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The Secret Agent: Necropolitics, Democracy, and the Community without Qualification

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Abstract

In its juxtaposition of liberal government and terrorist violence, metropole and colony, Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* explores the imbrication of modes of biopolitical and necropolitical sovereignty. Taking as its starting point Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, which has not yet been widely discussed in relation to Conrad's work, this essay argues that Conrad analyses a shift from biopolitical liberal democracy to necropolitical terror. Necropolitics, however, also forms the basis on which radically democratic communities of the biopolitically outcast, can form communities of resistance to sovereign power.

Keywords: terrorism, disability, liberal, London, imperialism, Achille Mbembe, Jacques Rancière

Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) is shot through with a politics of death. As the novel traverses London, narrator and characters reflect on the interweaving of power, life, death, and liberal democratic norms; and in a narrative propelled by political violence and bodily dispossession, characters are organised by their right to life or vulnerability to death. The novel contributes to a debate about the political status of disabled, maimed, dying, murdered, suicided, and eugenicised bodies under the shadow of the pervasive violence of the state and attenuated terrorist resistance.

In *The Secret Agent*, a relation between a politics that organises and protects life, and a politics of death, is juxtaposed with spectral and impotent liberal democratic norms. This relation emerges most obviously in the novel's central event, the botched attempt by Verloc, an agent provocateur posing as an anarchist, to bomb the Greenwich Observatory for the Russian embassy. This act is intended to put bloodless pressure on liberal norms and results in the death of Stevie, Verloc's brother-in-law, who has what would be termed in the twenty-first century a learning disability. This life-death-politics constellation, though, is persistently present: in the discussions of eugenics, prison, police, and political activism; in the celebrated 'Cab of Death' set-piece (125), where a journey across London to an alms house leads Stevie to imagine a community of himself, a beaten horse, and the violent cabbie's hungry children; in the Home Secretary, Sir Ethelred, who responds to the bombing while he attempts to steer food policy, a 'Bill for the Nationalisation of Fisheries' (106), through parliament; in the Assistant Commissioner of Police who compares the brute violence of colonial policing to the political management needed in London; and in the novel's final image of the manufacturer of homemade explosives, the Professor, bomb in his pocket, walking through London 'like a pest in the street full of men' (227), invoking the threat of political violence, categorisation of who counts as human, and the rhetoric of infestation or contagion.

This sustained exploration of the politics of life and death prefigures Achille Mbembe's important theoretical concept of necropolitics. For Mbembe, necropolitics 'account[s] for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*' (92, Mbembe's emphasis). Such death-worlds have obvious relevance to Conrad's colonial novels too, but, *The Secret Agent's*

exploration of metropole and colony, and direct representation of liberal democracy at work, offer particularly rich possibilities for analysis in relation to Mbembe's theory.

In contrast to Foucault, who suggests that a biopolitical regime historically succeeds a sovereign politics of death, Mbembe sees necropolitics as constitutively imbricated with biopolitics.¹ Liberal democracy, for Mbembe, is not only concerned with maximising the biopower of its subjects, but also in creating death worlds, particularly at the periphery. Mbembe's theory allows me to consider the treatment of liberal democratic institutions in Conrad's novel, where the necropolitical sovereign power associated with the colony returns to the metropole. I read Mbembe alongside Conrad to diagnose the forms of sovereign power present in British society in the late Victorian period. However, Mbembe's work does not only introduce necropolitics as a category of sovereign power in modernity. He also sees necropolitics as a possible basis for anti-imperial resistance. I suggest that the necropolitical status of the novel's characters allows a conceptualisation of a shared community and radical democracy, though ultimately this is only one strand of a politically ambivalent ending.

Though Mbembe concurs with the importance of optimising life as a political factor, his work on necropolitics argues that there is no irreversible historical passage away from the earlier sovereign right to decide death in favour of the administration of life. Rather, the right to decide death remains present in modern societies, both as a necessary corollary of the administration of life, and as a fundamental assumption of the liberal democratic governments which have developed alongside modern biopolitical power, and which theorise themselves as resting on the sovereignty of the people whose collective life must be maximised (Foucault 137). While liberal democracy claims for itself the emergence of a peaceful and healthy polis, Mbembe sees that polis underpinned by '*the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*' (68, Mbembe's emphasis). Necropolitical themes recur in several of Conrad's

fictions: the grove of death in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the white crew who believe they can consign the pilgrim passengers to death in *Lord Jim* (1900), and the politicised and racialised illness of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897). Mbembe, then, offers a theory of the politics and politicisation of the body as material object. This stands in contrast to influential and insightful readings of Conrad's novel with both historicist and formalist inflections.

Significant readings of the novel's politics claim that form displaces politics in the novel or that the novel's key political intervention is predominantly linguistic.

Frederic Jameson's foundational reading, for example, suggests that politics in Conrad exists in a 'repressed space of a world of work and history and of protopolitical conflict which may [...] be seen as the trace and the remnant of the content of an older realism, now displaced and effectively marginalized by the emergent modernist discourse' (195). Several recent and influential critics who have written on Conrad and violence have found common ground with Jameson's reading, by linking the representation of violence to the modernist self-referentiality of language games, either limiting violence to a metaphor for the novel's formal innovation at the expense of a politics of mimetic referentiality, or by focussing on the novel as critique rather than a positive political intervention which offers a political response to that which it critiques.²

This essay aligns itself with a recent trend to restore referentiality to Conrad's work. This, however, is not the historical positivism, particularly evident in responses to *The Secret Agent*, which seeks to return each character and event to a matching historical figure or incident, and which has been comprehensively critiqued by Michael Newton. He stresses that the novel is a 'work of art, not a series of abstruse allusions to "facts" waiting to be uncovered'. It is 'an interweaving of discourses' (144), in which referentiality does not assume a positivist relationship between a real world and the novel, but rather produces a fictional possible reality which the novel develops as a technology of political theorisation.

As a result, such responses can move between the theoretical (rather than vaguely metaphysical) and the referential.³ Jay Parker, for example, uses Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' to both reflect on the referentiality of the 'mere life' of the characters and Conrad's theorisation of justice.

Intriguingly, Parker, in a footnote, raises the relation of necropolitics to *The Secret Agent* only to choose to focus his attention elsewhere, since necropolitics is concerned with the subjection of whole populations, whereas his interest in *The Secret Agent* lies primarily with 'individual experience' (24n45). Necropolitics has been explored more fully in relation to *Heart of Darkness*. Lorenzo Servitje has observed that not only does Conrad's analysis of necropolitics in *Heart of Darkness* diagnose its operation, but also reproduces the categorisation of racial difference that underpins the operation of necropolitical power; as Mbembe puts it, 'the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the state's murderous functions' (71). Servitje, moreover, points out that 'Conrad's text does not present us with the full scope of necropower', because while Conrad demonstrates its operation in 'the death-producing work of colonization and war', the novel does not speak to the other side of Mbembe's theorisation, 'the way necropower functions as a tool of both the colonizer and the colonized' (212). The latter emerges from forms of violent resistance, particularly through martyrdom or suicide: 'the fact that native resistance through suicide is missing from Conrad's novella is telling: it supports Said's contention that Conrad can't see the Congolese resisting imperialism', despite contemporaneous accounts of such practices (212).⁴

It is significant that Conrad is, in contrast, able to conceptualise both sides of the necropolitical, sovereign power and necropolitical resistance, in the imperial metropole of *The Secret Agent*. He does this by interrogating the quasi-racial terms in which disability and debility are represented. Nonetheless, while connections are made between Britain and its

colonies in the novel's exploration of power and death, Conrad struggles to make the imaginative leap needed to critique imperialism outside the 'aegis of an imperialistic, civilizing mission based on racial difference' (Servitje 212).

The most explicit moments of contact between the colony and the metropole in *The Secret Agent* appear in passages of free indirect discourse attached to the Assistant Commissioner of the Special Crimes Department: 'His career had begun in a tropical colony. He had liked his work there. It was police work. He had been very successful in tracking and breaking up certain nefarious secret societies amongst the natives' (74). A similar sentiment is repeated in the following chapter: 'The Assistant Commissioner did not like his work at home. The police work he had been engaged on in a distant part of the globe had the saving character of an irregular sort of warfare or at least the risk and excitement of open-air sport' (83). In contrast to the novel's other policeman, Chief Inspector Heat, the Assistant Commissioner is concerned to ensure the liberal democratic operation of the law and ensure that guilt is apportioned correctly rather than arbitrarily: 'For [Heat] the plain duty is to fasten the guilt upon as many prominent anarchists as he can [...]; whereas I [...] am bent upon vindicating their innocence' (104). The way in which the novel presents and accounts for this seeming paradox in the Assistant Commissioner's motives is worth examining in detail for what it reveals about an underlying necropolitical structure to imperialist liberal democracy. Christian Haines has suggested that the novel 'deconstructs' the 'political struggle between liberalism and anarchism' to demonstrate an 'emerging biopolitics' in the interstices of liberal democracy (88). Alongside this, in the same deconstructive moment, necropolitics emerges.

The Assistant Commissioner's work in the colony is politically underpinned by two linked structures that Mbembe sees as fundamental to the imperial rule of the colony: racism and enmity. For Mbembe, racism is fundamental to the division of people 'into those who must live and those who must die' (71). In the colony there is a 'racial denial of any common

bond between the conqueror and the native. In the conqueror's eyes, *savage life* is just another form of *animal life*' (77, Mbembe's emphasis). Hence the suppression of the 'natives' can be imagined as 'open-air sport'. The Assistant Commissioner sees the natives he is employed to repress as animal life to be dealt with on the model of the big game hunt. The Assistant Commissioner's other image of 'an irregular sort of warfare' is also imbricated in the logic of hunting. In the 'European juridical order' which emerged as part of the development of modernity, the modern sovereign state develops a clear 'right to wage war': 'killing or concluding peace was recognized as one of the preeminent functions of any state' (77). This principle recognises a reciprocal legal equality between states. The state is 'the model of political unity, a principle of rational organization, the embodiment of the idea of the universal, and a moral sign' (77). Hence, 'the state, for its part, undertook to "civilize" the ways of killing and to attribute rational objectives to the very act of killing' (77).

Paradoxically, rational war based on legal principles results in near unlimited violence in the colony, since it is not recognised as a reciprocal sovereign state, but rather a space of lawless exception within the state in which absolute enmity governs the relations between coloniser and colonised: 'colonies are not organized as a state form and do not create a human world. Their armies do not form a distinct entity, and their wars are not wars between regular armies' (77). Rather, in the colony, 'an irregular form of warfare' develops, with no 'distinction between combatants and noncombatants, or again between an "enemy" and a "criminal",' and by extension between army and police (77).

For Mbembe, this ability to wage war without law, in the colony's space and state of exception, is not the opposite of liberal political modernity, but rather the displacement of its underpinning sovereign right, from the centre to the margin. Mbembe explains that 'normative theories of democracy' have 'made the concept of reason into one of the most important elements': 'From this perspective, the ultimate expression of sovereignty is the

production of general norms of a body (the demos) comprising free and equal individuals. These individuals are posited as full subjects capable of self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-representation' (67). However, as a tradition from Hegel onwards has observed, such a subject emerges through the negation of the animal part of the human: 'Becoming a subject therefore supposes upholding the work of death' (68). Thus the process Agamben describes, by which 'declarations of rights represent the originary figure of the inscription of natural life in the juridico-political order of the nation state' (127), and which results in the rights-bearing subject-citizen who constitutively retains vulnerable bare life at the mercy of sovereign violence, can be schematised by the imperial relation.⁵ Death is transferred from the centre or the metropole, to the margins or the colony. Alongside the constitution of the state and the subject who are recognised by the law, 'all the manifestations of war and hostility that a European legal imaginary relegated to the margins find a place to reemerge in the colonies' (77). This explains why the Assistant Commissioner supports the rule of law in the metropole and its suspension in the colony.

However, it is difficult to draw the distinctions between colony and metropole, combatant and non-combatant, since the liberal democracy he seeks to defend is moribund. Mbembe observes, in the wake of a number of other theorists including Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno, that 'World War II shapes up as an extension of methods previously reserved for the "savages" to the "civilized" peoples of Europe' (76). *The Secret Agent* already suggests a movement in that direction. The Assistant Commissioner is suspicious of the very Metropolitan Police that he serves in: 'It is but fair to say that his suspicion of the police methods (unless the police happened to be a semi-military body organised by himself) was not difficult to arouse' (85). This is precisely because he attempts to uphold the distinction between metropole and colony. However, the novel insistently suggests that the metropolitan polis that he seeks to protect is in danger of collapse.

Parliamentary democracy, in the novel, seems particularly to be running out of time and succumbing to enervation.⁶ The Home Secretary, Sir Ethelred, repeatedly tells the Assistant Commissioner, ‘I have no time for that’ (100), as the clock in his office moves with ‘a ghostly, evanescent tick’ (101). Moreover, he seems to belong to a political period that has passed away, his archaism exaggerated by the impression that he ‘might have been the statue of one of his own princely ancestors stripped of a crusader’s war harness, and put into an ill-fitting frock coat’ (101). Like the parliament he represents, he ‘is getting exhausted’ (106). In this respect, Sir Ethelred’s ‘Bill for the Nationalisation of Fisheries’, which he is ‘unable to trust anyone with’ (106), is perhaps less an object of parody than it might initially appear. If parliamentary democracy is passing away as necropolitics moves from the colony to the metropole, then Sir Ethelred’s markedly biopolitical reforms to food supply, and he himself, are more under threat from ‘the reactionary gang’ of the opposition than from a political assassination (107).

If the biopolitical functions and political stability of liberal democracy are ebbing away, it is from one of the basic institutions of the ‘European juridical order’ which the necropolitical impulse emerges: the embassy. In *The Secret Agent*, the Russian embassy is not so much the opposite of British government, but that which liberal democracy disavows. The embassy lies nestled in the heart of the British empire, in the precincts of Hyde Park. Verloc’s journey there takes him past the wealthy ‘men and women riding in the Row’, and Verloc himself understands that his work in the Russian embassy emerges from the necessity that ‘[t]hey had to be protected; [...] and the source of their wealth had to be protected in the heart of the city and the heart of the country’ (9). Moreover, the embassy lies under a ‘peculiarly London sun—against which nothing could be said except that it looked bloodshot’ (9). The ‘peculiarly’ here puns on its definition ‘specifically’, but also suggests some kind of perversion of London, towards the intimation of physical violence in ‘bloodshot’, implying

that the specificity of London and its empire's social order lies in its perversity and tendency towards physical violence, rather than in the solid opposition between Russian autocracy and British liberal democracy that Conrad wishes to maintain. London's instability is reinforced by its 'topographical mysteries', which confuse the embassy's relationship to the space around it (11). The municipal failure in 'keeping track of London's strayed houses', including the embassy, leads the narrator to enquire '[w]hy powers are not asked of Parliament [...] for compelling those edifices to return to where they belong (11). Again, there seems a tacit recognition of the destabilising influence of Russia on British politics: the power to return Russia to its proper place is *not* requested. Verloc's journey to the ambassador echoes the Assistant Commissioner's journey to the minister safely nestled in the heart of London. All of this strengthens what emerges in the 'theorisation' of the embassy within the dialogue of the novel: the reciprocal relation between Britain and Russia confirms the operation of the necropolitical within liberal democracy.

Mbembe argues that the European juridical order recognises the reciprocal equality of states, from which the modern diplomatic network of reciprocal embassies emerges, but also that 'the state could recognize no authority above it within its own borders' (77). The novel makes this juridical relationship clear. When he confronts Vladimir, the Assistant Commissioner states that the police 'stopped at the limits of our territory' (167), because the crime was planned abroad, '[t]heoretically only, on foreign territory [...] alluding to the character of Embassies, which are supposed to be part and parcel of the country to which they belong' (167). Alongside disrupting the European juridical order, the crime commissioned at Vladimir's embassy is designed to challenge the norms of liberal democracy. Vladimir explains to Verloc that Britain 'is absurd with its sentimental regard for individual liberty' (22), and that a faked terrorist 'outrage' must therefore influence 'the public opinion here in favour of universal repressive legislation' (23). While Vladimir insists that 'these outrages

need not be especially sanguinary' (23), the 'especially' hints at what becomes clear with Stevie's death - the basic indifference to the right to life that underpins what Mbembe calls '*the generalized instrumentalization of human existence*' inherent in the necropolitical (68, Mbembe's emphasis). Moreover, Vladimir's rejection of liberal democratic norms in favour of instrumentalised death is itself already present as a latent assumption in Chief Inspector Heat's belief that anarchists 'ought to be shot at sight like mad dogs' (70). This shared view represents the future of political power. The threat of necropolitical destruction is also contained in the paradox between the assumption that the reciprocal relation of the embassy can be held with autocratic Russia, and the persistent racialisation of Vladimir. The latter is shared by the novel's free indirect discourse: 'absolutely un-European, and startling even to Mr Verloc's experience of cosmopolitan slums' (19); and Sir Ethelred: '[w]hat do they mean by importing their methods of Crim-Tartary here? A Turk would have more decency' (101).

This suggests one explanation for the obscurity with which the novel treats the official and institutional resolution of the Vladimir-Verloc case: the foreign, Russian Other is racialised and dispelled, reiterating the racist relation of enmity in the metropole as well as the colony, while the techniques of necropolitical violence are imported from the colony by the mobility of imperial officials, and from Russia, a racialised Other, by the reciprocity of the embassy. While the Assistant Commissioner tells Sir Ethelred 'that the existence of secret agents should not be tolerated, as tending to augment the positive dangers of the evil against which they are used' (102), the outcomes the novel gives us are the personal expulsion of Vladimir from polite society (168) but also the suggestion that Verloc's actions were not exposed but rather 'smother[ed] so nicely' by the police (226), presumably with the blame pinned on anarchism after all. The intention to re-establish liberal democracy in opposition to necropolitical autocracy ends, at the level of political institutions, in the integration of the necropolitical regime into the liberal democratic.

As a result, anarchism, in a necropolitical reading, comes to occupy the potentially emancipatory place that is missing in liberal democracy. In the first instance, anarchism and liberal democracy are surprisingly closely connected. For Vladimir, ‘the imbecile bourgeoisie of this country make themselves the accomplices of the very people whose aim is to drive them out of their houses to starve in ditches’ (22). However, critics have generally been hesitant to argue that the novel adopts a positive and radical political position on the basis of its anarchists, instead tending to see the political content of the novel as historical data. An exception here is David Mulry, who stands out by unambiguously arguing for a positive and productive political dimension to the novel. Mulry bases this claim not just on the anarchists, but their relation to Winnie and Stevie, since ‘the essential truthfulness of [the anarchists’] concerns is often supported by other characters’ (9). While the anarchists present a critique of society, Winnie and Stevie convert this into action: ‘Conrad, then, moves the reader from propaganda by word to propaganda by deed, from the words of the anarchist to the actions of Stevie and Winnie’ (11). Mulry is less clear on exactly what Stevie’s and Winnie’s revolutionary actions are.

I want to offer a more precise reading of how Stevie, Winnie, the anarchists, and those who surround them, in *The Secret Agent*, are those who are most directly exposed to the operation of necropower, which becomes the basis for a necropolitical resistance combining political violence and radical democracy. This said, the politics of resistance in *The Secret Agent* are obscure and not fully coherent. I will consider the ambivalent place of the novel’s two most important women: Winnie Verloc and her mother, before offering some reflections on the novel’s suicide bombing.

Those who are exposed to necropower in the novel form a community of debility, which I argue offers the potential of the form of radical democratic politics theorised by Jacques Rancière. Critics have noted the bodily debility and vulnerability of Conrad’s

anarchists, and, particularly, those of previous generations have read this as evidence of Conrad's disgust towards, and satire of, the anarchists. In so doing, critics often reveal their own assumptions about fat, disabled, or elderly bodies, as much as Conrad's.⁷ However, rather than immediately foreclosing the politics of bodies in the formulation that disgust equals ironic condemnation, I agree with Christian Haines that '[t]here is [...] a politics of corporeality irreducible either to formal irony or the content of the plot' (88).

If the bodies of the anarchists are decaying, debilitated, and vulnerable in *The Secret Agent*, the same can be said of almost every character in the novel: 'Indeed—and this, in part, mitigates the depicted “deformities” of the novel’s anarchists—*no one* in this novel appears physically “normal”' (Lyon xxix, Lyon's emphasis). Rather than seeing the anarchists as being particularly marked for irony because of disability alone, then, another division of the novel's characters might reflect the necropolitical impulse to 'divid[e] people into those who must live and those who must die' (Mbembe 71). At work in such necropolitical divisions is disability plus capacity. At stake is not disability alone, but how certain disabilities, in relation to other forms of oppression, such as class, allow disability to be inscribed politically in some cases and not others. Thus, the division is not founded on disability alone, but the capacities which are apportioned to disabled bodies through the necropolitical workings of power. Though, as will be seen at the end of the essay, perhaps this universal condition of disability offers some sort of hope of the re-emergence of democratic community. As such, it would be inaccurate to suggest that disabled characters are interchangeable. While Verloc is 'very corpulent' (14), his weight is the mark of a kind of capacity: 'constitutionally averse from every superfluous exertion', his idleness 'suited him very well' (10). Similarly, the 'fat, witty, clean-shaved face' of Vladimir (175), represents a capacity to move in a high society he may otherwise be excluded from as a racialised foreigner. His 'round, full face' is part of

what allows him to assume ‘his drawing room attitude accompanying the delivery of delicate witticisms’ (26)

It is the anarchists and their associates who are exposed to both the basic necropolitical threat of violent death and to the necropolitical ‘form of governmentality that consists in *managing the multitudes* [...] who are incapacitated through mutilation’ (Mbembe 86, Mbembe’s emphasis), the practice Jasbir K. Puar has called ‘maiming to debilitate’ (Puar 127-161). On the one hand, then, we have Stevie, not an anarchist himself, but as will be seen, more politically radical than any other character in the novel. Stevie’s body is reduced to something so devoid of meaning it is less than bare life. Conrad’s description of his remains as ‘what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast’ (64) suggests the retrospective work of making meaning through the use of the past conditional tense. Rather, the body itself is more accurately described as a ‘heap of mixed things, which seemed to have been collected in shambles and rag shops’ (65), not only no longer recognisably human, but questionably organic, the necropolitical death of a body which has been instrumentalised and rendered meaningless in the biopolitical division of life: ‘simple relics of an unburied pain; empty meaningless corporealities; strange deposits plunged into cruel stupor’ (Mbembe 87). For many of the novel’s characters, Stevie was always-already a ‘meaningless corporeality’; I have shown Vladimir’s general indifference to death in the commission of the bombing. What makes Stevie particularly vulnerable to necropolitical disposability is his learning disability. Stevie finds himself on the wrong side of the biopolitical division. Ossipon makes such biopolitical divisions on the basis of the eugenic discourse of Lombroso. Stevie is ‘[t]ypical of this form of degeneracy’ (34). However, the novel indicates that Lombroso’s divisions are not Ossipon’s personal belief alone but dispersed through the society.⁸ Thus, while Verloc ‘did not mean him to perish’ (169), he has a general indifference to his human value: ‘he could not possibly comprehend the value of

Stevie in the eyes of Mrs Verloc' (172). Winnie Verloc sees it more accurately because she recognises that this indifference to Stevie's life is a form of instrumentalisation: 'the man whom she had trusted, took the boy away to kill him' (183). Verloc attempts to share the blame with Winnie: 'Strike me dead if I ever would have thought of the lad for that purpose. It was you who kept shoving him in my way' (189), but the novel suggests that this thought comes precisely at the point of necropolitical division. 'You would call that lad a degenerate, would you?' (34), Verloc asks Ossipon, and the discussion brings 'a faint blush' to his cheeks since scientific conversation has 'the curious power of evoking a definitely offensive mental vision of Mr Vladimir' (35), and so reminds Verloc of his task. What renders Stevie vulnerable to death is the division of life into those who are to live and those who are to die; Stevie is, as a 'degenerate', available for exposure to death.

It is notable then, that, along with his sister, the two characters to defend Stevie from his instrumentalisation are the two anarchists supposedly satirised by Conrad for their debility and who share with him particular exposure to necropolitical power. Yundt, who critiques Ossipon's recourse to Lombroso's biopolitical classifications, sits in 'the horse-hair arm-chair where Mrs Verloc's mother was generally privileged to sit' (31), and so, in a way, becomes interchangeable with the elderly, ailing woman whose condition sends her across London to an alms house, 'a place of training for the still more straitened circumstances of the grave' (118), for those who fall on the wrong side of the biopolitical division of life. Yundt too is a figure of death-in-life, a 'swaggering spectre', who already resembles the necropolitical icon of the skeleton, with his 'old and bald' head, 'extinguished eyes', and 'skinny groping hand deformed by gouty swellings' (31–2).

On the other hand, there is Michaelis, who is 'always so nice and kind' to Stevie (139). In contrast to Yundt, Michaelis has left prison 'as if deadened and oppressed by the layer of fat on his chest' (31). 'Round like a tub, with an enormous stomach and distended

cheeks' (31), he is one of several obese characters in the novel. In contrast to Vladimir, despite their physical similarity, in the drawing room of his 'lady patroness', Michaelis's obesity attracts pity. It makes him 'pathetic in his grotesque and incurable obesity which he had to drag like a galley slave's bullet to the end of his days' (79). Michaelis's obesity is part of his punishment for being involved in revolutionary activities. It is directly the result of a long prison sentence, and its imputed grotesqueness seems to be a visual representation of the 'revulsion of popular sentiment' in response to his involvement in the murder of a police constable (78). As an outcome of his judicial punishment, it appears as part of a necropolitical effort to disable him from further political action, a kind of maiming. While Verloc, Vladimir, and Michaelis share a bodily condition, for neither Verloc nor Vladimir is this condition a debility, rather it gives them capacity and status. On the other hand, Michaelis's obesity is produced by the state in order to limit his capacity. He has been in a 'highly hygienic prison' (31) which is like 'a colossal mortuary for the socially drowned' (33). Michaelis's treatment, in the biopolitical technology of the prison, debilitates him and renders him politically safe: he 'lost the habit of consecutive thinking in prison' (57), in a state of living death, while the liberal state is able to claim it does not exercise its sovereign power to kill, but treats its prisoners humanely.⁹ Rather than being 'parasitic on the society they seek to destroy' (Lyon xvii), it seems to me that Yundt and, especially, Michaelis have been rendered powerless by a division of the populace into the living and the dead. How could these maimed men act? They are physically incapable of it. Marked out for death, the support of Michaelis's 'lady patroness' and the old woman who cares for Yundt are a minimal condition of their survival. Parasitism here, the will to live on as 'vermin', could perhaps even be an act of resistance.

Stevie, Michaelis, and Yundt then form a community of those who are exposed to necropolitical power. Along with another anarchist, the Professor, in their twinned corporeal

exposure and resistance to revolutionary violence, they suggest the suicide bomber, Mbembe's key figure of resistance to state necropolitics (88–91). Born from necropolitical vulnerability, Mbembe's focus is on the suicide bomber's 'desire for eternity [...] in which the subject overcomes his own mortality' (89).¹⁰ While Mbembe's discussion is very much focussed on the specific logic of nations under Western neo-colonial occupation in our late modernity, in Conrad's novel there are connections made between suicide, terrorism, and the formation of radically democratic community by those who have been made vulnerable to necropolitical power. On the one hand, there is Stevie, accidental suicide bomber, who seems to have a radical ability to form, or at least posit, the possibility of community and, on the other, there is the Professor, a nihilistic individualist, who conversely has created a detonator which allows him to become an intentional suicide bomber.¹¹ Between these are found the two women of the novel, whose place in its political schema does not put them clearly in either Stevie or the Professor's camp, but suggests connections with both, as well as a perception of women as politically acquiescent despite the similarities of their situation with the necropolitically outcast.

At the centre of Conrad's novel is a remarkable set piece, not of explosive destruction, but of community formation. As 'time itself seemed to stand still', Stevie accompanies his sister (later described by Ossipon as mad like her brother), and his mother, who has legs so swollen she can no longer walk, to an alms house south of the river, the wrong side of the city's geographical division, where his mother will be placed into a space of biopolitical confinement until her death; the alms house 'might well have been devised [...] as a place of training for the still more straitened circumstances of the grave' (117–8). They travel in a cab driven by 'a maimed driver' (114) with a hook hand, and pulled by 'an infirm horse, with the harness hung over his sharp backbone flapping very loose about his thighs' (115).

What Stevie does on this journey is nothing short of revolutionary. He forges a community of the wretched, the dispossessed, and the outcast. It is more vulnerable to necropolitical power than the Stevie-Michaelis-Yundt grouping because Michaelis and Yundt are accorded some political recognition by Michaelis's patron and by the police and are supported by the women in their life. In contrast, this community is one which lies outside of political recognition and is made possible to perceive by the novel itself. The cabman whips the horse, 'not because his soul was cruel and his heart evil, but because he had to earn his fare' (116).¹² At the bottom of the chain of capitalism, its ordering of time and productivity still determines a hierarchical relation between the cabman and the horse. Stevie, however, disrupts this: "'You mustn't,'" stammered out Stevie violently. "It hurts.'" (116). The stammering and uncertainty of who is being hurt attests to intersubjective relations between human and animal, to a community of becoming-with, an emergence of new political subjectivity for the group as a whole, while the violence of his utterance insists on a corporeal and physical resistance. This creation of community is not a pleasant experience, unlike the community of the aristocratic drawing room we see elsewhere in the novel, attended by Vladimir, Michaelis, and the Assistant Commissioner, but prompted by generalised trauma. Stevie attempts to walk with the horse, as though taking its place. As Stevie and the cabman negotiate the status of the horse and his position at the most dispossessed end of capitalist employment, a more egalitarian and sympathetic community emerges. The excuse 'He ain't lame' gives way to 'I've got to take out what they will blooming well give me at the yard. I've got a missus and four kids at 'ome' (122). This is followed by the cabman's softening towards the horse, "'Ard on 'osses but dam' sight 'arder on poor chaps like me', which is followed by Stevie's inclusive stammer, 'Poor! Poor!' (123), which is not directed at anyone in particular and so encompasses all, and which is accompanied by a narratorial disruption of subjectivity with the replacement of the possessive 'his' for the generalised, shared 'the': 'He

could say nothing; for the tenderness to all pain and all misery, the desire to make the horse happy and the cabman happy, had reached the point of a bizarre longing to take them to bed with him' (123). At this, the cabman, like Stevie, enters into community with the horse, sharing its labour: 'He approached [...] the motionless partner of his labours, and stooping to seize the bridle, lifted up the big weary head to the height of his shoulder with one effort of his right arm, like a feat of strength' (123). Thus, a utopian instantiation of community asserts itself right in the necropolitical heart of Conrad's novel. This is a representation of community, but it also attempts to move from the representational to the referentially corporeal. Stevie's desire for community is 'a symbolic longing; and at the same time it was very distinct' (123). Just as necropolitics is a politics of the body, Conrad offers us, in potential opposition, a community of the body, based on a mutuality of bodies and sensory experience.

I have argued that Conrad's novel makes plain the necropolitical impulse that drives liberal democracy, in the first instance, in an opposition between metropole and colony but, in the second, by the movement of the techniques of the colony into the metropole. I have suggested that both the novel's anarchists, and a second order of even more dispossessed characters, are represented as being at the mercy of necropolitical power, but that such a reading also draws attention to the novel's representation of a community of the necropolitically outcast.

Necropolitics operates on the division of populations 'into those who must live and those who must die'. In this respect it recalls Jacques Rancière's theory of the operation of power as proceeding from a 'division' or 'distribution' of the sensible [*partage du sensible*]. Moreover, Rancière is concerned that, in theories of power which see sovereign and biopolitical power as convergent and simultaneous rather than historically successive, there is a risk that 'political practice turns out to be always already caught in the biopolitical trap'

(*Dissensus* 74). According to Rancière, in Giorgio Agamben's work the practice of politics vanishes in the destiny of a comatose bare life forever oppressed by the sovereign exception, a set of relations which are historically universal and unchanging, 'an overwhelming historico-ontological destiny from which only a God can save us' (*Dissensus* 75). Mbembe also argues for the identity of sovereign power and biopolitics, indeed, it is the basis of necropolitics. However, he refuses a theological solution to the impasse. Though this impasse is not referred to directly, Mbembe, instead of relying on a theological solution, turns to the work of Fanon who offers a therapeutic violence, which would not 'conquer the state but instead [...] create another formation of sovereignty [...] other forms of life' (129). Violence as necropolitical resistance within a necropolitical regime, in Mbembe's account, would both regenerate the necropoliticised subject and society (118).

Mbembe's Fanonian prescription is compelling in the colonial context, but less so in the metropole of *The Secret Agent*, where the whole movement of the plot is based on sovereign power appropriating, misrepresenting, and instrumentalising a violence of resistance. Rather, Rancière offers a solution to the impasse he describes via a theory of radical democracy.

For Rancière, political practice arranges the 'self-evident facts of sense perception', what we are able to recognise as a shared world, dividing it into 'something in common' while also enforcing 'the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it' (*Politics* 13). As such, politics divides subjects into those who are recognisable, and thus bear political rights, the biopolitical subjects of liberal democracy, and those who are not just debarred from rights, but are not recognisable as political actors, those objectified necropolitical outcasts marked for death who are only *recognisable* in death, on its road, or as instruments whose bare life and death are ultimately matters of indifference. For Rancière, these subjects who are not recognised or recognisable as subjects, are what he calls 'the part

of those who have no part' (78). These are not the poor, who are recognisable political subjects, as in Michaelis's account of class struggle between the capitalists and 'the suffering proletariat' (37). For Rancière '[d]emocracy is not the power of the poor, but the power of those who have no qualification for exercising power', they are the 'count of the uncounted – or the part of those who have no part' (78). Thus, they only *appear* as bare life, because they 'inscribe the count of the uncounted as a supplement' (78). The 'part of those who have no part' form a community on the paradoxically positive basis of their shared lack of qualification (*Dissensus* 33).

When Stevie embraces the horse, his life is not bare, but filled with qualities, sensations, and desires: he is 'apt to forget mere facts' but has 'a faithful memory of sensations' (123). The cabman's self-definition in terms of class 'poor chaps like me', becomes a sensation shorn of content in Stevie's mouth. It is 'stammered; and 'convulsive' because '[h]e could say nothing' (123). Nonetheless, it creates a community, and begins to be the basis of political action. Stevie has 'the desire to make the horse happy and the cabman happy' which 'had reached the bizarre longing to take them to bed with him'. However, this inchoate desire becomes not a political solution, but a political problem, the beginning of a political process, for 'he knew, it was impossible', but only because of 'being difficult of application on a large scale' (123). Politics, then, is the act of bringing the claims of the unrecognised to recognition, and the special role of aesthetics, for Rancière, is that it makes the part that has no part sensible.

In *The Secret Agent's* case, those who are placed on the unrecognisable side of the necropolitical division are made recognisable by shared sensation which refuse their condemnation and erroneous appearance as bare life, and which develop into a political problematic rather than a political solution. They form a community with no qualification,

such as aristocracy, education, or ideology, other than that of shared sensible presence, that from its excluded position demands sensory recognition.

Disquietingly, in the novel's complex time scheme, Stevie is 'already' dead, at the moment of the cab journey, raising the disconcerting proposition that this community can only exist virtually, posthumously, and never be instantiated. This is congruent with Rancière's theory of politics which sees the democratic community as only virtual, a supplementary rupture in society, which makes those excluded visible, either drawing them into political normality or excluding them once again (*Dissensus* 41). In this respect, Conrad's pessimism seems to chime with the limitation of radical democracy: its potential to fail.

Moreover, the novel's politics of resistance are ambivalent. Alongside the emergence of radical community, there is a tendency to exclude women into individualisation or acquiescence to the necropolitical regime, which suggests that while Stevie's community may embrace the non-human, the novel as a whole struggles to politicise gender. Mrs Verloc shares the bodily debility and lack of capacity, and the fact that she is an elderly woman seems to doubly exclude her as she is confined to 'the seclusion of the back bedroom' at the Verlocs'. Rather than being brought into Stevie's community, though, her decision to enter the necropolitical institution of the alms house implies an acceptance of her exclusion, as she enters into a bargain which, though pragmatic, reconfirms the logic of instrumentalised division, a kind of economic exchange whereby '[h]er act of abandonment was really an arrangement for settling her son permanently in life' (119). My point here is not to offer a moral condemnation of a character who is presented with an impossible dilemma, but rather, to note that the narrative effectively confines her to the space of her solution, rather than allowing her to enter into the community which the novel itself creates in opposition to the logic of that solution. This seems to be based on an association in the novel, between women

and commitment to the family in opposition to politics, and bland practicality, which is echoed at times in Winnie Verloc's calculations in marrying Verloc and her dismissive 'Come along, Stevie. You can't help that' (126) in response to his searching questions on inequality and the police.

Nonetheless, Winnie forms a kind of political pivot between the acquiescence of her mother, and the radicalism associated with Stevie. As Mulry notes in his discussion of this scene, 'Winnie's response is interesting because the question fails to engage her, although Conrad notes her link to the world of anarchists as a preface to her words' (10). While her passive practicality attempts to draw Stevie away from political experience, she is nonetheless committed to radical politics. Asked by Stevie the function of the police, she replies 'guiltless of any irony [...] in a form which was perhaps not unnatural in the wife of Mr Verloc, Delegate of the Central Red Committee [...] "They are so that them as have nothing shouldn't take anything away from them who have"' (127). Similarly, to protect Stevie, Winnie Verloc 'had to love him with a militant love' (181). And while, as Jay Parker suggests, her suicide might be a form of poetic justice in terms of individual experience (12–15), it makes her both a necropolitical victim, whose death is adjoined to the disposability of Stevie, and a possible figure of resistance. On the one hand, her passivity is echoed by the *appearance* of a lack of political content to her suicide. For the newspapers, her death is 'an impenetrable mystery', on the basis of its conventional melodramatic content, 'a wedding ring left lying on the seat' (226). This, though, only seems to account for the content of her actions rather than their form, for she appears to seek salvation in the 'sham sentiment' of redemption via self-sacrifice and conjugal fidelity with Ossipon, 'I will live all my days for you, Tom!' but this is just the content while the form of her words is 'the very cry of truth' (218). The cry of truth is 'the lament of poor humanity' (218), which picks up Stevie's word 'poor' and expands beyond familial relationships or erotic relationships which are stripped by

conventional content of their political resonances. The ultimate outcome of her suicide is to become a kind of virus which infects Ossipon, one of the proponents of necropolitical division in the novel. The words of the newspaper report start to ‘pulsate to the rhythm of an impenetrable mystery’, and the last we hear of him is that he is ‘seriously ill’ (227). Unlike the posthumous virtuality of Stevie’s political community, which is presented directly, Winnie’s own motivation is absent. Displaced by its newspaper interpretation, this could be either, or both, a private punishment for Ossipon’s betrayal of his conjugal promise or the start of a necropolitical pandemic.

Indeed, the only character who lives on is the nihilistic manufacturer of illegal explosives, the Professor, a suicide bomber who only leaves the house with his ‘right hand closed round [an] india-rubber ball [...]. The pressing of this ball actuates a detonator’ (49). Like Mbembe’s suicide bomber, whose aim is mutual recognition, the Professor’s bomb gives a ‘full twenty seconds’ between pressing the detonator and the explosion, an eternity for mutual recognition. His necropolitical resistance seems to be individualist: ‘Their character is built upon conventional morality. [...] Mine stands free from everything artificial. [...] They depend on life [...]; whereas I depend on death’ (51). Nonetheless, he is inscribed within the narratorial discourse of the novel as part of the community of the debilitated, ‘frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable’ (227), and as Ray suggests, the Lombrosian discourse deliberately associates Stevie, the Professor, and Winnie as parallel degenerates (128). Moreover, the Professor is a ‘pest’ (227), a creature marked for death, for extermination. The novel ends, then, not only by suggesting that those on the wrong side of the necropolitical divide in London can make their claim by virtuality or a violence that risks remaining highly individualised. Rather, the word ‘pest’ recursively returns to Conrad’s representation of the colonies. If Kurtz’s imperative in *Heart of Darkness*, ‘exterminate all the brutes’, designates all those under necropolitical power as pests, fit only for the

exterminator, then *The Secret Agent* ends by raising the question of what might happen if the pests were armed with bombs.¹³

Notes

¹ Mbembe responds to Foucault, 135-140 in particular. I assume a knowledge of this passage throughout the essay.

² See, for example, Cole; Eagleton, 'Form'; Mallios; Ó Donghaile; and Wisnicki.

³ See, for example, Houen; Lacoue-Labarthe; and Wexler.

⁴ See also Hume's exploration of bare life in *Heart of Darkness*.

⁵ Agamben's discussion of the relationship between death and the rights-bearing modern subject is developed in Part Three of *Homo Sacer* (1998): 119–180.

⁶ This is a key theme in Houen's thermodynamic reading.

⁷ For example Lyon, xvi and Melchiori, 78.

⁸ Lombroso's ideas appear throughout Conrad's fiction, see Ray and Jacobs.

⁹ My thinking and terms here are extrapolated from Puar, particularly xiv–xxi and 141–7.

¹⁰ See also Murray, whose sensitive study of suicide bombing in Israel-Palestine is too complex to summarise here.

¹¹ My reading here echoes other recent readings of Conrad as a communitarian or even reparative writer rather than an individualist and pessimist, such as Yamamoto, and those collected in Parker and Wexler.

¹² Recall here Mbembe's connection of 'savage life' to 'animal life' in the colony (77).

¹³ I cannot agree with Robinson that there is a 'poverty of agency' in *The Secret Agent*, rather political agency remains a virtual potentiality.

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