Modern Intellectual History, 7, 2 (2010), pp. 391–415 © Cambridge University Press 2010
doi:10.1017/S1479244310000132

AMBEDKAR'S INHERITANCES

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B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), the radical Indian anti-caste thinker, left unfinished a critical corpus of works on "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India", a fragment of which was provisionally titled "Essays on the Bhagavad Gita". This essay engages with that corpus, situating Ambedkar's encounter with the Gita within a much broader twentieth-century political and philosophical concern with the question of tradition and violence. It interrogates the excessive and heterogeneous conceptual impulses that mediate Ambedkar's attempt to retrieve a counterhistory of Indian antiquity. Located as it is in the same Indic neighborhood from which a radical counterhistory of touchability might emerge, the Gita is a particularly fraternal and troubling text for Ambedkar. Yet his responsibility towards the Gita comes to be hinged not upon evasion but rather upon an exaggeration of its hermeneutic power; that is, upon his painstaking inflation of the Gita's willfully modern interest in instituting the universal. Ambedkar's relentless struggle to annihilate this universality of the Gita would have to be founded upon another universality, at once destructive, excessive and counterlegislative. In this unfinished attempt to recuperate the ideality of the universal, this essay asks, does Ambedkar himself become the most thorough modern practitioner of the Gita?

Widely perceived as the most radical thinker and critic of caste in twentieth-century India, B. R. Ambedkar also remains the most enduring symbol of that country's emancipatory democracy. Relentlessly insurgent in thought and resolutely legislative in ambition, flirtatious with Marx but powerfully tied to the vicissitudes of his own revolutionary commitments, Ambedkar was not merely the foremost constitutionalist of free India but also the remorseless elaborator of the hollowness of the nation's freedom that had remained untouched by equality. Strikingly original in the way he conceptualized the varieties of power at the intersection of state and religion, Ambedkar was at once given to legislative reason and scriptural enchantments. He was born an untouchable within the Hindu fold, an identity he disclaimed on moral, political and religious grounds; and he died a Buddhist, to which he publicly converted in a spectacular *dalit* disavowal of free India's tolerance of untouchability. His prolific itinerary and his rigorously cosmopolitan cognition of suffering, one which allowed him to apprehend the negro, the Jew and the *dalit* within the narrative of universal dehumanization, secures Ambedkar rather decisively in the deformed constellation

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of twentieth-century humanistic thought. Such, clearly, are the legitimate broad strokes, if more than slightly homogenizing contours, of the didactic, secularist, and sometimes grudging nationalist appropriations of Ambedkar as the thinker of the Indian political.

These are no doubt powerful hegemonic readings of Ambedkar's politics. But what is Ambedkar's "politics of reading"? By which I mean in this essay not so much the overdetermined political interest and pragmatic conception of rights that supposedly underlay all his intellectual labor, a viewpoint curiously endorsed by his nationalist critics, liberal advocates and *dalit* hagiographers alike, tied historically as they all have been to the impasse and imperative of numbers, first under the constraints of imperial expansion of franchise and then of parliamentary democracy. Rather, by referring to Ambedkar's politics of reading, this essay points towards his insurgent and heterogeneous response to the unitary power of tradition to frame meaning, and the aesthetics of his resistance against that power. His responsibility, that is, to rigorously, doggedly, and politically read that scripture which bars the untouchable from its very "economy of reading", yet also constitutes, by the sheer reproducibility of its own authority and permissiveness, the untouchable's fraught inheritance. Ambedkar's politics of responsibility, his method of "excessive reading", constitutes his desire at once to violate this inheritance and to recuperate its plural touchable histories.

In that world of touchability that Ambedkar had conjured in his dream, authenticity of origins was clearly less important than the destination of history. Origins were dubious and secretive, their claim to authenticity dodgy and their textuality suspect. Repeatedly invaded, settled, interpreted, and translated, as Ambedkar loved to repeat, the Brahmanic authenticity of India itself buckled under the pressure of a revolutionary counterhistory. For someone whose acute awareness of the problem of violence came not always by way of modernity but fundamentally by way of his difficult relationship with antiquity and the medieval, the Gita opened up for Ambedkar a radical and slippery economy of reading. It was a passage both attractive because of its promiscuous interpretive world and its perversely alluring "economy of violence", and repelling because of its contaminating mythological power. As a text within scripture, the Gita became in fact a striking allegory for Ambedkar's history of a disrupted India. In its patchwork of interpretive maneuvers; its meticulously cultivated aura; its concealment of those cultic practices which gave it form and content; its suppression of plebian orality; its fratricidal remorselessness; its unacknowledged textual neighborhoods and arbitrary political boundaries that cut deep across a long history of degrading Indic violence and subjugation; and its construction of a timeless theological imaginary in order to hide its depressing, willful modernity, the Gita re-enacted just as it concealed the foreignness of the idea of India to itself and to Brahmanic Hindu thought. It is this secretive concealment of the

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modernity of the text, a secrecy that is foundational to antiquity by its very name, which Ambedkar sought to unlock.

Would the dissolution of this secrecy, this drive to force open the spurious antiquity of the Gita, enable him to write a wholly different history of touchability? Is a heretical history possible without that inheritance which, by its very name, is always in excess of one's capacity to respond? Could Ambedkar stand untouched by the excessiveness of this inheritance and its claim to universality and institute a new and ideal politics of responsibility? Is there an ideality, a touchable history which could be purely political, untouched by the repressive morality of the canon and its foundational secrecy? On what kind of ideality would that touchable history be founded if not on another universality, equally violent, excessive, and purist?

LEGISLATIONS OF FRATRICIDE

The critique of violence is the philosophy of its history.

Walter Benjamin, *Critique of Violence*

In his meticulous attention to both form and content, to the hermeneutics and politics of texts, in other words, Ambedkar comes remarkably close to that other distraught figure in twentieth-century thought, Walter Benjamin. I will leave aside the checkered relationship with historicism and humanism that both these figures share in the constellation of twentieth-century revolutionary thought, and focus here instead on their strikingly similar responses to the question of fate and the law.[1] At the common core of both Benjamin's and Ambedkar's political thought, which makes this contrapuntality possible, is a painstaking rethinking of the mythic, numbing, and pacifying force that sustains and reproduces the most oppressive forms of power in their respective traditions. Where Benjamin's work invokes the divinity of the revolutionary general strike, Ambedkar's reading of the Gita reveals exactly the opposite: the counterrevolutionary propensity inherent in fratricide that masquerades as holy, divinely sanctioned war. If, for Benjamin, responsibility resides in the ethical violence of the strike, Ambedkar's responsibility hinges on the non-ethical. It heretically breaches Hindu mythology and its Brahmanic secrets to force open a recalcitrant tactile space for the

[1] The mobilization of legal and legislative metaphors in Walter Benjamin's early essay on the "Critique of Violence" and Ambedkar's on the Gita is suggestively similar. Where Benjamin invokes the police, the military and the state, Ambedkar deploys the metaphors of the courtroom, "trial for murder", and Krishna as a defending lawyer and "dictator". See Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, "Philosophic Defense of Counter-Revolution: Krishna and His Gita" in *idem*, *Writings and Speeches* (henceforth *BAWS*), ed. Vasant Moon (Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra, 1987), vol. 3, 365.

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untouchable. Not for him the "pure means" of Benjamin's non-programmatic, utopian, divine violence,[2] which as Werner Hamacher has observed can easily lapse into an abstention from politics itself.[3] Ambedkar's critical space is animated by a stubborn intensity, a political responsibility not merely to dismantle the myth of the canon but also to situate that canon within the contingent histories of scriptural interpretation and popular religious practice.

Yet what is common to both these political thinkers is the idea of contamination and decay of divinity by myth.[4] At the core of both Benjamin's and Ambedkar's thought, in other words, is the attempt to lay bare the powerful aura of tradition and modernity whose legitimacy is enforced not by divine sanction but by the myth that goes in its name. Ambedkar's Gita, by which I mean his readings of that text, is first and foremost a political discourse which must be placed, according to him, within the larger juridical problematic of sovereignty. It is a discourse, before anything else, on the law. For the Mahabharat is fundamentally a lyrical exposition of fratricide and war.[5] Placed within this problematic, the Gita captures that moment when the juridical imperative of war interrupts the ethical demands of brotherhood. Sovereignty calls for exceptional action, even if such an action entails the supreme sacrifice of all things familial and affective. It is by elevating this decisive moment of war to the state of ethical exception and by raising fratricide to the status of singular responsibility that Krishna successfully "provokes" Arjun to pick up his arms again.[6] This moment of provocation, which is merely a singular instance of calling to war, assumes within the Gita a lawmaking force; in other words, it assumes the form of myth that posits and henceforth preserves the law of all war and all duty. Ambedkar's staging of this moment of decision resonates strikingly with Benjamin's attempt to liberate divine law, which is the law of justice, from the stupefying inertia generated by mythic forces.[7] Not for Ambedkar the fear and trembling that is Arjun's condition when Krishna reveals to him his infinite, universal and celestial form, "with countless mouths and eyes" and "raising divine weapons beyond count".[8] The trembling

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2 Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", in *idem*, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, *1913–1926*, ed., Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 252.

3 Werner Hamacher, "Afformative, Strike: Benjamin's Critique of Violence", in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds., *Destruction and Experience: Walter Benjamin's Philosophy* (Manchester, 2000), 113–14.

4 Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", 251.

5 Ambedkar, "The Literature of Brahminism", *BAWS*, 3: 261–2.

6 Ibid., 262.

7 "Justice is the principle of all divine endmaking", writes Benjamin, "power the principle of all mythic lawmaking'. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", 248.

8 *The Bhagavad-Gita in the Mahabharata: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. and ed. J. A. B. Van Buitenen (Chicago, 1981), 113. Henceforth *The Bhagavad-Gita.*

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of the subject, after all, is precisely what gives the Gita its auratic capacity to posit the law of war as the law of action. Stripped of this cultivated aura that clouds its mythic and bloody origin, then, Ambedkar's Gita reveals its true form: a reactionary "dogma of counterrevolution".

This conceptual move, which entails the rehabilitation of Gita in the world of representation—a very political world of representation—is crucial to Ambedkar's critique of violence. It is here, after all, in its founding at the moment of war, that the Gita finds its most violent form, expansive in its call to fratricidal duty, but measured in its political ambition, which is the legislative articulation of sovereignty. It defends war, according to Ambedkar, on two grounds. The first ground is that because the world is perishable and "man is mortal", he is "bound to die". What difference does it make for the wise whether "man dies a natural death or whether he is done to death as a result of violence"?[9] The violence of Ambedkar's prose and the interpretation itself is suggestive here. "Life is unreal", he continues, "why shed tears because it has ceased to be? Death is inevitable, why bother how it has resulted?"[10] It is worthwhile to quote at some length the second defense of violence that Ambedkar's Gita mounts:

> it is a mistake to think that the body and the soul are one. They are separate. Not only are the two quite distinct but they differ in-as-much as the body is perishable while the soul is eternal and imperishable. When death occurs it is the body that dies. The soul *never* dies. Not only does it never die but air cannot dry it, fire cannot burn it, and a weapon cannot cut it. It is therefore wrong to say that when a man is killed his soul is killed . . . His soul discards the dead body as a person discards his old clothes—wears a new ones [*sic*] and carries on. As the soul is never killed, killing a person can never be a matter of any movement. War and killing need therefore give no ground to remorse or to shame, so argues the Bhagvat Gita.[11]

To Ambedkar, this would actually seem to be an "unheard of defense of murder".[12] Despite his irony here, this critique of the Gita's representation of life as deathless abstraction is singularly important for Ambedkar's displacement of the ethical commandments that constitute the text. Ambedkar, of course, goes farther than merely displacing its ethics from politics. He attempts in fact to entirely empty the realm of the political of moral constraints. No etiquette of critique, no hospitality to tradition, no patience for abstraction even when few things are as abstract and imperative for him as rights, no concession to

9 Ambedkar, "Krishna and His Gita", 360.
10 Ibid., 360.
11 Ibid., 360.
12 Ibid., 364.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000132 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sovereign violence even when he must give up neither the idea of the state nor of representation, and clearly a great deal of principled attention but no cognitive sympathy towards the ethics of form: Ambedkar is a thinker of pure politics, where political consequences of critique are much more important than the merit of moral outcomes.

It is in this purity of means and meticulous unraveling of form that Ambedkar's corpus comes closest to Walter Benjamin's. What both of them emphasize is the importance of rescuing the body for itself, rather than in the name of the soul or the "impure sacred". Rescuing, that is, the idea of the body's vulnerability to injury and violence. For no matter how sacred man is,[13] Benjamin argues, his bodily life is always open to suffering, always vulnerable to the painful experience of corporeality. Now to suffer as a result of fate and because of conditions outside of one's control, Benjamin writes elsewhere, is one thing. This would be a suffering free of guilt. But to suffer one's corporeality with guilt, to blame oneself for one's suffering, is a telling sign that fate, or rather what goes in the name of that fate, has managed to install the law of suffering in its place. In other words, fate has transformed into the law—fate after all is the law—when it naturalizes itself by making suffering look like it is the problem of the sufferer. As Benjamin puts it, "Law condemns not to punishment but to guilt".[14] It is precisely this law masquerading as fate that Ambedkar too confronts: the law that puts the responsibility and the guilt of being an untouchable on that which is untouchable. A responsibility which is then legitimized as natural, for being born an untouchable is indeed one's fate and also one's guilt.

This violation of life in the name of the law—that is, violation of life in its most embodied form by being forbidden to touch—is enabled by what Benjamin would call "lawmaking" violence. The moment of lawmaking violence is the moment of instituting godly myths. In other words, mythic violence stages itself as a lawmaking force in the name of the gods or as gods' manifestation, and posits the law.[15] This mythic moment of law-positing or lawmaking does not remain merely a moment. Instead, it expands and reproduces itself continuously outside of its originary time, so that what started as momentary violence is transformed into a general rule, a repeatable example and a universal ethics. This infinite expansion of the mythic moment into the law enables not just the making of law

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[13] By which he means "that life in man that is identically present in earthly life, death and afterlife". Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", 251.

[14] And just before that: "Fate shows itself, therefore, in the view of life, as condemned, as having essentially first been condemned and then become guilty". Benjamin, "Fate and Character", 204.

[15] Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", 248.

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but also its preservation.[16] What originates at the exceptional moment as merely mythic violence, then, through expansion and repetition goes on to found the general law. Put differently, the law that exists is always already contaminated and ruined by the myth which gives it the mystifying stability, a "sacrosanct" attribute, a word Ambedkar uses for the Gita with a strikingly Benjaminian irony. The critical node of thought that joins Benjamin's lawmaking myth with Ambedkar's law of untouchability here is again that masquerade which enables the sacrosanct, auratic reproduction of violence: fate. It is from the "uncertain, ambiguous sphere of fate", after all, that mythic violence bursts upon the subject: Arjun in Ambedkar's case, Niobe in Benjamin's.[17] It stops short of killing the subject, but leaves in its trail a profound guilt, respectively, either of not having answered the call of duty or of having mistakenly underestimated the power of the gods. Arjun's trembling and the death of Niobe's children both stage this moment of violent law-positing, when not only is the God manifested and revealed, but also his law is transformed into a call of obligation to the infinite.

Looked at through this Benjaminian lens, Ambedkar's critique of the Gita begins to assume a radically impatient form, where his condemnation of the canon is enabled not by evasion but precisely by his exaggeration of its hermeneutic power; its capacity, in other words, to legislate and conceal at once. For within the text, at the moment of its enunciation, what is actually a call to fratricide is in due course transformed (outside of it and through recursive practice) into the law of action. If the Gita stages that mythic moment of exceptional encounter between Krishna and Arjun—that is, the moment of impending fratricide—it also has the capacity to expand the doctrine of that moment into the law. In other words, the negation of the body that inheres in the originary moment of the Gita, the refusal of the body as a site of any experience, any tragedy, any remorse, and, above all, any politics, does not merely remain a momentary doctrine. Nor is the trivializing of the destructible body meant merely to stage the exemplary "manifestation" of Krishna as an indestructible God. What the negation means, instead, is the coming together of a reproducible, recursive myth that legitimizes violence toward the body, toward thinking of the body itself, as it begins to masquerade as divine "sovereign" law.[18] This violence

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16 "All mythic, lawmaking violence, which we may call 'executive'", Benjamin writes, "is pernicious". Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", 252. Also see Hamacher, "Afformative, Strike", 109.

17 Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", 248.

18 As Benjamin writes, while distinguishing mythic or "executive" violence from divine violence: "Divine violence, which is the sign and seal but never the means of sacred dispatch, may be called 'sovereign violence'". See Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", 252.

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toward human finitude, toward the dark possibility of the destruction of man, is what Ambedkar, in the manner of Fanon, polemically calls "murder".[19]

Murder can, however, take dangerously banal and mundane forms. Beneath the polemical effect for which Ambedkar deploys that word is a simmering critique of the negation of the body in Krishna's mythic law. When thinking of violation from the untouchable space that Ambedkar inhabits, after all, murder could come to mean much more than destruction of "mere" life. For untouchability corrupts the untouchable even without spilling blood.[20] It demands the untouchable's sacrifice and secures his suffering, like all mythic violence, within the law. As Benjamin puts it, "mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake" which constantly "demands sacrifice".[21] Untouchability is precisely that: the reduction of life to "mere existence" and the mystification of the law as divine will. It is of critical importance to Ambedkar and the source of considerable anger, then, that it is precisely the body, reduced to mere existence, which is instituted as dispensable in the law of the Gita. As an encounter between the infinite God and the finite subject which occurs at the moment of a fratricidal war, the Gita institutes a specific kind of lawmaking moment, violent in origin, apparently disinterested in its politics, yet reproducible in its aura.[22] A moment, in other words, which can then be mobilized in nationalist political theology toward a "law-preserving" end, where bodily suffering can be permanently habilitated—or "bastardized", as Benjamin calls it[23]—as a source of ethics, but never apprehended, touched, and treated as a mark of juridical and historical injury.

While suffering of the self can now be given the name of absolute obligation to God, and in more public moments to the nation or *swaraj*, there would be no language to express the suffering of that which is suffered not as ethics but under force. There would be no language to conceptualize intimate bodily injury that is not practiced by the self but inflicted by fellow men and legitimized by the sheer everydayness of the law. Except that it is the sufferer's fate. It is instructive to read the word *harijan* as this lawmaking myth that institutes the untouchable

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19 Like when Fanon revolts on an equally angry humanist register, "I see constant denial of man, an avalanche of murders." Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, new trans. Richard Philcox (New York, 2004), 236.

20 Blood anyway, writes Benjamin, is a symbol of "mere life". Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", 250.

21 Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", 250.

22 On the Gita's "manipulation of the question of history" and its interest in the "apparent disclosure of the law" see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 58. As Krishna says, in Spivak's astute rendering of the Gita's legislative and semitic registers: "I make myself whenever the Law is in decline". Ibid., 53.

23 Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", 252.

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as the "manifestation of the gods". The naming draws its legitimizing force from the corporeal tragedy of the untouchable—of being *born* untouchable—and reinscribes him in his own mythic fate as "God's child". Reiterating, reminding, rehearsing, and even respecting the untouchable's tragedy by invoking the divine, the ethical act of naming can then defer a fundamentally political imperative: touching the moral law of untouchability itself.

NEGATIVE SACRED

Something is out of joint in the way the Gita acquires its legislative power in the name of divinity. For Ambedkar, the divinity of Krishna and of the Gita itself obfuscates the historicity of its beginnings, substituting the text's contingent temporal sedimentation with a timeless, mythic origin. To him Krishna is in essence a fallible warrior, and only a dense network of Brahmanic interpretation accumulated over time has lent to his name a divine aura. Throughout the Mahabharat, for instance, Krishna remains a subject of abuse because of his "low origins" and "loose morals".[24] He is the classic Machiavellian figure whose name attaches to "intrigue" and violation of "rules of war" a dubious and pragmatic legitimacy. Such is Krishna's wretched fallibility that even Duryodhan, the Kaurava prince whose imperial ambitions are at the center of this epic fratricide, can accuse and abuse him and still be endorsed by the "gods in heaven". Ambedkar's suspicion of the Gita is here both hermeneutic and theological. For if the Gita had always been a part of the Mahabharat at large, why does the "personality" of this God sway so violently between these two textual moments? In other words, how and why is a wretched human intriguer in the master text strategically elevated to divinity within the decisive event of the encounter that is the Gita?[25]

In itself and despite Ambedkar's resistance, this elevation of Krishna is not a dubious maneuver when viewed from inside the dense web of events that constitute the epic. The cultural force of the Mahabharat as epic resides precisely in its humanity and in its often perverse highlighting of the fallibility of gods and men alike. Its enduring political charm for the nationalist imaginary is a function of its complex narrative network that links several generations of betrayal, friendship and war together, eventually culminating in the delivering of justice. In fact, Ambedkar was himself situated in that hermeneutic field of infinite interpretive possibilities that the epic's, and within it the Gita's, mythological complexity opened up. It is his own worldliness, his corporeal awareness of being untouchable and the worldly tragedy that attaches to it, that opens up for him the

[24] Ambedkar, "Krishna and His Gita", 375.

[25] Ibid., 376.

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space of radical displacement inside the Mahabharat; an immanent displacement enabled by the transparent humanness and the moral lapses intrinsic to the epic. His countermemory, after all, is given no more to historicist fidelity and no less to radical mythology than that of the epic's other modern readers.[26] In that sometimes unwilling and sometimes willful intimacy of method and neighborhood, he thus inherits an impossible fraternity, difficult to disavow and painful to inhabit.

Ambedkar's singular tragedy is marked by this aporetic passage through Indian antiquity. The history he attempts to rewrite is not one he can simply conjure out of the remains of Brahmanic history, which he sees as absolutely antagonistic and therefore worthy of destruction. The history of touchability he wants to conjure would be necessarily intimate, by its very name, to the other's history even as it negates the latter.[27] There is, in other words, no material, no hermeneutics, no narrative of sovereignty, statemaking, legislation, cruelty, and disenchantment open to conjuring and rewriting that is not already marked and marred by the ghost of Brahmanic labor hovering over the conjoined archives of Indian antiquity. Ambedkar's painstaking and exasperated readings of both the Mahabharat and the Gita were constituted by and located within the textual matrices activated and disabled by the sheer heterogeneity of that canonical tradition. Neither this canon nor his resistance to it were available to him entirely outside this neighborhood of antiquity and the numerous modern imaginaries that this antiquity had generated, including his own Buddhist imaginary. The prolific matrix of Brahmanic and liberal–nationalist canonizing labor that Ambedkar is so righteously repelled by at once circumscribes and lends form and power to his displacement of the Indic tradition.

In finding himself perversely attracted to the permissive economy of texts such as the Gita, then, Ambedkar is no exception. The twentieth-century political life of the Gita and the several political theologies that were derived from it flourished precisely because its deftly constructed metasubject, from which all worldly subjects could derive their archetypal being and form, and its capacity to soothsay, could be mobilized for all sorts of ethical and political imaginaries. The Gita became the "God's law",[28] the law, in other words, of the nation's

[26] Ambedkar's difficult relationship with the method of modern historiography and his radical "mythography" has been attentively explored, with great originality, in Debjani Ganguly's *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-modernity: Notes on a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste* (New York, 2005).

[27] For a theoretically sophisticated engagement with Ambedkar's genealogy of the *dalit* as political subject and his conceptual struggle to frame a counterhistory for the "minority" see Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley, CA, 2009).

[28] This term surfaces throughout Gandhi's corpus. But see Gandhi, *The Bhagavad-Gita According to Gandhi* (Berkeley, CA, 2000), 81.

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ethical and semitized God.[29] It offered all worldly subjects something prophetic, something which promised transcendence from the drudgeries of colonial life and, problematically for Ambedkar, all life. The problem of Krishna's fallible and amoral humanity and his sudden transformation into divine form actually adds to the humane unpredictability and fickle intimacy of the canon. The problem, then, is not of the narrative kind. It is certainly not a problem of inconsistency that inheres in the text, as Ambedkar contends.[30] On the contrary, Krishna's magical transformations fundamentally constitute the productive vicissitudes of the epic form that lend and sustain its powerful universality.[31]

The problem is with what is silently enabled by the malleability of this epic, where the aesthetics of delivery shrewdly obscure the morbidity of its ethics and where its political consequences are concealed, through a strange reversal of Enlightenment disenchantment, by the cunning of magic and rebirth of God.[32] The problem is with the erasure of that textual history that makes the Gita what it is, which is a text outside and later than the Mahabharat, a text with heterogeneous beginnings and careers. As a text, Ambedkar argues, the Gita is a non-text, by which he means that unlike the Bible, it is unworthy of making any claim to universality on which a given text's status as scripture must hinge. Clearly interested more in its spuriously modern authority than in its scriptural antiquity, he is relentless in his emphasis of the obscurity of the Gita's dodgy authorship. It is not, according to him, "a single book written by a single author".[33] It is a patchwork of contingent improvisations. It is hetero-temporal in its beginnings and multiple in its authorship.[34] Not only is it *not* part of the canon of tradition, its textuality itself is also deeply suspect. For the very "transmissibility" of the Gita, to use another Benjaminian term, is enabled by its oral rather than scriptural provenance. Its genealogy is clannish rather than religious. The original Gita, according to Ambedkar, was merely a "ballad" recited by the bards about Arjun's unwillingness to "fight" the war and Krishna's use of "coercion" to compel Arjun to fight.[35] This "historical saga" is a "beginning" of the Gita. Like all beginnings, this beginning mutates over time: first, by the addition of the verses of *Bhakti Yoga* where Krishna is given divine form as "the God of the Bhagavat religion"; second, by stitching onto the original ballad a "patch" which introduces the *Sankhya* and

29 See Ambedkar, "The Literature of Brahminism", 263.

30 Ambedkar, "Krishna and His Gita", 376.

31 On the openness of the Gita as text and its permissive hermeneutic world which enables its prolific use in nationalist allegory, see Simona Sawhney's probing work *The Modernity of Sanskrit* (Minneapolis, 2009).

32 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA, 2002).

33 Ambedkar, "Krishna and His Gita", 376.

34 Ibid., 372–76.

35 Ibid., 376.

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Vedanta philosophy as "defense to the doctrines of *Purva Mimansa* which they did not have before";[36] and third, by finally elevating Krishna to the position of the transcendental, celestial, supreme God. "From the position of Ishwara", he was elevated "to that of Parmeshwara".[37]

The terrifying yet affective revelation of Krishna's *vishva-rupa* or celestial form was indeed part of the original folktale, but that early folktale was not a moment of enunciation of any ethics. An oral and popular cult of Krishna in due course came to be "interwoven" with a folktale on war to give the text its religious history. The terror which marks the trembling encounter between Arjun and Krishna was merely a "different way" of alluding to and legitimizing the use of "brute force".[38] It is the singular concern with moral law that must undergird the emergent form of sovereignty and legitimize the duty and right to kill in the interest of the state that formed the core of the text in its early iterations. So what changed with the addition of the patches? What does the counterhistory of the beginnings of Ambedkar's Gita tell us?

In the early forms of the Gita, Ambedkar's reading suggests, terror was foundational. The moment of divine revelation and the obligation to war were hinged on it. Trembling, provocation and fear were crucial, in other words, to the political and sacrificial structure of the early text. In the subsequent forms, Ambedkar argues, terror becomes secondary. Instead, it is revelation which is mobilized and habilitated at the centre of the politics and ethics of the Gita. In these subsequent forms the "mundane problems of war" are replaced by a discourse on religious practice, non-violence, and renunciation. In fact, in the later text one can easily discern a "drop in the tone" of the dialogue whenever Arjun's questions veer towards the worldly futility of killing. The narrative takes a new turn, in contrast, every time Krishna mobilizes his own metaphysical, "philosophic defense of war". This philosophic defense, more importantly, often has nothing to do with Arjun's worldly, "natural" questions, nor has it anything to do with war as such as a worldly and stately act of killing.[39] Instead, what is offered by Krishna is a combination of strands of later Vedanta and *Sankhya* philosophies. The philosophical emptiness of the early Gita is stuffed, *post facto*, by questions and answers on discipline, death and the transmigration of the soul. In fact, in both form and content the extended dialogic structure of the Gita resembles so

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[36] Ibid., 377.

[37] Ibid., 377.

[38] Ibid., 376. An entire chapter in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* goes by that term "brute force". Is Ambedkar as unaware of that other critique of violence as his secretive evasion of Gandhi in his essay suggests? Or is it Ambedkar's attempt to recuperate the history of non-violence itself, untouched by the spirit of the Mahatma?

[39] Ambedkar, "Krishna and His Gita", 377.

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strikingly the "dialogues" of the Buddhist suttas that it is preposterous to claim, as Tilak does, that the former borrowed nothing from Buddhism and that it is a self-standing text within the Mahabharat.[40]

For Ambedkar, with the occult histories of Buddha lurking in his imaginary, the ethical veneer of the Gita merely conceals its rootedness in the moment of fratricide and its originary theorization of clannish duty. This veneer is given its form not in textual isolation but through active exchange with other religious traditions, especially Buddhism. In fact, the ethics of the Gita is not only produced through this exchange, it is produced precisely as a response to the Buddhist doctrine of non-violence.[41] Neither is Ambedkar's Gita, then, a text of antiquity within the Mahabharat, for parts of the Mahabharat were themselves composed as late as the early medieval period, nor are its morality and politics part of its originary form. Its mobilization of friendship, compassion and disinterest as ethics, unless seen to have been derived straight out of the *Mahapadana Sutta*, sit uncomfortably on its founding moment of fratricide.[42] The Gita, in other words, was as foreign to the Brahmanic canon and to the politics of Hindu India as radical Buddhism was. Its secretive politics was a considerably modern politics, given form through recursive interpretive practice.

THE GIFT OF DEATH

It is in the Terror that the State is realized.

Alexander Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*

What is, then, according to Ambedkar, the politics of the Gita? What is it that dies at the very moment when a fratricidal politics is substituted, ironically, by an ethics of fraternity and care? Not only is Krishna, by deliberate mutation, made a god amongst other gods, a godliness which is inconsistent with his status as a fallible man throughout the Mahabharata, he is also suddenly made a "representative" par excellence, within the event of the Gita, of all other forms of gods.[43] The enormous power of this Brahmanic mutation of Krishna, first as the transcendental God who contains the multiplicity of gods inside him, and second as the "incarnation" of that God who is wholly incorporeal and infinite, paradoxically accrues from and enables the Gita's suspension of the finitude of

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[40] Ibid., 371.

[41] Ibid., 369–71. On Ambedkar's comparative reading and literal matching of words of the Bhagavad Gita and Buddha's doctrine in *Majjhina Nikaya I* see 370. On dates and authorship see 371–4.

[42] *Maitri*, *Karuna*, *Mudita*, and *Upeksha* are the words in Ambedkar's text.

[43] Ambedkar, "The Literature of Brahminism", 263.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000132 Published online by Cambridge University Press

worldly being. For according to Ambedkar, Krishna's doctrine of sacrifice and death necessarily hinges on the infinity of the *atman* or soul: man is never killed because the "*atman* is eternal" and even grief is unjustified because "things are imperishable".[44] That which is finite, worldly, and destructible trembles at the sight of divine, infinite aura, and is revealed the universal spirit in that very moment of terror. The law of war, the subject's obligation to the infinite, the invocation of the masculine, the politics of sovereignty, the ephemerality of the corpus, the indifference to death, the dictum of disinterested action—all politics, in other words—come to the subject as divine revelation at that dramatic moment of trembling.[45] This political theology, where politics comes as revelation of the aura and as transcendental terror, marks the triumph of the infinite over the finite.

Terror and revelation are out of joint, then, only inasmuch as one is lawmaking and the other law-preserving. They are disjointed, yet conjoined. For lawmaking terror originates at the moment of war and posits the law of killing precisely through the frightening revelation. Then, once the law has been posited, revelation quickly sequesters itself of its own origin in terror, becomes law-preserving, and opens itself as a site for peaceful (or liberal) ethics, lending in the process a stable continuum to its legislative powers. What makes such a continuum work? Benjamin's argument is acutely dialectical on this point: the law-preserving force is no less violent than the lawmaking one. In fact, it functions precisely by weakening the lawmaking violence that founded it, and then by "suppressing hostile counterviolence".[46] Ambedkar's interpretation of Krishna's ethics strikes a radically similar tone when he discusses the Gita's reinforcement of *Chaturvarnya*, or the Law of Four Varnas.

Krishna says: that a wise man should not by counter propaganda create a doubt in the mind of an ignorant person who is a follower of Karma Kand which of course includes the observance of the rules of *Chaturvarnya*. In other words, you must not agitate or excite people to rise in rebellion against the theory of Karma Kand and all that it includes. The second injunction . . . tells that every one do the duty prescribed for his Varna and no other and warns those who worship him . . . that they will not obtain salvation by mere devotion but by devotion accompanied by observance of duty laid down for his Varna. In short, a Shudra however great he may be as a devotee will not get salvation if he has transgressed the duty of the Shudra—namely to live and die in the service of the higher classes.[47]

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44 Ambedkar, "Krishna and His Gita", 377.

45 Ambedkar, "The Literature of Brahminism", 263.

46 Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", 251.

47 Ambedkar, "Krishna and His Gita", 365.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000132 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Now this commandment of duty and obligation to God does not merely institute the ethics of the Gita. It also stabilizes that which is crucial to all law-preserving violence: fate. For a *shudra* is born a *shudra* by his fate, and must aspire to salvation only as a *shudra*.[48] He must live within the lines of his fate, serve those he is born to serve, and, only in so doing, open his person to divine light. That is to say, the *shudra*'s sacrifice of politics for moral duty or dharma must be secured in advance by his fate. In *Chaturvarnya*, fate circumscribes not merely the boundaries of the *shudra*'s action but also his "life" and "death". Nothing escapes, in other words, the mythic force of fate. This is how the potential of any revolutionary "counterviolence", according to Ambedkar, is suppressed in the Gita.

The initial suppression of counterviolence is further stabilized through a second legislative moment. This is the moment when Krishna's law-preserving revelation hides its violent origin by creating an ethics of non-violence. Not only is the *shudra* barred from insurgency against fate in the name of devotion; those who provoke him are barred too with the threat of retribution. The Gita's enunciation of *ahimsa*, then, operates by outlawing all counterviolence, all insurgency, and all revolutionary action, precisely in the name of an unconditional gesture towards the divine. The dialectic at work here is, again, very Benjaminian: Krishna's law-positing occurs at the violent moment of terror, and then turns against its own nature—that is, against violence itself—to enunciate a sovereign law-preserving ethics of *ahimsa*. Law is preserved, in other words, by suppressing all "counterviolence" and by smothering any rebellion that might posit a new law.[49] It is this suppression which Ambedkar argues is the "soul" of the Gita that goes by the name of fate; that is, a suppression of worldly finitude and an injunction to live out this life in the form in which one is born, so that justice is delivered in the other life. Any transgression from this mythic law (which appears, of course, as "sovereign" divine law), in a classic Benjaminian moment, invites divine retribution. Such deferral of legislative justice and the foregrounding of the infinite, Ambedkar would argue, is what go in the Gita by the trope of "salvation".

The death of finitude has implications both hermeneutic (hence historical) and political (hence ethical) for Ambedkar's Gita. For the finitude of the Gita as a text situated in time, the history of its textuality and its readership, the worldliness

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48 On Varna founded as "innate, inborn qualities" see ibid., 361–2.

49 Thus Ambedkar's insistence of the Bhagavad Gita being a text of "counterrevolution", which in turn reinforces Jamini's *Purva Mimansa*, "the Bible of Counter-revolution", at the very moment when "revolutionary" Buddhism was articulating the *himsa* inherent in *Chaturvarnya*. Ambedkar's juridical metaphors and his allusions to that intractable relationship between violence, revolution and the law are remarkably persistent. Ambedkar, "Krishna and His Gita", 362–6.

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of its beginnings, the juridical moment of its enunciation, its will to sovereignty, its elevation of war to the level of unconditional duty,[50] its call to sacrifice the fraternal, its tactful deferral of the corpus in order to foreground the soul, could all be masked and legitimized only by violating the immutable corporeality of worldly life and lending to human soul the abstract myth of a deathless spirit.

FIDELITY AND FRATERNITY

Respect commands us to keep our distance, to touch and tamper neither with the law, which is respectable, nor—therefore—with the untouchable.

Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*

Thus it is that the Gita, even its "counterrevolutionary" defenders have to accept, never goes as far as to "root out caste", for its interest lies not in worldly finitude and touchability but in their suspension into an infinite world of sacrosanct untouchable spirit.[51] To an extent, Telang concedes that the Gita's "author" (note the nationalist singular) undermines the authority of the Vedic scripture and puts caste "on a less tenable basis". The Gita, in other words, does not "absolutely reject the Vedas, but it shelves them". Shelving is an important metaphor here. It enables Brahmanic nationalist thought to cite and archive without ever confronting the endurance of its degrading tradition. It allows a patronizing auto-critique without in any way compromising the moralistic claim to universality on which Vedic antiquity is hinged. Ambedkar's war is waged precisely against this Brahmanic claim over the universality of the Indic tradition.

Yet here is also the aporia of Ambedkar's politics of responsibility. Here is that moment where he comes up against his own readings. For the Gita, both as text and as epistemology, is inaccessible to Ambedkar, inaccessible to anyone, without the dense layers of interpretation and legislation, ancient and modern, by which it has been both generated and transformed. There are no originary moments of this theology, only obscure beginnings. What can be rewritten is the Gita's worldly career, its secular historicity, its contingent beginnings, the unfolding of its patchwork. Once Ambedkar has done that, however, he is faced by the enormity of the consequence of his own historicism. The enormity follows from the fact that the Gita has been shown, even by Telang, to have actually emerged as the product of the same milieu of "spiritual upheaval" of which ancient Buddhism is also a part.[52] The corrupt scaffolding of Brahmanic religion

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[50] See especially *The Bhagavad-Gita*, 85; and Ambedkar, "Krishna and His Gita", 377.

[51] Telang, cited at length in Ambedkar, "Krishna and His Gita", 368.

[52] Telang's argument is inconclusive: "either Buddhism having already begun to tell on Brahmanism, the Gita was an attempt to bolster it up", or more conclusively: "the *Gita*

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begins to shake, and this shaking generates two distinct but curiously conjoined responses: Buddhism and the Gita.

What does Ambedkar do with this skewed, disjoint, textual brotherhood? What does he do once he has already, in the preceding pages, committed an act of hermeneutic fratricide? In this act of unacknowledged fratricide, in this act of exemplary and fratricidal fidelity to what he has claimed to be the core of his Gita, does not Ambedkar himself become, inescapably and aporetically, the most thorough modern reader and practitioner of the text? Through the exemplary act of this hermeneutic fratricide, committed resolutely but secretively, does Ambedkar not move increasingly into the secretive—or as Max Müller would put it, "esoteric"—world of Hinduism rather than the spiritual openness that went by the name of Buddhism?

In a world of general critique and idealist politics Ambedkar would perhaps concede, given his own plea for consistency in acts of historical interpretation, that he is faced not merely by the temporal obscurity of the Gita, which he has painstakingly demonstrated. He is faced also by the historical possibility of mutual borrowing between Buddhism and the Gita, a memory of fraught and fraternal neighborhood. Although his emphasis on the Buddhist inspiration of the Gita is relentless, just as relentless as Tilak's or Telang's emphasis is on the anteriority of the Gita, it may have also been evident to him that textual similarities both in "ideas" and in "language"[53] point to a checkered history of cross-influences. Just as the Gita was many texts in one, so too were the Buddhist suttas and their authors. This limited concession to the probable and partial originality of the Gita and a more circumspect attitude toward his own dating of the texts would have marked the generality of Ambedkar's ethical responsibility. It would have marked his commitment to an interrupted yet conjoined history and memory of religious heterodoxies that punctuates Indic classicism.

Yet Ambedkar's responsibility towards antiquity and its violent secrecy is no general responsibility. Nor is his ideality any less grounded in the economy of fratricidal violence than is the Gita. His refusal to offer any hospitality to the canon marks the singularity of his response, one where moral outcomes and truth play a part only inasmuch as they must be reversed. His is a transgressive and unethical responsibility, not only violent toward scriptural authority but also irresponsible and willfully inconsistent toward rules of critique. Ambedkar is mindful of the contingency of all canons, Hindu and Buddhist. But this memory of contingent beginnings is a very heretical memory, in the sense that its use in his thought is radically amoral. His oppositional memory is meant neither to dismantle one

[was] an earlier and less thorough going form of it". Ambedkar, "Krishna and His Gita", 368.

53 Ambedkar, "Krishna and His Gita", 369.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000132 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tradition in order to replace it by another (which would be normatively predictable and desirable), nor to modernize religiosity (which is not required anyway, since this religion, by its very name, is modern). The heretical memory in his thought is mobilized to breach, refuse, and interrupt that canon which rests comfortably in the knowledge of its calculative legislations and its measured morality. It is meant to establish the exceptionally fratricidal career of the Gita rather than to devise a general theory of textual fraternity in the history of Indian antiquity. It is meant to establish the foreignness of the canon to itself; it is to reinstitute that memory of foreignness in order to trouble the Gita's ethical stability. It is to argue, in other words, for an absent centre of Brahmanic political theology.

The foregrounding of this absence is striking. For as if to compensate for this absent canon, Ambedkar radically reproduces an absence in his own readings of the text. As if to heretically mock the authority and completeness of the Gita, he makes a reciprocal gesture towards the canon. He conjures a counter-absence, as it were. For how else could one understand the absence of Gandhi in this particular essay, when Ambedkar would so relentlessly and angrily confront the Mahatma almost unfailingly all over his corpus? Why is Gandhi absent from this particular text on the Gita? Why does Ambedkar evade critiquing Gandhi's audacious reading of the Gita as a text of non-violence? Is this secrecy and silent disavowal of Gandhi, this refusal of intimacy at precisely that moment when the Mahatma is his most proximate, provocative and fraternal other, yet another moment of Ambedkar's exemplary fidelity to the Gita? Does the exceptional denial of Gandhi not uncannily mirror that other state of exception, that call to dutifully deny brothers their lives, which Ambedkar encounters in the Gita? Or perhaps it is an act of an exemplary and secretive annihilation, for it is only by dismissing the Mahatma's reading as absolutely unworthy of any political–rational attention that Ambedkar could underline and respond to the enormity of blasphemous labor that counterhistory demands. Either way, Ambedkar's secrecy and silencing of this fraternal figure, this other radical critic of violence, makes him a strikingly committed practitioner of that politics which according to him undergirds the Gita itself.[54] This, of course, is the Gita of his political thought; it is the text, like so many other versions ancient and modern freed from the burden of consistency, which is born and which dies through his interpretation, his readings, his fidelity, and his annihilation.

The exception of this creative and annihilative political thought is that unlike other political thoughts, it responds not by engaging the other but by doing exactly

54 Ambedkar's phenomenal awareness of muteness, the inhumanity that underlay the gesture of "silencing", and, by the same token, the enormously retributive potential of that gesture over which he lays claim here, is evocatively arrested in the name he chose for his earliest weekly, *Mooknayak*, literally "The Mute Hero".

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the opposite: by disengaging. The heresy that marks Ambedkar's responsibility is an evasion, and therefore exaggeration, of that which would always haunt his corpus. Evasion of the Mahatma is crucial not only to Ambedkar's heresy, it is critical also to his project of writing a touchable history. This desire for counterhistory makes it singularly imperative that he rescue the practice of history, and, more centrally, the practice of non-violence, from the Mahatma's Indic universality and rehabilitate it within the counteruniversality of another antiquity, an antiquity which would nevertheless have to be located in the same neighborhood. It is essential that this universality of non-violence be recuperated secretively and violently, by keeping its most powerful practitioner in secret. It is important, so as to drive home his point about the finitude of life deeper, that he play upon and reiterate the Mahatma's mortality and dispensability. It is imperative, above all, that his corpus have that exceptional moment, that rare corner, where it remains untouched by the Mahatma and where it can summarily dismiss him as an untouchable, so that this corpus can reveal the tragic tactility of untouchable existence, as opposed to the abstract divinity that the latter thought flowed from such a life. Gandhi would often suggest that he would have been happy to be born a *harijan*, and here at this exceptional moment Ambedkar, the conjurer of touchable history, heretically and dutifully renders the Mahatma exactly that: an untouchable. Such are the fraternal and fratricidal demands that the Gita makes on its modern readers; such is the reversibility of the touchable and the untouchable within its economy; such is the power of its hermeneutic openness to recognition and misrecognition; such, above all, is the contingency of its distinction between violence and non-violence that secures its universality.

Ambedkar struggles with this universality like few others who inhabit the tenuous, and for him reeking, corpus of modern Indian thought. For his critique of the Gita emerges from that untouchable space where to avoid touching and to avoid being touched had come to be legitimized in the general law of suffering, death and disinterest, a very Brahmanic disinterest that could have been enabled and sustained only by that moral and legislative power which flowed from tradition. To breach this disinterest requires an exceptional politics. It requires an understanding of the body as body itself, finite, servile, and banned from entry into the world of gods and men. The Mahatma's Gita redistributes this servility and ban into an economy of degraded labor that masquerades as the moral legislation of Varna. Gandhi's edification of the *shudra* for whom *seva* or "service" must be not only a worldly duty but also an obligation to the transcendental[55] reveals precisely that reproduction of the law which is enabled by the secrecy of Indian antiquity. Gandhian *ahimsa*, in other words, violates the

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[55] See Gandhi, *The Bhagavad-Gita According to Gandhi*, 85. Ajay Skaria's important essay "Gandhi's Politics: Liberalism and the Question of the Ashram", *South Atlantic Quarterly*

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untouchable at the very moment when, imbuing it with divinity as *harijan*, it opens an ethical economy of respect and sacrifice and lays politics and history to ruin. It is this residual cruelty, the conceptual turning of inequality into a distancing, if ethical, non-relation, inherent in the Mahatma's Hindu dharma, that Ambedkar annihilates when he responds to tradition.

ANNIHILIATION AS NEGATIVE UNIVERSALITY

Thus the task is both to construct *and* deny universal history.

Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom*

What kind of action, which must be political by its very name, does the Gita institute? To Ambedkar, the political economy of the Gita suspends the particularity of work precisely in order to empty the touchability and reproducibility of labor from the realm of action. Action, in other words, is articulated merely as a dharmic site for sacrifice rather than as a site for legislating upon the distinctly historical problem of *shudra* labor. Such a sacrificial economy, measured in its demand and self-centered in its legislation of moral law, can then not only defer touching the untouchable but also expropriate him from a distance by naming him. This name itself, which bears the mark of a deliberately distancing kinship of the *harijan* in the world of touchables, will have deferred that which is the most tactile corner of his being, his labor history, and imbue his degrading work with an abstract universal dharma and scriptural religiosity.

The Gita's elevation of suffering to an ethics of sacrifice is even more problematic. For that which is suffered every day not as ethics but as estrangement, not as renunciation but as worldly indignity, is somehow forbidden from its prolific legislative economy. It has no responsibility toward the ban and the effacement that is enforced by law. The obligation of sacrifice and the gift of revelation—the bond of interest, in other words, that joins the subject and the universal spirit—hinges on a generalized exchange of devotion and blessing. Like all economies of generalized exchange, this interest moves in a space of legislated, contractual goodness. The legislation dictates the foregoing of the local, the banned, and the situated; it banishes the corporeal and its recalcitrant particulars; it demands a focus on the absoluteness of spirit as it takes flight from history; it generates, above all, a kinship between the *shudra* and the Brahman and his God framed and secured by the scriptural universality of moral duty.

Ambedkar's engagements with the Gita are measured to annihilate this foundational claim that the Gita makes over universality as scripture and its

101/4 (Fall 2002) offers an illuminating reading of Gandhi's conceptual practice that underlay his naming of the *harijan*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000132 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interested legislation of duty as contract. As two moral sentiments that undergird liberalism, universalism and interest make Ambedkar's Gita a quintessentially modern text. It is the Indic liberalism of the text with which he grapples, then, unwilling to accept its morality but unable to give up its universality. His exceptional dilemma is that the Gita articulates a universalism which is foundational to his legislative politics: an Indian imaginary of the sovereign state. It articulates this universalism, more problematically, in the same neighborhood of antiquity where a similar ethics of sovereignty, kingship and justice also produces the elaborate Buddhist imperial edicts by Asoka.[56] This is the legislative tradition, the conjoined history of statemaking and renunciation, each of its parts equally violent, tributary, sacrificial and redemptive in its own right, fraternal yet dissonant, Brahmanic and Buddhist, heterodox in antiquity yet seamless in modernity, where Asoka's ethics of duty and Krishna's call to war would be guiltlessly braided in liberal–nationalist appropriations of *satya* and dharma, that as an untouchable Ambedkar is not only not born into but must also ironically inherit. What does he do with this fraternal antiquity, this Indic inheritance at once degrading and worth recuperating?

Untouched by the canon and forbidden by it, the untouchable is forced to respond to this inheritance which has already marked his presence as corrupting. Ambedkar must respond to this inherited tradition not merely by dismantling and disavowing it, but by doing precisely that which is feared: corrupting it. A responsibility worth its name, after all, must be excessive and singular; it must be annihilative of the tradition even as it recuperates the semblance of its antiquity. It must invoke the painful particularities of *shudra* labor yet it must never surrender the idea that suffering is universal. It must counter the universality of the scripture, so as to annihilate its mythic authority and moral foundations in war. Yet it must neither give up the universality of human experience nor the imperative and violent universality of the political that enables the re-legislations of history. What is called upon here from the untouchable, then, is an absolute responsibility, a Benjaminian strike on authority, an ideality at once destructive and universal. Ambedkar's annihilation would have to rescue the universality of touchable history even while it negates the universality of scripture. His history would have to be, as it were, a "negative universal history".

[56] State-making in antiquity, in that nascent form upon which the Mahabharat elaborates, is foundationally constituted by the move towards legislative and moral sanction for the sacrifice of blood kin. In its more mature forms, not less but more extractive and violent, it is again the state that also enables the economy of monastic renunciation. On the political and moral matrices of empire in Indian antiquity see Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State: Social Formations in the Mid-first Millennium B.C. in the Ganga Valley* (Delhi, 1984).

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In his "Analytical Notes" on the Mahabharat, for example, Ambedkar opens up what I call an "economy of pure defacement", a struggle to reconstitute the universality of suffering by inflicting pain on the scripture itself. Strewn throughout his "Notes" are words that destabilize the nationalist imaginary of the Mahabharat as an archive of virtuous conduct and masculine righteousness. For if a new history has to be founded on the ruins of Brahmanic antiquity it must hinge on the destruction of all fraternal neighborhoods that that antiquity marks out as its own. Foundational acts, after all, must be acts of separation and desecration, and, if need be, of fratricide. If Ambedkar ever produced a translation of the Mahabharat—and given his laborious attention to the corpus of Brahmanic texts, he certainly might have—the title of his epic would have been *War*. There is an entire vocabulary in his interpretation which invokes the morbid, the base, and the inhuman in the Mahabharat, everything, in other words, which goes in the name of just war. There is the "brag and boast" of Karna, the tragic anti-hero of the epic; there is "slander" by Karna of Drona; there are apologetics; there is ridiculing, arrogance, surrender and anger; there are taunts, refusals, and illegitimate origins;[57] there is "abuse" (note the condemnation by exaggeration here, as it is not rebuke or reprimand) of Duryodhan the ambitious prince by his mother; there is destruction and flight; there is the fainting of an entire army; and there is, strikingly, a corpse.[58]

For Ambedkar, the heretical responsibility of corrupting the legislative powers of the Gita demands an exception to the ethical practices of reading, recognition and respect. In fact, it is counter-abuse, misreading, and misrecognition that become Ambedkar's potent and legitimate strategies. Thus, in his Gita, Krishna makes a "fool" of himself by defending the dogma of *Chaturvarnya* (Law of Four Varnas) on the basis of the Guna theory of the *Sankhya*. Then there are those angry words that form his vocabulary of pure defacement and are deployed in his interpretation of both Krishna and the Gita: "absurdity", "stupidity", "transgression", "abhorrent", "murder", "foul", "effeminate",[59] "puerile", "fool's errand", "childish", "flung in the face", and "lunatic asylum".[60]

It is clear from this vocabulary of excess that Ambedkar goes well beyond the merely corporeal and cognitive registers in his readings of the Gita. It is also apparent from his language that Ambedkar can disinherit himself neither from the masculine and sexist impulses of nationalist thought nor from the strain of that pastoral lexicon on which his own counterhistory of antiquity is hinged. Yet

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57 Ambedkar, "Analytical Notes on the Virat Parva and Udyog Parva", 390.

58 Ibid., 381–7.

59 The pastoral and sexual registers on which Ambedkar's thought operates, and which so powerfully regulates his idea of the "woman", is itself worthy of an attentive reading.

60 Ambedkar, "Krishna and His Gita", 364.

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he does open up at such times and through such words a moment of absolute transgression and complete defacement of divinity. After all, Krishna's infinite divinity hinges critically on his face: his devouring of monsters, his eating up of the sun and his revelation of numerous mouths, his horrifying tusks, and his bristling fangs.[61] Ambedkar's defacement of this aura starts with the face and violently passes through it, first ravaging it in order to humanize it, and then finally dehumanizing it. In Ambedkar's hands, the talkative Krishna becomes a figure of buccality*:* a figure with a mouth but not a face.[62] For when someone as base as Duryodhan has the legitimacy to fling Krishna's foul deeds in his face, the godliness and the aura of the god become genuinely suspect. The corporeality of his tone, the dehumanizing reduction and inflation of characters of the epic into figures,[63] the power of excessive prose which accrues from cursing, and at moments the buccality of Ambedkar's own anti-humanist vocabulary are part of his attempt to radically reverse the human trembling that constitutes the force of divine terror.

Yet such attempts must also be read as defacement of divinity itself, as sacrificial gestures deeply universalist in their ambition and politics. Such defacement is singular and exceptional in that it is neither humanist, which expects the god to be made human, touchable, and be seen as face; nor religious, in that it never desires the god who would be accessible to the untouchable. Nor, finally, is this defacement wholly anti-scriptural, its priority merely the corruption, by touching, of the dharmic text. Ambedkar's fidgety relationship with scripture, which leaves in its wake *Buddha and His Dhamma* atop his corpus, is too tenuous to be resolved and settled into an anti-scriptural politics. The Benjaminian singularity that underlies his defacement, rather, is that of a violent ideality, an anti-liberal pure means: defacement of God's aura without any desire of replacing that god by another, or of opening an access to that god-as-human. Ambedkar's responsibility constitutes an unlimited responsibility, a "pure defacement", precisely because it breaches the ethical frontier of all religiosity by defacing God's divinity and humanity alike.[64] As if at once to mock and obediently to respond to the god's call to war, Ambedkar sacrifices the god himself.

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61 *The Bhagavad-Gita*, 113.

62 Sara Guyer, "Buccality", in Gabriele Schwab, ed., *Derrida, Deleuze, Psychoanalysis* (New York, 2007).

63 On the distinction between "character" and "figure" and the cognitive implications of that distinction see Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Boston, 2008).

64 This denial of humanity and historicity to Krishna is what makes Ambedkar's anthropology different in its performance from the semitic impulses of the Gita's other modern readers such as Bankim. On the latter's reclamation of Krishna as a Christ-like historical ideality see Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi, 1995).

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This "economy of pure defacement", with its mockery, dutifulness, violence, and responsibility, is pure not because of the integrity which underlies that gesture. No defacement worth its name, after all, can be anything but a failed sublimation, a lapse of integrity, a tactile expression of desire for intimacy and possession which culminates instead in angry defilement and contamination.[65] Ambedkar's sacrifice of god and his enduring proximity to that canon is, then, at once defiling and promiscuous. Yet the economy of this defacement is pure because of its absolute ideality; that is, not because of his complete fidelity to the act itself, but rather because of his faithfulness to the receiving subject of his act, the god to whom he meticulously listens and then sacrifices. Singular in its fidelity and heretical excess, Ambedkar's responsibility here blurs the lines between the divine, the human and the buccal. It destabilitizes that very mouth which institutes through its enchanting utterance the degrading dharma of *shudra* labor. In so doing, it gestures towards a universalist politics that wages war on that secretive and mythic morality which goes in the name of the untouchable's fate. A war, one might add, in which Ambedkar willfully and inescapably participates, never sacrificing his own idealist impulse to sacrifice, remaining at once dutiful and oblivious to the war's fratricidal matrices. This idealism of Ambedkar's fratricide, this passionate and violent recuperation of ideality from the cruelty that inheres for him in the Gandhian naming of the *harijan*, is what makes his politics accessible to the vocabularies at once of emancipatory democracy and didactic hagiography, vocabularies deemed incongruous otherwise but enamored in equal measure by the purity of ideals. For how else can Ambedkar's politics be accounted for if not through a certain ideality and desire for purity, where what he seeks to recuperate in the manner of the Benjaminian dialectic is not only the *shudra*'s right to revolutionary counterviolence but also an untouched history of non-violence?[66] This ideality, stubborn, worldly, intractable in its coupling of antithetical desires, and resolutely rooted in the "economy of violence", grounded at once in the purist practice and sincere renunciation of war, is what constitutes Ambedkar's annihilative "politics of reading".

CONCLUSION

Such politics would tragically, if so productively, bear the mark of Ambedkar's inheritance of the very canon he seeks to dismantle. His universality, in other words, would have to be negatively constituted. For in his resolute commitment

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[65] Norman O. Brown, *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, 1959).

[66] I draw here from Etienne Balibar's insightful elaboration of these relationships in "Violence, Ideality and Cruelty", in *idem*, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London, 2002).

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to the annihilation of a violent text on war and myth, Ambedkar himself becomes the most intimate and ideal modern practitioner of its law. The Gita, because of its prolific openness to interpretation that secures its universality, thus also becomes *his* Gita, the Gita he creates and destroys. Ambedkar's counterhistory, committed neither any more to interpretive consistency nor any less to idealistic violence than the Gita itself, comes to be staged in the universal idiom of destruction and counterlegislation even and especially as it assaults the universality of Hindu dharma.

In his dramatic coupling of scriptural authority with legislative power; in his remorseless decoupling of ethics from any concept of the political; in his simultaneous evasion and exaggeration of the fraternal other; in his conjoining of fratricidal apathy with fraternal duty; in his intense warlike infliction of pain on the scripture; in his ironic struggle to recuperate non-violence from the ruins of his own violent counterhistory; in the masculine and pastoral impulses of his hermeneutics; in his impossible disinheritance of the sovereign imaginary of the state no matter how violent; and, above all, in his exemplary fidelity to his Gita performed through the act of several fratricides, Ambedkar inherits and inhabits Indian antiquity intimate and distraught. His ideality, that world of touchability he dreams of, that conjuration of a *dalit* history which would have been born ironically untouched by the Brahmanic spirit, remains an impossible dream, an intractable prolific negative. Nor does the fate of the Hindu nation, as it now turns out, hinge any less critically on its fraternity with the *dalit*.

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