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The Developmental Stages of Simone  
Weil's Political Philosophy: From  
Pacifism to a Justification of Force

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## Abstract

Simone Weil had a short but distinguished career as a French intellectual. Writing mainly between the two European wars of the twentieth century, Weil is more widely accredited for her later spiritual work. This thesis seeks instead to discuss the political aspect of Weil's writing so that her early themes of labour and science can be charted as they develop through the later themes of oppression, liberty, power and force. I will show how her understanding of labour, liberty and science provide the foundation for her understanding of oppression and force. In charting her formal education, her Leftist syndicalist-revolutionary period and her critique of Marxism, I argue that her prolonged adherence to a pacifist position delays her comprehensive understanding of force, particularly during WWII. Importantly, it discusses the key stages chronologically, spanning the period 1925 – 1940, and relates them to the historical context of the period. This timeframe encompasses her earliest *Lycée Henri-IV* essays, a large proportion of her trade union journal articles, *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale* and *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*. I contend when she rejects these beliefs through a combination of maturing analysis and reflective experience that it became evident that oppression, power, and particularly force are not only undeniable and ineradicable but at times necessary.

## Acknowledgements

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This is also for the people who believe page numbers should not be put in corners.

## Introduction

In *Discussions of Simone Weil*<sup>1</sup> Rush Rhees expresses a sentiment that reverberates when approaching Simone Weil's thought and writing. In attempting to understand how she described material things through Greek science and Descartes's geometry to achieve a religious view of the world, Rhees suggests that perceptions like these

invite academic criticism and seem wide open to it. But when I do try to criticise them in this way, I always expect that I am being stupid, that I am failing (unable) to read what she has written in the way that it should be read, that I simply misunderstood something to which my eyes have not been opened. And then I conclude that I must leave it there.<sup>2</sup>

Acknowledging the depth and breadth of Weil's body of work, this research concentrates on Weil's political thought from her earliest *Lycée Henri-IV* essays to her writing around WWII. The purpose of this explicit concentration is to engage with her writing as it develops through revolutionary syndicalism, Marxism and pacifism and is achieved by investigating the philosophical and thematic nature of these transitions in parallel to the evolving European and Russian political turmoil of the interwar period of the twentieth century. I argue that Weil's slow rejection of syndicalist-revolution in response to the rise of National Socialism, her refutation of Marxism through analysis of oppression in production-labour and the recognition of the limitations of pacifism following a complex investigation of force over the course of WWII define and hinder her philosophical development.

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<sup>1</sup> Rush Rhees, *Discussion of Simone Weil*, ed. D.Z. Philips, ass. Mario von der Ruhr (Albany: State University of New York, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Rhees, p. 64.

Aside from enhancing the undeveloped field of Weil's political writing, I argue that research of this kind must engage with her earliest philosophical-political writing to reveal the foundation of her political thought.<sup>3</sup> As a methodology this thesis will employ a chronological approach that identifies Weil's themes with their development alongside evolving politics. This approach is necessary because Weil's thought develops both in relation to intellectual ideas and the historical events to which they correspond. Problematically, much of the secondary critique engages with the later 'spiritual' phase, or post-war phase, of her life, and because only a minority of the secondary research engages with Weil's political writings, this thesis contributes to that limited field by concentrating on the development of her political thought in relation to the evolving political crisis surrounding the two World Wars.

I contend that the distinction between the spiritual and political Weil has been affected by the way her early work appeared in obscure French trade union journals. However, the collection and serial publication by the French publishing house *Gallimard* is an excellent resource, especially concerning her unpublished work of the interwar period. If some secondary research relates to Weil's political writings, a minute amount engages with Weil's earliest writing. No research has shown how the themes of her political work are directly informed by her earliest writing. This is not to suggest that Weil's early preoccupation with science, labour and force do not extend into the later work after WWII. I do not contend that Weil's views on these themes do not change. Whilst the main source for this research is the *Gallimard*<sup>4</sup> series on Weil,

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<sup>3</sup> There is, possibly, also merited significance to be drawn from an investigative person charting the relation between her early writing and later work. However, it is not possible within the remit of this research.

<sup>4</sup> Simone Weil, *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957); *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988); *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2:*

I also research a series of texts by Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina van Ness, entitled, *Simone Weil: Formative Writings 1929—1941*<sup>5</sup> that gave access, not only to Weil's thesis on Descartes, her reports on Germany's convulsions just before Hitler became Chancellor, the *journal d'usine*<sup>6</sup> and select essays on the political crises of the 1930s, but to a number of unpublished fragments from the late 1930s. Thomas R. Nevin's *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*<sup>7</sup> not only addresses Weil's thoughts and her prejudices but examines her reasons for entertaining them and gives them a historical focus. He claims that to Weil's generation the Spanish Civil War, the Popular Front, the ascendance of Hitlerism, and the Vichy years were not mere backdrops but defining events. Lawrence A. Blum and Victor J. Seidler's *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism*<sup>8</sup> had a great influence on this research, showing how Weil's philosophy sought to place political action on a firmly moral basis. The activity, freedom and dignity of the manual worker became the standard for political institutions and movements.

Weil criticises Marxism for its confidence in progress and revolution and its attendant illusory belief that history is on the side of the proletariat. As a noted scholar of Marxism, David McLellan, in *Utopian Pessimist: The Life and Thought of Simone Weil*<sup>9</sup> and *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*<sup>10</sup> lends a judicious sympathy indispensable to

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*Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991): *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Simone Weil, *Formative Writings 1929-1941*, trans. & ed. by Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina van Ness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Simone Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 153-282.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas R. Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence A. Blum and Victor J. Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism* (Oxon: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> David McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist: The Life and thought of Simone Weil* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).



a study of Weil. Mary Dietz's *Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil*<sup>11</sup> is partly related to this thesis. Drawing on Weil's writings from 1934-1943, Dietz examines Weil from the psychoanalytical perspectives of rational dependence, impersonality and belonging and rootedness. Athanasios Moulakis in *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*<sup>12</sup> situates Weil's political thought within the context of the intellectual climate of her time, where he connects her epistemology, her cosmology, and her personal experience. Moulakis is attentive to the ideological climate of the time in which doctrine is inseparable from the last days of the Third French Republic, the Spanish Civil War, and the rise and clash of totalitarianism. Peter Winch's *Simone Weil: The Just Balance*<sup>13</sup> shows that Weil needs to be taken seriously not only as a religious and political thinker but also as a philosopher. Winch brings the later Wittgenstein to bear on his analysis of Weil and traces her gradual move away from Cartesian dualism and rationalism.

Rush Rhees's *Discussions of Simone Weil*<sup>14</sup> provides the most sustained critique to date of Weil's views on science and religion. Rhees's observations on the major themes in Weil's philosophy of work and society, science, ethics and religion show how he wrestles with the difficulties he found in the work of Weil. It is, however, another example of where Weilian scholarship lacks political analysis as his starting point is *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale*. Assisting in the production of Rhees's *Discussions of Simone Weil*, Mario von der Ruhr's *Simone*

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<sup>11</sup> Mary G. Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil* (New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Athanasios Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, trans. by Ruth Hein (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Rush Rhees, *Discussion of Simone Weil*, ed. D.Z. Philips, ass. Mario von der Ruhr (Albany: State University of New York, 1999).

*Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention*<sup>15</sup> is concerned largely with Weil's middle to later period. Written from the perspective of Weil as a religious mystic, his work is a meditation on the essence of Christianity in relation to Weil. The early parts of E. Jane Doering's *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force*<sup>16</sup> informs this research as it examines the material in Weil's notebooks and lesser-known essays to illuminate her evolving thought on power, force, violence, war, and injustice. However, as the bulk of the book addresses Weil's engagement with mysticism and the Bhagavad Gita during her final years, it seeks to encompass the entirety of Weil's activist and intellectual search for moral value in a violent world. Accordingly, except for Blum and Seidler, McLellan's *Utopian Pessimist* and Nevin, many of the secondary sources above limit their engagement with Weil's earliest writings. Consequently, after noting that Doering's *Specter of the Self-Perpetuating Force* begins with the rejection of pacifism, I sought to understand why, and so my research intends to reveal the foundation of Weil's position. This method of developing from the textual foundation reflects the historical process as it relates to the development of ideas in the twentieth century. Above all, this chronological approach reveals insights into the development of Weil's thought. A criticism of this method is the concern that I reproach Weil's thought for developing, that somehow, I believe that her thought should remain fixed. I cannot conclude that what Weil initially believes or eventually concludes is correct. My only concern is that it did and I suggest that it did so in relation to political events. My critique is that it developed too gradually.

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<sup>15</sup> Mario von der Ruhr, *Simone Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention* (London: Continuum, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> E. Jane Doering, *Simone Weil and the Spectre of Self-Perpetuating Force* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

This thesis is divided into four chapters, namely, ‘Science and Labour in Philosophical Education’, ‘Syndicalisme’, ‘Oppression and Liberty’ and ‘Justification of Force’. It is structured chronologically to allow for a delineation of Weil’s writing in relation to social and political events. The chapters are correlated so that the development of the themes of science and labour, which are found in her earliest student essay and publications, can be connected and developed chronologically through to her syndicalist ideals and then to her engagement with Marxism before we can understand the relation of force. This chronological method exposes the layers that reveal Weil’s hesitant recognition of the limited acceptance of a justification of force.

Chapter One, entitled, ‘Science and Labour in Philosophical Education’, discusses her writing that the *Lycée Henri-IV* and *École Normale Supérieure* period produced. The first and second sections details Weil’s philosophical topics in relation to Émile-Auguste Chartier, who gave Weil her most important lesson: that knowledge must be wedded to experience. Outlining Weil’s theory of labour, it will detail how it informed her dissertation on Descartes. It concludes that the themes of science and labour are central tenets to Weil’s earliest writing, which were to later underpin her thinking on *syndicalisme* and Marxism.

Chapter Two, entitled, ‘The Socialist Left and Weil’s *Syndicaliste* revolution retreat’, outlines how Weil’s active engagement and participation with syndicalism began in Le Puy in 1931. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section describes the Socialist and syndicalist landscape. The second section situates Weil within that landscape. The third section shows the relationship of the first and second sections to her decision to withdraw from political life after she witnesses Germany’s syndicalist and political movements rendered ineffective in halting the rise of National

Socialism. It concludes that Weil dismisses syndicalism as a method of heralding her version of revolution. It is also of note that she is developing a more refined philosophical outlook. Finding more philosophical nuance in her syndicalist experiences, Weil's own writing reveals the need for a greater theoretical understanding.

Chapter Three, entitled, 'Oppression and Liberty in *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale*',<sup>17</sup> investigates Weil's most developed writing on Marxism. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section discusses in order, 'Concepts of Oppression and Liberty', her 'Factory Labour' and the correlation between 'Weil and Marxism'. The second section engages with the initial two chapters of *Réflexions*; 'Critique du marxisme'<sup>18</sup> and 'Analyse de l'oppression'.<sup>19</sup> The third section reflects on the two concluding chapters of *Réflexions*; 'Tableau théorique d'une société libre'<sup>20</sup> and 'Esquisse de la vie sociale contemporaine'.<sup>21</sup> This chapter concludes that Weil rejects Marxism because of Marx's partial apprehension of the complexity of oppression, as she understands it, the consequence of which diverts him to an incomplete conclusion.

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<sup>17</sup> Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 31-47.

<sup>19</sup> Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 47-71.

<sup>20</sup> Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 71-93.

<sup>21</sup> Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 93-106.

Chapter Four, entitled, ‘From Pacifism to Justification of Force’, provides the evidence for Weil’s evolution from ardent pacifism to a recognition of pacifism’s limitations in counteracting an opposing, physical force deployed by humans. Despite the subject of force holding a central place in Weil’s later political thought, I wait until the final chapter to elucidate the subject so that the reader can have a greater understanding of how her thought, which evolves through Cartesian activity, labour, science, oppression and power, comes to recognise the limitation of pacifism. This chapter is divided into six sections. The first section, entitled, ‘Power and Force’, presents Weil’s understanding of force and power in *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale*. The second section of this chapter, ‘Reflections on War’, briefly discusses Weil’s reflections on war. The third section of this chapter, ‘A Response to Alain’s Challenge’, deals with Weil’s response to one of Alain’s questions on war. The fourth section of this chapter, ‘The Spanish Civil War’, reflects on Weil’s participation in the Spanish Civil War. The fifth section of this chapter, ‘The Power of Words’, assesses how Weil attempts to expose the power of words. The sixth section of this chapter, ‘The Tipping Point of Pacifism’, details an understanding of Weil’s “tipping point” of pacifism. This chapter concludes that Weil, while still retaining the principle of pacifism, recognises its limitations in physical confrontation.

Consequently, as syndicalism and Marxism’s ineffectiveness are recognised and pacifism’s limitation is reached, As a method, the chronological nature of these chapters relate how the corresponding political timeline affects Weil’s thought in *Réflexions* and *L’Iliade ou le poème de la force*.<sup>22</sup> I conclude that if pacifism is limited in its response to force, then force, in not only existing, is sometimes necessary. Force

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<sup>22</sup> Simone Weil, ‘L’Iliade ou le poème de la force’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

is not only a phenomenological characteristic of the world, but one which is required for our survival. In accepting that force exists in nature, irrespective of man, Weil argues that in society force continues to exist in the same natural guises but also produces new and concurring features where man evolves in society. A product of man's interrelationship as he attempts to mitigate force manifests as power and the race for power. It is fair to suggest that Weil does not completely reject the aspirational merits of pacifism but recognises pacifism's limits in counteracting an opposing, physical force deployed by humans. I contend though, in failing to employ a rigorous measure of doubt whilst advocating for syndicalism, Marxism and pacifism, it is evident that Weil's beliefs stifle her development. In finally accepting that force is pervasive and weighs upon everyone, she then implores that it should be employed in the full knowledge of its consequences.

# Chapter One

## Science and Labour in Philosophical Education

### Introduction

To understand the themes that Weil will articulate in the years after she graduated from the *École Normale Supérieure*, this chapter outlines her philosophical education as it relates to the influences and themes found in her texts. This summary is necessary to underpin the first stage of this thesis that charts the development of Weil's thought from pacifism to a justification of force. This chapter will show how Weil's theories on science and labour derive from her earliest writing. The timeline of this material is from her attendance at the *Lycée Henri-IV* in Émile-Auguste Chartier's class, hereafter known as Alain, in 1925 until her posting as a teacher in Le Puy in 1931 after graduating from the *École Normale Supérieure*.

Structurally, this chapter is subdivided into four sections. The first section, entitled, 'Philosophical influences', outlines the educational relationship between Weil and Alain and poses the question as to whether this relationship is as important as the influences of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza and Kant, or indeed, the climate of politics and social revolution in France, Europe and Russia during her childhood and upbringing. The second section, entitled, 'Themes and Philosophers', correlates Weil's earliest writing with the primary philosophers that are explicit in her texts through the application of several secondary sources.<sup>23</sup> This section specifically

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<sup>23</sup> Athanasios Moulakis in *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, David McLellan in *Utopian Pessimist: The Life and Thought of Simone Weil*, Mario von der Ruhr in *Simone Weil: An*

discusses her essays: *Le Conte des cygnes dans Grimm*,<sup>24</sup> *Le beau et le bien*<sup>25</sup> and *L'existence et l'objet*<sup>26</sup> before introducing a critique of the first of Weil's published articles, *De la perception ou l'aventure de Protée*.<sup>27</sup> It is through this first publicised article that we encounter a burgeoning engagement with the theme of labour. The third section, entitled, 'Theory of Labour', assesses *Du temps*<sup>28</sup> in relation to the Kantian view of time as an *a priori* form of thought. Extending the implications of her reflections on labour into more concrete areas, we observe in her later article, *Le travail comme médiation*<sup>29</sup> that Weil considers us separated from ourselves by work. The fourth section, entitled, 'Dissertation on Labour', shows how her theory of labour culminated in a dissertation, *Science et perception dans Descartes*.<sup>30</sup> In this major work we find a critique of science and the shaping of her theory on labour, which I discuss in the following chapter. Nevertheless, because of Weil's youth and developing education, this chapter is not overly critical of this early period. Instead, it seeks to unravel an under-researched period to provide the methodical foundation for a critique of science and labour so further chapters can consider their relation to pacifism, syndicalism and Marxism.

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*Apprenticeship in Attention*, Miklos Vetö's in *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil* and Thomas R. Nevin in his *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*.

<sup>24</sup> Also translated by McLellan as *Grimm's Fairy Tale of the Six Swans*.

<sup>25</sup> *The Beautiful and the Good*.

<sup>26</sup> *Existence and Object*.

<sup>27</sup> *Concerning Perception or the Adventures of Proteus*.

<sup>28</sup> *Concerning Time*.

<sup>29</sup> *Work as Meditation*.

<sup>30</sup> *Science and Perception in Descartes*.



## 1.1 Philosophical Influences

Despite attending lectures given by René Le Senne and Leon Brunschvicg in the *Lycée Henri-IV* and the *École Normale Supérieure*, Moulakis argues in *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial* that ‘[Weil] acquired the most important part of her schooling in philosophy from Alain’.<sup>31</sup> There is little argument that Alain influenced Weil. But we cannot truly know nor dismiss Alain’s influence on Weil’s thinking. Her education would have also been heavily influenced by the French tradition of Descartes. Moulakis states that ‘French philosophy was shaped by Descartes [and that] [f]or three centuries Descartes remained the patron saint of French thought’.<sup>32</sup> One of the endearing qualities of Descartes was that ‘[h]is style not only satisfied literary taste; it shaped it to a considerable extent [and] [...] his work could be influential in a way that could not be achieved by, say, Auguste Comte with his convoluted French’.<sup>33</sup> David McLellan is more definitive in *Utopian Pessimist: The Life and Thought of Simone Weil* when he states that Alain ‘had more influence on the development of her thought than any other of her contemporaries’.<sup>34</sup> However, Thomas R. Nevin states in his *Simone Weil: Portrait of Self-Exiled Jew* that Alain’s ‘influence on her can be read throughout her mature writings’,<sup>35</sup> which implies that Alain was not as influential on Weil’s early writing as McLellan states. The problem that McLellan states is that, while ‘Alain presented his pupils with a view of the world,<sup>36</sup> which left a profound

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<sup>31</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, trans. by Ruth Hein (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), p. 80.

<sup>32</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 82.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> David McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist: The Life and thought of Simone Weil* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1990), p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas R. Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Alain rejected any idea of system and his favoured vehicle was the short essay or *Propos*, dealing with a single highly specific question or event, of which he published thousands during his lifetime. Alain himself concentrated on style and approach more than originality of doctrine. A radical in politics,

impression on them, [it was] difficult to summarise'.<sup>37</sup> When Weil presented her thesis titled, *Science et perception dans Descartes*<sup>38</sup> to her *École Normale Supérieure* dissertation supervisor, Leon Brunschvicg, Moulakis states that 'the work is influenced by Alain, who was a Cartesian in the sense that he not only accepted Descartes's dualism as the truth but went further to raise it to the absolute criterion of those philosophies that can be trusted'.<sup>39</sup>

If one agrees, as Moulakis states, '[i]n Alain's work, as in Weil's, [that Cartesian] dualism was the indication of critical philosophy, as opposed to ontology and ideology, [and thus, a] protection against creating a closed system, Alain's refusal to present his work in systematic form, his use of the format of the *propos*, is part of this attitude',<sup>40</sup> then one finds Weil's early precepts. This is evidenced by Winch who states that 'she is concerned, roughly, with the nature of human beings, material beings in a material world, who think; and with the relation between the human thinking and the materiality of the human world.'<sup>41</sup> As evidence, one finds echoes of Moulakis, McLellan, Winch and Nevin's line of thinking in Miklos Vetö's passage in *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*.<sup>42</sup> The statements are intended to show that

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he had been an active defender of Dreyfus and, although an ardent pacifist, had enlisted in the war as a simple foot-soldier as an act of solidarity - an example that Weil was to follow later in Spain. An essayist, therefore, as much as a philosopher, he was also a great classicist, and denied that there was any progress in philosophy, and had no time for historical detail. His aim was to re-think the great tradition of Plato and Descartes in the light of Kant, whose ideas had been transmitted to him by his own philosophy teacher, Jules Lagneau, for whom Alain conserved an unbounded admiration.' McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> *Science and Perception in Descartes*.

<sup>39</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 83. Quoted from André Bridoux, 'Extraits' in *Alain. Sa vie, son œuvre avec un exposé de sa philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), p. 99. See also Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 38.

<sup>40</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 83.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.2.

<sup>42</sup> '[Weil's] thought, which betrays a certain heteronomy of philosophical, religious, and, occasionally, openly scientific ideas, hardly corresponds to the traditional conception of metaphysics. Descartes was the thinker who influenced her the most, after Plato and Kant; but toward the end of her life, she would not hesitate to affirm that, to her mind, the founder of Cartesianism was not a philosopher in the authentically Platonic and Pythagorean sense of the word, and to conclude that 'ever since the

Weil was traditionally orientated in her educational atmosphere. From Alain, Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza and Descartes we find a large proportion of Weil's philosophy, or at least its influence. There can be disagreement or discussion to the extent of their influence, or whether she is concerned more with Spinoza than Descartes, or Plato rather than Aristotle. The most notable point to observe is that Weil was eminently educated in the pillars of philosophy. Mario von der Ruhr writes in *Simone Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention* that Alain and Weil

realised that there was a strong temptation to model non-scientific modes of discourse on the structural and stylistic templates dictated by the natural sciences, and that the failure to resist that temptation invariably generated conceptual confusion and, by implication, a certain kind of superficiality in thought and feeling.<sup>43</sup>

It can be inferred from von der Ruhr's passage that Weil has not yet begun to form the themes that mark her political thought. I argue, however, that the essential hallmark of Alain's influence on Weil is not overtly philosophical, in terms of the people or subjects he taught, though that is undeniable as evidenced above. One can propose that the more prevailing influence may not have been a Cartesian or philosophical direction, but, as McLellan states, that Weil's 'indignant opposition to the prevailing social order and her enthusiasm for the cause of the underdog found a ready echo in Alain's teaching'.<sup>44</sup> Siân Miles in *Simone Weil: An Anthology* states that Weil 'believed, like Alain, that philosophy is the explanation of the obvious through the obscure'.<sup>45</sup> The most important method in revealing the obscure is Weil's engagement in active philosophy. It was Alain's friendship with Lucien Cancouët, a railway worker and active member in the Communist-affiliated union, C.G.T.U (*Confédération*

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disappearance of Greece, there has been no philosopher'. Miklos Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, trans. Joan Dorgan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 2-3.

<sup>43</sup> Mario von der Ruhr, *Simone Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 51.

<sup>44</sup> McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*, p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. by Siân Miles (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), p. 10.

*générale du travail unitaire*), that began Weil's participation in teaching trade-unionists. Aside from preparing her for a professional career teaching philosophy, Alain's influence stirred an 'interest in labour relations and in the nature of labour itself [...] long before Simone Weil became an undergraduate.'<sup>46</sup> Miles states that

[t]he connection between her experiences at the working men's school in the rue Falguière and her studies at the Ecole Normale Supérieure was crucially important. It provided the link between her most deeply held beliefs and the means of their implementation.<sup>47</sup>

This is Alain's most important legacy passed to Weil. As Winch states, the main issue which Weil attempts to confront is that 'human beings are essentially active beings, [that] [t]heir greatest good lies in the exercise of their activity.'<sup>48</sup> The nature of this activity quickly evolves to become one of Weil's lifelong themes: labour. Weil expressed this continuing commitment to workers' education in a letter to a former student in 1934, stating, '[t]he most important [positive work for the foundation of a new and more humane order than the present one] is the popularisation of knowledge, and especially scientific knowledge. Culture is a privilege which, in these days, gives power to the class which possesses it.'<sup>49</sup> When Lawrence A. Blum and Victor J. Seidler state in *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism* that 'Alain was suspicious of organised political parties, [that] he emphasised the importance of freedom of individual thought, was sceptical of political ideologies, and criticised socialism for insufficiently protecting the individual against abuses of power'<sup>50</sup> one can almost find Weil's entire canon and life unfolding in a few short lines. Her ideas and her life, though bound tightly, are not as closely linked with Alain as some sources suggest. Providing a pedagogical framework instead of strict systematic adherences, he

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<sup>46</sup> *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. by Sian Miles (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Miles, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Winch, p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters*, ed. and arr. by Richard Rhees (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Lawrence A. Blum and Victor J. Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism* (Oxon: Routledge, 1989), p. 1.

instilled his students with a social concern, as citizens, and taught philosophy as an active subject, one practised and experienced. One can argue that Alain nurtured intellectual, cultural, historical, political and literary curiosity in the French and European traditions. This abundant foundation, when combined with a broad philosophical skillset, encouraged students to question, why this world, and what I ought to do? These are aspects to consider when we engage in the next section with some of Weil's earliest writings during Alain's class (Oct. 1925 – Jul. 1928).

## 1.2 Themes and Philosophers

During her first year at *Henri-IV*, Weil's main interests were around human action and morality, as evidenced by two essays that she wrote. In an (Nov. 1925) essay, entitled, *Le Conte des cygnes dans Grimm*,<sup>51</sup> Weil recounted the story of a young woman whose six brothers have been changed into swans.<sup>52</sup> The lessons that Weil draws from this story is that 'pure abstention is active [...]; the only force in this world is purity; everything that is without admixture is a piece of the truth [...] [and that] the only force and the only virtue is to abstain from action'.<sup>53</sup> At the time of writing this essay Weil had yet to become involved in the active philosophy outlined earlier. Abstention as activity changes completely to engagement. Her references to force as purity and virtue will undergo radical alteration. This essay does highlight Weil's engagement with Aristotle and Plato, though it is Plato who Weil cites on four occasions, where

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<sup>51</sup> Simone Weil, 'Le conte des six cygnes dans Grimm', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 57-59.

<sup>52</sup> To have them changed back into their true selves, she must sew six shirts from white anemones while keeping silent. This takes her six years, during which she marries a king and is accused by her mother-in-law of murdering her children. Not being able to reply, she is condemned to death and is on the point of being executed when the six swans arrive. Throwing the shirts on them, they are transformed.

<sup>53</sup> 'Ici, l'abstention pure agit. L'amour du roi, les accusations de sa mère rendent l'épreuve plus difficile; mais sa vraie vertu n'est pas là. Il faut qu'elle soit difficile: l'on ne fait rien sans effort; mais sa vertu est en elle-même. La tâche de coudre six chemises ne fait que fixer son effort et l'empêcher d'agir: car tous les actes lui sont impossibles si elle doit la mener à bout, excepté parler et rire. Le néant d'action possède donc une vertu. Cette idée rejoint le plus profond de la pensée orientale. Agir n'est jamais difficile: nous agissons toujours trop et nous répandons sans cesse en actes désordonnés. Faire six chemises avec des anémones, et se taire: c'est là notre seul moyen d'acquérir de la puissance. Les anémones ici ne représentent pas, comme on pourrait croire, l'innocence en face de la soie des chemises enchantées; quoique sans doute celui qui s'occupe six ans de coudre des anémones blanches n'est distrait par rien; ce sont des fleurs parfaitement pures; mais surtout les anémones sont presque impossibles à coudre en chemise, et cette difficulté empêche aucune autre action d'altérer la pureté de ce silence de six ans. La seule force en ce monde est la pureté; tout ce qui est sans mélange est un morceau de vérité. Jamais des étoffes chatoyantes n'ont valu un beau diamant. Les fortes architectures sont de belle pierre pure, de beau bois pur, sans artifice. Quand l'on ne ferait, comme méditation, que suivre pendant une minute l'aiguille des secondes sur le cadran d'une montre, ayant pour objet l'aiguille et rien d'autre, on n'aurait pas perdu son temps. La seule force et la seule vertu est de se retenir d'agir'. Simone Weil, 'Le conte des six cygnes dans Grimm', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 58-59.

she iterates, that ‘[t]his is not a tale but a discourse, Plato would say’.<sup>54</sup> We must, however, be careful about drawing too many inferences from this essay as she is still learning and developing her philosophical studies.

In the second (Feb. 1926), more extensively developed, essay, entitled, *Le beau et le bien*,<sup>55</sup> Weil identifies the good with an act of free will by which the individual conformed to the moral law. Nevin states that ‘she showed the influence of Alain’s Protagorean devotions’<sup>56</sup> by equating God with humanity and the human spirit, ‘[a] position quite foreign to her later thinking’.<sup>57</sup> The example of such a beautiful act is Alexander’s refusal of the helmet full of water that one of his soldiers brings him when the army is marching through a desert. When Alexander poured the water on the ground, his action might be apparently useless and wasteful. For Weil, however, this ceremonious renunciation of water creates a solidarity with his soldiers, whose thirst is quenched by their leader’s act. The moral is that to

save the world it is enough to be just and pure; which is expressed by the myth of the Man—God who redeems the sins of humanity by justice alone without any political action. We must therefore save in ourselves the spirit of which external humanity is the myth. Sacrifice is the acceptance of suffering, the refusal to obey the animal in ourselves, and the will to redeem suffering humanity by voluntary suffering. Every saint has poured the water away; every saint has refused all happiness which means being separated from the sufferings of humanity.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> ‘Ce n’est pas là un conte, mais un discours, dirait Platon’. Simone Weil, ‘Le conte des six cygnes dans Grimm’, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 58.

<sup>55</sup> Simone Weil, ‘Le beau et le bien’, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 60-73.

<sup>56</sup> Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, p. 48.

<sup>57</sup> Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, p. 49.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Il suffirait donc d’être juste et pur pour sauver le monde; ce qu’exprime le mythe de l’Homme-Dieu, qui rachète les péchés des hommes par la seule justice et sans aucune action politique. Il faut donc se sauver soi-même; sauver en soi l’Esprit, dont l’humanité extérieure est le mythe. Le sacrifice est l’acceptation de la douleur, le refus d’obéir à l’animal en soi, et la volonté de racheter les hommes souffrants par la souffrance volontaire. Chaque saint a répandu l’eau; chaque saint a refusé tout bonheur qui le séparerait des souffrances des hommes’. Simone Weil, ‘Le beau et le bien’, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 71.

Duty to oneself, therefore, coincided with duty towards humanity and consisted in a self-mastery, which enabled one freely to choose to share the common position. Mario von der Ruhr states that Weil ‘is concerned with the kinds of considerations that would prompt us to say of an action that it is *beautiful*, and how, indeed, the notions of beauty and goodness are related to each other’.<sup>59</sup>

These moral considerations are complemented by more strictly philosophical concern, as Weil saw an intimate link between will and thought in that perfect freedom coincided with perfect knowledge. We can also read the influence of Aristotle and Spinoza on Weil, in that they both regard that man’s greatest attribute – the attribute of reason – must be demonstrated practically as well as theoretically. Fulfilling our nature depends upon establishing order over the emotions. Relating this connection, Weil writes:

Let us consider then a beautiful action. There is none more universally admired than that of Alexander who, suffering from thirst along with his whole army which he was leading across a desert, poured out on the ground a little water that a soldier had brought to him in a helmet. What are we thinking when we say that this action is beautiful?<sup>60</sup>

Von der Ruhr offers the critique that Weil is aware of the difference in approach to this seemingly wasteful use of water. He states that ‘Weil knows that there will be readers who [would not] think that Alexander’s action was beautiful at all — that pouring the water away was useless, for example, as Alexander was leading an army, and a thirsty leader is less likely to be efficient than one whose thirst has been quenched’.<sup>61</sup> However, Weil argues that a defender of Alexander will reply that the action of shedding water is more useful to the army than water could have been,

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<sup>59</sup> von der Ruhr, *Simone Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention*, p. 57.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Considérons donc une belle action. Il n’en est pas de plus universellement admirée que celle d’Alexandre qui, souffrant de la soif, avec toute son armée qu’il faisait passer par un désert, versa sur le sol un peu d’eau qu’un soldat lui avait apportée dans un casque. Que pensons-nous quand nous disons que cette action est belle?’. Simone Weil, ‘Le beau et le bien’, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 67.

<sup>61</sup> von der Ruhr, *Simone Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention*, p. 58.



because it is calculated to give courage.<sup>62</sup> This is a point of interpretation because drinking the water is as useful as pouring it away. Nevin, however, outlines that this passage exemplifies an element of rigidity in Weil's early thinking on morality, stating:

[Weil] takes up both the beautiful and the good without seeking their identification and concludes by affirming it. Weil presumes that because a human being has ideas of the good, the beautiful, and the true, they have a kind of unity in the human, but she recognises that a work of art might not be conformed to the good. Further, good conceived merely as morality is rigid and severe, yet the Jansenists' disapproval of art suggests to her that there might be a chasm between beauty and the good.<sup>63</sup>

We must assume that Weil is not stating that the pouring of water sated the thirst of the soldiers, while the point of courage is also moot. Rejecting both these ideas, Weil argues that 'the utility of his action is in effect beside the point'.<sup>64</sup> If we want to get to the heart of the matter, we must pay attention to other aspects of Alexander's action:

Alexander, after a first movement that is purely mechanical, stands motionless while the soldier draws near. The army does not spring toward the water either, and it does not even look on it with greed; it directs its gaze to human signs, that is to say, it looks at its leader. Alexander, all the while the soldier was coming toward him, made no movement toward the water; when the soldier is close by, he finally takes the helmet, and stands motionless a moment. The army stands motionless too, its eyes fixed on him; and the universe is filled with the silence and the tension of expectation of these men. Suddenly, at the necessary instant, neither too soon nor too late, Alexander pours out the water; and the tension toward it is as it were released. No one, Alexander less than anyone, would have dared to foresee this astonishing action; but once the action is accomplished, there is no one who does not feel that it had to be like this.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> 'Un défenseur d'Alexandre répondra que l'action de répandre l'eau était plus utile à l'armée que l'eau n'aurait pu l'être, parce qu'elle était propre à donner du courage'. Simone Weil, 'Le beau et le bien', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 67.

<sup>63</sup> Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, pp. 148-149.

<sup>64</sup> 'Bon, dira l'autre, Alexandre était un habile général; cela n'est pas encore beau. Et l'utilité de l'action d'Alexandre est en effet en dehors de la question'. Simone Weil, 'Le beau et le bien', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 67.

<sup>65</sup> 'Alexandre, après un premier mouvement purement mécanique, reste immobile tandis que le soldat s'approche. L'armée non plus ne bondit pas vers l'eau, et ne la regarde même pas avec convoitise; elle dirige ses regards sur les signes humains, c'est-à-dire qu'elle observe le chef. Alexandre, tout le temps que le soldat venait vers lui, n'a pas fait un geste vers l'eau; quand le soldat est tout près il prend enfin le casque, et reste un moment immobile. L'armée reste immobile aussi, les yeux fixés sur Alexandre; et l'univers est rempli du silence et de l'attente de tous ces hommes. Soudain, à l'instant qu'il faut, ni trop tôt ni trop tard, Alexandre répand l'eau; et l'attente en est comme délivrée. Personne, Alexandre moins que tout autre, n'aurait osé prévoir cette action étonnante; mais une fois l'action accomplie, il n'est personne qui n'ait le sentiment que cela devait être ainsi'. Simone Weil, 'Le beau et le bien', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 68.

The beauty of Alexander's action is 'therefore the same as that of a ceremony; and it may be said that the action of Alexander is ceremony',<sup>66</sup> meaning, as von der Ruhr states, 'he remained *still* at the crucial moment, and that his subsequent pouring out of the water is part of a geometry of renunciation in which his own motives and those of his soldiers are perfectly aligned'.<sup>67</sup>

Concentrating on the utility of Alexander pouring or drinking the water misses the point. In rejecting water that they could not also drink, Alexander shares and binds the suffering of his men. In rejecting the solution to their thirst, Alexander rejects a desire and his position as leader. The beautiful act is stripping Alexander and his men of their differences and binding their faith together, for Weil states:

And in effect the soldier who brings the water, and the army that looks at it, renounce the water too; they renounce it for Alexander; he renounces it for them; each man is, like the stones of a temple, at once end and means.<sup>68</sup>

We again observe that Weil is stipulating that the goodness of an action is derived from a non-action, which is also found in *Le Conte des six cygnes dans Grimm*. Nevin argues that '[Weil] never quite relinquished Plato's prejudice that the love of beauty is the one immediate avenue to the good vouchsafed to this life—a reflection of the Greeks' inclination to blur differences between the aesthetic and the moral'.<sup>69</sup> If an ethical decision is to be considered and there is no obvious solution to sharing a minute amount of water with an army, then adhering to an act that is empathetic to the plight of his soldiers allows Weil to cast Alexander in the light of Aristotelian goodness,

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<sup>66</sup> 'La beauté de l'action d'Alexandre est donc la même que celle d'une cérémonie; et l'on peut dire que l'action d'Alexandre est cérémonie'. Simone Weil, 'Le beau et le bien', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 69.

<sup>67</sup> von der Ruhr, *Simone Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention*, p. 58.

<sup>68</sup> 'Et en effet, le soldat qui apporte l'eau, et l'armée qui regardent, renoncent aussi à cette eau; ils y renoncent pour Alexandre; Alexandre y renonce pour eux; chaque homme est, comme les pierres du temple, à la fois fin et moyen'. Simone Weil, 'Le beau et le bien', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 69.

<sup>69</sup> Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, p. 148.

where truth is emphasised alongside virtue and beauty. At this early point, that Weil is aware and is basing these ethical considerations on Greek philosophy is prescient as her writing attunes to unfolding political events.

Weil rearticulates the virtues of the decision by presenting an image of Alexander alone in desert. Again, finding water, the consideration to drink is undeniable. Yet, Weil's response is clear. Were Alexander to drink the water, the beauty of the action disintegrates.

The sacrifice consists in the acceptance of pain, in the refusal to obey the animal in oneself, and in the will to redeem suffering men by voluntary suffering. Every saint has poured out the water; every saint has refused all well-being that would separate him from the sufferings of men.<sup>70</sup>

Von der Ruhr is satisfied that '[t]here is something saintly in this renewed renunciation'.<sup>71</sup> In heightening the moral implications of acting dutifully, even when nobody is watching, Weil wants to underscore that proximity is not the basis for action. It is more important for Weil that we are cognisant of others' suffering even when we cannot witness it. Nevin surmises that Weil insists that '[Alexander's] action was good [...] because he delivered himself from the thirsty animal within him, he gave up the water on behalf of his men as they did for him. His action was beautiful because he and his men, serve in this story as means and end'.<sup>72</sup> Weil identifies the good with an act of free will by which Alexander conforms to the moral law. I believe that empathy is this moral law and that beauty is in the acceptance of a shared sacrifice. The Aristotelian or philosophical ideas have merit, yet the essay is essentially a student exercise in philosophy. The main point to draw from the essay is the idea of shared

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<sup>70</sup> 'Le sacrifice est l'acceptation de la douleur, le refus d'obéir à l'animal en soi, et la volonté de racheter les hommes souffrants par la souffrance volontaire. Chaque saint a répandu l'eau; chaque saint a refusé tout bonheur qui le séparerait des souffrances des hommes'. Simone Weil, 'Le beau et le bien', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 71.

<sup>71</sup> von der Ruhr, *Simone Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention*, p. 59.

<sup>72</sup> Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, p. 150.

sacrifice. It is this concept that endures in Weil's work longer than any impressions of goodness and beauty.

In 1929, the journal *Libres Propos* published the first of two articles where Weil now concentrated on the idea of work. In the first published article, entitled, *De la perception ou l'aventure de Protée*,<sup>73</sup> Weil recounted the Homeric myth of Proteus, a sea-god of ancient Greece, who had the gift of assuming any shape he wished. Proteus is analogous for the age-old problem of correct perception: 'We all learn to perceive between the ages of one and four and all our life, through science, culture, art and work, we merely commemorate this first revolution'.<sup>74</sup> For Weil, the Protean impressions that the external world made upon the mind were not to be brought to heel by reflection alone, whether it was that of the geometrician or the physicist. Essentially, the concept of space is essential to perception and it is labour that provides an understanding of space.

Thus, for a man who takes refuge in a cave and wishes to block the entrance with a large rock, necessity dictates first that the movements that permit him to do this have no relation to the spontaneous movements that, for example, cause him to fear ferocious beasts, and are even their direct opposite.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Simone Weil, 'De la perception ou l'aventure de protée', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 121-139.

<sup>74</sup> 'Nous apprenons tous à percevoir entre un an et quatre ans, et toute notre vie, par les sciences, la culture, les arts, le travail, nous ne faisons que commémorer cette révolution première'. Simone Weil, 'De la perception ou l'aventure de protée', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 134-135.

<sup>75</sup> 'Le travail, par opposition à la réflexion, à la persuasion, à la magie, c'est une suite d'actions qui n'ont aucun rapport direct, ni avec l'émotion première, ni avec le but poursuivi, ni les unes avec les autres; ainsi pour un homme qui, par exemple, abrité dans une caverne, veut en boucher l'entrée par une grosse pierre, la loi est d'abord que les mouvements qui lui permettront de le faire n'ont aucun rapport avec les mouvements spontanés que causait en lui, par exemple, la peur des bêtes féroces, et leur sont même directement contraires. Simone Weil, 'De la perception ou l'aventure de protée', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 125.

Conjuring the Plato of *L'existence et l'objet*<sup>76</sup> and again the geometrical or algebraic movement found in *Le Beau et le bien*, Weil insists that 'a workman who ceaselessly experiences the law of work can know much more both about himself and the world than the mathematician who studies geometry'.<sup>77</sup> McLellan argues that the 'rather forced and awkward argument of this article reflected Weil's desire to integrate manual labour into her previously more abstract philosophical considerations'.<sup>78</sup> In *Le Conte des cygnes dans Grimm, Le beau et le bien* and *De la perception ou l'aventure de Protée* we find Weil grappling with abstention as an activity in *Le Conte*, which she transmutes to a working engagement in *Protée*. Her references to force as purity and virtue will undergo radical alteration, while *Le beau et le bien* constitutes Weil's foundation in a shared suffering. Whether this suffering is beautiful is somewhat beside the point. The important aspect is that she believes that only sharing the experience of other people's suffering constitutes a virtue worth pursuing. Alain's legacy to Weil is a philosophy of participation; Weil's participation is empathy through activity.

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<sup>76</sup> Simone Weil, 'L'existence et l'objet', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 80-88.

<sup>77</sup> 'Bien mieux, un ouvrier qui éprouve sans cesse la loi du travail peut connaître bien plus et sur lui-même et sur le monde que le mathématicien qui étudie la géométrie sans savoir qu'elle est une physique, que le physicien qui ne donne pas leur pleine valeur aux hypothèses géométriques. L'ouvrier peut être sorti de la caverne, les membres de l'Académie des sciences peuvent se mouvoir parmi les ombres'. Simone Weil, 'De la perception ou l'aventure de Protée', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 136-137.

<sup>78</sup> McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*, p. 22.

### 1.3 Theory of Labour

These reflections on labour were continued in the second article that Weil published in *Libres Propos. Du temps*<sup>79</sup> and consists of an analysis on Kant's view of time as an *a priori* form of thought. For Weil, time was 'this separation between what I am and what I want to be, such that the only path from myself to myself is work, a relationship between myself and myself that is forever being undone and that only work can tie together again'.<sup>80</sup> The law of time, therefore, is the law according to which 'effort, an action of the mind is the only means of passing from project to work; from the project, going to work, I exercise my power'.<sup>81</sup> Since the world was composed of objects that were simply juxtaposed without any necessary connection

it is only by the trial of work that space and time are presented to me, always together, time as the condition, and space as the object, of any action; the law of work prescribes, with regard to my action, that it has duration, with regard to the world, that it is extended.<sup>82</sup>

Weil concludes that we must 'awaken again to the world, that is, to work and perception, while still having the courage to observe this rule [...] to lower our body to the rank of a tool, our emotions to the rank of signs'.<sup>83</sup> Weil is concerned with

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<sup>79</sup> Simone Weil, 'Du temps (1928-1929)', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 141-158.

<sup>80</sup> 'Le temps est cette séparation entre ce que je suis et ce que je veux être, telle que le seul chemin de moi à moi soit le travail, ce rapport toujours défait entre moi et moi que le travail seul renoue; désirer être à demain c'est désirer avoir rendu la planche lisse sans avoir poussé le rabot, le plancher net sans avoir manié le balai'. Simone Weil, 'Du temps (1928-1929)', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 143.

<sup>81</sup> 'C'est par un effort, une action de l'esprit que je passe du projet à l'œuvre; à partir du projet, allant à l'œuvre, j'exerce ma puissance'. Simone Weil, 'Du temps (1928-1929)', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 151.

<sup>82</sup> 'Ainsi c'est seulement par l'épreuve du travail que me sont donnés, et toujours ensemble, temps et étendue, le temps comme la condition, l'étendue comme l'objet de mon action; la loi du travail enferme, quant à mon action, qu'elle dure, quant au monde, qu'il s'étende'. Simone Weil, 'Du temps (1928-1929)', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 145.

<sup>83</sup> 'La seule manière dont j'aie à penser ces idées, c'est de m'armer d'elles pour conquérir le monde. Éveillons-nous donc de nouveau au monde, c'est-à-dire revenons au travail et à la perception, sans manquer de courage pour observer cette règle, par laquelle seulement ce que nous faisons peut-être travail, ce que nous sentons, perception: rabaisser notre propre corps au rang d'outil, nos émotions au rang de signes. Simone Weil, 'Du temps (1928-1929)', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 147.

extending the implications of these reflections on labour into more concrete areas, as we observe in *Le travail comme médiation*.<sup>84</sup> Weil begins by stating that the problem is ‘we are separated from ourselves by work’.<sup>85</sup> This form of labour denies the worker influence over the nature of the labour, namely meditative involvement in the process. Labour which requires diminished input requires limited mastery over the ordering of one’s thoughts and emotions. She concludes that ‘for as long as the movements of the living body, which, by the inexplicable union of the soul and the body accompany each of my desires, are sufficient to accomplish these same desires, the mind, attentive to its own thoughts, never turns towards work’.<sup>86</sup> Whilst it is undeniable that a theory of work is central to Weil’s thought, why is it understood in purely philosophical considerations and not, for example, in economic terms? Moulakis states that her theory of work

allows her to combine the glorification of labour with Kantian causality, and it permits her to establish an epistemology that is also a doctrine of self-mastery, an ethic. Weil polemicizes against Max Planck and Albert Einstein to preserve the concept of work contained in classical physics.<sup>87</sup>

An understanding of her theory is necessary to underpin such statements like the concluding sentence in *Protée* where Weil states that ‘geometry, perhaps like all thought, is the child of workers’ courage’.<sup>88</sup> If we look ahead to her later writing, work and world, according to Weil in the closing paragraphs of *L’Enracinement*,<sup>89</sup> are so defined ‘that all other human activities, command over men, technical planning, art,

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<sup>84</sup> Simone Weil, ‘Le travail comme médiation, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 243-247.

<sup>85</sup> ‘Nous sommes, par le travail, séparés de nous-mêmes’. Simone Weil, ‘Le travail comme médiation, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 243.

<sup>86</sup> ‘Car tant que les mouvements du corps vivant qui, par l’union inexplicable de l’âme et du corps, accompagnent chacun de mes désirs, se trouvent suffire à accomplir ces mêmes désirs, l’esprit, attentif à ses seules pensées, ne se tourne jamais vers le travail’. Simone Weil, ‘Le travail comme médiation’, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 246-247.

<sup>87</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 94.

<sup>88</sup> ‘La géométrie, comme toute pensée peut-être, est fille du courage ouvrier’. Simone Weil, ‘De la perception ou l’aventure de Protée’, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 126.

<sup>89</sup> *The Need for Roots*.

science, philosophy and so on, are all inferior to physical labour in spiritual significance [...] [and] in a well-ordered social life, it should be its spiritual core.<sup>90</sup> Though a view which Weil refined, physical labour connected the human to himself with nature. It gives him a physical standing in the world, where he can perceive himself and the world their relation to one another. The worker is the tool; he, if she is allowed, is the solution to his problems. Activity as labour and freedom to think are two inseparable concepts that Weil bring with her from these early essay and articles. We can read in her article *Du temps* that this version of work is a form of creation of the human.

The only law that obtains in such a world is juxtaposition. Only in the test represented by work I am given, and always together, time and extension, time as the condition, extension as the object of my action. The law of labour encloses, as to my action, that it lasts, as to the world, that it extends.<sup>91</sup>

If we consider ‘time as the condition’, and as Moulakis states that ‘[w]ork means an adjustment to something that escapes our direct grasp, and as a formalising detour it is distinct from arbitrary and “imaginary” actions’,<sup>92</sup> we have a version of work that deviates from a valuation that consists of time and labour multiplied by the cost of producing goods and services. We must understand that Weil is imagining a theory of work that will counteract scientific elitism and mechanised production which alienates the worker from work. Consequently, we begin to read the influence of Marx’s alienation of labour in her writing. Already typifying the distinction between Weil and

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<sup>90</sup> ‘Dès lors les autres activités humaines, commandement des hommes, élaboration de plans techniques, art, science, philosophie, et ainsi de suite, sont toutes inférieures au travail physique en signification spirituelle. Il est facile de définir la place que doit occuper le travail physique dans une vie sociale bien ordonnée. Il doit en être le centre spirituel’. Simone Weil, *L’Enracinement: prélude à une déclaration des devoirs envers l’être humain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), p. 216. Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, trans, Arthur Mills (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 298.

<sup>91</sup> ‘La seule loi d’un tel monde c’est la juxtaposition. Ainsi c’est seulement par l’épreuve du travail que me sont donnés, et toujours ensemble, temps et étendue, le temps comme la condition, l’étendue comme l’objet de mon action; la loi du travail enferme, quant à mon action, qu’elle dure, quant au monde, qu’il s’étende’. Simone Weil, ‘Du temps (1928-1929)’, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 145.

<sup>92</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, pp. 94-95.



Marx, her theory of labour extends further than Marx's critique of production surplus. Weil will assert in the subchapter, 'Tableau théorique d'une société libre',<sup>93</sup> in *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale* that it is work which controls the passions and prevents madness:

We have only to bear in mind the weakness of human nature to understand that an existence from which the very notion of work had disappeared would be delivered over to the play of the passions and perhaps to madness.<sup>94</sup>

Correlating control of madness and prevention of madness, Weil further extends her definition to outline what work is not. 'Idle people might may well have fun giving themselves obstacles to overcome',<sup>95</sup> which do not relate to the external obstacles that need to be overcome. Observing obstacles such as 'science, sports, art'<sup>96</sup> as the results of 'pure whim',<sup>97</sup> which 'do not form for a man a means of controlling his own whims',<sup>98</sup> Weil asserts that '[i]t is the [external] obstacles that we encounter that have to be overcome which give us the opportunity for [internal] self-conquest'.<sup>99</sup> This is a particularly robust and encompassing duty of work, which aims to fulfil a function in the worker. The activities that could represent the greatest degree of freedom, like the

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<sup>93</sup> *Theoretical table of a free society*.

<sup>94</sup> 'Il suffit de tenir compte de la faiblesse humaine pour comprendre qu'une vie d'où la notion même du travail aurait à peu près disparu serait livrée aux passions et peut-être à la folie; il n'y a pas de maîtrise de soi sans discipline, et il n'y a pas d'autre source de discipline pour l'homme que l'effort demandé par les obstacles extérieurs'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 72.

<sup>95</sup> 'Un peuple d'oisifs pourrait bien s'amuser à se donner des obstacles, s'exercer aux sciences, aux arts, aux jeux; mais les efforts qui procèdent de la seule fantaisie ne constituent pas pour l'homme un moyen de dominer ses propres fantaisies'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 72.

<sup>96</sup> 'Un peuple d'oisifs pourrait bien s'amuser à se donner des obstacles, s'exercer aux sciences, aux arts, aux jeux; mais les efforts qui procèdent de la seule fantaisie ne constituent pas pour l'homme un moyen de dominer ses propres fantaisies'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 72.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> 'Ce sont les obstacles auxquels on se heurte et qu'il faut surmonter qui fournissent l'occasion de se vaincre soi-même'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 72.

pursuit of science, sport and art ‘are valuable only to the degree that they imitate or even exaggerate the strict rigor and accuracy of work’.<sup>100</sup> Moulakis observes that Weil’s ‘philosophy of work is Stoic in the sense that the revolt against necessity is made to appear foolish rather than heroic. Work is not a mode of Promethean rebellion. The free man determines his own fate’.<sup>101</sup> Weil’s understanding of an absolutely free mode of labouring, unconstrained by the modern micro or macroeconomic considerations that define politics, would be that ‘in which methodical thought was in operation throughout the course of the work’.<sup>102</sup> Highlighting the inarticulate nature of her theory at this time Weil agrees that ‘the difficulties to be overcome would have to be so varied that it would never be possible to apply ready-made rules’.<sup>103</sup> Weil will later argue in *Oppression and Liberty* regarding the nature of liberty, which encompasses work, that an ideal, while seemingly unattainable, is good to have as a measurement. An ideal is a yardstick by which one can measure how far we are away and whether our actions diminish or enhance the likelihood of attaining the goal. From this point forward in her career, Weil’s theory of labour is the central pivot which all her work revolves.

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<sup>100</sup> ‘Même les activités en apparence les plus libres, science, art, sport, n’ont de valeur qu’autant qu’elles imitent l’exactitude, la rigueur, le scrupule propres aux travaux, et même les exagèrent’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 72.

<sup>101</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 96.

<sup>102</sup> ‘Par opposition, le seul mode de production pleinement libre serait celui où la pensée méthodique se trouverait à l’œuvre tout au cours du travail’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 81.

<sup>103</sup> ‘Les difficultés à vaincre devraient être si variées que jamais il ne fût possible d’appliquer des règles toutes faites; non certes que le rôle des connaissances acquises doive être nul; mais il faut que le travailleur soit obligé de toujours garder présente à l’esprit la conception directrice du travail qu’il exécute, de manière à pouvoir l’appliquer intelligemment à des cas particuliers toujours nouveaux’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 81-82.

## 1.4 Dissertation on Science and Labour

Weil's reflections on power, work, and equality accompanied a continuing political and educational commitment at the turn of the 1930's. Certainly not the encompassing manifestation of her thought at this time, but one of Weil's earliest full bodies of writing was her dissertation for *Diplôme d'Études Supérieures*,<sup>104</sup> entitled, *Science et perception dans Descartes*. Weil's thesis concerned the history of humanity's search for knowledge and the problem with sense perception. Beginning with the revolutionary discovery of geometry by Thales of Miletus, the long history of modern science had begun, and so the question that Weil asked was what status to give to the successors of Thales:

Must we submit blindly to these thinkers who see for us, as we used to submit blindly to priests who were themselves blind, if lack of talent or leisure prevents us from entering their ranks? Or, on the contrary, did this revolution replace inequality with equality by teaching us that the realm of pure thought is the sensible world itself, that this quasi-divine knowledge that religions sensed is only a chimera, or rather, that it is nothing but ordinary thought? Nothing is harder to know, and at the same time nothing is more important for every man to know. For it is a matter of nothing less than knowing whether I ought to make the conduct of my life subject to the authority of scientific thinkers, or solely to the light of my own reason; or rather, since I alone can decide that, it is a matter of knowing whether science will bring me liberty or legitimate chains.<sup>105</sup>

The 'question was [...] the same that she had asked herself when fourteen years old: whether only people of genius had access to the realm of truth'<sup>106</sup> and it is notable how Weil takes the Cartesian *cogito* and reformulates it to assert a possessive power that

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<sup>104</sup> *Diploma in Higher Studies*.

<sup>105</sup> 'Devons-nous nous soumettre aveuglément à ces savants qui voient pour nous, comme nous nous soumettions aveuglément à des prêtres eux-mêmes aveugles, si le manque de talent ou de loisir nous empêche d'entrer dans leurs rangs? Ou cette révolution a-t-elle au contraire remplacé l'inégalité par l'égalité, en nous apprenant que le royaume de la pensée pure est le monde sensible lui-même, que cette connaissance quasi divine qu'ont pressentie les religions n'est qu'une chimère, ou plutôt qu'elle n'est autre que la pensée commune? Rien n'est plus difficile, et en même temps rien n'est plus important à savoir pour tout homme. Car il ne s'agit de rien de moins que de savoir si je dois soumettre la conduite de ma vie à l'autorité des savants, ou aux seules lumières de ma propre raison; ou plutôt, car cette question-là, ce n'est qu'à moi qu'il appartient de la décider, si la science m'apportera la liberté, ou des chaînes légitimes'. Simone Weil, 'Science et perception dans Descartes', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 162.

<sup>106</sup> McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*, p. 26.

can function actively. Descartes attempts to underpin his existence, whilst Weil moves beyond her existence to her ability to control her activity (power). She begins in the introduction by heralding the intellect of Greek science and the part that mathematics occupied in it. Nevin argues that

[h]er pleas for the intuitive grasp of science have a populist ring: she demands that science remain accessible to ordinary people's perceptions, that it first answers the external world before losing itself in theories. The thesis marks an attempt to go back to Descartes for a reorientation of scientific endeavour.<sup>107</sup>

Weil claims that Descartes is the first among moderns to understand that 'science takes as its sole legitimate aim the measure of quantities and their interrelations determining such a measure'.<sup>108</sup> Wrestling our knowledge of nature away from the domain of the senses to that of reason, 'he purified our thinking of imagination and modern scientists, who have applied analysis directly to all objects susceptible to this study, are his true successors'.<sup>109</sup> To determine whether scientists were divided on the question of whether their theories, which were becoming increasingly abstract and algebraic, were linked in any way to the world of everyday perception and experiment, Weil proposed revisiting the foundations of modern scientific method in the work of Descartes.<sup>110</sup>

The first part of Weil's dissertation is a textual analysis of Descartes's works in an orthodox style replete with quotations from the Latin originals. She begins by assembling passages from several of Descartes's central works to show that he is indeed rightly seen as the founder of modern science, in that, 'refusing to trust the senses, Descartes puts his trust in reason alone, and we know that his system of the

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<sup>107</sup> Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, p.54.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> 'Il a donc purifié notre pensée d'imagination, et les savants modernes, qui ont appliqué l'analyse directement à tous les objets susceptibles d'être ainsi étudiés sont ses vrais successeurs'. Simone Weil, 'Science et perception dans Descartes', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 172.

<sup>110</sup> Simone Weil, 'Science et perception dans Descartes', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 165.

world is the triumph of what is called the *a priori* method'.<sup>111</sup> By putting ratios, which involve mathematics and algebra, at the heart of the old physics and geometry, Descartes gives modern science an abstract analytic basis. The orthodox interpretation of Descartes is that modern science had always essentially been what it was in the twentieth century and it had to be accepted as such or abandoned altogether. Weil claims there are passages in Descartes that present a very different picture. Showing the realistic side to his thought, it expresses an interest in the applications of science and considers perception to be the beginning of science. Real science is simply the correct use of reason, and open to all. The conclusion of the first part of the dissertation is that Descartes appears to contradict himself, and the solution is not found in examining his texts but 'become, at least for a time, a Cartesian',<sup>112</sup> which meant being open 'to doubt everything, and then to examine everything in order, without believing in anything except one's own thought in so far as it is clear and distinct, and without trusting the authority of anyone, even Descartes, in the least'.<sup>113</sup> For this tall order, Weil imagines what such a fictitious Cartesian might say.

The second part of her dissertation aims at a re-thinking Descartes's *Discours de la méthode*<sup>114</sup> in the more personal style of his *Méditations*.<sup>115</sup> Like Descartes, Weil begins with a systematic doubt: sensations, feelings of pleasure and pain, even abstract

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<sup>111</sup> Refusant donc de croire aux sens, c'est à la seule raison que Descartes se fie, et l'on sait que son système du monde est le triomphe de ce qu'on nomme la méthode *a priori*; et cette méthode, il l'a appliquée avec une audace qui n'a eu, selon une parole connue, ni exemple ni imitateur; car il va jusqu'à déduire l'existence du ciel, de la terre et des éléments'. Simone Wei, 'Science et perception dans Descartes', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 167.

<sup>112</sup> 'La pensée cartésienne n'est pas telle qu'on puisse la commenter du dehors; tout commentateur doit se faire au moins pour un moment cartésien. Mais comment être cartésien? Être cartésien, c'est douter de tout, puis tout examiner par ordre, sans croire à rien qu'en sa propre pensée, dans la mesure où elle est claire et distincte, et sans accorder le plus petit crédit à l'autorité de qui que ce soit, et non pas même de Descartes'. Simone Wei, 'Science et perception dans Descartes', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 183.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> *Discourse on the Method*.

<sup>115</sup> *Meditations*.

mathematical ideas. All these appear at first to be arbitrary and possibly the product of illusion. What is not the product of illusion is the power that consciousness must doubt these appearances. Through this power Weil knows that she thinks. ‘Might what I take for my thought not be the thought of an Evil Genius? That could be so in regard to the things that I think, but not for the fact that I think then. And through this power of thinking — which so far is revealed to me only by the power of doubting — I know that I am’.<sup>116</sup> Thus, instead of Descartes’s ‘I think, therefore I am’,<sup>117</sup> Weil substitutes the more active, ‘I have power, therefore I am.’<sup>118</sup> But her power over her own thoughts is extremely limited, so there must be something external to cause this limiting. Having established the bare existence of her mind and an external world, Weil turns to the nature of the link between them:

Although I cannot create a single one of my thoughts, all of them from dreams, desires, and passions to reasoned arguments— are, to the extent that they are subject to me, signs of myself; to the extent that they are not subject to me, signs of the other existence. To know is to read this double meaning in any thought; it is to make the obstacle appear in a thought, while recognising in that thought my own power.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> ‘La puissance que j’exerce sur ma propre croyance n’est pas une illusion; c’est par cette puissance que je sais que je pense. Ce que je prends pour ma pensée, ne serait-ce pas la pensée d’un Malin Génie? Cela peut être quant aux choses que je pense, mais non pas pour ceci, que je les pense. Et par cette puissance de pensée, qui ne se révèle encore à moi que par la puissance de douter, je sais que je suis. Je puis, donc je suis’. Simone Weil, ‘Science et perception dans Descartes’, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 189.

<sup>117</sup> Simone Weil, ‘Science et perception dans Descartes’, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 189.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> ‘Aussi ces pensées dont je ne puis créer une seule sont-elles toutes, depuis les rêves, les désirs, les passions jusqu’aux raisonnements, autant qu’elles dépendent de moi, signes de moi, autant qu’elles n’en dépendent pas, signes de l’autre existence. Connaître, c’est lire en une pensée quelconque cette double signification, c’est faire apparaître en une pensée l’obstacle, en reconnaissant dans cette pensée ma propre puissance; non pas un fantôme de puissance comme ce pouvoir surnaturel que je crois parfois posséder dans mes rêves, mais cette même puissance qui me fait être, que je connais mienne depuis que je sais que, du moment que je pense, je suis’. Simone Weil, ‘Science et perception dans Descartes’, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 193-194.

This ‘knot of action and reaction that attaches me to the world’<sup>120</sup> Weil calls ‘imagination’,<sup>121</sup> a faculty that opens a passageway into the world for the mind. For, in addition to feelings and sensations, imagination presents her with the idea of number, order and the principles of geometry. How could perception unite these two sides of the imagination? In the key passage, Weil writes:

I am always a dual being, on the one hand a passive being who is subject to the world, and on the other an active being who has a grasp on it; geometry and physics help me to conceive how these two beings can be united, but they do not unite them. Can I not attain perfect wisdom, wisdom in action, that would re-unite the two parts of myself? I certainly cannot unite them directly, since the presence of the world in my thoughts is precisely what this powerlessness consists of. But I can unite them indirectly, since this and nothing else is what action consists of. Not the appearance of action through which the uncontrolled imagination makes me blindly turn the world upside down by means of my anarchic desires, but real action, indirect action, action conforming to geometry, or, to give it its true name, work.<sup>122</sup>

Her conclusion is the same as her previous essays on perception: ‘Now I recognise that the two kinds of imagination, which are found separately in the emotions and in geometry, are united in the things I perceive. Perception is geometry taking as it were possession of the passions themselves, by means of work’.<sup>123</sup> Perception united to work is like a blind person’s stick. It is the essential link between the mind and the external world, and body and tools were geometrical concepts rendered material. The question that she poses at the beginning of her dissertation on the relation of science

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<sup>120</sup> ‘À présent je n’ai plus à suspendre l’imagination, mais à lui laisser cours pour m’instruire auprès d’elle. C’est en ce nœud d’action et de réaction qui me retient au monde que je dois trouver ma part et connaître ce qui me résiste’. Simone Weil, ‘Science et perception dans Descartes’, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 201-202.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Je suis toujours deux, d’un côté l’être passif qui subit le monde, de l’autre l’être actif qui a prise sur lui; la géométrie, la physique me font concevoir comment ces deux êtres peuvent se rejoindre, mais ne les rejoignent pas. Ne puis-je atteindre la sagesse parfaite, la sagesse en acte, qui rejoindrait les deux tronçons de moi-même? Certes je ne puis les unir directement, puisque c’est en cette impuissance que consiste la présence du monde en mes pensées; mais je peux les rejoindre indirectement, puisque ce n’est pas en autre chose que consiste l’action. Non pas cette apparence d’action par laquelle l’imagination folle me fait bouleverser aveuglément le monde au moyen de mes désirs déréglés, mais l’action véritable, l’action indirecte, l’action conforme à la géométrie, ou, pour la nommer de son vrai nom, le travail’. Simone Weil, ‘Science et perception dans Descartes’, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 209.

<sup>123</sup> ‘Je reconnais à présent en ces choses perçues l’union de ces deux espèces d’imagination, qui se trouvent, séparées, l’une dans les émotions, l’autre dans la géométrie. La perception, c’est la géométrie prenant possession en quelque sorte des passions mêmes, par le moyen du travail’. Simone Weil, ‘Science et perception dans Descartes’, in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 210.

to equality is answered: science, properly conceived, is merely correct perception and is thus, in principle, open to all through the practice of work:

Science so conceived, by reducing the heavens, the earth, all things, and even the imagination under the name human body to a system of machines, will add only one thing to the knowledge that is implicit in self-conscious work, namely, it will add the knowledge that that knowledge contains all there is to know, and that there is nothing else.<sup>124</sup>

Hence, it follows that Weil's theory of work manifests the mind's genuine freedom. In it, the mind, using the body itself as pincers with which to grasp matter, realises its own freedom and, simultaneously, the inadequacy of its ideas. As the geometrical application of clear and distinct ideas, work is the outward sign that perception can actively accommodate the world.

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<sup>124</sup> 'La science ainsi conçue, en réduisant à un système de machines le ciel, la terre, toutes choses, et l'imagination même sous le nom de corps humain, ajoutera pour chacun une connaissance, une seule, à celle que renferme le travail percevant, à savoir que celle-ci contient tout et qu'il n'y a rien d'autre'. Simone Weil, 'Science et perception dans Descartes', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 218.



## Conclusion

In borrowing Descartes's image of the blind man's cane, Weil symbolises the sensory realm that thought uses as its intermediary for grasping the object of its work, the world as obstacle. Work does not detract from the exercise of doubt that forms the core of Cartesian method. Rather, it elevates doubt in affording perception something to be explored, namely, matter. Science's role is to enable anyone to become, as it were, a tool of perception, but Weil states that the benefit of that process is strictly internal. Science serves only to make the mind master its imagination in response to the world. Here, Weil lodges a caveat against notions of scientific progress. Technology initially gives us the illusion of power over matter, but the world no more belongs to us than to the ancients. Thus, while already entrenched in her earlier writings, *Science et perception dans Descartes* provides an indispensable foundation to Weil's subsequent writings on the integrity of work and work's function as a sacrament of life and subsequently provided the philosophical basis for her commitment to radical politics. Accordingly, the problem that Weil investigated in *La division du travail et l'égalité des salaires*<sup>125</sup> is an extension of this dissertation, as McLellan reformulates:

As long as human beings simply moved matter about, there was no problem; but the expanded division of labour meant that some people moved other *people* about. And with the rise of education, perhaps the greatest power in the present age, the situation was radically altered; for it produced an elite who claimed privilege in the name of science.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> *The division of labour and equality of wages.*

<sup>126</sup> McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*, p.23.

According to Weil, science is a word which, when

pronounced in the right place, places the individual who uses it among the small number of those who have the right to decide, while the ignorant crowd, the mass, in other words the people, find themselves pushed aside. If the people recognise that the elite have every right to push them aside, all that remains is to believe in the elite, to obey it, and hope for its benevolence.<sup>127</sup>

Weil's critique of science, and as such, labour, is important as it relates to analysis of syndicalism and Marxism. Believing that science is almost inconceivable by a single person, Weil laments that it functions a parallel role to that of the knowledge withheld by the priests. This understanding of science advancing the means of production destroys parity of social esteem for the labouring classes left behind. For Weil, man as an individual has two kinds of activity. 'He can form ideas, which is thought, and he can directly transform his impressions'.<sup>128</sup> It is also on this basis that Weil believes that people should be salaried and any other method, regardless of ability, 'would be unfair'.<sup>129</sup> Weil saw little solution except in acquainting the workers with the principles of science so that they could confront and understand the ever-evolving new technologies. The France in which Weil emerged from her student years was one of tranquil confidence. The time she spent at *Henri-IV* and the *École Normale* coincided with the height of France's prosperity. However, with America about to be shattered by economic crisis, with Stalin about to unleash collectivisation in the Soviet Union,

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<sup>127</sup> 'En ce que ce mot de science, prononcé à propos, place celui qui s'en sert dans le petit nombre de ceux qui ont le droit de décider, tandis que se trouve récusée la foule des ignorants, la masse, autrement dit le peuple. Si le peuple reconnaît que l'élite le récuse à bon droit, il ne lui reste plus qu'à croire en elle, à lui obéir, à espérer en sa bienveillance'. Simone Weil, 'La division du travail et l'égalité des salaires', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 254.

<sup>128</sup> 'Si l'on considère l'homme pris comme individu, l'on voit en lui deux espèces d'activité, et deux seulement. Il peut former des idées, ce qui est pensée; il peut transformer indirectement ses impressions, autrement dit changer volontairement la matière, ce qui est travail. Travailler, c'est changer volontairement la matière par les mouvements du corps; le travail d'ouvrier est le travail'. Simone Weil, 'La division du travail et l'égalité des salaires', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 249.

<sup>129</sup> 'Si deux faucheurs, d'ailleurs également forts et habiles, manient, l'un une faux très bonne, l'autre une faux très mauvaise, certes, en un jour de travail, le premier aura abattu plus de blé que le second, chacun reconnaîtra cependant qu'il serait injuste de lui payer un salaire plus élevé'. Simone Weil, 'La division du travail et l'égalité des salaires', in *Premiers écrits philosophie, Tome I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 249.

with Germany on the brink of civil war and Italy overtaken by Mussolini's Fascists, France was still a haven of political order and economic well-being, this prosperous tranquillity was soon interrupted by the accelerated crisis that began to appear at the end of 1930, a year mid-way between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the second and which marked a crucial turning-point in French society. In the following decade the basis of economic organisation, political institutions and intellectual life were fundamentally shaken. As the world literally transformed with the onslaught of new technology driving social conditions domestically, Weil looked to syndicalist revolution for a response.

## Chapter Two

### The Socialist Left and Weil's *Syndicaliste* revolution retreat

#### Introduction

Weil's active involvement with French *syndicalisme*<sup>130</sup> begins when with her teaching appointed in Le Puy. This chapter establishes her intellectual progression between 1931 and 1934 in relation to the syndicalist movements that she became involved with in this industrialised area in the wake of the 1929 Great Depression and the evolving European political crisis thereafter. The aim of this chapter is to utilise the themes of science and labour from the first chapter and question whether Weil's theory of labour and syndicalism is predicated on Marxist and Socialist theory. This investigation is necessary because it provides the basis for a Marxist critique in the following chapter. Methodologically, this chapter initially details the Socialist and syndicalist traditions in France. With this foundation in place, Weil's engagement with syndicalism and her ideological relation to trade unions will then be outlined so that an investigation of the German and workers' revolution can be understood. This method will show that Weil's disengagement from syndicalist and Marxist ideals relates to the simultaneous rise of National Socialism.

This chapter is subdivided into three sections. The first section, entitled, 'Socialist and *Syndicalisme* Tradition', outlines the French syndicalist movement and in brief Weil's ideological relation to its aims and ideals. I will show that the two main

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<sup>130</sup> Labour unionism.

syndicalist bodies, the C.G.T. (*Confédération Générale du Travail*) and the C.G.T.U. (*Confédération générale du travail unitaire*), split the workers, dividing the syndicalist movements between Marxist, French socialist and anarchic-revolutionaries. The second section, entitled, 'Weil and Syndicalisme', concentrates on Weil's engagement in syndicalist activities in the Loire and Haute-Loire regions, where she worked to unite inter-union groups and working to educate and inform union workers. The third section, entitled, 'Germany and Workers' Revolution', discusses Weil's travels to Germany, where she investigates the German proletariat's willingness and ability to engage in a workers' revolution as it had occurred in Russia. Retaining the deep conviction that only the workers could improve their own situation, I show that she transitions away from that idea. Disillusioned by the German unions and political parties' apathy in withstanding the rise of German fascism, I explore why Weil alters her political outlook. Consequently, the conclusion of this chapter argues that Weil's visits to Germany and her experience of the political and syndicalist inability to challenge the rise of the National Socialist Party creates a philosophical partition between the syndicalist movement and the means of heralding a social revolution.

## 2.1 Socialist and *Syndicalisme* Tradition

In 1909, the C.G.T. union came under the reformist leadership of Léon Jouhaux and tilted toward closer association with the socialist *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* (S.F.I.O.), which had grown into a democratic reform group. But in doing so, C.G.T. compromises the syndicalist principle of independent trade union action. Under these conditions, the *Comités Syndicalistes Révolutionnaires* (C.S.R.) contributed considerably to the split at the Congress of Tours and the establishment of the French Communist Party, as well as the Communist federation of trade unions, the C.G.T.U., which, initially comprised of anarcho-syndicalists, soon became aligned with the French Communist Party. In 1925, this group, rooted in the *La Vie Ouvrière* periodical, founded a *revue syndicaliste-communiste*, titled, *Révolution Proletarienne*, to serve as an organ of the opposition. The greater part of Weil's writings published under her name during her lifetime appeared in *La Révolution Proletarienne*.

In *En marge du comité d'Études*<sup>131</sup> Weil calls on the workers to take up the entire inheritance of past generations. Taking possession of culture is especially important: 'Indeed, this act of taking possession is the revolution'.<sup>132</sup> The ability to use language comprises the realisation of a liberating capacity. In the same spirit, she adopts Marx's position about overcoming the debasing separation of intellectual and manual labour. Partly out of principle, partly because of local conditions wherever she taught, Weil joins the teachers' unions and fights for the unification of the labour movement, believing that a strengthening unification leads to the power for change.

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<sup>131</sup> *In the margins of the study committee.*

<sup>132</sup> 'Cette prise de possession, c'est la Révolution elle-même'. Simone Weil, 'En marge du comité d'études', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 69.

However, Weil is a good example of the contradictions within the entire syndicalist movement. She believes in the uncompromising class-war attitude of the C.G.T.U., while also condemning its ties with the Communist Party. Conversely, she is comfortable in the tradition of independent union action, which was still alive in the C.G.T., while also disliking the reformist moderation of this organisation. Exasperating the fragmented nature of the labour movement, the debates within each union and among the various trade unions were increasingly affected by events abroad, including the rise of fascism in Europe and the growth of the Communist Internationale. Weil's last significant act in relation to syndicalism is her participation in the C.G.T.U. congress that took place in September 1933. The congress was firmly controlled by spokesmen for party orthodoxy, skilled at silencing any voices raised in opposition, where they vilified and intimidated the dissident delegates, Weil among them. She is prevented from reporting on events in Germany because her publications made it clear that she refuses to reinterpret the mistakes and defeat of the German labour movement along party lines to make them appear as carefully considered actions and victories. A month after the congress, Weil publishes an unsigned report. In it she wrote:

The true character of the congress was fully revealed when, after the session ended, Charbit and Simone Weil were brutally prevented from distributing appeals in the street for solidarity with German comrades, victims of Fascist terror, who did not belong to either of the two main Internationals. Such things would be impossible in a real trade union organisation. But the C.G.T.U. is an outright appendage of the Russian state apparatus.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> 'Le véritable caractère du congrès apparut pleinement quand l'on empêcha brutalement Charbit et Simone Weil de distribuer dans la rue, à la sortie d'une séance, des appels à la solidarité en faveur des camarades allemands victimes de la terreur fasciste qui n'appartiennent à aucune des deux Internationales. De tels faits seraient impossibles dans une véritable organisation syndicale. Mais la C.G.T.U., depuis longtemps dégénérée, n'a plus rien de commun avec une organisation syndicale. Elle est un simple appendice de l'appareil d'État russe'. Simone Weil, 'Le congrès de la C.G.T.U.', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 287.

The Bolshevik turn of the C.G.T.U. is not the only thing that discourages Weil. After experiencing the revolutionary syndicalism of her friends in Saint-Etienne, it seemed inadequate and dogmatic. In February 1933, she wrote to her friend Urbain Thévenon:

This is the moment above all—above all for the young—to start seriously reviewing all ideas, instead of adopting 100 percent any prewar platforms (prewar C. G. T. or Bolshevik party), just at the time when all workers' organisations have completely failed.<sup>134</sup>

Weil believes that workers' organisations failed because they are not the vehicle of change that she feels they should be; they are overly political and run by what she believes is an executive elite who stifle debate. In a broader sense, while dissatisfied by the German movement's inability to counteract National Socialism, she believes the French *syndicalism* system is ineffective in achieving the aims that she believes might help the worker, like cultural and scientific education. This would allow workers to reclaim language and cultural insight and gain a knowledge to alleviate the alienating processes.

In the last vestiges of a dying belief, she casts her lot one last time with a syndicalist organisation, when during the Spanish Civil War, she enrolls in the militia of the Catalan C.N.T. (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*). This is a significant development in Weil's outlook. Despite believing in the ineffectiveness of the German workers' organisations and the French syndicalist movement, she turns towards a theatre of war for hope in reviving her revolutionary dreams. Disillusioned, she writes to Bernanos in 1938:

From my childhood onwards, I sympathised with those organisations which spring from the lowest and least regarded social strata, until the time when I realised that such organisations are of a kind to discourage all sympathy.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), pp. 148-149.

<sup>135</sup> *Seventy Letters*, translated and arranged by Richard Rees (Oxford University Press: London, 1965), p. 105.



Weil hopes that the trade unions might serve as agents for a revolution that could not only seize the bureaucratic and military machines - but smash them as well. Attempting to rise above this rudimentary Marxist aim, assigning this function to the trade unions intends that the unity of their members might be brought about 'not through the imaginary ties created by the community of opinion but through the real ties created by the community of their productive function'.<sup>136</sup> Weil acts on her perception of the movement's structure and course of action on the one hand, and her analysis of the contemporary crisis on the other. Abandoning, if not her revolutionary hope, at least her conviction that the trade unions could be the embodiment of this hope, her lament is a resignation as much as it unwittingly points to a problem of power that would become an issue in her later work:

The problem is: to find some way of forming an organisation that does not engender a bureaucracy. For bureaucracy always betrays. And an unorganised action remains pure, but fails. The 'revolutionary syndicalists' are against bureaucracy, I know. But syndicalism is itself bureaucratic! And even the revolutionary syndicalists, discouraged, have wound up by coming to terms with the bureaucracy.<sup>137</sup>

Weil's problem with bureaucracy (and trade unions and political parties) is that they inevitably amount to dictatorship by the elite. A point which will become more obvious to Weil in *Oppression and Liberty* is that somebody (or an organisation) always has power and – more importantly – somebody or an organisation needs to have power. How it is wielded is the real problem. Given these circumstances and her beliefs, Weil is compelled to reject any responsibility in organised revolutionary acts, although she did not resign her principled solidarity with the workers' movement,

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<sup>136</sup> 'Pour que le pouvoir puisse passer effectivement aux travailleurs, ceux-ci doivent s'unir, non pas du lien imaginaire que crée la communauté des opinions, mais du lien réel que crée la communauté de la fonction productrice'. Simone Weil, 'Après la mort du Comité 22', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 74.

<sup>137</sup> Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, pp. 150-151

whenever it became manifest as the spontaneous protest of the masses. In March 1934,

Weil wrote to Simone Pétrement:

I have decided to withdraw entirely from any kind of political activity, except for theoretical work. That does not absolutely exclude possible participation in a great spontaneous movement of the masses (in the ranks, as a soldier), but I don't want any responsibility, no matter how slight, or even indirect, because I am certain that all the blood that will be shed will be shed in vain, and that we are beaten in advance.<sup>138</sup>

From that time on, Weil retreats from all organised political activity and concentrates on theoretical research. On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1934, she takes an unpaid leave of absence to start working in December of the same year at an unskilled factory job.

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<sup>138</sup> Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, p. 198.

## 2.2 Weil and *Syndicalisme*

The Depression of the early 1930s, although it came to France later than to the more developed industrial and financial nations, collapsed the tenuous promises of a revived French syndicalist political base. Pressure for unification of the C.G.T. and C.G.T.U. came from the indisputable fact that syndicalism had been robbed of its illusions on both ends: neither revolution nor respectability was within its grasp. Whilst the C.G.T.U. relished the opportunity to exploit class antagonisms aggravated by the crisis, the C.G.T. turned to America's New Deal and Belgium's *Plan du travail* for models of structural reform that could unite the *syndical* interests with those of the middle class. However, the common denominator of their concern was negative: the ascent of crypto-fascist leagues in France and the growing threat of National Socialism in Germany. These issues, the reunification of *syndicalisme*, its policies toward the government, the *patronat*, and the fascist threat, were only gradually coming into focus under the impact of the Depression when Weil entered the *syndicaliste* movement in 1931.

During this period Weil's hope for social change still centres on the unions rather than political parties, despite her growing apathy. She still believes that only a revolution prepared and carried out by the trade union organisations could be a genuine revolution. In an article written three months later titled, *Après la mort du Comité 22*,<sup>139</sup> Weil proposes that the groups based on occupations are the only ones that could really change society. Reinterpreting a definite Marx position, she suggests:

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<sup>139</sup> *After the death of the Committee of the 22.*

Experience has shown that a revolutionary party can effectively, according to Marx's formula, take possession of the bureaucratic and military machinery, but not to smash it. For power to really pass into the hands of the workers they would have to unite, not through the imaginary ties created by the community of opinion but through the real ties created by the community of their productive function.<sup>140</sup>

The Marxist line of thinking, from which Weil oscillates, is tenuous at times because Weil focuses on the positive aspect for a societal structure after the revolution. She needed to invigorate the revolutionary trade unionists, who she felt needed to wage the revolutionary struggle inside the factories and on the corporate level, while also attempting to retain a critical viewpoint that is not based on strict orthodox Marxist ideology. But Weil is arguing for a hierarchal Marxist society, asserting that those who produce things, i.e. manual workers, should be at the top of the hierarchy. One of the problems with Marxism is that Marx does not recognise that 'smashing the bureaucracy' is only half the battle when people need hospitals, schools and services the day after the revolution. Weil does not make specific reference to these services because she recognises these citizens' needs distinguishes her from Marx. What both Weil and Marx fail to recognise is that hierarchies are necessary structures to organise societies (clubs, schools, councils, governments) and that the hierarchal nature of these structures should not diminish the participation and rights of people below (or above). Communism is an example of an anarchic structure that devolved almost immediately into a hierarchal structure, ruled by the party elite. Weil does recognise this feature, yet later insists that an anarchic decentralised system should form the basis of a revolution. Maybe not specifically stemming from this above communist example, but

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<sup>140</sup> 'Néanmoins, l'expérience a montré qu'un parti révolutionnaire peut bien, selon la formule de Marx, s'emparer, de la machine bureaucratique et militaire, mais non pas briser. Pour que le pouvoir puisse passer effectivement aux travailleurs, ceux-ci doivent s'unir, non pas du lien imaginaire que crée la communauté des opinions, mais du lien réel que crée la communauté de la fonction productrice'. Simone Weil, 'Après la mort du Comité 22', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 74.

transformation of anarchic structures to hierarchal is the reason she condemns the bureaucratic, trade unionist and political party structures to failure.

From the start of her trade union engagement, Weil was committed to unity and attempted to organise meetings at Le Puy between militants of the C.G.T. and the C.G.T.U. to band together trade unionists of all the different tendencies. Her activities on behalf of the unemployed at Le Puy drew a great deal of criticism, especially from her school administration. Early in her Le Puy period, she considers joining a political party in addition to the membership she already held in the C.G.T. union. However, by December 1931 it could be argued that Weil had only contempt for political, organised parties. A visit to a mine marked a new interest in, and emphasis on, technology. A revolutionary approach to technology and the conditions it engendered, like uncritical thinking in a production line, is necessary to re-establish the workers' control over work because where '[m]an is forced to intervene in this struggle of gigantic forces he is crushed'.<sup>141</sup> For workers to re-establish control over their working conditions, Weil believes that they have to gain control of their minds while working. That means understanding the processes, being involved in the decision-making and be given opportunities to engage in problem solving. For Weil, political change only replaces one repressive regime by another, and because technology functioned as another layer of oppressive capitalism, it therefore required theoretical attention. Weil is concerned with the oppressive nature of technology because it removes man from the central role of production. Despite machines doing the work, man is now a slave to the machine in terms of maintenance or loading and unloading; the machine can work without man, but man cannot work without the machine in the modern capitalist

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<sup>141</sup> 'L'homme, contraint d'intervenir dans cette lutte de forces gigantesques, y est écrasé'. Simone Weil, 'Après la visite d'une mine', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 96.

system. Most concerning for Weil is that the automated machine denies man the important ability to think while working. A man who cannot think at work, while labouring long hours in service of a machine, is unable to think outside of work. Weil's activities and belief in the trade unions system would always struggle to counteract such machinations.

Although generally in agreement with the Twenty-Two group, Weil understood the objections that certain trade unionists, whether in the C.G.T. or the C.G.T.U., brought against them. Between the C.G.T. and the C.G.T.U. there existed not only a factual division but also a divergence of principles, in that the C.G.T. defended trade union independence from the political parties while the C.G.T.U. was in favour of a close connection between trade unionism and political parties. Although its activity was closely tied to the programme of the Communist party, the C.G.T.U. waged the class struggle more energetically than the C.G.T., which was progressively reformist. The disintegration of Weil's hope that syndicalism could herald the tangible social change is borne out in her thinking at the time. Supporting trade union independence (C.G.T.) and the class struggle (C.G.T.U.), she envisages that a merger between the two unions is not actually a capitulation of doctrines or an absorption of the central movements by the other. In Paris, the movement for unity was having its difficulties. In November 1931 the national congress of the C.G.T.U. was held in the Magic-City Hall. If the congress of the C.G.T. had already largely rejected the proposals of the Twenty-Two, the C.G.T.U.'s congress was even harsher towards them. Weil thus set about attempting to organise an inter-trade union group at Le Puy. The meeting decided to form an inter-union group and established certain rules, whose observation could in the future favour unity. They promised above all to fight any attempt to form a new trade union where there already was a union, whatever its

tendency: Confederated, United, or Independent, and where there was none, they advocated the formation of a single union that would freely decide upon its orientation.

Weil wrote a full account of this meeting, published in November in 1931 in *L'Effort*, titled, *La marche vers l'unité syndicale une réunion intersyndicale au Puy*.<sup>142</sup> In this article, when describing how the initiative for this meeting had been taken by militants from three different trade union groups, Weil does not mention her own role. The end of this article makes it evident that she is aware of the difficulties that the amalgamated union group would have to overcome. She foresaw them even more clearly since she already knew when she wrote the article of the decisions at Magic-City. It is evident that she is determined to continue the fight for unity, despite the opposition of the trade union bureaucrats. 'Unity at the top having proved unrealisable, [so] the members of the rank and file are now compelled to take the job into their own hands'.<sup>143</sup> Of course she does not want to weaken the existing organisations, as she states:

one must respect the existing trade union organisations, which are the most precious conquest of the working-class movement; and one must realise unity without the support of these organisations or even, in many instances, despite them. This seemingly insoluble problem must be solved by the working class, or else it will be condemned to disappear as a revolutionary force.<sup>144</sup>

In considering the conditions for a real revolution, Weil regards the workers' ability to attain knowledge and an understanding of culture as vitally important. What Weil means when she argues for a cultural education or a scientific education, or other form

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<sup>142</sup> *The march towards union unity an inter-union meeting in Puy*.

<sup>143</sup> 'L'unité par le sommet étant apparue comme irréalisable, les syndiqués de la base vont se trouver contraints de pendre la tâche en main eux-mêmes'. Simone Weil, 'La marche vers l'unité syndicale une réunion intersyndicale au Puy', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 63.

<sup>144</sup> 'Il faut respecter les organisations syndicales existantes, qui sont la plus précieuse conquête du mouvement ouvrier; et il faut réaliser l'unité sans l'appui de ces organisations, ou même, en bien de cas, malgré elles'. Simone Weil, 'La marche vers l'unité syndicale une réunion intersyndicale au Puy', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 63.

of education, is the attainment of knowledge that workers can use to understand and challenge the power that management and capitalism monopolise. She presents her ideas on this subject in an article published by *L'Effort* in December 1931 entitled, *La vie syndicale: en marge du Comité d'Études*.<sup>145</sup> Recalling the failure of the peoples' universities before the First World War, she asked, 'is this a reason to condemn all work of this kind? On the contrary, the important thing is to distinguish, among the attempts at working-class culture, those that are conducted in such a way as to strengthen the ascendancy of the intellectuals over the workers, and those conducted in such a way as to free the workers from this domination'.<sup>146</sup> In this article Weil articulates the priests role in the origins of human culture. Weil, I believe, is not lamenting religion's role, nor the ecclesiastical education that priests received, but that the disparity between what uneducated workers might know in relation to a learned, educated priest leads to a distinction between people: a superiority of knowledge.

At all times, the ability to handle words has seemed to men something miraculous. [...] These privileged beings are priests; and the fact that their formulas are bereft of effectiveness does not prevent them from being regarded as possessing an essence superior to those who know how to act. This domination of those who know how to handle words over those who know how to handle things is rediscovered at every stage of human history. [...] These assemblers of words whether priests or intellectuals have always been on the side of the ruling class, on the side of the exploiters against the producers.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> *Union life: on the sidelines of the Committee of Studies*.

<sup>146</sup> 'Est-ce une raison pour condamner tout travail de cet ordre? Il importe plutôt de distinguer, parmi les tentatives de culture ouvrière, celles qui sont conduites de manière à dégager les ouvriers de cette entreprise'. Simone Weil, 'La vie syndicale: en marge du Comité d'études', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 68.

<sup>147</sup> 'De tout temps la faculté de manier les mots a semblé aux hommes quelque chose de miraculeux. [...] Ces êtres privilégiés, ce sont les pètrés; et le fait que leurs formules sont absolument dépourvues d'efficacité ne les empêche pas d'être considérés comme étant d'une essence supérieure à ceux qui savent agir. Cette domination de ceux qui savent manier les mots sur ceux qui savent manier les choses se retrouve à chaque étape de l'histoire humaine. [...] Ces assembleurs de mots pètrés ou intellectuels ont toujours été du côté de la classe dominant, du côté des exploiters contre les producteurs'. Simone Weil, 'La vie syndicale: en marge du Comité d'études', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 69.



The problem is not that a priest or intellectual might know more than a worker, but that a broader utility of language signifies greater respect; while maybe knowing little, the sophist still appears knowledgeable. Where she will later amend this line of argument regarding language and the knowledge of language in *Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie*,<sup>148</sup> we should observe that she believes that the proletariat should not have contempt for those who can wield language. Rather, they should appropriate its use as a revolutionary weapon. For her, this approach is the true revolution.

This respect accorded language and the men who are best able to use it has been indispensable to human progress. Without it, men would have remained blind and routine when doing the necessary work of life; it is out of religion that all human thought has developed, including the most positive form of science. So, it is not by inspiring them with contempt for culture, described here as bourgeois, that the workers can be freed from the intellectuals' domination. Certainly, this superiority accorded up until now to intellectuals over producers, through a convention that has been indispensable to human development, must now be absolutely rejected by the workers. Yet this does not mean that the workers must reject the heritage of human culture; it means that they must prepare to take possession of it, as they must prepare themselves to take possession of the entire heritage from previous generations. Indeed, this act of taking possession is the revolution.<sup>149</sup>

Weil agrees with Marx on the empowerment of workers through education and language acquisition, though Marx's position is not as evolved as Weil's. However, Marx and Weil differ on their understandings of intellectual and manual labour. He argues that the division of intellectual and manual labour distinguishes people unequally, and that the material position should be erased, while Weil advocates for a unification. If Weil could enact her theory of labour, intellectual thinking would inform manual labour. Both, however, are concerned with the monopolisation of

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<sup>148</sup> *Let us not start the Trojan War again.*

<sup>149</sup> 'Ce respect accordé au langage et aux hommes qui sont le mieux capables de s'en servir a été indispensable au progrès humain. Sans ce respect, les hommes en seraient restés à la pratique aveugle et routinière des travaux indispensables à la vie. C'est à partir de la religion que s'est développée toute la pensée humaine, y compris la science la plus positive. Aussi n'est-ce pas en leur inspirant le mépris de la culture, qualifiée à cet effet de bourgeoise, qu'il faut libérer les travailleurs de la domination des intellectuels. Certes, cette supériorité accordée jusqu'ici aux intellectuels sur les producteurs par une convention qui a été indispensable au développement humain doit leur être à présent absolument refusée. Mais cela ne signifie pas que les travailleurs doivent se préparer à en prendre possession, comme ils doivent se préparer à en prendre possession de tout l'héritage de générations antérieures. Cette prise de possession, c'est la Révolution elle-même'. Simone Weil, 'La vie syndicale: en marge du Comité d'études', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 69.

power and information that they believe arises from intellectual activities from the same article, Weil surmises that:

In Marx's eyes, perhaps the most important conquest of the proletarian revolution should be the abolition of what he calls 'the degrading division of work into intellectual and manual work'. The abolition of this degrading division can and must be achieved, and we must prepare for it now. To this end we must, first, give the workers the ability to handle language and especially the written language.<sup>150</sup>

Not only is Weil teaching her courses at the lycée, doing the preparatory work for miners' courses at the Saint-Etienne Labour Exchange, carrying on her trade union activities at Le Puy, taking her trips to Saint-Etienne and sending in articles to *L'Effort*, she also finds the time to write an article for the November bulletin of the National Union of Public-School Teachers in France and the Colonies section at Haute-Loire. In an article entitled, *Réflexions concernant la crise économique*,<sup>151</sup> Weil maintains that 'the crisis has destroyed those advantages which the workers believed they had acquired',<sup>152</sup> but that the proletariat should continue the class struggle by instituting a policy of collaboration as 'the idea of possible collaboration between classes is not ruined by the crisis'.<sup>153</sup> However, far removed from a conciliatory stance on class struggle, the Twenty-Two were racked by dissension after the Japy Congress. Their differences had always been a threat, owing to the different loyalties within the group

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<sup>150</sup> 'Aux yeux de Marx, la conquête la plus importante peut-être de la Révolution prolétarienne devait être l'abolition de ce qu'il nommait la division dégradante du travail en travail intellectuel et travail manuel. L'abolition de cette division dégradante, l'on peut et l'on doit la préparer dès maintenant. Il faut, à cet effet, tout d'abord donner aux ouvriers le pouvoir de manier le langage, et en particulier le langage écrit. Simone Weil, 'La vie syndicale: en marge du Comité d'études', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 69.

<sup>151</sup> *Reflections concerning the economic crisis.*

<sup>152</sup> 'Du jour au lendemain, la crise a réduit à néant ces avantages que les travailleurs croyaient acquis; il apparaît clairement à présent que ces améliorations éphémères dans la vie du travailleur ne constituaient pas un progrès accompli par les ouvriers, mais simplement un aspect provisoire d'une certaine politique patronale'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions concernant la crise économique', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 65-66.

<sup>153</sup> 'Cependant l'idée d'une collaboration possible entre les classes ne se trouve pas ruinée du fait de la crise; elle trouve dans la crise de nouveaux arguments'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions concernant la crise économique', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 66.

and it became clear that the Committee of Twenty-Two was doomed to disappear. The Committee did soon break up. At a meeting held in late November 1931, the C.G.T. and C.G.T.U. members both refused to support the original position taken by the Twenty-Two and each resumed its freedom of action. The dilution of the Twenty-Two did not mean the end of Weil's struggle for trade union unification. She thought that the efforts to realise unity among the rank and file should now be intensified. However, despite working to prepare for the second inter-union meeting, which took place in Le Puy in late December, an opportunity presented itself: the events at Le Puy.

Advocating for assistance for the unemployed in Le Puy, Weil wrote *Une nouvelle étape dans le mouvement des chômeurs*<sup>154</sup> communique, which sought 'a soup kitchen to be created and municipal works to be opened',<sup>155</sup> the 'engagement of foreign unemployed at the municipal works'<sup>156</sup> and that the unemployed 'must force the municipality to take measures on behalf of women, old people and children'.<sup>157</sup> Despite singing the Internationale as they paraded through the street, Weil dismissed any political overtures on the part of the unemployed, stating, 'the Internationale is not a political song; it is the song of those workers who refuse to be slaves of the profiteers'.<sup>158</sup> To a conservative French society this was unabashed communism. The

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<sup>154</sup> *A new stage in the movement of the unemployed.*

<sup>155</sup> 'Un bouillon populaire est créé; un chantier municipal est ouvert'. Simone Weil, 'Une nouvelle étape dans le mouvement des chômeurs', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 76.

<sup>156</sup> 'Une autre concession arrachée par la magnifique solidarité des chômeurs, c'est la promesse formelle d'embaucher, dans les chantiers municipaux, les chômeurs étrangers'. Simone Weil, 'Une nouvelle étape dans le mouvement des chômeurs', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 77.

<sup>157</sup> 'Ils doivent contraindre la municipalité à prendre des mesures en faveur des femmes, des vieillards, des enfants, et des mesures qui ne se réduisent pas à de simples annonces'. Simone Weil, 'Une nouvelle étape dans le mouvement des chômeurs', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 77.

<sup>158</sup> 'Mais l'Internationale n'est pas un chant politique; c'est le chant des travailleurs qui refusent d'être esclaves des profiteurs'. Simone Weil, 'Une nouvelle étape dans le mouvement des chômeurs', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 77.

Mayor, however, conceded to ‘raise the wage, perhaps even to grant the salary of twenty-five francs a day demanded by the unemployed’,<sup>159</sup> while ‘their [insistence] on its being fulfilled’<sup>160</sup> compounded its perception as communist socialism. This is not evidence alone of Weil’s socialist tendencies, but it is evident that Weil had been thinking according to the Left tradition. It was also a critical point in Weil’s syndicalism, as not only did she protest, she became even more adamant.

In January 1932, *La Tribune* published a second communiqué from the Committee of the Unemployed, titled, *Une histoire instructive*,<sup>161</sup> again written but unsigned by Weil. This time, even harsher in its tone and demands, it states that the unemployed are tired of being exploited in being ‘deigned to permit them to engage in exhausting work for a derisory salary’.<sup>162</sup> Weil suggests that the mayor was ‘frightened and that afterward, he failed to keep his word’<sup>163</sup> by juxtaposing, without foundation, that ‘the morality of the elite is undoubtedly very different from the morality of the workers, who are naive enough to regard courage and loyalty as two virtues that can be transgressed only at the cost of dishonour’.<sup>164</sup> Originally distancing

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<sup>159</sup> ‘Le maire a fait une nouvelle concession. Il a promis d’élever le salaire, et peut-être même d’accorder le salaire de vingt-cinq francs par jour réclamé par les chômeurs. Les chômeurs prendront acte de cette promesse; ils en arracheront l’application’. Simone Weil, ‘Une nouvelle étape dans le mouvement des chômeurs’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 77.

<sup>160</sup> ‘Le maire a fait une nouvelle concession. Il a promis d’élever le salaire, et peut-être même d’accorder le salaire de vingt-cinq francs par jour réclamé par les chômeurs. Les chômeurs prendront acte de cette promesse; ils en arracheront l’application’. Simone Weil, ‘Une nouvelle étape dans le mouvement des chômeurs’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 77.

<sup>161</sup> *An informative story*.

<sup>162</sup> ‘Daignait leur permettre de se livrer à un labeur épuisant pour un salaire dérisoire’. Simone Weil, ‘Une histoire instructive’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 78.

<sup>163</sup> ‘[Il a eu] peur, et que, par la suite, il a manqué à sa parole’. Simone Weil, ‘Une histoire instructive’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 78.

<sup>164</sup> ‘La morale de l’élite est sans doute bien différente de la morale des travailleurs, qui sont assez naïfs pour regarder le courage et loyauté comme des vertus auxquelles on ne saurait manquer sans déshonneur’. Simone Weil, ‘Une histoire instructive’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 78-79.

herself from the rhetoric of the Left, Weil makes a significant leap from syndicalist organiser to an implicit threat of physical force. Stating, ‘if the unemployed are forced to recognise that they can only obtain something insofar as they make people tremble, they will learn this lesson well’.<sup>165</sup> Previously Weil wrote of force in terms of industrial force to crush man and suggested, without complete explanation, of a natural force. Her pronouncement in Le Puy marks a transition in Weil’s thinking. Instead of adhering to pacifist and syndicalist ideals, where the revolution is heralded through education, Weil is seduced by a more physical action. Acknowledging interpersonal force, she states that ‘between the unemployed and the ruling class there are only relations of force’.<sup>166</sup> This is an early expression that Weil recognises that force can be a response to counteract force: she concludes that ‘perhaps someday the working class will thank them by showing them that it has learned its lesson’.<sup>167</sup> The lessons she is thankful for is the realisation that ‘these relations of force are sometimes disguised by the public powers with fine appearances; sometimes, they are left naked, and then they educate the working class more effectively than anyone ever can’.<sup>168</sup> By this she means that public officials and politicians may appear to care, but when they are confronted with people on the street, in this instance, their empathy recedes. Her bombastic language can be downplayed, as she is writing the communique for a

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<sup>165</sup> ‘Si l’on oblique les chômeurs à reconnaître qu’ils ne peuvent obtenir quelque chose que dans la mesure où ils font trembler, ils se le tiendront pour dit’. Simone Weil, ‘Une histoire instructive’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 79.

<sup>166</sup> ‘Il n’y a entre eux et la classe dominante que des rapports de force’. Simone Weil, ‘Une histoire instructive’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 79.

<sup>167</sup> ‘Peut-être un jour la classe ouvrière sera-t-elle à même de les remercier en leur montrant qu’elle a compris la leçon’. Simone Weil, ‘Une histoire instructive’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 79.

<sup>168</sup> ‘Ces rapports de force, parfois les Pouvoirs publics les déguisent sous de belles apparences; parfois ils les laissent à nu, et ils font alors mieux que n’importe qui l’éducation de la classe ouvrière’. Simone Weil, ‘Une histoire instructive’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 79.

collective, but this is the first sign that Weil will eventually condone the overt use of violence, as we will see in chapter four of this thesis.

During the Le Puy period Weil is not yet entirely hostile to joining a political party, though she considered whether it was necessary to join both a union and a party. Her conviction is still that ‘the only action that is likely to be effective is for activists to give the trade union movement, wherever they can, its true character’.<sup>169</sup> In *Après la mort du Comité des 22*, an article published in *L’Effort* in early January 1932, Weil seems to demonstrate quite clearly that from 1931 onwards she had only contempt for the activities of the political parties.

Traditionally, those who desire the advent of this or that form of society or preservation of the existing form, are grouped according to their mutual affinities. At all times, the groups thus formed, under the name of parties or under other names, have, depending on the occasion, allied, spared or passionately fought. Alliances and fighting ghosts. Such groupings may, if they are highly disciplined, lead the movements that excite society in various senses; they never create them. They cannot bite on the real constitution of society. Behind these groups there are others who themselves does not rely on the compliance of opinions, but, unlike the first, regulate or constitute the social order. These groups are those that relate in any way to the production.<sup>170</sup>

Viewing the method of production as a greater issue than whether the members of the C.G.T.U. were independent of the Communist party or if the Communists were only a minority, organised under the name of M.O.R. (*Minorité Oppositionnelle révolutionnaire*<sup>171</sup>), the contacts that Weil had among the C.G.T. and the C.G.T.U.

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<sup>169</sup> ‘Dans ces conditions, la seule action susceptible d’efficacité consiste pour les militants à donner au mouvement syndical, partout où ils le peuvent, son caractère véritable’. Simone Weil, ‘Après la mort du Comité des 22’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 74.

<sup>170</sup> ‘De tout temps, ceux qui désirent l’avènement de telle ou telle forme de société, ou la conservation de la forme existante, se sont groupés conformément à leurs affinités mutuelles. De tout temps, les groupements ainsi formés, sous le nom de partis ou sous d’autres noms, se sont, selon l’occasion, alliés, ménagés ou passionnément combattus. Alliances et combats de fantômes. De tels groupements peuvent, s’ils sont fortement disciplinés, se mettre à la tête des mouvements qui agitent la société en divers sens; ils ne les créent jamais. Ils ne peuvent mordre sur la constitution réelle de la société. Derrière ces groupements, il en existe d’autres qui, eux, ne reposent aucunement sur la conformité des opinions, mais qui, contrairement aux premiers, règlent ou constituent l’ordre social. Ces groupements, ce sont ceux qui se rapportent de quelque manière à la production’. Simone Weil, ‘Après la mort du Comité des 22’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 71-72.

<sup>171</sup> Revolutionary Oppositional Minority.

unions meant that through the United Federation of Miners at Saint-Etienne Weil obtained the authorisation to visit a mine. A former shop steward permitted Weil to go down into a small artisan-type mine in Sardou near Rive-de-Gier where she experiences using a pickaxe and a compressed-air drill. She publishes an article in *L'Effort* in March 1932 entitled, *Après la visite d'une mine*<sup>172</sup> that details her experience. She described the miner's condition in terms of the tool that he uses, or rather the tool that he serves. Where man was once close to source, since the advances in technology, the relationship is now between 'coal and the compressed air',<sup>173</sup> and where 'forced to intervene in this struggle between gigantic forces, man is crushed'.<sup>174</sup>

She concludes that

[i]t will not be enough for a miner to expropriate the companies to become the master of the mine. The political and economic revolutions will become real only if they are extended into a technical revolution that will re-establish, within the mine and the factory, the domination that it is the worker's function to exercise over the conditions of work.<sup>175</sup>

Here again we encounter the problem that concerns her more than any other: under what conditions could a revolution really be effective? Political changes are a trifling matter in that they only achieve to replace one form of oppression with another. In recognising that an underlying oppression remains, even as politics and especially the production methods advance, Weil extracts the main topics for later work. In an article published by *L'Effort* in March 1932, entitled, *Le capital et l'ouvrier*,<sup>176</sup> she criticises

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<sup>172</sup> *After visiting a mine.*

<sup>173</sup> 'Le charbon et l'air comprimé'. Simone Weil, 'Après la visite d'une mine', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 96.

<sup>174</sup> 'Contraint d'intervenir dans cette lutte de forces gigantesques, y est écrasé'. Simone Weil, 'Après la visite d'une mine', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 96.

<sup>175</sup> 'Il ne suffira pas au mineur d'exproprier les Compagnies pour devenir maître de la mine. La révolution politique, la révolution économique ne deviendront réelles qu'à la condition d'être prolongées par une révolution technique, qui établira à l'intérieur même de la mine et de l'usine, la domination que le travailleur a pour fonction d'exercer sur les conditions du travail'. Simone Weil, 'Après la visite d'une mine', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 97.

<sup>176</sup> *Capital and the worker.*

technology in general not only certain machines. She described technology as the most oppressive feature of capitalism.

Capitalism is apparently defined by the fact that the worker is subject to a material capital composed of instruments and raw materials, which the capitalist is only representing. The capitalist regime consists in the fact that the relationship between the worker and the means of work has been reversed; the worker, instead of dominating them, is dominated by them.<sup>177</sup>

Still yet to define who the capitalists were, shopkeepers or steel moguls, the nature by which she laments their existence is disconcerting. Still adhering to the Marxist ideology, she quotes:

The machine, Marx says, does not leave anything more to man than the purely mechanical role of a motive force, while it imparts to him the new task of supervising the machine [...]. In manufacture and handicrafts, the worker makes use of his tools; in the factory, he serves the machine.<sup>178</sup>

Despite demonstrating that one must enact a profound transformation of technology, in the same article she also argues that technology relates to a collective mode of production that formidably augments the productivity of human labour. It is therefore necessary ‘to re-establish the worker’s domination over the conditions of work without destroying the collective form that capitalism has stamped on production’.<sup>179</sup> The solution to this problem ‘is the complete revolution’.<sup>180</sup> Without a comprehensive articulation of a complete revolution, it’s outcomes must be prepared to, not only raise

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<sup>177</sup> ‘Le capitalisme se définit en apparence par le fait que l’ouvrier est soumis à un capital matériel composé d’instruments et de matières premières, que le capitaliste ne fait que représenter. Le régime capitaliste consiste en ce que les rapports entre le travailleur et les moyens de travail se renversent: le travailleur au lieu de les dominer est dominé par eux’. Simone Weil, ‘Le capital et l’ouvrier’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 92.

<sup>178</sup> ‘La machine, dit Marx, ne laisse plus à l’homme que le rôle purement mécanique de force motrice, en même temps qu’elle lui départit le travail nouveau de surveiller la machine [...]. Dans la manufacture et le métier, l’ouvrier se sert de l’outil; à la fabrique, il sert la machine’. Simone Weil, ‘Le capital et l’ouvrier’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 94.

<sup>179</sup> ‘Rétablir la domination du travailleur sur les conditions de travail sans détruire la forme collective que le capitalisme a imprimée à la production’. Simone Weil, ‘Le capital et l’ouvrier’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 94.

<sup>180</sup> ‘C’est la Révolution tout entière’. Simone Weil, ‘Le capital et l’ouvrier’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 94.



the level of the proletariat's culture and knowledge, as Weil attempted, but also insist on a theoretical inquiry into the problem that, if not solved before or during the revolution, must be revisited again after the revolution. The question that the revolutionary faces is not how to overturn the government, but rather, how to envisage and create a form of organisation so that the revolution does not prove futile? During this year at Le Puy, Weil's reflections always return to this: one must analyse the real causes of oppression to be able to judge how and by what method oppression can be eliminated or reduced in other ways than mere appearances. So long as this work of analysis is not done, it seems reckless to work for a revolution that entails inevitable evils juxtaposed against advantages that are far from certain. This obstacle is lamented in January 1932, when she writes in an article, *Les modes d'exploitation*<sup>181</sup> that '[s]ince there are exploited people, there are people who revolt. These rebels have killed, have been killed; yet they have neither destroyed exploitation nor did they even generally mitigate it. It is not enough to revolt against a social order based on oppression; one must change it, and one cannot change it without knowing it'.<sup>182</sup> It is this distinction between the day before the revolution and the mitigation of the effects that caused the revolution the day after that is the defining separation of Weil and Marx at this point.

On the death of Briand<sup>183</sup> some professors had been assigned the task of explaining France's efforts toward peace to their pupils. They avoided giving Weil this task as it was known that she did not approve of France's foreign policy. She had expressed her opinion in an article published in *L'Effort* in February 1932, entitled, *La*

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<sup>181</sup> Modes of exploitation.

<sup>182</sup> 'Depuis qu'il y a des exploités, il y a des révoltés. Ces révoltés ont tué, se sont fait tuer; ils n'ont ni ne détruit ni même le plus souvent fait adoucir l'exploitation. Il ne suffit pas de se soulever contre un ordre social fondé sur l'oppression, il faut le changer, et on ne peut le changer sans le connaître'. Simone Weil, 'Les modes d'exploitation', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 94.

<sup>183</sup> Aristide Briand was a French statesman who served eleven terms as Prime Minister of France.

*Conférence du désarmement*.<sup>184</sup> In the article, she criticises both the French memorandum to the Conference for Disarmament and Litvinov's speech at this same conference. France had proposed the creation of an international force at the service of the League of Nations, yet Weil was sceptical that this proposal ever had a chance of being adopted. Another French proposal seemed more serious to her, that of establishing rules to protect the civilian populations in case of war and aerial bombardment. But, in her view, this proposal only helped to increase the probability of war by guaranteeing the safety of governments and generals staff as 'during the last war, the planes, by tacit agreement, refrained from bombarding the [headquarters] of the enemy's army'.<sup>185</sup> She felt that everyone should be in danger if any one person was, and that equality of danger might mitigate against war. Weil certainly wanted peace above all and did not countenance a revolution brought on by the war. During her stay in Paris, she writes the article, *U.R.S.S. et Amérique*,<sup>186</sup> which is published in *L'Effort* in July 1932. In an interview, Stalin expresses admiration for American 'efficiency',<sup>187</sup> and especially their progression in industry and technique. Weil states that 'nowhere else has this subordination [of man to the machine] been pushed so far as in America'.<sup>188</sup> In merging the differences between the Fascists and Stalinists, Weil concludes that the capitalist system also worked for the collective. In the latter

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<sup>184</sup> *The conference on disarmament*.

<sup>185</sup> 'Déjà pendant la dernière guerre, les avions, par une convention tacite, s'abstenaient de bombarder le G.Q.G. de l'armée ennemie'. Simone Weil, 'La Conférence du désarmement', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 86.

<sup>186</sup> *USSR and America*.

<sup>187</sup> 'L'efficiency'. Simone Weil, 'U.R.S.S et Amérique', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 106.

<sup>188</sup> 'Subordination n'a été poussée à un aussi haut degré qu'en Amérique'. Simone Weil, 'U.R.S.S et Amérique', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 106.

situation, the work of the worker is used to develop the productive apparatus, which never ended due to competition. However, Weil states

[t]he fact that Stalin, on this issue which is at the Centre of the conflict between capital and labour, has abandoned Marx's point of view and has allowed himself to be seduced by the capitalist system in its most perfect form, this fact shows that the USSR is still far from possessing the foundations of a working-class culture.<sup>189</sup>

As Russia also engaged in the same form of capitalist competition, the only difference being that it could constrain its labourers from selling their labour elsewhere, Weil rejected war as an end and as a tool for the revolution. Secondly, by using the concept of bureaucratic oppression, Weil collapsed some of the differences between Russia and the capitalist system that were driven by competition, profits and relied upon a division of labour and man's subjugation by the machine and its production methods.

Once again, Weil is not restrained by the accepted polarities of her time. She rejects distinctions between fascists and Stalinists, and between capitalists and communists, because they are organised by hierarchal elite and oppress the worker using similar methods. Rejecting the permissibility of sacrificing the individual to the collective, she concludes that Stalin had abandoned Marx's point of view, having been seduced by the capitalist system in its most perfect form found in America. In this one article, we can find the distinguishing division between Weil, Marx and Stalin's Marxism: the value of the individual in society. Weil's last refuge of a real workers' revolution now lay in Germany, which she believes could surpass Russia's now-disintegrating revolution.

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<sup>189</sup> 'Le fait que Staline, sur cette question qui se trouve au centre du conflit entre capital et travail, a abandonné le point de vue de Marx et s'est laissé séduire par le système capitaliste sous sa forme la plus parfaite, ce fait montre que l'U.R.S.S. est encore loin de posséder les bases d'une culture ouvrière'. Simone Weil, 'U.R.S.S et Amérique', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 107.

## 2.3 Germany and Workers' Revolution

In the summer of 1932, Weil travels to Germany because, as Athanasios Moulakis states in *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-denial*, 'she thought that was where she would be able to witness the alternative between fascism and revolution in its most acute form—an alternative facing the entire world, she believed, given the economic crisis'.<sup>190</sup> The problem with Weil's decision to travel is that it is propelled by a fractured France, waning support for Russia, and, one could argue, a romanticised expectation that Germany would follow a similar path as the revolution in Russia. Essentially, she sought a cohesiveness and an idealist purity in Germany that was no longer available in either France or Russia. It should be considered whether any romanticisation of Germany led to a clouded vision, which impaired her view of fascism's rise. Writing in *La situation en Allemagne*,<sup>191</sup> Weil states that

the life of the German workers is of vital importance to us as well. For, in the breakdown of the capitalist economy that is threatening to wipe out the gains of the workers in the democratic countries and even in the USSR by a wave of reaction, our greatest hope lies in the German working class, the most mature, the most disciplined, the most educated in the world; and especially in the working-class youth of Germany.<sup>192</sup>

It is debatable if Weil's motives were 'to witness the alternatives between fascism and revolution', because if that was the case, then why not visit Italy, the seat of European fascism. A sentiment that must be remembered, particularly when it comes to her comments on Czechoslovakia in her later work, is that Weil's concern is not for the

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<sup>190</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 60.

<sup>191</sup> *The situation in Germany*.

<sup>192</sup> 'Et la vie des ouvriers allemands est d'importance vitale aussi pour nous. Car, dans cette décomposition de l'économie capitaliste qui menace de détruire, sous une vague de réaction, les conquêtes des ouvriers dans les pays démocratiques et peut-être même en U.R.S.S., notre plus grand espoir réside dans cette classe ouvrière allemande, la plus mûre, la plus disciplinée, la plus cultivée du monde; et plus particulièrement dans la jeunesse ouvrière d'Allemagne'. Simone Weil, 'La situation en Allemagne', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 145.

entire category of people. Her concern is for workers, and more pointedly, the proletariat. Weil's ideological leanings are clear, as she states:

And, despite the electoral defeats, if the crisis lasts and a revolutionary movement has not triumphed, the Hitlerian assault troops, behind which may be found from one day to the next the State apparatus, constitute a permanent threat of extermination for the best workers. But even apart from the possibility of a systematic extermination, the crisis itself, if it lasts for some time, will destroy generations of German workers, especially the younger generations.<sup>193</sup>

One must be tentative, because it appears that Weil is demarcating her difficulty with extermination as it will involve the death of the best workers and not simply extermination. It is clear that Weil is searching for something in Germany. We are meant to sense a projection of the Leninist expectation of 1919, that the European proletariat, with the German proletariat as the vanguard, will follow the Russian example and that the detonation of the October Revolution will ignite the European powder keg that is assumed to exist. But, according to Moulakis, 'Weil never voiced any great hopes for the probability of revolution in Germany. She merely noted that both fascism and revolution in Germany would have worldwide repercussions.'<sup>194</sup> Yet, we can read, contrary to Moulakis' statement, in Weil's own words.

The situation in Germany can therefore be called revolutionary. The most conspicuous sign is that the thoughts and conversations of everyone, including the eleven-year-old children, are constantly and naturally concerned with the problem of the social system, and with the seriousness and sincerity peculiar to the Germans.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> 'Et, en dépit des défaites électorales, tant que la crise durera et qu'un mouvement révolutionnaire n'aura pas triomphé, les troupes d'assaut hitlériennes, derrière lesquelles peut se trouver d'un jour à l'autre l'appareil d'État, constituent une menace permanente d'extermination pour les meilleurs ouvriers. Mais, même en dehors de l'éventualité d'une extermination systématique, la crise elle-même, pour peu qu'elle dure encore quelque temps, détruira des générations d'ouvriers allemands, et plus particulièrement les jeunes générations'. Simone Weil, 'La situation en Allemagne', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 145.

<sup>194</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 61.

<sup>195</sup> 'La situation, en Allemagne, peut donc être dite révolutionnaire. Le signe le plus apparent en est que les pensées et les conversations de chacun, y compris les enfants de onze ans, se portent constamment et naturellement sur le problème du régime social, et avec le sérieux et la sincérité propres aux Allemands'. Simone Weil, 'La situation en Allemagne', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 143.

Weil clearly had revolutionary hopes, yet she did also state that ‘there is no sign of the revolution in action’, which validates Moulakis’ statement. From the above passage, we can read that Weil appears to discover a Germany populous engaged with their social system and its problems, and that the most intimate decisions and personal perspectives engaged the ‘framework of society’.<sup>196</sup> It was the crisis that seemed to create that dependence of the individual on society that revolutionary theory talks about. In this theory, society is understood as the system of economic relations.

For almost every German, at least in the petty bourgeoisie and the working class, prospects, good or bad, that concern even the most intimate aspects of one’s own life are immediately formulated, especially if one is young, as prospects that concern the future of the regime. Thus, the amount of a people’s energy that ordinarily is almost entirely absorbed by various passions and the defence of private interests is, in present-day Germany, brought to bear on the economic and political relationships that constitute the very framework of society.<sup>197</sup>

Weil never grew tired of expressing enthusiasm for the young German workers’ love of sports and of nature, for their love of music and literature, extolling that ‘one cannot imagine anyone more courageous, more lucid, or more fraternal than the best of them, despite this life’.<sup>198</sup> The contact with nature is of great significance, as the experience of necessity, as natural beauty, or as athletic control over one’s own body. Weil’s writing combines a Rousseauian romanticism and the ideal of Stoic discipline, allowing her to transform the German working youth into a prefiguration of the

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<sup>196</sup> ‘Ainsi la somme d’énergie qui est d’ordinaire, dans un peuple, absorbée presque tout entière par diverses passions et par la défense des intérêts privés, se trouve, en ce moment, en Allemagne, porter sur les rapports économiques et politiques qui constituent l’ossature même de la société’. Simone Weil, ‘La situation en Allemagne’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 143.

<sup>197</sup> ‘Pour presque chaque Allemand, du moins dans la petite bourgeoisie et la classe ouvrière, les perspectives bonnes ou mauvaises concernant les aspects même les plus intimes de sa vie propre se formulent immédiatement, surtout s’il est jeune, comme des perspectives concernant l’avenir du régime. Ainsi la somme d’énergie qui est d’ordinaire, dans un peuple, absorbée presque tout entière par diverses passions et par la défense des intérêts privés, se trouve, en ce moment, en Allemagne, porter sur les rapports économiques et politiques qui constituent l’ossature même de la société’. Simone Weil, ‘La situation en Allemagne’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 143.

<sup>198</sup> ‘Rien n’est plus écrasant que la vie de dépendance, d’oisiveté et de privations qui est faite aux jeunes ouvriers allemands; et l’on ne peut rien imaginer de plus courageux, de plus lucide, de plus fraternel que les meilleurs d’entre eux, en dépit de cette vie’. Simone Weil, ‘La situation en Allemagne’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 145.

emancipated ideal socialist. She admires most of all the way the young Germans remained steadfast as they became disillusioned, that the best among them were not inclined to give themselves over to compensatory raptures.

They are not trying to forget; they are not complaining; in this hopeless situation, they are resisting every form of despair. In general, they are trying— some with more energy than others, and the best wholly achieve it—to build a fully human life within the inhuman situation in which they have been placed.<sup>199</sup>

Weil is convinced that if these young people survive the fascist onslaught, they would represent the brightest hope for the future of Europe. The problem though, is that her adulation did not strictly apply to the young as a category, which was merely a combination of the ‘German working class, which, as we saw, seemed to be the most cultured, most disciplined, and most mature working class in the world’.<sup>200</sup> This raises the question, how was this ideal personification of perfection not able to resist fascism, much less bring about the revolution? In this situation, who failed the analysis? Is Weil over-wrought by ideological shortcomings? There is a strong sense that she is subjugated, even allowing herself to be lulled, by an adoration of a labour revolution consisting of the German proletariat. Like the air compressor in the mine, Weil is being subjected to a greater machine and crushed by greater forces. Observing how events unfolded, a fermentation of unrest existed. Weil analysed the state of the society for a proletariat revolution and missed the seething undertones of a humiliating First World War defeat.

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<sup>199</sup> ‘Ils ne cherchent pas à s’étourdir; ils ne se plaignent pas; ils résistent, dans cette situation sans espoir, à toutes les formes de désespoir. Ils cherchent en général avec plus ou moins d’énergie, et les meilleurs y arrivent pleinement, à se faire, dans la condition inhumaine où ils sont placés, une vie humaine’. Simone Weil, ‘La situation en Allemagne’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 145.

<sup>200</sup> ‘Car, dans cette décomposition de l’économie capitaliste qui menace de détruire, sous une vague de réaction, les conquêtes des ouvriers dans les pays démocratiques et peut-être même en U.R.S.S., notre plus grand espoir réside dans cette classe ouvrière allemande, la plus mûre, la plus disciplinée, la plus cultivée du monde; et plus particulièrement dans la jeunesse ouvrière d’Allemagne’. Simone Weil, ‘La situation en Allemagne’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 145.

The problem that Weil witnessed is that in the economic crisis every single act of rebellion is challenged by the rigidity of the social structure. The problem of transforming the social order, as well as the means of production, confronts an inhomogeneous working class. For this reason, it is incapable of sustained and effective action. The only time that the rigidity of a social structure can be bended is when most of the social structure assents. Labour reform could not affect enough of the social structure, whereas re-establishing in the German state benefitted all.

Thus, even though the crisis forces almost every German worker or petit bourgeois to feel, at one time or another, that all his hopes are being dashed against the very structure of the social system, it does not by itself group the German people around the workers determined to transform that system.<sup>201</sup>

Weil recognises the lack of support, advancing the argument that the German people are not unified behind the German proletariat. Arguing from the perspective of a particular sect of the German workers, she states that the ‘German proletariat is also weakened by the number of office workers in it’.<sup>202</sup> These office workers, who, as a consequence of the ‘number that has been increased by German capitalism, in a period of prosperity, with the same crazy prodigality that it displayed in building its factories and modernising its machinery’,<sup>203</sup> consist of a very considerable segment of all wage earners and the unemployed. This presents, in Weil’s view, a serious weakness in popular solidarity. On the one hand, they were ‘not much inclined to join ranks with the factory workers’<sup>204</sup> and, on the other, they ‘are incapable, by the very nature of

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<sup>201</sup> ‘Ainsi la crise, si elle force presque chaque ouvrier ou petit-bourgeois allemand à sentir, un moment ou l’autre, toutes ses espérances se briser contre la structure même du système social, ne groupe pas par elle-même le peuple allemand autour des ouvriers résolus à transformer ce système’. Simone Weil, ‘La situation en Allemagne’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 144.

<sup>202</sup> ‘Le prolétariat allemand est affaibli aussi par le nombre des employés de bureau, nombre qui a été accru par le capitalisme allemand, en période de prospérité, avec la même prodigalité folle qu’il a mise à bâtir ses usines et à renouveler son outillage’. Simone Weil, ‘La situation en Allemagne’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 144.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> ‘Car les employés de bureau, qui forment ainsi une partie considérable des salariés et des chômeurs allemands, sont peu enclins à se serrer autour des ouvriers, et incapables, par leur métier même, de



their profession, of wanting to take their fate into their own hands'.<sup>205</sup> From this line of argument, we have to consider whether Weil assumed that all the German people agreed with the workers, and if office workers agreed with the proletariat too. In fact, the difficulty arises because she has also clearly distinguished between the office worker and the factory worker, the unemployed and the employed, the capitalist and the proletariat, exactly down the Marxist divide of intellectual and physical labour.

Moulakis states that 'there is fundamental and historical accuracy in her psychological observation that those who have fallen out of their class or who are threatened by such a fate are not inclined to join ranks with the class to which they have sunk'.<sup>206</sup> Neither Weil nor Moulakis ever advance the argument as to why they should join the ranks of the labour movement, they merely advocate that they should. This entrenched thinking, solely from the position of labour or the proletariat, is a defining touchstone for Weil. Sometimes Weil does write of a German people. But in these rare instances, it is to lament why people do not support the proletariat. When she does write of the proletariat, Weil does not include office workers, the employed and certainly not any version of her understanding of capitalists. Echoing a sentiment of my argument, Moulakis states, '[i]t thus becomes clear that Weil shared the vulgar Marxist prejudice against the tertiary sector of the economy'.<sup>207</sup> The point where she and Marx differ is that any movement, set in motion by the crisis, is a concrete manifestation of the dialectic of weakness and strength, of employed and unemployed, rich and poor, of capital and labour. The matter is greatly confused when Weil insists that 'spontaneous struggle has always proved itself to be ineffective, and organised

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vouloir prendre leur sort en leurs propres main'. Simone Weil, 'La situation en Allemagne', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 144.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 66.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

action almost automatically secretes an administrative apparatus which, sooner or later, becomes oppressive'.<sup>208</sup> The distinct problem that faces Weil at his point is that nothing can be started or sustained that is not ineffective or oppressive. It is difficult not to agree with Weil on these points. Yet it is also confusing as to how one might proceed. According to Weil, the weaknesses at the foundation can be remedied only by strong organisation, but this is fraught with problems.

[C]onversely, an uprising of the masses left in the factories is the only thing that can really endanger the bourgeoisie. The existence of a strong revolutionary organisation, therefore, is a nearly decisive factor. But for a revolutionary organisation to be said to be strong, the phenomenon that reduces the proletariat to impotence in times of crisis must not be reflected in the organisation, or reflected in it only to a very slight degree.<sup>209</sup>

Weil examines the organisations of the workers' movement according to this criterion. These organisations did not appear to be able to stem the dissolution of demoralised individuals and engender effective action. In her view, the starting points of organisational action lie, on the one hand, in the emotional reaction of the masses to the crisis and, on the other, in the existence of pockets of the population both capable and determined to act. If Weil's analysis is correct, she has greatly reduced the avenues and scope for effective organisations or movements that might change a given situation. Weil's hope for a revolution in Germany lay in a spontaneous action of the masses that did not devolve into an oppressive nature, and her assurances of success were slight indeed:

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<sup>208</sup> 'La lutte spontanée s'est toujours révélée impuissante, et l'action organisée secrète en quelque sorte automatiquement un appareil de direction qui, tôt ou tard, devient oppressif'. Simone Weil, 'Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 279.

<sup>209</sup> 'Ce déplacement de l'axe du mouvement révolutionnaire permet, seul, à la bourgeoisie de traverser une crise sans y sombrer; et inversement, seul, un soulèvement des masses demeurées dans les entreprises peut véritablement mettre la bourgeoisie en péril. L'existence d'une forte organisation révolutionnaire constitue dès lors un facteur à peu près décisif. Mais, pour qu'une organisation révolutionnaire puisse être dite forte, il faut que le phénomène qui, en période de crise, réduit le prolétariat à l'impuissance, ne s'y reflète pas ou ne s'y reflète que très atténué'. Simone Weil, 'La situation en Allemagne', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 164.

If factory workers and the unemployed decide to rise in unison, the working class will emerge in its full strength, with far greater brilliance than it did in Paris in 1871 or in St. Petersburg in 1905. But who can say whether such a struggle would not end in a defeat, such as has put an end to all spontaneous uprisings up to now?<sup>210</sup>

Consequently, the ineffectiveness of the potential German workers' revolution and the 1933 seizure of power by the National Socialists forces Weil to abandon her belief that revolutionary syndicalism could affect the change that she thought necessary.

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<sup>210</sup> 'Vienne le moment où tous ensemble, ouvriers des entreprises et chômeurs, voudront se soulever, la classe ouvrière apparaîtra dans sa force avec bien plus d'éclat qu'à Paris en 1871 ou à Saint-Petersbourg en 1905! Mais qui peut dire si une telle lutte ne se terminerait pas par la défaite qui a écrasé jusqu'ici tous les mouvements spontanés?'. Simone Weil, 'Impressions d'Allemagne: l'Allemagne en Attente', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 137.

## Conclusion

On the surface, the tensions and problems with governments, political parties and movements, unions and intellectuals in both politics and labour in Europe can be examined from the perceived economic ramifications ensuing from revolutionary's attempts to wrest dominionship from a privileged status quo. As a Marx critique, this would be essentially true. He crudely pitted those who have little against those who have more.

Weil, however, brings a sophistication of examination and critique, challenging, not only man against man, but man against nature. Marx may have attempted a more scientific approach, even attempting to unravel and deal with the economics of the era. As wealth, money or materiality is essentially always the foundation of political strife, if not religion, Weil ignores the subject of economics. Any references are implicit rather than explicit. Weil called for pacifist revolutionary unity among workers and a rejection of oppression, and her writing must be interpreted as an effort to effect change through a form of collectivism by individuals. From 1931 onwards we find a marked engagement with syndicalist movements as an attempted means of improving the proletariat's position in an ever-increasingly mechanised era of production. We find, however, that Weil still advocated for syndicalism when the unions could not even agree on an aim, never mind a method. This problem was glaringly evident in Germany, but Weil was aware of this discord in France. I state earlier in this thesis that a transition in Weil's political thinking shifted away from syndicalism in Le Puy after a year of attempting to corral organisational unity. Her second communiqué from the Committee of the Unemployed of Le Puy, where I argue that she recognises force as a countermeasure is a critical development in her thinking.

It demarcates a gradual transition away from pacifism. For Weil, revolution is not an end itself, it is merely a means for arriving at optimal social conditions. Like all methods, she judged it not only by its professed aims but also by its unintended, unpredictable, but inevitable consequences. ‘The revolution is a *job*, a methodical task that the blind or people with blindfolded eyes cannot perform. And that is what we are at this moment’.<sup>211</sup> Yet, she argues, revolution is proclaimed not as a solution to existing problems but as a kind of miracle that relieves us of the necessity to face problems. The revolution seems possible only as a diversion, not as methodical work with a clear vision of aims and side effects. It is this inquiry into how we might function the day after the revolution that again distinguishes Weil from Marx.

After travelling to Germany to assess the prospect of a workers’ revolution and finding the rise of totalitarianism, Weil returns dejected to France, unconvinced by the role of syndicalist revolutionary politics. Whether she pre-empts the contagion of Hitler’s fascism is a question that Weil falls on the wrong side. I suggest that her ideological perseverance in solely advocating for the proletarian revolution means she left unaware of the bigger, more sinister, picture. The naive or cynical concealment of reality, the attempts at deception and self-deception, perhaps the will to pass off the hopelessness of the revolutionary aspirations in Germany as historical promise: these happen while Weil is concentrating on workers and labour, and not on the realities of segregation and violence. I argue that focusing on worker and labour politics distanced Weil from the unfolding situation. Viewing the events from a very particular viewpoint, that of the socialist Left, Weil is concerned with proletariat problems, rather than an infectious malaise that left the country vulnerable.

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<sup>211</sup> Letter to Urbain Thévenon. Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, p. 151.

If Weil believes that Marxism had become an applied dogma<sup>212</sup> rather than a living doctrine and productive method, then I argue that Weil is entrapped by a version of indoctrination. Weil argues that the scientific theory of socialism is dogma, along with all the results obtained by modern science because everyone believes the conclusion without understanding the method. This illegitimate appeal to Marx's authority is an expression of that dominant way of thinking that a liberating discourse should aim to defeat. Diagnosing the difficulties with a revolutionary theory that fails to overcome alienation and oppression, she sees it as a construct of dogmas separated from its methodological preconditions and deteriorating into one of the most acute forms of disjunction. But, if we acknowledge that Weil distinguishes between the German proletariat, the unemployed, the workers and the office workers, notwithstanding the forms of maligned capitalist, shopkeeper or steel mogul - and then the remainder of political and social life - Weil develops an unnecessary subdivision of society. In focusing on a very particular situation, i.e. a workers' revolution, from the perspective of socialist Left, Weil's overt concern with labour disfigured a nation in crisis.

Reducing a great swath of criticism to a succinct difference, we can say the foundational difference between Weil and Marx is that Marx was concerned with the relations between society and class struggle that divides us, while Weil is more concerned with the causes and effects that surround our relations: Marx believes that alienation can be relived; Weil knows that oppression can only be mitigated. Weil connected her criticism of doctrine with her fundamental condemnation of a

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<sup>212</sup> 'Quant à nous, Marx représente pour nous, dans le meilleur des cas, une doctrine; bien plus souvent un simple nom, que on jette à la tête de l'adversaire pour le pulvériser; presque jamais une méthode'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions concernant la technocratie, le national-socialisme, l'U.R.S.S. et quelques autres points', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 213.

specialising, alienating, mystifying science, which makes it impossible to reconstruct and thus to overcome any division of labour. Such a battle of the dogmas, blocking the way to its own objectives, cannot be credited as either a science or theory. If, Weil wrote, Lenin is correct when he states that ‘without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement, we must also accept that there is practically no revolutionary movement at present’,<sup>213</sup> then is Marxism unravelled in one paragraph when she states: ‘We are living on a doctrine elaborated by a great man certainly, but a great man who died fifty years ago. He created a method; he applied it to phenomena of his time; he could not apply it to phenomena of our own time’.<sup>214</sup> The consideration should not be whether Weil is right in this assertion, but to what extent does the penetration of Weil’s analysis negate Marxism? This is a question which I discuss in the next chapter.

It has already been shown above how Weil’s initial engagement with social change through revolutionary syndicalism disintegrated when it encountered the events evolving in 1930s Germany. At the beginning of this chapter we found a sympathetic Marxist and a pacifist revolutionary syndicalist; by the end of this chapter I showed the conditions that dissuaded Weil’s revolutionary syndicalism sympathies. Marx’s methodology continues to guide her in many ways, but the object of its concrete analyses, the society of its day, no longer existed. ‘[W]e must recognise that the two economic categories established by Marx—capitalists and proletariat—are no

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<sup>213</sup> ‘Celui qui admet la formule de Lénine: Sans théorie révolutionnaire pas de mouvement révolutionnaire est forcé d’admettre aussi qu’il n’y a à peu près pas de mouvement révolutionnaire en ce moment’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions concernant la technocratie, le national-socialisme, l’U.R.S.S. et quelques autres points’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 214.

<sup>214</sup> ‘Nous vivons sur une doctrine élaborée par un grand homme certes, mais un grand homme mort il y a cinquante ans. Il a créé une méthode; il l’a appliquée aux phénomènes de son temps; il ne pouvait l’appliquer aux phénomènes du nôtre’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions concernant la technocratie, le national-socialisme, l’U.R.S.S. et quelques autres points’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 213.

longer sufficient to grasp the form of production'.<sup>215</sup> The negation of prognoses by facts reflects on the methods themselves and leads to uncovering internal contradictions: '[I]t is not by comparison with the facts, but in itself, that I consider Marxist doctrine to be defective'.<sup>216</sup> Largely due its internal deficiencies and inconsistencies, Marxism, according to Weil, cannot meet the task assigned to it: to be a revolutionary theory. The problem that Weil has with Marx is that 'he worked out the conclusions before the method'.<sup>217</sup> I have outlined to what extent I believe that Weil considered revolution only in terms of scientific labour and the proletariat. She did defer to a misguided lack of confidence, that of a young person before the 'great minds'<sup>218</sup> who had embraced Marxism. Her case is an example of a false belief in authority, as states, '[h]ow many young minds are not thus led, through lack of self-confidence, to stifle their most justified doubts?'.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> 'Et nous devons reconnaître que les deux catégories économiques établies par Marx, capitalistes et prolétariat, ne suffisent plus à saisir la forme de la production'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions concernant la technocratie, le national-socialisme, l'U.R.S.S. et quelques autres points', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 215.

<sup>216</sup> 'Ce n'est donc pas par comparaison avec les faits, c'est en elle-même que j'estime la doctrine marxiste défectueuse; ou plutôt, je pense que l'ensemble des écrits rédigés par Marx, Engels et ceux qui les ont pris comme guides ne forme pas une doctrine'. Simone Weil, 'Sur les contradictions du marxisme', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 135.

<sup>217</sup> 'Ce n'est pas étonnant: il a élaboré les conclusions avant la méthode'. Simone Weil, 'Sur les contradictions du marxisme', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 135.

<sup>218</sup> 'Leur évidence même, à ce moment, m'a empêchée de faire confiance à mon propre jugement; je me disais que tant de grands esprits, qui ont adhéré au marxisme, avaient dû apercevoir aussi ces incohérences, ces lacunes si claires; qu'elles avaient donc certainement été les unes comblées, les autres résolues, dans d'autres ouvrages de doctrine marxiste'. Simone Weil, 'Sur les contradictions du marxisme', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 134.

<sup>219</sup> 'A combien d'esprits jeunes n'arrive-t-il pas ainsi d'étouffer, par défiance d'eux-mêmes, leurs doutes les mieux fondés?'. Simone Weil, 'Sur les contradictions du marxisme', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 135.



Once her efforts to apply the Marxist schema had proved factually false, Weil's suspended doubts were reaffirmed. Although previously setting those doubts aside out of reverence, they had first occurred to her with respect to the theoretical coherence of Marx's design. She saw herself compelled to work out with the greatest possible precision the inadequacy of the interpretational scheme. In this effort, she transitions increasingly from attempting to extract a Marxian purity in the face of a Marxist coarsening to a fundamental critique of Marxism. One of the results of this analysis is the insight that the immediate future would be determined not by a revolutionary emancipation of the proletariat, but by the war that would deliver the opposite of all the presumptive promises of liberation. Years later in London she would write: 'Twentieth century: war has replaced profit as the dominant motive [of human behaviour]'.<sup>220</sup> Weil's retreat from syndicalist engagement is accompanied by a return to her own analytical frame of reference. Accordingly, the analysis presented in *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale* and in the supplementary shorter texts shows Weil delivering a sustained critical dissection of Marxism, a direction to which this thesis will now turn its attention.

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<sup>220</sup> 'Vingtième siècle. La guerre a remplacé le profit comme mobile dominant'. Simone Weil, 'Fragments et Notes', in *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 175.

## Chapter Three

### Oppression and Liberty in *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale*

#### Introduction

In contrast to her syndicalist approach detailed in the chapter, where I show how her engagement with the trade union movement led to an awareness of their inability to ensure emancipation for workers, by 1934 Weil's involvement with the syndicalist revolution had ended. Viewing the revolutionary syndicalist and political stagnation in Germany, Weil wrote *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale*. Written before working in Paris factories, this long essay is the seminal work from her early writings, which is typified by an engagement with Marxism and concerns surrounding modern technology and automation in labour. *Réflexions* is important because it moves beyond Marx's criticisms, seeking to investigate the nature of oppression and liberty and their limits. Claiming that oppression is an inescapable social phenomenon of the human condition, unlike Marx, who believes it is the organ of a social function, Weil argues that it can be mitigated. As such, this chapter focuses on *Réflexions* to describe how she distances herself methodically from Marx, whether such mitigation from oppression is practicable, and what manner of thought and action might allow for a realisation of liberty.

The contrast between Weil and Marx, which Weil increasingly acknowledges, is that, while she admits that '[i]t would seem that man is born a slave and that servitude is his natural condition',<sup>221</sup> the fundamental aspect to human existence is that '[...] nothing on earth can stop man from feeling himself born for liberty. Never, whatever may happen, can [man] accept servitude; for he is a thinking creature'.<sup>222</sup> This trichotomy between slavery and feeling born for liberty and its relationship with the social order is the examination that is undertaken within *Réflexions*. A 'perfect liberty',<sup>223</sup> Weil states, is unattainable, one which 'the communism imagined by Marx is the most recent form that this dream has taken'.<sup>224</sup> Unlike Marx's liberty, who imagined an end to oppression, Weil thinks more practically, emphasising that man 'can steer toward the ideal'<sup>225</sup> if he (can) think and act correctly. The intention is not the attainment of the ideal, instead she applies it as a method of mensuration to recognise the degree of separation between the actuality and the ideal. Hence, the parentheses, denoting the capability for thinking, are important if oppression is to be mitigated for all. The parentheses represent the distinction between whether man is at liberty to think and whether he is allowed by others. This is important because the

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<sup>221</sup> 'Il semblerait que l'homme naisse esclave, et que la servitude soit sa condition propre'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 71.

<sup>222</sup> 'Et pourtant rien au monde ne peut empêcher l'homme de se sentir ne pour la liberté. Jamais, quoi qu'il adviene, il ne peut accepter la servitude; car il pense'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 71.

<sup>223</sup> 'C'est la liberté parfaite qu'il faut s'efforcer de se représenter clairement, non pas dans l'espoir d'y atteindre, mais dans l'espoir d'atteindre une liberté moins imparfaite que n'est notre condition actuelle; car le meilleur n'est concevable que par le parfait'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 72.

<sup>224</sup> 'Le communisme imaginé par Marx est la forme la plus récente de ce rêve'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 71.

<sup>225</sup> 'On ne peut se diriger que vers un idéal'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 72.

category of an ideal of liberty is in direct relation with the category of mitigating oppression. Consequently, where Weil once argued that syndicalism is the correct form of workers' revolution, this chapter charts how Weil's Marxist tendencies dissolve when she critically engages Marx.

Where the previous chapter details how Weil transitions away from syndicalism, this chapter shows why Weil's transitions away from Marxism. This chapter is subdivided into three main sections. The first section discusses 'Concepts of Oppression and Liberty', her 'Factory Labour' and the correlation between 'Weil and Marxism'. Firstly, it presents Weil's understanding of her concepts of oppression and liberty. A consideration that must be discussed is whether Weil focuses inordinately on the proletariat working-class and fails to account for the entire problem of oppression and liberty. Secondly, it offers a brief account of Weil's labour in Paris factories, citing that *Réflexions* is written beforehand. I argue that because of Weil's lifelong ill-health her conclusions should be read with an element of interpretation. Lastly, it discusses Marx and Marxism because any engagement with Weil is indelibly linked to Marxism. To narrow the inquiry, Marx will only be discussed in so far as to critique Weil's critique of Marxism. This thesis is not an overt critique of Marx, but it will show where Weil and Marx differ. An initial point of note is that *Réflexions* is an extension beyond Marx's materialistic concept of history and oppression. The second section of this chapter engages with the initial two chapters of *Réflexions*; 'Critique du marxisme'<sup>226</sup> and 'Analyse de l'oppression',<sup>227</sup> while the third section of this chapter reflects on the two concluding chapters of *Réflexions*; 'Tableau théorique d'une

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<sup>226</sup> Critique of Marxism.

<sup>227</sup> Analysis of oppression.

société libre'<sup>228</sup> and 'Esquisse de la vie sociale contemporaine'.<sup>229</sup> The rationale for bisecting *Réflexions* is that I argue that Weil's thought radically shifts between the end of the chapter, 'Tableau théorique d'une société libre' and the beginning of 'Esquisse de la vie sociale contemporaine'. I contend that the different chapters, which encompass the initial half and the latter half of the essay, offer considerably different positions. The first position is an analysis of a theoretical picture of a free society, while the second position is a sketch of contemporary social life and its ability to absorb this theory of a free society. 'Tableau théorique d'une société libre' is an optimistic presentation of an ideal society, whereas 'Esquisse de la vie sociale contemporaine' is a punctured realisation of a contemporary society. Where Marx argues that alienation (and oppression) can be erased, Weil's concept of activity and freedom in thought contrasts sharply with a devastating reality. This is of paramount importance in the evolution of Weil's thought transitioning away from Marxism. It is not that the ideal fell short, it is that Weil recognises the theoretical limitations of Marx's ideal. Where Weil stretches an unlikely aspiration, she believes that Marx did not fully grasp the problem. This is another essential pivot of Weil's thought, one which is defined by a complete transition from a Marxist position.

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<sup>228</sup> Theoretical picture of a free society.

<sup>229</sup> Sketch of contemporary social life.

## Section One

### 3.1.1 Concepts of Oppression and Liberty

Developing a concept of liberty through her critique of Marxism in *Réflexions* enabled Weil to conceive of a theory capable of dissecting the nature of social oppression. *Réflexions*' opening line states that Weil's purpose is to 'bring everything into question again'<sup>230</sup> because she feels that the world provided few reasons for living. In search of an answer, she tasks herself with identifying the precise nature of oppression in contemporary society. In her early writings, Weil drew heavily on Marx's understanding that socialism was to be above all the abolition of 'the degrading division of labour into intellectual and manual labour'<sup>231</sup> and consequently directs her attention on labour as a form of oppression. This concentration is important to the understanding of Weil's later conclusions concerning the spirituality of labour as the core of a reordered social life. According to Blum and Seidler in *A Truer Liberty:*

*Simone Weil and Marxism:*

Weil also believed that this division was not merely a mechanical reflection of the categories of class provided for in Marx's theory. For Weil, the division between conception and execution ultimately was not reducible to class divisions, and the assumption that it could be marginalised the force of Marx's own insights on the all pervasiveness of the degradation with which capitalist society had infused human experience.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> 'La période présente est de celles où tout ce qui semble normalement constituer une raison de vivre s'évanouit, où l'on doit, sous peine de sombrer dans le désarroi ou l'inconscience, tout remettre en question'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 29.

<sup>231</sup> 'De même la séparation entre les forces spirituelles qui interviennent dans la production et le travail manuel, ou, selon une autre formule, la dégradante division du travail en travail manuel et travail intellectuel est la base même de notre culture, qui est une culture de spécialistes'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 33.

<sup>232</sup> Lawrence A. Blum and Victor J. Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism* (Oxon: Routledge, 1989), p. 107.

It is crucial then for Weil to recognise the implications of the fact that the division between intellectual and manual labour had not been transcended in the Soviet Union.<sup>233</sup> Agreeing with the aim of Marx, and hoping to see the spirit of the Russian Revolution extend to France and Germany, Weil is disillusioned by the realities. A position that I will assess more critically within this chapter, Blum and Seidler state that ‘these concerns and their consequences for human dignity form the framework within which Weil considered the potential for transformation of oppression to liberty’.<sup>234</sup> This point is echoed in Weil’s *Lénine: Matérialisme et empiriocriticisme*<sup>235</sup> in 1933, where she states, ‘we do not seem to have understood what the conditions of such a transformation are’.<sup>236</sup> Political stagnation and technical developments in Germany and France had led to eventual disillusionment with political parties, unions and revolutionary syndicalism. These problems in Europe led Weil to studying oppression and liberty to examine what is was that activists of change sought. Blum and Seidler make the point that

this task was crucial because if we have an unreal sense of liberty, our efforts to attain it will be misdirected or, worse, will themselves undermine our aspirations to freedom by generating different and deeper structures of subordination.<sup>237</sup>

Weil realises that neither the problems nor the solutions could be encompassed by an uninformed perspective but I argue that Weil’s view predominantly focuses on labour and oppression in the proletariat class. Weil is influenced by Marx, but argues that his analysis must be applied to current problems and that capitalist oppression is not the final form of oppression. A greater, more oppressive force has developed in society

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<sup>233</sup> Weil deals with this issue in her 1933 essay, *Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne*, and in her essay, *Lénine: Matérialisme et empiriocriticisme*.

<sup>234</sup> Blum and Seidler, *A Truer Liberty*, p. 108.

<sup>235</sup> *Lenin: Materialism and Empiricism*.

<sup>236</sup> ‘Cependant l’on ne semble pas avoir compris quelles sont les conditions d’une telle transformation’. Simone Weil, ‘Lénine: Matérialisme et empiriocriticisme’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 308.

<sup>237</sup> Blum and Seidler, *A Truer Liberty*, p. 80.

namely, bureaucratic oppression. Bureaucratic oppression is a result of industrial development. Closely related to its development are evolutions in science and specialisation. A class who manages, and who have a monopoly on the knowledge of overall process, has the power to destroy the culture and creativity of those who work under their control. It is because of this power that Weil believes technology plays a central role in the oppression of the workers. She realises that the workers need to re-establish control over their conditions of work. Thus, she felt that the role of technology was another oppression that required study. According to Blum and Seidler, when she wrote in *Réflexions*

Weil's conception of liberty was fundamentally tied to a Kantian framework characterised by its identification of freedom, morality, and reason, with freedom conceived as an essentially inner quality and the aspiration to freedom inviolable.<sup>238</sup>

Weil believes that oppression occurs in the workplace through isolated technique and distant bureaucracy. Apart from the physical labour involved, Weil's main concern is that an ever-evolving production-automation technology limits the mind's ability to think and engage. Hence, when Weil discusses liberty it is that of a mind free to think, to engage with all the aspects of labouring. This is an important distinction in the direction of her development. Rush Rhees in *Discussions of Simone Weil* advises though, that '[i]f we say [liberty] is possible, we should recognise that what I do, the life I lead, is limited by the special time and place in which I live, by the hardships and misfortunes I meet, by the death of friends and those whom I depend, by the obstacles I could never have foreseen'.<sup>239</sup> Yet, instead of encompassing labour into life, Weil argues that labour, and its full engagement, is a core experience of what it is to be fully human, thus subsuming life into work. Blum and Seidler argue that 'Weil took from

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<sup>238</sup> Blum and Seidler, *A Truer Liberty*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>239</sup> Rush Rhees, *Discussion of Simone Weil*, ed. D.Z. Philips, ass. Mario von der Ruhr (Albany: State University of New York, 1999), p. 3.



Kant the notion that we must exercise our freedom in our thoughts and our actions'.<sup>240</sup> This is a valid assessment of Weil's understanding of freedom, yet it shows the contradictions of tolerance in Weil's argument. Considering that Blum and Seidler insist that 'she brought Kant's sense of moral capacity as the source of dignity in human existence to her thinking on the inadequacies of the conception of freedom she believed implicit in orthodox Marxism',<sup>241</sup> a problem of tolerance as much as freedom is found in Weil. Blum and Seidler restate that by *Réflexions* 'Weil already moves towards a critique of the Kantian inheritance that sees freedom as radically a matter for the individual',<sup>242</sup> yet we must consider if this is a similar version of freedom that Weil is discussing. Blum and Seidler state that

Weil develops a conception of liberty [in *Réflexions*] as something that we can exercise only in our relations with the world. Freedom can only be meaningfully thought about in relation to necessity and to our orientation to necessity. This makes work and our relation to our work integral to our potential to actualise our liberty. Freedom thereby gains substance.<sup>243</sup>

If liberty is of the mind and linked with work, then we must consider whether Weil's, and seemingly Blum and Seidler's, concept that work should be integral to liberty is a version of freedom that everyone desires. For some, a hobby or a family may be their ideal of freedom. Roy Pierce states in *Sociology and Utopia: The Early Writings of Simone Weil* that '[t]his view of liberty is presented, of course, only as an ideal, not existing in any real situation. No man can alone forge the conditions of his existence. But it is an ideal which man can seek to approximate'.<sup>244</sup> The contradiction with Weil, Blum and Seidler, and Pierce is that they all account for work as an activity that must be subsumed into the very essence of a person's life, thereby directly linking it liberty.

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<sup>240</sup> Blum and Seidler, *A Truer Liberty*, p. 81.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Roy Pierce, 'Sociology and Utopia: The Early Writings of Simone Weil', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (Dec. 1962), p. 513.

Again, for some people, this could represent a narrow definition of liberty that places work and its value at the centre of life. We can infer that Weil is stating that only liberty can be found through work, meaning that to not work is to be unfree. Contradictory, this is not a conclusion that Marx reaches.

### 3.1.2 Factory Labour

From December 1934 until August 1935, after she wrote *Réflexions*, Weil is employed as an unskilled labourer in various French factories in the surrounds of Paris. She spent the first four months in the Alsthom electrical plant, then moves to the Forges de Basse-Indre, before finally ending her labours at Renault. Robert Chenavier remarks in *Simone Weil: Attention to the Real* that '[Weil] tried to respond to the utter confusion of her era by what she called her Great Work, [...] which she set herself to complete before she went to work in a factory. The dead ends of her reflections on the social question and the dangers of methodical action pushed Simone Weil to become a worker'.<sup>245</sup> In a letter to Auguste Detoef, the manager of the Alsthom works, outlining her experiences, she illuminates what Mary Dietz states in *Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil* as 'the foreign nature of the working condition'.<sup>246</sup>

The obedience I had to practice can be defined as follows. To begin with, it shrinks the time dimension down to a few seconds. [...] My attention had to be constantly restricted to the movement I was performing. [...] Secondly, it is an obedience to which one's entire being is committed. In your own sphere, obedience to an order means directing your activity in a certain way; but for me an order might overwhelm soul and body together because—like some of the others—I was almost constantly at the limit of my strength. [...] In the third place, this discipline relies upon no incentives except the most sordid form of gain, on a paltry scale, and fear.<sup>247</sup>

Although it is without challenge that the experiences in the factories had a profound effect upon Weil, Dietz takes issue with Weil, stating that 'it would be misleading to suggest that Weil's factory labours shaped or otherwise determined her critique of the modern world and her understanding of oppression'.<sup>248</sup> Weil does observe that, '[i]n

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<sup>245</sup> Robert Chenavier, *Simone Weil: Attention to the Real*, trans. Bernard E. Doering (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2012), p. 9.

<sup>246</sup> Mary G. Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil* (New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988), p. 37.

<sup>247</sup> Weil, *Seventy Letters*, translated and arranged by Richard Rees, p. 56.

<sup>248</sup> Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 37.

this situation, the greatness of soul which allows one to despise injustice and humiliation is almost impossible to exercise'.<sup>249</sup> The argument which Dietz states is that by 1934, before undertaking her factory experiences, Weil already completes *Réflexions*. However, where Dietz's argument may falter, in suggesting that '[*Réflexions*] set out in more theoretical and analytical terms what her year of work and her factory journal confirmed',<sup>250</sup> presumes, if not alters, Weil's conclusions. If the factory work is the opportunity of any intellectual discovery, since the essential themes of her social philosophy were settled as early as 1934, the conditions provide the opportunity to verify or to substantiate the hypotheses which she drew up in *Réflexions*. In the light of experience, she could refine certain analysis. But again, there is nothing of what she addresses in *La Condition Ouvrière*<sup>251</sup> that is not already detailed in *Réflexions*. Demonstrating the philosophical principles developed in *Réflexions* in the factories, Weil illuminates the evolutionary causes that led the revolutionary syndicalism to be contaminated by Fascism. However, Philippe Dujardin remarks in *Simone Weil: Idéologie et politique*<sup>252</sup> that '[t]he tendency of Simone Weil to exaggerate the value of this experience, which she had ardently desired, is, moreover, very clear and expressed with brilliance in one of the first letters she addressed to Albertine Thévenon':<sup>253</sup>

When I think that the great Bolshevik leaders were claiming to create a free working class and that none of them Trotsky surely not, Lenin I do not believe either - probably set foot in a factory and as a result had - no longer a faint idea of the real conditions which determine servitude or liberty for the workers politics appears to me as a sinister joke.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Weil, *Seventy Letters*, translated and arranged by Richard Rees, p. 56.

<sup>250</sup> Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 37.

<sup>251</sup> *The Workers' Condition*.

<sup>252</sup> *Simone Weil: Ideology and politics*.

<sup>253</sup> 'La tendance de Simone Weil à majorer à l'extrême la valeur de cette expérience, qu'elle avait ardemment souhaitée, est d'ailleurs très nette, et s'exprime avec éclat, dans l'une des premières lettres qu'elle adressa à Albertine Thévenon'. Philippe Dujardin, *Simone Weil: Idéologie et Politique* (Presses Universitaires de Grenoble: Grenoble, 1975), p. 132.

<sup>254</sup> 'Quand je pense que les grands chefs bolchevistes prétendaient créer une classe ouvrière libre et qu'aucun d'eux Trotsky sûrement pas, Lénine je ne crois pas non plus - sans doute mis le pied dans une

The bitter experience of the status of a specialised worker in a country affected by unemployment and recession did not in any way bring Weil closer to the revolutionary groups she had attended. On the contrary, it led her, as her letter to Thévenon testifies, to move further away from the theoretical principles of Marxism. It is possible that for the first time we find an emerging spirituality in Weil's thinking. Françoise Meltzer states in *The Hands of Simone Weil* that work entailed more than just labouring:

Weil's own factory work was intended to demonstrate to herself her conviction that assembly line work prevents attention in her sense, indeed, prevents thought altogether. Repeatedly, the journal she kept during her factory work attests to her crushing fatigue and inability to think. And yet attention for Weil is only possible through work. The paradox is for her one of the profound scandals of high capitalism.<sup>255</sup>

On the one hand, she introduces in her analyses the criteria of the lived subjective experience to the detriment of conceptual construction. On the other hand, it proposes remedies for the flaws of contemporary capitalism borrowed from a Marxist tradition that we will tentatively call reformist. According to Chenavier, 'it was the very conditions of work that had to change, and the urgency of this task led her to think about the primary conditions for a new regime in the factories'.<sup>256</sup> However, such was the fragility of Weil's body and her employment of a methodology that sought to confirm rather than investigate, this is the extent that I will engage with Weil's factory years.

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usine et par suite n'avait - la n'avait plus faible idée des conditions réelles qui déterminent la servitude ou la liberté pour les ouvriers la politique m'apparaît comme une sinistre rigolade'. Simone Weil, *La Condition Ouvrière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p. 16.

<sup>255</sup> Françoise Meltzer, 'The Hands of Simone Weil', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Summer, 2001), p. 614.

<sup>256</sup> Chenavier, *Simone Weil: Attention to the Real*, p. 9.

### 3.1.3 Weil and Marxism

In undertaking an examination of Marx, Weil's admiration ends when her critique sources the weakness of a theory that cannot rigorously demonstrate the underlying factors that define its prophesied vision. However brilliant the analyses that outlines man's progress toward a utopian socialist free society, Weil dismisses their validity when they fail to trace the source of oppression outside of the societal structure. Nevertheless, Weil is indebted to Marx's materialism, stating that the 'Marxist view, according to which social existence is determined by the relations between man and nature established by production'<sup>257</sup> is the only appropriate 'basis for any historical investigation'<sup>258</sup> of oppression. Marx and Engels' understanding of oppression in *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848 states that oppression arises when 'every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe [...] has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers [...] veiled by religious and political illusions, [leading to] naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation'.<sup>259</sup> Considering the demanding productive forces and the clinical division of labour in man's relation with man, Marx writes four years earlier, '[i]f he relates to his own activity as to something unfree, it is a relationship to an

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<sup>257</sup> 'La vue marxiste selon laquelle l'existence sociale est déterminée par les rapports entre l'homme et la nature établis par la production reste bien la seule base solide pour toute étude historique; seulement ces rapports doivent être considérés d'abord en fonction du problème du pouvoir, les moyens de subsistance constituant simplement une donnée de ce problème'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 60.

<sup>258</sup> 'La vue marxiste selon laquelle l'existence sociale est déterminée par les rapports entre l'homme et la nature établis par la production reste bien la seule base solide pour toute étude historique; seulement ces rapports doivent être considérés d'abord en fonction du problème du pouvoir, les moyens de subsistance constituant simplement une donnée de ce problème'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 60.

<sup>259</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 6.

activity that is under the domination, oppression, and yoke of another man'.<sup>260</sup> The difference that defines Weil's dissatisfaction with Marx is that increased production begets oppression, which cyclically stimulates the oppressive productive forces. Man is not released from the forces of production under Marxism, he continues to work in a similar manner. It is just the ownership that of the production that changes hands, not the manner of the work. By the end of *Réflexions*, Weil's analysis is far removed from Marxism, a point with which Dietz agrees, who states that

part of the unusual quality of [*Réflexions*] is that it is written by a thinker and activist who sympathises with the aims of the working-class and respects basic aspects of Marx's thought, but rejects Marxist doctrine and social theory as an explanation of oppression or a program of action.<sup>261</sup>

Herein, after her view of Marx's (mis)understanding of the real causes of oppression, Weil's social analysis gradually shifted its emphasis from economically determined power relations to, what Moulakis states, as 'the mechanics of the formation of collective opinion as the decisive factor of oppression'.<sup>262</sup> This is the basis of her concept of materialism, and whereas Marx understood oppression as the organ of a social function, namely, class struggle or categorisation, Weil states that

Marx's truly great idea is that in human society as well as in nature nothing takes place otherwise than through material transformations. 'Men make their own history, but within certain fixed conditions'. To desire is nothing; we have got to know the material conditions which determine our possibilities of action; and in the social sphere these conditions are defined by the way in which man obeys material necessities in supplying his own needs, in other words, by the method of production.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 92.

<sup>261</sup> Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 38.

<sup>262</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 113.

<sup>263</sup> 'La grande idée de Marx, c'est que dans la société aussi bien que dans la nature rien ne s'effectue autrement que par des transformations matérielles. Les hommes font leur propre histoire, mais dans des conditions déterminées. Désirer n'est rien, il faut connaître les conditions matérielles qui déterminent nos possibilités d'action; et dans le domaine social, ces conditions sont définies par la manière dont l'homme obéit aux nécessités matérielles en subvenant à ses propres besoins, autrement dit par le mode de production'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 36-37.

Weil understands the principal error of Marx's social physics to be the implausible prognosis that in the end the weak will have force on their side and will wield power while concurrently remaining weak. This belief is in contradiction with Weil's view that force is relative to dominance.

Marx's revolutionary materialism consists in positing, on the one hand that everything is exclusively regulated by force, and on the one hand that a day will suddenly come when force will be on the side of the weak. Not that certain ones who were weak will become strong – a change that has always taken place; but that the entire mass of the weak, while continuing to be such, will have force on its side.<sup>264</sup>

If Marx's materialist method is to work, it has to achieve the same kind of progress that Darwin's theory gained in recognition with Lamarck's theory, which states that 'the function creates the organ'.<sup>265</sup> Juxtaposing Marx's explanation of social oppression analogous to Lamarck's biological theory, in accordance to how function gives rise to emergence or adaptation of a specific organ, the idea of a natural selection of individual efforts that prove viable within the context of living conditions explains the social form without any need to surrender the core of free will in man to an invisible hand that would determine historical changes.

Investigating the ideas of liberation and revolution and that power is being abused, Weil argues that ideological orthodoxy and state bureaucracy are crippling the individual's freedom to critically engage with the world. New social forces both sacred and secular promise salvation but deliver oppression. The problem which Weil is unable to surmount is that social relations are unbalanced. This contrasts with Marx who believes that the equity distinction is erasable, if enough of the material aspects

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<sup>264</sup> 'Le matérialisme révolutionnaire de Marx consiste à poser, d'une part que tout est règle exclusivement par la force, d'autre part qu'un jour viendra soudain où la force sera du côté des faibles. Non pas que certains qui étaient faibles deviendront forts, changement qui s'est toujours produit; mais que la masse entière des faibles, demeurant la masse des faibles, aura la force de son côté'. Simone Weil, 'Y-a-t-il une Marxiste doctrine ?' in *Oppression et liberté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), p. 208.

<sup>265</sup> 'La première consiste à adopter pour l'histoire humaine le principe d'explication de Lamarck, la fonction crée l'organe; ce principe selon lequel la girafe aurait tellement essayé de manger des bananes que son cou se serait allongé'. Simone Weil, 'Y-a-t-il une Marxiste doctrine ?' in *Oppression et liberté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), p. 243.



are realtered. Concluding that '[s]omebody's nature will always be violated',<sup>266</sup> Winch outlines the hurdle in *Simone Weil: The Just Balance*.

So, the presence of another human being will always be an essential threat to one's realisation of one's own projects; and the only way to avert that threat is to dominate the other. Naturally, not everyone can achieve a dominating position, so human relations will always be between those who dominate and those who submit; but since the essential reality of a human being is to be active, such relations will never constitute an equilibrium.<sup>267</sup>

Winch's argument of domination and power (in)equilibrium<sup>268</sup> moves Weil further away from a Marxist position, in that material differences may be overcome but that relationships always entail the subjection of one person to another. Weil's argument is that a person's activity, which stems from how she characterises thought in *Science and Perception* – I (can) act, therefore, I am, defines their liberty. This activity in work – freedom of thought – also defines their humanness. Winch states that the problem that Weil had in conceptualising genuine equilibrium is 'that the moment such beings become mutually dependent, as they do when their attempts to assert their active natures in the face of a hostile nature lead to a division of labour, the active independence of some, and perhaps of all, is inevitably threatened.'<sup>269</sup> For Weil, freedom stemmed not solely from the freedom to choose, but to be able to restrain, or to control the manner of work or a lived day. A capitalist, utilitarian based system conceives of liberty as the ability to satisfy desires, whereas Weil would argue that freedom is a person's ability to act freely. Then fundamentally, if a person is still bound to the nature of productive forces, then they are not free nor relieved of oppression.

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<sup>266</sup> Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 87.

<sup>267</sup> Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 87.

<sup>268</sup> Winch defines equilibrium as [...] a stable relation between things of a sort which involves no violation of the reality of any of the things related. Two active human beings, therefore, could be in equilibrium with each other only in so far as the actions of each respected the reality of the other. Winch, *The Just Balance*, p. 87.

<sup>269</sup> Winch, *The Just Balance*, p. 90.

In a simplistic sense, Weil agrees with Marx's overall precepts of revolution and believes that the working-class should be relieved of oppression, but she disagrees with Marx's reliance on science as a method of analysis, his theory of productive forces and his concept of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. Her critique is underpinned by both an intellectual and experiential dimension as she deconstructed Marx's theory. Submission is a key aspect for Weil, and Winch, who states:

Drawing on ideas in Hegel and Marx (amongst other writers at least as far back as Plato) [Weil] points out that domination itself characteristically involves an element of submission, though this fact may be hidden even from the one who thinks to occupy the dominating position.<sup>270</sup>

If this is true, then the possibility of rectifying or mitigating the problem is weakened. Whilst Weil's argument is not that domination by some is acceptable, including the state, the bureaucracy and capitalists, she does not elucidate her argument by creating a dichotomy between oppressor and oppressed while also advocating for the oppressed. Winch's argument is that we are all capable of being oppressed while some are capable of being the oppressor. Drawing their oppressive power from their environment, Winch remarks, that it 'is in very large measure a human, social environment. So their power comes, in large, probably pre-eminent, measure from the society in which they exercise their domination'.<sup>271</sup> The argument advanced by Weil and then Winch is that people dominate (some) other people 'only in so far as, one way or another, they have the support of others'.<sup>272</sup> For Weil, an analysis of societal oppression must conduct an examination of the nature and quality of work, something that Marxism and capitalism ignores.

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<sup>270</sup> Winch, *The Just Balance*, p. 88.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

Marx identifies the source of oppression as the capitalist exploitation of surplus labour and so proletariat ownership became a defining principle of revolution. For Weil, this analysis ignores the working conditions and type of work, just as the capitalist industrial system had with its scientific measurements of factory labour. Weil applies her critique equally between socialism and capitalism because both systems emphasise the maximisation of production and exploitation of the worker, albeit for different reasons. This leads to the alienation of the worker, and the increased mechanisation of human labour results in less knowledge. The relationship between the individual worker and their ability to comprehend the structure of the labour process is paramount. The connection between the workers' intellectual control of their actions that interested Weil, as she states:

An artisan who has his own tools is more independent than a factory worker whose hands become useless as soon as it pleases the boss to stop him from working his machine [...] To sum up, the least evil society is that in which the general run of men is most often obliged to think while acting, have the most opportunities for exercising control over collective life, and enjoy the greatest amount of independence.<sup>273</sup>

Weil separates the systems of power relations from the machines and technology used in the work and claims that any system could just as easily reproduce oppression. Marx had not foreseen this aspect and so, even though a system of oppression could be replaced with a similarly oppressive form of Marxist production, Weil argues that a similar form of oppression exists within any system that does not account for oppression in this manner. This is one of the clear examples where we see Weil agreeing with Marx in a sense but refining the analysis with greater acuity. According to Winch, '[h]er chief criticism of Marx is directed against the idea that industrial

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<sup>273</sup> 'Un artisan qui possède ses outils est plus indépendant qu'un ouvrier d'usine dont les mains deviennent inutiles lorsqu'il plaît au patron de lui retirer l'usage de sa machine [...] En résumé la société la moins mauvaise est celle où le commun des hommes se trouve le plus souvent dans l'obligation de penser en agissant, a les grandes possibilités de contrôle sur l'ensemble de la vie collective et possède le plus d'indépendance'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 89.

society could ever itself evolve conditions in which things were fundamentally different'.<sup>274</sup> If this is the case, then Weil reaches an impasse, however much she recognises the problem. Instead of the abstract Hobbesian state of nature, where society is yet to be formed under consensual values or social norms, in *Réflexions* Weil discusses competition in a complex industrialised society. If Weil is attempting to sketch the human condition in *Réflexions*, one which would make a genuine equilibrium between human beings at least conceivable, Winch states '[s]he was always realistically pessimistic about the possibility of ever bringing such an equilibrium about as a lasting state of affairs'.<sup>275</sup> The important aspect of this pursuit, much like her ideal of liberty, is that detailing such an equilibrium provides a perspective route to an approximation of the ideal.

Consequently, Weil disagrees with Marx's believe in the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. Weil wonders how the disenfranchised workers might transform their consciousness as well as overthrow the ruling class. This question defines Weil's critique of the Marxist theory of the proletarian revolution. Fred Rosen remarks in *Marxism, Mysticism, and Liberty: The Influence of Simone Weil on Albert Camus* that:

At a time when many intellectuals [...] were joining the Communist party in response to the crisis of capitalism and the rise of fascism, Simone Weil perceptively observed that Marxism and the Russian state provided an empty hope for the emancipation of the proletariat and that capitalism, fascism, and socialism were becoming in practice more alike, as production in these forms of society came under the domination of a technocratic elite. She believed that many people had failed to see that Russia was not a workers' state in the sense that workers possessed democratic institutions, nor could it be in a 'transitional' phase [...] when the workers were oppressed by a 'bureaucratic caste'. This failure, she argued, was due to the tendency to distinguish only between the two kinds of state, the capitalist and the workers', while the Russian regime was neither the one nor the other, but a new and oppressive form.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Winch, *The Just Balance*, p. 88.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>276</sup> Fred Rosen, 'Marxism, Mysticism, and Liberty: The Influence of Simone Weil on Albert Camus', *Political Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Aug. 1979), p. 302.

For Weil, the revolutionary impulse is developed from a state of consciousness that is significantly diminished by the capitalist system of production. Thus, to carry through and sustain the revolution, certain qualities of mind and attitudes are necessary. Despite the tendency for the proletariat to develop a significant solidarity through factory work in relation to the bourgeoisie, the oppression experienced in the capitalist system served to dispossess the worker of the revolutionary spirit. So, any intellectual or knowledge-based attempts to instruct these dispossessed workers to understand the proletarian revolution would fall short according to Weil. It must come from a cultivated sense of character, one which is also developed in environments conducive to freedom and creativity. Liberty is not some external structural force that can be transferred to the worker. Without a genuine spirit of revolution, Weil is unable to see how workers will resist reproducing oppression and the problems of state bureaucracy, as she states:

And yet, though one can see very well how a revolution can ‘expropriate the expropriators’, one cannot see how a method of production founded on the subordination of those who do the work to those who co-ordinate could do otherwise than produce automatically a social structure of which the distinguishing mark is the dictatorship of a bureaucratic cast.<sup>277</sup>

As such, Weil disputes the teleology found within Marx’s conception of history. Rather than inverting Hegel’s dialectic of the spirit, as Marx claimed he was doing, Weil suggests that he simply injected the material explanation of historical force with a spirit. For her, there was no basis to accept Marx’s claim that history is unfolding toward greater progress or increased production. Nor is there any reason to accept the

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<sup>277</sup> ‘Et cependant, si l’on voit très bien comment une révolution peut exproprier les expropriateurs », on ne voit pas comment un mode de production fondé sur la subordination de ceux qui exécutent à ceux qui coordonnent pourrait ne pas produire automatiquement une structure sociale définie par la dictature d’une caste bureaucratique’. Simone Weil, ‘Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 272.

nineteenth century cult of progress that promised a positive direction to history, as she states:

The whole of this doctrine, on which the Marxist conception of revolution entirely rests, is devoid of any scientific basis<sup>278</sup> [...]. The term religion may seem surprising relating to Marx; but to believe that our will coincides with a mysterious will which is at work in the universe and helps us to conquer is to think religiously, to believe in Providence.<sup>279</sup>

It is faith in ‘the historical mission of the proletariat’<sup>280</sup> that provides the mythological backdrop for Marxist ideology. If history, spirit or God is on your side then revolution seems more inevitable, and yet, revolution became a meaningless word for Weil, both because it was used differently and because the revolution never actually manifests as intended. A bureaucracy, party elite or new ruling class is always formed and oppression, in Weil eyes, is not mitigated or erased. Stating, ‘the word revolution is a word for which you kill, for which you die, for which you send working masses to their death, but which does not possess any content’,<sup>281</sup> violent insurrection is often thought of as a genuine form of revolution, offering a clean break from the previous system of oppression. However, Weil believes that during the French Revolution the ruling class had already lost much of its support by the time of the violent overthrow. The example of the problem with the disintegrating notions of revolution is that the Russian Revolution simply transferred the oppressive systems into new hands, as she

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<sup>278</sup> ‘Toute cette doctrine, sur laquelle repose entièrement la conception marxiste de la révolution, est absolument dépourvue de tout caractère scientifique’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 35.

<sup>279</sup> ‘Le terme de religion peut surprendre quand il s’agit de Marx; mais croire que notre volonté converge avec une volonté mystérieuse qui serait à la l’œuvre dans le monde et nous aiderait à vaincre, c’est penser religieusement, c’est croire à la Providence’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 36.

<sup>280</sup> ‘La mission historique du prolétariat’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 36.

<sup>281</sup> ‘Le mot de révolution est un mot pour lequel on tue, pour lequel on meurt, pour lequel on envoie les masses populaires à la mort, mais qui n’a aucun contenu’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 45.

states, ‘the institutions arising out of the insurrection did not perhaps effectively function for as long as a single morning; and the real forces, namely big industry, the police, the army, the bureaucracy, far from being smashed by the revolution, attained thanks to it, a power unknown in other countries’.<sup>282</sup> Furthermore, Weil asks of Marx ‘why the oppressed in revolt has never succeeded in founding a non-oppressive society’.<sup>283</sup> Though Marx did provide the basis and fuel for a revolution, Weil asks the question, what happens afterwards? For, if a form of oppression just changed hands, then no real revolution has occurred.

Essentially, the distinction between revolution and reform is false. In some ways, she both accepts and rejects these ways of approaching social change. She criticises reform tendencies for not seeing the radical nature of the critique necessary to bring about change and rejects the idea that violence could lead to drastic change. Indeed, the thinking about social solutions did need to be revolutionary or radical. However, she rejects the notion that society could undergo a quick revolution and end oppression. According to Pierce, ‘[i]n the conflict between revolution and reform, Simone Weil was squarely on the side of reform. Yet at the same time, she was convinced that a utopian vision was essential, no matter how far distant it may be from reality’.<sup>284</sup> Weil did acknowledge the possibility of creating a society with less oppression. But she points out that Marx and his followers never clearly define what

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<sup>282</sup> ‘Les institutions surgies au cours de l’insurrection n’ont peut-être pas été effectivement en fonction l’espace d’un matin; et que les forces réelles, à savoir la grande industrie, la police, l’armée, la bureaucratie, loin d’avoir été brisées par la révolution, sont parvenues grâce à elle à une puissance inconnue dans les autres pays’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 66.

<sup>283</sup> ‘Pourquoi les opprimés en révolte n’ont jamais réussi à fonder une société non oppressive’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 48.

<sup>284</sup> Pierce, ‘Sociology and Utopia: The Early Writings of Simone Weil’, p. 510.

constitutes less oppression and without this analysis it is impossible to properly examine the situation, stating:

for as long as the worst and the best have not been defined in terms of a clearly and concretely conceived ideal, and then the precise margin of possibilities determined, we do not know which is the lesser evil, and consequently we are compelled to accept under this name anything effectively imposed by those who dispose force, since any existing evil whatever is always less than the possible evils which uncalculated action invariably runs the risk of bringing about.<sup>285</sup>

Accordingly, Weil rejects Marx's reduction of society to economic forces and argues for a more complex understanding of social life. In *Méditation sur l'obéissance et la liberté*,<sup>286</sup> war is distinct from the economy and plays a central role in oppression as 'however much you may resort to all kinds of subtleties to show that war is an essentially economic phenomenon, it is palpably obvious that war is destruction and not production'.<sup>287</sup> This is an aspect of understanding economics and war that changes in the latter part of *Réflexions*, but in *Méditation* force is the central determining factor to understanding oppression on a social basis according to Weil. Systems of production do not determine the level of oppression. Rather, Weil recognises that irrespective of the form of economy, whether feudal, capitalism or communism, abuses of power can and will occur. This is simply the nature of existence. No transformation of any economic system can rid the world of the human tendency to exploit. Using the examples of command and obedience, Weil points out that, despite those in power being less in number, they garner a force capable of controlling the

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<sup>285</sup> 'Car tant qu'on n'a pas défini le pire et le mieux en fonction d'un idéal clairement et concrètement conçu, puis déterminé la marge exacte des possibilités, on ne sait pas quel est le moindre mal, et dès lors on est contraint d'accepter sous ce nom tout ce qu'imposent effectivement ceux qui ont en main la force, parce que n'importe quel mal réel est toujours moindre que les maux possibles que risque toujours d'amener une action non calculée'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 51.

<sup>286</sup> *Meditation on obedience and freedom.*

<sup>287</sup> 'On a beau avoir recours à toutes sortes de subtilités pour faire de la guerre un phénomène essentiellement économique, il éclate aux yeux que la guerre est destruction et non production'. Simone Weil, 'Méditation sur l'obéissance et la liberté', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 129.



masses. Due to ignorance, most misplace their critique and a ‘veil is thrown over the fundamental absurdity of the social mechanism’.<sup>288</sup> Many simply accept Marx’s theory of economic determinism. Weil states in *Examen critique des idées de révolution et de progrès*,<sup>289</sup> that ‘people would rather believe that Marx has demonstrated the future, an imminent constitution of a socialist society, than study his works to see if they can discover even the remotest attempt at demonstration’.<sup>290</sup> Whereas Marx believes the bourgeoisie acted primarily to obtain a disproportionate amount of goods, Weil believes they acted solely to retain power. This creates a sharp distinction with Marx on the issue of scarcity.

There are many contributing factors to oppression, not simply whether a society has a lack of abundance or not. Here again, power or its underlying force is central to Weil’s thought as she states, ‘at times war occupies the forefront, at other times the search for wealth, at other times production; but the evil remains the same’<sup>291</sup> where ‘we should be mistaken likewise in assuming that oppression to be ineluctable as soon as the productive forces have been sufficiently developed to ensure welfare and leisure for all’.<sup>292</sup> Weil also disagrees that it is both possible and desirable to

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<sup>288</sup> ‘Des deux côtes, on jette un voile sur l’absurdité radicale du mécanisme social’. Simone Weil, ‘Méditation sur l’obéissance et la liberté’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 130.

<sup>289</sup> *Critical examination of ideas of revolution and progress*.

<sup>290</sup> ‘On aime mieux croire que Marx a démontré la constitution future et prochaine d’une société socialiste, plutôt que de chercher dans ses œuvres si on y peut trouver même la moindre tentative de démonstration’. Simone Weil, ‘Examen critique des idées de révolution et de progrès’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 148.

<sup>291</sup> ‘Tantôt la guerre apparaît au premier plan, tantôt la recherche de la richesse, tantôt la production; mais le mal reste le même’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 58.

<sup>292</sup> ‘On se tromperait de même en supposant que l’oppression cesse d’être inéluctable dès que les forces productives sont assez développées pour pouvoir assurer à tous le bien-être et le loisir’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 59.

overcome scarcity. Describing the idea that not needing to work as ‘mad’<sup>293</sup> is not surprising as work for Weil is a central part of what it is to be a free human and a dignified activity when done with understanding and intelligence. However, Weil does recognise the stream of thought in Marx’s early writings, which emphasises the importance of work, as she states:

It must take from thence precisely that which has been almost forgotten by what is called Marxism: the glorification of productive labour, considered as man’s highest activity; the assertion that only a society wherein the act of work brought all of man’s faculties into play, wherein the man who works occupied the front rank, would realise human greatness to the full. We find in Marx’s early writings, lines concerning labour that have a lyrical accent [...] This new poetry, appropriate to our time, which forms perhaps its chief claim to greatness, must not be lost. Therein the oppressed must find evoked their own mother-country, which is hope.<sup>294</sup>

Therefore, Weil disagrees with the orthodox interpretation of Marxism which focusses on ideas within *Capital* but perhaps finds similarities with his earlier writings.<sup>295</sup>

Related to the issue of scarcity is that of private property. Again, Weil fundamentally disagrees with Marx. He believes that once private property is abolished the oppression of workers disappears simultaneously. For Weil, this is another false conclusion. Contrary to Marx, she believes any societal system of production could produce oppression. Since power is the central tool for oppression in Weil’s analysis, and since hierarchies are inevitable, oppression will always be reproduced. Whereas private property represented the misuse of surplus labour to Marx, it remains a neutral

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<sup>293</sup> ‘La folle idée’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 45.

<sup>294</sup> ‘Il a à y prendre ce qui a été précisément presque oublié par ce qu’on nomme le marxisme: la glorification du travail productif, conçu comme l’activité suprême de l’homme; l’affirmation que seule une société où l’acte du travail mettrait en jeu toutes les facultés de l’homme, où l’homme qui travaille serait au premier rang, réaliserait la plénitude de la grandeur humaine. On trouve chez Marx, dans les écrits de jeunesse, des lignes d’accent lyrique concernant le travail [...]. Cette poésie nouvelle, propre à notre temps, et qui en fait peut-être la principale grandeur, ne doit pas se perdre. Les opprimés doivent y trouver l’évocation de leur patrie à eux, qui est une espérance’. Simone Weil, ‘Sur les contradictions du marxisme’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 141.

<sup>295</sup> In his 1844 Manuscripts Marx never posited the notion of a work free utopian society but these ideas can be found within *Capital*. Orthodox Marxism ignored his earlier writings. And there is a similarity between Weil’s emphasis on work and Marx’s early writings.

factor for Weil's understanding of oppression. The argument over ownership of property becomes secondary to the structure of labour and the organisation of power within the workplace. Therefore, it is Weil's argument that Marx fails to fully investigate the problem of oppression which is key to her position on oppression and consequently, liberty.

## Section Two

### 3.2.1 Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne

In her 1933 article, *Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne*,<sup>296</sup> Weil demonstrates the germination of analysis which we find more complete in the 1934 *Réflexions*. By comparing the social and political developments in Russia, Germany, France, and America, Weil concludes that ‘capitalist expansion has now nearly reached the point where it will be halted by the actual limits of the earth’s surface [and] yet never have there been fewer premonitory signs of the advent of socialism’.<sup>297</sup> Despite the obvious shortcomings in this statement, Weil nevertheless reminds her readers that the individual worker, as opposed to the collective, should be the supreme value and that the goal should be to support the value of the worker by opposing specialisation. This is achieved by dignifying manual labour through helping the worker understand his work. Weil summarises the task of her generation as follows:

We want to get back to man, that is to say to the individual, the power which it is his proper function to exercise over nature, over tools, over society itself; to re-establish the importance of the workers as compared with material conditions of work; and instead of doing away with private property, to turn individual property into something real, by transforming the means of production [...] which at present serve above all to enslave and exploit labour, into mere instruments of labour freely and co-operatively performed.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> *Prospects: Are we heading for a proletarian revolution.*

<sup>297</sup> ‘L’expansion capitaliste n’est plus loin du moment où elle se heurtera aux limites mêmes de la surface terrestre. Et cependant jamais le socialisme n’a été annoncé par moins de signes précurseurs’. Simone Weil, ‘Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 260.

<sup>298</sup> ‘Nous voulons rendre à l’homme, c’est-à-dire à l’individu, la domination qu’il a pour fonction propre d’exercer sur la nature, sur les outils, sur la société elle-même; rétablir la subordination des conditions matérielles du travail par rapport aux travailleurs; et, au lieu de supprimer la propriété individuelle, faire de la propriété individuelle une vérité, en transformant les moyens de production [...] qui servent aujourd’hui surtout à asservir et exploiter le travail, en de simples instruments du travail libre et associé’. Simone Weil, ‘Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 277.

This criticism and the subsequent critique of Marx starts to place Weil outside the mainstream ideologies and movements. It is shown above that this focus on labour, particularly from the viewpoint of the individual worker, is continued in *Réflexions* so we turn our attention to the specifics of the essay.

### 3.2.2 Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression

After she relinquishes hope of revolutionary syndicalism alleviating the plights of the common worker, the themes of *Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne* that continue in *Réflexions* comprises a further development in Weil's political thought. Encapsulated in a critique of all current developments, her criticism extends to intellectuals, labour unionists, Marxists, Stalinists, capitalists and fascists. Leaving few unchastised, *Réflexions* is important because it demystifies Marx by 1933-34. Citing work as the core of society and workers as the supreme value, the main function in writing *Réflexions* is to remind readers that these aspects should be the focus of any social reform. Weil is critical of everything that moves the individual worker away from problem's locus. When the concerns of individual workers are diminished, Weil believes that focus has been lost. Consequently, her criticism includes revolution, specialisation, and bureaucracy. Weil's *Réflexions* is divided into four parts, entitled, 'Critique du marxisme', 'Analyse de l'Oppression', 'Tableau théorique d'une société libre', and 'Esquisse de la vie sociale contemporaine'. The first two parts focus on critique and analysis, whereas in the last two parts Weil develops an ideal against which she compares the state of contemporary social life. This section of this thesis will subsequently outline the first two parts: 'Critique du marxisme' and 'Analyse de l'Oppression'.

### 3.2.3 Critique du marxisme

In the first section of *Réflexions* Weil dissects the Marxist position that modern techniques, once freed from capitalist forms of economy, can give men enough leisure to enable them to develop their faculties harmoniously, and consequently bring about the disappearance, to a certain extent, of the degrading specialisation created by capitalism. The further development of technique must lighten the burden of material necessity, and, as an immediate consequence, that of social constraint, until humanity reaches at last a truly paradisiacal state in which the most abundant production would be at the cost of a trifling expenditure of effort. From his earliest writings on the alienation of labour, Marx states:

We started from the presuppositions of political economy. We accepted its vocabulary and its laws. We presupposed private property, the separation of labour, capital, and land, and likewise of wages, profit, and ground rent; also, division of labour; competition; the concept of exchange value, etc. Using the very words of political economy we have demonstrated that the worker is degraded to the most miserable sort of commodity; that the misery of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and size of his production; that the necessary result of competition is the accumulation of capital in a few hands, and thus a more terrible restoration of monopoly; and that finally the distinction between capitalist and landlord, and that between peasant and industrial worker disappears and the whole of society must fall apart into the two classes of the property owners and the propertyless workers.<sup>299</sup>

The difficulty Weil has with this bifurcation of people into classes who have property and those who do not is that it does not account for oppression. This problem intensifies when an increase in productive forces is unquestioned by Marx in his 1857-58 *The Economics*, where he states that capital tears ‘down all obstacles that impede the development of productive forces, the expansion of needs, the diversity of production and the exploitation and exchange of natural and intellectual forces’<sup>300</sup> and ‘there is a limit not inherent to production generally’.<sup>301</sup> Weil criticises Marx for

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<sup>299</sup> *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, p. 85.

<sup>300</sup> *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, p. 398.

<sup>301</sup> *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, p. 399.

holding a religious fervour in the power of matter to subvert the given working conditions. The effect of this argument is that socialism continues to oppress workers by subjecting them to historical progress. Marx's concern in his latter writings is not of oppression but of capital that

[t]he universality towards which it is perpetually driving finds limitations in its own nature, which at a certain stage of its development will make it appear as itself the greatest barrier to this tendency, leading thus to its own self-destruction.<sup>302</sup>

According to Weil, 'Marx's truly great idea is that in human society as well as in nature nothing takes place otherwise than through material transformations.'<sup>303</sup> In society man is subject to material necessities otherwise known as material production. To make any change or improvement in social organisation, a study of the method of production is necessary. One should ascertain the actual and potential output of the production mode, the forms of social and cultural life compatible with it, and the potential transformations of the production mode. Weil is convinced of the importance of the materialist method, but she also laments Marx by stating, 'the only really valuable idea to be found in Marx's writings is also the only one that has been completely neglected. It is not surprising that the social movements springing from Marx have failed'.<sup>304</sup> Essentially, Weil and Marx are interested in different aspects of the workers' condition. We find that Weil agrees in principle with Marx's intentions to change the system, but that his assessment of the major obstacles and his methodology in achieving them fail to recognise the true nature of the workers' plight.

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<sup>302</sup> *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, p. 398.

<sup>303</sup> 'La grande idée de Marx, c'est que dans la société aussi bien que dans la nature rien ne s'effectue autrement que par des transformations matérielles'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 36.

<sup>304</sup> 'La seule idée vraiment précieuse qui se trouve dans l'œuvre de Marx est la seule aussi qui ait été complètement négligée. Il n'est pas étonnant que les mouvements sociaux issus de Marx aient fait faillite'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 36.



Overt specialisation or mundane labour that leads to work devoid of a worker's ability to be active only add to his oppressive weight.

Weil examines the argument that modern technique might provide welfare and leisure equally to everyone in order that the individual does not suffer under modern working conditions. She concludes that eliminating private property would never in itself provide the solution since 'the abolition of private property would be far from sufficient to prevent work in the mines and in the factories from continuing to weigh as a servitude on those who are subjected to it'.<sup>305</sup> Dispelling hope that the modern state of technique is a solution for the situation of the workers, Weil examines the presumption of unlimited future development of technique. The presupposition underlying such development is the potential for an unlimited increase in productivity. That Weil recognises the presupposition of unlimited growth separates her from the assumption of unlimited growth that is imbedded in both the capitalist and socialist theories. Weil proceeds to apply the unused method 'of studying the conditions of a given phenomenon and the limits implied by them'<sup>306</sup> to the notion of technical progress. Yet, criticising Marx, and expounding a further point of divergence, Weil states that his 'dialectical method should have saved him from such an error, [yet he] fell into it on this point just like other people'.<sup>307</sup> It is this difference in methodology that Weil creates a creates an intellectual divergence with Marx.

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<sup>305</sup> 'La suppression de la propriété privée serait loin de suffire à empêcher que le labeur des mines et des usines continue à peser comme un esclavage sur ceux qui y sont assujettis'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 38.

<sup>306</sup> 'D'étudier les conditions d'un phénomène et les limites qu'elles impliquent'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 38.

<sup>307</sup> 'Méthode dialectique devait préserver d'une telle erreur, y est tombé sur ce point comme les autres'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 38.

In compartmentalising the technical progress and its factors, Weil wants to study these procedures separately. The first stage underlying the technical progress, which promised to produce more with less effort, is the utilisation of natural sources of energy. Not assuming an unlimited source, the energy must be wrestled from nature and transformed through labour. She describes the end of non-renewable resources as ‘simply daydreaming’,<sup>308</sup> lamenting the idea that a source of energy will be found that can be immediately utilisable without requiring human labour to transform it. The second stage underlying the technical progress, which intended to decrease human effort, is ‘the rationalisation of human labour’.<sup>309</sup> Weil’s ideal of production is that labour can be understood as the relationship between ‘simultaneous efforts’.<sup>310</sup> Weil distinguishes between production that is created in simultaneous partnership and products that are created between ‘successive efforts’,<sup>311</sup> whereby products are created in successive stages, like on production line. In both these modes of production, progress is derived by a combination of both modes of production. This is an organisation of work to maximise production, whether it involves a sequence of repeated operations or a process of production. Weil questions whether this type of ‘progress is unlimited and if not, whether we are still a long way from the limit’.<sup>312</sup> The third stage underlying the technical progress, which had promised to produce

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<sup>308</sup> ‘C’est rêver’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 39.

<sup>309</sup> ‘La rationalisation du travail’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 40.

<sup>310</sup> ‘Les efforts simultanés’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 40.

<sup>311</sup> ‘Les efforts successifs’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 40.

<sup>312</sup> ‘Progrès est illimité, et, dans le cas contraire, si nous sommes encore loin de la limite’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 40.

more with less effort, is the rationalisation of labour in space. This factor included the concentration, division and coordination of labour. Concentration of labour relates to the reduction of overheads. The coordination of labour involves making the possible efforts reach beyond the scope of a single person to increase the speed of production. This is possible because one person assumes the work of coordination on behalf of others. Thus, ‘division and coordination of effort makes possible gigantic works, which would be infinitely beyond the scope of a single man’.<sup>313</sup> However, after stating one of the rare positive aspects concerning a capitalist mass-production system, she concludes that these ‘labour-saving’<sup>314</sup> devices contain ‘within themselves a limit, beyond which they form factors of expenditure’ and ‘this limit had been reached and overstepped’.<sup>315</sup> The fourth stage underlying the technical progress is the coordination of labour in time. This factor Weil considers the most important and most difficult to analyse. The analysis of this factor requires a confrontation with a notion prevalent since Marx that ‘living labour’<sup>316</sup> could eventually be replaced by ‘inanimate labour’.<sup>317</sup> Weil criticises this idea as the modern scientific culture and the consequential extrapolation of Marx’s misunderstanding of the conditions of labour. In 1844, Marx states in first-stage manuscripts of *Economics* that ‘the worker can

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<sup>313</sup> ‘La division et la coordination des efforts rendent possibles des œuvres colossales qui d’passeraient infiniment les possibilités d’un homme seul’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 40.

<sup>314</sup> ‘D’économie comportent’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 40.

<sup>315</sup> ‘Une limite au-delà de laquelle ils deviennent facteurs de dépense, mais encore que cette limite est atteinte et dépassée’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 40.

<sup>316</sup> ‘Travail mort’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 41.

<sup>317</sup> ‘Travail vivant’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 41.

create nothing without nature’,<sup>318</sup> but five years later, he states in *Wage-labour and Capital*:

Machinery brings about the same results [of competition] on a much greater scale, by replacing skilled workers by unskilled, men by women, adults by children. It brings about the same results, where it is newly introduced, by throwing the hand workers on to the streets in masses, and, where it is developed, improved and replaced by more productive machinery, by discharging workers in smaller batches.<sup>319</sup>

Later in *Capital*, Marx is convinced of the problem, stating ‘we see, that machinery, while augmenting the human material that forms the principal object of capital’s exploiting power, at the same time raises the degree of exploitation’.<sup>320</sup> Weil states that the idea that inanimate labour would replace human effort is ‘a dangerously vague formula in the sense that it conjures up the picture of a continuous evolution towards a stage of technique where, if one may express it, all the jobs to be done would be done already’.<sup>321</sup> In contrast to all the hopes for infinite development of automation, of which the robot is the ultimate symbol, Weil states, ‘no technique will ever relieve men of the necessity of continually adapting, by the sweat of their brow, the mechanical equipment they use’.<sup>322</sup> The difference in approach is that Weil argues that Marx fails to recognise that increases in automation accounts for more oppression in labour not less, whereas Marx’s concern is the economic exploitation of labour.

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<sup>318</sup> *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, p. 87.

<sup>319</sup> *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, p. 291.

<sup>320</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Samuel Moore, Edward Aveling and Ernest Untermann (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2013), p. 273.

<sup>321</sup> ‘Formule d’une redoutable imprécision, en ce sens qu’elle évoque l’image d’une évolution continue vers une étape de la technique ou, si l’on peut parler ainsi, tous les travaux à faire seraient déjà faits’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 41.

<sup>322</sup> ‘Jamais aucune technique ne dispensera les hommes de renouveler et d’adapter continuellement, à la sueur de leur front, l’outillage dont ils se servent’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 43.

In developing a critique which, although influenced by Marx, hazards a more encompassing view, Weil cautions that oppression must be distinguished from the suppression of personal whims to a social order. The constraint which society imposes on individuals should not be confused with oppression unless it results in a division of those who exercise it and those who are subject to it, giving those in command the power to crush those who obey. Having made this distinction, Weil cautions against the assumption *a priori* that the abolition of oppression is possible. Marx demonstrates that big industry reduces the worker to an instrument in the hands of the employers, but Weil concludes that it is useless to hope that the technical progress alleviates the double burden imposed by man and society. Weil asks whether it is possible to conceive of a system of production that allows the necessities imposed by nature and social constraint to be exercised without grinding down souls and bodies under oppression. The difficulty in understanding Weil's position with Marx is that we cannot account for which period of Marx she is discussing and their language. While interrelated, it means attempting to correlate where Weil's use of oppression and Marx's use alienation in his early work and exploitation thereafter speak to the same problems.

### 3.2.4 Analyse de l'Oppression

In the second part of *Réflexions*, entitled, 'Analyse de l'Oppression', Weil explains her method of studying social oppression, which she introduces in 'Critique du marxisme.' Outlining that Marx eventually recognises that if oppression is linked to the material producing conditions of the social system it will not be abolished if the conditions causing oppression remain. Developing a theory of oppression wherein oppression is interpreted 'as the organ of a social function'<sup>323</sup> of developing productive forces, 'no longer [...] as the usurpation of a privilege',<sup>324</sup> Marx and Engels' theory of exploitation fragmented in *The Communist Manifesto*, which is linked to the bourgeois' exploitation of private property and capital to solidify a division of labour, states that 'private property is the final and most complete expression of the system of producing and appropriating products, that is based on class antagonism, on the exploitation of the many by the few'.<sup>325</sup> Yet, according to Weil, Marx perceives that oppression 'stimulates the further development of the productive forces',<sup>326</sup> transforming itself when production demands it, and eventually disappearing when it no longer proves itself helpful. Weil, however, remains dissatisfied with Marx's theory of exploitation, stating:

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<sup>323</sup> 'Qu'organe d'une fonction sociale'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 47.

<sup>324</sup> 'Non plus en tant qu'usurpation d'un privilège'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 47.

<sup>325</sup> *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, p. 256.

<sup>326</sup> 'Provoque le développement ultérieur des forces productives'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 47.

It only partially describes its origins; for why should the division of labour necessarily turn into oppression? It by no means entitles us to a reasonable explanation of its ending; for if Marx believed himself to have shown how the capitalist system finally hinders production, he did not even attempt to prove that, in our day, any other productive system would hinder it in like manner. Furthermore, one fails to understand why oppression should not manage to continue, even after it has become a factor of economic regression. Above all, Marx omits to explain why oppression is invincible if it is useful, why the oppressed in revolt have never succeeded in founding a non-oppressive society, whether based on the productive forces of their time, or even at the cost of an economic regression which could hardly increase their misery; and lastly, he leaves completely in the dark the general principles of the mechanism by which a given form of oppression is replaced by another.<sup>327</sup>

Not only did Marxism fail to solve these problems, its proponents do not recognise that these problems are in their remit. The Marxist explanations rely on, as previously states above, the Lamarckian principle of development wherein ‘the function creates the organ’<sup>328</sup> and assumes that social oppression ‘corresponds to a function in the struggle against nature’.<sup>329</sup> By contrast, Weil proposes a method based on the conditions of existence. In her proposal, evoking Darwin, the function does not create the organ but the function is the result of the organ. Weil argues that ‘non-viable structures’<sup>330</sup> would be eliminated and therefore ‘adaptation is henceforth conceived as an exterior and no longer as an interior necessity’.<sup>331</sup> Placing Marx’s method in a

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<sup>327</sup> ‘Il n’en décrit que partiellement la naissance; car pourquoi la division du travail se tournerait-elle nécessairement en oppression ? Il ne permet nullement d’en attendre raisonnablement la fin; car, si Marx a cru montrer comment le régime capitaliste finit par entraver la production, il n’a même pas essayé de prouver que, de nos jours, tout autre régime oppressif l’entraverait pareillement; et de plus on ignore pourquoi l’oppression ne pourrait pas réussir à se maintenir, même une fois devenue un facteur de régression économique. Surtout Marx omet d’expliquer pourquoi l’oppression est invincible aussi longtemps qu’elle est utile, pourquoi les opprimés en révolte n’ont jamais réussi à fonder une société non oppressive, soit sur la base des forces productives de leur époque, soit même au prix d’une régression économique qui pouvait difficilement accroître leur misère; et enfin il laisse tout à fait dans l’ombre les principes généraux du mécanisme par lequel une forme déterminée d’oppression est remplacée par une autre’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 48.

<sup>328</sup> ‘La fonction crée l’organe’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 48.

<sup>329</sup> ‘Correspond à une fonction dans la lutte contre la nature’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 48.

<sup>330</sup> ‘Les structures non viables’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 49.

<sup>331</sup> ‘L’adaptation est dès lors conçue par rapport aux êtres vivants comme une nécessité extérieure et non plus intérieure’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 49.

Lamarckian framework, she insists his theory requires a Darwinian improvement. Marx's understanding of social evolution would theoretically give rise to an infinite number of forms of social organisation. Conditions of existence limit the infinite variations. A type of natural selection among human efforts eliminates all human innovations that are incompatible.

These conditions of existence are determined in the first place, as in the cases of living beings, on the one hand by the natural environment and on the other hand by the existence, activity, and especially competition of other organisms of the same species, [namely] other social groups. [...] a third factor enters, namely, the organisation of the natural environment, capital equipment, armaments, methods of work and warfare.<sup>332</sup>

The third factor quoted in the above text holds a unique position in that it acts upon the form of social organisation. But as the third factor, namely, the organisation of the natural environment, equipment, armaments and methods of work and warfare, acts upon the form of social organisation, it is also subject to the methods of work and warfare. Consequently, it is the only factor over which society can legitimately exert control. Weil recommends a definition of the conditions of oppression by proposing the ideal limit. The actual conditions would have to be transformed to bring them closer to the ideal. Subsequently, it is 'the least oppressive form of social organisation'<sup>333</sup> for a specific set of social conditions which need to be discovered. Within this design, the power of an individual's actions and responsibilities would also need to be defined. To analyse further the nature of social oppression, Weil traces its origins historically to various forms of social organisation. The few forms of social

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<sup>332</sup> 'Ces conditions d'existence sont déterminées tout d'abord, comme pour les êtres vivants, d'une part par le milieu naturel, d'autre part par l'existence, par l'activité et particulièrement par la concurrence des autres organismes de même espèce, c'est-à-dire en l'occurrence des autres groupements sociaux. Mais un troisième facteur entre encore en jeu, à savoir l'aménagement du milieu naturel, l'outillage, l'armement, les procédés de travail et de combat'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 49.

<sup>333</sup> 'La moins oppressive d'organisation sociale'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 50.



organisation that are free of oppression correspond to a low level of production in a subsistence economy because the energy required for subsistence mitigates oppression or warfare for conquest. This is contestable, since it can be argued that as oppression is accompanied by higher forms of production, there is a difference in degree and kind between a primitive and a developed economy. Production is transformed in the transition from primitive to developed economy. A primitive economy is completely subject to nature, whereas a developed economy is less immediately subject to nature, due partly to the accumulation of surplus. This development occurs in stages where primitive man defies nature, that, as Weil states, nature ‘gradually loses her divine character and divinity more and more takes on human shape’.<sup>334</sup> However, Weil states that this appearance of increasing freedom from nature is not present. She admits that while primitive man in a primitive economy ‘is necessarily free with respect to other men’,<sup>335</sup> he faces a greater weight of force in that ‘he is narrowly subjected to nature’s dominion’.<sup>336</sup> In a more complex economy, where ‘human action continues, as a whole, to be nothing but pure obedience to the brutal spur of immediate necessity; only, instead of being harried by nature, man is henceforth harried by man’.<sup>337</sup> Immediate necessity manifesting as force exerts pressure on man through oppression in the form of power, and because of the interrelation between force and nature, in that

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<sup>334</sup> ‘La nature perd graduellement son caractère divin, et la divinité revêt de plus en plus la forme humaine’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 53.

<sup>335</sup> ‘Est nécessairement libre à l’égard des autres hommes’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 52.

<sup>336</sup> ‘Assujetti à la domination de la nature’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 52.

<sup>337</sup> ‘L’action humaine continue, dans l’ensemble, à n’être que pure obéissance à l’aiguillon brutal d’une nécessité immédiate; seulement, au lieu d’être harcelé par la nature, l’homme est désormais harcelé par l’homme’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 53.

force originates in nature, power cannot be eliminated. Hence, for Weil, oppression can only be mitigated.

Consequently, now force becomes important to Weil's study of liberty, oppression and power. The point she stresses is that the very nature of force, as opposed to how it is used, determines whether it is oppressive. The first objective condition which gives rise to oppression is the existence of privileges. In the process of social evolution, 'certain circumstances [...] give rise to forces [...] between the ordinary man and his own conditions of existence [...] which are, inherently, the monopoly of the few, since they cannot be shared among all',<sup>338</sup> and as such, 'equality is destroyed' in the process. Weil uses the example of priests in a primitive society who acquire specialised knowledge of religious rites, claiming to have power over nature. Her example can also be applied to a more complex society, as she states, 'nothing essential is changed when this monopoly is no longer made up of rites but of scientific processes, and when those in possession of it are called scientists and technicians instead of priests'.<sup>339</sup> This statement illustrates one of the essential differences between Weil and Marx. Weil compared the modern form of science to a new form of religion, and yet her objection is not against science, but against its use by individuals to develop a monopoly of knowledge. Weil felt that Marx's critique of religion, who states in the introduction of *Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy*

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<sup>338</sup> 'Certaines circonstances, qui correspondent à des étapes sans doute inévitables de développement humain, font surgir des forces qui s'interposent entre l'homme du commun et ses propres conditions d'existence, entre l'effort et le fruit de l'effort, et qui sont, par leur essence même, le monopole de quelques-uns, du fait qu'elles ne peuvent être réparties entre tous; dès lors, ces privilégiés, bien qu'ils dépendent, pour vivre, du travail d'autrui, disposent du sort de ceux mêmes dont ils dépendent, et l'égalité périclite'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 53.

<sup>339</sup> 'Rien d'essentiel n'est changé lorsque ce monopole est constitué non plus par des rites, mais par des procédés scientifiques, et que ceux qui le détiennent s'appellent, au lieu de prêtres, savants et techniciens'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 53-54.

of Right that ‘man makes religion, religion does not make man [...]’. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself<sup>340</sup> needs to apply to science. In *Lénine: Matérialisme et empiriocriticisme* Weil writes that ‘Marx’s excellent observation about the criticism of religion, as being the condition of all criticism, must be extended also to include modern science. Socialism will not even be conceivable as long as science has not been stripped of its mystery’.<sup>341</sup> The key is that everyone would be able to understand all the aspects of method and discovery. The second objective condition which gives rise to privilege is the existence of arms. When arms require special knowledge to handle them or when they eliminate the possibility that unarmed men can defend themselves against armed men, privilege is established. A similar development of privilege arises whenever the struggle against men or nature requires the coordination of effort. Complex coordination results in leaders who demand obedience. Privileges alone, however, are not enough to cause oppression. The struggle for power is the factor which produces oppression. Weil states that Marx understood, in his analysis of capitalism, that ‘power contains a sort of fatality which weighs as pitilessly on those who command as on those who obey; much more, it is to the extent that it enslaves the first that, through them, it crushes the second’.<sup>342</sup> To illustrate the discussion of power as it relates to oppression, Weil contrasts power in the struggle of man against nature to the struggle of man against man. When man struggles against nature the fight is restricted by

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<sup>340</sup> *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, pp. 71-72.

<sup>341</sup> ‘Aussi la belle formule de Marx concernant la critique de la religion comme condition de toute critique doit-elle être étendue aussi à la science moderne. Le socialisme ne sera même pas concevable tant que la science n’aura pas été dépouillée de son mystère’. Simone Weil, ‘*Lénine: Matérialisme et empiriocriticisme*’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 308-309.

<sup>342</sup> ‘La puissance enferme une espèce de fatalité qui pèse aussi impitoyablement sur ceux qui commandent que sur ceux qui obéissent; bien plus, c’est dans la mesure où elle asservit les premiers que, par leur intermédiaire, elle écrase les seconds’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 54-55.

certain limiting necessities. By contrast, no limits exist in the struggle of man against man since ‘the preservation of power is a vital necessity for the powerful’.<sup>343</sup> Those who have power constantly fight against their rivals and their subjects as it is malleable and flows between people. The two ways to break this circle are ‘by abolishing inequality, or else by setting a stable power’<sup>344</sup> wherein a balance is obtained between ‘those who command and those who obey’.<sup>345</sup> Weil associates the second option, namely the establishment of a stable power, with ‘sincere and thoughtful men of the Right’.<sup>346</sup> Her evaluation of this option was that ‘this stability of power, objective of those who call themselves realists, shows itself to be a chimera [...] on the same grounds as the anarchists’ utopia’.<sup>347</sup> This option, evident in history from Roman times until modern France, is not a real solution because of the nature of power. Power contains a contradiction that prevents it from becoming consolidated. Those who rule are always trying to establish a dominion impossible to attain. ‘It would be otherwise’, Weil states, ‘if one man could possess in himself a force superior to that of many other men put together; but such is never the case; the instruments of power; arms, gold, machines, magical or technical secrets, always exist independently of him who

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<sup>343</sup> ‘Conserver la puissance est, pour les puissants, une nécessité vitale’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 55.

<sup>344</sup> ‘Supprimant l’inégalité, ou en établissant un pouvoir stable’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 55.

<sup>345</sup> ‘Ceux qui commandent et ceux qui obéissent’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 56.

<sup>346</sup> ‘Des hommes de droite sincères et réfléchis’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 56.

<sup>347</sup> ‘Mais cette stabilité du pouvoir, objectif de ceux qui se disent réalistes, apparaît comme une chimère, si l’on y regarde de près, au même titre que l’utopie anarchiste’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 56.

disposes of them, and can be taken up by others'.<sup>348</sup> But one man or men cannot indefinitely retain a superior and so Weil concludes 'that all power is unstable'.<sup>349</sup>

In social relationships, the methods of labour and warfare produce inequality. The race for power consequently enslaves everyone including the strong and the weak. The truth of this principle extends beyond the capitalist system. In any race for power, the methods to obtain power subject men by becoming absolute ends. Weil concludes that the race for power reveals human history as

the history of the servitude which makes men — oppressors and oppressed alike — the plaything of the instruments of domination they themselves have manufactured; and thus, reduces living humanity to be the chattel of inanimate chattels.<sup>350</sup>

Weil suggests it is things that prescribe the limits in the race for power. The actions of the oppressed are futile, even though they occasionally succeed in driving out one set of oppressors for another, or changing the form of oppression. Oppression itself cannot be abolished if the sources of it are not abolished. Even if the sources of oppression are abolished by a social group, they would be enslaved by another group which had not undertaken the same process of abolition. They would also not survive since they would be incapable of primitive production and 'cannot recover immediate contact with nature'.<sup>351</sup> To make an abstract preliminary description of the interplay between

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<sup>348</sup> 'Il en serait autrement si l'homme pouvait posséder en lui-même une force supérieure à celle de beaucoup d'autres réunis; mais ce n'est jamais le cas; les instruments du pouvoir, armes, or, machines, secrets magiques ou techniques, existent toujours en dehors de celui qui en dispose, et peuvent être pris par d'autres'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 56.

<sup>349</sup> 'Ainsi tout pouvoir est instable'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 56.

<sup>350</sup> 'L'histoire de l'asservissement qui fait des hommes, aussi bien oppresseurs qu'opprimés, le simple jouet des instruments de domination qu'ils ont fabriqués eux-mêmes, et ravale ainsi l'humanité vivante à être la chose inerte'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 58.

<sup>351</sup> 'On ne peut retrouver le contact immédiat avec la nature'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 59.

power and methods of production, Weil lists the necessities which limit all species of power. First, a power ‘relies upon instruments which have in each situation a given scope’.<sup>352</sup> Second, ‘since the power that a human being really exercises extends only to what is effectively under his control, power is always running up against the actual limits of the controlling faculty’.<sup>353</sup> Third, ‘the exercise of any form of power is subject to the existence of a surplus in the production of commodities, and a sufficiently large surplus so that all those engaged, whether as masters or as slaves, in the struggle for power, may be able to live on’.<sup>354</sup> These three factors enable one to conceive of political and social power as analogous to measurable force. Weil adds the comment that the use of power is cemented by ‘a religion of power’<sup>355</sup> and kings or military leaders believe they rule by divine right and those who are under them feel crushed by a ‘divine or diabolical’<sup>356</sup> power. But, while this religion of power thereby ‘falsifies all social relations by enabling the powerful to command over and above what they can impose’,<sup>357</sup> at times of agitation, oppressors and the oppressed fail to recognise how heavy the weight of this oppression can be felt.

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<sup>352</sup> ‘Quelconque s’appuie sur des instruments qui ont dans chaque situation une portée déterminée’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2, Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 60.

<sup>353</sup> ‘Comme le pouvoir qu’exerce réellement un être humain ne s’étend qu’à ce qui se trouve effectivement soumis à son contrôle, le pouvoir se heurte toujours aux bornes mêmes de la faculté de contrôle’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 61.

<sup>354</sup> ‘L’exercice d’un pouvoir quelconque a pour condition un excédent dans la production de subsistances, et un excédent assez considérable pour que tous ceux qui se consacrent, soit en qualité de maîtres, soit en qualité d’esclaves, à la lutte pour le pouvoir, puissent vivre’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 61.

<sup>355</sup> ‘Cette religion du pouvoir’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 62.

<sup>356</sup> ‘Divine ou diabolique’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 61.

<sup>357</sup> ‘Qui fasse tous les rapports sociaux en permettant aux puissants d’ordonner au-delà de ce qu’ils peuvent imposer’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits*

It is obvious that Weil's analysis of the nature of power goes beyond Marx. Oppression might only end when it becomes detrimental to production. The idea of the revolt of the productive forces described by Trotsky as a factor in history is dismissed by Weil as 'pure fiction'.<sup>358</sup> Oppression does not disappear when the productive forces has evolved to the point of providing welfare and leisure for all. In this society, the struggle for subsistence is only one factor in the struggle for power. This analysis reveals how Weil uses Marx's analysis but moves beyond it to formulate more refined theory of oppression. This is confirmed when she states:

The Marxist view, according to which social existence is determined by the relations between man and nature established by production, certainly remains the only sound basis for any historical investigation; only these relations must be considered first in terms of the problem of power, the means of subsistence forming simply one of the data of the problem.<sup>359</sup>

Another aspect of Weil's analysis of the struggle for power contradicts the idea of infinite development and extension of power. If power could extend infinitely its means of control, 'it would tend towards ubiquity',<sup>360</sup> while if it could extend its resources endlessly, 'it would be as if the surrounding nature evolved gradually towards this unreservedly generosity from which Adam and Eve benefitted in the earthly paradise'.<sup>361</sup> However, Weil argues that power is subject to limits but that

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*historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 62.

<sup>358</sup> 'Une pure fiction'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 59.

<sup>359</sup> 'La vue marxiste selon laquelle l'existence sociale est déterminée par les rapports entre l'homme et la nature établis par la production reste bien la seule base solide pour toute étude historique; seulement ces rapports doivent être considérés d'abord en fonction du problème du pouvoir, les moyens de subsistance constituant simplement une donnée de ce problème'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 60.

<sup>360</sup> 'Il s'approcherait indéfiniment d'une limite qui serait comme l'équivalent de l'ubiquité'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 63.

<sup>361</sup> 'Tout se passerait comme si la nature environnante évoluait graduellement vers cette générosité sans réserve dont Adam et Ève bénéficiaient au paradis terrestre'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 64.

competition forces power beyond these natural limits. When power extends beyond these limits, it surpasses what it can control; attempting to ‘command over and above what it can impose, and spends in excess of its own resources’.<sup>362</sup> Every oppressive system contains within it that contradiction comprised of ‘the opposition between the necessarily limited character of the material bases of power and the necessarily unlimited character of the race for power considered as a relationship between men’.<sup>363</sup> In terms of Weil’s understanding of oppression, a decadent system does not necessarily disappear, and can sometimes become even more oppressive. Even when there is a change of regime, oppression does not disappear because it is based on patterns which gradually replace those of the declining regime. Weil illustrates this by the Russian Revolution, which only reinforced the power of ‘big industry, the police, the army, the bureaucracy’.<sup>364</sup> Weil concludes that this limited type of revolution is not a primary factor of change in history. History consists of slow transformations of regimes which involve ‘a dreary play of blind forces that unite together or clash, that progress or decline, that replace each other, without ever ceasing to grind beneath them the unfortunate race of human beings.’<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> ‘Il commande au-delà de ce qu’il peut imposer; il dépense au-delà de ses propres ressources’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 64.

<sup>363</sup> ‘Elle est constituée par l’oppression entre le caractère nécessairement limité des bases matérielles du pouvoir et le caractère nécessairement limité de la course au pouvoir en tant que rapport entre les hommes’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 64.

<sup>364</sup> ‘La grande industrie, la police, l’armée, la bureaucratie’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 66.

<sup>365</sup> ‘Qu’un morne jeu de forces aveugles qui s’unissent ou se heurtent, qui progressent ou déclinent, qui se substituent les unes autres, sans jamais cesser de broyer sous elles les malheureux humains’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 66.67.



That social oppression and progress is united in the relations between man and nature is reflected by primitive man being subject to nature whereas modern man, viewed from the collective, appears to have harnessed nature through work. However, the mastery of the collective is transformed into servitude when one examines the situation from the perspective of the individual. The modern worker is as constrained by circumstances as the primitive hunter is subject to hunger. Throughout history man has been ‘goaded to work by some outside force’.<sup>366</sup> The sequence of movements in work is often imposed from outside. The imposition of work methods is a mystery over which the worker has no control. This mystery is more brutal than that facing primitive man, because the latter still had the option to innovate. This liberty to innovate is denied to assembly line workers. Furthermore, modern collectives which appear to have the power to subject nature only contain members which are subject to the race for power. The connection between Weil’s social analysis and the central theme of work is evident. From the perspective of the worker, a much harsher necessity constrains his actions. This necessity, in the form of oppression, is imposed by man on man through the instrument of force contained within collectives who organise work. Weil’s analysis is based on the conditions of existence which include the organisation of work. The methods of labour produce inequality. The race for power based on the assumption of unlimited progress enslaves everyone including those who command and those who obey. Weil concludes that progress has not changed man’s servility to ‘blind forces in the universe’<sup>367</sup> but merely ‘that the power

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<sup>366</sup> ‘Les hommes n’ont jamais cessé d’être poussés au travail par une force extérieure’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 68.

<sup>367</sup> ‘Toutes les forces aveugles qui composent l’univers’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 68.

which keeps him on his knees has been transferred from inert matter to the human society of which he is a member'.<sup>368</sup>

Accordingly, Weil asserts that the conditions and cost of progress should be evaluated. In a modern society, humans spend their time accumulating surplus and luxury goods. These labours result in an organisation of nature favourable to human existence. The efficacy is indirect and separated by many intermediaries so that it is a long-term efficacy. Thus, the benefits of labours may only be visible to future generations, whereas the pain accompanying the labour is perceived in the immediate. The coordination of labour in modern society combines the efforts of one to the efforts of all others. Primitive tribes cannot solve the problems of privation, incentive to effort, or coordination of labour. However, social oppression does have a solution by creating two categories, those who command and those who obey. Those in command are not influenced by limits of fatigue or what is necessary and man is thus subject to the struggle for power. In this manner, humanity is the plaything of the forces of nature in their guise of technical progress. Thus, there is little change from primitive times to modern times in relation to man's subjection by the forces of nature. 'It would seem man is born a slave, and that servitude is his natural condition'.<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> 'Simplement la puissance qui maintient sur les genoux a été comme transférée de la matière inerte à la société qu'il forme lui-même avec ses semblables'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 68.

<sup>369</sup> 'Il semblerait que l'homme naisse esclave, et que la servitude soit sa condition propre'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 71.

## Section Three

### 3.3.1 Tableau théorique d'une société libre

In the third section of *Réflexions*, entitled, 'Tableau théorique d'une société libre', even though Weil has posited that man seems to be born for servitude, it is his ability to think that allows him to retain the idea of liberty. The dream of perfect liberty was provided in Weil's time by Marx's Communism, which, she states, is a 'form of an opium [and that] the time has come to give up dreaming of liberty, and to make up one's mind to conceive it'.<sup>370</sup> Weil is reforming an ontological argument for the existence of God in the form of conceived liberty. The verb *concevoir*; to design, is more apt than dreaming of an ontological conception of theory. Weil's initial method is not to attempt to form a free society but to conceive of the least oppressive society. Rhees states that '[o]ne reason for taking thinking as a paradigm of free activity is that thinking cannot be brought about by force – a man cannot be forced to think'.<sup>371</sup> The difficulty is that any least oppressive society will always be in relation to an oppressive previous society. Marx cites in an early article for *Rheinische Zeitung* that freedom in relation to the state is tied to rationale, stating, 'a state that is not a realisation of rational freedom is a bad state'<sup>372</sup> and in *On the Jewish Question* defines 'freedom [as] the right to do and perform what does not harm others'.<sup>373</sup> In 'Tableau théorique d'une

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<sup>370</sup> 'Ce n'est que comme un opium; il est temps de renoncer à rêver la liberté, et de se décider à la concevoir'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 71-72.

<sup>371</sup> Rhees, *Discussion of Simone Weil*, p. 6.

<sup>372</sup> *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, p. 24.

<sup>373</sup> *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, p. 60.

société libre' Weil begins to formulate her ideas beyond Marx, who is bound by economic and legal considerations.

An ideal of liberty must be visualised to attain a liberty which is more perfect than the present. Weil emphasises that the ideal is 'just as unattainable as the dream'<sup>374</sup> but, because it differs from the dream in that the ideal is related with the reality, it offers a process of evaluation. Perfect liberty is not the abolition of 'this necessity whose pressure weigh continually; as long as the man lives, that is, as long as he is a tiny fragment of this ruthless universe, the pressure of necessity will never be released for a moment'.<sup>375</sup> Here Weil connects the presence of necessity in this world and the need to work. A world wherein man did not work would only result in man being 'delivered over to the play of passions and perhaps to madness'.<sup>376</sup> Marx and Engels state in their *Manifesto* that '[i]n a Communist society, accumulated labour is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer'.<sup>377</sup> For Weil, self-mastery results from discipline and the only source of discipline is the 'effort demanded in overcoming external obstacles'.<sup>378</sup> It is not enough to overcome obstacles in art, science or games. The value of these activities is derived from their imitation of work. Therefore, perfect liberty does not involve the abolition of necessity in the form of work. Work and necessity are a permanent and useful part of human reality. Weil's

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<sup>374</sup> 'L'idéal est tout aussi irréalisable que le rêve'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 72.

<sup>375</sup> 'Cette nécessité dont nous subissons perpétuellement la pression; tant que l'homme vivra, c'est-à-dire tant qu'il constituera un infime fragment de cet univers impitoyable, la pression de la nécessité ne se relâchera jamais un seul instant'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 72.

<sup>376</sup> 'Disparu serait livrée aux passions et peut-être à la folie'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 72.

<sup>377</sup> *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, p. 257.

<sup>378</sup> 'Que l'effort demandé pas les obstacles extérieurs'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 72.

definition of true liberty is ‘a relationship between thought and action’.<sup>379</sup> A free person would act according to the ends set by themselves and the means judged to be suitable to attain it. One can choose to submit blindly to necessity, which Weil would describe as servitude, or one could adapt oneself to the inner representation of it that one forms in one’s own mind. The latter would be an extension to the definition of liberty. These two oppositions are ideal limits between where some humans live their lives without attaining either. A slave would be someone whose movements are completely motivated by a source outside his own mind. Weil equates a primitive person or a manual worker on an assembly line with the condition of slavery. Complete liberty is illustrated by a model of a mathematical problem containing all the elements of a solution. Man uses his mind to put together these elements into a solution and can ‘forge the conditions of his own existence by an act of mind’<sup>380</sup>, whereas Marx asserts that this forging of conditions is achieved by accumulated labour and the collective. For Weil, the resulting confrontation with necessity, which, without expecting anything other than that derived from his own exertion, means man continually affirms his existence. ‘Unlike God, man cannot be the direct author of his existence. However, he can possess the human equivalent of that power if the material conditions of his existence are the work of his own mind’.<sup>381</sup> Man’s destiny brings him in direct contact

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<sup>379</sup> ‘Un rapport entre la pensée et l’action; serait tout à fait libre l’homme dont toutes les actions procéderaient d’un jugement préalable concernant la fin qu’il se propose et l’enchaînement des moyens propos à amener cette fin’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 73.

<sup>380</sup> ‘Il forgerait à chaque moment les conditions de sa propre existence par un acte de la pensée’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 74.

<sup>381</sup> ‘L’homme est un être borné à qui il n’est pas donné d’être, comme le Dieu des théologiens, l’auteur direct de sa propre existence; mais l’homme posséderait l’équivalent humain de cette puissance divine si les conditions matérielles qui lui permettent d’exister étaient exclusivement l’œuvre de sa pensée dirigeant l’effort de muscles’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 75.

with necessity and requires his exertions, and as such, ‘his life is a continual creation of himself by himself’.<sup>382</sup> This is true liberty where a man can choose to act.

However, while true liberty is only an ideal, it is necessary to conceive this ideal form of liberty, to ascertain the circumstances that draw it near or push it further away. Assessing the factors that keep us from this ideal of liberty, Weil understands that the complexity and size of the world are greater than one person’s mind can handle. Rhees states that ‘[Weil] does not suggest that what she sketches could ever exist. The sketch is to give a standard by which to measure the liberality or oppressiveness of communities that do exist or may exist’.<sup>383</sup> The results of our actions are outside our control, but our actions themselves must be under control of the mind. We can relate this to Weil’s dissertation on Descartes where she reforms his ‘I think’ to ‘I have power, therefore, I am’. A person should conceive of intermediaries linking the movements he is capable of to the results he wishes to obtain. The plan sketched out by intelligence limits the disruptive effects of chance. One source of chance that cannot be eliminated is the body. All man can do is reduce this source with respect to scientific and technological progress. Weil demands however, that this role be subordinate ‘and should not prevent method from constituting the very soul of the work’.<sup>384</sup> Nevertheless, all technical advancements ensure that ‘the human body is gradually and increasingly reduced to a docile intermediary role between mind and instrument’.<sup>385</sup> The separation between method and action in the work process provide

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<sup>382</sup> ‘Sa vie soit une perpétuelle création du lui-même par lui-même’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 75.

<sup>383</sup> Rhees, *Discussion of Simone Weil*, p. 5.

<sup>384</sup> ‘N’empêche pas la méthode de constituer l’âme même du travail’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 76.

<sup>385</sup> ‘Le corps humain à ce rôle d’intermédiaire docile entre la pensée et les instruments’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II:*

an important tool for her analysis of production methods. As a solution, Weil proposes widening ‘the sphere of conscious work’,<sup>386</sup> which would overcome the separation between method and action, and the body and the soul. For Weil, the individual mind forms the basis for a free society. In this utopian vision, individuals would exercise thought and control in the work process. Manual labour would emerge as the basis for the most fully human civilisation. Although labour consisted of an act of conscious submission to necessity, this submission could contain creative joy, provided that the work process allowed the worker to come to grips with nature.

Examining the method of production to ascertain which obstacles limit man’s freedom in work, Weil observes that an ‘obstacle to liberty is derived from the difference separating theoretical speculation from action’.<sup>387</sup> Attempting to distinguish between intellectual and manual labour in physical labour, like chair-making, Weil judges that capital speculation or managing men is an intellectual labour, i.e. non-manual labour, and is therefore not productive. It is this type of work that Weil believes is adding to the malaise of oppression. When the manual worker uses his mind, this intellectual labour is transformed to a version close to the ideal of liberty. Weil presents the paradox that since the entire process of the work is divided into portions continually repeated by each worker, there is an overall process in the work which the mind of the worker is not privy. If a person is not allowed to mentally engage in the labour, then it becomes oppressive. In opposition to a civilisation wherein everyone

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*L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 78.

<sup>386</sup> ‘Le domaine du travail lucide’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 82.

<sup>387</sup> ‘Un nouvel obstacle à la liberté surgirait aussitôt, à cause de la profonde différence de nature qui sépare la spéculation théorique et l’action’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 78.

rigidly follows details of work without anyone understanding what they are doing, Weil proposes that the worker should be aware of guiding principles behind the work to be able to apply the principles in relation to different circumstances. An example might be that a person cutting glass in a factory will also know about the composition process of glass to better understand its heat retention properties or its solar power reproduction. Although this ideal is not fully realisable, whether this type of production would lead to a greater consciousness of work would be subordinate to its economic viability. What Weil is trying to show is that the person in the above example has a greater understanding, not only of the glass producing process or possibilities, but of the geological, ecological and environment aspects of their job. I believe it would be beneficial that instead of specialisation, where one just cuts glass, the worker would have a wider understanding of the process which may be utilised in another area of the economy. Weil does not overly credit the economic aspect of her idea. Her idea of a fuller, wider understanding of any labouring process is important so that the worker becomes more engaged intellectually with a process.

As such, ‘collective strength infinitely surpasses individual strength’,<sup>388</sup> except ‘in the sphere of the mind’.<sup>389</sup> The mind is the only thing truly individual about a person. Thinking is the only function which cannot be compelled by force. Weil’s model for a free society would hold as a central value the free use of the individual mind. The collective life would be subject to men as individuals. Material efforts would require intelligence to be applied to the work done and the coordination of this work with all other members of the collective. The technique of work would require

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<sup>388</sup> ‘Les forces collectives dépassent infiniment les forces individuelles’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 84.

<sup>389</sup> ‘Le domaine de la pensée’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 84.



continual use of methodical thought in such a manner that each worker would understand all the specialised procedures. Each worker would have to understand the coordination of work, thereby keeping the collective under control by individuals. If each person understands all tasks, then individuals would be able to verify the activities of all the rest. The condition of material existence would be based on the goal that each person should use his reason and problem-solving skills. The function of this model would be to serve as an ideal to use as a standard for evaluation of other social patterns. This new social method is akin to Marxism in that it starts with the relationships of production. The difference is that Marx classifies the modes of production in terms of output, whereas Weil analysed them in terms of the relationship between thought and action. Thus, for Weil, a society wherein persons are most often obliged to think have the benefit of exercising control over collective life and offers the greatest amount of independence in a free society. Weil suggests that if her analysis of the problem is correct, 'the most fully human civilisation would have manual labour as its pivot, that in which manual labour constituted the supreme value'.<sup>390</sup> The value of manual labour should be placed on the person who produces it, not on the object produced, because the production also produces the human.

It is not in relation to what it produces that manual labour must become the highest value, but in relation to the man who performs it; it must not be made the object of honours and rewards, but to constitute for every human being what he most essentially needs so that his life takes by itself a sense and a value in his own eyes.<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> 'La plus pleinement humaine serait celle qui aurait le travail manuel pour centre, celle où le travail manuel constituerait la suprême valeur'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 89-90.

<sup>391</sup> 'Ce n'est pas par son rapport avec ce qu'il produit que le travail manuel doit devenir la valeur la plus haute, mais par son rapport avec l'homme qui l'exécute; il ne doit pas être l'objet d'honneurs ou de récompenses, mais constituer pour chaque être humain ce dont il a besoin le plus essentiellement pour que sa vie prenne par elle-même un sens et une valeur à ses propres yeux'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 90.

In this passage Weil argues that manual labour should ideally provide an individual with a feeling of value. This is fraught with problems on a social and economic level, such as how an individual determines their social value and how others determine the economic value of their labour. The world community might value sitting, but not value those who make chairs. The market place might not be willing to pay for hand-crafted, time-consuming labour, possibly costing more than saleable price of the product. Weil argues quite validly that working and its value is necessary for more than simply producing goods or offering services. Valuing our own work and having it validated by society can be important. But it cannot be expected or required. This is evidence of the lack of importance that Weil places on market place economics. She argues that manual labour must become the highest value. But, tautologically, people value what they value. Weil is adopting the Marxist principle that there are those who produce value and those who own the method of production, and only those that produce have any value.

### 3.3.2 Esquisse de la vie sociale contemporaine

Evaluating the social reality of her time in the final section of *Réflexions*, entitled, ‘Esquisse de la vie sociale contemporaine’, Weil uses the example of the individual to illustrate what occurs in society. This section is a critical indictment of contemporary society and its ability to conform to Weil’s idea of labour and liberty. In its state of disequilibrium, individual thought and action have become the prerogative of a collective apparatus. Delivering a demonstrative rebuke in the opening lines, Weil states that ‘it is impossible to imagine anything more contrary to this ideal than the form which modern society has assumed in our day’.<sup>392</sup> The ideal she is referring to is the conclusion of ‘Tableau théorique d’une société libre’ where the revolutionary syndicalists are commended for placing man as a producer of his conditions at the centre of the social problem. Such a sentiment made Weil feel ‘proud to belong to a civilisation which has brought with it the presage of a new ideal’.<sup>393</sup> These two statements, the opening statement in ‘Tableau théorique d’une société libre’ and the concluding statement in ‘Esquisse de la vie sociale contemporaine’, are diametrically opposed. She differentiates between the heralding of the possibility of an ideal, and the non-actuality or the non-presence of that ideal in a modern society.

It is evident, that while Weil holds a view of oppression that, if enacted, might mitigate oppression, the opening statement of ‘Tableau théorique d’une société libre’ suggests that that ideal is no longer possible because society is beyond a point where

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<sup>392</sup> ‘Il est impossible de concevoir quoi ce soit de plus contraire à cet idéal que forme qu’a prise de nos jours la civilisation moderne’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 93-94.

<sup>393</sup> ‘Nous pouvons avoir la fierté d’appartenir à une civilisation qui a apporté avec le pressentiment d’un idéal nouveau’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 93.

it can be successfully realtered. This marks the most important evolution in Weil's thinking away from Marxism at this stage: where once man had the possibility of conceiving an ideal society, in the final section the ability to think has been destroyed. Not only has man been 'delivered up to a blind collectivity',<sup>394</sup> he has never been 'less capable of subordinating their actions to their thoughts'.<sup>395</sup> In contrast to the positivity offered about the ideal portrayed in the previous section, there is a sense of utter dejection in her evaluation of contemporary civilisation.

Such terms as oppressors and oppressed, the idea of classes – all that sort of thing is near to losing all meaning, so obvious are the impotence and distress of all men in face of the social machine, which has become a machine for breaking hearts and crushing spirits, a machine for manufacturing irresponsibility, stupidity, corruption, slackness and, above all, dizziness.<sup>396</sup>

As all distinctions, such as oppressors and oppressed, collapse under the crushing effects of the social machine, disequilibrium characterises the present order and methodical thought disappears. However, while the collective swamps the individual's role and manual workers are reduced to a passive role by technical progress and mass production, we can understand that while Weil engages in investigating the exterior elements of oppression weighing on men, she is also disheartened by the response of the individual and the collective alike. Aside from exterior elements, including man being part of the cause of the problem, the complication is the lack of response from man. Weil states in the previous section 'that only man can enslave man'. There is an element of positivity in this statement, aside from the obvious negativity. If man is

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<sup>394</sup> 'Livré à une collectivité aveugle'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 94.

<sup>395</sup> 'Jamais les hommes n'ont été plus incapables non seulement de soumettre leurs actions à leurs pensées, mais même de penser'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 94.

<sup>396</sup> 'Les termes d'opresseurs et d'opprimés, la notion de classes, tout cela est bien près de perdre toute signification, tant sont évidentes l'impuissance et l'angoisse de tous les hommes devant la machine social, devenue une machine à briser les cœurs, à écraser les esprits, une machine à fabriquer de l'inconscience, de la sottise, de la corruption, de la veulerie, et surtout de vertige'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 94.

responsible for man's enslavement, this means that he can also free himself or be allowed to be freed. If he as an individual or collective is unwilling to attempt to become free, then there is little hope for a society being able to conceive an ideal society.

There is no category, group or class of men who completely escapes this devout imbalance, except perhaps from a few islands of more primitive life; and the young people, who have grown up, who are growing up, reflect more than others within themselves the chaos that surrounds them.<sup>397</sup>

The inhuman system which Weil describes moulds everyone to its image. Labour becomes servitude, machines crush workers, and there is no chance to produce free workers. 'In reality the methodical thought is progressively disappearing, owing to the fact that the mind finds less and less matter on which to bite'.<sup>398</sup> With the technical progress and mass production subjecting the worker to passive engagement, which in turn limits thinking, Weil points out that even the 'men who occupy key posts in social life are in charge of matters which are far beyond the compass of any single human mind'.<sup>399</sup> This problem becomes multiplied when these matters naturally become too unwieldy for the mind of a single person. Stating that 'it is entrusted to a curious machine, whose parts are men, whose gears consist of relegations, reports and statistics, [...] [that which is called the] bureaucratic organisation',<sup>400</sup> she argues,

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<sup>397</sup> 'Il n'existe pas de catégorie, de group ou classe d'hommes qui échappe tout à fait à ce déséquilibre dévorant, à l'exception peut-être de quelques îlots de vie plus primitive; et les jeunes, qui y ont grandi, qui y grandissent, reflètent plus que les autres à l'intérieur d'eux-mêmes le chaos qui les entoure'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 94.

<sup>398</sup> 'Mais en réalité l'esprit méthodique disparaît progressivement, du fait que la pensée trouve en moins où mord'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 95.

<sup>399</sup> 'Tous les hommes qui se trouvent aux postes importants de la vie sociale sont chargés d'affaires qui dépassent considérablement la portée d'un esprit humain'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 95.

<sup>400</sup> 'Enfin là où la fonction de cordonner et de diriger est trop lourde pour l'intelligence et la pensée d'un homme seul, elle est confiée à une machine étrange, dont les pièces sont hommes, où les engrenages sont constitués par des règlements, des rapports et des statistiques, et qui se nomme organisation bureaucratique'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques*

‘almost reach the point of taking the place of leaders’.<sup>401</sup> Thus, in all aspects of social organisation, the individual is subordinated to the vast mechanisms of collective life.

It is in this process of enveloping man where the ability to think has become mired. With machines, industrialisation and the monetary system, and even the sciences, subjugating the individual in favour of the collective, Weil admits that while this level of oppression can provoke an individualistic response, it is diminishing, as she states:

Such a stifling state of affairs certainly provokes here and there an individualistic reaction; art, and especially literature, bears the marks of it; but since, owing to objective conditions, this reaction cannot impinge on either the sphere of thought or that of action, it remains bottled up in the play of the inner consciousness or in dreams of adventure and gratuitous acts, in other words, it never leaves the realm of shadows; and everything leads one to suppose that even this shadowy reaction is doomed to disappear almost completely.<sup>402</sup>

It is confirmed in this passage to what extent that Weil has lost any hope for a non-oppressive ideal society. Even though she agrees that an individualistic response is possible, it is one that is fleeting, and by her account, destined to disappear completely. Believing, in other words, that, because the world is materialistically orientated and that the sciences and technical processes have become so complicated that the mind is subordinated, it is incapable of absorbing such multitudes. But with the State becoming involved with the economic and social spheres, and tending towards the

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*et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 96.

<sup>401</sup> ‘Et les mécanismes bureaucratiques parviennent presque à remplacer des chefs’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 96.

<sup>402</sup> ‘Un état de choses aussi étouffant suscite bien çà et là une réaction individualiste; l’art, et notamment la littérature, en porte des traces; mais comme en vertu des conditions objectives, cette réaction ne peut mordre ni sur le domaine de la pensée ni sur celui de l’action, elle demeure enfermée dans les jeux de la vie intérieure ou dans ceux de l’aventure et des actes gratuits, c’est-à-dire qu’elle ne sont pas du royaume des ombres; et tout porte à croire que même cette ombre de réaction est vouée à disparaître presque complètement’. Simone Weil, ‘Les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 97-98.

centre, the bureaucracy's activities operate as to favour the development of its power.

Thus, Weil ominously states:

It seems clear that contemporary humanity tends everywhere towards a totalitarian form of social organisation - to use the term which the national-socialists have made fashionable - that is to say, towards a system in which the State power comes to exercise sovereign sway in all spheres, even, indeed above all, in that of thought.<sup>403</sup>

An end to this situation is the stage when chaos reaches the limit and all civilisation perishes. Decentralising social life would be a mitigation, because Weil believes the current social system destroyed all possibilities for developing alternatives. In the economic sphere, conquest is the goal of economic struggle. Cautioning against false expectations of change through reform or revolution, the power of an inhuman society is contained in its ability to shape everyone according to its image. The solution for the totalitarianism of the state, the social system and organisation of work is a decentralised system which would allow the workers to be liberated. In the end, I must defer to Rhees's understanding of Weil's endeavours in *Réflexions*. He states:

In *Oppression and Liberty* Weil is trying to explain the hold which a way of thinking had on Marx and his followers; and the way in which it prevented them from criticism or examination of their conception of 'revolution'. What she brings out is the trust which Marx had in science, and the idea that the growth of science [...] would *liberate* man (whatever that meant). So that man could lead their *own* lives rather than submit to a form of life that was imposed on them.<sup>404</sup>

If we agree that inhumanity in life will increase as the individual's ability to think decreases, then we can reason that Weil's assessment is both prescient and condemnatory. But is Weil delineating another Marxism by another name? If civilisation contains the ability to crush man and the only model for our liberation is exemplified by skilled labourers, then we are subjected to Weil's version of what it is

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<sup>403</sup> 'Il apparaît assez clairement que l'humanité contemporaine tend un peu partout à une forme totalitaire d'organisation sociale, pour employer le terme que les nationaux-socialistes ont mis à la mode, c'est-à-dire à un régime où le pouvoir d'État déciderait souverainement dans tous les domaines, même et surtout dans le domaine de la pensée'. Simone Weil, 'Les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 101.

<sup>404</sup> Rhees, *Discussion of Simone Weil*, p. 9.

to work, or have liberty or be oppressed. Detailing previously that Weil disagrees with Marx's philosophical methodology, we now have evidence that Weil is also offering a philosophical methodology on work, liberty and the value of life. This is dangerous territory into which Weil is venturing. Suggestive of another division between people, she imposes a value and a method of living in continuity with those she is arguing against.



## Conclusion

In 1931, one could describe Weil as revolutionary syndicalist, whereas by 1934 she rejected the ideals of revolution and syndicalism. Her intense involvement in various aspects of the trade union movement gradually led to a decision to withdraw from political or social activities because of syndicalist stagnation to focus on theoretical work. Whilst Weil provides a model for society and an assessment of its reality in *Réflexions*, what has been shown is how Weil's philosophical engagement diverges from Marx. It is without value to categorically state whether Weil was an apostle of Marx. The rejoinder is somewhere between sympathising with Marx's aims, to disappointment at his failures, to outright critique and then rejection. The corollary is that she engaged with Marx without becoming an apologist. She rejects his methodology and analysis rather than his ideology.

According to Weil, Marx accurately describes how an oppressive system enslaves some workers. Yet, in focusing their attention on the labour and economics respectively, neither Weil nor Marx can satisfactorily identify a solution to their labour and economics concerns. Beginning this chapter by detailing an understanding of Weil's conceptualisation of oppression and liberty, we are confronted with the obstacle that oppression occurs in the workplace through isolated technique, an over-reliance on scientific method and a division of intellectual and manual labour that denies the worker the critical, thinking engagement that Weil links to liberty. These examples of oppression exemplify how her understanding of these concepts situate labour at the centre of human flourishing. Work for Weil is a central part of life and a dignified activity when done with understanding and intelligence. Weil recognises this aspect in Marx's early writings, which emphasise the importance of work.

It must take from thence precisely that which has been almost forgotten by what is called Marxism: the glorification of productive labour, considered as man's highest activity; the assertion that only a society wherein the act of work brought all of man's faculties into play, wherein the man who works occupied the front rank, would realise human greatness to the full. We find in Marx's early writings, lines concerning labour that have a lyrical accent [...] This new poetry, appropriate to our time, which forms perhaps its chief claim to greatness, must not be lost. Therein the oppressed must find evoked their own mother-country, which is hope.<sup>405</sup>

Therefore, Weil disagrees with the orthodox interpretation of Marxism which focuses on ideas within *Capital* and perhaps finds similarities with his earlier writings.<sup>406</sup>

Related to the issue of scarcity is that of private property, and again, Weil fundamentally disagrees with Marx. He believes that once private property is abolished that the oppression of workers would disappear simultaneously. For Weil, this is another false conclusion. Contrary to Marx, she believes any societal system of production could produce oppression. Since power is the central tool for oppression in Weil's analysis, and since hierarchies are inevitable, oppression will always be reproduced. Whereas, private property represented the misuse of surplus labour to Marx, it remained a neutral factor for Weil's understanding of oppression, and thus, the ownership of property is secondary to the structure of labour and the organisation of power within the workplace.

Where we observed an agreement between Weil and Marxism is that she agreed with Marx's identification of the bureaucracy as an oppressive system, neither present viable structures of organisation that can manage the immensity of a state's

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<sup>405</sup> 'Il a à y prendre ce qui a été précisément presque oublié par ce qu'on nomme le marxisme: la glorification du travail productif, conçu comme l'activité suprême de l'homme; l'affirmation que seule une société où l'acte du travail mettrait en jeu toutes les facultés de l'homme, où l'homme qui travaille serait au premier rang, réaliserait la plénitude de la grandeur humaine. On trouve chez Marx, dans les écrits de jeunesse, des lignes d'accent lyrique concernant le travail [...]. Cette poésie nouvelle, propre à notre temps, et qui en fait peut-être la principale grandeur, ne doit pas se perdre. Les opprimés doivent y trouver l'évocation de leur patrie à eux, qui est une espérance'. Simone Weil, 'Sur les contradictions du marxisme', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 141.

<sup>406</sup> In his *1844 Manuscripts* Marx never posited the notion of a work free utopian society but these ideas can be found within *Capital*. Orthodox Marxism ignored his earlier writings. And there is a similarity between Weil's emphasis on work and Marx's early writings.

economic and social responsibility while also empowering an incorruptible form of bureaucratic power. History has shown how versions of Marxism in Russia and China directly led to loss of life. Weil's anarchist or syndicalist version contains same problem: defining value for other people and any controlling majority or minority being corruptible. Thus, while we can assert that Weil agreed with Marx's overarching critique of society and the need for a reorganisation of labour, and though revering Marx's placement of the social as the site of analysis, her examination begins with the individual, knowing this method will benefit the collective. Marxists may disagree, citing earlier work or instances where he references individuals, but I contend that he is always writing towards a critique of the collective. For Marx, all conditions are mitigated through the materialisation of the social. But, as the social structure has an influence on the degree of individual oppression in a society, Weil's investigation moves beyond Marx to critique the oppressive nature of all organisations – socialist utopias. Importantly, it is the consciously informed and educated individual who functions as the instrument of change for the collective, not the collective for the individual. Weil did reject a passive explanation of the forces of society, which ascribe the causes of a given situation to historical or socially structured conditions. Challenging this passive acceptance of the status quo to establish the locus of oppression, Weil's method involved determining an ideal to determine how the conditions of existence could be changed by an advance towards this ideal. Hence, as she emphasises man's role as a thinking and acting individual, the juxtaposing relationship between oppression and liberty is the initial procedure to a consciousness of the conditions and their limits.

Weil contends that the underlying current to the social and material world is force. In contradiction to the limits inherent in the force of nature, social force weighs heavily on man because it is unlimited. Social force is manifest as power, but at least that is limited because it shifts as people lose or gain it. As it is not man surviving against nature, social force destroys all that is necessary for an individual to be human because it is man versus his fellow man. Taking this struggle as a definition of power relations, the only power that can mitigate the strength of social force is that of a mind freely exercised. Straining to accurately absorb a narrow definition from Weil, I hazard that societal force will always exist so long as society exists, but that manifestation of force as power; how force is wielded, is malleable. Power has the force to dehumanise, crush and kill people, but they have power, however limited, to resist. Weil's idea of resistance is a revolution predicated on conscious, free-thinking individuals. However, she does not fully define the boundaries of a freely exercised mind. Weil and Marx agreed that within the organisation of labour in modern industry there is no consideration of the ideas of force and limit on the mind. In contrast, later Marxism deems that a period of denying these limits is necessary for the betterment of those who might later reap their benefit. *Réflexions* places labour at the core of society and workers as the supreme value. The social resistance she sought is not just a demystification in terms of industrial specialisation, workers must also be given the time and space to think. I believe that there is a moral problem in Weil's social reform. In one sense it is inherent in all ideas of social or revolutionary change. If Weil or another person wishes to affect change over the long-term, the short-term effects are borne by people who may not witness the fruition of the change. If in attempting to mitigate long-term oppression, liberty is reduced in the short-term, then is it fair to subject some people over the short-term for the benefit of some other people over the

long-term? I believe not. This is a fallacy that Weil later accepts as she grapples with her pacifism, one which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Reaching the conclusion that oppression cannot be eliminated, unlike Marx's version of a utopian society, Weil articulates the most fundamental critique of both Marx and orthodox Marxism. The myth of Marx and the spirit of revolution could not prevent her conclusions that Marxism is another defective political and economic system sweeping over the popular imagination. In the above 'Analyse de l'Oppression' it is shown that if oppression is linked to the material producing conditions of the social system, oppression will not be abolished if the conditions causing oppression remain. This is a clear example of how Weil went beyond Marx's narrow vision. In the name of scientific socialism and reason, Marx proposes a theory that according to Weil is almost entirely devoid of both. The authority of institutions, political ideologies or state bureaucracies rely upon propaganda of a mythological nature and its mass obedience. Despite claiming to have inverted Hegel's idealism, Weil declares that Marx simply relocates his spirit into history. She illustrates how there is no evidence that society would unfold as Marx speculates other than his reference to an unsound scientific methodology. Additionally, if a powerless group were to incite a successful revolution, they would have only achieved a slow but silent ascendancy to power and a concurrent loss of identity. In the above 'Critique du marxisme' it is shown that the difficulty that Weil has with Marx's bisection of people into those who have property and those who do fails to properly account for oppression as well. Weil disagrees that the abolition of private property would end oppression, and that an attempt to exorcise society of scarcity is not only fictitious but just adds to the level of oppression. Marx simply wedded both the cult of science and the inevitability of industrial progress to his vision. This results in an attractive but

vacuous theory of revolutionary change. As Marx's theory calculates the accumulation of the exploited surplus labour, Weil recognises how the quality and nature of work might reinforce oppression instead of alleviating it. Yet, while the relationship between the worker and their ability to understand the work process is crucial for creating a less oppressive society, Weil does not engage specifically with its impact on the economy. Weil instead focuses on the role power and social force, leaving Marx to reduce the world to economics and capital.

If an increase in productivity is the end, and specialisation and efficiency are the means, then individual man is oppressed by the force of this social organisation. The complexity of the resulting bureaucracy grows beyond an individual's capacity to understand. Work then separates man's activities from his mind and, consequently, work becomes a form of slavery. Competition and the race for power become the sole goals, causing a coalescence of the industrial, military and state spheres, where individual workers provide the source for this machine to function. The bureaucratic workers are no less oppressed than those whom they oppress in the struggle for power, which, with its inherent instability, enslaves everyone. To constitute the ideal society, Weil tackles the problem of equilibrium to elucidate the ideal limit. Stating that even though man seems to be born for servitude, Weil's most prescient argument states that it is man's ability to think that allows him to retain the idea of liberty. Yet, distinguishing between those who are actively free to think or those who dominate leads to disequilibrium. If liberty is the relationship between thought and working in the labour sphere, then the radical method of economic change that this would necessitate is not accounted for or outlined. Weil does not suggest that the advances in science and technology should be abolished but instead cautions against the transfer of this consciousness to matter and advocates that the development of technology

should be controlled by man. Society, technology, the organisation of work and the development of knowledge must remain within the experience and intelligence of the individual. Monopoly of any of these consigns the many to oppression by the few. The exercise of manual labour, using the strength of the body and the mind in a task, draws man to the point of being fully human. Thus, *Réflexions* presents us with an important development in Weil's political thought. It recognises the magnitude of oppression and its link with free-thinking labour, and then combines their relationship to the actualisation of a conceptualised ideal. Most importantly, it questions whether contemporary society can coordinate such reforms.

Essentially, Marx provides Weil with a methodical framework with which to analyse society, which she then reconstructs. Although she displays acuteness in dissecting Marx, she also credits him as the basis for her ideas. Believing that science has developed into an unwieldy, unknowable occultism because of its culture of specialists and that Marx's critique of religion needed to be applied to modern scientific developments, Weil supports the materialist method but criticises the myth of infinite progress and the myth of revolution. Her critique is based on an acceptance of necessity as part of human reality. In 'Esquisse de la vie sociale contemporaine' Weil presents a damning indictment of contemporary society and its ability to absorb Weil's reform ideas on labour, economic oppression and liberty. Unlike Marx, work needs to be reformed, not eliminated or reduced to the merest trifle. Weil's proposals for reform are based on an examination of the conditions of existence. Any change requires an understanding of the nature of true liberty and oppression so that individuals can consciously select and build towards the least oppressive systems.

## Chapter Four

### From Pacifism to Justification of Force

#### Introduction

During the last three years of the 1930's, Weil is occupied by the European continent's drift towards war. In this period, her thinking evolves from pacifism to reluctant advocate of force. As a pacifist, Weil condemns war for the physical destruction it wreaks mainly on the oppressed and the repressive domestic policies it requires. For her, only freedom and peace could sustain the value of the individual. Later, as an advocate of force, she is still reluctant to countenance the use of force. Developed through the misgivings of Marx, her evolving theory of force leads to an alteration of her pacifist position when confronted with Germany's utilisation of force. In the decade before the Third Reich ignored the Munich Accords by marching into Prague, Weil advocates for peace on the basis that it is the workers and the oppressed who pay the heaviest toll, and laments the overextension of power that results during war-time and vilifies the hypocrisy of WWI hollow slogans that gave primacy to ends over means. Attempting to detail the oppressive effects of deploying force to achieve a goal in *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale*, she pleads for greater lucidity when advocating the use of violence. Despite the eventual centrality of force in Weil's later political thought, I choose to wait until the final chapter so that the reader has a greater understanding of how her thought evolves and the nuance involved when she decides to break from her pacifist position.



This chapter is subdivided into six sections. The first section of this chapter, entitled, ‘Power and Force’, presents what Weil understood as force and power in *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale*. Even though Weil had not yet fully defined force, this chapter details how Weil distils force in *L’Iliade ou le poème de la force*. Accordingly, I show that the difficulties in Weil’s initial definition in *Réflexions* are replicated in *L’Iliade ou le poème de la force*. Charting the development of force is crucial to this chapter. To understand force, it is justifiable to recount its development chronologically, utilising Weil’s engagement in the Spanish Civil War where, though repulsed by force, she is challenged and maybe even exasperated by its pervasiveness. Witnessing at a very young age the mutilating effects of WWI on the French male population and writing her first pacifist piece at nineteen on the value of civil service as an alternative to military service, the second section of this chapter, entitled, ‘Reflections on War’, discusses the concern that war affects the country’s internal politics and its social and economic conditions. Highlighting the multiple and contradictory rationales for violence, the third section of this chapter, entitled, ‘A Response to Alain’s Challenge’, deals with the proposition, are the men who extoll honour and dignity as being more precious than life disposed to be the first to risk their lives? Weil’s principal argument is to question the hypocrisy of those who argue that a sanctity of a country’s dignity and honour oblige them to declare war while also forcing conscription on those who are forced to submit to the daily indignities of oppression within their own country. The fourth section of this chapter, entitled, ‘The Spanish Civil War’, reflects on Weil’s participation in the Spanish Civil War, where afterwards she argues that those who hold authority with a weapon use it to maintain their dominance over the vulnerable despite their initial idealistic revolutionary intentions. For Weil, the Spanish militias’ behaviour corroborates the

ineluctable contamination of force that corrupts the virtue of their endeavour. The fifth section of this chapter, entitled, 'The Power of Words', assesses how Weil exposes the power of words by stripping layers from emotive-laden and misleading pretences that were common in WWI. The analysis of these abstract, vacuous entities, which are not weighted accordingly by those under their sway, present how words are a poor pretext for conflict. When Germany invades Poland in March 1939, Weil advocates for appeasement to avoid another war. However, when Germany's intentions began to manifest, she slowly disavows total pacifism by accepting the existence of force, not only in conflict, but also as an inherent part of humanity. It is a stretch to assert that Weil advocates a just-war theory, but that her thinking, which is informed by the combination of her Spanish experience and theoretical analysis, certainly advocates for a just-force theory. The sixth section of this chapter, entitled, 'The Tipping Point of Pacifism', details Weil's tipping point of pacifism. Reflecting on her proposition to concede part of Czechoslovakia, asserting that war had to be honestly calculated to compare respective sacrifices and merits, Weil states that military aggression is not only the least desirable response but also the one with the highest price. In contrast, I argue that her ideas advocate for the acceptance of short-term injustices and an increase in oppression, which contradicts her understanding of oppression. However, when presented with the overwhelming evidence that force is needed to deny an opposing force, if one is to resist, Weil eventually succumbs and advocates for killing. Consequently, the final section *qua* conclusion shows how Weil's revised understanding of force in *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force* completes her transition from pacifism to acceptance of the use of force.

## 4.1 Power and Force

Weil countenances the unpalatable idea that force is pervasive in *Réflexions sur barbarie*.<sup>407</sup> Acknowledging the need for recourse to force if one is to counteract violence, she states, ‘barbarity is a permanent and universal characteristic of human nature and develops more or less according to the circumstances that give it play’.<sup>408</sup> In recognition of the need to understand how force is exercised in a society, Weil states that ‘one cannot even begin to form any clear ideas on the relationships between human beings as long as one has not put the notion of force at their very centre’.<sup>409</sup> It is important to note that Weil could not have uttered this statement without the shedding developments in her earlier work. Therefore, it is important to show the syndicalism’s inability to affect change and Marxism’s ineptitude to really understand the problems. Rejecting the extent of oppressive force built into a centralised bureaucratic government and assessing the tensions of power within a society, Weil’s statement on the centrality of force defines the central theme of her final three years’ work.

Based on Homer’s poem *L’Iliade* that depicts the Trojan War and the Greek siege of the city of Troy, force is the central theme to Weil’s *L’Iliade ou le poème de la force*. At the time, force had an undeniable relevance to the contemporary state of Europe. Written during the summer of 1940 when Paris is occupied and war raged

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<sup>407</sup> *Reflections on barbarity*.

<sup>408</sup> ‘Barbarie comme un caractère permanent et universel de la nature humaine, qui se développe plus ou moins selon que les circonstances lui donnent plus ou moins de jeu’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions sur la barbarie’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 223.

<sup>409</sup> ‘Je ne crois pas que l’on puisse former des pensées claires sur les rapports humains tant qu’on n’aura pas mis au centre la notion de force, comme la notion de rapport est au centre des mathématiques’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions sur la barbarie’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 223.

across central Europe, Weil analogises Homer's epic poem on the human condition, applying it universally. When Weil writes that 'the whole of the *Iliad* lies under the shadow of the greatest calamity humanity can experience, the destruction of a city',<sup>410</sup> she had Paris in mind. Weil's *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force* is written in a manner that Homer's *The Iliad* subsumes a philosophical analysis of force. It laments 'that men are capable of being so transformed'<sup>411</sup> by force and marks, not just a transition from her previous idea of pacifism above all, but beyond it in order to study its nature and so it can be argued that we are also reading the developing concern with spiritual values in her writings. Shedding old light on new situations, Weil assesses Western culture in the dying light of the Roman and Greek civilisation. According to Blum and Seidler:

[Weil] no longer accepted the terms of reference established by the Western Enlightenment tradition for they could not explain the forms of oppression and liberty that exist within modern society. Her developing relationship to Christianity cannot be separated from this broadening of her vision.<sup>412</sup>

In *Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne*, Weil wants to clarify the true relationship between man and nature, to 'give back to man, that is to say the individual, the power which it is his proper function to exercise over nature, over tools, over society itself'.<sup>413</sup> From this early stage in the development of force we can

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<sup>410</sup> 'Toute l'*Iliade* est sous l'ombre du malheur le plus grand qui soit parmi les hommes, la destruction d'une cité'. Simone Weil, 'L'*Iliade* ou le poème de la force', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 249.

<sup>411</sup> 'Quant aux guerriers, les comparaisons qui les font apparaître, vainqueurs ou vaincus, comme des bêtes ou des choses ne peuvent faire éprouver ni admiration ni mépris, mais seulement le regret que les hommes puissent être ainsi transformés'. Simone Weil, 'L'*Iliade* ou le poème de la force', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 250.

<sup>412</sup> Blum and Seidler, *A Truer Liberty*, p. 211.

<sup>413</sup> 'Nous voulons mettre en pleine lumière les rapports véritables de l'homme et de la nature, ces rapports que déguise, dans toute société fondée sur l'exploitation, la dégradante division du travail en travail intellectuel et travail manuel. Nous voulons rendre à l'homme, c'est-à-dire à l'individu, la domination qu'il a pour fonction propre d'exercer sur la nature, sur les outils, sur la société elle-même; rétablir la subordination des conditions matérielles du travail par rapport aux travailleurs; et, au lieu de supprimer la propriété individuelle, faire de la propriété individuelle une vérité, en transformant les moyens de production [...] qui servent aujourd'hui surtout à asservir et exploiter le travail, en de simples instruments du travail libre et associé'. Simone Weil, 'Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution

tentatively state that power is something that a person possesses (or does not) and force is something (external) which acts upon a person, persons or things. Whilst Winch states that the '[r]ecognition that human action can destroy values is a central theme in Simone Weil's thinking',<sup>414</sup> force should not be considered as solid thing, which can be held. We witness the effects of force, like leaves blowing in an invisible wind. Defining the relationship between man and nature as the duty of her generation, Weil states in *Perspectives* that 'for centuries now, ever since the Renaissance, men of thought and men of action have laboured methodically to give the human mind mastery over the forces of nature'.<sup>415</sup> This means that we can chart the development of Weil's understanding of the force of nature through *Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne* to *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale* to *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*. In *Perspectives* Weil states that

during the last century it came to be realised that society itself is a force of nature, as blind as the others, as dangerous for man if he does not succeed in mastering it. At the present time this force weighs upon us more cruelly than water, earth, air and fire; all the more so since it holds in its grasp, as a result of the technical progress, the control of water, earth, air, and fire.<sup>416</sup>

Still heavily engaged in Marxist critique at this point, Weil understands that the force of nature is linked to 'the total subordination of the individual to the collective industrial machine'<sup>417</sup> and is the result of the technical process. It is important to note

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prolétarienne', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 277.

<sup>414</sup> Winch, *The Just Balance*, p. 145.

<sup>415</sup> 'Depuis plusieurs siècles, depuis la Renaissance, les hommes de pensée et d'action travaillent méthodiquement, à rendre l'esprit humain maître des forces de la nature; et le succès a dépassé les espérances'. Simone Weil, 'Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 277.

<sup>416</sup> 'Mais au cours du siècle dernier l'on a compris que la société elle-même est une force de la nature, aussi aveugle que les autres, aussi dangereuse pour l'homme s'il ne parvient pas à la maîtriser. Actuellement, cette force pèse sur nous plus cruellement que l'eau, la terre, l'air et le feu; d'autant qu'elle a elle-même entre ses mains, par les progrès de la technique, le maniement de l'eau, de la terre, de l'air et du feu'. Simone Weil, 'Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 277.

<sup>417</sup> 'L'individu s'est trouvé brutalement dépossédé des moyens de combat et de travail; ni la guerre ni la production ne sont plus possibles sans une subordination totale de l'individu à l'outillage collectif'. Simone Weil, 'Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne', in *Écrits historiques et*

in the above passage that Weil situates society as a force of nature within the last century and consequently within the timeframe of the emergence of the industrial revolution. In *Réflexions*, whilst discussing the difficulties with Marxism, she attributes a version of force to

[t]his religion of the productive forces in whose name generations of entrepreneurs have crushed the working masses without any remorse is also a factor of oppression within the Socialist Movement.<sup>418</sup>

Still engaged in the primacy of socialism that does not account for an understanding of oppression, let alone force, the important point to take from Weil at this stage is that force is directly linked with an industrialised society. As primitive man overcomes nature (builds shelter and creates agricultural society) and even thrives (early medicine). The nature of force morphs, parallels and bifurcates when necessary alongside man's development, giving him different obstacles that if overcome might return him to a form of dominionship.

In short, man seems to pass by stages, with respect to nature, from servitude to dominion. At the same time nature gradually loses her divine character, and divinity more and more takes on human shape.<sup>419</sup>

Yet, instead of man being able to confront and overcome nature by building a shelter or feeding oneself sufficiently to satisfy immediate necessity, or where nature has a limit, like weather relenting or, in an extreme case, death, when man is pitted against man force has only one limit - death.

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*politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 277-278.

<sup>418</sup> 'Cette religion des forces productives au nom de laquelle des générations de chefs d'entreprise ont écrasé les masses travailleuses sans le moindre remords constitue également un facteur d'oppression à l'intérieur du mouvement socialiste; toutes les religions font de l'homme un simple instrument de la Providence, et le socialisme lui aussi met les hommes au service du progrès historique, c'est-à-dire du progrès de la production'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 36.

<sup>419</sup> 'Bref l'homme semble passer par étapes, à l'égard de la nature, de l'esclavage à la domination. En même temps la nature perd graduellement son caractère divin, et la divinité revêt de plus en plus la forme humain'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 52-53.

Unfortunately, this emancipation is only a flattering semblance. In reality, at these higher stages, human action continues, as a whole, to be nothing but pure obedience to the brutal spur of an immediate necessity; only, instead of being harried by nature, man is henceforth harried by man. However, it is still the same pressure exerted by nature that continues to make itself felt, although indirectly; for oppression is exercised by force, and in the long run all force originates in nature.<sup>420</sup>

Weil attempts to elucidate her understanding of force further, yet at this stage all she can offer is that it can be understood not in its composite elements but by its nature.

Despite disclaiming that the notion of force is far from simple, we can read the difficulty she has in accurately articulating its oppressive parameters.

The notion of force is far from simple, and yet it is the first that must be elucidated in order to formulate the problems of society. Force and oppression—that makes two; but what needs to be understood above all is that it is not the manner in which use is made of some particular force, but its very nature, which determines whether it is oppressive or not.<sup>421</sup>

Describing it in relation to the governmental state's power, in this case (maybe) legal powers, to grind down an individual, Weil argues that the state's force can manifest as oppression.<sup>422</sup> An (in)ability to withstand this oppression relates to the power of the individual. As shown in the previous chapter, a method of mitigating oppression is the freedom to think and ability to act. If an individual has privileges, Weilian examples would be a priest, a property-holding capitalist, a holder and purveyor of scientific knowledge, a holder of arms and weapons or essentially, the monopoly of the few.

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<sup>420</sup> 'Par malheur, cette émancipation n'est qu'une flatteuse apparence. En réalité, à ces étapes supérieures, l'action humaine continue, dans l'ensemble, à n'être que pure obéissance à l'aiguillon brutal d'une nécessité immédiate; seulement, au lieu d'être harcelé par la nature, l'homme est désormais harcelé par l'homme. Au reste c'est bien toujours la pression de la nature qui continue à se faire sentir, quoique indirectement; car l'oppression s'exerce par la force, et en fin de compte, toute force à sa source dans la nature'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 53.

<sup>421</sup> 'La notion de force est loin d'être simple, et cependant elle est la première à élucider pour poser les problèmes sociaux. La force et l'oppression, cela fait deux ; mais ce qu'il faut comprendre avant tout, c'est que ce n'est pas la manière dont on use d'une force quelconque, mais sa nature même qui détermine si elle est ou non oppressive'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 53.

<sup>422</sup> It is fair to suggest that a forceful government/ state can also wield its power without inflicting oppression. Weil might disagree, as she states that power is still concentrated. But in theory, a government/ state could act in a manner not consistent with Weil's beliefs on elite bureaucratic groups.

Then that person or persons can withstand an element of force by mitigating their experience of oppression by utilising their privileges. However, everyone is still subject to force and it is only our ability (power) to mitigate force that differentiates us. A statement which possibly defines the history of humanity existing in the state of nature, Weil's concludes on the instability of power in 'that there is never power, but only the race for power'.<sup>423</sup> Where mankind attempts to overcome the state of nature and recognises that (momentarily) holding power, however unstable, helps to mitigate the effects of force. The struggle to hold or gain power is the struggle of mankind.

Despite articulating definitions of oppression and to a lesser extent power, Weil struggles to articulate a definition of force in *Réflexions*. I surmise that Weil is attempting to reveal that force is something which is underpinned by nature and should be understood by its nature. As it is rooted in the foundations of our world (natural force) and that it can evolve to keep dominionship over society, force has the characteristics to apply to any given situation in any time of history. I suggest that an outline of Weil's definition of force includes the weight of nature's conditions, indifferent to one's existence, and the pressure of humanity as it attempts to coordinate and control nature's meagre provisions. Force ranges from physically battling nature to satisfying hunger, to keeping a domicile erect in an environment indifferent to human's survival or overcoming and developing medical provision against disease or injury, to withstanding the pressure of surviving politically in a community, state,

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<sup>423</sup> 'Car du fait qu'il n'y a jamais pouvoir, mais seulement course au pouvoir, et que cette course est sans terme, sans limite, sans mesure, il n'y a pas non plus de limite ni de mesure aux efforts qu'elle exige; ceux qui s'y livrent, contraints de faire toujours plus que leurs rivaux, qui s'efforcent de leur côté de faire plus qu'eux, doivent sacrifier non seulement l'existence des esclaves, mais la leur propre et celle des êtres les plus chers; c'est ainsi qu'Agamemnon immolant sa fille revit dans les capitalistes qui, pour maintenir leurs privilèges, acceptent d'un cœur léger des guerres susceptibles de leur ravir leurs fils'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 57.



country or continent scrambling for material subsistence. Where force manifests itself as power is the great game that we all play (and is played upon us) so that we might survive the force of nature. For McLellan, '[w]hat turned privilege into force more brutal than that of natural necessity was the concomitant struggle for power',<sup>424</sup> meaning all stakeholders in the race for power engage in a struggle to retain their power, acquire more or wrest some away. The problem, if we can agree that power is unstable, is that physical force; assault, violence or war, can be then reintroduced as a method of attempting to preserve power. The idea of holding power is vain, as McLellan argues, because 'at the very heart of power is a contradiction which prevents it from ever really existing – the only thing that ever exists is the race for power, a race which enslaves the strong as well as the weak'.<sup>425</sup> By the time that she writes *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force* Weil has a greater understanding of force, Instead of moving directly to this work, it is of greater merit to show how Weil's pacifism interacted with this limited understanding of force as events in Spain and Europe unfolded.

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<sup>424</sup> McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*, p. 83.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

## 4.2 Reflections on War

When Hitler comes to power in 1933, Weil composes an in-depth analysis regarding whether workers could improve their situation through violence. Entitled, *Réflexions sur la guerre*,<sup>426</sup> it highlights the multiple and contradictory rationales for violence. She shows how history's long list of revolutions and counterrevolutions prove that war and authoritarianism enjoy a close relationship. The French Revolution, Napoleon's imperial reign, and the Russian Revolution had all led to unending struggle and deprivation for the common people. These violent changes and their aftermaths show that revolutions succeed only in replacing one group of oppressors by another. Any theory supporting war or any other violent change that privileges ends over means has an inherent faulty premise. Central to whether a country should go to war should show conflict will affect the country's internal politics and its social and economic conditions. Readiness for war implies tight political and military control over a nation's people, so the decision to go to war is decided more often by carefully orchestrated internal politics than by external relations. The control achieved by the state inevitably grind down people's lives, for 'arms manipulated by a sovereign state bring liberty to no one'.<sup>427</sup> Weil's rationale for peace is predicated on safeguarding individual liberty, something which cannot be done during times of war. 'In any circumstance', she maintains, 'the worst possible treason consists always in accepting one's subordination to the apparatus and in serving it by crushing underfoot human values: one's own and those of others'.<sup>428</sup> I suggest that Weil is analytically brilliant

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<sup>426</sup> *Reflections on war*.

<sup>427</sup> 'Des armes maniées par un appareil d'État souverain ne peuvent apporter la liberté à personne'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur la Guerre', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume I: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 294.

<sup>428</sup> 'Dans n'importe quelle circonstance, la pire trahison possible consiste toujours à accepter de se subordonner à cet appareil et de fouler aux pieds pour le servir, en soi-même et chez autrui, toutes les

in this 1933 article but also quite subjective. By still asserting her pacifist and syndicalist ideals, I believe that these adherences, at this stage, obfuscate and delay her later conclusion that force is an inherent part of society.

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valeurs humaines'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur la Guerre', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'engagement syndical, Volume 1: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 299.

### 4.3 A Response to Alain's Challenge

It is evident at this point that Weil has not relinquished her pacifist position and continues to probe the nature of force from within the Spanish Civil War. In the early spring of 1936, Alain challenges the French intellectuals by publicly asking several questions in view of Hitler's provocative act of occupying the Rhineland. In *Réponse à une question d'Alain*<sup>429</sup> Weil states she would 'only answer the last of Alain's questions:'<sup>430</sup> 'Are men who speak of honour and dignity as more valuable than life willing to risk their lives first? And if not, what should we think of them?'<sup>431</sup> In her response, Weil insists on applying consistent criteria to policy decisions concerning questions about war, which can equally apply to a nation's treatment of its own disenfranchised members. Weil singles out the words *honneur* and *dignité* as the most bloodstained in the language, reminding readers that Poincaré's<sup>432</sup> vacuous formulas *Peace with dignity* and *Peace with honour* were preludes to the senseless slaughter following 1914.<sup>433</sup> She argues that these pre-WWI slogans, along with the men who proclaimed them without going to war themselves, are partly responsible for the

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<sup>429</sup> *Response to question from Alain*.

<sup>430</sup> 'Je ne répondrai qu'à la dernière des questions d'Alain'. Simone Weil, 'Réponse à une question d'Alain', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 329.

<sup>431</sup> 'Les hommes qui parlent d'honneur et de dignité comme plus précieux que la vie sont-ils disposés à risquer les premiers leur vie? Et que penser d'eux s'ils ne le sont pas?'. Simone Weil, 'Réponse à une question d'Alain', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 329.

<sup>432</sup> Raymond Poincaré, president of the French Third Republic, 1913-20. L'Appel à la nation française signé par Poincaré le 1st Aout 1914 disait: 'La mobilisation n'est pas la guerre. Dans les circonstances présentes, elle apparaît au contraire comme le meilleur moyen d'assurer la paix dans l'honneur'.

<sup>433</sup> 'La formule la paix dans la dignité ou la paix dans l'honneur, formule de sinistre mémoire qui, sous la plume de Poincaré, a immédiatement prélude au massacre, est encore employée couramment'. Simone Weil, 'Réponse à une question d'Alain', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 329.

deseccration of human lives. Dignity, signifying self-esteem,<sup>434</sup> is contingent exclusively upon freely decided actions. Honour also depends on a free, uncoerced resolution, in this case to put one's life in danger for a greater cause. Authorities who declare war impel others to go to battle. Consequently, the powerful cannot honestly base their conscription to arms on appeals to honour or dignity, for both depend on the liberty to make unconstrained choices. As for non-combatants, neither their honour nor their self-esteem is at stake in war because, in theory, they have a limited exposure to the danger. Stating that 'war is never a resource to avoid having to despise oneself',<sup>435</sup> one can conclude that, because war did not engage anyone's individual honour, appeasement could not be considered dishonourable.

Weil's principal point is to underscore the hypocrisy of leaders who argue that protection of a country's dignity and honour obliges a declaration of war and, by consequence, conscripting those who are already forced to submit to indignities every day within their own country. In her response, Weil brought a higher principle to bear on war, which is integrity in applying criteria for major decisions involving violence. She exposes the dishonesty of authorities who send men to war by proclaiming empty slogans, which deceives them into believing that the slogan's ideals merit the supreme sacrifice of their lives. She declares that war, in both its preparation and its conduct, is 'the essential cog in the mechanism of oppression and inequality'.<sup>436</sup> Weil adds that

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<sup>434</sup> 'Le mot de dignité est ambigu. Il peut signifier l'estime de soi-même. Simone Weil, 'Réponse à une question d'Alain', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 329-330.

<sup>435</sup> 'Il faut en conclure que jamais la guerre n'est une ressource pour éviter d'avoir à se mépriser soi-même'. Simone Weil, 'Réponse à une question d'Alain', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 330.

<sup>436</sup> 'Ces guerres constituent le rouage essentiel dans le mécanisme de l'oppression et l'inégalité'. Simone Weil, 'Réponse à une question d'Alain', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 332.

civil liberties are curtailed during war and it is generally a certain class of person conscripted into the army. This hypocrisy could be dispelled by deciding to honour peace over war. I do not disagree with the sentiment of Weil's argument, but must remark that she takes a sweeping approach. It is not inconceivable that some people might willingly submit to war on a point of principle. Weil's arguments for nonviolence have a revolutionary tone, in that they advocate equality in human relationships and an unemotional, honest, and pragmatic discussion of whether the cause merits the terrible human sacrifice. Her language at this time is largely informed by Marxism, namely, the 'essential cog in the mechanism of oppression and inequality' parallels with her tone of dignity in labour and the syndicalist movement. Leaving aside slights made against any government's honour and dignity, Weil does not countenance that if people are to be subjected to greater oppression and inequality than already exists (when an invading army occupies a country), a call to war can be justified because it is the common man and his conditions that bears the brunt of an invasion and occupying force. If Weil accords 'the free decision to risk one's life is the very soul of honour; honour is not involved where some men make decisions without taking any risks, and others die in order to carry out their decisions'<sup>437</sup> and she maintains that dignity and honour are dangerous words, 'where slaves are invited to die in the name of dignity',<sup>438</sup> particularly when used in a national context, I question to what extent is dying for the *soul* of honour any more relevant than that of not dying for honour or dignity. An aspect that Weil misses at this point is, notwithstanding

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<sup>437</sup> 'La libre résolution de mettre sa vie en jeu est l'âme même de l'honneur; l'honneur n'est pas en cause là où les uns décident sans risques, et les autres meurent pour exécuter'. Simone Weil, 'Réponse à une question d'Alain', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 330.

<sup>438</sup> 'Ces guerres où les esclaves sont invités à mourir au nom d'une dignité'. Simone Weil, 'Réponse à une question d'Alain', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 332.

uncoerced soulful honour and coerced sloganised national honour, that war can be foisted upon a country rather than decided upon for honour's sake. Furthermore, one can infer that while coerced war on the grounds of honour and dignity is unjustified, individual uncoerced warring is justified. She states that 'a man who has been grossly insulted may need to fight in order to regain his self-respect'.<sup>439</sup> A man may fight for his own dignity, but not the state's? Indeed, an oversimplification, as the point that Weil wants to underscore is choice, which relates to *activity* in her thesis. Whilst she argues that one should have a choice, I suggest that choice is not always possible. We both agree that this limits liberty. I believe that Weil is not able to fully investigate the nuances because she is attempting to investigate the root of the problem of force. In one sense, Weil is attempting to theorise the problem, in accordance with acting freely, and I think that she does not recognise that this route is limited by another agent (in this case Hitler) denying this freedom.<sup>440</sup> Despite retaining a pacifist standpoint in early 1936, it is challenged during her brief spell in the Spanish Civil War, where we find the germination of force in her writings.

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<sup>439</sup> 'Un homme outrage peut avoir besoin de se battre pour retrouver sa propre'. Simone Weil, 'Réponse à une question d'Alain', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 330. Weil does state in the second clause of the above sentence that 'this will be the case only if it is impossible for him to submit passively to the insult without being convicted of cowardice in his own eyes'. (Ce sera le cas seulement s'il lui est impossible de subir passivement l'outrage sans se trouver convaincu de lâcheté à ses propres yeux.).

<sup>440</sup> A solution at this stage could be to decide not to fight and submit to whatever course of action, or even commit suicide or be killed. When choices appear limited, we can decide to do nothing or the unpalatable and accept the consequences. While the external force negates the freedom, Weil should be satisfied if one can choose the course of (in)action.

#### 4.4 The Spanish Civil War

From the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936, Weil's advocacy to preserve syndicalism in France is closely bound with the pacifism she believes is a legitimate method to keep France from developing in a similar manner to Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia. When General Franco's army engages with Republican Spain, Weil wants to observe the interaction of forces on the battlefield. Whilst participating in the Republican's defence of liberty and democracy, Weil places more emphasis on the peasants struggling against proprietors, much like the workers in syndicalist France. As such, war itself is a separate matter, one not to be ignored, but her concern is the treatment of the oppressed and the oppressive. To her dismay, however, she soon finds a complex mix of admirable and reprehensible behaviour on the part of her Republican comrades.

In the two months that Weil participates in the Spanish Civil War, she scarcely fought at all and gave no allegiance, yet it is just long enough to perceive the disasters of war and to gain a sobering acuity about political ideals when they are placed in the crucibles of fear, terror, and cruelty. Her short stint in Spain with an international unit of anarchist militias is long enough for her to accept the disheartening fact that force does not pick a side in a war. Those who are given a gun and free licence to use it maintain their dominance over the vulnerable, scarcely concerning themselves with questions of justice or the spilling of blood. The militias she observes succumb to this intoxication and lower themselves to the level of their adversaries. Their behaviour corroborates that force is ineluctable contaminating. The experience galvanises her ready suspicions against all collective endeavour aimed at political power. In Spain,



she beholds, as she had been unable to in Germany four years earlier, the ugliest face of force.

Following her to return to Paris (Sept. 1936), Weil is clear-sighted enough to appreciate the realities of Spain and her enthusiasm for personal participation wanes. Her 1936 article, *Réflexions pour déplaire*<sup>441</sup> points to the common lesson of Russia in 1917 and now Spain: revolutionary promises of abolishing the state's oppressive bureaucracy and military machinery vanish behind the war's intensification of these means, with no possibility of popular control over them. She did not question her anarchist comrades in Catalonia, but in October 1936 she reflects that

we see forms of compulsion and instances of inhumanity that are directly contrary to the libertarian and humanitarian ideal of the anarchists. The necessities and the atmosphere of civil war are sweeping away the aspirations that we are seeking to defend by means of civil war.<sup>442</sup>

Now active in the broadly-based *Comité de vigilance des intellectuels antifascistes*,<sup>443</sup> founded by Alain in 1934, Weil pacifism begins to wane. Despite supporting Léon Blum's policy of non-intervention, which was under strong attack from the Communists, particularly after the Stalin—Laval pact of 1935, in which the Soviet Union gave its support for French rearmament, she favours sending technical assistance and raw materials to Spain. In an October 1936 article, *Faut-il graisser les godillots*<sup>444</sup>, Weil challenges the misrepresentation of these libertarian and humanitarian ideals by writing that 'for some comrades it is no longer a matter of turning international war into civil war, but civil war into international war'.<sup>445</sup> For

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<sup>441</sup> *Reflections to displease*. (Also translated, *Reflections that no one is going to like*.)

<sup>442</sup> 'Là aussi, hélas, nous voyons se produire des formes de contrainte, de cas d'inhumanité directement contraires à l'idéal libertaire et humanitaire des anarchistes'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions pour déplaire', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 389.

<sup>443</sup> Committee of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals.

<sup>444</sup> *Do we have to grease our combat boots?*

<sup>445</sup> 'Il ne s'agit plus pour certains camarades de transformer la guerre internationale en guerre civile, mais la guerre civile en guerre internationale'. Simone Weil, 'Faut-il graisser les godillots?' in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 386.

her, opposition to Fascism is an opposition to all forms of authoritarianism and any recourse to war submits to the logic of military prestige and power inherent in fascism itself. Her conclusion is unequivocal.

One must choose between prestige and peace. And whether one claims to believe in the fatherland, democracy, or revolution, the policy of prestige means war. [...] And if the misfortune of time wants the civil war to become a war like any other, and almost inevitably linked to the international war, one can only draw a conclusion: we must also avoid civil war.<sup>446</sup>

Weil detects ambivalence in the foreign policy of the French government, which proclaimed neutrality for fear of setting all Europe ablaze. Writing in *Non-intervention généralisée*<sup>447</sup> she ‘def[ied] anyone, including Blum, to explain why the reasons that deter us from intervening in Spain would be less compelling if it were a question of Czechoslovakia’s being invaded by the Germans’.<sup>448</sup> The reference to Czechoslovakia is prophetic. Weil remains faithful to this point of view up to, and including, the Munich crisis. Yet it must be emphasised that her resistance to the war fever, which seized France in 1936, is not based on an individualistic pacifism. She is dedicated to preserving the substantial gains and hopes that the *Fronte Popolare* begun securing for the workers’ movement. One can question the legitimacy of her correlation between France’s non-involvement in the Spanish Civil War and their involvement in what would eventually become a total European War. Hitler’s move into the Rhineland in April, Mussolini’s war in Ethiopia and his pact with Berlin, and the chaos in Spain all contribute a vague urgency to put France on a war economy. Such preparation,

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<sup>446</sup> ‘Il faut choisir entre le prestige et la paix. Et qu’on se réclame de la patrie, de la démocratie ou de la révolution, la politique de prestige, c’est la guerre. Alors? Alors il serait temps de se décider: ou fleurir la tombe de Poincaré, ou cesser de nous exhorter à faire les matamores. Et si le malheur des temps veut que la guerre civile devienne aujourd’hui une guerre comme une autre, et presque inévitablement liée à la guerre internationale, on n’en peut tirer qu’une conclusion: éviter aussi la guerre civile’. Simone Weil, ‘Faut-il graisser les godillots?’ in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 387.

<sup>447</sup> *Generalised non-intervention*.

<sup>448</sup> ‘Je défie n’importe qui, y compris Léon Blum, d’expliquer pourquoi les raisons qui détournent d’intervenir en Espagne auraient moins de force s’il s’agissait de le Tchécoslovaquie envahie par les Allemands’. Simone Weil, ‘Non-intervention généralisée’ in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 45.

however, is greatly hindered by labour reforms. France's industrial weakness is accentuated in the face of Germany's build-up. To France's further detriment, less is now required of its inferior work force at the very time when more is imperative.

In April 1937, Weil outlines this counterproductive element in *Les dangers de guerre et les conquêtes ouvrières*.<sup>449</sup> The 1936 June strikes show that a *fait accompli* persuades better than all arguments. Nothing replaces its effectiveness in imposing something new. Yet the strikes' failure to address the basic issues of social life now became evident. Both sides of the political spectrum agree that a strong France is necessary to ensure peace. That means that factories need to increase production to a seventy-hour week and the old, brutal and arbitrary working conditions must return. France's choice is between preparing for war or continuing its commitment to social justice. From Weil's point of view, the two positions are diametrically opposed. Ominously she declares that

one cannot at the same time preserve the regime resulting from June and have a strong France. One must choose. If we want a strong France, the liberties of the workers will have to disappear one day or another. We shall then have the military strength necessary to defend ourselves against the foreigner; only we will have, after all, nothing more to defend.<sup>450</sup>

Aside from the nationalistic vein of defending against the foreigner, this passage outlines the crucial position that workers' rights have in Weil's ideal French society. Even though she does not explicitly use the word *droits*, we can understand this is what she means, for assigning workers' essential liberties would be problematic. In the same month, writing in *Prestige national et honneur ouvrier*<sup>451</sup> she stresses that France's choice of militarism or revolution is effectively a choice between the

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<sup>449</sup> *The dangers of war and the workers' conquests.*

<sup>450</sup> 'On ne peut pas à la fois conserver le régime issu de juin et avoir une France forte. Il faut choisir. Si on veut une France forte, les libertés ouvrières devront disparaître un jour ou l'autre. On aura alors la force militaire nécessaire pour se défendre contre l'étranger; seulement on n'aura, somme toute, plus rien à défendre'. Simone Weil, 'Les dangers de guerre et les conquêtes ouvrières' in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 72.

<sup>451</sup> *National prestige and worker's honour.*

specious claims of national pride and the substantial claims of syndicalism. Drawing on tangible humiliations that workers underwent, which she suggests occurred in its factories before June 1936, what did it matter if France endures all manner of mortifications from Germany now that the honour of its own working people is being reclaimed. A bloodless revolt had been carried out against true oppressors, is the working class now to be conscripted for one imagined? Weil is underestimating the German threat, but her criterion is the tangibility of honour, that no nation can genuinely claim while condoning the degradation of its own people.

There is honour to be defended, it is the honour of those who are at the bottom of the social ladder against the abuse of power of those who are above. It must be defended by the daily social struggle, which does not involve the use of tanks, cannons, bombing planes. A so-called national honour common to oppressors and oppressed deserves not a drop of blood, still less millions of corpses.<sup>452</sup>

These remarks suggest why, after the Popular Front's fall in 1938 and the ensuing reaction, that the working class take little interest in defending France against Germany. They also show that Weil views the war preparation program as counterrevolutionary. Most importantly, it shows that the emergent crisis intensifies her commitment, against all odds, to a peacetime workers' revolution. That sense of hope lingers in Weil's *Les rapports franco-allemands*.<sup>453</sup> Although the atmosphere that Weil depicts could not have been more inauspicious— 'uncertainty, ignorance, in blind anguish, amid rumours of panic, false news [and] alarmist noises',<sup>454</sup> chiefly because no one has access to or control over secret diplomacy, she supports the

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<sup>452</sup> 'L'honneur à défendre, c'est l'honneur de ceux qui sont au bas de l'échelle sociale contre les abus de pouvoir de ceux qui sont en haut. Il faut le défendre par la lutte sociale quotidienne, lutte qui n'implique pas l'emploi des tanks, des avions de bombardement. Un soi-disant honneur national commun aux oppresseurs et aux opprimés ne mérite pas une goutte de sang, encore moins des millions de cadavres'. Simone Weil, 'Prestige national et honneur ouvrier', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 45.

<sup>453</sup> *The Franco-German reports*.

<sup>454</sup> 'Nous vivons dans l'incertitude, l'ignorance, dans une angoisse aveugle, au milieu de rumeurs de panique, des fausses nouvelles, des bruits alarmistes'. Simone Weil, 'Les rapports Franco-Allemands', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 47.

formula of Léon Jouhaux, the C.G.T.'s president, that 'peace is not defended by preventive war. It defends itself by means of peace'.<sup>455</sup> Preventive war or threats of war are not be the best means of preserving peace and would not have succeeded against Hitler because his fascist regime depended on prestige. The National Socialists precipitated a war rather than losing prestige with their own people because, as Weil figured Germany is 'a fascist country, whose government lives on a perpetual demagoguery, whose leaders have great ambitions'.<sup>456</sup> Consequently, negotiation deserve first consideration, no matter what the adversary's internal orientation and foreign ambitions. Negotiation aims toward 'a possible common ground of understanding'<sup>457</sup> with the awareness that 'foreign nations are what they are, and not what we would like them to be'.<sup>458</sup> Yet, while she signs a declaration in March 1938, *Pour une négociation immédiate*<sup>459</sup>, supporting Neville Chamberlain's conciliatory policy toward Germany, *Les rapports franco-allemands* demonstrates how far Weil is willing to negotiate and subvert her principles for the sake of peace.

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<sup>455</sup> 'La paix, a dit Jouhaux, ne se défend pas par la guerre préventive. Elle se défend par des moyens de paix'. Simone Weil, 'Les rapports Franco-Allemands', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 48.

<sup>456</sup> 'L'Allemagne étant ce qu'elle est, c'est-à-dire un pays fasciste, dont le gouvernement vit d'une démagogie perpétuelle, dont les dirigeants nourrissent de grandes ambitions.' Simone Weil, 'Les rapports Franco-Allemands', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 48.

<sup>457</sup> 'Un terrain d'entente possible'. Simone Weil, 'Les rapports Franco-Allemands', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 48.

<sup>458</sup> 'Les nations étrangères sont ce qu'elles sont. Et non ce que nous voudrions qu'elles soient'. Simone Weil, 'Les rapports Franco-Allemands', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 48.

<sup>459</sup> *For immediate negotiation.*

## 4.5 The Power of Words

Developing two of the anti-war arguments in her *Réponse à une question d'Alain*, Weil weaves them into a pragmatic discourse entitled, *Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie*.<sup>460</sup> Inspired by the play of Jean Giraudoux, *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*<sup>461</sup>, the sub-title of the *Nouveaux Cahiers* essay is *Le pouvoir des mots*.<sup>462</sup> Its thesis is that the destruction wrought by war is in inverse proportion to the official pretexts for fighting it. 'The most threatening conflicts have a common character', Weil states, in 'that they do not have a definable objective'.<sup>463</sup> The ten-year-long Trojan War was fought for a person about whom the participants, except perhaps for Paris, cared little or knew nothing of, indeed in Euripides's version Helen is not even in Troy at the time. Despite Helen being held up as the objective, 'it was merely the symbol of the true stake [that] nobody defined [...] and [...] could not be defined, for it did not exist'.<sup>464</sup> In modern wars 'it is words adorned with capital letters that play the role of Helen, [which] if we try to squeeze one of these words, swollen with blood and tears, we find it without content'.<sup>465</sup> A critique of these abstract entities, which corresponded to no clear idea in the minds of those under their sway and whose analysis would show

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<sup>460</sup> Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 49-66.

<sup>461</sup> *The Trojan War will not take place*.

<sup>462</sup> *The power of words*.

<sup>463</sup> 'Les conflits les plus menaçants ont un caractère commun qui pourrait rassurer des esprits superficiels, mais qui, malgré l'apparence, en constitue le véritable danger; *c'est qu'ils n'ont pas d'objectif définissable*'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 49.

<sup>464</sup> 'Sa personne était si évidemment hors de proportion avec cette gigantesque bataille qu'aux yeux de tous elle constituait simplement le symbole du véritable enjeu; mais le véritable enjeu, personne ne le définissait et il ne pouvait être défini, car il n'existait pas'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 50.

<sup>465</sup> 'Pour nos contemporains, ce sont des mots ornés de majuscules qui jouent le rôle d'Hélène. Si nous saisissons, pour essayer de le serrer, un de ces mots tout gonflés de sang et de larmes, nous le trouvons sans contenu'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 51.

them to be much more relative, and therefore less dangerous, is found in Weil's *Réponse à une question d'Alain*. However, there is a contradiction, or at the least a conflation, when she states that 'a man who has been grossly insulted may need to fight in order to regain his self-respect'.<sup>466</sup> Weil does not explicitly explain why *self-respect* is no less swollen and bloated a word than that of either *dignity* or *honour*. It is probably fair to suggest that Weil might respond that an individual can choose what he wants to fight for. In opposition to her thinking, that one should not fight a war in the name of words beginning with capital letters, a country and its citizens can be faced by a country and its people declaring war also based on abstract entities and words beginning with capital letters. Not fighting a war from the bastion of capitals letters and bloated vacuous slogans does indeed have merit. However, this abstraction of the words, its demerits and the philosophical difference disappear when faced with actual armaments. The reasons for war, vacuous, abstract or otherwise, become redundant once the first shell whistles over the capital. One can theorise why one should not fight; this is not a defence, however.

In this 1937 essay, she calls for clear thinking when rushing into war without rationally assessing the means, goals, and costs. She pursues her warning against abstract words, hollow in meaning, yet charged with emotion, which gain momentum when the prestige of one's nation seems sullied. To make her point about the role played by manipulative words in accelerating a nation's entry into conflicts, Weil repurposes the ancient classical tale: *The Iliad*. Along with dignity and honour, an example of a concept that needs demystifying is the idea of national interest and how it is the antagonism between capitalists which is the prime cause of war. For her,

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<sup>466</sup> 'Un homme outrage peut avoir besoin de se battre pour retrouver sa propre'. Simone Weil, 'Réponse à une question d'Alain', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 330.

Anatole France's<sup>467</sup> view that 'they think they die for their country [...]; they die for industrialists'<sup>468</sup> is too optimistic; 'one does not even die for something as substantial, as tangible as an industrialist'.<sup>469</sup> The economic interests of capitalists increasingly overstep national boundaries and, in any case, what is really meant by the national interest of a country is not what gives life to its citizens but what gives it the means to fight war. If countries are divided by a real opposition of interest, then a compromise should be possible. But

when economic and political interests have no meaning apart from war, how can they be peacefully reconciled? It is the very concept of the nation that needs to be suppressed — or rather, the manner in which the word is used. For the word national and the expressions of which it forms part are empty of all meaning; their only content is millions of corpses, and orphans and disabled men, and tears and despair.<sup>470</sup>

Language can determine interests and defuse passions, but Weil recognises that phantom words have people behind them and that power exists as a social function. If power is inherently unstable and held arbitrarily, Weil argues that it must be cloaked in prestige and authority to sustain the illusion that it is absolute. Maintaining this facade is costly and absurd, especially in international relations, where whole systems of prestige become competitive. 'Another admirable example of bloody absurdity is

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<sup>467</sup> Anatole France, pseudonym of Jacques-Anatole-François Thibault (born April 16, 1844, Paris, France—died Oct. 12, 1924, Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire), was a writer and ironic, sceptical, and urbane critic who was considered in his day the ideal French man of letters. He was elected to the French Academy in 1896 and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1921.

<sup>468</sup> 'On croit mourir pour la patrie, disait Anatole France; on meurt pour des industriels'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 53.

<sup>469</sup> 'On ne meurt même pas pour quelque chose d'aussi substantiel, d'aussi tangible qu'un industriel'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 53.

<sup>470</sup> 'Mais quand les intérêts économiques et politiques n'ont de sens qu'en vue de la guerre, comment les concilier d'une manière pacifique? C'est la notion même de nation qu'il faudrait supprimer. Ou plutôt c'est l'usage de ce mot: car le mot national et les expressions dont il fait partie sont vides de toute signification, ils n'ont pour contenu que les millions de cadavres, les orphelins, les mutilés, le désespoir, les larmes'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 54.



the opposition between Fascism and communism',<sup>471</sup> Weil states, which underlines the tense political situation that meant possible civil and probable world war.

There are no two nations whose structure is more similar than Germany and Russia, who threaten each other with an international crusade and pretend to each take the other for the Beast of the Apocalypse. Therefore, one can safely say that the opposition between fascism and communism has absolutely no meaning.<sup>472</sup>

For Weil, the only victory that either side can incur is the extermination of the other side, as she states, 'the anti-Fascist position was that anything was better than Fascism — anything, including Fascism, so long as it was called communism, and the anti-communist position was that anything was better than communism — including communism itself, so long as it was labelled Fascism'.<sup>473</sup> Mired in meaninglessness, the phantom of Helen has a substantial reality in comparison to such non-existent distinctions. Even the opposition between democracy and dictatorship, although a real opposition, loses much of its force if these words do not represent some discrete entity, but as criteria for measuring the characteristics of a given social structure.

Democracy was no more inherent in France than dictatorship was in Germany and that both were the result of a determinate situation open to analysis and change. Weil states: 'there is nowhere either absolute dictatorship or absolute democracy, the social organism is always and everywhere a compound of democracy and dictatorship,

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<sup>471</sup> 'Un autre exemple admirable d'absurdité sanglante, c'est l'opposition entre fascisme et communisme. Le fait que cette opposition détermine aujourd'hui pour nous une double menace de guerre civile et de guerre mondiale est peut-être le symptôme de carence intellectuelle le plus grave parmi tous ceux que nous pouvons constater autour de nous'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 54.

<sup>472</sup> 'Il n'y a pas deux nations dont la structure soit plus semblable que l'Allemagne et la Russie, qui se menacent mutuellement d'une croisade internationale et feignent chacune de prendre l'autre pour la Bête de l'Apocalypse. C'est pourquoi on peut affirmer sans crainte que l'opposition entre fascisme et communisme n'a rigoureusement aucun sens'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 55.

<sup>473</sup> 'La position des antifascistes, c'est: Tout plutôt que le fascisme; tout, y compris le fascisme sous le nom de communisme. La position des anticommunistes, c'est: Tout plutôt que le communisme; tout, y compris le communisme sous le nom de fascisme'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 55.

with different degrees.’<sup>474</sup> The climate of opinion is and was opposed to such analysis.

If anyone were to suggest an armistice in the Spanish Civil War, the suggestion might be greeted with derision on both sides, in that

each of them has unconsciously lost sight of his ideal and replaced it by an entity without substance; for each, the victory of what he still calls his idea can no longer mean anything except the extermination of the enemy; and each of them will scorn any suggestion of peace, replying to it with the same knock-out argument as Minerva in Homer and Poincaré in 1917: ‘the dead do not wish it’.<sup>475</sup>

In all human conflict, Weil claims, the only legitimate and serious one is class struggle.

Yet, while it is a struggle of the oppressed against their oppression and not a war, it can result in a compromise and a new balance of forces. War for Weil is the manipulation of emotion-laden words flaunted as absolutes: democracy, tyranny, communism, capitalism, nation, security, authority, order, and freedom. These words did not exist as absolutes. Sometimes democracy is tyrannical, some communism requires capitalism. Weil construes the role of the abducted Helen as analogous to these empty mobilising words. When the Greeks were tempted to return home, Homer evokes the sacrifices of the Greeks’ dead compatriots, as if to suggest that the war cannot be stopped because the dead did not wish it. Stabbing at Poincaré, who in 1917 used the same argument, she recounts that reasonable warriors on each side propose reasonable conditions for ending the Trojan War, but each time someone burst forth with an emotional tirade, clamouring for victory, war trophies, courage, heroes and

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<sup>474</sup> ‘Il est clair qu’il n’y a nulle part ni dictature absolue ni démocratie absolue, mais que l’organisme social est toujours et partout un composé de démocratie et de dictature, avec des degrés différents; il est clair aussi que le degré de la démocratie se définit par les rapports qui lient les différents rouages de la machine sociale, et dépend des conditions qui déterminent le fonctionnement de cette machine; c’est donc sur ces rapports et sur ces conditions qu’il faut essayer d’agir’. Simone Weil, ‘Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 56.

<sup>475</sup> ‘Chacun des deux a perdu son idéal sans s’en apercevoir, en lui substituant une entité vide; pour chacun des deux, la victoire de ce qu’il nomme encore son idée ne peut plus se définir que par l’extermination de l’adversaire; et chacun des deux, si on lui parle de paix, répondra avec mépris par l’argument-massue, l’argument de Minerve dans Homère, l’argument de Poincaré en 1917: Les morts ne le veulent pas’. Simone Weil, ‘Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 57.

honour. ‘To push humankind to the most absurd catastrophes’, writes Weil, ‘neither gods nor secret conspiracies are needed. Human nature suffices’.<sup>476</sup> For Weil, Homer’s tale highlights humankind’s inability to deal rationally with force. She inveighs against the inability to apply elementary methods of reasonable thought to crucial social dilemmas. Though, she writes:

our science is a storehouse of the most refined intellectual mechanisms to solve the most complex problems, [modern civilisation] is almost incapable of applying the elementary methods of reasonable thought. In all fields we seem to have lost the notions of limit, measure, degree, proportion, relationship, ratio, condition, necessary link, connection between means and ends.<sup>477</sup>

Without the gauge of specified attainable goals, people lose sight of their own best interest. Even those in power do not imagine the wheel of fate turning against them, no matter how far they overextend their reach. Weil insists that for present-day problems one could not blame gods or international capitalist trusts or any other scapegoat: the fault rests with human nature.

To clarify notions, discredit words congenitally empty, define the use of others through precise analysis, is, as strange as it might appear, a labour that could save innumerable human lives. (But) our era seems to be inept at this task.<sup>478</sup>

Any decision made for or against war requires reliance on explicit methods of evaluating the potential impacts of war and all its alternatives. Although dictatorship and democracy might appear to be opposites in the extent of order and freedom, they

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<sup>476</sup> ‘Mais pour acculer les hommes aux catastrophes les plus absurdes, il n’est besoin ni de dieux ni de conjurations secrètes. La nature humaine suffit’. Simone Weil, ‘Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 51.

<sup>477</sup> ‘Notre science contient comme dans un magasin les mécanismes intellectuels les plus raffinés pour résoudre les problèmes les plus complexes, mais nous sommes presque incapables d’appliquer les méthodes élémentaires de la pensée raisonnable. En tout domaine nous semblons avoir perdu les notions de limite, de mesure, de degré, de proportion, de relation, de rapport, de condition, de liaison nécessaire, de connexion entre moyens and résultants’. Simone Weil, ‘Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 51-52.

<sup>478</sup> ‘Éclaircir les notions, discrediter les mots congénitalement vides, définir l’usage des autres par des analyses précises, c’est là, si étrange que cela puisse paraître, un travail qui pourrait préserver des existences humaines. Ce travail, notre époque y semble à peu près inapte’. Simone Weil, ‘Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 51.

imply that the two terms have significance only in relation to a social structure. Nations that are democratic have elements of tight control over behaviour, even though they enjoy a high degree of liberty, and dictatorships carry a heavy burden of historic baggage that affects the amount of control a despot could exploit. While an adversary needs to consider how a dictatorship might be altered without resorting to war, citizens of a democracy need to realise that war mobilisation entails severe restriction of freedoms. People could find themselves living in an increasingly totalitarian state even as they fight to defend their freedom against outsiders. As a temporary sacrifice, such a situation might be accepted with enough goodwill, but the vital danger is that despotic conditions become permanent. In Weil's choice of arguments, one reads alarm for her countrymen when they face the likelihood of defending their homeland by force. She wants them to evaluate carefully all that they stand to lose.

Fresh from her activism against oppressive internal working conditions, Weil argues that basic principles of class struggle apply to conflicts in general, including those between nations. Since there is always social tension in relationships between groups within a society as well as between societies, there is a constant level of distrust between those holding power and those with little or none. She knew that a balance between those who command and those who obeyed could never be stable, nor should it be. By the nature of things, each side grapples continually to retain or achieve more power. Those on top of the ladder strive to maintain the *status quo*. Those on the lowest rungs fight to keep their basic rights as human beings. This contest is endless, but it is not war. Society's delicate balance of powers needs to be constantly realigned, and methods need to be found to re-order ever-shifting relationships of stronger and weaker groups without resorting to violence. A parallel should exist in international relations between stronger and weaker nations. Nations endure an ever-present

instability involving perceived power and prestige, just as workers must unflinchingly insist on their dignity as contributing members of society.

Weil recognises that force succeeds force in a spiral without end unless people come to their senses. In her observation, all modern nations seek to avoid the loss of prestige by improving their ability to wage war. This competition sets in motion the ludicrous cycle of going to war to conserve and increase the means to wage war: that is, the manpower, resources, and armaments. France had unscrupulously risked war over Morocco in 1911, not for necessities, but their ability to keep the French economy viable due to Morocco's raw materials, jobs, and human labour, who were exploited in both world wars.

What a country calls vital economic interest is not what enables its citizens to live, it is what allows it to make war; oil is much more likely to provoke international conflicts than wheat. Thus, when war is waged, it is to preserve or to increase the means of making it. The whole of international politics revolves around this vicious circle. What is called national prestige consists in acting in such a way as always to give the impression to the other countries that eventually one is sure of defeating them, in order to demoralise them. What is called national security is a chimerical state of affairs in which the possibility of war can be preserved by depriving all other countries. All in all, a self-respecting nation is ready for anything, including war, rather than forsake the eventual war.<sup>479</sup>

National leaders subscribe to the hallucinatory goal of having the means to wage war, even though the expensive arms race belittled human life. Weil suggests that carefully considering the word *nation* would uncover 'the millions of cadavers, the orphans, the mutilated [as well as] despair and tears'<sup>480</sup> and that the use of the word should be

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<sup>479</sup> 'Ce qu'un pays appelle intérêt économique vital, ce n'est pas ce qui permet à ses citoyens de vivre, c'est ce qui lui permet de faire la guerre; le pétrole est bien plus propre à susciter les conflits internationaux que le blé. Ainsi, quand on fait la guerre, c'est pour conserver ou pour accroître les moyens de la faire. Toute la politique internationale roule autour de ce cercle vicieux. Ce qu'on nomme prestige national consiste à agir de manière à toujours donner l'impression aux autres pays qu'éventuellement on est sûr de les vaincre, afin de les démoraliser. Ce qu'on nomme sécurité nationale, c'est un état de choses chimérique où l'on conserverait la possibilité de faire la guerre en privant tous les autres pays. Somme toute, une nation qui se respecte est prête à tout, y compris la guerre, plutôt que de renoncer à faire éventuellement la guerre'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 54.

<sup>480</sup> 'C'est la notion même de nation qu'il faudrait supprimer. Ou plutôt c'est l'usage de ce mot: car le mot national et les expressions dont il fait partie sont vides de toute signification, ils n'ont pour contenu que les millions de cadavres, les orphelins, les mutilés, le désespoir, les larmes'. Simone Weil, 'Ne

challenged. She had no illusion that either unilateral disarmament or general disarmament is even conceivable, but she did want people to deal honestly with an essential contradiction in social relationships, in that they

rest on a parity of forces, a balance of pressures analogous to that of fluids. Different countries' prestige cannot be equated; prestige has no limits; all pretensions of prestige detract from the prestige and dignity of others. Consequently, all prestige is inseparable from power.<sup>481</sup>

Absurdly striving to maintain a nation's prestige could lead to its destruction if candid rationality is not brought to bear on the facts of the situation. The Trojan War serves as Weil's framework to reflect contemporary social, political and economic struggles, and their relation to questions of war and violence, as well as the use of inflammatory political language that pushes citizens toward war. Therefore, to minimise their exposure to war, people need to discern between the real conditions of their lives, which involves the struggle for dignity, and their elusive dreams of prestigious power over others. At this juncture pacifist conciliation still made more obvious sense to Weil rather than meeting force with force. In the final section of her essay, she tries to establish the relationship of these empty abstractions with real life. Clearly every abstraction relates to a social group aiming at power. At the centre of power is the illusion of prestige, without which power would become even less stable than it is. Priam and Hector could not have returned Helen to the Greeks without giving the impression of weakness, which would have invited attack from the Greeks or even their own subjects.<sup>482</sup> The result is that force 'seems to be an impasse from which

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recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 54.

<sup>481</sup> 'La contradiction essentielle à la société humaine, c'est que toute situation sociale repose sur un équilibre de forces, un équilibre de pressions analogue à l'équilibre des fluides; mais les prestiges, eux, ne s'équilibrent pas, le prestige ne comporte pas de limites, toute satisfaction de prestige est une atteinte au prestige ou à la dignité d'autrui. Or le prestige est inséparable du pouvoir'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 65.

<sup>482</sup> 'Si Priam et Hector avaient rendu Hélène aux Grecs, ils auraient risqué de leur inspirer d'autant plus le désir de saccager une ville apparemment si mal préparée à se défendre; ils auraient risqué aussi un soulèvement général à Troie; non pas parce que la restitution d'Hélène aurait indigné les Troyens, mais

humanity can only escape by some miracle'.<sup>483</sup> The real problems of contemporary politics are obscured by a swarm of vacuous entities or abstractions and 'to sweep away these entities from every department of political and social life is an urgently necessary measure of public hygiene'.<sup>484</sup> Above all, it was and still is necessary to seek international peace without opposing the legitimate claims of the underprivileged: 'What is required is discrimination between the imaginary and the real, so as to diminish the risks of war, without interfering with the struggle between forces which, according to Heraclitus, is the condition of life itself'.<sup>485</sup> Weil's conclusion is in keeping with the pacifist, internationalist sentiment at the time.

By the time her essay is published, Weil is in Switzerland en route for Italy, and while it did little to improve her health, the journey marks the beginning of the metaphysical development in her thinking. Returning to a France grappling with its transition to a second-rank power, who had always believed itself both the terror and the darling of the world, the Popular Front government fell. Although Blum continued to be Vice-President, in Weil's view the Popular Front, although continuing in name, was dead. Weil delivers her post-mortem *Méditations sur un cadavre*.<sup>486</sup> Insisting on the paramount role of imagination in politics, stating that 'imagination is always the

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parce qu'elle leur aurait donné à penser que les hommes auxquels ils obéissaient n'étaient pas tellement puissants'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 64.

<sup>483</sup> 'Il semble qu'il y ait là une impasse dont l'humanité ne puisse sortir que par miracle. Mais la vie humaine est faite de miracles'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 65.

<sup>484</sup> 'La chasse aux entités dans tous les domaines de la vie politique et sociale est une œuvre urgente de salubrité publique'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 65-66.

<sup>485</sup> 'Il ne s'agit pas d'immobiliser artificiellement des rapports de force essentiellement variables, et que ceux qui souffrent chercheront toujours à faire varier; il s'agit de discriminer l'imaginaire et le réel pour diminuer les risques de guerre sans renoncer à la lutte, dont Héraclite disait qu'elle est la condition de la vie'. Simone Weil, 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 66.

<sup>486</sup> *Reflections on a corpse*.

fabric of social life and the dynamic of history’,<sup>487</sup> she criticises Blum for not building on the reforming sentiment unleashed by the Popular Front’s victory a year earlier. Intelligent and sincere though she thought he was, he had not managed to appreciate that ‘the material of the political art is the double perspective, ever shifting between the real conditions of social equilibrium and the movements of collective imagination’.<sup>488</sup> Machiavelli is a better teacher here than Marx, and writing in a variant for *Méditations*, Weil states that anyone acceding to power should take harsh measures immediately since

the fundamental principle of power and political action is that the appearance of weakness should never be presented. Force is not only feared, but at the same time always a little loved, even by those who violently bend under it; weakness not only is not feared, but always inspires a little contempt and repulsion even to those that it favors. There is no more bitter truth, and that is why it is generally unrecognised. [...] [i]t is generally believed that men are determined according to reasoning either on justice, or on their interest; in reality the empire of force shapes sovereignly feelings and thoughts.<sup>489</sup>

In *Méditations sur un cadavre* we read Weil’s apathetic strain towards the political system, much like the end of *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale* that questions syndicalism’s ability to effect change. These considerations are equally valid for economics, though. Contrary to popular opinion, economies seldom collapse. Yet, unsound economic conditions undermine the prestige of power so

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<sup>487</sup> ‘L’imagination est toujours le tissu de la vie sociale et le moteur de l’histoire’. Simone Weil, ‘Méditations sur un cadavre’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 74.

<sup>488</sup> ‘La matière propre de l’art politique, c’est la double perspective, toujours instable, des conditions réelles d’équilibre social et des mouvements d’imagination collective’. Simone Weil, ‘Méditations sur un cadavre’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 76.

<sup>489</sup> ‘Le principe fondamental du pouvoir et de toute action politique, c’est qu’il ne faut jamais présenter l’apparence de la faiblesse. La force se fait non seulement craindre, mais en même temps toujours un peu aimer, même par ceux qu’elle fait violemment plier sous elle; la faiblesse non seulement n’est pas redoutée, mais inspire toujours un peu de mépris et de répulsion même à ceux qu’elle favorise. Il n’y a pas de vérité plus amère, et c’est pourquoi elle est généralement méconnue. Sylla, après son abdication, a vécu en parfait sécurité dans cette Rome où il avait fait couler tant de sang; les Gracques ont péri lâchement abandonnés par cette multitude à qui ils avaient voué leur vie on croit généralement que les hommes se déterminent d’après des raisonnements soit sur la justice, soit sur leur intérêt; en réalité l’empire de la force façonne souverainement sentiments et pensées’. Simone Weil, ‘Méditations sur un cadavre’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 290.



important for securing popular obedience. This bitter truth had been neglected by Blum, who succumbed to the common failings of social democracy: excellent intentions but lacking the touch of cynicism essential for perspicacity. Weil recounts this failing:

For there is a political art. The dictators know this; nothing more refined than the manner in which Mussolini governed, or even Hitler, or even Stalin. Democrats are unaware of this, at least in France. [...] Our left-wing men, and particularly our Socialists, govern as if the choice of the moment, the order of succession in the measures taken, the manner of presenting the measures, and so many other similar things did not matter in politics.<sup>490</sup>

In March 1938, German troops entered Vienna; the Anschluss with Austria is the result. Weil immediately joins other anti-Fascist intellectuals in signing a petition published by *Feuilles libres de la quinzaine* that declares ‘however distasteful it may seem, Chamberlain’s policy, inasmuch as it endeavours to put a stop to the deadly armaments race, is actually the only one that by means of effective negotiation makes an attempt to bring about the pacification of Europe’.<sup>491</sup> Weil’s recourse to the word *only* is an ideological limitation on the subject. There are several variations of choice between doing nothing and declaring war. Already stating that Germany is a fascist state, in her syndicalist years Weil expresses concern with the oppression faced by the German factory workers. The declaration that Weil signs calls upon

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<sup>490</sup> ‘Car il y a un art politique. Les dictateurs le savent; rien de plus raffiné que la manière dont gouverne Mussolini, ou même Hitler, ou même Staline. Les démocrates l’ignorent, du moins en France, car il se peut que par exemple Roosevelt ne l’ignore pas. Nos hommes de gauche, et particulièrement nos socialistes, gouvernent comme si le choix du moment, l’ordre de succession dans les mesures prises, la manière de présenter les mesures, et tant d’autres choses analogues n’importaient pas en politique’. Simone Weil, ‘Méditations sur un cadavre’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 288-289.

<sup>491</sup> ‘Il faut le dire, si déplaisant que cela paraisse: la politique de M. Chamberlain — pour autant qu’elle s’efforcera d’aboutir à un arrêt de la mortelle course aux armements — est actuellement la seule qui, par une négociation effective, tente enfin une pacification de l’Europe’. Simone Weil, ‘Pour une négociation immédiate’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 79.

the French government to join in this action resolutely, and that once a first international détente is achieved, it guides the negotiation, in accordance with the popular will, towards a just settlement of European and colonial conflicts, condition and starting point of a progressive and controlled disarmament.<sup>492</sup>

She is, however, decrying the French Government of 1936 at the same time, who were

brief among all those whose good intentions pave the hell [sic]. People of this character, when they meddle in action, are often treated as pure theorists; but they sin on the contrary by insufficient theory. They have neglected to meditate on the matter and the instruments proper to their art.<sup>493</sup>

Weil is willing to concede a German hegemony in Europe, if it avoids war. To deter the enemy, she suggests in *Réflexions sur la conférence de Bouché*<sup>494</sup> that the political and economic decentralisation that is proposed as a defence against air attack could be carried further:

A certain form of resistance, which would be more guerrilla than warlike [...] not to form fronts, not to lay siege to cities; to harass the enemy, to hinder his communications, to attack him always where he does not expect it, to demoralise him, and stimulate resistance by a series of tiny but victorious actions.<sup>495</sup>

Such a form of national defence, centred on the people and not on the state, could revive the true spirit of the nation. Decidedly changing tack from her pacifist position in view of warfare, yet not advocating for physical force, Weil underlines the problem

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<sup>492</sup> ‘Nous réclamons du gouvernement français qu’il se joigne résolument à cette action, et qu’une fois réalisée ainsi une première détente internationale, il oriente la négociation, conformément à la volonté populaire, vers un juste règlement d’ensemble des conflits européens et coloniaux, condition et point de départ d’un désarmement progressif et contrôlé’. Simone Weil, ‘Pour une négociation immédiate’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 79.

<sup>493</sup> ‘On a porté, on portera sur l’équipe gouvernementale de juin 1936 bien des jugements injustes par trop d’hostilité ou de faveur; peut-être l’appréciation la plus juste consisterait-elle à les ranger parmi ces architectes qui ne savent faire que des dessins fort agréables sur le papier, mais non conformes aux lois des matériaux de construction; ou parmi ces poètes qui ne savent écrire que des projets de poèmes rédigés en prose; ou parmi ces auteurs dramatiques dont les œuvres font de l’effet sous forme de livres, mais ne passent jamais la rampe; bref parmi tous ceux dont les bonnes intentions pavent l’enfer [sic]. Les gens de ce caractère, quand ils se mêlent d’agir, sont souvent traités de purs théoriciens; mais ils pêchent au contraire par insuffisance de théorie. Ils ont négligé de méditer sur la matière et les instruments propres à leur art’. Simone Weil, ‘Méditations sur un cadavre’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 289.

<sup>494</sup> *Reflections on Bouché’s lecture*.

<sup>495</sup> ‘Une certaine décentralisation étant supposée, la technique moderne rend, il me semble, possible, notamment par la rapidité des communications, une certaine forme de résistance qui tiendrait plus de la guérilla que de la guerre. Ne pas constituer de fronts, ne pas assiéger de villes; harceler l’ennemi, entraver ses communications, l’attaquer toujours là où il ne s’y attend pas, le démoraliser et stimuler la résistance par une série d’actions infimes, mais victorieuses’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions sur la conférence de Bouché’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 88.

in her thought. Outlining the decentralisation of political and social life along with the resistance, she states ‘decentralisation of a possible armed resistance, which one should always consider that in the natural course of things it must not have to happen’.<sup>496</sup> It is often the case that elements of thought and theories are not scrutinised *in the natural course of things*. Few could have conceived the devastation that would be wreaked on Europe. For all Weil’s understanding of Greek and Roman mythology and war and the Russian and French Revolutions and their consequences, in effect, few were willing to countenance that Germany might again attempt to expand its territories. When Weil finally abandons her pacifist approach, it is in recognition of a force that she had not yet contemplated.

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<sup>496</sup> ‘Décentralisation de la vie politique, économique et sociale en France, dispersion des agglomérations, union de la vie urbaine et de la vie rurale; mais aussi décentralisation d’une résistance armée éventuelle, dont on devra toujours considérer que dans le cours naturel des choses elle ne doit pas avoir à se produire’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions sur la conférence de Bouché’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 88.

## 4.6 The Tipping Point of Pacifism

At this stage, Weil's pacifism still held a central place in her thinking. I believe that she is certain that rationality can thwart the fast-approaching war. She floats her last proposal for conciliation, which causes deep remorse later. After annexing Austria to Germany, Hitler looked to Czechoslovakia for his next capture. In her 1938 article, *L'Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie?*<sup>497</sup> Weil argues for ceding Czechoslovakia to Germany. Whilst acknowledging that rights figure in every international issue, she is willing to accept a German hegemony in Europe. Czechoslovakian submission to Hitler is an obvious injustice, but so is the submission of the Sudeten Germans to Czechoslovakia:

That simply proves that the right of peoples to order their own lives meets an obstacle in the nature of things, by the fact that the three maps of Europe, the physical, economic, and ethnographic, do not coincide.<sup>498</sup>

Weil proposes that Hitler should be given rights over Sudetenland. Finally sensing that conflagration would be so terrible, Weil concedes that certain injustices could preserve many individuals and cultures from excessive harm. I can understand Weil's reasoning, but even without assessing her decision in hindsight, I believe this is the most damning indictment of Weil. It is debatable, if not unknowable, whether aggressive acts or war or taking a life is necessarily wrong. But she is willing to concede the definite loss of some people's short-term rights for the profit of a possible longer-term peace. *Prime facie* Weil is contradicting herself. Why are the rights of some people less important? She wants to believe that her fellow human beings,

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<sup>497</sup> *Europe at war for Czechoslovakia?*

<sup>498</sup> 'Sans doute; mais le *statu quo*, d'autre part, est une injustice infligée aux Sudètes; cela prouve simplement que le droit des peuples à disposer d'eux-mêmes rencontre un obstacle dans la nature des choses, du fait que les trois cartes physique, économique et ethnographique de l'Europe ne coïncident pas'. Simone Weil, 'L'Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie?', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 82.

envisioning the inevitable dire consequences of violence, would go to extremes to avoid war. I argue that she inverts the foundations of her earlier thinking on oppression. It is one thing to suggest that oppression can only be mitigated, but she accepts that some should suffer oppression worse than others. She railed against France's hypocrisy and inconsistency, and failure to support the Rights of Man doctrine, yet propositioned the concession of part of Czechoslovakia and its peoples.

Reasoning that war and ways to circumvent it need to be honestly calculated, she argues that military aggression is not only the least desirable response but also the costliest. Weil finally wades into the realm of economics. Instead of counting coin, she counts coffins. Her formula for causing the least possible harm also sanctions grave injustices. Given that the stakes were extremely high, she held all aspects of the dilemma up to the harsh light of logic, asking, should France send her sons to their death for an incoherent principle or instead accept a humiliating erosion of her prestige? I do not disagree with this sentiment. I do, however, disagree that some (Czechoslovakian) people (and their rights) should be sacrificed so this position can be held.

The Czechoslovakian question can be considered from four points of view. From the point of view of rights, the Sudeten Germans had a certain right to self-determination. If it was exercised and they became a part of Germany then, because the geographic, economic and ethnographic maps of Europe did not coincide, the probable result would be that Czechoslovakia would become a German satellite. But it might still be able to preserve its culture, its language, and its national characteristics. Remarkably, because the National Socialist ideology 'is purely racist; it is only

universal if it is anti-communist and anti-Semitic',<sup>499</sup> and if a German hegemony in Europe simply required France to take measures against its communists and Jews, the price would not be considered too costly. The Czechoslovakians, Weil states,

can ban the Communist Party and exclude Jews from somewhat less important functions without losing anything from their national life. In short, injustice for injustice, since there must be one in every way, let us choose the one that is least likely to bring a war.<sup>500</sup>

She self-deceptively assumes that the safeguard of their culture, language, and ethnic characteristics could be assured. Weil, however, is not clear whether it is the Czechoslovakian or Jewish culture that could be safeguarded. This hypothetical concession, entirely inconsistent with her method of first evaluating objectively all possible alternatives and then imagining their consequences, became a source of deep dismay for her when Hitler's full aggressive intentions became evident.

Secondly, the balance of power would then shift towards Germany. But 'if one country must dominate the centre of Europe, it is in the nature of things that it will be Germany'.<sup>501</sup> Weil questions, 'why is the possibility of German hegemony worse than French hegemony?'.<sup>502</sup> Without answering, instead asserting that in the long run hegemony always weakens the country that achieve it, she states:

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<sup>499</sup> 'L'idéologie national-socialiste est purement raciste; elle n'a d'universel que l'anticommunisme et l'antisémitisme'. Simone Weil, 'L'Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie?', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 82.

<sup>500</sup> 'Les Tchèques peuvent interdire le parti communiste et exclure les Juifs des fonctions quelque peu importantes, sans perdre quoi que ce soit de leur vie nationale. Bref, injustice pour injustice, puisqu'il doit y en avoir une de toutes manières, choisissons celle qui risque le moins d'amener une guerre'. Simone Weil, 'L'Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie?', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 82-83.

<sup>501</sup> 'S'il doit y avoir une hégémonie au centre de l'Europe, il est dans la nature des choses que ce soit une hégémonie allemande. La force est du côté de l'Allemagne'. Simone Weil, 'L'Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie?', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 83.

<sup>502</sup> 'Au reste, pourquoi une hégémonie allemande est-elle une éventualité pire qu'une hégémonie française?'. Simone Weil, 'L'Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie?', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 83.

Germany is ‘totalitarian’, it is true. But political regimes are unstable; in thirty years, France and Germany, who can say which will be a dictatorship, which a democracy? Right now, a German hegemony would be suffocating. But could it be more, I’m not saying than a war, but than the present peace, with the maddening nervous tension, the siege mentality, and the material and moral impoverishment to which we are increasingly subjected?<sup>503</sup>

This line of thinking bears little resemblance to Weil’s syndicalism. There is no consideration for the oppressed proletariat. She states that because ‘both the acquisition of hegemony and the weakening that follows from it have always, if I am not mistaken, been brought about by wars. If this time the same process could take place without war – would not that be real progress?’<sup>504</sup> Stipulating that France or Europe should conform to a totalitarian regime in the hope that hegemonies historically weaken at some point, Weil fails to consider events in Russia and more recently in Germany.

Thirdly, that treaty obligations are not considered as overriding in international relations as ‘even a formal promise does not constitute, in international matters, sufficient grounds for action’.<sup>505</sup> There are shades of WWI in this consideration. It is, however, suffice to suggest that honouring commitments on an international stage merit serious consideration. Fourthly and most importantly, the essential question is whether the chances for peace would be improved if France and Britain guaranteed the territorial integrity of Czechoslovakia. Weil saw only two choices:

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<sup>503</sup> ‘L’Allemagne est « totalitaire », il est vrai. Mais les régimes politiques sont instables; dans trente ans, de la France et de l’Allemagne, qui peut dire laquelle sera une dictature, laquelle une démocratie? En ce moment, une hégémonie allemande serait étouffante. Mais pourrait-elle l’être plus, je ne dis même pas qu’une guerre, mais que la paix, avec la tension nerveuse, affolante, l’esprit d’état de siège, l’appauvrissement matériel et moral que nous y subissons de plus en plus?’. Simone Weil, ‘L’Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie?’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 83-84.

<sup>504</sup> ‘Seulement, jusqu’ici, l’acquisition de l’hégémonie, puis l’affaiblissement qui en résulte se sont toujours accomplis, sauf erreur, au moyen de guerres. Si le même processus pouvait, cette fois, avoir lieu sans guerre, ne serait-ce pas le vrai progrès?’. Simone Weil, ‘L’Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie?’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 84.

<sup>505</sup> ‘Mais un engagement même formel ne constitue pourtant pas, en matière internationale, une raison suffisante d’agir’. Simone Weil, ‘L’Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie?’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 84.

either France or England declare that they will go to war to maintain Czechoslovakia's integrity, or they openly agree to a transformation of the Czechoslovakian state that would satisfy the main German aims. Apart from these two choices, there can only be terrible humiliations, or war, or probably both. It is obvious to me that the second choice is infinitely preferable.<sup>506</sup>

Although she countenances a government oppressing Jews and communists, she does not want a French government making France an armed camp on perpetual alert. The hope of containing Germany by exerting such a counterforce would be a political and psychological disaster, and the end of freedom and democracy. I believe that Weil is undertaking a considerable negotiation with her pacifist position so that it might stay intact. I argue that it directly contradicts her position as defender of the oppressed. To further weaken her stance, she states:

It is true that the satisfaction of Germany's demands in Czechoslovakia would bring down all Central Europe under its influence. This leads us to another point of view, that of the relationship of the forces. It is no longer a question of the law.<sup>507</sup>

Although Weil came to bitterly regret her attitude, it certainly seems to follow both from her previous views and from the pacifist attitudes of a large part of the non-Communist Left. From her days at *Henri-IV* and the *École Normale* she, in common with many of her fellow pupils, abhors flag-waving patriotism. Like most intellectuals of her generation, she believes that resistance to Fascism and resistance to war went hand in hand and views war in the larger context of the sufferings and oppression that it would entail for the mass of the people. How far Weil's positions shifts captures the

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<sup>506</sup> 'Ou la France et l'Angleterre se déclarent décidées à la guerre pour en maintenir l'intégrité, ou elles acceptent publiquement une transformation de l'Etat tchécoslovaque propre à satisfaire les principales visées allemandes. En dehors de ces deux partis, il ne peut y avoir que des humiliations terribles, ou la guerre, ou probablement les deux. Que le second soit infiniment préférable, c'est ce qui est à mes yeux évident'. Simone Weil, 'L'Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie?', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 86.

<sup>507</sup> 'Il est vrai que la satisfaction des revendications de l'Allemagne en Tchécoslovaquie ferait tomber toute l'Europe centrale sous son influence. Ceci nous amène à un autre point de vue, celui du rapport des forces. Il n'est plus question de droit'. Simone Weil, 'L'Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie?', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 83.



tone of Europe pre-WWII. Everyone is grappling to understand how, again. Afterwards everyone questions, why?

The reality of Hitler's intentions is another matter, however. Even though Weil states that Hitler's racist ideology required periodic and brutal affirmations of power, she accepts his claims of the contested German territory. If Hitler wants to regain the Sudetenland, which the Versailles Treaty took from the German nation, Weil accepts that he had some basis for that. If nations honestly supported Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, particularly a people's right to self-determination, the fact that most German speakers in Sudetenland never had the opportunity to decide their fate posed a problem of consistency. This same indifference to a people's right to choose occurred in 1919, when the fate of the Austrian German-speaking population was decided without their consent. If re-altering Germany's frontiers might satisfy Hitler, she reasons, that since the victors at Versailles decided without a referendum to give part of Germany to Czechoslovakia, then returning the territory to Germany might extend the peace. Weil understood the painful reality that the grand principle of European stability is constructed on war. If hegemony in Central Europe fell to Germany, the perceived balance of power between nations would be seriously altered. France wanted to keep its hegemony in Europe, but could not, in good conscience, accept only its own hegemony without considering that of others. There is, however, a downside to being the dominating power, for hegemony creates its own strain within a nation. It is arguable that maintaining a position of power among countries eventually wears out a nation from the inside. Weil argues that Germany's sustainability in a position of domination might not be durable. This experiment, not yet purposefully tried, might be far less costly than war. However, I argue that *L'Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie* is the tipping point of Weil's pacifist and

conciliatory beliefs. Her concession that the Czechoslovakian government should marginalise Jews and communists, so hated by the National Socialist regime, to maintain the peace is complex. Doering states that what ‘led her to this point was a willingness to weigh all options, not indifference to the well-being of others’.<sup>508</sup> Whilst Weil later condemns the limitations of her wholehearted commitment to peace, what she considers at the time is a compensatory sacrifice to avoid the horrors of war. This is contradictory because she still accepts this compromise and maintains a pacifist position.

One final time before the outbreak of war, Weil comments on the political situation in *Réflexions en vue d’un bilan*.<sup>509</sup> In March, Hitler’s troops occupy Prague; in April, Mussolini invades Albania, and Britain introduces conscription; in May, Germany and Italy conclude a military alliance. For, while ‘both war and the domination of civilian life by the military are evils as great as enslavement by foreigners’,<sup>510</sup> it is equally true that ‘an enslaved country may be subjected to a military regime and compelled to participate in its conqueror’s wars’.<sup>511</sup> In an era of unlimited or total war, any peace is likely to be as catastrophic as the war which preceded it. Since security could only be achieved by universal domination, ‘either some other country will acquire ‘universal domination’ — which will be no less of an evil in its hands — or, more probably, since there seems to be no country of sufficient calibre

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<sup>508</sup> E. Jane Doering, *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. 38.

<sup>509</sup> *Reflections in view of an assessment*.

<sup>510</sup> ‘Certains sont prêts à subir même la perte de l’existence nationale plutôt que d’avoir recours soit à la guerre, soit à la militarisation complète du pays; et leur opinion peut être défendue ou condamnée par des arguments également sans réplique, car s’ils montrent facilement que la militarisation de la vie civile et la guerre comportent des maux égaux à ceux de l’asservissement à l’étranger, on peut alléguer tout aussi facilement qu’un pays asservi peut être soumis à un régime militaire et contraint de participer aux guerres de ses maîtres’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions en vue d’un bilan’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 100.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*

for the role, the total ruin of Europe, which will thereafter no doubt become, in its turn, a colonial territory'.<sup>512</sup> Negotiation simply became a phase of the war itself, designed above all to preserve prestige, which is the essence of power. For Weil, the key to the situation did not lie in speculating about the psychology of Hitler. He was no maniac obsessed with delusions of grandeur:

The appetite for power, even for universal power, is only insane when there is no possibility of indulging it; a man who sees the possibility opening before him and does not try to grasp it, even at the risk of destroying himself and his country, is either a saint or a mediocrity.<sup>513</sup>

Nevertheless, in the long term, totalitarian regimes such as Hitler's are subject to fundamental weaknesses. The examples of imperial Rome and the Soviet Union show that the constant purging of the top echelons of society undermine the continuous and reliable team-work demanded by action on a grand scale. Also, when the only incentives remaining are fear or ambition for power, weaknesses in the technical field soon become apparent. Most important is the strain on the human material.

The real stumbling-block of totalitarian regimes is not the spiritual need of men for freedom of thought; it is men's inability to stand the physical and nervous strain of a permanent state of excitement, except during a few years of their youth.<sup>514</sup>

Enthusiasm is a machine which wears out and, in the end, produces the combination of docility and rancour characteristic of slaves. Any sensible policy, therefore, should be to try to match the German system's phase of expansion. An intuitive tactic of

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<sup>512</sup> 'L'anéantissement d'un pareil pays implique, ou qu'un autre pays acquiert la domination universelle — qui ne serait pas meilleure entre ses mains — ou plus probablement, car aucun pays ne semble de taille à jouer un pareil rôle, la ruine complète de l'Europe, vouée sans doute dès lors à devenir à son tour un territoire colonial'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions en vue d'un bilan', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 102.

<sup>513</sup> 'L'appétit de domination, même universelle, n'est une folie que si les possibilités de domination sont absentes; celui qui voit des chemins vers la domination s'ouvrir devant lui ne s'abstient de s'y avancer, même s'il doit y jouer son existence et celle de son pays, que s'il est ou un saint ou un homme de petite envergure'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions en vue d'un bilan', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 106.

<sup>514</sup> 'Le véritable écueil du régime ne réside pas dans le besoin spirituel qu'éprouvent les hommes à penser d'une manière indépendante, mais dans leur impuissance physique et nerveuse à se maintenir dans un état durable d'enthousiasme, sinon pendant quelques années de jeunesse'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions en vue d'un bilan', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 111.

standing firm or giving way according to circumstance might yet circumvent the choice between enslavement and war. But Weil is now clear that her previous pacifism was no longer applicable.

Only ten years ago France had the power to behave with generosity in Europe; even three years ago she could still at least have behaved with moderation; today she is able to do neither because she is not strong enough.<sup>515</sup>

France's attitude could not remain purely defensive, since such a stance would have been bad for morale and unlikely to succeed. Only appeals for genuine liberty could galvanise the people of France and further afield. But for that, a new atmosphere was necessary.

It is not enough that France should be regarded as a country which enjoys the remains of a freedom acquired long ago. If she is still to count in the world — and if she does not intend to, she may as well perish — she must be seen by her own citizens and by all men as an ever-flowing source of liberty.<sup>516</sup>

Weil's conclusion does not go so far as to state that her former pacifist stance is mistaken, only that it was no longer applicable. I content that Weil's pacifism is now redundant because the position cannot be universally. Once a position can be defeated, in this case, pacifism is good but the use of force is sometimes necessary, then the position collapses on itself because of the person's own declarations. A person cannot declare to be a pacifist and advocate the use of violence: it is a contradiction of definitions. Her sentiment of application parallels the tone of disillusion that followed her anarcho-syndicalism activities in the early years of the decade. In *Réflexions* she bids farewell to many of the expectations that inspired her commitment to the workers'

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<sup>515</sup> 'Il y a dix ans encore elle pouvait agir en Europe d'une manière généreuse; il y a trois ans encore, elle pouvait au moins se montrer raisonnable elle ne peut plus ni l'un ni l'autre, parce qu'elle n'est plus assez forte'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions en vue d'un bilan', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 114.

<sup>516</sup> 'Il ne suffit pas que la France soit considérée comme un pays qui jouit des restes d'une liberté depuis longtemps acquise; si elle doit encore compter dans le monde — et si elle ne le doit plus, elle peut périr — il faut qu'elle apparaisse à ses propres citoyens et au monde comme une source perpétuellement jaillissante de liberté'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions en vue d'un bilan', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 116.

movement. Now she had to, regretfully, admit that her aims in international relations proved equally elusive. *Réflexions en vue d'un bilan*<sup>517</sup> also clarifies her understanding of pacifism and why she now rejected it. She believes that had France been able to carry out Aristide Briand's initiatives after the Great War, Hitler could not have come to power.

Virtue in itself is a timeless thing, but it has to be exercised in the course of time; and when, having the power to act wisely and justly in a given situation, one abstains from exercising virtue, one is often punished by the very ruin of that power.<sup>518</sup>

By holding up a mirror to France, Weil wants to shame the country into facing publicly its own moral failings and to persuade people that the rationale for this war could lead to endless wars. Hindsight allows us a clearer evaluation of the various options than were evident in 1938—39, though I do believe that some evidence of National Socialism's authoritative intent was observable. Weil's determination to look at all sides clearly and to confront candidly her own cherished homeland's abuses of power is an exemplar of probing reflection and some of its pitfalls. To her profound dismay, Weil discovers that she underestimated Hitler. Although her personal sense of guilt for promoting a pacifist position is unassuageable, she never denies her own responsibility for having encouraged conciliation. She spurns pacifism as no longer having validity for the current circumstances.

You do not need a tank or an airplane to kill a man. A kitchen knife is enough. If those who have had their fill of the Nazi executioners all rise up together, at the same time that the armed forces strike the decisive blow, deliverance will be swift.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>517</sup> Can also be translated as *Reflections in view of a balance sheet*.

<sup>518</sup> 'La vertu est en soi chose intemporelle, mais elle doit être exercée dans le cours du temps; et quand, ayant le pouvoir d'agir à l'égard d'une situation donnée d'une manière sage et juste, on s'abstient de l'exercer, on en est puni souvent par la perte même de ce pouvoir'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions en vue d'un bilan', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 114.

<sup>519</sup> 'Il n'y a pas besoin d'un tank ou d'un avion pour tuer un homme. Il suffit d'un couteau de cuisine. Quand tous ceux qui en ont assez des bourreaux nazis se lèveront ensemble, en même temps que les forces armées frapperont le coup décisif, la délivrance sera rapide'. Simone Weil, 'Fragment', in *Écrits historiques et politiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 315.

In recognising that force has a central place in the human condition, Weil accepts that sometimes men of goodwill must deploy force. Hitler's aggression causes her to alter her direction and to attend to the urgent need of making others aware of the inherent place that force, and its consorts, power and prestige, held in human aspirations. Nevertheless, war and force require explicit methods for evaluating ends and means. Her insistence on this need for evaluation and enlightenment is based on keen empirical observations of human behaviour and knowledge of history. A nation's constant need to display its invincibility could lead to endless war. At this point, Weil embarks on the quest for a new strategy to understand force's corrupting power. In her concern regarding the use of force, to keep it from spiralling out of control and demoralising everyone it touched, she devises her own variation on, not a just-war theory, but a just-force theory. While she accepts the use of force in very limited circumstances, she never again advocates complete accommodation when faced with an unconscionable deployment of force.

## Conclusion: Accepting Inherent Force

Weil now confronts the conclusion that is as complex as it is difficult to reconcile: that force is an inherent and inescapable part of the social fabric. A defining characteristic of force between living things is scarcity of resources as they attempt to mitigate and resist life's death and decay. Power is the race to attain prominence in securing a share of this scarcity and oppression is the consequence of losing that race. Weil's crucial observation is that oppression will always exist so long as we depend on each other, and she does not suggest that we will ever be truly independent. Recognising the tautological nature of existence defines Weil's philosophical opposition as it relates to Marxism. In a broad sweep, it insists that if some measures are taken, like redistribution of wealth or socialising private property, then a paradisaal state can be realised. Working towards a society without oppression (or alienation) is a contradiction in terms: for a large many people, the working entails oppression. Weil finally recognises that oppression cannot be eradicated as its bound to force.

Instead of insisting that Weil's position on force is solely because of the European war, it is more justifiable to suggest that her position could have been reached without the conflict. It is without merit to decipher what came first: the war or the development of her understanding of force. Yet, it is undeniable that the conflict informed the further development of force. I show in the opening section how force develops from an understanding of oppression, even though Weil's argument developed through working conditions, Marxism and then oppression. As Weil considers force as perennial only when confronted with the impending conflict, it is necessary to outline her understanding of force in *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*, where it declares at its outset: 'The true hero, the true subject, the centre of the *Iliad* is

force'.<sup>520</sup> Dietz states that '[i]mmediately, she draws our attention toward the same invisible, pervasive element that governs her analysis of oppression in [...] [*Réflexions*]'.<sup>521</sup> Instead of shifting perspective from *Réflexions*, Weil further develops her argument in *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*. In attempting to define force, Weil states that force is

that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him. Somebody was here, and the next minute there was nobody here at all.<sup>522</sup>

Winch translates this definition to mean that force as 'the power of the force which rules human life to turn anybody who is subjected to it "into a *thing*",<sup>523</sup> yet Weil does not clarify what X is in the above definition. There appears to be a materiality in the *thing*, though it is increasingly possible to understand this force in relation to its reification of human into non-human. Again, we are relying on its effects rather than its nature. It is only somewhat clarified when Weil underscores force's possessive aspect as

[t]he forces that men wield, the force that subdues men, in the face of which human flesh shrinks back. The human soul seems ever conditioned by its ties with force, swept away, blinded by the force it believes it can control, bowed under the constraint of the force it submits to.<sup>524</sup>

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<sup>520</sup> 'Le vrai héros, le vrai sujet, le centre de l'Iliade, c'est la force'. Simone Weil, 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 227.

<sup>521</sup> Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 86.

<sup>522</sup> 'La force, c'est ce qui fait de quiconque lui est soumis une chose. Quand elle s'exerce jusqu'au bout, elle fait de l'homme une chose au sens le plus littéral, car elle en fait un cadavre. Il y avait quelqu'un, et, un instant plus tard, il n'y a personne'. Simone Weil, 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 227. This is a translation echoed by Rachel Bepaloff in Bepaloff, Rachel, *Simone Weil: War and the Iliad* (New York: New York Book Review, 2005). It can also be translated as 'Force is that which makes a thing of whoever submits to it. Exercised to the extreme, it makes the human being a thing quite literally, that is, a dead body. Someone was there and, the next moment, no one'.

<sup>523</sup> Winch, *The Just Balance*, p. 145.

<sup>524</sup> 'La force qui est maniée par les hommes, la force qui soumet les hommes, la force devant quoi la chair des hommes se rétracte. L'âme humaine ne cesse pas d'y apparaître modifiée par ses rapports avec la force; entraînée, aveuglée par la force dont elle croit disposer, courbée sous la contrainte de la force qu'elle subit'. Simone Weil, 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 227.



The germination of this thought is evident in the *Réflexions*, when she comments upon ‘the race for power’<sup>525</sup> and writes, ‘it is the reflection of this frenzy that lends an epic grandeur to works such as *Comédie Humaine*, Shakespeare’s *Histories*, the *chansons de geste*, or *The Iliad*’.<sup>526</sup> In particular, however, she focuses on *The Iliad*, and notes that its primary theme is the ‘sway exercised by war’.<sup>527</sup> Thus, she concludes, ‘in this ancient and wonderful poem there already appears the essential evil besetting humanity, the substitution of means for ends’.<sup>528</sup> The substitution of means for ends, and the phenomenon of war taking on a life of its own, continues to guide Weil’s reflections in *L’Iliade ou le poème de la force*. She chooses France’s defeat and her own exile as the occasion to examine the universality of force more closely and *The Iliad* is the text that brings this political context most vividly to life. Consequently, within the body of *L’Iliade ou le poème de la force* we have a more detailed understanding of what Weil means by force, but is its essence that much clearer? Dietz states that ‘[w]e might characterise her understanding of this idea much as we did the ‘collectivity’—force is both some ‘thing’ and nothing, a sinister mesh of

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<sup>525</sup> ‘Le seul caractère propre à ce régime, c’est que les instruments de la production industrielle y sont en même temps les armes principales dans la course au pouvoir; mais toujours les procédés de la course au pouvoir, quels qu’ils soient, se soumettent les hommes par le même vertige et s’imposent à eux à titre de fins absolues’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 57.

<sup>526</sup> ‘C’est le reflet de ce vertige qui donne une grandeur épique à des œuvres comme la *Comédie humaine*, ou les *Histories* de Shakespeare, ou les *chansons de geste*, ou *l’Iliade*’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 57.

<sup>527</sup> ‘Le véritable sujet de *l’Iliade*, c’est l’emprise de la guerre sur les guerriers, et, par leur intermédiaire, sur tous les humains; nul ne sait pourquoi chacun se sacrifie, et sacrifie tous les siens à une guerre meurtrière et sans objet, et c’est pourquoi, tout au long du poème, c’est aux dieux qu’est attribuée l’influence mystérieuse qui fait échec aux pourparlers de paix, rallume sans cesse les hostilités, ramène les combattants qu’un éclair de raison pousse à abandonner la lutte’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 57-58.

<sup>528</sup> ‘Ainsi dans cet antique et merveilleux poème apparaît déjà le mal essentiel de l’humanité, la substitution des moyens aux fins’. Simone Weil, ‘Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L’expérience ouvrière et l’adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 58.

circumstances that overwhelms human agents, and an indiscernible power'.<sup>529</sup> This understanding of force is concomitant to my previous discussions, that and force is something (external) which acts upon a person, persons or things and that we witness the effects of force. Dietz confirms this by stating that Weil 'makes it both concrete and abstract, physical and spiritual, natural and social, visible and invisible'.<sup>530</sup>

If we directly translate 'est soumis'<sup>531</sup> in isolation, then we discover the definition hinges on subjection: a thing subjected to another thing. When investigating the subjection of moral phenomena to necessity, Rhees comments on Weil's use of language. He states, 'I can understand being subjected to such and such a pressure or being subjected to radiation of such a such a sort',<sup>532</sup> so how are we to understand the subjection of a thing to another thing that falls outside of the continuity of, for example, the natural sciences, where, for example, water is subject to turning to steam at one-hundred degrees Celsius. Yet, even this example has a myriad of problems like water heated in a vacuum distorts the continuity of its subjection. Again we are redirected to its effects rather than its essence, which reinforces Dietz's attempt to define: '[f]orce, it seems, is best understood by looking to its consequences—its ability to turn a human being into a thing— rather than to its origin, or to its cause, or to something like its internal nature'.<sup>533</sup> If we recall that Weil gave a different definition to force in *Réflexions*, stating, 'what needs to be understood above all is that it is not the manner in which use is made of some particular force, but its very nature, which determines whether it is oppressive or not',<sup>534</sup> it appears that the inarticulability is

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<sup>529</sup> Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>530</sup> Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 87.

<sup>531</sup> Is subjected.

<sup>532</sup> Rhees, *Discussion of Simone Weil*, p. 35.

<sup>533</sup> Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 87.

<sup>534</sup> 'La notion de force est loin d'être simple, et cependant elle est la première à élucider pour poser les problèmes sociaux. La force et l'oppression, cela fait deux; mais ce qu'il faut comprendre avant tout, c'est que ce n'est pas la manière dont on use d'une force quelconque, mais sa nature même qui

continued in *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*. It seems we cannot know force. We can only experience its effects. Therefore, we must contend that force is only understood by its effects.

Understanding force's effects is more approachable. Force turns humans into non-humans by causing them to cease to live. The second instance is more problematic, however. By this Weil means that, while force has 'the power to kill — to turn a living human being into a corpse; [it] also [...] has the power to rob a human being of what is distinctively human about him or her: ability to consent, or power to refuse'.<sup>535</sup> Running parallel to an understanding of force, we also have a further development, force can characterise a person's humanness. Weil may also add what it is to be a free human. In *Réflexions* we understand that labour and the workers' inherent ability to think, to engage, is at the centre of what it means to be human. The ability to consent and the power to refuse are now added. I contend that Weil understands force's greatest effect to be outside of war, in that it is the weight which is placed on a person's ability to think, thus negating liberty. She states: 'before long he understands that the weapon will not turn aside, and, though breathing still, he is no more than matter; still thinking, he can think no more'.<sup>536</sup> Moulakis argues that '[s]ince power is a relationship—it is always power over someone weaker—at its extreme limit, killing, it abolishes itself by abolishing one of the poles of the relationship'.<sup>537</sup> For Dietz, 'Weil presents force as a power that one individual or a

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détermine si elle est ou non oppressive'. Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution, Volume 2: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 53.

<sup>535</sup> Winch, *The Just Balance*, p. 146.

<sup>536</sup> 'Mais bientôt il a compris que l'arme ne se détournera pas, et, respirant encore, il n'est plus que matière, encore pensant ne peut plus rien penser'. Simone Weil, 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 229.

<sup>537</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 155.

group holds over another. But it is not just any sort of power; it is one that dehumanises'.<sup>538</sup> I argue that Dietz's force as a power is somewhat limited. It is not wrong to suggest that force is a power over individuals or groups, I argue that Weil is attempting to suggest that force exists irrespective of the ability of people to wield it in the form of power. Force is both pervasive, in that it is naturally occurring, and it is a tool or weapon or abstract pressure that can be exercised through power. In its most summary form, force kills. In a more subdued form, it strips a person of their human qualities. For Weil, 'in whatever aspect, its effect is the same: it changes the human being into stone'.<sup>539</sup> Instead of concentrating on the transformation of humans into things through killing, she is (more) concerned with this stone-like quality transformation, 'that of making a still living human being into a thing'.<sup>540</sup> Moulakis states that '[t]hose who suffer always live under the more or less disguised threat of death, since the power to kill another human being is enough to half-kill him, turn him into a thing'.<sup>541</sup> This is exemplified when Weil states that '[a] man disarmed and exposed, toward whom a weapon points, becomes a corpse before being touched'.<sup>542</sup> It can be understood that, aside from the crushing, indifference of nature and the physicality of war, the force of inhumane working conditions, like the inability to think as Weil understands it, delivers a similar non-fatal blow. But then the corollary for

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<sup>538</sup> Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 87.

<sup>539</sup> 'La force qui tue est une forme sommaire, grossière de la force. Combien plus variée en ses procédés, combien plus surprenante en ses effets, est l'autre force, celle qui ne tue pas; c'est-à-dire celle qui ne tue pas encore. Elle va tuer sûrement, ou elle va tuer peut-être, ou bien elle est seulement suspendue sur l'être qu'à tout instant elle peut tuer; de toutes façons elle change l'homme en pierre'. Simone Weil, 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 228.

<sup>540</sup> 'Du pouvoir de transformer un homme en chose en le faisant mourir procède un autre pouvoir, et bien autrement prodigieux, celui de faire une chose d'un homme qui reste vivant'. Simone Weil, 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 228-229.

<sup>541</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 155.

<sup>542</sup> 'Un homme désarmé et nu sur lequel se dirige une arme devient cadavre avant d'être touché'. Simone Weil, 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 229.

Weil, which Winch outlines, is that ‘[f]orce may damage the human capacities not merely of the one who is at the receiving end but also of the one who, for the present, wields it’.<sup>543</sup> I believe that Winch is arguing that force wielded diminishes human capacity, which in turn diminishes our capacity as humans. Here Winch wrenches force away from those solely subjected to include those who subjugate. Force has lost its possessive dominant quality as its pervasiveness taints even those who wield it, as echoed by Weil:

Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to his victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates. The truth is nobody really possesses it. The human race is not divided up, in the Iliad, into conquered persons, slaves, suppliants, on the one hand, and conquerors and chiefs on the other.<sup>544</sup>

Weil’s overall concern is, what is this thing that weighs upon man, which suffuses the world and holds all living creatures in its grip. For Moulakis

[i]t is worth noting that Weil, and in similar passages Alain as well, trapped in their physicalism, were not out to discover a criterion for differentiating between power and force. If killing radically turns the victim into an object—that is, a corpse—then every exercise of power is analogously a relationship that deals in material objects.<sup>545</sup>

However, while thinking in an abstracted form, Weil contemplates force from the perspective of the working conditions, of the proletariat, of the common soldier. Dietz states that Weil ‘introduces the metaphor of slavery in order to underscore the abject condition of the defeated’.<sup>546</sup> Maybe the term ‘defeated’ is a more understandable narrative, but it can be argued that a slave mentality is closer to Weil’s engagement

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<sup>543</sup> Winch, *The Just Balance*, p. 146.

<sup>544</sup> ‘Aussi impitoyablement la force écrase, aussi impitoyablement elle enivre quiconque la possède, ou croit la posséder. Personne ne la possède véritablement. Les hommes ne sont pas divisés, dans l’Iliade, en vaincus, en esclaves, en suppliants d’un côté, et en vainqueurs, en chefs, de l’autre; il ne s’y trouve pas un seul homme qui ne soit à quelque moment contraint de plier sous la force. Les soldats, bien que libres et armés, n’en subissent pas moins ordres et outrages’. Simone Weil, ‘L’Iliade ou le poème de la force’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 233-234.

<sup>545</sup> Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 155.

<sup>546</sup> Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 87.

with Roman history and an acceptance of a developing spirituality that relates to Catholicism, as Weil states:

To lose more than the slave does is impossible, for he loses his whole inner life. A fragment of it he may get back if he sees the possibility of changing his fate, but this is his only hope. Such is the empire of force, as extensive as the empire of nature.<sup>547</sup>

When Dietz argues that ‘force involves the diminishment of some human beings by others, and the suffering of some at the hands of others’<sup>548</sup> she, like Weil, must account for a force that is also pressing on the people who dominate other people, such that the definition of force is so broad and so pervasive. Akin to her understanding of labour, I argue that Weil is more concerned with force from the point of the view of the people who are suffering at the hands of others and not those who dominate. It can be argued that because force acts upon all people in different guises, oppression has the same perennial quality. If we are to accept Dietz’s account, that

Weil’s reflections here—on thinghood, on the loss of ‘inner life’, on the fragmentary and wasted nature of the existence of the slave/vanquished in whom ‘memory itself barely lingers on’—recall the graphic imagery of factory work she presents in *La Condition ouvrière*<sup>549</sup>

combines with Weil’s account of her factory labour and an advocacy for the labouring classes. We then find a subjective, narrow version of force that does not account for force in its entirety, as per Weil’s earlier definition of the nature of force. Dietz challenges this argument, by stating that

[w]e would be mistaken, of course, to draw from this the conclusion that Weil is somehow erasing all distinction between the extremities of factory work and the horror of war. Yet if we read [*L’Iliade ou le poème de la force*] with her earlier essays in mind, it is difficult not to see her preoccupation with the dehumanising aspects of earthly life.<sup>550</sup>

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<sup>547</sup> ‘On ne peut perdre plus que ne perd l’esclave; il perd toute vie intérieure. Il n’en retrouve un peu que lorsque apparaît la possibilité de changer de destin. Tel est l’empire de la force: cet empire va aussi loin que celui de la nature’. Simone Weil, ‘L’Iliade ou le poème de la force’, in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 233.

<sup>548</sup> Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 87.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid.

Dietz represents Weil accurately, but is it fair to question, that if force and its effects are inescapable, then the dehumanising element of force is also inescapable. Force always has the power to dehumanise. Force cannot not exist. It can be mitigated through commanding power. So, we could consider that an unpalatable aspect of power is that it is better to have power than not. In terms of humanity's use of physical force, which emanates from a wider of understanding force, Weil states that

[p]eople in *The Iliad* are not segregated into conquered, slaves, suppliants on the one side and conquerors and masters on the other; every human being may at any moment be compelled to submit to force. The warriors, though free and armed, submit no less to commands and insults.<sup>551</sup>

How then do we expect, for example, factory owners to create an environment free from force that is pervasive and inescapable and that does not need to kill to dehumanise? It is an important shift in the concept of force if we are not divided into conquerors and slaves or the victors and the vanquished. Weil's understanding insists that nobody is in possession of force. I contend we have the power to wield force and that that power is unstable. Dietz rephrases, stating that '[t]he reality of war, then, is larger than the dualism of conqueror/ conquered suggests. For in war, all humans are transformed into things, although perhaps in different ways'.<sup>552</sup> The contradiction within this statement is that, if force is pervasive and all humans are subject to its dehumanising nature, then there is the possibility that all humanity can be dehumanised simply because they and force exist. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Weil states that '[f]orce is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he

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<sup>551</sup> 'Personne ne la possède véritablement. Les hommes ne sont pas divisés, dans *l'Iliade*, en vaincus, en esclaves, en suppliants d'un côté, et en vainqueurs, en chefs, de l'autre; il ne s'y trouve pas un seul homme qui ne soit à quelque moment contraint de plier sous la force. Les soldats, bien que libres et armés, n'en subissent pas moins ordres et outrages'. Simone Weil, 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 233-234.

<sup>552</sup> Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 88.

does, as to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates',<sup>553</sup> meaning force is non-discerning as to who it weighs upon. As, however, *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force* is written in the shadow of an occupied Paris, Weil is more concerned with force in relation to war, as she states:

The point is that in this condition, there is no fixity, no stable identity; the intoxicated and the crushed are one and the same. And this is not only because, as in the *Iliad*, the progress of war is a 'continual game of seesaw' where the victor one day is vanquished the next. More importantly, war reduces everyone to a common denominator, to thinghood. It petrifies human sensitivity, compassion, generosity, and respect.<sup>554</sup>

If we are to accept, as Weil has done, that, if force is pervasive and affects and weighs upon everyone, an acceptance of another form of force (war) is just another state of force. This leads to an escapable argument *ad infinitum*.

Thus, war effaces every concept of a goal, even the goals of war. It effaces the idea of an end of war. The possibility of a situation so violent is unthinkable outside that situation; an end to it is unthinkable within it.<sup>555</sup>

If war is another form of force and force is pervasive within nature and society, then pacifism when confronted with force is invalid, irrespective of the context of the force. If we are always acted upon by force then resisting force is the only corresponding action, save of being crushed or dehumanised. I argue that it is this line of thinking which dissolves Weil's pacifist ideal. It can be argued that, as war is force and force is pervasive even outside of war, then engaging in war is just another form of the struggle against force. There could have been another account of this dissolution of pacifism according to Blum and Seidler, who state:

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<sup>553</sup> 'Aussi impitoyablement la force écrase, aussi impitoyablement elle enivre quiconque la possède, ou croit la posséder. Personne ne la possède véritablement'. Simone Weil, 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 233-234.

<sup>554</sup> Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 88.

<sup>555</sup> 'Ainsi la guerre efface toute idée de but, même l'idée des buts de la guerre. Elle efface la pensée même de mettre fin à la guerre. La possibilité d'une situation si violente est inconcevable tant qu'on n'y est pas; la fin en est inconcevable quand on y est'. Simone Weil, 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force', in *Écrits historiques et politiques, Tome II: Vers la guerre, Volume 3: Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 242.



A deepened concern with spiritual values was an integral part of her rejecting her long-held pacifist position. She became convinced of the unimaginable destruction of human values that would result with Hitler's victory.<sup>556</sup>

Despite acknowledging force, Weil is also reluctantly advocating the use of force in war as it negates humanity's ability to withstand force. In spite of the analysis suggesting a pervasive force, reluctantly this leads to the understanding that Blum and Seidler state, that '[a]fter a painful inner struggle she changed her view that the cost of war was greater, [...] she accepted an overriding obligation to work for Hitler's destruction'.<sup>557</sup> Consequently, Weil sought to fully inform people of the repercussions of the impending conflict, imploring that if force is to be utilised in response to force that it should be done so in the full knowledge of its consequences for societal values. With the conflicts of the Great War and the Spanish Civil War still fresh in the minds of the readers of *L'Iliade ou le poem de la force*, the oscillating force detailed in Homer's *The Iliad* is not minutely reawakened in advocacy of force but so the significance of that choice can be understood. Force clings to all exponents and unmitigatedly weighs upon the executioner as well as the victim. In *L'Iliade ou le poem de la force* Weil dissects the boundless capacity of force that can destroy men's humanity. Accepting that force is significant throughout history and that no one can escape its pressure, Weil acknowledges that man must bear some responsibility for perpetuating its effects as Weil argues that we exasperate its effects. If force is inescapable, then anything that mitigates and lessens its heavy burden is preferable. Criticising the shortcomings of a Marxism that fails to recognise the full extent and consequences oppression or force, eventually, when Weil abandons her pacifist position it is because of a rigorously philosophical dissection of the political and social context devoid of ideological blinkers.

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<sup>556</sup> Blum and Seidler, *A Truer Liberty*, p. 211.

<sup>557</sup> Blum and Seidler, *A Truer Liberty*, pp. 211-212.

## Conclusion

Simone Weil's political and social writing not only analyses the tempestuous period of the twentieth century, it reflects a maturing philosophical consciousness that develops in parallel with its traumatic political events. Whilst not relevant to this thesis, I believe that Weil's later work is an extension of this consciousness. Her life's work suggests she embodies one of Alain's lessons, that thought must be wedded to experience. The conjunction of *theoria* and *praxis* Weil maintains can hardly be overstated because it has immediate relevance to one of the difficulties of the French and European Left, in that it so often failed to bridge the substantial gap between bourgeois socialist utopianism and the real concerns and conditions of the impoverished working class. Irrespective of whether one agrees with Weil's methods or analysis, it cannot be contested that Weil does not actively engage with her subjects.

Painstakingly detailing the stages through which Weil's philosophy evolves from pacifism to a justification of force, I present an argument in consideration of its evolution. I conclude that her thought could have evolved quicker had she not been so wedded to pacifism, syndicalism and Marxism. Whilst her rejection of syndicalism and Marxism are informed by these movements' inability to either deal with or understand the complexity of the problem respectively, it is fair to suggest that she may not have rejected pacifism except that WWII exposes its limitations, though the contrary is equally possible. I contend that only when she rejects these beliefs, through a combination of maturing analysis and reflective experience, that it becomes evident that oppression, power, and particularly force, are undeniable and ineradicable. In order to prove this conclusion, my argument is chartered methodically through four chapters, spanning a chronological timeframe of 1925 to 1940. In one sense, it may

have been easier to begin with force, working instead from a thematic methodology, which might be punctured with a contextual timeframe. But if Weil's philosophical development is to be understood, I contend that it must be explicated in parallel to the belief systems and political events of the time.

The first chapter of this thesis identifies the thematic components of Weil's philosophical education in *Lycée Henri-IV* and *École Normale Supérieure*, where labour and science are drawn from her earliest essays. It shows how Weil argues that labour should be the centre of life and that science has become almost inconceivable by a single person. The way Weil expands on these themes is the basis for her syndicalist activism. There is a problem methodically at this point, however. We cannot discount Weil's age, that she is young and the authority of her ideas are compromised, or that her age presents limited grounds on which to criticise what is a developing philosophy. I argue, however, that these themes are ingrained politically as well as philosophically. I think it is uncontentious to suggest that from an early age Weil intellectually aligns herself with the socialist Left. I argue that this alignment hinders her development as a philosopher. The most important aspect of Weil philosophy at this stage though, is the redefinition of Descartes's *cogito* from "I think" to "I (can) act". This activity defines and later underpins Weil's understanding of work, humanity and liberty and consequently, oppression and force.

The second chapter details Weil's engagement and subsequent progression through the French syndicalist movement. Developing political *praxis* alongside a teaching career, Weil's appreciation and conflict with the French syndicalist movement develops a more militant hue. But her critique of orthodox Marxism also elicits a profound intellectual disagreement, which acts as a counterpoint that Weil is definitively Marxist. Where Marx believes that oppression can be eliminated, Weil

disagrees, stating that it can only be mitigated. This is a seminal period in Weil's philosophical life. I argue that her profound dismay with syndicalism, in conjunction with a visit to Germany in the 1930s, elicit the first hints that force is a necessary countermeasure in social and syndicalist relations. But it is also fair to suggest that Weil does not reject syndicalism. In its current form, namely bureaucratic and elite, syndicalism is unable to deliver the type of revolution that she believes would be transformative and lasting. It is probably also fair to suggest that Weil's type of revolution; slow and one not requiring a central elite, is highly unlikely. The revolution that she really desires is one where the individual is revolutionised, where liberty flourishes when one can choose (or reject) their actions, which stems mainly from "correct" working conditions, and that this revolution completely reforms the societal and political systems. I argue that this revolution is much more violent than, say, a militant, violent uprising against the government where buildings are looted and burnt. Weil instead wants to "burn down" a traditional way of thinking, wants to dramatically reduce the power of powerful people, wants to completely re-alter how the economy functions. Her version of a revolution requires the complete restructure of French and European life.

The third chapter concentrates on her seminal work, *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale*. In this section I provide textual evidence that Weil concludes her engagement with syndicalism because it cannot herald the reforms her philosophy requires. Preferring instead to concentrate on more theoretical work, she focuses on themes of labour, science and oppression, which I explicate from her earliest writings. Engaging more critically with Marxism and its defects, Weil's argues that because power (and privilege) is a manifestation of oppression, then power is an undeniable and eradicable phenomenon. Consequently, oppression cannot be

eliminated and may only be mitigated. Whereas Marx believes the bourgeoisie act primarily to obtain a disproportionate amount of goods and that re-altering the hierarchical system and ownership of production methods would erase oppression, Weil believes they act accordingly to retain power. This sharp distinction on the nature of oppression is the diverging issue between Weil and Marx. There are many contributing factors to oppression and Weil argues that Marxism reproduces rather than erases them. At this stage, power is central to Weil's thought but the foundational factor of force emerges to have a greater bearing on her thought. Consequently, working conditions and liberty, science and privilege, and power and oppression, which are all underpinned by force, must be completely re-imagined.

The final chapter provides evidence of Weil's philosophical attempt to understand and subsequently accept force in *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*. Whilst Weil might accept that force as a natural and social phenomenon exists, she struggles with its justified use in the impending Second World War and remains almost intractably pacifist. Building my argument throughout outline steps research, I argue that Weil's experiences expose the limitation of syndicalism, Marxism and pacifism only when she disregards them as beliefs. Whilst Weil finds that syndicalism is unable to provide a method for reform and Marxism is limited because of its defects, namely is misunderstanding of oppression, Weil does not reject pacifism but recognises its limitations once again. Weil still holds pacifism as a moral position and yet struggles with her relation to its contradictions as her understanding of force becomes more conceptualised. Some of Weil's remarks relating to Czechoslovakia are isolated during this timeframe and the inferences appear damning. Some of her arguments do not align with her previous work on oppression and her emerging but unarticulated ideas on human rights. It is arguable that Weil is philosophically at her most vulnerable

and most ruthless. In calculating the cost of war, a smaller number must pay the price. Whilst the experience and active engagement within these movements might lead Weil into a greater understanding, I believe she commits the cardinal sin: philosophers cannot join clubs. They cannot advocate from within political parties; they cannot be members of unions; they cannot be proponents of movements. Once this happens, it is very difficult to not be influenced by membership and association. Advocates of Weil will say that she never joined a political party or even a religion. She was, however, a strong proponent of syndicalism, Marxism and pacifism, and while she recognised their limitations, she should not have needed to rid these movements from her belief system. They should not have been held.

Weil's formal education concludes with *Science et perception dans Descartes*. It is important to show that she reworks Descartes's *cogito* into a form of power through thinking, asserting, 'I (can) act, therefore, I am'. However, this act only characterises thought itself – as an activity. In expressing that the power she has over her own beliefs is not an illusion and through this power she knows that she thinks, Weil reveals a discourse on the nature of doubt, thought, power, existence and knowledge. More significantly, previous essays and her dissertation incorporate the early iterations of themes on labour and science, showing that Weil's earliest writings fecundate her later political writing, which predates the war. Directly relating these dissertation themes within France's syndicalist tradition provides fertile criticism of Marxist socialist syndicalist ideology, where Weil analyses workers' oppression in relation to her theory of labour. Therefore, in 1931, Weil champions unions as the vehicle imperative to actualising an ideal society rather than the machinations of political parties. She believes in the power of the collective (unions) to wage a peaceful class war. Considering revolution as a worthy pursuit, her focus is guided by a belief

in the unity of labour union politics during this period. Advocating pacifism and empathy for the underprivileged, the industrialised town of Le Puy becomes the battle ground for her activities in the syndicalist movement. When she takes her teaching post, this movement is torn between the reformist *Confédération Générale du Travail* (C.G.T.) and the Communist leaning *Confédération Générale du Travail Unifiée* (C.G.T.U.). During this period, Weil's thought and action refer to the ethics and conceptions of anarchic-spirited revolutionary syndicalism and Marxism. Her solidarity with the working class dictates her participation in events arising from the economic crisis that wreaked early 1930s France. Accompanying a delegation of the unemployed to the mayor of Le Puy, Weil attempts to intervene on their behalf to the municipal council of this city. Advocating on behalf of the employed leads to a written declaration that force may be a necessary counterforce in the class war.

Irrupted by the tension provoked by Hitler's Nationalist Socialist's policies, Weil laments the absence of coherent thought in the contemporary workers' movement. The divisions within syndicalism, the party-political system and the fragmentation of movements like Communism, socialism and anarchism mean that lucid positions are inarticulable. Echoing Marx, Weil is also optimistic about the capacity of the German workers to provide the next revolution. Yet, after her trip to Germany, Weil is firmly convinced that Communist influences are harmful to the future of the labour movement, who, along with the socialists, social-democrats and the unions, fail to engage seriously with the rise of fascism. Weil regards the situation from the workers' revolutionary perspective, meaning that her belief in syndicalism diverts her attention from the more serious problem and I suggest that Weil mistakenly sought to articulate the plight of the underprivileged. The textual evidence shows that by examining oppression in relation to the conditions of proletariat workers, instead

of the totality of those who are oppressed, her analysis is far from encompassing but still more developed than Marxism. However, a visit to Germany marks the beginning of Weil's political and syndicalist despondency. Thereafter, she shows no real engagement in trade union activities as she recognises that their prospects of change are illusory. The rejection of revolutionary syndicalism led her to withdraw from her political and syndicalist activities to focus on theoretical work.

Responding to a differentiation between idealism and actuality, I argue that methodologically *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale* can be understood in two sections. The first section focusses on analysis and critique. In the second section Weil envisages an ideal and compares the viability of contemporary social life to absorb such an ideal. I argue that we can essentially divide the article into two parts; critical analysis and idealistic abstraction. The division between these two sections is an important development in Weil's thought. How we understand the confrontation between the conceptual ideal and the diagnosed reality is paramount. It is not that the ideal fell short, it is that Weil recognises the limitations of Marx's ideal. Where Weil stretched an unlikely aspiration, she believes that Marx did not fully grasp the problem. This underpins Weil's rejection of revolutionary syndicalism, Marxism and ultimately pacifism. My articulation of the difference between Weil's idealism and actuality is underpinned by Weil's argument that the modern worker is not offered the opportunity to conceptualise and act on his liberty. In order to demonstrate why this step is important, it is necessary to contrast Weil and Marx. Weil still believes after her disengagement with syndicalism that a real revolution required that workers re-appropriate knowledge and gain dominionship over the science that informs the production methods. It is important to understand Weil's theory of labour to



distinguish earlier Weilian thinking in relation to Marxism with the later Weilian thinking and Marxist ideology.

One of the main differences between Marx and Weil is her insistence that the individual worker, as opposed to the collective, should be considered as the supreme value. In believing that the labouring worker should be the supreme value, she opposes specialisation that reduces his ability to think as it blunts his ability to conceive liberty. The obvious rebuttal is that Marx is also concerned for the worker. But Weil extends far beyond Marx, in that she wants to give the worker the dignity of understanding the entire production process, which is not just controlling the means of production. Marx wants to redistribute power to the worker, while Weil wants to empower the worker. As revolutionary as Marx's ideas are, Weil's ideas are much more seismic, even violent, requiring a complete reshape and redirection for (French, European, world) society. An implementation of her ideas would change society beyond recognition and may even cause economies to collapse. Weil does not provide an explanation of how this might be actualised, though her later work, *The Need for Roots*, is a closer manifestation of these ideas. Even the idea of de-specialising the economy, which amounts to specialising all workers in all things related to their field, is (somewhat) beyond comprehension. It may not be her area of expertise or something that she does not need to concern herself with, but, while this ambition is laudable, it shows that she does not engage with the economics of such an argument. I suggest that the radical change which Weil sought could lead to even more desperation and oppression as economies collapse. We also must recognise that Weil does not discriminate between capitalists, classes of capitalists, or even capital. This oversight is important because this inarticulation inadvertently moves her closer to a Marxist position. Its inference is that those who are oppressed are not capitalists or that (some) capitalists do not

suffer oppression. It is type of bluntness that Weil criticised, because analysis without perspicuity differentiates her from Marx. As her work is devoid of such a perspective, I argue that Weil does not appreciate that there is industrial (factory) capitalists and financial (speculative) capitalists but also shop keepers and sole traders and employers of two and three people. This type of dogmatic composition is an example of blunt Marxism, which asserts that temporary oppression is an acceptable means to disintegrate the classification of classes. Weil (correctly) diagnoses part of the problem with capitalism, but then attempts to solve it by eradicating capitalism, creating a fallacy of composition. If there is a problem with some part of capitalism, then trying to solve it by eradicating capitalism is likely to solve the problem, but only at the expense of those who did not cause the problem. If the problem with capitalism is speculative financial capitalists and not a shopkeeper hoping to expand, then the shopkeeper is considered similarly to the speculative financial capitalist. Hence, where the analysis is blunt, the solution is crude. In contrast, Weil believes that Marx sins by optimism, asserting that oppression is destined to disappear because it is bound exclusively to the mode of capitalist property. In a more developed contrast, Weil believes oppression is linked to the production of great industry and the unlimited development of the productive forces. She criticises the very notion of revolution, particularly the Soviet kind, which represents a degenerate bureaucratic deformation of the dictatorship of the proletariat state. In regarding the USSR bureaucracy as a new social class form as exploitative as capitalism, Weil's belief that a revolution against the apparatus of State shows she still held a position that war is not justified because war-time production is a heightened form of oppression.

Weil circumvents man's seemingly endless servitude by arguing that an ability to think allows an idea of liberty to be retained. One could be forgiven for thinking that Weil aims at forming a society free from oppression. Utilising the free ability to conceive, she images a society that mitigates oppression. Weil, however, cautions that oppression must distinguish between the suppression of individual (harmful) desires and the need for social order and harmony. The constraint that society imposes on individuals should not be confused with oppression unless it results in a division of those who exercise it and those who are subject to it, in effect, giving those in command the power to crush those who obey. Having made this distinction though, Weil argues against the assumption *a priori* that the abolition of oppression would be possible and concludes that it is impracticable to expect that the utopian use of technology would alleviate the burdens imposed by nature, and man and society. If it were possible, unlimited production might eradicate nature's burden through food and shelter, but societal issues, albeit maybe new ones, would still occur. Power and the race for power would still exist as some new form of oppression is created. It is through this evidentiary caution that it can be contested with certainty that Weil rejected Marxism.

As tension engulfed Europe in 1937, Weil implores the Europeans not to repeat the Trojan War in her pacifist article, *Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie*. Based on Homer's *The Iliad* and the account of the Trojan War, Weil's article analyses the mechanism of murderous force. Detailing this development in her writing shows its evolution as it transitions from an almost unconditional pacifist viewpoint to the acceptance of a justified force in an inevitable war. It is my contention that the inevitability of war as a force illuminates the point that, even if one does not wish to engage in force, force may be employed anyway. For Weil, the Spanish Civil clarifies

this unpalatable aspect of force. Occurring because of political unrest, mirrored somewhat in France and Germany, the volatile theatre, which rejected political methods for violence means, is a decisive stage in Weil's rejection of pacifism. The themes of science and labour were still applicable, but they had to be re-envisioned. The fight in Spain was a political, unionised issue, concentrating on the distilled issue of who decides: the nationalists or the monarchy; the unions or the factory owners; the (religious) status quo, the socialists, the anarchists or the myriad of splinter groups. This chaotic milieu forces Weil to delve behind labour and science to reformulate the themes as oppression, power and force in *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale*. Weil struggles to fully articulate a definition of force, and reformulating the definition in *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*, I conclude that the ambiguity in *Réflexions* is replicated in *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*.

Prior to 1936, Weil's position is clear. In *Réflexions sur la guerre* she is almost unconditionally pacifist and condemns all foreign war and even so-called revolutionary war like that of 1792 as it fails to take account of oppression. The enemy of the people is the State and its apparatus. Only a social revolution without the means of war is legitimate, as all war leads to despotism and continues or increases oppression. Weil's *Non-intervention généralisée*<sup>558</sup> approves of France's non-intervention policy in Spain and questions whether that consistency should be enforced as it related to the pacts that France had signed with other countries. This argument is decisive because Weil countenances whether it is necessary to remain passive while Germany invades Czechoslovakia, even though France had signed a pact of assistance that had not been ratified. We can understand that Weil is attempting to avoid war at all costs, but to what extent is she accepting an ever-increasing bill of

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<sup>558</sup> *Generalised non-intervention*.

sale? Despite still holding a position of pacifism, it is also difficult to understand the extension of its limit. We can understand her reasoning, however. *Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie*, subtitled, *Pouvoir des mots*, demonstrates how men might fight for abstract words and phrases, like fascism, communism, nation, order, authority and property. Justifiably, she argues that these concepts are rarely pure in their essence, in that they are infrequently always true all the time. The article dismantles all the pretexts, all the mechanisms by which countries justify war. However, I argue that Weil also utilises the same Orwellian abstraction of words to advocate against war. In a sense though, we exist in the same argument. All language is abstract, and so open to interpretation. Language can be hollow, meaningless phrases, until such time as it manifests concretely, if ever at all. The Spanish Civil War continues and Weil realises that the war is no longer an uprising of peasants oppressed by the Nationalists and the Church. Without the western powers deciding to intervene amidst the fear of a European conflict, Republican Spain dies gently as Russia, Germany and Italy turn the peninsula into the *matinée* for a greater conflict.

When Germany annexes Austria, the focus turns to Czechoslovakia and the agitation of the Sudeten minorities. It is within this atmosphere that Weil publishes *L'Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie*. I contend that Weil struggles to maintain a coherent argument, based on a hangover of her political beliefs from her upbringing, school and university. She tries to argue for the avoidance of war within a Leftist framework. It is difficult not to lament that she casts aside the very people she once principally stood for, though undoubtedly, she is arguing pragmatically. If Weil believes in the value of life and the rights of citizens, then not only accepting but advocating that a group should be subjugated by another is a contradiction in terms of her own convictions. I am not trying to assert the universality of either of her positions.

The framework that I use is Weil's argument. She cannot advocate both for the mitigation of oppression and that some people should be oppressed.

Far from completely castigating Weil's patience in concluding that force is perennial as Europe catapulted itself in another conflict, it is of greater insight to detail the development of her understanding of force in *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force* after she recognises pacifism's limitations. Attempting to articulate force in accordance with its nature in *Réflexions*, Weil is more assured of the concept by the time she writes *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*. However, while we observe a determined concentration on force, the more that Weil attempts to define force, the more it becomes opaque. By her own assertion, we cannot know force, we can only experience its effects. I suggest that force exists in nature, irrespective of man, and then it continues to exist in the same and different guises when man exists. The manifestation of man's interrelationship (strife and success) as he attempts to mitigate force is power. In finally accepting, as Weil did, that, if force is pervasive and weighs upon everyone, she still employs a measure of doubt by imploring that if force is to be utilised in response to force, then it done so in the full knowledge of its consequences. It is fair to suggest that Weil does not reject the aspirational merits of pacifism but that she recognises pacifism's limits in counteracting an opposing, physical force deployed by humans. I contend though, that in failing to employ a rigorous measure of doubt whilst advocating for syndicalism, Marxism and pacifism, it appears Weil's own beliefs stifle her development. We can understand that Weil's desire to advocate and be a voice for the underprivileged against the oppressors means that philosophy's semantics cannot alleviate hunger or mitigate the crushing weight of force. Is the lesson then to be taken from Nevin's 'Inconclusions', that '[Weil] does not solve

problems, but she can more than occasionally help us in trying to face them’?<sup>559</sup> This I certainly believe to be true. With that in mind, we must return to Rush Rhees’s patience in the introduction, who, in doubting his own sensibilities, helps us to recognise that Weil bypassed that which did not provide an answer to the completeness and complexity of the world. As such, one must be compassionate for such a profound figure writing in an era of illimitable turmoil. Weil only sought to understand and delivers herself from this world on pain of conviction.

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<sup>559</sup> Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, p. 384.

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