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Insistence

The Temporality of the Death Fast and the Political

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ABSTRACT: Gilles Deleuze, borrowing from Maurice Blanchot's distinctive vocabulary in *The Space of Literature*, offers death as the ultimate example of the event. In this paper, I propose reversing the current of concept-metaphor against a certain performance theory of sovereignty and ask, not what the concept-metaphor death does for the thought of the event, but what the concept-metaphor event does for the thought of death on the hunger strike in order to explore the divide between the space of dying and the space of politics, which are incompatibly distinct and yet inextricably linked. Revealing an irreducible anachrony between two deaths — the passage of time that separates dying as pure potentiality from death as a radically contingent event that comes either too early or too late — I argue that the political efficacy of hunger striking depends less on the consummation of death in the immediacy of an ecstatic moment than on the prolongation of this interval of time by potentially endless repetitive enactments, which imply both finality and incompleteness.

KEYWORDS: hunger strike; death; event; repetition; time; prisons; Turkey

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Whoever stays with the story penetrates into something opaque that he does not understand, while whoever holds to the meaning cannot get back to the darkness of which it is the telltale light. The two readers can never meet; we are one, then the other, we understand always more or always less than is necessary. True reading remains impossible.

Maurice Blanchot, 'Reading Kafka'

On 23 January 2007, the Death Fast of prisoners affiliated with outlawed Marxist-Leninist organizations in Turkey came to an end after 122 deaths. This mass hunger strike — 2286 consecutive days long, which the participating organizations extended for more than six years by launching new teams almost continuously — began as a prison resistance against the introduction of high-security penal institutions as part of the larger restructuring of the Turkish penal regime in the new millennium.¹

1 The text that follows is based on my long-term ethnographic work on the Death Fast in Turkey and is a continued meditation written in the margins of that experience.

The introduction of high-security penal institutions, known as 'F-type' prisons, had its legal basis in Article 16 of the Anti-Terror Law (1991), which stipulated that the sentences of those convicted and awaiting or standing trial on charges under the provisions of this law would be served in 'special penal institutions' built on a system of cells holding one or three inmates, explicitly prohibiting any open visitation and any communication and interaction between the inmates.² The construction of the new celled prisons, along with the alteration of the remaining seventy-five prisons into a similar architectural plan, provided the Turkish state with the infrastructural capacity to abolish the prison commune as an economic and political entity and reestablish punitive sovereignty over the prisoners in the service of coercive individualization.

The first and only irrevocable demand of the hunger strike was the immediate abolition of the F-type prison project. In the view of prison organizations, the F-type prison entombed the prisoner in the cell; by naming the cell-type prison *tabutluk* (coffin), they insisted that isolation was no different than being buried alive.³ Isolation killed the subject without killing; it annihilated the subject but conserved life. Such individualized and separated life, the organizers argued, was at best only a hollowed-out life, a brutal and oppressive attempt to extend the condition of alienation and abstraction under capitalism by destroying the inmates' communal life in the prison. Instead of appealing to the fundamental and inalienable right to life as a (legal) value in and of itself, which would have had disquieting similarities with the very discourse of the state authorities that they sought to challenge, the political organizations reaffirmed each prisoner's right to death, a right that was absolute to the extent that each death faster made a sovereign decision about their own fate.

What Maurice Blanchot says of reading Kafka can equally be said of reading the Death Fast, since the main source of the self-questioning paradoxes of the Death Fast is the incompatibility between the political

2 For the full text, see Terörle Mücadele Kanunu (Anti-Terrorist Law), Law No. 3713, 12 April 1991 <<http://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.3713.pdf>> [accessed 15 November 2017].

3 'F Tipi Tabutluk Gerçeği' (Truth of the F-Type Coffin), *Ekmek ve Adalet*, 5 June 2002, p. 5.

and extrapolitical elements of the hunger strike itself.⁴ Whatever is singular in a radical sense — and every right to death is so singular — offers resistance to the conventions of language, the instituted order of meaning, and the historical record. By making the motives or interests, messages or arguments, demands or ends generally communicable, the hunger strike *form* renders this singular resistance representable and thus visible in the first place.⁵ At its extreme, the motives or interests, messages or arguments, and demands or ends would have to be capable of being universalized in order for the hunger strike to be recognized as the same form of political action across social, cultural, and linguistic space. Every death, by contrast, at its extreme would be so singularized that it would elude universal communicability, withdraw from what is generally called the ‘scene of politics’, and be accessible only as an entirely untranslatable, extrapolitical idiom.

The Death Fast, far from facilitating mediation, had the effect of intensifying the discord between the communicable content of the prison movement and the incommunicable sovereignty of the prisoners. The declared aim of prisoners gave way to a state of suspension, overwriting the conclusiveness of demands with an abstract insistence that was symptomatically reflected in the duration of the prison resistance. The duration of the resistance was extended by means of an ostensibly inexhaustible reserve of volunteers, but the actual substitutability of hunger strikers was achieved not by effacing their singular relation to death but by accentuating it, not by denying the differences between the volunteers, but by recognizing their irreducibility. This internal economy of recognition had as its own paradoxical outcome: the abstraction of self-starvation. Such deliberate abstraction ultimately foundered on the scandalous disproportion between human loss and paltry gains, revealing an indelible residue that threatened to overwhelm political instrumentality.

4 Maurice Blanchot, ‘Reading Kafka’, in Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 1–11 (p. 4). One of Franz Kafka’s final stories, ‘A Hunger Artist’, may be said to engage the aporia addressed in the following reading of the Death Fast.

5 Jacques Derrida often insists upon the universalizability of the singular. See, for example, his *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 41.

In considering the repeatability of death as a dramatization of this tension between the incommunicable and the communicable, I will deploy the concept-metaphor 'event' in order to explore the divide between the space of dying and the space of politics, which are incompatibly distinct yet inextricably linked.

Gilles Deleuze, borrowing from the distinctive vocabulary of Blanchot's *The Space of Literature*, offers death as the ultimate example of the event in order to mark its double structure: 'Death and its wound are not simply events among other events. Every event is like death, double and impersonal in its double.'⁶

No longer synonymous with worldly affairs, the event is necessarily irreducible to historical factuality; indeed, effects are so radically disjoined from causes that the event is affirmed as that which breaks with a linear or expressive causality. More importantly, the event is never simply 'present', but instead takes place repeatedly, though always differently, in an open-ended movement of spatiotemporal differentiation. It is grammatically associated with the substantival infinitive *mourir* (dying) inasmuch as death corporealizes itself only in singular bodies, and yet it always exceeds all its possible corporealizations. An unrepresentable excess that is never present in itself, but only as a perpetual movement of self-differentiation, death is always already at least two, simultaneously singular and 'impersonal and pre-individual, neutral.'⁷

I propose reversing the current of concept-metaphor here against a certain performance theory of sovereignty and ask, not what the concept-metaphor *death* does for the thought of the event, but what the concept-metaphor *event* does for the thought of death on the hunger strike, in order to distinguish the infinite reserve of the event from sovereignty.

Giorgio Agamben determines the structure of sovereignty in terms of an oppositional identity between actuality and potentiality.⁸

6 On 'double death', see Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 153–55; Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 148–53 (p. 152).

7 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

8 See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 46–47.

Such identity is evidently both performative and ‘afformative’ for his astute readers in anthropology.⁹ Sovereignty, Allen Feldman maintains, grounds itself in the body as pure effective power inasmuch as it could construct itself as ‘an archic center and reserved site of power’ — both visible and invisible, tangible and intangible, secret and public — only through reenactments of violence in an open seriality that necessarily thwarts a final closure or a determinate form. He writes, ‘In its desistance from violence, sovereignty puts off from itself any configurable essence of violence; desisted violence persists as a formless force in its nonbeing and promissory phenomenality.’¹⁰ Thus, as an ‘evental’ site of sovereignty, the temporal body cannot be subjectivized; the subject loses its relation to itself as possibility or propriety and dissipates to a point of extremity, where it becomes a double of sovereign self-identical indifference. Nevertheless, despite or even because of the sheer exteriority of its body, Feldman further asserts that the subject has the chance of recovering self-identity in death. In Feldman’s account, the state of impropriety turns unaccountably into one of propriety in a mimetic reversal of expropriation.¹¹

Though Feldman contests desubjectivation as absolute sovereign effect in Agamben’s thought; essentially instrumental, Feldman’s notion of ‘subjectivization of power as exteriority’ depends upon the bifurcation of the self and the active objectification of the body as an instrument of violence in a desire for the proper body and body politics. Accordingly, Feldman construes the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike as a deathly purification of the self, a ‘sacrifical’ expulsion of state violence by means of eating the very body that has become infested with it — in other words, consuming the enemy by consuming the self.¹² Similarly, Banu Bargu’s reading of the Death Fast is organized largely by the same logic of counter-subjectivation, taken in the first instance from Feldman’s locution ‘weaponization of the body’ and displaced in

9 See, respectively, Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and *Archives of the Insensible: Of War, Photopolitics, and Dead Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). For the exposition of the term ‘afformative’, see Werner Hamacher, ‘Afformative, Strike’, *Cardozo Law Review*, 85 (1991–1992), pp. 1133–57 (p. 1139).

10 Feldman, *Archives of the Insensible*, p. 163.

11 Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, p. 178.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 236.

such a way that the weaponization of life comes to signify the sacrifice of life in the name of a life that would, in the end, be worth more than life.¹³ However, counter-subjection is not ‘counter-actualization’; the margin of freedom does not consist in mimetic subversion but, on the contrary, concedes to the radical impropriety of the event and becomes equal to it in reenactments that actively incomplete its full actualization.¹⁴

It is precisely this suspended relation to death that distinguishes death fasting from self-immolations and suicide attacks. Despite all the emphasis on the instant of decision, the death fast does not necessarily precipitate death and its actual consummation in the immediacy of an ecstatic moment; rather, the political efficacy of the death fast depends on the prolongation of the interval that separates ‘death’ as finality from ‘dying’ as impersonal event and keeps the coincidence of two deaths in perpetual reserve.¹⁵ What is essential in death fasting is that the irreducible anachrony between two deaths — the passage of time that separates dying as pure potentiality from death as a radically contingent event that comes either too early or too late — is not resolved or equalized, and that this interval of time that passes between the two is itself maintained at the limit of bodies. Accordingly, the suspension of death (or life) is less in the service of mastery than of an endless contestation bearing witness to someone, or someones, that can only communicate or affirm itself in this interim state, belonging neither to life nor to death: the undead and the unborn.

The clandestine memory and belief of the space of dying that may never be relinquished are expressed in the temporal structure of the Death Fast. In the form of a potentially infinite series of reenactments, the participating organizations invested in a structure of temporal return that set in motion a strange oscillation between eventfulness (‘already happened’) and suspension (‘still to come’). In addition to this structure of temporal return that paradoxically potentialized the limit between life and death through the very actualization of death,

13 Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 14–18.

14 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, pp. 150–52.

15 The following reading is much indebted to Blanchot’s reflections on ‘double death’. See also Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).

which was itself rendered possible by the multiplication of hunger strikers, the organizations advanced a temporal suspension in the form of a constant deferral between life and death. This deferred death (or life) was as much a result of the intake of vitamin B1 as of the Turkish state's policy of forced feeding after the loss of consciousness. Deferral and repetition, extraordinarily long self-starvation periods (up to 558 days), and serial introduction of teams resisted the idea of ending in the interest of maintaining the constant possibility of the end until their ends were achieved.

The space of dying that haunted the representational space of politics was consigned to obscurity by a phantasm of immortality that repressed the difference between two forms of repetition: (1) reproduction of heroic death as an exemplary model, and (2) the repeated return of the difference that suspends the distinction between the act and citation and the instant and instance. The longevity of the Death Fast, maintained by the exceptional perseverance of death fasters who had succeeded each other uninterruptedly over the course of six years, was presented by the organizations as proof of their exteriority to law. Far from being beyond the law, however, they had instead fallen hostage to it, with the repeated negation of the law by the return of death necessarily confirming the law as a limit. As a result, the relation to the limit of law began to resemble the limitlessness of time, a limitlessness that gave rise not to another law but to the endless succession of teams and deaths that resisted designation as events, if only because they were bound to the future as the coming of victory. As Ç., one of my interlocutors, recapitulated their slogan, 'To the End, To Eternity, To the Last', each death faster was the penultimate, but never the last, in an infinite but closed series, a series of absolutely singular yet substitutable placeholders: 'Every volunteer, every death faster is a last man, but they are not the last point. There is no last man until victory.'¹⁶

The organizational command invoked the endlessness of the Death Fast only to abstract a sacrificial Subject from the uninterrupted continuity of its teams, and it did so by subsuming the singular acts of dying within a totalizing unity and closure.¹⁷ Though they now ap-

16 Private communication, 12 July 2006.

17 'Büyük Direniş 2000–2007 Ölüm Orucu' (Great Resistance 2000–2007 Death Fast), *Yürüyüş*, 12 October 2008, p. 10.

peared, by a fetishistic inversion, to be the embodiments of a self-same immortal Subject, it was the singular acts of dying that had in fact given rise to this ideal and unchanging self-identity by their possibility of repetition. The organizations revisited the possibility of repetition itself as a new tactic on the second-year anniversary of the Death Fast by exploiting the iterability of the calendar to radical effect. Henceforth, the ninth and subsequent teams were named after exceptional martyr-death fasters, and these commemorative teams were introduced on the anniversaries of their deaths.¹⁸ In this manner, the inaugural series duplicated itself to constitute a new series of death fasters, who repeated the past events as if they were anticipating their future repetition for completion. By turning toward the past events to recall them, despite and even because of the irreversibility of the past, the singular acts of dying severed their relationship with the law to inscribe the event itself as a timeless instant within time. That the organizational command sought to capitalize upon, or at least to recuperate, this repeated return of death by tethering it to a rival code of values could not efface its unanswerability. As far as the outside gaze was concerned, the unanswerability of this insistent repetition was perhaps the one that was the most disturbing, for at the very moment that the Death Fast lost its political force and justification, its own repetition of itself divided the presence of the present and denied the seeming closure of the event. From an outside view, this repetition could only appear as mechanical repetition, which was why, in turn, it was mediatized as political religion; nevertheless, it was an event which knew no negation.

Crucial to the difference between sovereignty and event is their opposing relationship to time; while sovereignty is the 'eternal present', Deleuze argues that the actor, on the other hand, exists in relation to another time: that is, the time of the 'mobile and precise instant'.¹⁹

18 The ninth team was named after Zehra Kulaksız, a member of TAYAD (Solidarity Association for the Families of Detainees and Convicts) who had died on the death fast outside the prison in Küçükarmutlu in June 2001. The tenth was named after Gültekin Koç who died in a suicide attack against a police headquarters in January 2001. The eleventh team was named after Sevgi Erdoğan who had continued to fast in Küçükarmutlu after her release and died in July 2001. The twelfth team was named after Fidan Kalşen, a female prisoner who had set herself on fire in Çanakkale Prison during the prison operation. The last team was named after Cengiz Soydaş, the first death faster to fall martyr in Sincan F-type Prison in March 2000.

19 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 150.

'Aion,' unlike 'chronos,' has the curious property of existing only as an 'empty present' that reflects an unlimited past and future. This is why, as Deleuze puts it, counter-actualization is an impersonal reenactment of events 'perpetually anticipated and delayed, hoped for and recalled,' but also why the negation of death (objective genitive) is intimately bound to the 'substitution' of the self by 'the figure which the most singular life takes on.'²⁰

Deleuze, in his implicit dispute with Blanchot, insists on the difference between 'consciousness dying' and an 'empty consciousness,' teeming with a virtual multiplicity that vacillates between the self's finitude and the infinitude of the event and inflects the sense of the impersonal. Hence, for Deleuze, the impersonality of dying, no longer only designating the absence of a fixed subject, indeed resembles more affirmatively a place of communication that he terms 'the fourth person.'²¹

Only such a 'figure' would interrupt the narrow sense of 'death' — if it has a sense at all — and bring out the mediality of the hunger strike as political medium. I argue that, in this radically different understanding of 'death,' the body of the hunger striker is neither the material ground for the production of law nor the expressive sign for self-sovereignty, but the anonym, which 'comprehends all violence in a single act of violence, and every mortal event in a single Event.'²²

20 Ibid, p. 153.

21 Ibid., p. 152.

22 Ibid.

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