

PRIMAL FEAR

THE WEAPONISATION OF NOTHINGNESS

By Brad Evans

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We owe it to Friedrich Nietzsche for revealing the dark heart of the modern condition. Writing with some trepidation and concern about the declared death of the Christian God, the philosopher was compelled to ask what sacred and violent games humans would now invent for themselves. The answer, he explained, would show most fully our ability to repudiate all value and meaning as the nihilism of modernity spread. Such nihilism – or the will to nothing, as Nietzsche explained – was both normal and yet also extreme. It was always just lurking within the body of any modern social order, yet when fully unleashed it could bring about the total annihilation of entire peoples.

Such understanding invariably resonated with Hannah Arendt, who noted that a real lesson from the Holocaust was that humanity found nothing of value once the body was revealed in all its abstract nakedness. These same ideas would be present in the thought of Giorgio Agamben, whose concept of bare life forced us to address the real violence of modern sovereignty and the continued construction of camps for human extermination. Informed by the testimonies of Primo Levi, for Agamben there is a threshold that is passed in the disqualification of a life, which effectively removes it from all ethical and worldly obligation. A limit is crossed, where the body of a life ceases to have any rightful claim.

In his powerful aesthetic treatment of such violence, we can learn from Jacques Rancière to see this threshold moment as a kind of vanishing point. In short, the denial of a life is most acutely witnessed at the moment when a life is shown to be at the very point of its veritable disappearance. Nobody has captured this terror better than the Irish-born artist Francis Bacon, who paints vanishing states.

But what does all this mean for how we conceptualise power, violence, and fundamental questions about the human condition?

While the use of enforced disappearance as a weapon is often associated today with non-state actors such as the violent Mexican drug cartels, it remains the case that its systematic use is overwhelmingly deployed by States. There is a very evident logistical reason for this, inasmuch as it takes a great deal of organisational planning to remove entire groups from the terrestrial

surface of the earth. And it takes even greater effort, enabled through networks of complicity to maintain regimes of denial and culturally normalise what Henry Giroux has termed the violence of organised forgetting.

But disappearance, as the most extreme form of violence, is not just a logistical or even strategic issue. Of course, there is a strategic value inasmuch as disappearance instils widespread terror and fear amongst affected communities. Yet in terms of the interplay between power and violence, it's much more revealing.

Following Carl Schmitt, we have learned to see sovereign power as something that is both materially grounded and yet always exceeds its presentness. That is why it can always appear timely and yet timeless. Whilst the material force of its law is often visibly felt through the bullet and the baton, it is the abstract excessiveness of sovereignty that should really concern us here. Indeed, what defines modern sovereignty, which is not embodied in a single ruler or entity, is precisely that it can be always felt while never visible. As Shakespeare's *Macbeth* alludes, sovereignty in fact has always been a ghost formation. Kings or regimes may fall and die, but its presence always hovers until the next manifestation is consecrated. Understood this way, we can see how the violence of disappearance is the greatest and truest expression of sovereignty and its will to power. That which exceeds is mirrored by a kind of violence that is also defined by the very qualities of excess and invisibility. Sovereign ghosts thus produce their own hauntings, which are created through the production of armies of the unfound, who in the act of denial, show how far the logic of its power is willing to extend.

THE VIOLENCE OF DISAPPEARANCE IS THE GREATEST AND TRUEST EXPRESSION OF SOVEREIGNTY AND ITS WILL TO POWER

Sovereignty, however, has never been just about law. Following Michel Foucault, we have understood how the modern condition is equally shaped by biopolitical

concerns that focus more intently on the problem of life itself. That the modern condition is mostly defined by progressive narratives is hardly controversial. More challenging have been the observations made by Zygmunt Bauman, who not only showed how the logics of progress are inherently violent (especially in the context of the Holocaust), but how it is also complicit in the production of wasted lives, which in the case of disappearance is evidenced in the most tragic and symbolic way with the finding of human dumping grounds. There is often a clear lineage between a politics of disposability and disappearance.

Whilst Gilles Deleuze showed how the biopolitical was key to understanding the logics of genocide, as the very justification for massacre is often tied to the security and survival of perpetrators – what Foucault would identify as the vitality and necessity of slaughter – Achille Mbembe realised there was a need to take this a stage further to consider the necropolitical as a means of controlling the narratives of the deceased for the conditioning of the living. If acts of killing are mostly reasoned, rationalised, and calculated by orderly and progressive minds, there is also a need to attend to the regulation of death. That is to say, the logics for power and violence don't cease in the absence of bodies. On the contrary, again it is in the presence of absence that we find their most potent expressions. We only have to look at the situation in Gaza today to appreciate how different claims to disappearance (from the act of abduction that invariably brings back memories of the Holocaust, to the wanton and widespread destruction of Palestinian life, culture, and ecology) have become the most pressing, deeply politicised, intellectually challenging, and emotive of all concerns.

But what does all this mean for individuals? If there is a cruel genius to disappearance it is manifest precisely through the weaponisation of nothingness. The thing about nothing is that it evades proofing. We find it impossible to imagine nothing, and were we to do so for any sustained period of time, madness would surely ensue. As Nietzsche counselled, throwing oneself into the void threatens to produce an abyss of the self. Moreover, in modern times when the only certainty to value, meaning and truth is the body, it is precisely its total absence that evokes the most afflicting terrors. Is there a greater fear than to vanish without a trace? Psychologists have referred to this as *nihilophobia*, which



is the anxiety produced from a fear of nothingness and the abdication of one's human presence.

We know that regimes which disappear bodies provide alibis in the manufacturing of denial. Disappearance doubles the pain and the suffering. It stops the living from living, and it prevents the dead from dying. In this regard, disappearance blankets over the operations of power by governing through invisibility and openly recruits the unknown as it brings about a deprivation of the body, its mourning and justice. There is nothing irrational in fearing this kind of power, especially in secular times. Perhaps then it is no coincidence to see families searching for the disappeared frequently drawing upon spiritual and artistic comforts, for at least it provides a semblance of hope when the world around is crumbling. Yet we do also need to go further back still to ask more intently about what is this *nothing* we speak of? Could it be that nothing truly is the most primordial of all our shared fears? And the weaponisation of this fear – the nothingness that threatens to swallow us at any moment – is far more terrifying than any image of lasting hellish punishment, which Dante Alighieri had us imagine?

IF THERE IS A CRUEL GENIUS TO DISAPPEARANCE IT IS MANIFEST PRECISELY THROUGH THE WEAPONISATION OF NOTHINGNESS.

In our attempts to answer this, what we can say is that if disappearance is the truest expression of both sovereign power and the nihilism of modernity, there is a need to foreground it in our concerns with violence. Only then can we listen more intently to the silence, ask what is being revealed by the absences, rethink what justice could mean in the face of sovereign deniability, and recognise how the disappeared don't just fall through the cracks, but are the shadow cast on the empty ground before Hobbes' Leviathan, and demand more empowerment for the artistic and poetic

sensibility, which having the courage to venture into the void, seeks to return something of the human in the face of its potential annihilation.

In Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects*, Keyser Soze tells how the greatest trick the devil played was convincing the world he never existed. Everardo González sought him out in *la Libertad del diablo* (*The Devil's Freedom*) to show how the doubt, denial, and invisibility are doubled in an act of killing in which perpetrators and victims become mirrors of a void (to echo the title of Chantal Meza's painting) as witnesses are denied their role, but that doesn't stop them from also becoming searchers of invisible forces. We need to bear witness, as Levi insisted, especially when there is nothing to be seen.

Nietzsche once argued that we need art, so we don't die from the truth. If we see that truth as disappearance, then it becomes more of a philosophical and political imperative, for through art we are able to offer a kind of transgressive witnessing to history, ensuring the disappeared are never forgotten, while presenting the deepest questions concerning what it means to be human. For, in the process of confronting the intolerable, we are asked why regimes are still allowed to become prey to the most primal of fears as they attempt to author a perfect crime – which is the obliteration of every trace of a person's existence.