

The 19th Century French Socialist Press at Stanford University Library: 1819-1871 –
November 1-2, 2013. Philippe Le Goff, University of Warwick

‘La faim justifie les moyens’: Auguste Blanqui, ‘structural’ violence and the socialist press

The germs of an idea

‘Oui, messieurs, ceci est la guerre entre les riches et les pauvres, les riches l’ont ainsi voulu, car ils sont les agresseurs.’¹ So proclaimed Auguste Blanqui in his incendiary defense speech of January 1832 at the *Procès des Quinze*. During the course of the speech Blanqui expanded on this idea. Employing arrestingly violent metaphors to paint a somewhat different picture of the new order than the much lauded ‘best of republics’, he held that an order rooted in inequality, exploitation and oppression amounted to a systematic act of aggression against the French people. He described the Orleanist state as ‘[une] pompe aspirante et foulante qui foule la matière appelée peuple, pour en aspirer des milliards incessamment versés dans les coffres de quelques oisifs, machine impitoyable qui broie un à un vingt-cinq millions de paysans et cinq millions d’ouvriers pour extraire le plus pur de leur sang et le transfuser dans les veines des privilégiés.’² For Blanqui, therein resides the violence of everyday life; a socio-political order structured solely around serving the interests of the idle rich and facilitating their exploitation of the poor amounts to a perpetual, daily war. And this war was the essential condition for facilitating the ‘smooth functioning’³ of the state: ‘Les rouages de cette machine, combinés avec un art merveilleux,’ Blanqui told the assembled audience, ‘atteignent le pauvre à tous les

¹ Auguste Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze’, in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, ed. Dominique Le Nuz (Paris: La Fabrique, 2006), p. 64.

² *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³ In a similar manner Slavoj Žižek identifies a form of ‘systemic’ violence as the ‘often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems.’ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile Books, 2009), p. 1.

instants de la journée, le poursuivent dans les moindres nécessités de son humble vie, se mettent de moitié dans son plus petit gain, dans la plus misérable de ses jouissances.⁴

The defense speech – a canonical work of the nineteenth century’s most significant revolutionary - provides the point of departure for our analysis. The importance Blanqui places on exploring the violence of the rich (or, in a word, the exploiters) and the socio-political structure it wielded in its name invites us to consider how and why Blanqui (and later his followers) developed and disseminated this idea. In her history of radical republicanism during the July Monarchy Jill Harsin offers some insightful reflections on this issue. Radical republicanism was characterised, she states, by ‘violence not only in action but in ideology, a theoretical commitment to the revolutionary appropriation of the machinery of state as the chief means to transform the social and economic environment.’⁵ The movement did not perceive the state ‘as a neutral force, but rather as the repressive arm of the financial and commercial bourgeoisie who ruled.’⁶ State or socio-economic violence was therefore a key notion for radical republicans. It was from this position that they legitimised, in part, their use of revolutionary violence. Rather than the ‘initiators’ of violence, they ‘stressed the prior aggression of the government, which promoted an economic system in which men could not protect their families from starvation. In doing so, they attempted to redefine the nature of violence, to persuade Parisians that a government that allowed its citizens to starve was itself committing a violent act.’⁷

⁴ Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze’, in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, p. 65.

⁵ Jill Harsin, *Barricades: The War on the Streets of Revolutionary Paris, 1830-1848* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 6. For an interesting discussion of communism and violence in the nineteenth century, see Alain Badiou, ‘The Communist Idea and the Question of Terror’, in Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *The Idea of Communism Volume 2* (London: Verso, 2013).

⁶ Harsin, *Barricades*, p. 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Here Harsin outlines two key issues that will guide our analysis. With the use of Blanquist newspapers from the two bookends of France's radical nineteenth century - the early 1830s and the Paris Commune - we shall examine Blanqui's and Gustave Tridon's (one of Blanqui's closest disciples) intellectual engagement with the notion of structural or socially inbuilt violence, considering in turn the significance of the press in both the dissemination of this idea and as part of Blanquist politics more generally. But a third, crucial question should also be posed: how did such a conception of violence influence the conviction to end it? The paper will suggest that the commitment to highlighting the everyday violence and suffering of society was closely linked to the voluntarist belief that one had to end such injustice immediately, a belief summed up in Tridon's phrase: 'La faim justifie les moyens'. Indeed, the paper will seek to discuss – albeit rather briefly – fragments of a wider reflection on the contemporary significance of Blanqui, and particularly two major elements of Blanqui's thought that, it seems to me, we should rediscover today: the conception of politics as conflict, and political will and voluntarism.

Defining 'structural' violence

To avoid invoking celebrated theorists or theories much in the way a drunk uses a lamppost – for support rather than enlightenment⁸ – let us take a moment to consider what we mean by structural violence. Johan Galtung, with whom the concept is most associated, distinguishes between two forms of violence: on the one hand, there is personal violence, in which direct, intentional physical harm is committed by an identifiable actor; on the other hand, there is the harm and suffering built into a social structure that cannot be directly traced to an actor or subject. This non-agent-

⁸ I owe this analogy to a listener of the BBC Radio 4 programme 'Thinking Allowed', Monday 2 September. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b038yk6v>

generated form of violence may be inflicted through conditions of work, unequal life expectancies, indeed the harm that results from the uneven distribution of resources – whether, for example, linked to income, access to education and medical services – within a society where this is objectively avoidable.⁹ As one form of violence is direct and visible, the other indirect and thus not immediately discernible, Galtung astutely points out that ‘personal violence may more easily be noticed, even though the “tranquil waters” of structural violence may contain much more violence.’¹⁰ More recently, Slavoj Žižek has essentially reproduced Galtung’s central arguments under his own nomenclature of ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ violence, though that does not detract from the overall import and insight of the intervention.¹¹

But it would be misleading to suggest that such attempts to rethink and redefine violence are an entirely recent development; the nineteenth century offers a rich resource when considering this question. Žižek himself cites Mark Twain’s reflections on the French Revolution from his 1889 work *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*:

There were two ‘Reigns of Terror’ if we would but remember it and consider it; the one wrought murder in hot passion, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other had lasted a thousand years; ... our shudders are all for the ‘horrors’ of the minor Terror, the momentary Terror, so to speak; whereas, what is the horror of swift death by the axe, compared with life-long death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heart-break? ... A city cemetery could contain the coffins filled by that brief Terror which we

⁹ Johan Galtung, ‘Violence, Peace and Peace Research’, in *Journal of Peace Research* (Vol. 6, No. 3, 1969), p. 171.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 173-174.

¹¹ Žižek, *Violence*.

have all been so diligently taught to shiver at and mourn over; but all France could hardly contain the coffins filled by that older and real Terror - that unspeakably bitter and awful Terror which none of us have been taught to see in its vastness or pity as it deserves.¹²

Likewise, in his introduction to Gustave Tridon's *Les Hébertistes* Blanqui describes the Terror as the moment at which the people 'retourne l'épouvante contre ses tyrans'; 'une délivrance', its aim was 'de combattre, avec ses propres armes, l'éternelle terreur appesantie sur l'humanité'.¹³ As Blanqui writes elsewhere, before the Revolution 'Notre rôle était de mourir, le votre de tuer. L'histoire jusqu'à la n'est que l'éternel récit de vos férocités et de vos supplices. Vous avez régné 1.400 ans par le glaive.'¹⁴ Both Twain and Blanqui challenge those who in the face of the explosive upheaval of the Revolution are blinded to the much greater violence of society under the *ancien régime*, as if the Terror were a violent aberration on a peaceful historical plane. In a similar respect a strong case could be made for understanding the 1832 cholera epidemic in Paris as reflecting or manifesting otherwise unseen, socially inbuilt violence. During the epidemic (which ravaged Paris, causing an estimated 19,000 deaths in six months) wealthy Parisians, on the whole, had the resources and means to flee, 'with doctors and drugs', and '[take] refuge in healthier climes', as Heinrich Heine observed.¹⁵ The impoverished worker districts of the city, meanwhile, suffered the greatest losses. Contemporary accounts attest to the manner in which the

¹² Cited in Slavoj Žižek, 'Foreword: The Dark Matter of Violence, Or, Putting Terror in Perspective', in Sophie Wahnich, *In Defence of the Terror* (London: Verso, 2012), p. xiv.

¹³ Auguste Blanqui, 'Introduction', in Gustave Tridon, *Les Hébertistes* (Brussels: Imprimerie de J.H Briand, 1871), p. 8.

¹⁴ Mss. Blanqui, NAF 9581, fo. 39.

¹⁵ Cited in Eric Hazan, *The Invention of Paris* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 250.

injustices of life reproduced themselves in death.¹⁶ ‘The poor note with discontent that money has also become a protection against death’ (Heine); others spoke of the ‘plague of a population that is the first and only one to die, formidably giving the lie by its bloody death to the doctrines of equality that have been preached to it for half a century’ (Jules Janin).¹⁷ We might say, then, following Galtung, that during the epidemic the latent structural violence of Parisian society became manifest;¹⁸ the epidemic merely magnified and exposed the fact – unambiguously for all to see - that suffering and preventable or premature death afflicted the poor to a much greater extent than the rich, an observation which remains no less true today.

Evoking and adopting this notion is, of course, not without its shortcomings. Arguably such a broad definition of violence merely serves to rename inequality or injustice – Galtung himself concedes that structural violence is largely synonymous with social injustice¹⁹ - thus the analysis is at best limited or obscure, at worst guilty of diminishing the specificity of acts understood under the normative concept of violence. Perhaps anticipating this critique, Galtung does suggest that an understanding of violence must rest on an understanding of peace. Since peace, he argues, should be understood not simply as a state of non-combat but as the ‘absence of violence’, and the injustices and suffering produced by many social orders are unworthy and incompatible with any such definition of peace, one must necessarily extend the concept of violence.²⁰ This is not, however, the place to explore this issue

¹⁶ Or as Eric Hazan writes: ‘The epidemic harshly showed up social inequality in the face of death’.

Ibid.

¹⁷ Both cited in *ibid.*

¹⁸ See Galtung, ‘Violence, Peace and Peace Research’, p. 172.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

²⁰ As Galtung states: ‘we are rejecting the narrow concept of violence – according to which violence is *somatic* incapacitation, or deprivation of health, alone (with killing as the extreme form), at the hands of an *actor* who *intends* this to be the consequence. If this were all violence is about, and peace is seen as its negation, then too little is rejected when peace is held up as an ideal. Highly unacceptable social orders would still be compatible with peace. Hence, an *extended concept of violence is indispensable*’. *Ibid.*, p. 168 (emphasis in original).

in the sustained, critical depth it demands. For the benefit of this discussion, then, let us resolve that, critically applied, the notion provides a useful and important analytical reference point with which to approach the question of violence, not least the most obvious yet most problematic question of all: what is violence? From the examples noted above, as well as those from the nineteenth-century socialist press examined in this paper, close reading enables us to trace a long, highly stimulating intellectual tradition of those who have sought to highlight and explore a form of violence simultaneously described as eternal, structural, systemic, objective or invisible. My approach to this question, and to the political thought examined more generally in the paper, will continue in this manner, uniting the historical with the contemporary, combining intellectual history with elements of political theory and philosophy.

Blanqui and *Le Libérateur*

To begin, let us comment on the intellectual and political presuppositions behind Blanqui's broader engagement with the press. To do so one must appreciate Blanqui's concern for what is perceived. Here his conception of the proletariat or the people – he often uses the terms synonymously – is particularly instructive, for it names the nameless, the excluded, those 'en dehors', as he puts it,²¹ of the political order who have no rights nor a recognised voice.²² To cite his 1832 defense speech once again:

²¹ Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze', in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, pp. 69-70.

²² Here I follow Jacques Rancière's reading. See Jacques Rancière, *Aux bords du politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), pp. 118-119; Jacques Rancière, *La Mésestente* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1995), pp. 61-64. Dominique Le Nuz makes a similar point to Rancière, noting that for Blanqui the proletariat is 'celui qui n'a pas le droit à l'éducation, celui qui se tait parce que ni la loi ni la presse ne lui laissent la parole'. See Dominique Le Nuz, 'Introduction', in Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *Œuvres I: Des Origines à la révolution de 1848*, ed. Dominique Le Nuz (Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1993), p. 89.

Le peuple n'écrit pas dans les journaux ... toutes les voix qui ont un retentissement dans la sphere politique, les voix des salons, celles des boutiques, des cafés, en un mot de tous les lieux où se forme ce qu'on appelle l'opinion publique, ces voix sont celles des privilégies ; pas une n'appartient au peuple ; il est muet ; il végète éloigné de ces hautes regions où se règlent ses destinées.²³

By invoking the people and the proletariat, Blanqui creates and defines 'un sujet du tort', Jacques Rancière writes, highlighting 'la difference entre le distribution inégalitaire des corps sociaux et l'égalité des êtres parlants.'²⁴ Exposing this gap, 'Blanqui inscrit,' Rancière continues, 'sous le nom de prolétaires, les incomptés dans l'espace où ils sont comptables comme incomptés.'²⁵ 'Le prolétaire' and 'le peuple' are thus at once terms of identification of and solidarity with the excluded as equal subjects, and a forceful attack against the order which denies their rights, their voice, their existence, and therefore denies their equality.

The importance of what is seen and heard remained a key concern of Blanqui's throughout the early 1830s. The idea is explored at length in the columns of *Le Libérateur*, the newspaper he founded in 1834. The opening line of its 'But du journal' declares that: 'De toutes les exclusions qui pèsent sur le citoyen sans fortune, la plus douloureuse et la plus amèrement sentie, est celle qui lui interdit de publier sa pensée.'²⁶ In the first and only issue of the paper (2 February 1834) Blanqui expands on this notion. If the oppressed – whether in its successive historical incarnations as 'serfs', 'ouvriers', 'artisans', 'prolétaires' – have always been 'le souffredouleur de

²³ Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze', in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, p. 68.

²⁴ Rancière, *La Méésentente*, p. 63

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Auguste Blanqui, 'But de journal', in *Œuvres I*, p. 258.

l'aristocratie', he also notes the imperative, on the part of the oppressor, to maintain the people in a state of 'ignorance éternelle', which in Orleanist France was seen in the government's restriction of press freedom.²⁷ Indeed, the importance of newspapers and the public sphere is ultimately rooted in Blanqui's idealism and his insistence on popular enlightenment as the precondition for communism and emancipation.²⁸ As instruction was the 'unique agent du progrès humain',²⁹ and the power of an idea was conditional on its clear communication,³⁰ newspapers were a key means with which the intellectual elite, carrying the 'arme de la pensée',³¹ could undertake the work of enlightening the uneducated majority. Accordingly, *Le Libérateur* was conceived to 'exposer en termes simples, clairs et précis, pourquoi le peuple est malheureux, et comment il doit cesser de l'être.'³² In a society in which the press was nothing more than the mouthpiece for the 'classes opulentes', where men devoted to equality discovered that 'un gantelet de fer leur brise la parole sur les lèvres', Blanqui writes that he 'entreprend de braver l'interdiction lancée par l'aristocratie des écus contre le pauvre qui ose penser.'³³ Press freedom is, then, the 'liberté la plus précieuse de toutes'³⁴ because the battle over what is seen and heard, written and read is at the heart of the conflict of politics. *Le Libérateur*, the self-styled 'Journal des opprimés', sought to give a voice to the voiceless, to the excluded of

²⁷ Auguste Blanqui, 'Loi qui interdit au peuple la faculté de lire', in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, p. 103. Throughout his writings for *Le Libérateur* Blanqui sustains his attack on the government's persecution of press freedom as part of a wider policy to 'anéantir la presse' and end 'la liberté de penser et d'écrire.' See Blanqui, *Œuvres I*, pp. 277-282.

²⁸ See Maurice Dommanget, *Les idées politiques et sociales d'Auguste Blanqui* (Paris: Rivière, 1957), pp. 195- 204; Alan B. Spitzer, *The revolutionary theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), ch. 3, pp. 142-143.

²⁹ Mss. Blanqui, NAF 9590(1), fo. 193.

³⁰ 'La source de la puissance intellectuelle est dans la faculté de communiquer ses idées. L'idée communicable n'est rien ; elle n'existe pas'. Mss. Blanqui, NAF 9592(3), fo. 244. Or, as he wrote elsewhere, 'La source du progrès est dans la communication de la pensée.' Mss. Blanqui, NAF 9590(1), fo. 58.

³¹ Auguste Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, p. 114.

³² Blanqui, 'But de journal', in *Œuvres I*, p. 259.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

³⁴ Blanqui, 'Loi qui interdit au peuple la faculté de lire', in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, p. 104.

society whose suffering goes unseen and unheard in order to explain to them, as we shall see, how and why that very violence they suffered was a product of the social order.

During a life of close and consistent involvement with the radical press as contributor, editor, founder, not to mention avid reader,³⁵ Blanqui's articles from *Le Libérateur* retain a unique place in his political and intellectual development.³⁶ Intellectually engaging and stylistically striking, the texts represent some of Blanqui's most compelling work, demonstrating his power as a thinker and writer; more than simply a 'man of action', we discover a man of ideas. And in many respects, to understand Blanqui's thought requires an engagement with his writings in the newspaper. They offer crucial insights into, amongst other issues, his reflections on equality (which remained the unsurpassable horizon, to borrow Sartre's famous expression, of Blanqui's politics); the historical struggle between equality and privilege; the primacy of politics; property; and the emancipatory role of intelligence. The columns of *Le Libérateur* were also used to expand on the idea of suffering and injustice as essential to the functioning of the state. In order to comment on a few such passages, we must first briefly address Blanqui's understanding of the fundamental structures of society as also outlined in the newspaper.

In an usurpation of the natural order, Blanqui argues, individuals seized common land by 'la ruse et la violence' and enshrined in law their right to property as

³⁵ Prior to *Le Libérateur* Blanqui had worked at the *Globe* in 1830 and was involved in the publication of *Au Peuple* (1831) during his membership of the *Société des Amis du Peuple*. Later he founded *Candide* (1865), *La Patrie en Danger* (1871) and *Ni Dieu ni maître* (1880). The Blanqui manuscripts (BN NAF 9580-9598), in which one discovers pages upon pages of notes and clippings from newspapers, attest to a voracious reader of the press.

³⁶ Many of Blanqui's biographers have noted the intellectual importance of his writings in the newspaper. See Samuel Bernstein, *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), pp. 58-59; Maurice Dommanget, *Auguste Blanqui: Des origines à la révolution de 1848* (Paris: Mouton, 1969), pp. 129-130; Le Nuz, 'Introduction', in *Œuvres I*, p. 247.

the basis for society.³⁷ A minority gained exclusive ownership of the land and, by logical extension, the ‘produits accumulés du travail, et qu’on appelle *Capitaux*.’³⁸ But since land and capital are ‘stériles’ in and of themselves, requiring labour to fructify, the majority of the population, dispossessed of the ‘instruments de travail’, was transformed into ‘un vil bétail destiné uniquement à labourer et fumer les terres de ces monstres.’³⁹ The people are therefore forced to provide for the parasitic usurpers - the idle rich.⁴⁰ Much like Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation, Blanqui describes an order of accumulation through expropriation. It is an order conceived out of conquest, dividing ‘les populations en deux catégories, les vainqueurs et les vaincus’,⁴¹ bringing servitude and exploitation – in a word, slavery – to the latter, and preserved through the former’s hereditary, oligarchic control of land, capital and production. It is an order that binds the masses into work through the fear of starvation, thus ultimately maintaining itself through the greatest form of violence - death.⁴² It is, in short, an order established through violence, enforced through violence, continually inflicting violence.⁴³ And this last point should command our attention, for Blanqui describes destitution and the continued infliction of suffering as essential to the functioning of social order. Since the rich, he writes, require work ‘pour nourrir leur dévorante oisiveté des sueurs de ces ouvriers ... ils consentent à

³⁷ Auguste Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, p. 116.

³⁸ Auguste Blanqui, ‘Qui fait la soupe doit la manger’, in *Œuvres I*, p. 291

³⁹ Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, in *Maintenant, il faut des armes* pp. 117-118; Blanqui, ‘Qui fait la soupe doit la manger’, in *Œuvres I*, p. 291.

⁴⁰ Blanqui adopts two Saint-Simonian ideas: the critique of the idle rich and a form of ‘association’ as the order in which equality will be realised.

⁴¹ Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, p. 117.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

⁴³ ‘Ce qui constitue la servitude, ce n’est point d’être esclavage mobilier d’un homme, ou serf attaché à sa glèbe, c’est d’être entièrement dépossédé des instruments de travail et mis aussi à la merci des privilégiés qui ont usurpé et conservent par la violence la possession exclusive de ces instruments indispensables aux travailleurs. Cet accaparement est donc une spoliation permanente, et il devient clair par là que ce n’est point telle ou telle forme politique de gouvernement qui maintient les masses en état d’esclavage, mais bien l’usurpation de la propriété posée comme base fondamentale de l’ordre social.’ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

laisser à leurs victimes ce qu'il faut de pain tout juste pour qu'ils ne meurent pas, comme on jette quelques gouttes d'huile dans les rouages d'une mécanique pour empêcher que la rouille ne les mette hors de service.'⁴⁴ 'Les masses,' he later reaffirms in the same article, 'au prix des labeurs les plus pénibles, obtiennent à peine de quoi vivre au jour le jour, sans avoir jamais un lendemain assuré.'⁴⁵ Note the description of the workers as a victim, reinforcing the idea of society as a perpetual war in which the poor were the prime causality, the forever vanquished. The suffering of the people is not, then, an unfortunate yet overall negligible or contingent consequence of an otherwise humane, largely free and equal society. Suffering is at once a product *and* a component of the social order; it is, as the metaphor strikingly conveys, the lubricant that enables the social machine to function. As he continues: 'Il est d'ailleurs de l'intérêt des riches que les ouvriers puissent perpétuer leur miserable chair à mettre au monde les enfants d'esclaves destinés à servir un jour les enfants d'opresseurs, afin de continuer de génération en génération ce double heritage parallèle d'opulence et de misère, de jouissances et de douleurs, qui constitue notre ordre social.'⁴⁶ In the historical struggle between privilege (the cause of the rich) and the equality (the cause of the people), the social order of privilege is always reliant on perpetuating the suffering of the people. Whether 'l'oppression se manifeste sous la forme d'aristocratie militaire ou commerciale' or the people are 'exploité par le sabre ou par les écus', whether seen in 'les souffrances du paysan foulé aux pieds du coursier de son châtelain' or in heard in 'l'agonie de l'ouvrier dont le sang sert à graisser les mécaniques de son suzerain industriel', all these forms of suffering are

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 119.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Blanqui then restates his point with a final, striking image: 'Quand le prolétaire a suffisamment souffert et laisse des remplaçants pour souffrir après lui, il n'a plus d'autre service à rendre que d'aller mourir dans un hôpital, afin que son cadaver disséqué enseigne aux médecins l'art de guérir les riches.'

products of privilege.⁴⁷ In Blanqui's eyes, the violence of privilege - and here we come to the crucial point - thereby takes on many forms, from direct, physical fighting to the indirect harm inherent within social structures, including the masses' state of unenlightened ignorance ('Ignorance is at the same time the instrument and the victim of violence')⁴⁸ which is, in the final instance, the cause of their servitude.⁴⁹ Moreover, as the Lyon *canuts* revolts revealed, those who do rise up against this social order will face an uncompromising, brutal military repression - an 'extermination jusqu'au dernier homme'.⁵⁰ The violence of revolt or the violence of their subscribed role in society – this is stark reality workers face, as Blanqui argues in a passage of particular force:

L'extermination, telle est la seule alternative qu'on lui offre avec celle de rentrer dans le devoir. Le devoir des ouvriers, c'est de se considérer comme des machines fonctionnant pour créer des jouissances aux privilégiés ; le devoir des ouvriers, c'est de mourir de misère sur les étoffes de soie qu'ils tissent pour les riches ; le devoir des ouvriers, c'est de subir le supplice d'Ugolin, c'est de voir leurs femmes et leurs enfants périr lentement, consumés par la faim, et d'expirer ensuite eux-mêmes...⁵¹

⁴⁷ Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, p. 111.

⁴⁸ Cited in Spitzer, *The revolutionary theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 54.

⁴⁹ As he writes: 'la plus grande partie des classes pauvres en sont encore à méconnaître d'où viennent leurs maux. Car le premier et le plus déplorable résultat de leur asservissement, c'est une ignorance profonde qui les rend presque toujours les instruments dociles des passions perverses des privilégiés. Comment des malheureux, éternellement courbés sous une tâche accablante, avec la perspective incertaine d'un peu de pain au bout de leurs fatigues de chaque jour, pourraient-ils cultiver leur intelligence, éclairer leur raison, et réfléchir sur les phénomènes sociaux où ils jouent un rôle passif?' Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, pp. 120-121.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

The manner in which Blanqui brings together what Galtung calls personal or direct with structural or impersonal forms of violence would suggest that Blanqui too held a broad, extended understanding of violence. All the death, destruction and suffering of French society, he reasons, are part of the logic of a social order based on the monopoly of property.⁵² Property is inequality is violence - whether witnessed in society itself or during a revolt against it.

‘Comment serait-il possible’, Blanqui therefore asks, ‘d’échapper à ces désastreuses conséquences d’une loi sociale qui concentre dans un petit nombre de mains toute la fortune publique et qui [dote] une caste du droit de vie et de mort sur l’immense majorité de la population ?’⁵³ We cannot address here how Blanqui fully responds to his question; nonetheless it is worth resuming one key point outlined in *Le Libérateur* as it forms a central basis upon which Blanqui conceived politics. The idea, he writes, propagated by the press of the rich (and shared, we should note, by the likes of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Cabet) that social reconciliation is possible between workers and the rich, that equality and emancipation can be achieved through collaboration or compromise must be fully rejected. For Blanqui, social relations are inherently conflictual: ‘il n’existe entre les deux moitiés inégales de la société d’autre rapport que celui de la lutte, d’autre besoin que de se faire le plus mal possible ; c’est, en un mot, la guerre organisée.’⁵⁴ Words of ‘concorde’ and ‘fraternité’ may obfuscate uncomfortable social realities, they may ‘déguisent une soif insatiable d’exploitation’ that fool some. But facts and events attest that ‘il y a lutte et que dans

⁵² He reiterates this point elsewhere, describing privilege as the ‘principe de désordre et de violence, cherchant son appui dans l’égoïsme et les viles passions qui en découlent, divise les hommes pour les isoler, ne veut d’instrument que la force matérielle, n’enfante que la concurrence, la guerre, et a pour dernière conséquence logique la destruction.’ Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, pp. 109-110.

⁵³ Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, pp. 122-123.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

cette lutte, l'une des parties doit succomber, car il ne saurait y avoir de fusion entre deux principes contraires, entre le bien et le mal.⁵⁵ The logic of an irresolvable conflict between antagonistic social groups is the key to understanding society and defining the role and meaning of politics, Blanqui believes. In a clear rupture with utopian socialism he sees the project to actualize equality not as social and consensual, but as *political* and *conflictual*. And he takes this idea of politics as conflict to the end, for with recognition of what is at stake comes a choice: either you are with the oppressed or with the oppressor; for the exploited or for the exploiter; an agent of liberty, justice, equality or an agent of oppression, injustice and inequality. Between enlightenment and ignorance, progress and reaction, revolution and counter-revolution, republicanism and royalism, a choice has to be made, a side has to be taken. Purported neutrality is the greatest enemy, opportunism the greatest disgrace. One must take a side and fully assume one's choice. As the 'But du journal' of *Le Libérateur* unambiguously states, to renounce any form of conviction or to claim impartiality 'entre ceux qui souffrent et ceux qui font souffrir' is a cowardly, dishonest illusion - hence the newspaper was conceived from the unashamedly passionate conviction to forcefully intervene in support of the oppressed and in hatred of the oppressor.⁵⁶ In such fundamental respects, Blanqui defines 'une politique, une culture de conflit' completely repressed by our so-called 'post-ideological' era and its rhetoric of consensus, Daniel Bensaïd incisively suggests, reinforcing how and why

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Blanqui concludes this passage by stating: 'Avouer hautement ses affections et ses haines, c'[est] le seul rôle qui convienne à un honnête homme. Il faut plaindre ceux qui se targuent de n'aimer et de ne haïr personne.' Blanqui, 'But du journal', *Œuvres I*, p. 258. Similarly, in a letter from 12 February 1834 to his longtime interlocutor Adélaïde de Montgolfier, he writes that the newspaper 'exprime des convictions profondes chez moi. Ces convictions sont mortellement hostiles à l'ordre social dans lequel nous vivons'. See *Les Lettres*, No. 7, 6 Août 1906, p. 519.

we should rediscover a voice that speaks to our *actualité* like never before.⁵⁷ Blanqui stands for a politics of conviction and commitment in thought and (as we shall discuss shortly) lived experience. He is guided by the most basic question in politics: which side are you on? Indeed, invoking Saint-Just's maxim, 'les malheureux sont les puissances de la terre', Blanqui emphatically writes that 'nous sommes toujours et partout avec les opprimés contre les oppresseurs'.⁵⁸ To defend the weak and be on the side of the oppressed was to expose and oppose 'la violence brutale du privilège'⁵⁹ in all its manifestations; it was to decide to fight and end all forms of suffering.

Tridon and *La Patrie en Danger*

To jump forward significantly, let us now turn to *La Patrie en Danger*. As its name and restoration of the revolutionary calendar suggest, the newspaper, launched by Blanqui on 7 September 1870 (or 20 *Fructidor*, Year 78), contained a fervent republican patriotism and a daily call to arms against the foreign enemy that consciously echoed 1792. Gustave Tridon (1841-1871) was amongst the paper's regular contributors. A close follower of Blanqui, Tridon's political and philosophical essays were revered not only for their intellectual insight but for the power and style of the prose, leading him to be described as the 'intellectual spokesman' of the Blanquist movement.⁶⁰ Style is, to be sure, an important issue in Blanquist politics, particularly regarding the role of the press and our earlier observations on idealism, voluntarism and the communication of ideas. As Patrick Hutton points out, the Blanquists' emphasis on revolutionary will and creativity led them to a notable

⁵⁷ Daniel Bensaïd, 'Entretien avec Daniel Bensaïd et Eric Hazan sur le recueil de textes d'Auguste Blanqui *Maintenant il faut des armes*', Emissions *Là-bas si j'y suis* de Daniel Mermet sur France-Inter, 12 February 2007. Available at <http://danielbensaid.org/Auguste-Blanqui?lang=fr>

⁵⁸ Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau c'est l'égalité', in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, p. 111.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112, 115.

⁶⁰ Patrick H. Hutton, *The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition: The Blanquists in French politics, 1864-1893* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1981), p. 28, 164.

concern for ‘aesthetic effect as the leaven of revolutionary agitation.’ ‘Intellectual statement alone was insufficient’, Hutton states. ‘The need was to move men to a deeper awareness of the meaning of an idea.’⁶¹ Dommanget thus resumes the defining characteristics of Blanqui’s style (and the same applies to Tridon): ‘Simplicité, clarté, concision et, en même temps, grâce et mouvement’.⁶² Writings had to serve the ideal: newspapers, like essays and pamphlets, were conceived as major political interventions, as weapons in the struggle against oppression,⁶³ as vehicles for the idea of communism. Is there not in fact a striking symmetry between the style and the doctrine itself? Both were characterised by vigour and passion, force and resolve.⁶⁴ And the fluid relationship between style and conviction extended beyond the written word. One’s life, actions and engagements could ‘give aesthetic definition to one’s values’.⁶⁵ As such, for his supporters ‘Blanqui’s life was valued not for his specific accomplishments, but for the authenticity of the style in which he had pursued his ideological commitments.’⁶⁶ The primary of principle is certainly one of Blanqui’s enduring legacies. In a recent discussion that strongly resonates with Blanqui, following Alain Badiou’s formula that communists ‘live for an idea’ Etienne Balibar observes how, ultimately, communist subjects ‘were all idealists, both in the ordinary and in the technical sense of the term: dreaming of another world and ready to sacrifice much of their lives, sometimes all of it, for their conviction’.⁶⁷ Is Blanqui not an exemplar of communism as commitment, of ‘practical idealism’ as Balibar calls

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 164. On Blanquist style, see also *Quelques agents du Parti imaginaire*, ‘À un ami’, in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, p. 25.

⁶² Dommanget, *Les idées politiques et sociales d’Auguste Blanqui*, p. 52.

⁶³ See Mss. Blanqui, NAF 9588(2), fo. 540.

⁶⁴ Dommanget, *Les idées politiques et sociales d’Auguste Blanqui*, p. 53.

⁶⁵ Hutton, *The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition*, p. 164.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Etienne Balibar, ‘Communism as Commitment, Imagination and Politics’, in Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *The Idea of Communism Volume 2* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 14-15.

it?⁶⁸ Are these not the contemporary terms on which his project deserves to be rediscovered and reloaded?

Returning to *La Patrie en Danger*, our analysis will focus on an article from 19 September 1870 entitled ‘La Faim’ in which Tridon explores the socio-politics of starvation – a major issue that would take on even greater significance as the siege of Paris went on. The short article seeks to challenge normative understandings of violence, suffering and reflect on their political implications. Tridon begins by posing a series of provocative rhetorical questions directed towards the rich of Paris:

Avez-vous jamais eu faim, messieurs les faiseurs de phrases et les enfileurs de périodes ? Vous êtes-vous jamais trouvé face à face avec ce spectre décharné ? Avez-vous jamais senti la faim, cette louve, enfoncer dans vos poitrines ses dents aiguës ? Vos vertus grassouillettes, nourries à quatre services, ont-elles jamais entendu ses conseils perfides et ses insinuations véreuses, lorsqu’elle montre, du doigt les calèches des prostituées et les palais dorés des hauts voleurs ? Avez-vous jamais entendu, plus cruelle encore que la faim, la voix d’une femme hâve et d’enfants affolés qui viennent vous dire au milieu des hoquets : « Père, du pain ! » ?⁶⁹

Following Blanqui, Tridon’s intervention was conceived to expose the plight of the unseen and the unheard. It is *we*, and not *you*, who hear the voice of the famished, their screams of hunger. ‘Eloignez de *nos* oreilles’, he demands, ‘les cris déchirants des femmes et des enfants, plus terribles que le craquement de la mitraille.’⁷⁰ And this relates back to our earlier discussion of the Terror. Tridon’s article shares the belief

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Gustave Tridon, ‘La Faim’, *La Patrie en Danger*, Lundi 19 Septembre 1870.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Emphasis added.

that the greatest violence is the normalized violence of a social order; where not overlooked or denied altogether, this violence is met not with outrage and condemnation, but with indifference and acceptance. Therein resides the socio-politics of starvation. It is all too easy, Tridon continues, for the well-fed bourgeoisie and those indifferent to injustice to preach ‘l’oubli des castes et la fusion des partis’ to the starving.⁷¹ Famishment shattered this illusion. Indeed, for the Blanquists the war ‘helped to clarify the terms of the struggle, everpresent but often obscured.’⁷² With manifest, physical violence fundamental social realities were revealed – a point Blanqui had made in *Le Libérateur* regarding the *canuts* revolt.⁷³ As was suggested earlier apropos of the 1832 cholera epidemic, in Tridon’s eyes conditions in Paris during the war are a mere extension and intensification of the everyday suffering of the poor. He writes of the disgrace that the rich gorge themselves on the boulevards while the poor of Belleville were shaking with hunger; that the rich sip champagne ‘tandis que les sentinelles populaires tombent de faim sur les remparts’; that ‘les uns périssent de besoin et les autres d’intempérance.’ That this situation is avoidable renders it even more disgraceful. ‘Paris a des vivres pour plusieurs mois,’ he argues, ‘à condition qu’on les rationne.’ Bringing an end to ‘ces orgies outrageantes, de ces gaspillages honteux qui insultent et enforcèment [sic] la misère’,⁷⁴ the need of the many must be placed above the greed of the few. After Blanqui, and before Rosa Luxembourg, for Tridon the choice between ‘socialism or barbarism’ is therefore clear.⁷⁵ Between

⁷¹ Tridon, ‘La Faim’.

⁷² Hutton, *The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition*, p. 59.

⁷³ In Lyon, he writes, ‘l’hostilité des intérêts était manifeste, la question si nettement tranchée entre les deux camps opposés qu’il devenait impossible aux plus stupides de ne pas voir clairement de quelle insatiable avidité ils étaient victimes’. Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, p. 122.

⁷⁴ Tridon, ‘La Faim’.

⁷⁵ Bensaid and Lowy make the allusion to Luxembourg’s maxim in regard to Blanqui’s writings in *Le Libérateur*. See Daniel Bensaid and Michael Löwy, ‘Auguste Blanqui, communiste hérétique’, in P. Corcuff, A. Maillard (eds.), *Les Socialismes français à l’épreuve du pouvoir* (Paris: Textuel, 2006). Consulted at <http://danielbensaid.org/Auguste-Blanqui-communiste?lang=fr>

these two paths a *juste milieu* or third way is impossible, and one could certainly no longer share in the illusion of social cooperation between oppressor and oppressed: ‘il n’y a rien de commun entre l’homme qui sort en titubant du café Anglais avec des filles d’opéra, et le malheureux qui rentre accablé du travail du jour, à son foyer désert et à son taudis famélique.’⁷⁶ Reprising Blanqui’s thought on the fundamentally conflictual nature of politics, Tridon infers from ‘la faim’ a vital lesson. It seems that in suffering, as in defeat, ‘an immense truth effect’ emerges.⁷⁷ ‘Il n’y a pas de fraternité entre le tigre et sa parole ; entre l’opresseur et sa victime ; entre l’affamé et l’affameur.’⁷⁸ History took little time to offer brutal confirmation of Tridon’s hypothesis, for just eight months later the *semaine sanglante* destroyed any remaining myths and illusions of fraternity.

Much of the article remains at the level of an intellectual reflection on the political dimensions of famishment. Some practical solutions are offered, however. He calls for the city’s food supplies to be centralised, recorded and evenly distributed amongst each inhabitant by ‘des comités populaires’. Indeed, it is important to remember that Tridon was writing as France was at war. If the rich were using hunger to wage their war against the poor, similarly the Prussians, having seen ‘l’élán du Paris maigre’ and not wanting to risk a direct attack on the city, ‘préféreront combattre avec la famine’, he prophetically argues.⁷⁹ ‘Protégez-nous, messieurs,’ he therefore writes, ‘pensez quelquefois, au dessert, aux moyens de nous défendre contre la faim, cette sinistre avant-garde de la Prusse.’⁸⁰ In short, starvation was a weapon, a form of violence inflicted by enemies, foreign or domestic.

⁷⁶ Tridon, ‘La Faim’.

⁷⁷ See Hazan, *The Invention of Paris*, p. 309 for a powerful reflection on the truths inherent within the defeats of the nineteenth century.

⁷⁸ Tridon, ‘La Faim’.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Tridon brings the article to a close in emphatic style. Declaring that the ‘scandale’ of exorbitant inequalities, of opulence living side by side with starvation ‘doit cesser’, he offers a final phrase of remarkable polemical force: ‘La faim justifie les moyens.’⁸¹ In a *détournement* of the oft-quoted expression, Tridon outlines arguably the essence of Blanquist politics. For a doctrine defined by the primacy of human agency and the subject, by the rejection of ‘la fatalité du progrès’⁸² and the ‘mauvaise plaisanterie’ of political, social or economic laws,⁸³ it is the suffering *here* and *now* that justifies if not requires our full, uncompromising engagement and devotion *here* and *now*. Imagining ‘the end’ is not the concern. For the Blanquists emancipatory politics is not about an drawing up a vision of a future society or believing in the inexorable forward march of history as the means to arrive there. Only recognising and tackling existing injustice⁸⁴ through a dedicated and determined mobilisation - in which ‘la déception ou l’insuccès ne n’apporte ni repentir, ni découragement’⁸⁵ - and uniting under the moral, creative power of an idea will the conditions for emancipation emerge. Wherever ‘la faim’ appears, ‘les moyens’ to end it must follow. Tridon thereby espouses a central principle of emancipatory political will as articulated by Peter Hallward. From Toussaint L’Ouverture, John Brown (and Blanqui, we should add) to Che Guevara and Paulo Freire, voluntarists hold that, if ‘confronted with indefensible institution[s]’, inequalities or injustices, ‘when the

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Mss. Blanqui, NAF 9592(3), fo. 161.

⁸³ Mss. Blanqui, NAF 9590(1), fo. 274, 278. Contrary to the idea of social, political or economic laws, Blanqui asserts that: ‘Il n’y a que des expédients, phénomènes qui varient au gré des fantaisies et des passions humaines. Ce qu’on appelle la loi, chez les hommes, n’est jamais que l’expression de la volonté du plus fort. Que cette volonté soit par occasion, conforme au droit et à la justice, c’est possible. Tant mieux alors, mais ce n’est là qu’un hasard heureux. Du jour au lendemain la volonté peut devenir la formule de l’iniquité et de la violence.’ Mss. Blanqui, NAF 9590(1), fo. 278.

⁸⁴ Bensaïd and Lowy note how for Walter Benjamin ‘la grandeur de Blanqui, c’est qu’il ne croyait pas au progrès, mais à la décision de mettre fin à l’injustice présente. Il était, de tous les révolutionnaires, le plus déterminé à « arracher au dernier moment l’humanité à la catastrophe qui la menace en permanence ». See Bensaïd and Löwy, ‘Auguste Blanqui, communiste hérétique’, in P. Corcuff, A. Maillard (eds.), *Les Socialismes français à l’épreuve du pouvoir*.

⁸⁵ Mss. Blanqui, NAF 9588(2), fo. 494.

opportunity [arises]’ one must ‘[resolve] to work immediately and by all available means for [their] elimination.’⁸⁶ Voluntarists, including Blanqui and Tridon, affirm that ‘an idea, like the idea of communism, or equality, or justice, commands that we should strive to realize it without compromises or delay, before the means of such realization have been recognized as feasible or legitimate, or even possible. It is the deliberate striving towards realization itself that will convert the impossible into the possible, and explode the parameters of the feasible.’⁸⁷ It is this voluntarist logic at work behind Blanqui and Tridon’s respective articles, informing and guiding their thought (and action) that is, it seems to me, worth rescuing and reviving today, particularly in light of Hallward’s intervention.

The implication of ‘La faim justifie les moyens’ is therefore twofold, uniting many of the issues discussed in this paper, and therefore providing a useful point of conclusion. First, the phrase highlights the centrality in radical, emancipatory politics of the everyday plight of the oppressed; it renders visible and audible the otherwise overlooked and unheard, exposing the forms of non-agent-generated suffering and harm inflicted against these groups that we have called structural violence. Blanquist newspapers served to voice this belief, revealing to the oppressed themselves the reasons for their suffering. Yet Blanquists also saw such violent acts as political acts. As we have noted, Blanqui and his followers maintained that ‘a government that allowed its citizens to starve was committing a violent act.’⁸⁸ Where starvation, inequality and oppression abound, a political conflict is being waged. Starvation and

⁸⁶ Peter Hallward, ‘Communism of the Intellect, Communism of the Will’, in Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *The Idea of Communism* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 112.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Harsin, *Barricades*, p. 9.

the everyday suffering of the people were fully within the domain of politics, and as such they required political solutions.

In turn, then, 'La faim justifie les moyens' not only highlights that the notion of structural violence is crucial in understanding the justification of revolutionary politics. Tridon's formula goes one step further to pose the question of the means of revolutionary politics itself. In the face of starvation one cannot rely on the forward march of history or the inevitability of progress, on objective economic laws or social cooperation. All are illusions, all are blind alleys that do not confront the problem in hand. A determined conviction and commitment to end the violence and suffering of the present was the only course of action.