

'The Politics' by Levinas: Towards a 'Critical' Political Philosophy

ENRIQUE DUSSEL

Translated by Jorge Rodriguez

We want to establish a dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas about 'politics.' Covering ideas from *Totality and Infinity* up to a more recent article, we depart from a necessary critique of politics understood as totalized strategic domination. This dialogue shows the difficulties involved in constructing a positive and creative political concept that is liberating in the perspective of exteriority.

1. The Ethical Critique of Politics as Totality in 'State of War'

Levinas accurately situates the negative sense of politics when it becomes a permanent 'war state,' that is, a tautological self-reference of the heroic and public action of the State as Totality. Departing from 'ethics,' Levinas deconstructs politics. His politics is *negative* and, for that reason, critical with respect to politics. But Levinas falls into the Hegelian position that confuses the Lutheran state with a Christianity that Levinas criticizes following F. Rosenzweig. Let us examine some of his statements that emerge in part from his painful experience in the totalitarian Nazi state in the Europe of his lifetime.

Ethics criticizes politics: 'Situated at the antipodes of the subject living in the infinite time of fecundity is the isolated and heroic being that the State produces by its virile virtues. Such a being confronts death out of pure courage and whatever be the cause for which he dies.'¹ Almost ironically, Levinas refers to the political 'virtues' of the Nazi hero (and other fundamentalist patriotisms). With respect to politics understood in this way, Levinas characterizes ethics with the fol-

lowing words: 'The ethical, beyond vision and certitude, delineates the structure of exteriority as such. Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy.² Under the State's power, vision and certainty belong to the order of the ontological Totality. Ethics is the 'anteriority' or 'the beyond' of Being's Totality: 'Thus a political and technical existence ensures the will its truth, renders it objective (as we say today), without opening upon goodness, without emptying it of its egoist weight.'³

Thus we arrive at a first negative definition of Levinasian politics: 'The art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means – politics – is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason. Politics is opposed to morality, as philosophy to naïvité.⁴ Politics is war itself. War is nothing but the pure face of politics. However, Levinas loves to show this violent action as an expression of an ontology of light (*to fos*). He states even more clearly: 'Does not lucidity, the mind's openness upon the true, consist in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war? The *state of war* suspends morality ... War is not only one of the ordeals – the greatest – of which morality lives; it renders morality derisory.'⁵ The most original aspect of Levinas is his characterization of politics as the 'state of war' in itself. Levinas transforms Locke's⁶ position by considering this state of war as the permanent, 'normal' state, the very way in which Totality operates: 'The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy ... [Philosophers] found morality on politics.'⁷ Politics would be the strategic action whereby the members of a community, all considered as part, are affirmed as functional, as 'the Same.' Their alterity and exteriority are denied, so they cannot be considered as 'the Other.' This is what Levinas refers to as 'the ontology of totality issued from war.'⁸ The ontology of 'the Same' closes progressively upon itself. '[B]eing, totality, the State, politics, techniques, work are at every moment on the point of having their center of gravitation in themselves, and weighing on their own account.'⁹

To this self-referential totalization of politics, Levinas opposes a process of decentring: 'Justice, society, the State and its institutions, exchanges and work are comprehensible out of proximity. This means that nothing is outside of the control of the responsibility of the one for the other.'¹⁰ This 'responsibility,' previous to any political anteriority, inaugurates a 'new' politics. Levinas will oppose 'ethics' to 'politics,' this last understood as the order of domination:

It is a relationship with a *surplus always exterior to the totality* ... This 'beyond' the totality and objective experience is, however, not to be described in a purely negative fashion. It is reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience ... The eschatological vision breaks with the totality of wars and empires in which one does not speak.¹¹

The 'beyond' of the totality, of war and politics, establishes itself with the irruption of the face of the poor, the widow, or the orphan who, supplicant, beg for alms. It is an interpellation coming from the *outside* of the system, from the 'Exteriority,' that manifests itself *within* the Totality. The 'face-to-face' relation with the Alterity of the 'somebody' (*Autrui*) is the ethical relation par excellence. This relation breaks the functionality of the actor subjects (the ontic) within the system (the ontological) and situates them one in front the other as Others, as responsible for the Other (metaphysics).

In this way, Levinas opposes ethics to politics. Ethics refers to this relationship of 'responsibility,' of 'taking charge of the Other' as an 'obsession.' In this relation, the hungry one imposes himself with his 'hunger' as an irrecusable exigency of justice. 'Feed the hungry!' is an unavoidable imperative. During the last thirty years, we have said this repeatedly in many works that have allowed us to analyse Levinas's position in a plurality of ways.¹²

However, the critical question comes up when we ask Levinas: 'How to feed the hungry, how to do justice to the widow, how to build an economic order for the poor, how to reconstruct the structure of the law in a political order that functions as a closed totality, so inhospitable to the stranger ...?' Levinas's criticism of politics as the strategy of the state of war is accurate, courageous, and clairvoyant. However, his critique does not avoid the difficulties involved in reconstructing the *positive and critical-emancipatory* sense of the new politics:

Thirty years ago, I wrote: 'When I first read Levinas' book *Totality and Infinity*, my spirit experienced a sort of subversive unhinging of all the things I had learned until then.'¹³ Later I stated:

However, what was distancing me from Levinas, in a metaphysical sense, was something more serious. The great philosopher of Nanterre brilliantly describes ... the face-to-face position, the irrespective relation of one's face before the Other's, yet he does not culminate his discourse ... The Other calls into question, provokes, claims ... but nothing is said, not only about the knowing how to listen to the voice of the Other, but above

all about the knowing how to respond through a liberating praxis ... Levinas brilliantly reveals the violent trap intrinsic to politics when it becomes a totality that negates the Other as other; in other words, he philosophizes about an *anti-politics* of the Totality, yet he says nothing about a *politics of liberation* ... The poor pro-vokes, but in the end, he stays poor and miserable forever.¹⁴

Levinas is the genius of negativity, yet he cannot articulate a *positive* architectonic of the mediations in favour of the Other. Phenomenology should be 'mediated' by categories belonging to other epistemic disciplines. These considerations, for instance, required us to turn to Marx in order to 'explicate' the historical and concrete existence of the 'poor,' the *pauper ante* and *post festum*, and to find the 'mediations' to liberate him from his poverty.¹⁵ 'Anti-politics' as sceptical or deconstructive negativity is fundamental, but 'critical politics' is also necessary, the politics oriented to constructive and innovative liberation.

2. Ambiguity of the 'Davidic State'

We want to indicate certain difficulties that arise when Levinas attempts to enter into this '*positive* space' of politics. In fact, Christianity appears to Levinas as a daring yet ambiguous 'positive' participation in politics. In his view, Christianity has paid a high price for such an attempt. A '*politics beyond politics*' seems to be sketched when Levinas writes:

In Christianity, the kingdom of God and the earthly kingdom are separated yet placed side by side without touching and, in principle, without contesting each other. They divide the human between themselves, and do not give rise to conflicts. It is perhaps because of this political spirit of indifference that Christianity has so often been a State religion.¹⁶

Some aspects of this formulation should be clarified. It could be said that both orders are distinct, but it would be equivocal to state that they 'do not touch each other,' that 'they do not confront each other' (*sans se contester*), and that they 'do not raise conflicts.' And what if, on the contrary, they touch and confront each other, creating permanent and unavoidable conflicts endowed with a deep political sense?

In contrast, Levinas points out with respect to Judaism:

The Messiah institutes a just society and sets humanity free after setting Israel free. These Messianic times are the times of a reign. The Messiah is king. The divine invests History and State rather than doing away with them. The end of History retains a political form ... But if the Messianic City is not beyond politics, the City in its simplest sense is never this side of the religious.¹⁷

Levinas resorts to the formulation of a 'Davidic state' (*État davidique*) that corresponds to the Messianic state, 'beyond' the historical or merely political state. For the Rabbinic tradition, the empires of Babylon, Partos, Seleucides, or Rome represent these totalized and totalitarian states, the states that 'incarnate the alienation or paganization of History, political or imperial oppression.'¹⁸ I think that these texts allow us to begin to understand the limitations of the Levinasian 'politics.'

I wish to depart from the position criticized by Levinas, that is, the position of Christianity. I have laboured on this topic in many of my works during the last forty years. I think that the political position of Jeshua of Nazareth, a Jew entirely Jewish, is not exactly as described by Levinas. And perhaps we can situate here the beginning of our debate. Let us examine the problem in detail.

For Levinas, the expression 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's'¹⁹ is a formula that distinguishes the 'political order' from the 'spiritual order.' Levinas, however, does not notice that he is taking the expression from the already deformed and reductive perspective of later Christianity.²⁰ What do the '*political order*' and the '*spiritual order*' signify? Are we referring to the 'Earthly City' and the 'City of God' of Augustine of Hippo? Is the Davidic state a 'Jewish political state,' or is it simply a 'political state' like any other? Is it an exceptional 'Messianic' state beyond any state or is it a state against every historical institution of the state? Is it the full realization of the State? Is the 'Davidic state' still within the scope of politics or does it belong to the utopian space of an anti-political ethics?

The Jewish Jeshua of Nazareth – and I insist that he was entirely Jewish, as 'rabi' of a group, a sect, a hermeneutic tradition entirely Jewish, within the first generation of the geographical horizon of Judaea and Galilea – distinguished clearly between two modalities of 'Messianism': the political or *royal messianism* and the *prophetic messianism*. In my opinion Levinas does not make this distinction. For Levinas, messianism is only the one of the king, the royal messianism ('The Messiah is king,' as he writes). The distinction, not accepted by Levinas, between a '*political order*' (even with the intervention of a King's

messianism, and for that reason, profane) and a '*spiritual* order' (the prophetic messianism) allows Jeshua's followers to achieve the progressive secularization of the Roman state or Theodosius's Hellenistic Oriental state constituting, without ambiguities, an ethical and religious 'pedagogical community' that, profoundly institutionalized and legalized thanks to the genius of the Roman law,²¹ acquires a total organizational autonomy from the Roman Empire. The 'ekkklesia' or the Judaeo-Christian 'religious community' (a Jewish sect named in Antioch, for the first time, 'Messianic,' that is, 'consecrated': from the 'oil' that consecrates, that 'anoints,' and from there 'meshiakh' or 'Kristós') never longed for the constitution of a new 'State of Israel,' a 'historical state,' and therefore not a 'Davidic state' either. They never longed for this since the Jewish rebellion in 70 CE (on account of which Titus's Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple). The constitution of such a state might have enclosed Christians into a narrow 'nationalism.' In its origins, Christianity quickly grasped as its distinctive mark the affirmation of a clear universalism that had the entire empire, and other empires (such as the Persian), as the horizons of its Messianic action.²² The 'ekkklesia' was not looking for the exercise of state power nor was it looking for another Jewish 'diaspora' for those who had suffered the destruction of their land and temple. This was a religious community that did not aspire to constitute a state.²³ Nevertheless, far from being indifferent, this community began to exercise a prophetic criticism, specific to the ecclesiastic, political-prophetic Messianism of a *pedagogic* community, distinct from and anterior to, the *political* community of the Roman state (and from all future states). It was possible to be a 'citizen' of 'two cities': the 'City of God' that constitutes the Messianic eschatological Realm (religious but trans-historical) and the 'Earthly city' that constitutes the secular state. John Chrysostom, the patriarch of Constantinople, was condemned to exile by the Byzantine emperor because of the prophetic criticisms (prophetic Messianism) that he proffered with regard to the injustices inflicted by the political power of the Empire against the poor. Marx perfectly comprehends the issue at stake when he writes:

The confusion of the political principle with the Christian-religious principle has become the official confession²⁴ ... You want a *Christian state*²⁵ ... You want religion to justify the earthly.²⁶

Has Christianity not been, by the way, the first to separate the Church from the State?²⁷ Read Augustine's work *De Civitate Dei* or study the other

Fathers of the Church and the spirit of Christianity ... [C]ome back and tell us which one is the *Christian State*.²⁹

And going beyond Levinas, in matters where politics and religion are articulated, Marx explains: 'Or is it that when you say that we have to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's you do not consider as King and Prince of this world,²⁹ not only the Mammon of Gold but also ... free reason.'³⁰ For Marx, the confusion of Lutheran Christendom consists in having identified Augustine's 'City of God' with the 'Earthly City'; Christianity with Christendom (as with Kierkegaard in the same epoch; he and Marx both relied upon the anti-Hegelian critique presented in Schelling's *Philosophy of Revelation*,³¹ the course given in Berlin in 1841). This confusion revealed the lack of criteria to distinguish between Mammon or the 'Prince of this world' (Satan; later on, capitalism) and Christendom proper (the presumed 'City of God' transformed into the 'Earthly City'; for Marx, the presumed 'City of God' of the Lutheran Christendom was, in addition, identified with the capitalist order – a question that will never be clearly analysed by Levinas since he lacks the necessary economic-political categories).

We want to point out that Marx, with his Jewish origin, saw this problem with more clarity than our admired philosopher, also a Jew, Levinas. Why do I say this? Because Marx distinguished with more precision and in a more rigorous way the different hermeneutical levels involved. And this derives from the fact that Marx constructed appropriate political and economic categories. The mere phenomenological categories, so important in Levinasian ethics, are not sufficient in political or economic philosophy.

Although Levinas accurately and pertinently points to the Messianic aspect of politics, he confuses the political with the prophetic messianism, that is, the political community with the ethical community or (following Kant's wording in *Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason*) with the religious community. This last may have, in my architectonic comprehension of ethics, a political function; not as politics, however, but as prophesy. In ancient Israel when the prophets (mainly negative-ethical critics) criticize the kings, they fulfil a political function, but as prophets. David fulfils a political function as a king. When the community of the prophets, with Nathan, criticizes David's faults (as with the scandal of his relation with Bathsheba, in 2 Samuel 12:1), they fulfil a prophetic-political function. This function must not be confused, accordingly, with

King David's political function, distinct from the function of the community of the prophets. My opinion is that Levinas fails to differentiate between both planes. The Jewish community, after 70 CE, was a religious and cultural community, a *sui generis* 'people' in the Diaspora of the Roman Empire, without empirical reference either to the Israeli state or to the destroyed Jerusalem temple, but never forgetting a *Messianic* reference to Jerusalem. In Levinas's interpretation, this situation was 'defective,' incomplete. Levinas had a 'quasi' Zionist position (certainly anti-fundamentalist and anti-dogmatic since it opens toward a political position rather 'liberal'³² in relation to Israel's concrete political institutions since 1948). Accordingly, for him the creation of the state of Israel would contribute to the 'solution' of the old conflict. The prophetic community would transform itself, as it was supposed to in Levinas's view, in the King's community, in the Davidic community: 'The State of Israel will be the end of assimilation. It will make possible, in its plenitude, the conception of concepts whose roots go right to the depths of the Jewish soul.'³³ This is the problem posited by Albert Memmi, the great Jew of Tunisian origin, when in his work *La Liberación del Judío* he states: 'Only Israel will bring to an end the negativity of the Jew liberating his positivity ... [For this to happen] it is necessary to liberate the Jew from oppression and it is necessary to liberate Jewish culture from religion.'³⁴ For Memmi, the state of Israel should be a secular state, with a majority of Jewish citizens, but equally accepting of Palestians, Muslims, or Christians, all of them having equal rights vis-à-vis the state (in this case, it should be called 'Israel's state' or the 'Israeli State,' but not 'Jewish state'). Martin Buber was of the same opinion. But Levinas does not examine the issue in this way because, as we have already seen, 'if the Messianic City is not beyond politics, the City in its simplest sense is never this side of the religious.'

For this reason, instead of moving closer to the foundations, the identification of the 'Messianic community' with the 'Messianic state' (unification of the religious community with the political community) creates in the ethical and political conscience of many Jews an extraordinary contradiction. Let us take as an empirical example the concrete militarist actions performed by Ariel Sharon with respect to the vulnerable Palestinian community in Israel (today, 19 February 2002) and in the rest of the ancient Palestine. The Jewish ethical-religious community, persecuted throughout twenty centuries, has difficulties with its ethical-critical and religious-messianic conscience when assuming the actions of such a historical state. Levinas must remain faithful to the

tradition of 'non-assimilation' to a non-Jewish culture or state. However, in pursuing the 'identification' between the 'Davidic state' and the community who bears the Jewish culture and religion, it becomes impossible for him to justify the tyrannical and unjust actions that such a state may perform. The 'non-assimilation' with the non-Jewish state that justifies the 'identification' with the Israeli state now contradicts Levinas's ethics of responsibility for the Other. His ethics demands the exertion of justice with respect to the poor (Palestinian?) who attempts to defend his occupied land and create a Palestinian state in the remaining land of the old Palestine. This is a major contradiction and fracture, not only in regard to the last twenty centuries of Israel's history but since its origins, because the 'schools of prophets' never identified themselves with Israel's monarchy. To return in the twenty-first century to a theocratic conception of the state, deeply and irreversibly secularized in our days, is also to move against the very tradition of the Jewish community of the last centuries of modernity, which does not allow such an identity. The crisis consists in the fact that if the Jewish religious community identifies itself with the 'Israeli state' (would it be what Levinas calls the 'Davidic state?'), even worse, when this state responds to the interests of the more fundamentalist Jewish groups, those who also persecuted Levinas while he was living in Paris, this community would not be critical any longer before such a state, even if it was the Israeli state. Such a state is far from any political Messianism because it has been involved empirically, and regrettably, in clear acts against the human rights of the Palestinians not only during Levinas's time but much more in the present.

Any 'state' pretending to be Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Jewish enters into contradiction with itself when a group of citizens does not confess the religion of the majority (and even of the minority) of such a state. Marx saw very clearly that the Jewish sect called 'the Christians' became 'the first' in promoting the secularization of the state (when it organized juridically and autonomously the religious community with respect to the Roman empire). This outcome, paradoxically, was the fruit of the Jewish historical experience: it emerged, continuing, radicalizing, and generalizing the experience of the Jewish 'Diaspora' in the Roman Empire.

However, for this secularization to be possible it is necessary to understand that the 'City of God' is not the Christian church; nor is the Roman state the 'Earthly City' of Augustine. Indeed, they constitute two different 'orders' traversing both the state and the religious com-

	Totality	Exteriority
	Earthly city ('Caesar')	Celestial city ('God')
Political 'order'	Totalized state (Rome, Hegelian state, Nazi state, etc.)	King's Messianism (secular), 'Davidic' state (?), new State of Liberation
Spiritual order (?)	Christendom, 'Christian state,' Jewish state (Idolatrics)	Prophetic Messianism, Christianity (as religion), Judaism (religious community)

munity. The 'City of God' is for Augustine 'Abel's City' and 'Abel, as pilgrim did not found it (*non condidit*).'³⁵ The 'City of God' is 'the beyond' of Levinas's actual political Totality as Exteriority. The 'Earthly City' is the totalized (Levinasian) totality. But the 'Caesar' of Jeshua is not merely the 'political order' but the 'Earthly City,' and 'God' is in the 'City of God' (the 'Kingdom of God') and not in the ambiguous 'spiritual order' that Levinas talks about. As can be observed in the accompanying table, Levinas's use of the categories 'political order' and 'spiritual order' is ambiguous. They have equivocal meanings. Such categories articulate themselves in a complex way with concepts such as 'Earthly city' and 'City of God' (which, from my point of view, better correspond to Levinas's categories of Totality and Exteriority). However, for Levinas, the state would not have a 'Messianic' quality except for the case of the 'Davidic state'³⁶ (or 'State of Liberation')³⁷ as a state beyond the politics of war. But is the 'Messianism of peace' still political?

3. Towards a 'Critical' Politics as *Abodah*³⁸

In 1970, a few weeks after reading *Totality and Infinity*, and while writing the second volume of *Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana*, I confirmed Levinas's difficulties in presenting phenomenologically the practical 'construction' of the 'new' Totality aimed at the 'service' (*abodah*) of the Other, the poor, the widow, the stranger. This practical-political construction opened up an entire problematic that Levinas never examined thoroughly, perhaps because of lack of experience or because he belonged to a Diaspora without any possibility of exercising political power. It is necessary to consider not only the critique of Egypt as the land of slavery but also the ambiguous 'passage' through the desert

and, especially, the 'strategic' and unavoidable invasion of the 'Promised Land,' the assault on Jericho, and the construction of the Monarchical state in Jerusalem. This complex but unavoidable process demanded by the claim 'I am hungry!' posed the question 'How to leave him without bread to eat?' However, 'to feed the hungry' we need to work the land, produce the grain, prepare the bread, structure in a political way the economic institutions of distribution and exchange, to finally achieve the donation, the gift as charity or the sale of bread to the hungry. The satisfaction of the 'I am hungry' is the fruit of a process of ambiguous and necessary 'mediations' of every political, social, and economic strategy; it is necessary for the construction of a 'new' Totality that, necessarily, will become the 'old' Totality, whereby *Totality and Infinity* starts. Levinas remains in the *negative* critique of politics. He does not face analytically, the ambiguity of the positive construction of the 'new' Totality, which I call 'liberation' – as Albert Memmi does, for example.

The liberation starts with the slavery of Egypt (*negative* aspect) and ends in the construction of Jerusalem (*positive* aspect). But when the dreamed 'new' Jerusalem is finally built, it slowly transforms itself into Egypt, the 'second' Jerusalem, the Jerusalem to be deconstructed ... and the history will continue, never repeating and always renewing itself, as the history of the politics of liberation.

It seems that Levinas ends with the ethical critique of the Totality, but he cannot think the political-liberating (Messianic) construction of a 'new' Totality. It appears that Levinas cannot formulate a *positive* politics, although under the name of 'Messianism of peace' the topic begins to emerge. Was it lack of care? lack of interest? the absence of appropriate categories, or perhaps Levinas's existential situation? I believe it has more to do with the latter possibility and I will advance some ideas to prove it.

There are some interesting texts that seem to give us a possibility of formulating a 'positive' politics:

[T]he idea of a power that does not abuse its powers, of a power that safeguards Israel's moral principles and particularism, which an institution common to Israel and the nations risks compromising. An idea to which the image of Saul at the beginning of his reign, 'hiding himself among the baggage' and continuing to plough his field seems to conform.³⁹

It is a time in which the king is humble, in which he works by hand. He does not dominate nor use anybody to his own interest. All these things are fulfilled 'at the beginning of his reign,' because it is, diachronically, in the always ambiguous moment of creation of the 'new' institutions that justice shines without major contradictions. The 'new' institution is still very close to the negative and chaotic previous state. The new dominations are not visible yet; the unavoidable institutional 'entropy' has not yet shown its erosion. It is in the novelty of the 'new' state that a certain 'Messianic' (or 'Davidic') state seems to be possible. When the institutions articulate themselves, when the 'new' order becomes 'old,' Samuel's admonition is remembered: 'When that day comes they will cry to the Lord for relief from the King they have chosen. And He will not answer in that day.' Levinas concludes: 'Would a decision for the State be equivalent to choosing life over the Law, while this Law aspires to be the Law of life?'⁴⁰ This is understood. It refers to the ambiguity of the political 'institutions,' necessary and yet 'disciplinary' (as Foucault would say), 'repressive' (for anarchism). Without these 'institutions' the reproduction of life is impossible (there would not be bread nor its distribution), but the institutions always become, *with time*, totalized mediations with the potential to 'kill.' Politics' law (the system of Right) becomes the law of the actual system (excluding the weak, the poor, the stranger, the Other). But this ambiguity does not divest politics of its 'necessity' or its 'sanctity' as 'service' to the Other in his nakedness, in his hunger, in his 'no-right,' in his 'no-city,' in his lack of protection by a political system that allows him to live.

The 'political Messianism' of the liberators (Moses, Washington, Bolívar, Fidel Castro ...) is a 'Messianism' of goodness and justice. The 'prophetic Messianism' *criticizes* the political Totality when it is no longer the original 'Davidic state,' the creative times when the emancipators have not yet contaminated their hands with their people's blood. This emancipating, liberating, critical moment of politics is the moment in which the 'state of war,' which denies morality, transforms itself in the 'state of peace' *still* founded in morality. The diachronic dialectics is essential here. There are creative political times that are innovative, novel: the initiation of a system. The ambiguity grows thereafter, when the system is totalized, the Other is excluded, and politics transforms itself into 'the art of foreseeing and winning the war by all means.' It is the politics of decadence. Now we are facing Evil, the Empire.

The positive and critical politics, the politics of the initial 'David's

state' is the original moment of every new order. It is the politics of liberation. It represents a qualitative growth of history: it is 'political Messianism' that accepts and works conjointly with the 'prophetic Messianism.' Trotsky and Lenin still work together; Stalin has not created a domination yet. Washington is not an expansive or imperial hero; he is not thinking of annexing Louisiana, Texas, California, Puerto Rico ... the Pacific, the Atlantic; he has not yet waged yet the Gulf War, nor Kosovo's, nor Afghanistan ...

The impossibility of understanding the 'ethical necessity' and despite this, the ambiguity of politics, hence, the impossibility of surpassing, moving 'beyond' the Totality, creates equivocal situations. There are two politics in history: (a) war as domination (Totality's war); (b) struggle as liberation (the overcoming of the 'old' Totality and the subsequent creation of a 'new' Totality). Levinas does not give us an example; he does not portray an experience of the Jewish people that would allow him to describe the construction of the second Totality (the 'new'). The State of Israel would have served him as a good first example but, as Michael Walzer and many others have pointed out, he did not discover in a clear way the thematic of the Other in Israel. For this reason, tragically, the traditionalist Zionism, frequently dogmatic, defeats the 'Messianism of Peace' of the political party of Arabs and Jews, which Martin Buber promoted in Israel during Levinas's life. Although Levinas suffered because of the Jewish fundamentalism of the Algerian émigrés who persecuted him in Paris, he failed to think through these problems in a philosophical way.

Levinas writes about 'the feeling that it is the Palestinians who are the weakest, and one must be on the side of the weak'⁴¹ and '[a]n armed and dominating State ... against the unarmed Palestinian people whose existence Israel does not recognize.'⁴² We have to consider that for Levinas the critique of the Israeli state is difficult, most of all when he states that 'Zionism is probably one of the great events in human history.'⁴³ If we were clear about the 'Messianic moment' of politics as a new, yet ambiguous political order, the necessity could be shown for a 'land' for a people that, expelled from theirs, has wandered as strangers during twenty centuries. This does not change the fact that the 'Davidic state' can very soon be replaced by a state that, like any state, say Egypt, has 'slaves' who need to be liberated. No state can claim that at some point in its history it won't become totalized, needing to become the object of the critique of the 'prophetic Messianism' of those who, like Martin Buber, faced in the name of the Palestin-

ians in his own Israel the fetishized state (certainly fetishized in Ariel Sharon's government).

If the necessity and the ambiguity of the 'politics of liberation' are understood, that is, if the short but empirically possible time of the 'Davidic state' is accepted as a moment of politics, the Messianic 'anti-politics' can be established as *negative* critique. In the same way, a *positive* 'politics of liberation' could be established, attentive to the entropy of institutions, to the 'new' political order that conveys, from its origins, the always growing possibility of self-referential totalization. In the moment of the state's totalization, the 'prophetic Messianism' awakens again, criticizing David's injustice (the 'Davidic state' has transformed itself in a Totalized Totality) in sending Urias to the 'front line' of the war.⁴⁴ The 'political Messianism' that must be differentiated from the former must undertake the *transformation* of the order that has become 'old'; of the order that has fossilized itself as dead Law that kills life. This transforming action, this liberating praxis, is the 'service to the Other,' is *critical* politics.⁴⁵ The *critical* political philosophy, as a certain 'prophetic Messianism,' ethical but not necessarily religious, is indeed the philosophy that explains the possibility of a critical-liberating politics, a politics conceived as an exercise of 'political Messianism' at certain crucial moments of history.

Nevertheless, it is fundamental to know if the 'new' order is born only from the war against the enemy or if it derives from the responsibility for the Other (even if it must resort to a proportional coercion in the defence of the innocent or even the necessary use of weapons, as in the case of Jeanne d'Arc, Washington, Hidalgo, or Mao, for whom war was imposed as an ethical duty), as the 'interruption of the Infinite being fixed in structures, community and *totality*.'⁴⁶ However, we always need to recognize the ambiguity of this totality that as self-referential totality, transforms itself in 'the state, which, violently excludes subversive discourse.'⁴⁷ To the unjust politics of the self-centred Totality we oppose the 'new' critical politics, and 'it is because *newness* comes from the other that there is in *newness* transcendence and signification.'⁴⁸

NOTES

- 1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 306.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 304.

- 3 Ibid., 241–2.
- 4 Ibid., 21.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 For Locke, there were three ‘states’: the state of nature, the civil state (politics), and the ‘state of war.’ The latter puts in abeyance the political state and places the ‘civilized’ condition (in a time before the slave, the Indian, the civil, the colonial barbarian, and the intra-European enemy) out of order. In a certain way, Levinas joins together the civil state and the state of war, making both of them ‘permanent.’
- 7 *Totality and Infinity*, 21–2.
- 8 Ibid., 22.
- 9 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 159.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 *Totality and Infinity*, 22–3.
- 12 All my works (from chapter 3 of *Para una ética de la liberación* [Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1973], 1: 188ff.) refer to this original topic (from 1970 until today [2002]). The Alterity of Other opens the world (the Totality) to its Exteriority. See *Philosophy of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985).
- 13 Preliminary text written in 1973 and published in E. Dussel and D.E. Guillot, *Liberación latinoamericana y Emmanuel Levinas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Bonum, 1975), 7.
- 14 Ibid., 8–9.
- 15 I wrote thirty years ago: ‘The original face-to-face, adequately understood by Levinas against a still intuitionist phenomenology, is that of *Eros*, of a male in front of a woman. But here the woman is already described as passivity, as house’s interiority, as withdrawal into the home space. That is, Levinas’ description alienates woman through a certain macho view of existence ... The question of children’s education is wrongly posited ... Likewise, the question of the brother is not established. Levinas describes completely the first face-to-face experience but without considering any mediations’ (Ibid., 8).
- 16 Levinas, ‘The State of Caesar and the State of David,’ in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. G. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 177.
- 17 Ibid., 180, 183. Again, the position is ambiguous. The Messianic may not be a ‘beyond’ politics (if it is political Messianism), but in this case, it should be an ‘over here’ of the religious (otherwise, we would fall in a theocracy or in a confessional state).

- 18 Ibid., 183.
- 19 Ibid., 177.
- 20 The concept of 'Christendom' is the point of departure in a Latin American tradition of critical interpretation of Christianity. This tradition follows Kierkegaard's critical position against Hegel. See Karl Lowith, 'Das Problem der Christlichkeit,' in *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1964), 350ff; and E. Dussel, 'Las cristiandades,' in *Historia General de la Iglesia en América Latina. Introducción General* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1983), 1: 173ff.
- 21 The Roman people stood out for their juridical creativity, their 'Lex.' It is not difficult to imagine that a community inside this empire was contaminated by its 'legalism,' institutionalizing itself in such a way that it could differentiate itself from the Roman State. But this juridical fact was possible because of the distinction between two Messianisms accomplished by Jeshua of Nazareth. A 'canonical law' is a worldwide, historical novelty with respect to all the former religious communities, even with respect to the Jewish 'Diaspora' in the Empire.
- 22 See E. Dussel, *El humanismo semita* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1969), final annex about 'El universalismo en los poemas del *Siervo de Yahveh*.' In this work, written more than thirty years ago, I presented the meaning of the Semitic concept of 'habodah,' from my experience of two years of manual work in Israel (1957-9).
- 23 From 70 CE, the Jewish Diaspora had the clear consciousness of being a religious and cultural community without state. This last moment was experienced as a 'lack-of' (a historical state, destroyed by the Romans and, according to some traditions, to be reconstructed by the 'Messiah'). Zionism, as we will see, will attempt to deny this 'lack-of' and will assert the necessity of the Jewish State for a full Jewish self-comprehension of existence. This is not true for Christianity.
- 24 The 'official confession' was the political conception of the Empire as German and Lutheran 'Christendom.' This conception was much criticized by Kierkegaard in the name of Christianity against the Christendom of Denmark, also a Lutheran state. It seems that Levinas did not attempt to build adequate political categories to distinguish between religious Judaism and the Jewish state (or Israeli state, as some prefer to call it), lay, profane, and secular, as stated by Albert Memmi: 'It is necessary to liberate Jews from oppression and the Jewish state from religion.' *La liberación del judío* (Buenos Aires: Raíces, 1988), 270.
- 25 Not being exactly the same, it would be something like a 'Davidic state.'

Of course, for Levinas, this state would be a Messianic one, a utopian state of peace and justice. It would differ from the Lutheran Christendom of Marx. But, could such a Messianic state exist without falling for the demands of the legitimate and monopolist use of violence, and therefore, inevitably (due to its imperfection), produce non-intentional negative and unfair effects?

- 26 Marx, *Marx-Engels Werke* (Berlin: Diels, 1956), 1: 11–12. For Hegel, ‘religion is the foundation of the State.’ This is the very same definition of Christendom against which Marx, legitimately, raises himself (like Kierkegaard, still in the name of Messianic Christianity).
- 27 In saying ‘the first,’ Marx risks a judgment of historical profundity, which I think is accurate. It will be part of a long historical introduction to a work I am currently elaborating and whose title will be *Politics of Liberation*.
- 28 *Marx-Engels Werke*, 1: 100–3.
- 29 Marx quotes here John 12: 31.
- 30 Marx, *Marx-Engels Werke*, 1: 42.
- 31 See E. Dussel, *Método para una Filosofía de la Liberación* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1974): ‘Del Hegel definitivo al viejo Schelling’ (116ff.). This passage from Hegel to Schelling, taken as the origin of the post-Hegelians’ position, has been well studied in my work by Anton Peter, *Befreiungstheologie und Transzendentaltheologie. Enrique Dussel und Karl Rahner im Vergleich* (Freiburg: Herder, 1988).
- 32 ‘[T]he liberal world on which Jewish existence, more or less successfully, was built and was reliant.’ Levinas, ‘Politics After!’ in *Beyond the Verse*, 190.
- 33 Levinas, ‘Assimilation and New Culture,’ in *Beyond the Verse*, 201
- 34 *La Libération du Juif* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966; trans., Buenos Aires: Proyectos Editoriales, 1988), 262, 270. We have, then, three levels: (a) a Jewish religious culture; (b) a secular Jewish cultural community where the ‘holy’ books are taken as the community’s secular literature; and (c) a secular Israeli state where the term ‘Israeli’ would refer to a relation to the secular Jewish culture and not necessarily to a religion. The Israeli state could promote preferentially the secular ‘Jewish culture’ (in the same way that the states of the Christian, Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist cultures have done). The Jews would feel at home (*zu Hause*) by the first time, after twenty centuries. However, the members of other ‘cultures’ would have the same rights. It would be a multicultural state with a Jewish majority (and, for that reason, this state would give priority to the traditional language and culture of Jews). This position of Memmi is sufficiently

complex and bears resemblance with the position adopted by Martin Buber. Levinas leaves the matter in a state of bigger confusion.

- 35 *De civitate Dei*, L.XV, cap. 1.2 (Madrid: BAC, 1964, 2: 125).
- 36 As can be observed, the 'Davidic state' is either a critical and liberating 'secular' state (that should not be called 'Davidic') or it is a critical 'Jewish' state. Since in this last case the state is still theocratic, its position would be ambiguous with regards to non-Jews, who would be 'second class' citizens, as are the Palestinians, Arabic Muslims, or Christians in Israel. They cannot serve in the military. This leaves them, ipso facto, without many citizenship rights.
- 37 A 'State of Liberation' means a state that is creative of new institutions, a state that organizes society in order to give a place to the former oppressed. It is the state that Joshua pretended to create, commanding the ancient slaves of Egypt. In the fifteenth century, the medieval cities created a capitalist world that was liberating and progressive when compared to feudalism. But given the 'entropy' of the new institutions, they became repressive centuries afterwards. A 'Liberating State,' ambiguously named a 'Davidic state,' which should better be called a 'Messianic state' (the kingdom of Samuel until David, Washington's New England becoming independent from England, Hidalgo's México when it becomes independent from Spain, Zaire freeing itself from Belgium), can transform itself into something tyrannical.
- 38 *Abodáh* (עֲבֹדָה) in Hebrew may signify 'work,' 'opus,' 'service.' This last meaning makes reference to the 'server' or the 'slave' (*ébed*, עֶבֶד). In Greek, 'service' is translated as *diakonía* (διακονία). In this sense, we have constructed the concept of 'service-to-the-Other' as 'work' or 'praxis of liberation.' This work transcends the system, the Totality, as a creative action or a 'critical political service.' See E. Dussel, *Para una ética de liberación latinoamericana*, § 22: 'El bien ético como justicia' (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1973), 2: 34ff.; and also in many chapters of E. Dussel, *Hacia una filosofía política crítica* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001).
- 39 Levinas, 'The State of Caesar and the State of David,' in *Beyond the Verse*, 178.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 Levinas 'Judaism and Revolution,' in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. A. Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 115.
- 42 Levinas, 'Politics After!' in *Beyond the Verse*, 193.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 194; translation modified.
- 44 2 Samuel 12:15.

45 See *Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana*, § 30 (2: 102): 'The morally good act, then, is the transversal act with respect to the All, a creative act: the liberating *service* or the *work* (*abodah* in Hebrew also signifies work).'

46 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 160; italics added.

47 *Ibid.*, 170.

48 *Ibid.*, 182; italics added.