others and the urgency to protect them, an obsession with concern for others inasmuch as it proves to be more pressing than the imperative of preserving one’s own life.” (46)

By the time of the Enlightenment, the ideals of heroism and *philia* give way to rational mechanization as the underlying principle of war. The army is now thought of as a machine, and the soldiers are mere cogs to be ordered, situated, and deployed in the most efficient manner possible. Through a close reading of military history, directly engaging the writings of François de la Noue, Raimondo Montecuccoli, and the Marquis de Puy-ségur, Gros observes that the new goal is to establish a total science of war. (54) Geography, architecture, physics, geometry, and arithmetic become the scientific models for

generals who are no longer leading charges at the front ranks of the battlefield, but instead giving orders and calculating positions. Of course the State and military institutions become all the more dependent on each other, especially as one takes into consideration the necessary resources involved in developing modern weaponry, artillery, and the overall massification of armies: "And the State will be able to arrange these resources only by imposing on its people a durable and consistent tax system, as it constitutes between itself and those it governs an obligatory, continuous, and general administrative relation through taxation." (59) A centralized, hierarchical system is developed and refined in the administrative control of inventories, logistics, headcounts, requisitions, discipline, training, inspections, and decision-making. Modern warfare is therefore conducted by immense armies whose overall structures and movements are dominated by an administrative approach, by an all-encompassing logic which demands of its soldiers perfect discipline. What is required is nothing less than uniformity in action: the rationality of automatic and coordinated responses became paramount as technological innovation raised the stakes of calculative precision. (65) Gros, known for his work on Foucault, elucidates the nuances of *docility* and *consent* which perforce complement the otherwise externalized administration of war. Just as docility is distinguished from submission by its deeply ingrained obedience, consent departs from obligation in that the former presupposes a freely decided acceptance of exactly that which has already been determined for the rational, modern subject: "the fact remains that in consenting, even for my greatest advantage, I consent to what has been decided for me by someone else." (72) These are the paradoxes of modern disciplinary structures, in which active consent is the pathological manifestation of blind zeal and conformity. In this regard, modern power has become all the more effective and ubiquitous as it relays its commands, in the context of the military or the militarized State, through administrative channels that already presuppose disciplined subjects, those good soldiers and citizens who freely agree to agree to everything. (75)

In the above accounts of war, from the chivalrous ethic to mechanized obedience, there is a moral narrative which opens itself up to the possibility of resistance. Gros in fact develops this argument in the remaining configurations of violence, namely, sacrifice and total war, as well as the traditional categories of war thought in terms of justice, loyalty, and law. The meaning of sacrifice, for instance, is all too often absorbed into a higher dialectical frame of patriotism, through which the individual's death is transformed into a celebration of the eternal destiny of his people. (80-81) But at the same time, Gros contends, the brutal experience of war opens the possibility of a reversal in sacrifice, so that it becomes detached from external values, concerns, and goals: "the experience of this total freedom rattles the strictly utilitarian dimension of sacrifice and opens out onto the general denunciation of any enlistment or requisition." (93) In this moment of freedom, it would appear, sacrifice is affirmed on its own terms, as opposed to being subordinated to an overarching nationalistic mythos. In total war, entire populations are mobilized against one another in a spiral of catastrophic destruction. These massive upheavals are motivated by a technological imperative, in which all resources, living or non-living, are placed into the all-consuming and all-

destroying service of complete extermination. (116) Total war is fundamentally, for Gros, technological: "As there is mass consumption, so total war is mass destruction, in which people are no longer anything but 'human resources' in the furnace of a machine that wants only to turn." (117) But even in this ideological hell, in which all reality necessarily reflects the delirious mobilization of totalitarian ideals, there is the motive to bring it to an end. Hatred seeks out the absolute annihilation of the enemy, and does this in order to emerge from itself all the more quickly and decisively. (120) Contemporary states of violence, by contrast, seem to do away with even this mode of wishful moralizing.

Before states of violence, war was concentrated both geographically and temporally: its battles took place in open plains and wide spaces typically set apart from the daily course of mundane activities, and they were fought during specific times according to which "[p]eriods of peace alternated with periods of war, in a relatively exclusive way." (263) Today we see modes of decentralized violence break out in unpredictable ways, from bombs detonated on a double-decker bus during London's morning rush hour in 2005 to the terrorist siege of Mumbai's Taj Mahal Palace & Tower in 2008. Equally as disturbing is the phenomenological distance achieved by pushing the technological imperative to its extreme limit, so that violence becomes increasingly unilateral: "one can bring about the death of hundreds of thousands of enemies from the comfort of an armchair in front of a computer screen, and without risking a single moment of one's own existence." (268) Traditional war was fought by enemies locked in an exchange of death which held out the possibility of a moral victory, whereas the contemporary state of violence is perpetuated by the myth of perfect security, which simply forms the counterpart to privatized and de-regulated terrorist attacks. What we are left with is an ongoing awareness of multiplying threats which must be monitored and neutralized, so that in our mission to respond to every imaginable danger, we exacerbate the conditions from which those threats arise. The living individual thus becomes all the more vulnerable the more she is protected by systems of security, systems vigorously excluding the destitute who thereupon become feared as outsiders and used to justify heightened security. (284) For Gros, it is precisely this bleak circle of anxiety, rage, and nihilistic destruction which cries out for us to "inspire vigilance and invent fresh hopes." (290)

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