

AMBEDKAR CONTRA ARISTOTLE:  
ON A POSSIBLE CONTENTION  
ABOUT WHO IS CAPABLE  
OF POLITICS

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*For Ghanshyambhai*

I

At the outset, I would like to place side by side, two documents, greatly removed from each other with regard to their time and location of origin. The first: upon India's independence from British rule in 1947, the Constituent Assembly debated anew the question of constitutional safeguards for minorities. The section of opinion arguing for such safeguards expressed itself thus, "The reservation of seats has benefited us in many ways ...it has created an awakening among the Scheduled Castes; it has brought among them a spirit of self-progress; it has made others realize that the members of Scheduled Castes are citizens, equal to them, and they too should be entitled to all the rights that a citizen should have. It has also developed amongst us a habit to sit together and decide the future of the country and to discuss the important and grave problems of the country mutually..." (Sen 2007: 107)

The second text now : Aristotle in 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C Athens, devotes the Book Eight of his *Politics* to the role of such activities as music, painting, gymnastics etc in the education of the young such that they can become good citizens. With particular reference to music Aristotle says:

Since we accept the division of melodies proposed by certain philosophers into (i) ethical, (ii) practical and (iii) enthusiastic, with distinct modes corresponding to each and [since] we maintain that music should be used not for the sake of one benefit only but for several ( for it should be used for education and for *katharsis* as well – what I mean by *katharsis* I will indicate generally now but more clearly in the work of poetics – and thirdly for employment for cultivated leisure [*diagoge*] both for amusement and relaxation from toiling, it is clear that one must make use of all the musical

modes but not use them all in the same way: for education the most ethical modes are to be employed; but for listening to others perform we must also use the practical and the enthusiastic. For any affection that occurs strongly in some souls occurs in a lesser or greater degree in all such as pity, fear or again religious ecstasy [*enthusiasmos*]. There are some people who are particularly susceptible to this later form of excitement and we see them once they have availed themselves of melodies that thoroughly excite the soul, put back on their feet again as a result of the sacred melodies just as if they had obtained medical treatment and *katharsis*... In a similar way [to the sacred melodies], the kathartic melodies offer a harmless pleasure to all. Hence the use of such modes and melodies must be permitted for those whose business is providing music for the theatre; the audience after all is double, partly free and educated but partly vulgar too, composed of laborers and farmers and other such, and these people too must be granted their spectacle as a relaxation...it is appropriate thus to permit those who perform publicly to make use of this sort of music but for education, as has been said, one must employ ethical melodies and modes. (Ford 1995: 118-119)

Without making any vain, ill-advised attempt to make commensurate the vast difference of provenance between the two documents, let us pick out an apparent point of contact, which is also a point of repulsion, between them: which could be identified as the evaluation of something like “habit” in the two texts. Though Aristotle doesn’t use the word it seems he is saying that kathartic modes and melodies correspond to a low level pleasurable *habit* of the soul, its most degraded, if harmless, potentiality. While the citation from the Constituent Assembly Debates puts a positive value on habit which is a *new* and *relational* possibility with the coming of the Scheduled Castes, with reservation, up to the level of a general citizenship. But this point of contact – and repulsion – must be immediately qualified. It is not as if Aristotle does not recommend the positive uses of habit. Quite the contrary. In *Politics*, Aristotle urges the ethical habituation of the youth in their conduct towards virtue and citizenship. Such habituation, with specific modalizations, pertains as much to the body as to the soul (*psyche*). In fact without habituation and practice, it is impossible to mould conduct in the requisite form(s) of virtue (*arête*). Then is it that in the above texts from *Politics*, Aristotle is concerned only with the habits of those who are a priori excluded from the rights – and obligations – of citizenship? Just as in inverted symmetry, the Constituent Assembly pro-minority view seems to foreground the emancipated habits of

the hither-to excluded Scheduled Castes. I think it will be useful at this point to take a second look at the tabled documents – and it is possible that they will reveal a symmetry, an inverted one at that, but answer the question “whose habits are at stake here?” somewhat differently in the light of this second symmetry.

Clearly the Constituent Assembly view says, “it has developed amongst *us* [emphasis mine] a habit to sit together and decide...”. In fact throughout the passage the pronominal subject travels between “them” and “us” – and “us” in two compositions, one *without* them and one *with* “them” such that the habit of participating in citizen-politics, of deciding the future of the country is mutually conducted by a re-composed “us”. Now read the Aristotle passage again: Without equivocation it is said that the kathartic pleasure is meant “for all”. Everyone is susceptible to this pleasure, to a greater or lesser degree. The kathartic modes and melodies appeal and have access to the simpler and least composed (or organized, if you will, but the musical term for both sides, the melody and part of the soul, is more illustrative) part of the soul, which is an essential component of the universal constitution of the soul as such. At this level, everything is automatism, a cycle of equilibrium and disequilibrium – and Aristotle’s medicinal analogy to the incidence of kathartic music emphasizes that by the introduction of the melodic medicine in the system, *nothing is fundamentally transformed*. The automatism is restored, the universal animalism of the soul is put back on its feet – nothing, in other words, is composed or re-composed at the level...at the level of what, or who?

I think Aristotle provides the answer in the first book of *Politics* much before he has questioned the effects of music on the souls of potential citizens. The answer lies in his definition of the *zoon politikon*, “the political animal” and the relation of that definition with what he calls the “outcast”<sup>1</sup> (Aristotle 1995: 250). This nexus of definition and exception, postulate (or prescription) and intransigence provides the fundamental grid of judgment on political constitution and capacity that from its ancient Greek provenance travels afar and seems to arrive at the doorstep of the new Indian Republic whose ‘melodic line’, as it were, was being created by the Constituent Assembly before 1950. The grid in Book One of *Politics*, lays out the following parameters: when Aristotle says that “Man is, by nature, a *zoon politikon*, a political animal” this utterance starts off as a postulate or axiomatic declaration. At one level, everything either follows from this axiom or everything henceforth is mobilized to save this axiom. At another level, Aristotle does provide a defining parameter for

the declaration – by which parameter and others, he will distinguish the political animal from the “outcast”. The parameter by which the ‘being-political’ of man – which further coincides with man’s ‘being-human’ — is decided is the capacity of *logos* that is not only more than but is also an *overcoming* of the voice (*phone*) of the animal which expresses mere pleasure and pain. (Aristotle 1995: 250) Thus the definition of ‘being-political’ of the animal that is man involves not only a predicate or positive capacity of reasoned speech (*logos*) but is the grid of the overcoming, a cross-over and transformation vis-è-vis a *threshold* of animalism. Which means according to Aristotle, the generic capacity for politics is both existent and in-existent for man, an actual capacity and constitutive possibility as well as a hazard and *exposure* to the risk of failing to overcome the defining threshold, falling back into animal automatism of pleasure and pain. Interestingly, Aristotle’s distinction between the *zoon politikon* and the “outcast” maintains the first parameter but articulates it with the second one which gives it a paradoxical evaluation.

According to Aristotle, the outcast is the negative of the political animal. The outcast, *beast or god*, lives outside the State and by that virtue, is a kind of ‘fundamental being’, an un-composed or non-constituted entity who is marked by a paradoxical *sovereignty without capacity*. The strangeness, or should one say, grotesquerie, intensifies when we see that outside of divine entities, the consistent examples of outcasts, these sovereigns without capacity, in Aristotle’s text, are women, slaves, laborers, children, foreigners, in short, every category which is excluded from the full capacities of the political animal and yet *is ruled by them*<sup>2</sup>. How is this unsavory paradox to be explained? By going back to Book Eight and its kathartic expedient: which is that the fundamental, non-constituted, factual outcast-nature which is a cold sovereign indifferent to joys of political constitution(s) is a *universal nature*. Fundamentally – and musically – according to Aristotle, we are all outcastes and we are all sovereigns and even for such cold sovereigns there is the musical stimulation of the degraded, kathartic type. Upon this kathartic incidence, arrives the threshold or moment of political differentiation that must differentiate the universal nature or substance from its outcast(e) sovereignty into a divided structure of inclusion and exclusion. Which is to say a structure self-divided into the ‘natural’ and ‘political’ animal where the trace of one beast is always carried by the other. So every further expedient of ethical habituation of the bodies and souls of citizens – whether through forms of music other than kathartic or not – will always carry the trace of the fundamental

automatism and the sovereign animal habit. Aristotle is keenly aware of the presence of the trace of difference in the paradigmatic dyad of inclusion and exclusion that constitutes the grid of the political animal in its graded distribution of sovereignties and capacities, governments and freedoms. Before relating this structure to Ambedkar's thesis on 'graded sovereignties' of the caste-system, a parenthesis:

At the threshold where man is sovereign and subject to the pure automatism of *katharsis*, sovereignty is the same as absolute incapacity. How to explain this? By the speculation that this threshold in Aristotle is abysally split between the greater schema across of genus and differentia, potentiality and actuality etc., and the 'fundamental' non constituted hither side which is sovereign by dint of being non constituted and factual. It's the hither side of a split threshold whose kathartic facticity – this is how some classes *are!* – is projected into the greater side of the schema of soul and its parts, the hierarchy of potentiality and actuality, etc as the possibility of a kind of constitutive entropy of all constitution. Which is the same thing as saying that all 'definition' of man as a political animal is a theoretical effort to attenuate this entropic return to a fundamental state which is factual through and through. However despite this effort, to the factual givenness of outcast(e) sovereignty there will always correspond the entropic potential of constituted humanity – this is what we might all become, mere kathartic animals!

Now by the above *speculative* construction, it can be readily admitted that the use of terms/concepts such as "sovereignty", "soul", and "habit" is not strictly aristotelian. But this use is only a reflection of a 'repressed' presupposition of Aristotle's system and is of the nature of an untimely *trace* of this presupposition. Hence for instance there is such a trace of this automatic-animal sense of habit in the *formal* cultivation of habit (*hexis*) as the proper infrastructure of potentiality supporting all actual conduct of virtue (*arête*). One might summarize the clarification by introducing a term for this 'trace' betwixt potentiality and actuality: im-potentiality. As impotential, 'entropic' vitality, habit secretly persists in the formal structure and pedagogy of Aristotelian habit as virtue. Life haunts form in the history and destiny of western constitutional politics from its Aristotelian beginnings. And this spectrality veils and separates Aristotle's political-philosophical concepts from themselves and from each other. That is the point of this long parenthesis. Now to return to the main comparison.

Is the above Aristotle's Ambedkar moment, the homologue of

an Ambedkar-threshold of graded sovereignties of the caste-system in India?<sup>3</sup> I will postpone the theoretical comparison for the moment but indicate the stakes of such a comparison. The stakes lie in the constitution of a congregation or assembly which both articulates as well as mobilizes the dyadic structure of society with its spaces of inclusion and exclusion. When Aristotle points out the simple fact that the theatre-audience, which listens to musical performances, is always two, the laboring classes, women, slaves etc and the educated elite, he is already setting up the task of both overcoming and articulating this doubleness in the constitution of the political assembly by carrying the trace of difference in every actual politically and socially differentiated formation. A certain *ontological* inclusion of the fundamental degradation of the universal sovereign 'animal' and 'kathartic' nature must carry on in every higher ethical and political habituation – and the habituation of every higher level of congregational existence is a kind of *rule* or *government* of the outcast-habit rather than its total exclusion. For Ambedkar, the primary, irreducible question is that, does the caste-system in India, historically petrified over two thousand years and with a claim to immemorial existence beyond historical time present a *trace* of its systematic, structural or relational reality? Is there any space of mobility and mobilization of structural difference and historical contingency, in the political constitution of a congregation that includes in its formation traces of its own exclusions? Indeed B.R. Ambedkar will ask this question explicitly in his comparative discussion of Brahminical caste-system with the treatment of plebeians under the provisions of Roman Law. But that elaboration for later...

I would like to summarize the sequence that follows from Aristotle's equivocal or diaporetic axiom that man is, a *zoon politikon* – equivocal because it contains and presupposes the opposite axiom that man's nature remains subject to ecstasies that are cold to politics: first, exclusion is not separation; the subject of politics includes its exclusions, its incapacities, and its inexistences. In that sense the subject of politics is always also im-political. The second link of the sequence is that by the im-political logic of political capacity, *everyone* is political; or rather everything can be – and must be – *politicized*. The third link is that in its operational economy, every-one, instead of living the life of a multiplicity, is always reducible and divisible into the figure of the *two*: Included and Excluded, Master and Slave, Human and Animal. Thus the sequence closes in on itself and forms a circular chain or grid that Aristotle onwards distributes the classical principles of western political philosophy.

## II

It is a reasonable supposition that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar belonged to the opinion that praised in the Constituent Assembly the new “habit” of participation in collective decision on the nation’s future, a habit made possible by reservations. Indeed this admirable opinion addressed a subject which, as I pointed out earlier, was re-composed from the initial separation of “them” and “us” and yielded a new and egalitarian indiscernibility of erstwhile hierarchies of society. Yet we also know that Ambedkar in his day, was a critic of any ‘natural’ constitutional reflex or habit that flowed smoothly from ‘liberal’ constitutionalism of the West. In his “A Plea to the Foreigner”, Ambedkar was at pains to point out that all constitutional projects, indeed, all sovereignty, must take into account the irreducibility of “circumstances” and the demands of contingency (Ambedkar 1991a: 199-238). According to this critique, the theory of constitutional habit – which, following Aristotle’s grid, leads to constitutional morality as a habituation – promotes the *form*, not the actuality of the constitution of self-government. (Ambedkar 1991a: 202-203)

Though I will not attempt a historical analysis here, the context of “A Plea to the Foreigner” which was the tremulous eve of Indian self-government, demanded that the stakes be clearly expressed as to *who* would rule whom in the actuality of self-government, not only in its constitutional form. This was a demand placed vis-à-vis the imminent ruling party of an imminently independent India, that is, Congress. But Ambedkar addressed this demand to the so-called generic “foreigner” to campaign for a kind of cosmopolitan rallying around the exigency of this demand. There was an effort to penetrate the general bloc of sympathy for Congress in Britain – including liberals and socialists – but it was as much an attempt to draw out liberal-constitutional political philosophy, with its subjective infrastructure of habits and reflexes considered “democratic”, on the exigency of social separation, irreducible in its structure and topology, that was a point of *resistance* to, and not a threshold of a transformation into the constitution of the ‘political’ subject. The entire criticism of Congress rested on its majoritarian as well as Gandhian covering over of the separative structure by an *appearance* of social totality or *one* society whose Hindu and secular modes of existence were fused together in this majoritarian-Gandhian logic of mass organization and mass-ideology that Congress represented.

Ambedkar’s criticism in “A Plea to the Foreigner” unfolded on two levels. The criticism of the potential ally in the cosmopolitical



'foreign' partisan was that he or she was a partisan of what was considered to be a 'natural-political' totality continuous with an emancipation from the fundamental animal life of universal humanity. According to Ambedkar, the liberal – as well as the socialist – democratic partisan must become aware of the actuality of the 'Hindu exception', an exception which didn't admit of the index of intelligibility of the 'animal', who is generically asocial in habit, pleasure, suffering and is the generalized equivalent of all life-processes that is automatic and kathartic. The 'Hindu' outcaste, the Untouchable, is intensely socialized, thus dense with the human habits of following rules, prescriptions, proscriptions and commands as no animal is – and exactly by virtue of this total human-social habituation is entirely *separate* such that no *notion* of caste and outcastes exists, no *trace* of the Untouchable exists in thought.<sup>4</sup>

The second level of criticism is directed toward the Congress party and particularly Gandhi. Here the accusation, not merely exhortation, is the following: the Congress maintains the separation of the lower castes by excluding them from the logic and technique of mass – and militant – organization, of which Mahatma Gandhi is the undisputed master. Ambedkar had been the first to admit that it was the Mahatma's arrival on the scene from South Africa that was singularly responsible for the conversion of Congress from a campaign for political reform to an organization which henceforth would impose militant sanctions which the 'masses' would enforce. (Ambedkar 1991: 20) And this extraordinary act of 'conversion' was carried out by Gandhi through a singular intervention into Hindu society, which was not a society, with no real stakes in 'totality', which was a non-totality of corporations hanging together through shared negative injunctions against who and what was impure, unseeable, unspeakable within that system. Indeed Hindu society was separate from itself which lived out a collective life as sheer *habit* that erased all traces of its systematicity and 'mad' rationality.<sup>5</sup> Now Gandhi didn't, atleast to begin with, when he wasn't pushing for social reforms and Congress wasn't from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century either, intervene in Hindu society as such. What he did was give a militant and mass programme to the 'Hindu' so as to convert the Hindu corporatism and separatism not *into* but *as* secular and political congregation. Now this quizzical formulation requires a parenthesis before one goes on to Ambedkar's critique of Gandhi:

"Conversion *as...*" instead of "conversion *into...*" is a clear case of linguistic infelicity. Strangely, it is a meaningful – and productive–infelicity when understood in the light of a Gandhian strategy of



individual-to-national *debt*. The function of this strategy of debt is to induce the conversion of a multitude into a congregation *in its own place*. Instead of converting ‘into’ another form or denomination, a scatter or multiplicity of individuals become a homogenous collective without any conscious movement of such homogenization when they fulfill a *minimal* obligation as individuals as if it were a ‘pure’ (and ‘free’) exercise of self discipline. In his or her own place, each individual, *selfishly* practices ‘Gandhian’ selflessness in such acts as that of spinning cloth and paying the minimal four anna fee to Congress as token of ‘selfish’ participation. Gandhi’s genius of inducing the minimal selfish debt/obligation in the ‘Hindu’ individual *converted* Hindu individuality into secular-political discipline without the slightest disorientation of that individual status or being towards ‘another’ form of life, whether political or religious. Interestingly, in perfecting this technology of ‘conversion *as...*’, Gandhi proved himself as one of the greatest exponents of the same Christian technology of inducing a modern, ‘free’ debt that so marks the constitution of the Western individual as a political being. So there is no contradiction, seen from this angle of debt induction, between modern, secular-western Congressist individualism and the ‘Hindu’ Gandhian practices of the self.

The above is the crux of Ambedkar’s accusation, nay, indictment. According to Ambedkar, the lower caste in general, the Untouchable in particular, are exempted from the superb Gandhian technique and logic of inducing in the individual Hindu, who leads essentially always a fragmented existence, a *minority* existence (in the true sense of existential weight and not number), a unified *national debt*. This debt is expressed in the ‘minor’ subscription of a few annas which every individual pays to become a member of one political party so as to be totalized into a mass action of repayment of national debt. Now Gandhi will eventually go further and offer the alternative mode of individualized as well as totalized debt-payment by paying with the labor of two thousand yards of hand spun cloth. (Ambedkar 1991b: 246) Ambedkar accuses this extraordinarily sophisticated technique that it exempts the Untouchable from this debt of the new congregation. How so, when Gandhi was eventually campaigning for the abolition of Untouchability and urged non-Hindus as well to join this ‘Hindu’ secular process? By the diagnosis that the Mahatma didn’t apply himself his personal authority and his strategic genius to the task of organizing the Hindus in support of the cause of Untouchables *as* Untouchables<sup>6</sup> — for who could doubt the need to convert the

'problem' Untouchability was into a *locus* of political transformation and congregation? The Untouchable could never simply *be* the generalized Hindu in the process of Gandhian and Congressist conversion to nationalist debt until the excluded castes' debt to itself *as* excluded was expressed as a congregation and political assembly. And until then the Untouchable was only *abandoned* to Hinduism and in Ambedkar's criticisms of Harijan Sevak Sangh, such an abandonment, in the midst of all the exaltation into divinity of the Untouchable and the penance of the Hindu, was vividly felt, accused, denounced<sup>7</sup>.

In "Annihilation of Caste", meant to be a speech in the cause of social reform which was cancelled because of its *decision* on Hinduism so as to *annihilate its habit* from Ambedkar's own life, the author takes issue with Mahatma Gandhi (in the letters following the publication of the address) on the very principle of equality. For Ambedkar against Gandhi as well as against Arya Samajists, the concern was equality, not in God's eyes but in the real unequal world. (Ambedkar 1989 b: 87-88). Equality in the here and now of inequality! Forced by the actuality of different kinds of inequalities – socio-historical and physical – will we treat unequals unequally? – this is Ambedkar's founding question to any egalitarian thought (Ambedkar 1989 b: 58). But if Ambedkar enunciates a founding principle from his side of equality, which bases itself neither on God's sanction and grace nor on the Aristotelian *threshold* of potential equality which is the threshold of overcoming *and* politicization of animal life – a later generation of biologicistic and economic philosophies will speak of "animal spirits" – then doesn't such 'axiomatic' equality go against the insistence on thinking the caste system as a trace of its differentiated structure, against the separation of the Untouchable in thought as much as in the electorate? In such essays as "Are the Untouchables a Separate Element?" and "A Plea to the Foreigner", we find an urgent campaign for reservations and separation of electorates which is somewhat impatient with the expected 'reasonable' justification of capacity – and opportunity – correction of historical wrong. In Ambedkar's view, if one works with the axiom of equality – he says that thought is nobody's monopoly – and under British rule, some form of civil rights are available to the Scheduled Castes, then the urgent issue is not capacity-equalization through reservations. In the legislative as well as administrative spaces, protection and reservation are the *direct* legal-constitutional propulsion to *exercise* of right and capacity given the absolute obstruction of Hindu (non)society to such exercise<sup>8</sup>. It

is, even more fundamentally, the *demonstration* of the Untouchable's separation in a vivid alienation of the truth that not only is the Untouchable excluded, abandoned but also that Hindu society is separated from itself, is anathema to itself, is, hence, not a society at all. For Ambedkar, what Gandhi could never take upon himself was the *thought* of caste as Hinduism's self-anathematization even while he deployed a complex logic of debt and love vis-a vis the reformist conduct towards the Untouchable's hereditary function of scavenging (Ambedkar 1991 c: 297).<sup>9</sup> Ambedkar wants to show that in this comprehensive regimen and prescriptions of reformist, nay, loving conduct, the Mahatma is still not *thinking* as far as caste is concerned (Ambedkar 1991 b: 19).

But what is Ambedkar's analysis of Gandhi's logic of conduct in the social reform programme for the abolition of Untouchability, which was a programme, after all, in great advance of the days of Annie Besant's prognosis of social integration as doomed on the grounds that the lower classes/castes are incorrigible for which they are not to be blamed since they carry in their unclean, inassimilable habits no trace of reflection of their degradation?<sup>10</sup> The analysis yields the following features, which, taken together, reveal a masterful, if secret and perverse, Gandhian logic of conservation of the hereditary caste-system. In the piece "Gandhism", Ambedkar extracts a simple model of sociability underlying Gandhism which could be almost called "animal". Maybe not in the sense of Aristotle's kathartic homeostasis but in the sense of a repetitive and self-sufficient locus of *work*. Even with the expansion of the model to make intelligible wider networks of human community, the locus of productive self-sufficiency remains the same – and the simple repetitive principle is the basis for all further strivings towards spiritual self-sufficiency, which surely is creative and not repetitive or habitual merely. In fact, in the early *Hind Swaraj* and several contexts, Gandhi will repudiate and not cease launching tirades against what he sees as a 'culture of leisure' that comes with modern technological civilization and breaks open and infiltrates the principle of self-sufficiency. According to Ambedkar's analysis, this repudiation of leisure and love of labor is precisely the *affection of the leisured classes* (Ambedkar 1991 c: 291). Or, maybe the precise formulation should be that Gandhi's love of labor – as true as that of a Ruskin's why not – is an affection that serves the interests of the leisured classes. In caste propelled Hindu (non) society, Gandhi's transvaluation of labor as virtue re-induces labor and work, the limit manifestation of which is scavenging, as a 'privilege' in society. This

general re-induction is accompanied, simultaneously with social reforms and the campaign to abolish Untouchability by a prescription and tactic to re-induce the 'privilege' of labor, including scavenging, in the same functional distribution (*varna*) that the caste-system articulates. And in the existent functional distribution, it is then the Shudra's and the Untouchable's 'privilege' whose fruits the leisured classes enjoy.

But we must understand this tortured logic that ends up as a Shudra's curse being her privilege, is not a 'Hindu' logic; it is formal and if one may call it that Aristotelian. Gandhi prescribes the privilege to be so because it is an act of repaying a general debt of humanity (the debt of *all* to scavenge). Or, even better, the prescription of debt is inflated into a *love of debt* ("I love scavenging", says Gandhi) (Ambedkar 1991 c: 292). These prescriptions and inflations – Gandhian, whether or not 'Hindu' – lead to the logical deduction of scavenging as the Shudra's 'privilege'. This is because the Shudra can legitimately and habitually do as a matter of *birth-right* what general humanity is indebted to do and loves being so indebted...in the essay mentioned above and in the letter of reply to Gandhi's objections, objections to *Annihilation of Caste in Harijan*, Ambedkar carries out a kind of scientific polemic against Gandhism which is as much an axiomatic struggle, a struggle to depose the axiom of eternal and virtuous scavenging that determines Gandhian reformist conduct. Does Ambedkar lay the groundwork for a 'dalit' theory of future sociability which will be a theory of universal, unconditional and fundamental *leisure*? Does he obliquely prophesize a *dalit snobbism* as a catachrestic riposte that the future will provide to the laceration and love of hereditary occupation, and its deep, monotonous "ancestral calling"?<sup>11</sup> A theory of leisure that is non-Aristotelian and does not require to be itself produced by slaves, women, laborers – and of course professional musicians who the citizens must enjoy and judge but never emulate? (Ford 1995: 117) I will not even begin to check subtle prophecy against hard historical reality Ambedkar onwards and after early 1950s. Only this might be proposed, at the risk of over-generalization, that the 'real' of Ambedkar's historical threshold was one when all past habits must be broken and revoked and new habits must start to be formed. Not just habits as habituation but habits as experiments with a new *purposiveness*<sup>12</sup>.

## III

It is true that the opinion from the Constituent Assembly Debates cited at the beginning signals a re-composed horizon of political and collective participation, nay, decision, which is already, within a limited space, ‘impurifying’ the subject of politics of its pure caste-bound separations. Such an ongoing impurification was indeed the main constitutional task, the new experiment with a republican purposiveness. And B.R. Ambedkar couldn’t but be galvanized by this emergent republican horizon of unity and indiscernibility of erstwhile separate and hierarchical categories. At the same time, it seems to me, Ambedkar’s singular preoccupation with creating the trace of separation as separation in thought that would be the key critical step towards solving the “mystery of caste” was not fully exhausted. And given the incompleteness of the task, all projects of constituting political self-government would be subject to a social and ontological blind spot which erases all traces of the systematicity of the caste-system and is itself never quite erased. How could a political (and juridical) constitution be actualized, which is an eminently rational and purposive orientation, when the social space was saturated by the living *absurdity* of the caste-system! This was the basis for Ambedkar’s foreboding that independent, republican India was entering a life of contradiction in which the egalitarian constitutional principles and inegalitarian social structure would contradict each other to catastrophe<sup>13</sup>. It was also the source of his wry advice to the dominant interests to be grateful that the minorities in India, unlike in Ireland, had accepted the constitutional compromise of reservations and not indulged in direct action (Ambedkar 1989 b: 40-43). So within the constitutional horizon we do see an ambivalent subjective figure emerge who is both certain and uncertain, reassuringly certain about the truth of liberty, equality, fraternity as the generic ideals and values to be accomplished; almost tragically uncertain as to the possibility of realizing these values faced with the immemorial impasse of the caste-system.

Indeed if Ambedkar is always writing with both hands, with one the draft of the constitution with a kind of patient, almost ironic energy, with the other, the critique of immemorial habit with a nearly tragic lucidity and urgency, I would like, at the end, to imagine a third organ in action; an incorporeal organ of thought with which Ambedkar intellectually chooses to *default* on both the

debt of Hindu shastras and of liberal political knowledge, though never with the same intensity and amplitude. But since his repudiation of and conversion from Hinduism is well known, I will make a statement about his intellectual resistance to, if not default of, the *givenness* of the political subject in western liberal democracy and its donative condescension, which is to say, its *sovereignty*.

I tried to show earlier the equivocal axiomatic core of Aristotelian constitutions of the political subject formed of a certain complicity and vacillation between generic sovereignty and predicative capacity – constitutions of which liberal democracy is one. I also specified the Aristotelian sequence to be an equivocation, utilization and recuperation of a fundamental dyad – which is also a continuum – whose constitutive terms are “human” and “animal”. In that unfolding in Aristotle, the becoming-human of man and being-political of the animal are the same. Though he was a physiological researcher and not a political philosopher, Xavier Bichat, during the time of the French Revolution, drew up a ‘modern’ cognitive physiology of human consciousness that roughly replicated Aristotle’s criterion of possession of *logos* for the political animal; only this time *logos* encompassed an expressive and cognitive consciousness emancipated from the habitual life of “assimilation and excretion”. To such a habitual monotony was opposed the differentiated and emancipated “life of relation”. In fact, Bichat writes of an *organic* life which is “vegetal”, an *animall* life of relation which feels, perceives, reflects on its sensations and “...is frequently enabled to communicate by its voice its desires and its fears, its pleasures and its pains.” (Starobinski 2003: 129-130) The gradation of vitalist transformation – which as much as a political schema of transformation, I have proposed – leads to the properly cerebral life of human *will* but it is still in differentiated continuity with *passion*, whose roots lie in organic life (Starobinski 2003: 130). Thus roughly to the measure everything and everyone is politicized, every exclusion is included the trace of which lingers, appeals and dismays, everything including the highest cerebral will is physiologized even while every physiological stage is vitalized by a kind of infinite virtuality.

The above homology between a ‘science’ of life and the ‘life’ of politics is formally subtended by two dyads or couples: ‘limitation-transformation’, ‘externality-subjection’. The couples separate and intertwine such that every transformation takes place under a constellation of external limitations and every limit is transformed into a *force* of ‘becoming’: This is the ‘becoming-human’ of life, the ‘becoming-political’ of the living individual such that the limitation

or externality of life becomes or transforms into a *subject* of a capacity or a sovereignty with infinitely graded potentialities. With this schema the consistency of classical Aristotelianism with modern biopolitics is demonstrated and it seems that the political field is totally saturated with this ‘western’ logic<sup>14</sup>.

Despite the obvious parallel between the differential model above and Ambedkar’s thesis on graded sovereignty of the Hindu caste-system, the thesis itself insists on the exceptional status of the Hindu system. So, in conclusion, what might be the nature of this exception and what universal, generic stakes might be involved in that separation? In the text “Who Were the Shudras?” – a title obscurely resonant with Emmanuel Sieyès’ 1789 text, *What is the Third Estate?*<sup>15</sup> – Ambedkar develops the Greek axiom on man’s nature as political animal and shows its differential and potentializing truth in Roman Law. He shows how the codes of Roman Law retain the principle of mobility within the hierarchy of patrician-plebeians such that there can be a differentiation of the hierarchy of legal and social *personae*. Roman Law allows degrees of legal capacity – *juris sui* and *juris alieni* among other categories – to subjectivate the *personae* of society to the extent that the plebeians and slaves with hardly a *persona* through the contingency of acts, have a chance of crossing the threshold Aristotle called “*kathartic*”<sup>16</sup>. Analogously, through the chance of reprehensible public acts, the full, patrician *persona* of law and society was liable to be struck with sanctions and fall below the threshold of subjectivation<sup>17</sup>. Then for Ambedkar as for the history after him, was a *plebianization of lower castes* possible within the caste-system in India?<sup>18</sup> According to Ambedkar, it was *not* within the rigors of Brahmanical law. These were rigors – like the *akribeia* of iconoclast Christians<sup>19</sup> – that were fabricated to foreclose the chance of actions and events, foreclose anything from *happening*. The technique of this rigidification/ rigour is the law of hereditary, immemorial transmission of caste-status unlike the severely limited but strikingly effective *topology* of legal personality in ancient Rome. But it is at this point that an observation from Ambedkar’s work “The Untouchables” reveals an extraordinary modality of the rigid Brahmanical hierarchy.

In this work, Ambedkar cites the list of Scheduled Castes in all the provinces from a 1935 survey by the Government of India and calls it a “terrifying” list (Ambedkar 1990 b: 265).<sup>20</sup> Why? Because below the immobile, rigid threshold – hence not a threshold but a hellish abyss – according to the survey, there exist four hundred and twenty nine communities! This “terrifying” number *is* the real



of an utterly exposed mass of existences and at the same time it is a number as if in pure play of numericality conveying no more even the corporeal simplicity or degradation of 'being-animal' as opposed to 'becoming-human'. Rather, it is the decisive count of *existence itself* which doesn't add up to or express a total sum because this is an existence dispossessed of what Ambedkar calls "the title-deeds to humanity" (Ambedkar 1991 b: 269).<sup>21</sup> Which means, this is a state of 'being-human' and nothing but 'being-human' – yet without a *trace* of any *consistent, formal* humanity, thus, 'being-human' inconsistently. So instead of the simple bi- or tri-partite division of vegetal, animal and human differentials of 'life' that is the framework of a 'western' typology, the case of 'immemorial' Brahmanical Law sits rigid and massive, though also articulated in a distilled economy of three high *dvija* (twice-born) castes, sits over the nether and according to Ambedkar's prophecy, potentially tectonic play-ground of the lower castes' *existence* – this play of difference of castes, sub-castes and out-cast(e), is a play of stratification *in one place* (and in apparently one immemorial time). While this 'play' is not the natural material for 'western' politics' programme of limitation, transformation and constitution, every constitution must, according to Ambedkar, reflect the actual play of forces of a given society<sup>22</sup>. So, "reservation for backward classes/castes" will be the general name for the brief reflection of society in a constitution, which even if, *to all appearance* liberal-western, is also an *index of resistance* to that very constitutional philosophy and habit.

But at that late stage in Ambedkar's life and work, things had assumed an ambivalence which was in turn, and together sometimes, delicate and discordant. However in his earliest presentation at Columbia University, "Castes in India", Ambedkar had a firm diagnostic thesis: The caste-system, with its massive and immemorial saturation of the social field, being a system, *was also a historical contingency*<sup>23</sup>. It was an act, plot – and chance – of such enormous proportions that it became axiom, law and habit fused into one. From that early stage onwards, Ambedkar, based on his pioneering thesis, never ceased to make the most open and unqualified appeal (which also had the insistence of a demand). Which was that the caste-system being a historical contingency must be recognized, analyzed and overcome; its annihilation must become the stakes of not only Indian history, in search of independence and equality – that is, the stakes of the political consciousness of that exigent time when Ambedkar was thinking and writing – but the concern and stakes of *any* definition, model and prescription of politics. The

historical contingency of the caste-system in India, which has, for whichever reasons, assumed this shape of an immemorial mystery and monster, appeals to and demands the attention of *any* politics that while never ceasing to pay – and default on – the debts of sovereignty and capacity, is also ready this time, in Marx’s imagery, “to weave its intrigue with the world” with *thought* and *chance*<sup>24</sup>.

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#### NOTES

1. Here Aristotle quotes Homer on the “outcast” as the one who is “tribeless, lawless, heartless”.
2. In Aristotle’s scenario the outcast is a figure of *separation* and *injustice* – hence both for the exigency of the principle of justice and that of the administration of this principle, “rule” or “government” is necessary. See (Aristotle 1995 : 251)
3. This is a reference to Ambedkar’s comprehensive thesis on the structure of caste system in India, its static multiplicity of parts and its totally ‘habituated’ and invisible articulation in time. See, for the entire construction of the thesis (Moon 1989: 5-96).
4. This is the crucial point of contention between Ambedkar’s understanding of caste and the Western tendency at the time to make what Ambedkar consistently considered a question of *notion, structure and relations of multiple elements*, into a ‘substance’, whether rendered impure, animalized and degraded in the putting down of lower castes or redeemed through social reform. For Ambedkar, as for someone like Frantz Fanon on race, caste was a question of *thinking* against its habit. Thus the Untouchable, *once thought*, was not defined by ‘being impure’ but by a structure of separation between the categories of “purity” and “impurity”.
5. The characterization of the caste-system as a case of madness is found many times in Ambedkar. The defenders of the system are indeed mad, its greatest upholder, Manu, must have been overcome with madness to have enunciated the law he did; Ambedkar doesn’t exempt Gandhi of a certain madness for explaining injunctions against inter-dining on the ground that eating was as disgusting as defecating and thus best done alone. Again, it seems to me, the issue of madness is really an issue of the erasure of all marks or signs of a system so pervasive as caste, from the objects and dispositions (habits?) of a society’s thinking. The *real* madness of caste, its absurdity, was that it was *not thought to be mad*.
6. (Ambedkar 1991b: 246) This support, in Ambedkar’s projection of Gandhi’s method of debt-induction, could be expressed by the Hindu’s employing in his

- household at least one Untouchable – and defaulting on this would exclude the Hindu from the franchise and membership of a nationalist party and ‘congregation’ such as Congress.
7. This criticism also involves Gandhi’s campaign for the Untouchables’ right to temple entry. Given Gandhi’s vacillations with regard to such a Bill – and the same regarding his decision to fast or not on that question – Ambedkar’s statement is that the real stakes are not in the permission to enter a Hindu temple or not but in ‘Untouchables’ experience of Gandhi’s actions, their judgment based on that experience about Gandhi and the consequent *decision* to separate or not from Gandhism.
  8. There is enough evidence for this insistence on Ambedkar’s part on “exercise”. Yet we mustn’t limit such exercise to that of constitutional and juridical rights that vindicate a fundamental ‘human’ capacity thus giving the lower castes their legitimate dignity. I think, Ambedkar’s arrow pierces deeper into the real of *existence*, however excluded and disabled, and the exercise of dignity is sought even in that *weakest real* of existence – a kind of generic dignity. It is probably with post-Ambedkar history that the ‘symbolic turn’ comes and dignity becomes the affect of a *symbolized* Dalit existence, whether through reservations or through other iconized, even idolatrous means.
  9. For Gandhi, caste evil is *anachronism*, not *anathema*.
  10. See the long and appalling quote (Besant 1909) in (Ambedkar 1991 d: 3-7).
  11. This phrase in Gandhi’s reply to “Annihilation of Caste” is used by Ambedkar in his riposte repeatedly – and reversed in tone and value, refuting and mocking against affirming and obligating.
  12. For an extraordinary reading of David Hume which puts into assemblage habits, custom, imagination and truth, an assemblage whose purposive orientation doesn’t contradict habit, in fact needs it, but also vigilantly regulates it according to a criteria of consonance of imagination (which builds on habit) with truth, see (Deleuze 1991)
  13. See this prophetic remark as cited by Perry Anderson in his recent essays in the *London Review of Books* launched in the cause of blowing up the contemporary triumphalist (nuclear?) establishment of an ‘ideology of India’ masking itself as the (ancestral?) “idea of India”. See Perry Anderson, *After Nehru*, <http://www.irb.uk/v34/n15/perry.anderson/after.nehru>, p. 5. Right after quoting Ambedkar, Anderson says the champion of unconditional equality was wrong; caste inequality, among others, became a resource of the democracy to come in India since Ambedkar.
  14. This is not to deny the tremendous value of a thesis like Giorgio Agamben’s that the field of ‘western’ political logic is inaugurated by a fundamental *abandonment* of all logic of sovereignty and capacity and that moment of *re-vocation* must forever accompany every stage of the political vocation of ‘empowerment’ and ‘constitution’ of sovereignty. One could say that in a historically and socially ‘alien’ case of caste in India such a revocation and an abandonment is utterly exposed – a kind of bewildering ‘play’ of sovereign abandonment is exposed to the eyes of ‘others’ (other than Hindus, who according to Ambedkar, see, hear, feel, *think* nothing).
  15. I will not develop this speculation – which, to me, is a compelling one – here. But I do think this is another direction to take from the one which likens Ambedkar to a Tocqueville of Indian history.
  16. For reasons of brevity, I will not expand Ambedkar’s comparison of Roman Law

and Brahmanical Law. The details are crucial though – the reader is advised to go to Ambedkar’s full text – but this much can be said, that the author brings out the differentiator as “contingency” which Roman Law takes account of. But this contingency, precisely because it is *law*, Roman Law must constitute as a flexible but firm *code*. Is this then the ideal for Ambedkar’s vision of politics? I suggest that it is not and for Ambedkar, the chance of history must be understood as a *challenge* to any constitution. See (Ambedkar 1990 a: 57-64)

17. This is called the fall from *existimatio*, or reputation in the eyes of law. This could be lost by committing certain proscribed acts – one of which was for the *persona* with *existimatio* to appear on the public stage! See (Ambedkar 1990 a: 61)
18. I will not – I can’t – conduct any serious investigation into such so-called “plebianization” in the post-independence India, particularly in electoral terms. But for an expert analysis on “plebianization” (and “ethnicization”) of the lower-castes and related studies, see (Jaffrelot 2010).
19. For the contrast between *akribeia* and *oikonomia* (a kind of flexible “economy” of power) in the war of doctrines of the icon between the iconoclasts and iconophiles in Christian Middle Ages, see (Mondzain: 2005).
20. What terrifies Dr. Ambedkar in this list prepared by the Government of India in 1935 is its *teeming isolation*. The imagination of the slave against the master, the animal against human, foreigner against citizen retains a classical economy – and dramaturgy– of the Two. This is a “terrifying” *play* of human isolation.
21. Again in the context of Gandhi’s efforts of social reform, what is at stake, in Ambedkar’s view, is not just an abstract right but the *habit* of *not feeling grateful* which must be practiced. I will call this the project of a new conduct of *defaulting* rather than induction into the old Brahmanical habit of ‘being-in-debt’.
22. For the Lasalle quotation on constitution of social forces, see (Ambedkar 1989 b: 42)
23. For the argument of castes in the caste system being a “parceling-out” from a single caste and its consequences for the *appearance* of an immemorial hierarchy of ‘bits’ of caste which must actually be historical in its genesis, see (Ambedkar 1989 a: 22)
24. I will not elaborate a theory of chance or events here. But such a task is essential for understanding the *consequences* of contingency that convert the latter into forms of *necessity* and *destiny*. It is as much essential for the *opening* to historically unprogrammable *acts*. I think there is sufficient cue to think these possibilities in Ambedkar’s example of the railways in India as a contingent moment of decision on the immemorial caste-segregation. Which is also when Hinduism will try to pre-empt true decision by a theory of *prayaschitta*, which ‘pays back’ the ‘debt’ of the crisis or contingency through expiation (or *Katharsis*, in the sense of purgation?) of the decision on the event. See (Ambedkar 1989 b: 73).