

# The Enlightenment, Pyropolitics, and the Problem of Evil

MICHAEL MARDER

*IKERBASQUE/University of the Basque Country, Spain*

In this article I argue that the ideal of rationality espoused by the European Enlightenment hinges on the separation of the light of reason from heat, with which it had been conjoined in the classical element of fire at least since the Greek antiquity. As a result, evil, from the standpoint of the Enlightenment is tantamount to heat without light, while evil, critically viewed outside this tradition, inheres in the absolute separation between the two aspects of the life-giving, albeit ineluctably dangerous, fire.

KEYWORDS evil, Enlightenment, fire, rationality, light, heat

And new philosophy calls all in doubt,  
The element of fire is quite put out;  
The sun is lost, and th' earth, and no man's wit  
Can well direct him where to look for it.  
—John Donne, “An Anatomy of the World”

## Enlightenment light without heat

After centuries of critique and interpretation, the semantic surface of “the Enlightenment” has remained the most obvious and the least understood of its features. We hear nothing mysterious in this overused and incredibly polarizing word; it is almost embarrassing to reiterate the insistent privileging of light in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, or, for that matter, in Western philosophy as a whole, which “since the time of its beginning [...] has been a philosophy of light, vision, and enlightenment.”<sup>1</sup> The same emphasis on light recurs, with slight variations, in other European languages: the German *Aufklärung* (literally, “clearing up”), the Spanish *Ilustración*, the French *le Siècle des Lumières* (“the Age of Lights”) or simply *les Lumières* (“the Lights”), the

<sup>1</sup> Levin DM. *The philosopher's gaze: modernity in the shadows of the enlightenment* (Berkeley: The University of California Press; 1999), p. 15.

Portuguese *o Século das Luzes*, carrying the same literal meaning as the French term, the Russian *vek prosvetscheniya*... In its obsession with light, the Enlightenment has faithfully repeated the movement of philosophical heliotropism, with its “opposition of appearing and disappearing, the entire lexicon of the *phainesthai*, of *alētheia*, etc., of day and night, of the visible and the invisible, of the present and the absent,” “possible only under the sun [*tout cela n’est possible que sous le soleil*].”<sup>2</sup> The criteria of clarity and distinctness, applied to certain knowledge in the early modernity by the likes of Descartes and Spinoza, were themselves the tropes of heliotropism, enlisting the metaphorical sun to the service of philosophy. Sunlight soaked the fields of sensory vision as much as of intelligibility, of metaphor as much as of *eidōs*.<sup>3</sup> The shining ground for the European Enlightenment has been readied ever since Plato.

But in the course of all the turns of the sun, throughout its tropes and tropisms, something gets irretrievably lost and no longer returns. A critique of philosophical heliocentrism — even one as nuanced as that launched by deconstruction — is still too blinded by the light of the sun to be sensitive to the other dimension of the celestial blaze. It does not see (perhaps, because this is no longer a matter of vision, of *theoreia*) that the contrast of light and darkness is only half the Enlightenment story. What escapes the modern sensibility is the *ur*-division between light (and darkness), on the one hand, and heat, on the other.

Antiquity saw in light and heat two effects of the cosmic fire (the cosmos *as* fire) that both illuminated and emitted life-giving warmth. That is why, for the ancients, fire could be creative, as well as destructive. The Vedic tradition in Hinduism intuited in the god of sacrificial fire, the hearth, and the sun — Agni, from which the verb “to ignite” is derived — a conjunction of shining truth and “the ancient vigor of life.”<sup>4</sup> In the *Heraclitus Seminar*, Heidegger and Fink construed the pre-Socratic *helios* as a “fire that apportions light and life.”<sup>5</sup> An inheritor of the Heraclitean way of thinking, Plato depicted the sun as, both, the condition of possibility for seeing and for the generation of beings that sprang up into existence thanks to its abundant heat. The Idea of the Good, to which the celestial body stood in a precise analogy, was meaningless unless it interrelated what we now refer to as “ontology” and “epistemology,” the conditions of possibility for being and for knowing. Early Christian theology, likewise, treated the two functions of fire as mutually complementary. “Fire,” Origen wrote in a commentary on the Book of Exodus, “has a double power: one by which it enlightens, another by which it burns.”<sup>6</sup> The shining of eidetic and divine light was incomplete without the burning of the undying onto-theological fire.

The Enlightenment puts an abrupt end to the very tradition, which it seems to have carried forth. It segregates the two powers of fire from one another, fetishizes light without heat (impassionate rationality, the ideal of objectivity, etc.), and

<sup>2</sup> Derrida J. *Margins of philosophy*, translated by: Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; 1982), p. 251–99.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>4</sup> Doniger W, editor. *The rig veda: an anthology* (London and New York: Penguin Books; 1981), p. 118.

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger M, Fink E. *Heraclitus seminar* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press; 1993), p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Origen. *Homilies on genesis and exodus* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press; 1982), p. 382.

rejects heat without light as myth, as unenlightened obscurity, and ultimately as evil. The darkness, against which the light of reason was to assert itself, is more than sheer obscurity: it shelters the supplement of heat, unrelated either to vision or to its privation. Enlightenment nihilism, so astutely diagnosed by Friedrich Nietzsche, is an offshoot of rationality's aversion to the warmth of life. The core binaries of modernity — such as warm animal vitality and cold calculative intelligence; the intimacy of the hearth and the icy public realm; feminine affectivity and masculine nonchalance — are the avatars of the non-binary, and indeed non-oppositional, primary division between light and heat. The Enlightenment ideal of the aloof, non-pathetic, neutral luminosity is as sterile as the universe it has constructed in its own image. The cosmos is no longer alive; it is no longer a warm and shining order it had been for the Greeks, which is why organic life appears within it as an exception.

It is extremely difficult, not to say dangerous, for finite human beings to expose their thought to both “powers” of fire. To accomplish this feat, metaphysics has relied on an external guarantor, be it the Idea of the Good or God. The light that burns overwhelms the senses, like the blinding image of the sun directly emblazoned on the retina. In her patient meditations on the Platonic cave, Luce Irigaray has paid attention to this excess, this “too-much” of light mixed with heat: “It was too much. Too much for them to be given both light and fire at once. That light which floods out in such a burning stream was making them lose their way. A separation had to be imposed. Brightness on the one side, heat on the other.”<sup>7</sup> The excess of givenness calls for a decision on what the human subject would consent to receive: Light or heat? We know what facet of fire modernity has opted for. Eventually, the separation within the given paved the way to a differential valuation: from Plato to Hegel, heat, registered by our tactile sense, was ranked as a less ideal (or less eidetic) force than that inherent in light. And everything harboring heat (the animal, the feminine, emotions, life itself) was devalued and vilified along with it.

It seems to me that Irigaray reaches too far back in the history of Western thought, when she reads the suppression of heat into *The Republic*. For Plato, the sun's generative capacity, its stimulation of growth and life, is at least as significant as its illuminative capacity, across the spectrum of tropes that infinitely mirror and echo one another. Everything that lives strives toward the sun and the good not only because they are the sources of physical and eidetic light but also because their warmth summons the living to the source of heat they will never reach (the “final” end). Still, Irigaray's observation remains valid, insofar as the separation of brightness from thermal energy is the uncritical prelude to any critique — a split in the phenomenon of fire that stamps modern philosophy, ethics, and politics with truncated heliotropism. It induces a partial amnesia of fire, an intense concentration on one of its aspects to the detriment of the other.

The segregation of the two powers of fire is not without precedent in Christian theological commentary that forewarns us against the rift's deleterious effects.

<sup>7</sup> Irigaray L. *Elemental passions*, translated by: Joanne Collie and Judith Still (London: The Athlone Press; 1992), p. 40-1.

Origen, in one of his homilies, interprets Jeremiah 5:14 — “Behold, I have made my words in your mouth as fire [*dvarai b’pikha l’esh*]” — in terms of the need to enlighten the parishioners and, at the same time, chastise them for their sins. A mere rebuke and censure that “explain nothing obscure,” “touch nothing of more profound knowledge,” and “do not open more sacred understanding” are the sparks of a fire “that burns only and does not enlighten.”<sup>8</sup> Conversely, “if when you teach you open the mysteries of the Law, you discuss hidden secrets, but you do not reprove the sinner [...] your fire enlightens only; it does not burn.” The one who follows the best course of action, then, is the one who “mixes the small flame of severity with the light of knowledge.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Bernard of Clairvaux decries the exclusive focus on burning *or* shining (*ardere* *or* *lucere*), on splendor *or* fervor: “To shine only is useless, and to burn only is insufficient; but to burn and to shine — that is perfection.”<sup>10</sup> The useless, cold light that does not burn represents, in Bernard’s imagery, moonlight, that is, the luminosity of an ostensibly disengaged “pure” theory and speculation. From this division stems the problem of theory’s disengagement from practice. In opting for light without heat, the Enlightenment falls under the illusion that it has resolved the dilemma at the heart of fire, has minimized the risk of passionate flare-ups, and has eradicated the dangers of “non-rational” political engagement. It shines with borrowed light — lunar, not solar.

A case-in-point of the Enlightenment politics of light is Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality. With the stated goal of “achieving understanding in language,” Habermas advocates “a rationally motivated agreement among participants that is measured against criticizable validity claims.”<sup>11</sup> To communicate in this sense is to reflect the light of reason from one participant in the communicative process to another, all the while keeping an eye on “validity claims” that would warrant the non-hallucinatory nature of this agreement. A postmetaphysical version of perpetual peace reigns within the confines of rationality’s infinite and infinitely tedious self-reflection. But outside these ideal and tautological boundaries things are different. Here, we come face-to-face not so much with an enemy, who puts in question the existence of a community that builds understanding in language, but with evil, at least as the politics of light would portray it. The enemy can still resort to a modicum of communication, if only for the purpose of signaling her stance as an enemy. Evil, on the other hand, is non-communicative, totally idiomatic and idiotic (in the etymological sense of *idios*, “one’s own”), separated. Despite its belabored praise of pluralism, communicative rationality absolutizes evil. But is absolute evil at all conceivable? And, if so, how?

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *Homilies on genesis and exodus*, p. 383.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Chrétien JL. *L’Intelligence du feu* (Paris: Bayard; 2003), p. 99 [author translation].

<sup>11</sup> Habermas J. *The theory of communicative action: volume 1: reason and the rationalization of society* (Boston: Beacon Press; 1992), p. 75.

## Heat without light, or evil from the perspective of the Enlightenment

As a rule of thumb, if evil is only relatively separate from those basking in the light of understanding without heat, then it is a force of darkness, engaged in a dialectical combat with the practitioners of Enlightenment politics. This evil is relative. Novalis, in fact, proposes that there is no other kind of evil: “There is no absolute evil, and no absolute affliction,” because, though “[a]ll affliction and evil is isolated and isolating — it is *the principle of separation* — the separation is both annulled and not annulled by means of combination” and, therefore, affliction and evil “*only exist in a reciprocal relation.*”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the principle of separation as such already presupposes the principle of aggregation or relationality it distinguishes itself from, relies on the very thing it repels, and, as evil, owes its substantiality to the good. Schelling wholeheartedly agrees with Novalis’s assessment, when he observes that “evil does not have the power to exist through itself; that within evil which has being is (considered in and for itself) the good.”<sup>13</sup> Lest we have any doubts, Novalis and Schelling are in a good company, as virtually every Western philosopher has ruled out the possibility of absolute evil, wholly separate from being and the good.

There is one caveat, however. The conventional account of evil assumes that the dividing lines pass between the reciprocally related elements of good and evil, or being and nonbeing, not between two autonomous powers of light and heat. Once the Enlightenment splits the phenomenon of fire in two, evil becomes absolute, absolutely separate and non-communicative: not as a force (or, ultimately, the impotence) of darkness but as heat detached from light. Regardless of the efforts to shed light on and to comprehend this form of evil, it will escape the grasp of rationally inspired overtures.

The absolute evil of heat without light is both the catalyst for and a monstrous brainchild of the “enlightened” light without heat. Historically, as Reinhart Koselleck notes, Enlightenment thought evolved from Absolutism and coincided with the consolidation of the modern state form.<sup>14</sup> The nascent political and intellectual infrastructures of Hobbesian modernity formed a united front against the possibility of civil war. “Following the paths illuminated by reason,” writes Koselleck, “the State can be realized only through ending civil warfare and, having ended it, preventing any recurrence. Thus, like the political morality of individuals, the state also corresponds to reason. For reason, faced with the historical alternative of civil war or State order, ‘morality’ and ‘politics’ coincide.”<sup>15</sup> Civil war, then, is the absolute evil from the political perspective of the Enlightenment; it is the unthinkable heat without light, which is ideally separate from the light without heat of the state form and its attendant reason. In Hobbes’s political

<sup>12</sup> Novalis. Notes for a romantic encyclopaedia: das allgemeine brouillon, translated by: David W Wood (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), p. 120–1.

<sup>13</sup> Schelling FWJ. Philosophical investigations into the essence of human freedom, translated by: Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press; 2007), p. 13. More recently, Terry Eagleton has made a similar point in *On Evil* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press; 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Koselleck R. Critique and crisis: enlightenment and the pathogenesis of modern society (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; 1988), p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

philosophy, to be sure, the divestment of heat is still incomplete, to the extent that the Leviathan is imagined in the form of “an Artificial Animal.”<sup>16</sup> It will not be until organic, animal vitality is drained from the political domain (which, in an exacerbation of the “artificial” aspect of the Leviathan, mutates into bureaucratic machinery) that the last vestiges of life-giving warmth are removed from the state form illuminated with sterile light. In any event, Hobbes regards civil war as the absolute evil, separated from the power of reason and “scarce sensible, in respect of the miseries, and horrible calamities, that accompany” it.<sup>17</sup>

If, as some contend, the creation of a global civil society is the corollary of globalization,<sup>18</sup> then the threat of a global civil war is bound to raise some of the specters that haunted Hobbes in the seventeenth century. A knee-jerk response is to inscribe terrorism within the framework of global civil war as “radical evil,”<sup>19</sup> epitomizing the lightless heat of absolute violence. The pyropolitical effects of terrorist actions that often resort to explosions, suicide blasts, and car bombings, apparently confirm this transposition. Terry Eagleton, in turn, cautions us not to succumb to the temptation of labeling terrorism or Islamic fundamentalism as “evil.” Its “lethal fantasies,” he writes, “are mixed in with some specific political grievances, however illusory or unjustified its enemies may consider them to be. To think otherwise is to imagine that Islamic terrorists, rather than being viciously wrong-headed, have no heads on their shoulders at all.”<sup>20</sup> Although he is not a Habermasian by any stretch of the imagination, Eagleton leaves the window of communicative rationality open, even in the case of those who entertain and act upon their “lethal fantasies.” If terrorists are not acephalic beasts, if they have a head on their shoulders, then their actions have a modicum of light mixed with the scorching heat emanating from them. A pure politics of light without heat is as impossible as a pure politics of heat without light.

The split between the two “powers of fire” does not describe political reality but rather the Enlightenment ideal and its obscure underside. Just as the absolute evil without any relation whatsoever to being and the good is inconceivable, so it is absurd to insist on light completely devoid of heat and on heat without a glimmer of light. *On the one hand*, we have already seen how Novalis, Schelling, and Eagleton insinuate the light of being, reason, and the good into the thickets of the darkest heat. Their interpretations are consistent with the prevalent view — to which the Gnostics take an exception<sup>21</sup> — that evil, unlike the good, has no substantial reality of its own. To be realizable, evil must be adulterated with the good, if only in order to attain its goal (*its* good). According to the Jewish Kabbalah’s *Book of Zohar*, such adulteration relies on the “spark of God [that] burns even in Samael, the personification of evil.” In and of itself, evil is dead, but “it comes to life only because a ray of light, however faint, from the holiness of

<sup>16</sup> Tuck R, editor. Hobbes T. *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1991), p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>18</sup> Kaldor M Cf. *Global civil society: an answer to war* (London and New York: Polity; 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Bernstein R Cf. *Radical evil: a philosophical interrogation* (London and New York: Polity; 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Eagleton, *On evil*, p. 158.

<sup>21</sup> Garagalza L. La existencia mala. In: Oriz-Oses A, Solares B, Gargalza L, editors. *Claves de la existencia: el sentido plural de la vida humana* (Barcelona: Anthropos; 2013), p. 330-47.

God falls upon it.”<sup>22</sup> The neatness of the division between good and evil, light and heat, testifies to the Enlightenment strategy of dissociation, or splitting in the psychoanalytic sense of the term. Heat without light is the disavowed part of the Enlightenment itself, which means that civil war, terrorism, and other phenomena it deems evil are corollaries to a cleavage in the modern political “ego.”

*On the other hand*, a commitment to the light of reason (hence, of the state) mixes this luminosity with the heat of a passion *for* reason. In “Faith and Knowledge,” Derrida gives his readers to understand that the separation between the two is never complete; that knowledge presupposes our *faith in knowledge*; and that its light finds religion even there where it appears to be absent: “Everywhere light dictates that which even yesterday was naïvely construed to be pure of all religion or even opposed to it and whose future today must be rethought (*Aufklärung*, *Lumières*, Enlightenment, *Illuminismo*).”<sup>23</sup> Politically, the problem of motivational deficit in liberal democracies bespeaks a lack of faith in the current political regime, as well as the absence of stimuli for playing by the rules of the game it has set. Public apathy and inaction are the telltale signs for the waning ardor of the liberal-democratic principle, which, in the last decade, desperately tried to reanimate (or reignite) itself by spreading “the light of freedom” outside the North-Atlantic “West.” Cold indifference to election outcomes is, itself, a symptom for the cooling down of the regime’s animating principles.<sup>24</sup>

To sum up: the sterile light of the political and philosophical Enlightenment labels its disavowed other “evil.” When evil is understood as a mere privation of light, which will be dispelled as soon as reason and freedom shine their lanterns in the previously non-illuminated corners of the planet, the implication is that this kind of evil is relative. Here, the frame of reference is essentially Aristotelian: degrees of evil can be measured against the optimal amount of light, so as to be categorized as deficiencies and, in a more critical vein, as excesses. Too little light means that the uneducated and illiterate masses are manipulated by tyrannical (usually theocratic) political regimes; too much — spells out the demands of total transparency, all-around surveillance, or panopticism. But when, thanks to political machinations, evil is completely removed from the field of vision and associated with the highly lethal lightless heat, it turns absolute, albeit not in itself but in the political discourse that utilizes it for its own purposes, that is, for its own good. Such is the sense of “evil” in George W. Bush’s expression “the axis of evil,”<sup>25</sup> used to refer to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea — incidentally, all countries with the real or imagined nuclear arsenals (let us recall that Carl Schmitt thought

<sup>22</sup> Scholem G. *Major trends in Jewish mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books; 1974), p. 239.

<sup>23</sup> Anidjar G, editor. *Derrida J. Acts of religion* (London and New York: Routledge; 2001), p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, everything phenomenology has taught us on the subject of the reactivation of the origins applies to the efforts of re-awakening the founding principles of Western politics, provided that we make a switch from the geo-archaeological to the pyrological model. Instead of unearthing the origin, covered over by dead sediments of its own systematization, it is a matter of reigniting the revolutionary fire that made it so potent in the first place.

<sup>25</sup> George W Bush. State of the Union Address. January 29, 2002. Available from: <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4540>.

that the atomic bomb inaugurated the age of “the politics of fire”<sup>26</sup>). Within the confines of this rhetorical field, it makes no difference that weapons of mass destruction have never been found in Iraq. The absolute evil, with which the Bush administration has painstakingly linked Saddam Hussein’s regime, is not about the hidden and the unconcealed, the visible and the invisible, but about the burning of hatred. (Originally, Bush’s speechwriter David Frum considered using the expression ‘the axis of hatred’). Absolute evil exceeds the Aristotelian notion of excess, so that the so-called rogue states and terrorism, with which they are often identified, acquire an overloaded meaning, “meaningfulness-as-excess,”<sup>27</sup> or, better, meaningfulness in excess of eidetic light.

### Absolute separation and evil

Our typology of evil would have been incomplete were it not to take into account the consequences of a non-binary opposition installed at the heart of modernity. To the relative evil of darkness and the absolute evil of obscure heat, we must add a third category, inherent in the separation of heat from light — the separation that portends the divorce of theory from praxis, of ethics from politics, and of life from reason and the state. Among the fundamental causes of evil within the Kabbalistic worldview is the partitioning of the manifestations (Sefiroth) of God. Scholem explains: “[T]he quality of stern judgment represents the great fire of wrath, which burns in God but is always tempered by His mercy. When it ceases to be tempered, when in its measureless hypertrophical outbreak it tears itself loose from the quality of mercy, then it breaks away from God altogether and is transformed into the radically evil, into Gehenna and the dark world of Satan.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, “the metaphysical cause of evil is seen in an act which transforms the category of judgment into an absolute.”<sup>29</sup> What is in question is not the plausibility of an absolute separation but an *absolutizing tendency* that sacrifices everything to an ideal, be it light or heat, mercy without justice or justice without mercy.

The surge of radical evil, according to the Kabbalah, was due to the uncontrollable inflammation of God’s wrath that disrupted the balance and harmony of the Sefiroth. Though presumably neutral, the cold judgment of the Enlightenment, for which mercy is but a pitiful appeal to the affects and hence a “moral pathology,” followed a similar self-absolutizing track. Immanuel Kant, in “Perpetual Peace,” enthusiastically seconded the Latin motto, *Fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus*, “Let justice be done, though the world perish,”<sup>30</sup> so as to underscore his own anti-utilitarianism. The dispassionate light of critical reason proved to be more deadly than any theological fire. The burning wrath of God

<sup>26</sup> Schmitt C. *The nomos of the Earth in the international law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, translated by: Gary L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press; 2003), p. 49. Von Medem EF, editor. Schmitt C. *Glossarium: aufzeichnungen der jahre 1947–1951* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot; 1991), p. 180–1.

<sup>27</sup> Ugilt R. *The metaphysics of terror: the incoherent system of contemporary politics* (New York and London: Bloomsbury; 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Scholem, *Major trends*, p. 237.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>30</sup> Kant I. *Perpetual peace: a philosophical sketch*. In: Reiss HS, editor. *Political writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1991), p. 123.

effectively coincided with a merciless tribunal of pure practical reason, which could with equal ease destroy the entire world on the altar of critique.

When not moderated by extra-judicial factors, judgment and critique bring about a crisis of reason, attributable to the immoderate negativity of separation and division. (Critique, judgment, crime, and crisis share the same etymology, derived as they are from the Greek verb *krinein* — “to separate, to divide.”) The merciless light of relentless critique is “unstuck” from the warmth of life itself, reducing the living body to a “meaningless mass of sensations” and, therefore, to a figure of evil.<sup>31</sup> Edmund Husserl’s *exposé* of the crisis of European sciences attributed their dire predicament, precisely, to the sciences’ forgetting of the lifeworld, with the structures of practical meaningfulness embedded in it. More pertinently to our argument, in the wake of Koselleck’s reading of Hobbes the crisis of reason is, necessarily, a crisis of the state form. Despite his fanatical adherence to transcendental principles, Kant did not dare to extend the tribunal of critique to the state, and so a part of the world was clandestinely saved from perishing in the name of justice. As Koselleck puts it, “[c]riticism [...] became the victim of its ostensible neutrality; it turned hypocritical.”<sup>32</sup> It will not be until Karl Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1843) and *The German Ideology* (1846) that critique is saved from hypocrisy at the price of equating the “embodiment of reason” to a potent instrument in class struggle. For Marx, the state is not a *katechon*, or the restrainer, preventing the apocalyptic relapse of chaos and civil war, but, rather, the political support mechanism for economic exploitation. The sham neutrality of the state form belies the myth of the cold light of bourgeois reason. Beneath the façade of cold rationality boils an intense class struggle, rooted at the same time in the logic of capital and in the intolerable living conditions of its victims.

Emitted in excess, light and heat have deleterious effects: the one blinds, and the other burns. And the more each of them tends to absoluteness, i.e., to an absolute separation from the other, the more destructive it waxes. Remarkably, the difference between absolute good and absolute evil evaporates, which is why, having placed the absolute separation of the I from the Other at the opening of *Totality and Infinity*,<sup>33</sup> Emmanuel Levinas has no other choice but to admit, as did René Descartes before him, that I can never know whether the Other’s intentions are good or evil with regard to me. The Platonic sun blinds those who gaze at it directly, just as the sacred (or the Other) burns those who approach it too closely, foregoing all mediations. The archetypal Biblical warning in this respect may be found in Leviticus 10:1–2, where “Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu put coals of fire [*esh*] in their incense burners and sprinkled incense over it. In this way, they disobeyed the Lord by burning before him a different kind of fire [*esh zarah*: literally, ‘a foreign fire,’ or ‘an other fire’] than he had commanded. So fire blazed forth from the Lord’s presence and burned them up, and they died there before the

<sup>31</sup> Eagleton, *On evil*, p. 73–6.

<sup>32</sup> Koselleck, *Critique and crisis*, p. 98.

<sup>33</sup> Levinas E. *Totality and infinity*: an essay on exteriority, translated by: Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press; 1999).

Lord.” At any moment, fire can slip out of our control, become other, foreign to our intentions. Playing with it is always risky business, but so, too, are non-normative ethics and politics!

Dreaming up the utopia of a risk-free society, liberal political philosophers sought to do away with politics altogether. In the words of Koselleck that could have been easily uttered by Schmitt: “That politics is fate, that it is fate not in the sense of blind fatality, this is what the enlighteners failed to understand.”<sup>34</sup> The forgetting of fire in the Enlightenment demanded that the political-revolutionary spark, which had ignited it in the first place, be extinguished. All that was left was a pale afterglow. But this extinguishing did not mean that tumults were empirically more rare or less bloody. On the contrary, the isolation of light from heat rendered oppositions more polarized and disorders more violent; revolution, the complete upending of the existing order, is a quintessentially modern political phenomenon, which entails a conflagration of the collective will. Whether they are thought of as quasi-miraculous events exploding in the continuum of history, or as the beacons of universality shining a steady light on human actions,<sup>35</sup> revolutions are a part of a pyropolitical theology, which preserves the — secularized and truncated — fiery manifestations of the Judeo-Christian God in modern theory and political practice.

In a less dramatic form as well, “the Age of Reason” secularizes elements of its theological prehistory, including sacred fire. Separation of church and state notwithstanding, the light of the Enlightenment is nothing other than the refracted, “lunar,” divine light, ideally rid of its “sting.” As soon as criminal responsibility supplants the notion of sin, the indifferent light of justice, predicated on equality before the law, takes the place of the fiery judgment of God. The terms of Origen’s theology become incomprehensible. An Enlightenment thinker would greet with a condescending shoulder shrug a statement such as “[...] *our* God is said to be *a consuming fire* [...] [*Deus noster ignis consumens est*]. Light is He without a doubt to the just; and fire to the sinful, that He may consume in them every trace of weakness and corruption that He finds in their soul.”<sup>36</sup> The fire of divine judgment is replaced with the cold light of justice that, from the outside, shines on all in equal measure. The judgment of interiority (“weakness and corruption [...] in their soul”) is reduced to the assessment of criminal intent. At least for a time being, the category of evil vanishes from political philosophy, even as the chasm between the two effects of fire widens beyond all measure.

## Whither pyropolitics?

A staple political question, “What is to be done?” — so crucial to Vladimir Il’yich Lenin — imposes itself on us. How do we reintegrate the two powers of fire? And is their reintegration possible, let alone desirable, today?

<sup>34</sup> Koselleck, *Critique and crisis*, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> On this point, see Alain Badiou’s writings on St. Paul, especially *Saint Paul: the foundation of universalism*, translated by: Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press; 2003).

<sup>36</sup> Origen. *Song of songs: commentary and homilies*, translated by: Lawson NP, Mahwah (NJ: Paulist Press; 2002), p. 112.

Certainly, the gap between light and heat, law and life, will remain unfilled, and no special effort is required for its maintenance.<sup>37</sup> Law, judgment, and the entire biopolitical apparatus will be imposed onto life from a feigned space outside of it. But what if we refrained, for an instant, from passing judgment on life and, instead, judged along *with* it, guided by its own light or *logos*? The ancient equivalent to this endeavor was *pyr phronimon*, a discerning fire, which silently announced its judgments by literally analyzing whatever it burned. The enigmatic Heraclitean knowledge proper to heat has to do with this discernment that, at the same time, precedes and succeeds human intelligence: “What we call ‘hot’ [*thermon*] seems to me to be immortal and to apprehend all things [*noeein panta*] and to see and hear and know all things [*eidenai panta*], both present and future.”<sup>38</sup> An antidote to the excessive separation of light and heat, of reason/state and life, is not an undifferentiated mess of chaotic matter but the divisions and concrete judgments inherent in fire and in life itself.

Subsequently, Origen will recover for Patristic theology the pre-Socratic idea of *pyr phronimon*, the discerning fire. Unlike the Enlightenment, which operates with an impoverished scheme of justice built upon an unacknowledged division *in* fire (between light and heat), Origen conceives divine justice as a division, or judgment, *by* fire. God’s fire itself discerns among the just and the sinners: in the hearts of the former, it burns as the fire that “opens the Scriptures;” in the hearts of the latter, it “is that fire which burns up the thorns of the evil earth, that is, which consumes the evil thoughts in the heart.”<sup>39</sup> Justice is at the root of a non-public, inner illumination and of a consuming blaze. The same fire burns in each differently, respecting the ancient principle of dispensation *to each his own*. And, when it burns in the hearts of the sinners, it works as a purifying remedy, indissociable from the discernments of divine justice itself.

In the commentary on the Song of Songs, upon which we have already touched, the *locus* of fire shifts onto the sun with its double capacity harnessed in the service of justice. Interpreting the word of the psalmist “The sun shall not burn thee by day, nor the moon by night,” Origen concludes: “So you see that the sun never burns the saints, in whom is nothing sinful; for, as we have said, the sun has twofold power: it enlightens the righteous, but the sinners it enlightens not, but burns, for they themselves *hate the light because they do evil*.”<sup>40</sup> While the condition *sine qua non* for true enlightenment is the love of light and its warmth, the hatred of light precedes the punishment of the sinners that merely confirms their futile flight from the divine glow by way of evil actions. Evil spawns its own burning darkness. So, too, division and decision by fire are not external to the ethereal flammable matter — the soul — on which judgment is passed. Pyropolitical justice is, at once, singular and universal, inner and outer, fiery and luminous.

<sup>37</sup> And, conversely, see Simon Critchley’s *The faith of the faithless: experiments in political theology* (London/New York: Verso; 2012). “Agamben tries to keep open a space between law and life [...]” (p. 163).

<sup>38</sup> Kirk GS, Raven JE. *The pre-Socratic philosophers: a critical history with a selection of texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1963), p. 201.

<sup>39</sup> Origen, *Homilies on genesis and exodus*, p. 314.

<sup>40</sup> Origen, *Song of songs*, p. 112.

To be perfectly clear, I am not advocating a revival of Origen's conception of justice today. It is too late for a grand new synthesis of light and heat in political fire. To us, the words of Origen reek of the smoke rising from the pyers of the Inquisition, and Heraclitus is as enigmatic as ever. As John Donne puts it, "The sun is lost"<sup>41</sup> — and that is not such a bad thing. Deconstruction has done much to cement this loss, in that it dismantled the systematic alignment of the discourse of reason with the sun and the king.<sup>42</sup> I only want to emphasize that one can go about losing the sun in different (and mutually exclusive) ways. Is it really lost if the light of reason is retained at the expense of the heat of faith? Or, if the absolute and objective standards of both powers of fire give way to the dispersed sparks of luminosity and warmth, not to mention the positive possibilities of darkness?<sup>43</sup> Here, then, is the tangle of contemporary postmetaphysics, which lends its ambiguous name, at the same time, to Habermasian politics, to much of analytic philosophy, and to post-Heideggerian thought.

If it's too late for a post-Enlightenment synthesis of pyropolitics, then perhaps there is still some time for a flickering of meaning coextensive with life in its political intensity. When lives become unbearable under foreign occupation, or because of the environmental calamities inflicted upon human and non-human beings, or, again, due to the economic exploitation of those who are already poor and vulnerable — when life cannot go on as usual, pyropolitics makes its flash-like comeback. Simmering discontent may (and does) explode when people are pushed to the edge of the tolerable. Austerity-hit Southern Europe, where political polarization and general strikes are prevalent, is nowadays the testing ground for the threshold of what is tolerable in the West.

Assuming that the deconstructive variety of postmetaphysical thought has a propaedeutic value, its lesson is that fighting fire with fire will be hopelessly embroiled in the spiral of sovereign violence. In Shakespeare's *King John*, this fight is the prerogative of the king ("govern[ing] the motion of a kingly eye"), as the advice of the Bastard goes: "Be stirring as the time; be fire with fire; / Threaten the threatener and outface the brow / Of bragging horror [...]."<sup>44</sup> Life that is fully alive, sovereignty completely in control of the situation, absolute good and evil, the fire of a successful revolution — all these are the inventions of onto-theology, that is to say, metaphysics. We may have underestimated the scope of our lateness, which is — to resort to the language of German Romanticism — late for life itself. In that case, we must contend with life *qua* afterlife, and, instead of a new synthesis of pyropolitics, wade through the politics of ashes.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> See the epigraph to the present essay.

<sup>42</sup> Balfour I. Introduction. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. 2007;106(2):211.

<sup>43</sup> Some fine example of the new political possibilities arising from blindness and darkness may be found in Patricia I Vieira's study *Seeing Politics Otherwise: Vision in Latin American and Iberian Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 2011).

<sup>44</sup> Act 5, Scene 1.

<sup>45</sup> See Marler M. *After the fire: the politics of ashes*. *Telos*. 2012;161:163–80.

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## Notes on contributor

Michael Marder is IKERBASQUE Research Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of the Basque Country (UPV-EHU), Vitoria-Gasteiz, in Northern Spain. A specialist in phenomenology, political philosophy and environmental thought, he is the author of *The Event of the Thing: Derrida's Post-Deconstruction Realism* (2009); *Groundless Existence: The Political Ontology of Carl Schmitt* (2010); *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013); *Phenomena—Critique—Logos: The Project of Critical Phenomenology* (2014); *The Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium* (2014); and *Pyropolitics: When the World is Ablaze* (forthcoming in 2015).

Correspondence to: Michael Marder. Email: michael.marder@gmail.com