

Michael Marder

# **Pyropolitics**

Fire and the Political

With a foreword by Slavoj Žižek



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לזיכרונם של שרה בת מלכה, רחל בת שרה ומונייה בן יוסף



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## **Foreword**

### *A Hologram of Our Present*

*Slavoj Žižek*

While I cannot follow any of Bach's *Passions* without yawning, I find his solo violin and cello sonatas irresistible. Take the fugues of Bach's three sonatas for solo violin (especially that of N°1), in which the entire polyphonic structure is condensed in one instrumental line, so that, though we "effectively" hear only one violin line, in our imagination we automatically supplement it with other unheard implicit melodic lines and seem to hear the multitude of melodic lines in their interaction. It's a musical hologram at its purest. The actual condensation to one single line is thereby by no means simply suspended: the key element of the artistic effect is that we are all the time aware of how we effectively hear only one line.

The unique achievement of Michael Marder's *Pyropolitics: Fire and the Political* is that it is a book structured like a Bach fugue: the motif of fire serves as a prism, a single motif through which, like superpositions in quantum mechanics, all the antagonisms and threats of our predicament appear in their interconnectedness. Marder is breathtakingly imaginative in composing a list of all the modes and uses of fire, literal and metaphorical, a list that includes political theory, literature, theology, philosophy, biology, up to the analysis of current events like the "incendiary speech" of the New Right populists from Trump to his European counterparts. He is also far from focusing just on the two most obvious cases, namely global warming, which menaces to bring the entire surface of our planet to a boiling point, and the threat of nuclear warfare that could ruin all life on earth. He deals, among

other things, with books and heretics burnt on Inquisition pyres, with self-immolations at protest rallies, with the sun, with phenomena ranging from the massive burning of oil and coal to forest fires in Amazonia and Australia to gigantic volcanic outbursts, from revolutionary sparks which ignite radical social changes to the terrorist bombings of cars and buildings...

The choice of fire as a prism through which to analyze the complex interaction of multiple crises is much more appropriate than the obvious culprit—global capitalism—because it avoids the temptation to “essentialize” economy into the ultimate ground. Fire serves as a kind of filter, which makes transparent the interplay of all our antagonisms and threats. But there is an additional reason for the choice of fire: Marder argues that geo-politics, or the politics of the Earth, has always had an unstable, at once shadowy and blinding, underside—pyro-politics, or the politics of fire, which is increasingly dictating the rules of the game today, and that, as a result, it is necessary to learn to speak its language, to discern its manifestations, and to project where our world ablaze is heading. To do this properly, one should relativize some of our most elementary oppositions, like the one between nature and society.

In a recent text, Marder analyzes the effects of “Lavender,” an AI-based program developed by the Israeli army which has played a central role in the unprecedented bombing of Palestinians. Such digitalized destructiveness also produces as its outcome something which cannot be simply conceived in the old terms of “mutilated corpses” and “ruins”; rather, it is a specifically pyro-political event:

“Gaza is rapidly transformed into a dump, where high-rise buildings and human bodies, ecosystems (including the fragile riverine one, cutting between the north from the south

of the Strip) and orchards are mutilated beyond recognition and reduced to organic-inorganic rubble. A solidarity with dumpified lives, places and worlds requires something other than compassion, so what could that be? 'I am biomass' is a speech act that identifies with a vanishing life, with life's vanishing into dumped massiveness. The affirmation says: I am decimated being and stymied becoming, yet not exactly nothing. Dumped, I resist the dump with the surreal power of nothing. It is quite a stretch of the imagination to think that one can easily identify with the victims of genocide in Palestine. But what if Gaza were a condensed and particularly blunt version of a planetary tendency, as neoliberal new-speak with regard to 'compassionate genocide' leads us to believe? If so, then the biomassification of life, which proceeds at an uneven pace elsewhere, is accelerated in Gaza at the cutting edge of the most recent technologies of devastation. Rather than compassion, then, what is required is the solidarity of the dumped, who dare assert, 'We are biomass.'<sup>1</sup>

The "biomassification of life" is what a contemporary criminal use of fire does to us, albeit unevenly in different regions of the world. But Marder goes much further in undermining ordinary oppositions: in his overview of the existing literature on the modes of cognition, which do not involve any conscious self-awareness, not even the one that is sometimes attributed to highly developed animals, he convincingly argues that "plants are *res cogitantes extendentes*": "plants are constantly extending their cognition through the active extension of their bodies, and, with it, their functional cognitive apparatuses. And beyond that, plants also actively extend their cognitive process to the environment they are constantly engaged with and which houses a wide array of their biochemical substances."<sup>2</sup> Such an anti-Cartesian approach (rejecting the ontological distinction between *res*

*cogitans* and *res extensa*) has nothing whatsoever to do with any New Age vitalist obscurantism: it remains firmly in the space of scientific materialism. And it bears on plants that relate to solar fire otherwise than today's pyro-politics would allow.

There is a book comparable to Marder's, namely Peter Sloterdijk's *Prometheus's Remorse*<sup>3</sup> which traces a line from the mythic beginning—Prometheus giving fire to humans—to the present threat of humanity's self-destruction through different forms of an all-encompassing fire (global warming, nuclear war...). I see the advantage of Marder's approach over Sloterdijk's precisely in what may appear as its weakness. While Sloterdijk follows a single straight line from the human use of fire to the entire earth caught in fire, Marder's book appears as a mess of examples—but this mess is our reality today, and one that contains fugal variations on the theme of fire that by far exceeds instrumental attitudes and their uncontrollable consequences.

Our predicament could be called "a six-crises problem": ecological crisis, economic imbalances, wars, chaotic migrations, the threat of AI, disintegration of society. Although the underlying cause of these crises is the dynamic of global capitalism, their interaction leads to chaos and unpredictability. Do these crises strengthen each other or does their interaction offer some hope—say, a hope that the ecological crisis will compel us to move beyond capitalism and war to a social order of global solidarity? Even more provocatively, we know that wars condition new scientific discoveries and that technological inventions propagate—so what if, after a new war, these inventions would help humanity to deal with the ecological crisis? For all those who want to orient themselves in this mess without falling prey to simplistic answers, Marder's book is an obligatory reading.

## Preface

### *Pyropolitics Reborn*

This tome is reborn from the ashes of the previous two editions of *Pyropolitics* (RLI, 2015, 2020) a little like a phoenix that has assumed the shape of a book. Truth be told, since I had first started my research into the immense theme of fire in the early 2010s, I have never quite abandoned it. In the interim period, other works of mine on this theme have appeared. In *Energy Dreams* (Columbia UP, 2017) I contemplated not alternative sources of energy but an alternative concept of energy, which would not require the burning of all that is in the unquenchable search for unlimited potentiality. In a much more pessimistic *Dump Philosophy* (Bloomsbury, 2020), I considered, among other things, the dump-term *biomass*, which, in addition to the massification of life and the enlivening of mass, designates all organic materials (whether living or dead, organismic or residual) that are suitable for combustion as energy sources. In *The Phoenix Complex* (MITP, 2023), I examined an entrenched psychological structure, modeled on the widely-known variation on the myth of the phoenix, according to which the acts of burning both “external nature” and ourselves are instigated by a deadly hope and even a certainty that the lives lost in the ashes would come back, finite existence being infinitely recoverable and reproducible. The current return to *Pyropolitics* happens via these and other detours and meanderings in the labyrinthine theme (or non-theme) of fire.

But it is not just the book that is reborn in this instance; pyropolitics itself has made a startling comeback ever since my initial forays into it ten years prior. Already at the time of preparing the book’s second edition, it was clear that both political changes and the exacerbations of already existing

tendencies had speeded up, even compared to the first decade of the new century. So, in 2020 I asked: "Who could have imagined still in 2015 the rapid rise of the populist right all over the world, from Brazil to the UK, from the US to Italy?" And I noted that "'far' right is no longer far; it is all too near, as it forms governments and coalitions across the political spectrum. Relying on the mechanism of collective incitement and excitement, fanning the flames of hatred toward outsiders and other 'others' while at the same time reigniting nationalist pride, these regimes have resorted to the arsenal of revolutionary pyropolitics. Their rapid and widespread ascent gives us a clear indication of how the world has burnt more intensively and more extensively over these last five years." Now, with far right on the rise also in France and Germany, to mention only the European configuration, the return of a *certain* pyropolitical intensity from the feigned technocratic coldness of the recent past is undeniable.

And then there is the return of open warfare to European soil, spearheaded by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Barefaced imperialism and rabid nationalism are combined in this pyropolitical explosion, which still covers itself, as with a fig leaf, with the discourses and images of a technocratic and neoliberal worldview. The outcome are the blatant contradictions in Putin's explanations for the invasion of the neighboring country: Russia having the courage to assert its sovereignty (in the old-fashioned way, by declaring war) and Russia having no other choice but to invade, given the pressures and threats posed by the encroaching NATO. A similar, if also drastically different, reliance on neoliberal newspeak in the bombings of Gaza by the Israeli military is evident in leaflets airdropped on the Strip's population, encouraged to proceed to evacuation routes "for your own safety," when, in fact, the officially designated safe

zones are also bombed. It is in these incongruences that the still incomplete emancipation of pyropolitics from technocracy announces itself, in the movement of the tectonic plates of geopolitics caused by pyropolitical activity.

Harkening back to the beginning of the decade, Brexit and revamped US isolationism under Trump testify to the lightning-fast disintegration of synthetic political unities and processes (globalization, Anglo-Saxon postcolonial hegemony, European integration...) with pyropolitical incitement-excitement for a catalyst. The response of the global left to these watershed events has been inadequate, to say the least, in part because the left has disclaimed its own revolutionary pyropolitical tradition. In the vacuum left by the left, environmental movements have gained momentum, albeit with a distinct set of pyropolitical catalysts. Instead of incitement, they are nourished by indignation with the present state of the world and by the apprehension that a liveable future, too, is being stolen from us; instead of excitement, there is a feeling that it is simply impossible to act otherwise – or not to act at all – in light of ecological calamity.

At its dynamic edges, the global political scene is divided between, on the one hand, parochial populist regimes that despite their slogan “Me first!” form a right-wing International and that encourage unbridled deforestation, use of natural resources, and reliance on the most polluting methods of energy production, and, on the other hand, a loose but sizeable alliance of young people and others concerned with the severity of the ecological crisis. This polarity itself is far from new. Nearly one hundred years ago, the two movements (the nationalist and the environmentalist) were united under the aegis of the official regime in Nazi Germany. Contemporary populist nationalism is at the antipodes of ecological concerns, but the political affect shared across the

dividing lines is the same—fear, whether of otherness or of extinction, of national differences dissolving in the hodgepodge of globalisation or of the conditions that make life possible being fatefully undermined.

Given this tacit unity of opposites, it stands to reason that the environmental movement does not forfeit, but merely transforms the pyropolitical incitement-excitement model, which is so evident in the rise of the new right. What serves as a call to action is the actual burning of the world in the mass combustion of fossil fuels and in the devastating bushfires and forest fires in Australia and in what remains of the Amazon, in Indonesia and California, Siberia and Iberia. It is this burning of past and present plant life that comes to consciousness and, in doing so, spurs protests, strikes, and other kinds of political organising. With vegetal matter, the earth and the sky are set on fire and filled with smoke, but so, also, is the consciousness licked by and engulfed in the flames of devastation. Fire alters that within which it rages; one cannot fit it into an objective and detached representation, to which one would remain cold and indifferent, least of all when what is burning in the swathes of forest and fossils aflame is time itself. The analogue of excitement, then, would be the feeling that you are burning together with and in the world—that your future is going up in smoke with it.

But what exactly is this world that is now burning up or burning out, without the chance of a phoenix-like rebirth? It is made of institutions (states, international organizations such as NATO, big corporations, and so forth) and discourses, forests and fields (cultivated so as to be converted into calories or construction materials, into biodiesels or paper), the earth and the sky (into which the unearthed and incinerated fossils are dumped), people's minds and hearts (on fire with indignation, anger directed against foreigners, or

the desire for justice) ... That is to say: the world aflame is as much outer as it is inner, physical and psychic, human and other-than-human, pertaining as much to nature as to culture. If the integration of the world's fractal dimensions in the long process of capitalist globalization (which began already more than half a millennium ago with the first colonial ventures across the Atlantic) has been swiftly supplanted by its seemingly total disintegration, that is because the deconstruction of opposites and, especially, of binary relations has never operated by "blurring boundaries," as fashionable theory has it, but by letting them be consumed by fire, in which they melted down. Fire itself carries out the ultimate act of deconstruction, conditioning and consuming both sides of the integration/disintegration polarity.



## **Kindling**

### *The World on Fire*

February 11, 2012. Tenzin Choedon, an eighteen-year-old Buddhist nun from the Ngaba region in the Sichuan Province of China, torched herself, while calling for the return of the Dalai Lama from exile and demanding political freedom for Tibet. A few months later, on July 14 of the same year, Moshe Silman, an Israeli trying to make ends meet on a meagre state disability program and about to be evicted from his apartment, set himself on fire during a social justice demonstration in Tel Aviv. February 20, 2013. Varna, Bulgaria. Plamen Goranov self-immolated as a part of anti-government protests that swept the country and eventually led to the resignation of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. April 14, 2018. David Buckel, a prominent New York City environmental and LGBT+ rights advocate died in Prospect Park by self-immolation, meant to draw public attention to the disastrous consequences of continued reliance on fossil fuels. September 9, 2019. Sahar Khodayari burnt herself to death as she protested the impending six months in jail sentence for having tried to enter a stadium in order to watch a soccer game as a woman in Iran. February 25, 2024. Aaron Bushnell, a twenty-five-year-old American serviceman self-immolated in front of the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC, while shouting “Free Palestine!” in the midst of Israel’s military assault of the Gaza Strip.

Fire, to which the six activists among countless others before and after them have delivered themselves, gave them a voice but spirited away their bodies: *la voix sans le phénomène*. It made visible the otherwise veiled oppression, injustice, and violence by instituting another regime of

visibility, abysmal and unsustainable. Did this voice (the ideal medium of expression and self-expression) gain more power, as it resonated in international news outlets, in exchange for life itself? An impossible political phenomenology and an unfathomable economy of violence, to wit...

Momentarily shedding light on human suffering, fire speeded up and completed the work of destroying the abject victims of political, social, economic, and environmental brutality, driven beyond the threshold of despair. (Was this *our* lightning, the fleeting moment of truth, which Martin Heidegger had extracted from ancient Greece *via* the poetry of Hölderlin?<sup>4</sup> How many such “lightnings” are still bound to happen?) Rather than escape from the veritable furnace that fuels the growth of financial capital or the melting pot of a unified nation-state, as the case may be, the secular and religious martyrs who set themselves ablaze mediated the true consequences of these merciless bonfires by throwing themselves there. In a brief and terrifying flash, the consequences of oppression became a public spectacle. What kind of a spectacle? Sublime? One, where the agents of self-immolation took phenomenality, the possibility of seeing and making sense, into their own hands, showing the rest of us the contours of an unjust world lit by black light and suffocating in the intolerable heat of suffering?

Perhaps, we’ve already had a premonition of this obscure phenomenology all along, and the acts of Tenzin, Moshe, Plamen, David, Sahar, and Aaron give it the most brazen form, which can strike as obscene only those of us who have the luxury of caring about and protecting our sensibilities. The world around us is disintegrating at such a vertiginous speed that any descriptions of its physical, social, economic, or political makeup yield but a series of nostalgic snapshots, similar to the black-and-white photographs of the

yesteryear capturing the already outdated structures and processes. But—here is the twist—it is also building itself up through this disintegration. Neither the event nor the scale of the world’s crumbling is new: in the nineteenth century, Marx and Engels linked it to the expansion of the capitalist model that caused all that was solid to melt into air. What is unique today is *how* world-destruction, which encompasses a globalising world-creation or world-integration and fierce ultranationalist or frankly neo-fascist resistance to these processes, is accomplished. Instead of evaporating into thin air, things are consumed by fire. For over a hundred years now, since the start of World War I in 1914, the world in its entirety has been burning. Does it, in this flaming up, come into its own, as “world”? Does it finally reveal its fragility and finitude, its material precarity made obvious in a piece of wood (the Aristotelian prototype of matter, *hylē*) about to be reduced to a pile of cinders and ashes?

When a physicist conceptualises matter as accumulated and temporarily held-back energy; when we quantify our diets in terms of caloric intake and measure fitness by calories burnt; when the quest for alternative sources of energy leads governments seriously to consider the prospect of burning *anything* whatsoever, to accelerate deforestation, and to spread plant monocultures for the sole purpose of transforming them into biofuels: when all this takes place, then fire comes to dominate our sense of reality. Life itself is an internal conflagration, a great fire in which all living beings are so many sparks, igniting other similar sparks in reproducing themselves. We would not swerve far from the ancient Greek take on the life-giving power of heat and its revival in nineteenth-century German thought (notably, that of Novalis) in making this assertion. But, while for the Greeks, the creative potential of fire had to do with its measured, controlled,

periodic lighting up and extinguishing, for us all sense of measure has been lost as the blaze rages uncontrollably. As the worldwide fire grows, so does the destruction.

From the books and heretics incinerated on the pyres of the Inquisition to self-immolations at protest rallies, from the massive burning of oil to inflammatory speech, from global warming or heating to the melting pot, from the imagery of revolutionary sparks ready to ignite the spirits of the oppressed to car bombings in the Middle East—fire proves to be the *sine qua non* of politics. If, in physics, the dominant paradigm has shifted from the solidity of matter to the volatility of energy (which *is*, itself, matter), then, in the political sphere, there has been an analogous transition from the clarity of *geopolitics*, broadly understood as “the politics of the earth,” to the explosive ambiguity of *pyropolitics*, or “the politics of fire.” It is not that one elemental regime supplanted the other in a linear succession, putting an end to an era of stability tied to the soil and guaranteed by a sedentary, agricultural, telluric lifestyle. Indeed, as I wrote elsewhere, the earth itself presents only an illusion of stability; we would do well to recall that its core is fire as well, and that the earth can give way underneath our feet, for instance, in the situation of a landslide or an earthquake.<sup>5</sup> The fickle force of pyropolitics has erupted at cardinal points in human history, much like the lava spewed by a dormant volcano. The intensification of politics, with its threat or reality of war—be it civil, interstate, or worldwide—has always foregrounded the fiery core of the political, whereas its dulling down has tended to resort to the essentially economic, property-oriented logic of partitioning, exchange, and the demarcation of real and imaginary borders on the earth’s surface. Peace dovetails with the economic interests of unimpeded trade, and, as such, it is yet to be thought in strictly political terms. “Cold” War is an

exception that proves this rule, since the very designation implies the usually “heated” nature of hostilities.

The politics of fire comes to determine the rhythms and the arrhythmias of today’s world, which, with the doggedness that would have driven Heraclitus to the point of madness, is literally burning itself up. Our conceptual vocabularies, however, are lagging behind this world-conflagration, geared as they are toward the analyses of geopolitics, or, at best, of maritime politics. The time has come to update the political lexicon so as to account for the elements that do not fit into the simple opposition of land and sea.

The word *pyropolitics* has no established genealogical line in political philosophy. It is a bastard term. In the early years of the twentieth century, French professor of common law, Ernest Roguin, used it derisively to refer to political anarchism with its penchant for the use of dynamite and lethal explosions to sow the seeds of chaos.<sup>6</sup> As we survey the term’s episodic history, we may also appreciate the delicious irony of this sentence in a 1925 *Time Magazine* article, “Italy: Financial Improvement”: “If Fascism has frequently indulged in pyropolitics to its moral discredit, it has at least vindicated itself on the practical side of its policies.”<sup>7</sup> On this view, pyropolitics, comparable to pyrotechnics, is just for show; what matters the most, the essential issue, is the pragmatics of economic improvement, even if it is brought about by fascism... More recently, Hilary Hinds and Jackie Stacie dubbed the representations of feminists as bra-burners “pyro-political.”<sup>8</sup> And then there is Nigel Clark’s praise of fire as “our pre-eminent means of modifying the environment, of opening up pathways, of rendering the earth more fruitful, more homely, less hazardous.”<sup>9</sup> Bio-politics, for Clark, is “first and foremost a ‘pyropolitics’, centred on the regulation, manipulation, and enhancement of fire,”<sup>10</sup> as

though this deliberate use, associated with human technology in general, were assured and its consequences predictable. The exact opposite is the case: the apparently controlled deployment of fire, whether in “clearing” forested areas for pasture or in burning (fossilized or non-fossilized) organic matter to produce energy, leads to an uncontrollable global environmental disaster.

The examples are a handful, and for good reasons. If politics is a matter of the *polis* (originally, the Greek city-state and, now, more broadly, a political community), then it can only take place on earth where humans dwell, miscellaneous dreams of celestial or heavenly cities notwithstanding. As a physical support for the *polis*, the earth is preeminent, which is why we are under the illusion that all politics is ineluctably a geo-politics. Heedless to Immanuel Kant’s warnings, we conflate the state with the territory it occupies. But, besides Kantian criticisms, doesn’t this common-sense idea miss the forest for the trees? Does it not rob politics of what is most unique in it, of what is irreducible to the economic sphere in the Greek determination of *oikonomia* as the “law of a dwelling,” or, less literally, “household management”? What if the political, on the contrary, disturbs every dwelling united around a carefully controlled fire of the hearth, unsettles everything and everyone it touches, debunks the myth of stability, and gives the lie to the much-vaunted permanence of the status quo?

Expressing this disturbance, *Pyropolitics* aims to create a semantico-discursive field that would draw toward itself, magnet-like, the instances when fires, flames, sparks, immolations, incinerations, and burning have made their appearance in political theories and practices. This field will be, as much as possible, free of hasty judgments of pyropolitical phenomena as “good” or “bad,” “invigorating” or

“dangerous,” “progressive” or “dictatorial.” Pyropolitics, along with the fire it feeds upon, precedes all binary oppositions, including the institution and the disruption of an order. These judgments and these oppositions crop up once pyropolitics is already in place, enabling the ongoing contestation of the meaning of human engagement with fire as benevolent, malevolent, or neutral. The tall task before us is to grasp the pyropolitical not as a conjunction of phenomena to be analysed but as a set of indicators pointing to what makes political phenomena visible in the first place.

That the regimes of political visibility may change is no news to us.<sup>11</sup> What is less obvious is that the medium of light is only half the story. It is not by chance that “the other half” of fire—heat—is forgotten; modernity has tended to divide the flame into two and to ignore its less than convenient, abstruse dimension. Unless intentionality (taken in its broadest sense as attraction to its object) connotes the warmth of love, phenomenology, both in its classical and in its more political variations, remains a faithful inheritor of the Enlightenment tradition, where the light of reason was severed from the ardour of *polemos* or the warmth of the good, with which it was interlaced in Antiquity. Even medieval *lumen naturale*, coupled with the supernatural *lumen gratiae* of divine revelation, was a far cry from its sterile and cold Enlightenment analogue.

The philosophy of Carl Schmitt, usually read as anathema to Enlightenment rationality, is one of the few approaches to the political that takes pyropolitics seriously. Although Schmitt himself does not extol the risk, danger, and instability of this “elemental” political regime, he nonetheless reluctantly assents to its unavoidability and its influence in the contemporary world. From the scant mentions of fire in his works, we may reconstruct the overall parameters of

pyropolitics, as much as the centrality of mytho-poietic figures in the thinking of the political. Geo-politics, expressed in the *nomos* of the Earth, and pyro-politics, describing a certain experience of *anomie*, stand for the two contrasting poles, between which political theory and practice oscillate. Sovereignty, defined by Schmitt as the decision on the exception and traditionally associated with the fire of glory, is, then, the irruption of pyropolitical phenomena into the legalistic framework of geo-politics. The hubris of modernity, in turn, has to do with the attempt to dissolve sovereignty and political risk in the more or less deft management of public and foreign policy by demagogues and technocrats.

Modernity's predominant self-image, already made evident in its essentially anti-political stance (which might be the most cunning expression of the political), is that of the dispassionate light of reason refracted through the prism of critique. The modern fantasy of "light without heat" construes its exact opposite — "heat without light" — as the embodiment of evil. In the political sphere, terrorism falls into this last category, along with everything that appears senseless, absurd, or gratuitous from the perspective of pragmatic rationality. And yet, the mainspring of political evil is not the unintelligible, but the very split between the two aspects of fire: the light shining on the surface, on the one hand, and the heat penetrating into the depths of things, on the other. The deficient politics of pure light is responsible for the persistent and growing problem of "motivational deficit" in contemporary democracies unable to cope with the logic of terrorism that is driven by what we might call "motivational surplus." Nor is the bifurcation of heat and light limited to the political sphere alone. When the complex unity of fire is lost, we witness the proliferation of the staple oppositions of modernity — the bifurcations between the cold albeit transparent public sphere

and the warm but obscure private realm; calculative rationality and the ethics of care; the mind and the heart; the masculine and the feminine, and so forth.

Revolutionary outbursts announce the return of heat—the other quality of fire, which, like the repressed in psychic life, cannot be brushed aside once and for all. The Terror, which followed the 1789 French Revolution and the 1917 Russian Revolution, issued from the failure of modern light without heat to deal otherwise than by resorting to the utmost violence with what it construed as the intense and overwhelming heat without light of political energy. Revolutionary fervour restored to the political both its inflammatory rhetoric and the burning of desire in the subjectivity of the revolutionaries. The quick and contagious spread of these fires from the vanguard to the rest of the *body politic* gave the impression of a wild blaze, which had to be hemmed in from all sides and contained, if not altogether extinguished, in the periods of post-revolutionary normalisation. The ruthlessness with which the new regimes consolidated themselves (for instance, in Stalin's "purges") borrowed from fire its unstoppable drive toward pure ideality, achieved at the price of leveling down and destroying all real differences and, indeed, actual human lives. Having secularised the Christian inflammation of the believers' souls with true spirit, revolutions faltered when it came to transferring these technologies of divine fire to the political realities here-below.

Certainly, pyropolitical theology is not limited to revolutions. In the notion of the holocaust (whether applied to the genocide of the Jewish people in World War II, or, more recently, the idea of a "nuclear holocaust"), there is a direct allusion to burnt offerings that, originally, were signs of a total devotion to God. The bond between fire and sacrifice seems to be unbreakable: Tenzin, Moshe, Plamen, David, Sahar, and

Aaron along with other agents of self-immolation, such as the *satis* in India, made it their final act of affirmation. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Russia, collective suicides by fire, sometimes called “the second christening” or “christening by fire,” were common among *starobryadtsy*, who had voluntarily elected martyrdom. Suicide bombers, too, re-appropriate the ancient ritual of a burnt offering, though in that case self-sacrifice is a vehicle for the sacrifice of others to an idea or a cause. Finally, the heedless, utterly irresponsible tendency to dig up and burn all of the world’s oil and natural gas reserves does not merely fuel the world’s economy, which, by now, could have plausibly made the switch to other, more environmentally-friendly founts of energy; rather, it makes of the entire planet a burnt sacrificial offering to the gods of progress.

What brings together sources as diverse as the Indian Vedic tradition, Zoroastrianism, the pre-Socratics, and the philosophies of Hegel and Heidegger is the conviction that fire is the most ideal of material elements; it is this ideality that substantiates its proximity to spirit, while keeping a foothold in the world of matter. Fire is supposed to purge the bodies it consumes of their imperfections, seen as inseparable from their very materiality. The Inquisition was probably the most dreadful mass “purging” of heretics, as well as of their heretical printed doctrines, in the exemplary spectacles of *auto-da-fé*. The practice of burning flags, the leaders’ effigies, texts, or even car tires and rubbish bins at contemporary political protests still clings, likely unbeknownst to its perpetrators, to the idea of purification by fire. The ultimate justification for the existence of matter here is that it is the instrument of spirit: consumed by the flames, matter sustains the burning life of spirit, for which it pays with its own integrity. Once material reality is completely destroyed, fire is reduced to

mere embers and, finally, goes out altogether. Against the limitations imposed by finitude, nationalist pyropolitics deploys the proverbial eternal flame, typically commemorating the sacrifice of soldiers in a war. Its metaphysical hubris shines through in this image of an unextinguishable fire, freed from the constraints of matter.

The ideality of fire has played a distinct role in the formulation of utopias, most notably Campanella's *City of the Sun*, alluding to Plato's *The Republic* and older invocations of *Heliopolis*. The ideological construction of "America" as the shining city upon the hill, most emblematically by President Ronald Regan, has built upon this tradition, as did the self-representation of the Spanish, Portuguese, and British Empires as places, upon which "the sun never sets." In each case, the city and the empire serve as mediators between the light of divinity, freedom, or civilisation, and the rest of the world, which basks in this luminosity already refracted through the empire's privileged political instantiations. If, as psychoanalysis insists, sunrises and sunsets are apt symbols for penile erection and masculine sexual desire, then the ever-luminous polities dream up the state of a permanent excitation, an absolute potency that results from having swallowed up, incorporated, and subjugated the sun. (Hence, also, the styling of France's absolutist monarch Louis XIV as the "Sun King.") To swallow up the sun is, nonetheless, to interiorise not only its blinding light but also its unbearable heat. Heliocentric utopias are self-destructive, to the extent that they strive to contain the blaze of ideality in the material *body politic* of the sovereign, the country, or the empire. That is why, in a *mélange* of utopian metaphors, we might say that the sun is bound to set on the city upon the hill.

Besides fire's destructive potential, it is useful for preparing foodstuffs for consumption, that is to say, for cooking

conceived as a basic cultural mediation of nature. This more constructive, down-to-earth function has a peculiar place in politics. Lenin's famous, though misquoted, remark about a simple cook's ability to run a communist state; Golda Meir's Israeli "Kitchen Cabinet" – still in existence today – which echoed the first ever such group created by the US President Andrew Jackson and referring to the inner circle of government ministers who gathered for informal policy meetings in the prime-minister's kitchen; the American immigration policy, known as the *melting pot* are three illustrations of the transformative and creative power of fire. Traditionally imbricated with the politics of sexual difference, the fire of the hearth, which does not burn whomever comes close to it, is not necessarily more "gentle," even if it displays a greater sensitivity to the materiality it preserves. This transformative fire welds previously distinct elements together and introduces an essentially economic, homely, administrative dimension into the political process.

Fire is embroiled in the theologico-metaphysical paradigm, and so is the explosive vision of politics emanating from it. But what would the politics of ashes look like at the dusk of metaphysics? What remains of light and heat when material existence as a whole is on the verge of being consumed and destroyed, without any hope for an eternal conflagration of spirit sustaining itself? How to make sense of the charred and smouldering remains – the traces of catastrophes found alongside those of hopes and revolutionary desires – littering the horizons of the political today? These are the questions that open the pyropolitical paradigm to another politics and another *ethos*, congruent with postmetaphysical thought.