

Chapter 3

The range of the political:

Decolonisation as a case in point

1 FROM SITUATED THOUGHT TO GLOBAL CONSEQUENCES

Levinas' major concern is then with political events, or the threat thereof, that cause harm to the other. The origins of such events are not the ideas of social scientists or philosophers – neither those of Lévi-Strauss, nor those of Heidegger. It cannot be since – as has been shown from Levinas' reading of Lévy-Bruhl – the *mens* and its ideas are brought forth and depend on a more original *mentality*.¹ Mentality belongs not to the individual but rather to a group, and it predisposes the members, that share the mentality, to certain kinds of action. Typical mentalities judged by Levinas are identity totalisation and indifferent pluralism. It is the text of ethnographers that help to identify those mentalities – not only in “primitives” but also by projection of the studies on the “primitives” on modern societies. But although large-scale political catastrophes result from mentality, rather than from ideas, aspects of mentalities can still be enforced by the cultural influence of ideas. Levinas' accusation against Heidegger is exactly that his philosophy enforces an undesirable mentality. In the same manner intellectual support can be given for other or positive possibilities of mentalities and this is the ambition of Levinas. It is not his thought that initiates or grounds the alternative action, but it identifies and gives intellectual support to an aspect of human “mentality” (Levinas will say a form of intelligibility) that exists before and independently from the philosopher. And it is exactly the work of the phenomenolo-

1 However, it should be borne in mind that this reading of Lévy-Bruhl is dependent on Levinas' reading of Heidegger.

gist to lead us in reflection back (that is, to practice reduction, albeit then in a particular, Levinasian sense) to the constitution of this mentality – as has been indicated in the introductory Chapter. Furthermore, if I have insisted on the fact that for Levinas writing philosophy is already a political intervention (Chapter 1), then this is at the core of his practice: to re-enforce, by affirming and analysing, the ethical aspect of the constitution of human agency, that is, of agency as constituted by its responsibility for a plurality of others, in other words, of political agency.

Levinas spent his philosophical life endeavouring to convince his readers that whatever our mentality might be, it is always already, continuously, and decisively tampered with by the other. This tampering is not in the first place the otherness that consists of a different language, physiognomy, cultural reference, or nationality but rather a tampering by the radical alterity of the ethical imperative coming from the other that has its origin neither in the subject's position within the totalising force of history, nor in the cultural particularity of the subject.

Yet, as already argued, this discourse always has political overtones and political objectives, even when it is explicitly concerned with ontology and alterity. "Political" in this context refers to the relationships between the plurality of people, where these relationships are constituted by different kinds of power and have an influence on the fate of people's existence, in such a manner that could be susceptible to judgement in terms of justice. This circumscription is Levinasian in that it does not concern only the institutions of the State or those that in one way or another strive to impact on the exercise of State power (but certainly does not exclude these either), but concerns already the difficult task of deciding about the priority and nature of action due to all other people, as well as the effective realisation of this reflection in the world. If such is the use of the term "political", it is now important to reflect on the scope of the political: how far does the relevance of Levinas' thought stretch on alterity despite the totalising force of history, and on the non-indifferent ethical meaning in a world of indifferent cultural particularity?

In order to respond to this question, let us return to the two guiding problems of political history as exemplified by the identity violence of Nazism and the indifference reflected in decolonisation. A superficial consideration of the historical manifestation of Nazism already shows that although it is a form of nationalism and as such ideologically attached to a particular soil and blood, the energy of such a nationalism very quickly gives it an international momentum. That the identity violence of Nazism had international and even global consequences hardly needs to be argued. But it is important to insist on the fact that even though this

problem is initially nationally situated, it is an event of international, if not global, dimensions.

Since a lot has been written about Levinas and Nazism, I shall henceforth take it for granted that the ultimate horizon of the criticism of identity violence is global and turn my attention to the question of decolonisation – that we encountered at the beginning of this Part in the guiding citation (page 33, above). It is also important to examine Levinas' position on decolonisation (in as far as it is permissible to construct it from the very few texts on the theme), since one's first impression is that he writes about decolonisation disapprovingly and thus implicitly supports the idea of Europe's cultural superiority. But what does a closer look reveal?

2 DECOLONISATION, COLONISATION: FIGURES OF THE GLOBAL

From our guiding citation, it appears that it is of some importance to Levinas that the historical process of decolonisation be qualified as political. In order to appreciate what the political stakes are for him in decolonisation, we have to examine his declarations concerning decolonisation and colonisation – all of which are from his later philosophy.

In his only other usage of the term “decolonisation”,² Levinas criticises the non-specified proponents of a non-specified anti-colonial discourse in the following terms

“[o]ne reasons as if the equivalence of cultures and the discovery of their multiplicity [*foisonnement*] and recognition of their riches were not themselves the effects of an orientation and an unambiguous sense in which humanity stands. One reasons as if the multiplicity [*multiplicité*] of cultures had always been rooted in the era of decolonization, as if misunderstanding, war, and conquest did not flow just as naturally from the proximity of multiple expressions of Being, the numerous assemblages or arrangements it takes in various civilizations. One reasons as if peaceful coexistence did not suppose that an orientation is traced in Being, endowing it with a unique sense [*sens unique*].”³

The triple parallel helps us to equate or at least to associate decolonisation with the idea of the equivalence of cultures and their peaceful coexistence. But all three of these elements are suggested by Levinas to be secondary to and dependent on “an unambiguous sense”, “an orientation that endows a

2 The other two being the guiding citation and the remark about Lévi-Strauss in EL (both cited above).

3 HO 23 / HH 39, translation modified.

unique sense” and it is only since this is now forgotten in the anti-colonial discourse, that one reasons as if the multiplicity of cultures always co-existed in this peaceful manner associated with, or believed to be possible in, the contemporary era of decolonisation. Over against this opinion, Levinas implicitly claims an original plurality of human cultures, as well as a non-peaceful existence between them; cultural plurality (he implicitly claims) is naturally coordinated by incomprehension, war and conquest. Levinas’ point – which is also the point of his later philosophy – is that the recognition of cultural diversity in the contemporary practice and discursive support for decolonisation, betrays an implicit acceptance of a non-cultural specific orientation to the plurality of cultural expressions.

Decolonisation thus stands for two things in Levinas’ mind: (1) the historical fact of a plurality of cultures, without common denominator and (2) a discourse in which recognition is given to the respective values of each of these. Of course, most often this discourse is “atheistic”, i.e., conducted in oblivion of the unique and one-directional meaning (*sens unique*). The object of his criticism is neither the fact of the plurality of cultures, nor their recognition in the political form of decolonisation, but that which, to his mind, would be a naïve forgetfulness of that which makes the claim to the possibility of peaceful coexistence between cultures possible. A celebration of diversity without consideration for an orientation to that diversity amounts to a provocation of incomprehension, war and conquest. This seems to me to be Levinas’ opinion, on all levels of human interaction. However, when one speaks of “decolonisation” it is the relation between constellations of States that is evoked. I allow myself to refer to this level or reach of application of Levinas’ conviction as the *global*.

It would be possible to expand our understanding of what Levinas has in mind with the political event of decolonisation by an examination of his use of the semantic field of colonisation, coloniser, colony, etc. Although these words are more frequently used in his work than decolonisation, this doesn’t amount to a full exploration of the colonial phenomenon. My intention is not to force his remarks on this theme to form a system, but to throw light on the current subject by reference to the *four* most important of these remarks. From the outset it should be mentioned that the words colony, coloniser, etc., are completely absent from Levinas’ earlier philosophy, in fact, they appear for the first time in the 1964 essay “Signification and sense”, that later formed the first chapter of *Humanism of the other* and from which the notion of decolonisation has been cited twice. In each of the cases that will be examined now, something will be added to our understanding of Levinas’ idea

of colonisation, but something will also be revealed about the manner in which he opposes a facile discourse of decolonisation and the rehabilitation of a universal reference for judgement.

Referring to Merleau-Ponty's conviction that, when a universal point of judgement of cultures or a common grammar is abandoned, universality can only be lateral, Levinas explains:

“Such a conception of universality translates the radical opposition, characteristic of our times, against cultural expansion by colonization. Culture and colonization do not go together [*se séparaient foncièrement*].”⁴

And thus expands on his impression of anti- or decolonising discourse: the essence of his concern is not decolonisation as such, but the abandonment of the idea of a universal judgement. This becomes even clearer when Levinas reconstructs the tradition of Western thought, from Plato to Léon Brunschwig, as characterised by the attempt of “purifying thought of cultural alluviums and language particularisms” and by situating its own dignity in “liberating the truth from its cultural presuppositions”.⁵ But since in this tradition there lurks the danger of committing violence and exploiting people in the name of such a liberation, philosophy had to unmask such hypocrisy and this had the effect of inverting the tendency of the venerable tradition: philosophy had to

“show that significations arising on the horizon of cultures, and even the excellence of Western culture, are culturally and historically conditioned. So philosophy had to join up with contemporary anthropology [*ethnologie*]. Behold Platonism defeated!”⁶

It is of crucial importance to note that Levinas *shares* the criticism of violence associated with the (hypocritical) use of an ideology of emancipation that is nothing other than exploitation and violence in the name of universally valid values.⁷ In our later discussions of Levinas' response to

4 HO 37 / HH 59.

5 HO 37 / HH 59

6 HO 37 / HH 59. It is when Levinas subsequently (in HO 37 / HH 59) continued his line of thought by attributing this victory over politico-cultural Platonism to the generosity of Western thought, that he exposes himself to the ethno-centrist criticism developed by Bernasconi (see discussion in Chapter 6, § 1).

7 Despite appearances then, Levinas does not at all lament the decline of Europe as a global power, of “the Platonic privilege, until then uncontested, of a continent which believes it has the right to colonize the world” (DF 292 / DL 407). Rather, he seems to condemn this “entitlement to colonise” in terms that show some affinity with that of Sartre when the latter described colonialism as a *system* (see “Le colonialisme est un système” [1956], in *Situations V. Colonialisme et néo-colonialisme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964, pp. 25–48). According to Sartre, colonialism is a unificatory system in that the significant part of the advantage of the inter-

the down-side of the loss of a point of judgement of the plurality of cultures, we shall see that Merleau-Ponty will serve as an important aid to understand the manner in which “philosophy joined up with contemporary ethnology” (at least in *Humanism of the other*). Also if this alliance between philosophy and ethnology amounts to a victory over Platonism, Levinas counters by formulating the objective of his own philosophical project as a support for a kind of Platonism.⁸

In “Signature” Levinas links this Platonism and its possible exploitative abuse explicitly with Europe and the history of colonisation:

“In spite of his intellectualism and his conviction about the excellence of the West, Husserl has thus brought into question the Platonic privilege, until then uncontested, of a continent which believes it has the right to colonize the world.”⁹

Here again something is said about the overcoming of this assumed privilege: “Husserl sought to contest that the place of Truth is in Representation.”¹⁰ Levinas’ own rehabilitation of Platonism will thus be one that passes through that which is learned from Husserl, namely, that what is decisive is not on the level of explicit formulations or statements

action between the colonising State and the colonised regions is concentrated in the colonising country (p. 35). From this simple principle the form of existence and the mentality of both the colonisers and the colonised are shaped (p. 40, 43), since, as Sartre explains: “the colonist is created just as much as the native is: he is created by his function and by his interests” (p. 43). Levinas would have reformulated this such that the history of colonial power imposes its totalising and identity-creating force on those that participate in it.

- 8 When we work through my criticism of Levinas’ project later on, I shall point out the irony in Levinas’ figurative usage of the term “coloniser” in his explanation of Platonism: “the world of significations precedes the language and culture that express it; it is *indifferent* to the system of signs that can be invented to make this world present to thought. Consequently, it *dominates* historical cultures. [...] there would exist a culture that consists of *depreciating* purely historical cultures and in a certain way *colonizing* the world” (HO 19 / HH 31, my italics). My criticism will consist, amongst others, of showing how the letter of this text turns against the spirit of the text. But before doing so, it could be noted that one finds the same set of ideas, affirmed in another way, in the notes that Levinas took for writing “Signification and sense” (Chapter 1 of HO) and that are now available under the title “Sens et signification” in the section “Notes philosophiques diverses” in the newly published *Oeuvres complètes* (volume 1). The ninth point apparently establishes an equivalence or relation of mutual implication between four terms: “9° Anti-Platonism. Disorientation. Equivalence. Decolonisation.” (CdC 263).

9 DF 292 / DL 407.

10 DF 292 / DL 406.

(i.e., representations) of truth, but on the level of pre-representational “mentality” or intelligibility.¹¹

In a discussion of the “bad consciousness and conscience” (*mauvaise conscience*) of Europe in “Peace and proximity”, Levinas takes up the question of the arrogance of European reason. The latter would have promised the world peace and freedom as the consequence of its pursuit and expansion of universal reason, but it is difficult to believe in this promise after

“its millennia of fratricidal struggles, political or bloody, of imperialism, scorn and exploitation of the human being, down to our century of world wars, the genocides of the Holocaust and terrorism; unemployment and continual desperate poverty of the Third World; ruthless doctrines and cruelty of fascism and national socialism, right down to the supreme paradox of the defence of man and his rights being perverted into Stalinism.”¹²

It is not clear if Levinas intends to place the responsibility for the terrorism and genocides (of the twentieth century), for instance, also on Europe, or if he means that Europe merely failed to prevent these catastrophes. However, what is sure is that for Levinas these events decisively question the centrality of Europe and its culture in human history. This questioning of a supposed European centrality is not simply referred to by Levinas, but he evidently subscribes to it, at least in as far as it strikes at the arrogance of European reason (as he portrayed it). Hence the understanding he shows for “the affirmation and championing of specific cultures in all corners of the globe”.¹³ But in accordance with Levinas’ philosophical aim of salvaging the possibility of judgement of cultures, he points out the irony that the equality of all cultures is exactly claimed in the name of universalism that typifies the age-old European strategy for the encounter with the other. But now – and we shall later see how Levinas justifies this speculation – this universalism is not the child of reason, but “exaltation of a logic *other* than that of Aristotle, of a thought other than civilized”.¹⁴ What could the origin of such a different questioning be? It could be situated in “remorse fed by the memory of colonial wars and the long oppression of those once called savages, a long indifference to the sadness of a whole world”.¹⁵ This regret would then be an

11 It is also what Levinas claims in *Aterity and transcendence* to have learned from Lévy-Bruhl: his reflections on representation in the “mentalité primitive” (amongst others) encouraged Levinas “to reflect on thought freed of all representation [*pensée libérée de la pure représentation*].” (A&T 129 / AT 137).

12 A&T 132 / AT 139.

13 A&T 132–133 / AT 140.

14 AT 140.

15 A&T 133 / AT 140.

element of European culture by which that very culture's supposed centrality is disputed on the basis of the denunciations of its violence. It should be clear from this context in which the word "colonial" is used, that it serves as a metonymy for the whole series of violent consequences of what Levinas considers to be the arrogance of a particular form of European reason. As could be derived from the list of catastrophes evoked by Levinas, his issue is with the consequences of political organisation of societies and the relations between groups of human beings, from the local to the international and the global. We learn already from the fact that Levinas is interested in the suffering of the people concerned (much more than in the inherent value of their respective cultures), what his point of entry will be for the rehabilitation of an ethical Platonism: the fragility and mortality of people – wherever they may be. It is only in the name of the meaning of people's suffering that the violent effects of a dominating culture (and for the same price, the violent plurality of cultures) may be contested and re-directed.

It is of importance to note that this perspective is also echoed by a reflection on colonisation in one of Levinas' Talmudic readings. In *Quatre lectures talmudiques* Levinas explains that the ancient Israelites did not take possession of the Promised Land like a territory that is colonised, but took charge of it in order to construct a just society on it. Having stated this principle, Levinas then asks if that is not the principle by which all conquerors and colonialists justified their actions (just as we have seen him ask in the texts cited from *Humanism of the other*¹⁶). His answer is that for those who take possession of a territory under the authority of the Torah, a different orientation is valid:

"to accept the Torah is to accept the norms of a universal justice. The first teaching of Judaism is the following: a moral teaching exists and certain things are more just than others. A society in which man is not exploited, a society in which men are equal [...] is the very contestation of moral relativism. What we call the Torah provides norms for human justice. And it is in the name of some national justice or other that the Israelites lay claim to the land of Israel."¹⁷

Whether one accepts Levinas' argument here or not, what is important for the current argument is to note that he refuses a Jewish nationalism that is anchored in its territory or in ethnicity. Its true anchor, or rather,

16 The fact that the Talmud contains the same teaching as Levinas' philosophy is in my judgement not sufficient proof that he is merely translating Jewish convictions into Greek. The influence is probably stronger in the inverse direction: from philosophical ideas to his interpretation of the Talmudic text. Besides, his philosophical convictions are strong enough to stand (or fall) on their own.

17 NTR 66 / QLT 141–142.

its true orientation that points beyond all relativism is universal justice, equality of people¹⁸ and the refusal of exploitation of people. Thinking of the previous discussion on atheism and monotheism, it should strike the reader as interesting that the essence of Judaism has, according to Levinas in this passage, nothing to do with a conviction concerning the reality of a transcendent entity called God. However, God is not absent here, since this transcendent orientation, this single imperative, is God.¹⁹

It should be abundantly clear from this discussion of one passage on decolonisation and four on colonisation in Levinas, that in each case the focal point is the refusal of a cultural arrogance of whatever nation or group that imposes itself by whatever means as superior to others and thus as measure for the validity or value of others. But at the same time, Levinas refuses to abandon cultural plurality to an indifference in which no judgement would be possible. In this double concern – for which the issue of colonisation and decolonisation serves as excellent introduction – Levinas’ care about the relation between the self and the other is extended to the question concerning the relation between large groups of people – States or cultural groups. It is impossible to miss that this is a *geopolitical perspective on Levinas’ most precious concerns*.²⁰ It is equally impossible to deny that what is at stake for Levinas in

18 The intention of the word “homme” is probably to refer to all human beings.

19 In the name of this God, certain tendencies in the contemporary State of Israel may be critically exposed – in a context where Levinas speaks of the undermining of the ideals of Judaism in the young State of Israel: “As for Israel, by dint of insisting on its significance as a State, it has been entirely reduced to political categories. But its builders found themselves abruptly on the side of the colonialists. Israel’s independence was called imperialism, the oppression of native peoples, racism.” (DF 222 / DL 311). From the context it seems most probable that Levinas refers here to criticism from the inside.

20 Robert Bernasconi has argued, albeit with a different strategy, for the mutual relevance of globalisation and Levinas’ ethics in “Globalisierung und Hunger” (in *Im Angesicht der Anderen. Levinas’ Philosophie des Politischen*. Pascal Delhom and Alfred Hirsch (eds.). Zürich and Berlin: Diaphanes, 2005, pp. 115–129) and his essay could certainly be considered as support for the point I am advocating here. I do differ from him when he states that globalisation is to be understood as the overcoming of spatially structured limitations and that it is therefore necessarily in conflict with what is human (p. 122). It cannot be contested that action is concentrated in the locality of the acting body, but it is not correct to consider the overcoming of this natural limitation as an infringement on our humanity. What is human is determined by, amongst others, the technology of a certain era – this has been the case ever since the dawn of humanity. The enhanced technical capacities of our era augment our capacity to do harm and good on a previously unimagined scale. Yet, I do agree that the growth in power, sophistication and complexity of technical processes exposes the process of decision making to greater uncertainty and risk. That this uncertainty has in our era the overwhelming tendency to do harm, is unfortunately true.

each of these cases is not the vibrancy or equality of cultures, not even the interaction between a subject and a cultural other, but the suffering of countless others with whom the ethical subject would never be in direct contact. The bad conscience – a key term in Levinas’ later philosophy for evoking the proximity of the other to the self – is clearly shown to emerge also from the memory or knowledge of wars, oppression and “a long indifference to the sadness of a whole world.” (cited above). That this immediately also raises the question concerning the relevance for Levinas’ philosophy of ethnicity of the means by which people are oppressed, or the means by which one could gain knowledge of such oppression and the means by which one could hope to oppose such oppression, will be thematised later, for it will first have to be argued that such considerations concerning means are not secondary to reflection on the meaning of the ethical. But let it for now at least be suggested that, if we accept Levinas’ underdeveloped idea about the global reach of the ethical, and thus of responsibility, it would in one form or another naturally have to lead to reflection concerning the means that mediate distant people, in other words the technical system of the world as we have it today.

3 FOR A GLOBALISED WORLD

Once this international and global dimension of the problems with which Levinas aspires to engage has been noticed, the insufficiency of a response to them that would only concern the politics of the State becomes evident. By making this claim, it is of course not denied that the reflection provided by Levinas on the liberal State, the State of which the legislation is continually challenged in the name of justice, is an essential part of the reflection on politics. My point is rather that in Levinas’ thinking concerning matters political, most often the politics of the State is taken as its largest horizon and the presentation of the international or global dimension of the political remains underdeveloped. This situation invites his readers to contemplate the inevitable global dimensions of the political from a Levina-

By commenting on Levinas’ response to Kant’s practical philosophy, and in particular the essay on “Perpetual peace” (that is situated in contemporary geopolitical debates concerning the justification of war in the name of human rights), Alfred Hirsch also assumes and demonstrates the capacity and indeed the aptitude of Levinas’ philosophy to be confronted with its global relevance. See Alfred Hirsch, “Vom Menschenrechte zum ewigen Frieden. Grenzgänge zwischen Kant und Levinas”, in *Im Angesicht der Anderen*, *op. cit.* pp. 229–244.

sian perspective and this, by starting from the sparse reflections in his work that lend themselves to such a reflection.

A first way to examine the case for such a global Levinasian view would be to consider the numerous places in which Levinas lists the human catastrophes of his lifetime. Speaking of the century of his lifetime, Levinas summarises:

“This is the century that in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianism of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia.”²¹

And elsewhere,

“[t]he world wars (and local ones), National Socialism, Stalinism (and even de-Stalinization), the camps, the gas chambers, nuclear weapons, terrorism and unemployment – that is a lot for just one generation, even for those who were but onlookers.”²²

From these and similar passages, it should be clear that when Levinas contemplates the catastrophes of his era that they are not simply phenomena that took place in different countries and that they could for that reason be said to constitute an international phenomenon; rather, most of them are international and sometimes global phenomena and deserve to be reflected on in that dimension, since they would be simply unintelligible without this perspective. Furthermore, as pointed out already in Chapter 1, it is remarkable that in these passages where Levinas lists the most spectacular catastrophes of his century, what happens in far away places is of ethical significance for a Levinasian subject of responsibility, even if he/she is not directly affected by such events.

This can be shown to hold also in the rare texts of direct political commentary from the pen of Levinas.²³ He can hardly be more explicit about this than when he comments on the novelty introduced by the scientific and technical development of atom bombs and the threat of sparking nuclear war by the unleashing of unheard of powers of nature in “On the spirit of Geneva” (1956).²⁴ Since the force of nuclear attack involves a human-made force that transcends the power of States that would normally be the ultimate instance of protection of people against the forces unleashed by humans,

21 ENT 97 / EN 107.

22 PN 3 / NP 7.

23 An overview of important themes of political interest in Levinas’ work is given in *De l’éthique à la justice* 135–136.

24 Caygill gives a detailed analysis of this essay in *Levinas and the Political*, *op. cit.* pp. 69–71.

Levinas can summarise: “Politics is replaced by a cosmo-politics that is a physics.”²⁵ The irony with which Levinas exposes the superficiality that international political action can have, takes nothing away from the affirmation of the technically mediatedness and global dimension of this issue. This seems an elementary fact to state, but it means that if Levinas doesn’t want to leave politics to its own devices (as argued for in Chapter 1), he has to aspire to have something to say for such a cosmo-politics. And he does, in fact, open such a discourse by exposing the false start of such a cosmo-politics, namely by being the response to a “physics”, that is, by being nothing more than an attempt to re-arrange the blind forces of nature as remobilised by human effort. Cosmo-politics is in this sense (and in the terms exposed in Chapter 2) an “atheistic” enterprise, to which Levinas’ philosophy could exactly contribute a recall to orientation by ethics.²⁶

Similarly, in an extension of his later meditation on the injustice inherent in the obstinate claim to one’s own position in Being, Levinas asks:

“My place in Being, the *Da-* of *Dasein* – isn’t it already usurpation, already violence with respect to the other? A preoccupation that has nothing ethereal, nothing abstract about it: the press speaks to us of the Third World, and we are quite comfortable here; we’re sure of our daily meals. At whose cost? – we my ask.”²⁷

Such a remark about the fact of being put to question by the misery of far-away others would be completely unintelligible in the context of Levinas’ ethics of the face-to-face and of proximity, if one doesn’t accept

25 IH 144.

26 A very noteworthy attempt to make Levinas’ thoughts on ethics useful for a critical engagement with cosmopolitan political thought (in the usual sense of the term), is that of Eduard Jordaan in “Cosmopolitanism, freedom, and indifference: a Levinasian view” (*Alternatives* 34/2009, pp. 83–106). By deploying a Levinasian critique, Jordaan argues: “that despite the moral concern for the world’s poor which cosmopolitan thought exhibits and seeks to inspire in the rest of us, the writings of some influential cosmopolitan authors contain elements that strain against greater concern for the world’s poor, and, more worryingly still, might be said to entrench and even engender indifference towards the world’s poor.” (p. 101). The result of this argument is not a “refutation” of cosmopolitan political thought, but rather a Levinasian call to greater sensitivity for the risk of indifference lurking in the limitation of the responsibility of political agents, the suppression of otherness of the other and the weaknesses in emphasising equality in cosmopolitan theory (p. 84). By restricting his use of Levinas for such a critical exposure, Jordaan shows a “negative” way to use Levinas for argumentation in global political relations. Whereas the validity of such a Levinasian approach is not questioned, it should be noted that my critique of Levinas’ idea of infinite responsibility and the need to reflect on the means of responsible action (Chapters 6 and 7) will set limits to the usefulness of such an approach.

27 A&T 179 / AT 180, translation modified.

that for Levinas my injustice (that is, the manner in which my existence is violently integrated with the existence of others) and justice (as response to this injustice of my existence) is mediated and constituted even on a global scale. To put it bluntly, in Levinas' example, that which makes the questioning of my right to be a matter that is not abstract but very concrete is not the proximity of the other, but the newspaper or television (i.e., the socio-technical system of news reporting) through which, by mediation of which, I am questioned by the far-off other.

One could equally consider the notion of *election* and the particular universal interpretation that Levinas gives to it in his writings prepared for a Jewish context. As will be explained in detail in Chapter 4, the particularism of Judaism, the election of Israel, is in Levinas' view the universal asymmetry of all subjects faced with the others and thus also a figure of the obligation to respond to the suffering of all others. The global presence of both ethical agents and the suffering others seems to fit in the extension of Levinas' idea of election.

Two themes of Levinas' thought directly extend his ethics to an international political dimension through their claim to universality and desire for universal validity: human rights and humanism. Since the *Universal declaration of human rights* (1948), all discourse on *human rights* has to deal with this dimension. Having devoted a study previously to Levinas' thought on human rights, I shall not look at this issue in this book.²⁸ There is also more than a mere affinity for the global dimension of ethics in the theme of humanism that is used in both Levinas' philosophy and his writings prepared for Jewish readerships. That *humanism* tends to be a discourse that should at the very least be defined by its claim to an ethical relevance for the whole of humanity, warrants the attention that will be devoted to it in the whole of Part 2 of this book.

Apart, then, from explicit references to international political issues one needs simply to reflect on key notions from Levinas' philosophy in order to realise that it is in vain that one avoids the global dimension thereof. *Peace*, if it is to retain any correspondence with what is commonly understood by it, that is, what is commonly yearned for by people in a state of war or violent conflict, cannot be conceived of independently from international relations – and this, even if one doesn't reduce reflection on peace to the subtle balance of warring parties, but instead refers it to the

28 See my "The quest for justice versus the rights of the other?", in *In Levinas' trace*. Maria Dimitrova (ed.). Sofia: Avangard Prima Publishers, 2010, pp. 101–111.

alterity of the other, that would be more original than war.²⁹ *Food* for one's hungry neighbour is a simple idea, used by Levinas, but one that obviously refers to the establishment of nutritional security and what is today called environmental justice – that is, if it is not reduced to a simplistic and moralistic handing out of sandwiches as alms (which of course doesn't exclude the sharing of sandwiches).

As has already been suggested at the end of § 2 (but will be argued in detail in Chapter 7), once it is affirmed within the Levinasian context that the *means* of ethical conduct is significant for ethics, then the entire question regarding the “how?” of the efficient use of means, the question of the just use of means, stretches as far as the effect of the use of these means. And since ethics involves all human action, ethics thus covers all technical action, i.e., all action as it is transformed, specialised or augmented through the implementation of technical means. For this reason the question concerning the justice done to ethics is as big as the technical systems needed to realise justice or submitted to the evaluation of justice – which is the global scale. The global dimension of international relations, of media, of the economy, of marketing, of cultural exchange, of banks, transport and pollution, etc., forms the horizon within which justice should be thought through and pursued.

That this is a valid conclusion for Levinas' ethics could also be shown by transposing the question to the register of ontology and alterity. The Saying is the Saying of the Said, claims Levinas, which means that the ethical stretches as far as the ontological. As far as there is a human network of capability of “I can”, so far is this capability questioned by the ethical. As far as there are beings that understand Being, but do so in interaction or exchange, albeit mediated by technical means, there is an exchange of the *logos*, or an interference in the *logos* of understanding that the different individuals carry. This is of course not, or not always on an explicit level, but very often implicit, or on the level of mentality (in the sense explained in Chapter 2). Furthermore, I can see no way in which there could be a limit in principle in the consideration of the *thirds*; it seems inevitable to conclude that the calculation of justice, as presented by Levinas, should at least in principle stretch as far as all the thirds, that is, the entire humanity.

29 A development of the theme of peace in Levinas from a point of view that supports my “global” perspective can be found in the already mentioned essay of Alfred Hirsch, “Vom Menschenrechte zum ewigen Frieden.” *op. cit.*

To conclude, it is unjustified and undesirable to think of Levinas' philosophy principally in terms of ethics (as argued in Chapter 1) and when thought of politically then it is unjustified to restrict reflection to the local, the neighbourhood or the State context. The ultimate horizon within which Levinas' ethics and theory of justice presents itself to be thought through is that of the *entire humanity* and the *international and global relations* that bring people into interaction. That Levinas didn't devote too much space to developing his thought in this direction cannot be considered an invalidation of this conclusion. Rather, his negligence in this regard should be the subject not only of our criticism, but also of our continued efforts to appropriate and engage with his thought. At the same time, my point is not to reduce the political implications of Levinas' thought to the global. Responsibility for a global world does not exclude responsibility for the local, but entails at least in principle an openness to the biggest scale in which to situate all reflection on responsibility and all evaluation of responsible action.

This international or global horizon of ethics is of course not an a-temporal aspect of ethics or implication of Levinas' thought on the ethical – the inevitable international or global fabrication of our very lifeworld and of the political structure of contemporary life is simply the condition of our contemporary world. This is true not only for people living in the advanced industrial regions of the planet, but practically for everybody. Since the creation of a world of networked societies, the global dimension is rather the rule than the exception: practically all societies are bound up in global networks and, as Manuel Castells has shown with perspicacity, marginalisation is also a form of integration into the global network.³⁰

The historical situation in which the a-historical validity of the ethicity of Levinas has to realise itself, is implied in the very choice of the word “responsibility” for ethicity, since this prospective understanding of responsibility as the major figure for the reflection on obligation is itself the child of an era of unparalleled complexification and thus uncertainty of the causal networks of human action. Although ethicity as such is an a-historical, context-independent signification, for Levinas,³¹ the

30 See Manuel Castells, “The rise of the fourth world: informational capitalism, poverty, and social exclusion”, in *End of millennium*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, chapter 2.

31 However, since the ethical is only as old as the human, the question of ethico-genesis might be interesting to explore. One finds a theory of ethico-genesis in the work of another critical Heidegger student, Hans Jonas. In his work too, one has

world in which one has to weigh the responsibility due to a plurality of others, the world in which one has to be just, is historically constituted. This might seem a very basic point to make, but with all of Levinas' insistence on the context-independent signification of the alterity of the other, this fact tends to fade into the background, not only in his own work, but also in that of a good number of his commentators.

Typical of this contemporary political condition is the frequent, constant and complex contact between people of different cultural and therefore ethico-evaluative backgrounds.³² A phenomenon that is probably as old as humanity, in our time it has taken on proportions probably never before experienced. That this is due to immigration, travelling, the increasing density of commerce, military activity, refuge seeking, sport and cultural exchanges, all of these enforced by the development of technologies of transport, of communication and of the diffusion of cultural products, could be considered general knowledge. A mixture of old and new forms of misery, and thus sources of ethical appeal and of political demands of rights or claims to recognition spontaneously ensue from this situation. At the same time claims for the universal institutionalisation of, and at worse the widespread lip-service to, a fairly established set of human rights and the establishment of international agreements or institutions of justice, on the one hand and the spread of a relatively homogeneous economic model over the globe, on the other hand, enhance the compatibility and translatability between different cultures, sometimes creating the impression of homogenising cultural plurality to dialects of one language and seeming to limit the differences of a process of multiple modernities.³³ Once it is recognised that people are caught in the tension between such diversifying and unifying forces and the values they enforce in their lifeworld, one could, from this perspective, return to

to distinguish between two theories of responsibility – the one ethnicity, the other responsibility for a particular context or era of human history – see my “Responsibility in an era of modern technology and nihilism. Part 2. Inter-connection and implications of the two notions of responsibility in Jonas”, in *Dialogue. Canadian Philosophical Review* 48/4, 2009, pp. 841–866.

- 32 This fact, together with the preceding line of argumentation, draws the direction in which I shall attempt to think about political responsibility very close to the “social connection model” of responsibility developed by Iris Young in “Responsibility, Social connection, and Global labor justice”, in *Global Challenges. War, Self-determination, and responsibility for Justice*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2007, pp. 159–186.
- 33 See especially Shmuel Eisenstadt, “Multiple modernities” in *Daedalus* 129/1, 2000, pp. 1–29.

Levinas to enquire about his contribution to ethics in such a world. This is what will be done in Part 2 of this book.

But before we turn the page, let the preceding reflection serve to bring a final articulation to the reference to a “globalised world” in the title of the book. There is in this book no ambition to make a contribution to the state of the debate about the status of globalisation or the forms of modernisation. “Globalised” is the term that marks the intention to engage as well as is possible with the world in its current situation and of which I have just recalled some salient traits. It is my intention to emphatically situate my reflection on Levinas, *within this world*. This is, as far as I am concerned, part of the meaning of doing justice to responsibility. Reflection on the genocide in the Second World War and on the process and intellectual interpretation of decolonisation is still of great importance to this world, but I explicitly resist a reflection that is so philologically mesmerised by the texts of Levinas’ arguments, that it doesn’t dare to venture further to contemplate the contemporary relevance thereof. Even more important – and that is the second justification for the choice of placing the “globalised world” in the title – is the effort to avoid the moralistic and therefore context-alien appropriation of Levinas for the contemporary world. That a discourse about globalisation and ethics can equally succumb to moralization goes without saying. Whether I succeed in avoiding this, my reader will judge.

