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The Transindividual Act of Self-Burning

BOJANA CVEJIĆ

In this text, I will examine public acts of self-annihilation that protest against the unsustainability of life under the conditions of contemporary neoliberal capitalism by making the body the locus of violent and spectacular destruction.[1] Following on Mohamed Bouazizi's self-incineration in 2010, which served as an iconic catalyst for the popular uprising in Tunisia, the recent wave of self-burnings has spread beyond the so-called geocultural belt of self-immolations in South East Asia into the Middle East and Europe, notably France, where in the period 2011–13 every fifteen days somebody new set themself on fire (Bollendorff and Cloarec 2015). While only a few instances of these burnings have been explicitly articulated as political protests against neoliberal reforms leading to dire precarization, the majority of cases appear unobtrusive, at best registered in the local (more often than national) press as suicides concluding a 'personal drama' (French president François Hollande cited in Chastand 2013). Although most of the self-burners whose acts I will examine here leave no note framing from the outset, in political terms, the reasons of a protest, their motives can be inferred from the public site chosen for its staging, the scene of a dramatic appeal to a government, a private company or an employer deemed responsible for their breakdown. These motives include unemployment, debt, removal of social benefits, rejection of an application for social housing, restructuring of jobs that results in excessive workloads, lay-offs or forced resignations, and administrative refusal to review one's eligibility for social welfare, to name but a few of the recurrent grievances behind the self-burnings that have occurred in France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Greece, Turkey, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Mauritania since 2010. In a word, they cause a breakdown of the infrastructure of one's own life, understood here as 'the living mediation of what organises life' (Berlant 2016: 393). Here, I take 'breakdown of infrastructure' to mark the low point in the range of effects resulting from 'governmental precarisation', which, after Isabell Lorey, denotes a complex dynamic of 'interactions between an instrument of neoliberal governing and the conditions of economic exploitation' (2015: 12).

Underlining precarization as a *process* that entails a differential distribution of economic insecurity, I am concerned here with the temporal dimension of normalizing neoliberal measures that unequally affect its subjects. Precarization as an instrument of neoliberal governing implies a division between those who experience 'ambivalence between subjugation and self-empowerment' (ibid.) in navigating neoliberal restructuration of work and social welfare, and those numerous others who are in this process pauperized and dispossessed to the extent that they no longer deem their life 'worthy of being lived' (Katsouraki 2017: 152). While it might be difficult to compare levels of precarization that precipitated these self-burners into their act, their shared state of 'affliction', wherein life and death become 'interchangeable' (ibid.), directly correlates with neoliberal reforms of work and welfare. Thus, the self-burnings I will attend to highlight the aspect of governmental precarization that causes a variety of breakdowns in which individuals become the collateral damage of an infrastructural transformation or failure and subsequent ruin. In Berlant's expansion of this term, infrastructure comprehends more than roads, schools, medical insurance or families; it encompasses all 'the systems that link ongoing proximity to being in a world-sustaining relation' (2016: 393). And because infrastructural failures don't affect everyone to the same degree and at the same time, precarization is diversified and too differentially (unequally) distributed for

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it to act as a unifying political demand of protest for the cases I will examine.

The aim of my enquiry is to show how these scattered, isolated and seemingly individualistic acts converge in a novel category of self-burning motivated by economic insecurity, a category that I contend ought to be redeemed politically as a *transindividual* form of political protest. With the concept of the 'transindividual' I am drawing on Gilbert Simondon's (2005) relational ontology, which has guided Bernard Stiegler (1998) and Paolo Virno (Virno and Hirose 2006) in their leftist critiques of individualism and modes of subjectivation under neoliberal capitalism. Simondon reserved the neologism 'transindividual' for a more complicated relation than that of unity between individual and society. The transindividual is that which is transmitted from the interior to the collective, recreated and reassumed across time by successive individuals (Simondon 2005: 216). In a broader perspective, transindividuality refers to the capacity of 'we': what we have in common, and what we can be and can do together in social and political senses, on the condition that this relational 'we' is differentiated and reconstituted every time, in each case of transindividuation, rather than being a given identity. By unifying a relation that is interior to the individual (or the psyche) and a relation exterior to the individual (or the collective), transindividuality defines the bi-dimensional process in which the individual and the collective reciprocally co-evolve. In Stiegler's and Virno's Marxist readings of Simondon's concept, the transindividual becomes that place, event, situation, act or collective operation in which the potentials that individuals bring in their mutual relations are put to work. For example, social forms of production and reproduction are the historical component of the potentials that are exploited or commodified in the capitalist subsumption of work or enriched and renewed in egalitarian cooperation or organized political protest, as in the solidarity movement in South Europe and collective practices of care (Vujanović and Cvejić 2022).

In order to consider these self-burnings *transindividually*, I will show how the act exceeds individualist premises by redressing in the public sphere the right to a sustainable life. First, this requires that the motives of self-burning be de-individualized, demonstrating that distress and alienation are socially and politically induced by governmental precarization. Second, I will examine the power that such a self-destructive act has to 'collectivize' ('transindividuate') through confronting lives that are not as gravely afflicted by precarization with lives that are unlivable. Moreover, this argument entails considering how one might be interpellated to respond to the violence of self-incineration with respect to the shared condition of having a body. Juxtaposing corporeal techniques of the self based on well-being and vitality in neoliberal lifestyles with the bodies of self-burners consumed by fire raises the following question: How are we to attend to irreparable acts of self-annihilation, which stand in dire contrast to contemporary practices of vitalist self-preservation through intensive life- and self-enhancement?

These two divergent images of embodiment symbolize two facets of the biopolitical regime of power at work today, one in which administration of life focuses on the well-being of the population, and the other in which some lives are hindered or abandoned to the powers of death. This rift within the spectrum of biopower, where levels of precarization get finer with respect to the two extremes of care and disposability, is key to the revision of Foucauldian biopolitics found in Achille Mbembe's thesis on necropower, which determines whose lives matter and whose are disposable (2019: 80). Mbembe's account of 'death-worlds' is illuminating here, as it posits 'new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*' (92). I take the acts of self-burning arising from governmental precarization to testify to necropower in Mbembe's sense as the negative underside of a contemporary regime of biopolitics. Furthermore, I will argue that they carry a transindividual potential of political protest that counters the biopolitical precept of survival at all costs.

There are several difficulties inherent to the staging of these acts that make for their

political illegibility and for other obstacles to reading them as transindividual performances of protest, which I will discuss here. In the first instance, self-burnings are recognized as acts of political self-sacrifice on the condition that they protest political oppression, and are, moreover, part of an organized political struggle or movement. Thus, the political motives are inferred from self-incinerations that combat imperialist domination and foreign occupation or are orchestrated in a movement for national independence.[2] These acts owe their status of political 'self-immolation' to inscription in the lineage that harks back to 1963 when the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức performed ritual self-incineration at a Saigon intersection—an act of self-sacrifice that influenced the course of the Vietnam War (1955–75) and set a historical precedent for self-burning to enter the repertoire of self-destructive practices of political resistance worldwide. Thereafter, 'self-immolation' has been used to denote sacrificial self-burning, the sense given in the word's etymology: *immolare* in Latin designates 'to sprinkle [a victim] with sacrificial meal [*mola salsa*, mixture of flour and salt], before sanctifying it by fire'.[3]

While sacrifice evokes the religious background of the act, religion and individual psychopathology have often been used as 'rationalising narratives' to obfuscate its political significance (Bargu 2014: 22). The latter have consistently played a prominent role in the attempts of news media or the officials interpellated by the self-burner to marginalize or explain away the political message of a public fiery protest. It also accounts for the relative paucity of the media coverage of these acts. With the exception of the literature dated after 2010, which includes Bouazizi's as the only examined case of self-burning against precarization (Fierke 2013; Ziółkowski 2020), including Katsouraki's (2017) investigation of a 'radical praxis of political protest' of suicides in Greece against the neoliberal economic capture of life, most of the instances I address here haven't received adequate attention in print. Our knowledge of this category of self-incinerations in Europe and the Middle East is confined to scanty media reports, which present these public acts in an anecdotal fashion as personal suicides without acknowledging their social and political or, more specifically, transindividual dimension. My interest here is to interrogate the discursive silence to which the recent self-burnings in Europe and the Middle East have been subjected, and more specifically to enquire into the perplexing problems posed by these fiery political acts. How can *individual* life be weaponized as a *transindividual* form of protest if self-destruction also brings the suffering of a person to an end through an extreme public act of suffering?

'IF YOU DON'T SEE ME, I WILL BURN MYSELF'

This section presents three distinctive cases of self-burning that have advanced or revealed governmental precarization as their main cause. Its title quotes Bouazizi, poignantly summarizing the calculus involved in the choice of self-destruction. Although Bouazizi's story is well known, I will rehearse it here one more time.

Bouazizi was a fruit and vegetable vendor in Sidi Bouzid (Tunisia), who had been harassed for years by the police for allegedly not having the required permit or, more likely, for not having the means to bribe the police officers. One day, the police confiscated his produce and the scale he had indebted himself in order to purchase. Outraged at losing his entire economic livelihood, Bouazizi tried to appeal to the city administrator, who declined to see him despite Bouazizi's threat ('If you don't see me, I will burn myself') (see Fierke 2013: 218–22; Michelsen 2016: 58–9; Ziółkowski 2020: 254). Bouazizi returned to the administration building within an hour to set himself on fire. Before he doused himself in gasoline, he was heard screaming his last words: 'How do you expect me to make a living?!' Although he left no explicit statement of political intention, a large community of young Tunisians recognized themselves in his despair and chose his act as a symbol of their protest.[4]

Bouazizi's is an act of self-burning that doesn't address itself politically to a public, yet it qualifies as a liminal act that earns the

[2] Prominent examples include self-burnings against the US-led war in Vietnam in the United States (1965–9); the self-burnings of Ryszard Siwiec, Jan Palach and others against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (1969–70); self-burnings of Kurds in Turkey (since 1982); self-burnings in various provinces in India fighting for statehood (2010–20); and self-burnings of 157 Buddhist monks in Tibet against Chinese state repression since 2011.

[3] See www.etymonline.com/word/immolate, accessed on 2 February 2021. In a broader sense, self-immolation includes other forms of self-mutilation that symbolize self-sacrifice.

[4] It must be mentioned that Bouazizi's act resonated in social media thanks to his cousin's actions. Ziółkowski reports that Ali Bouazizi magically 'appeared outside the magistrate building moments before the suicide protest and later recorded footage of the incident with his phone. Then, he collected photos of Mohamed engulfed in flames from other witnesses and packaged them for online distribution. He was perfectly aware of the power of this particular medium, believing, in his own words, that "images are like weapons, they can help topple a regime".' He deliberately meddled in portraying Mohamed as an unemployed university graduate in order to help the class of young, educated Tunisians in rebellion to identify with him (Ziółkowski 2020: 254).

status of political protest by the effect it had in retrospect. The rhetorical question he thrust at the municipality provides a terse statement about the pain of dispossession motivating his self-incineration. A comparable, albeit more politically organized and articulated message stems from the case of Anas K. On 8 November 2019, a 22-year-old student and activist of the leftist student union set himself ablaze in front of the building that houses the regional student aid centre (Centre régional des œuvres universitaires et scolaires (CROUS)) in the French city of Lyon. The letter Anas K. left behind explicitly accused the French government and other political figures for social problems ranging from student living costs and precarious life to social inequalities and fascism in French politics. The acuteness of his words is worth citing in full:

> Today, I will do the irreparable. My target is the CROUS, a political site, and beyond it, the minister of higher education and research and the government. This year, undertaking a third L2 [equivalent to year two in three-year BA degree—B.C.], I didn't have a stipend, and even if I had, is 450 Euros per month enough to live on? I've been lucky to have amazing people around me, my family and my union, but should we continue to survive like we're doing today? And after all these studies, how long will we have to work and contribute to have a decent retirement? Will it be possible with mass unemployment? So I'd like to repeat one of my union's demands—a student wage and more generally an unconditional lifelong salary, so we don't have to lose our lives trying to earn a living. Let's move to a 32-hour work-week to put an end to these uncertainties regarding unemployment, which lead hundreds of people like me each year into my situation. Who die in the most complete silence. Let's fight the rise of fascism, which only divides us, and of neoliberalism, which creates inequalities. I accuse Macron, Hollande, Sarkozy and the EU of having killed me, by creating uncertainties about the future of all, and I also accuse Le Pen and the pundits for having created fears that are more than secondary. My last wish is that my comrades continue to struggle, to definitively put an end to all of this. Long live socialism, long live self-management, long live social security. And sorry for the ordeal that this is. Au revoir. (Anas K. 2019)

Anas K.'s letter indicates that his personal situation (loss of student aid) is only a pretext for protesting against neoliberal reforms that have eclipsed social security and for advancing demands for more socially just labour conditions that would render life more sustainable for all. Despite its express political message and affiliation with the socialist political struggle, his act achieved a meagre echo in the public. Students in several cities in France rallied to counter the attempt of the government to obfuscate the political intention of the self-burning as the politicians underlined personal distress as the main motive. The French students insisted: Anas K.'s act was political!

Between Bouazizi's and Anas K.'s acts more than fifty cases of self-destruction out of precarity have been recorded in France. For most of them, however, the political import of the situation they protested has gone unrecognized. Out of seven cases documented in a web-audio-film *Le grand incendie* (2013), the self-burning of Rémy Louvradoux serves as a blueprint for the acts of self-destruction caused by diminished livelihood due to neoliberal reforms to work and welfare since 2011.[5] A technician at Orange–France Télécom since 1979, Louvradoux addressed the management of the merger enterprise (Orange–France Télécom) with objections to their plan to a restructure of the company ('NeXT'), which would result in laying off 22,000 workers. Delegated by his colleagues, Louvradoux formulated their concerns in part around the notion of being treated as 'surplus' ('*de trop*') in an open letter to the managers, which was followed by numerous unanswered emails over two years until 26 April 2011, when he set himself ablaze in front of his workplace, the France Telecom office in Mérignac. While the management denied knowledge of any communication, and the lawsuit against seven directors of the company charged for moral harassment and complicity in the death of Louvradoux was unsuccessful, Louvradoux's family has been approached by dozens of France Telecom workers expressing their solidarity and the need to unite in order to demonstrate together their shared precarious working conditions (Burel 2019).

Two years later, the self-burning of Djamal Chaar, whose objection to the government unemployment agency in France for a miscount

[5] Apart from Louvradoux, the seven cases include: E. C. working for the French energy company GDF; Lise Bonnafous, high-school maths teacher; Joseph Kebaha, searching for social housing; Manuel Gongora, sanitation worker of Grand Lyon; Jean-Louis Cuscussa, pleading for his case to the Caisse des Allocations Familiales (CAF) (a French government body that offers benefits and services to families); and Djamal Chaar, pleading for his case at Pôle emploi (a government agency for unemployment).

of his employment hours, with consequences for his unemployment benefits, was twice refused, triggered a wider political echo. In a letter entitled, 'The right to live, with or without employment', several prominent public figures, philosophers, sociologists and militants including Jacques Rancière and Saïd Bouamama, asked: 'How many men and women, unemployed or working, will have to die refusing to live with indignity before the denial of their human, social, and democratic rights is finally heard?' (Jennar 2013). Their words pin down the political meaning of the many unreported acts whose actors remained anonymous. To gauge the performativity of these self-burnings, I will now look at the performative structure of the act.

The self-burner re-addresses their unanswered plea to the public or, in other words, they coerce the public into bearing witness to injustice, for which they blame an authority symbolically identified by its official seat: a public building or a site that serves as the context-specific stage for the act. The conditions for acquiring the status of a political performance are only partly fulfilled: the act is public and communicates with the antagonist and the broader public in the symbolic place of a state institution or private company. The interpellated antagonists (employers, public servants, co-workers, HR services) disavow their responsibility for the grievance and the accusation that the self-burner has made public. Instead, most acts are psycho-pathologized and isolated as cases of individual vulnerability, deviancy, anomaly, and in that way reduced to a glitch on the flat surface of a media report. Their disparagement rests on judging that two elements in the act 'misfired', to revert to J. L. Austin's (1975) apparatus of performative. First, the accusation is neutralized when the accused proves they followed the procedure correctly. Second, the actor (self-burner) is denied authority because their motives are deliberately labelled as personal distress. In a statement reported in the national news, the at the time French president, François Hollande, expressed his 'strong feelings over this sign of personal distress and [of becoming] a serious situation' (Chastand 2013). But as the spouse of the self-burner argued in the same article: 'If it were a personal drama as François Hollande has said, he [Djamal Chaar] would not have done it in a public space' (ibid.). The question arises of whether the public place partly grants the act the political authority denied to its actor and the accusation. The site of the act doesn't only make it public, but adds the illocutionary weight of a political accusation, with the act staged in the place that symbolizes the blamed instance. Hence, the numerous suicides caused by the same situation of dispossession and humiliation that are enacted in the private sphere—at home, for instance –risk their political significance passing unrecorded. In addition to the public site, fire as the means of self-destruction renders the act hypervisible.

The spectacle of the burning body cannot escape the notice of the public eye, as the political significance of the place and the brutality of the act compel immediate and remote witnesses to ask why, what for or even in whose name the act was committed. A person setting their body on fire wants to 'leave an indelible imprint on the minds of others' (Belayachi 2011). The contrast between being the immediate audience of self-burning and a second-hand viewer implies a difference in degree of intensity, but not a different kind of impact. The reports and images of self-immolations that have circulated in the media act as a support for the imagination of the ordeal. What is there to witness in either the first or second degree is the rigorous determination of a subject, who is unafraid to die a horrific death. The act is irreparable, as Anas K. put it in his letter, and what makes it even more cruel is that the self-burner addresses their plea to a public without having the possibility to receive a response. Watching or imagining self-incineration, one registers the embodiment of pain made graphic. Facing the destruction of the body as an act of self-annihilation from the perspective of an affluent society instilled with corporeal techniques of well-being is daunting and incomprehensible. It inevitably prompts the question: for there to be such a violent destruction of one's body, how much violence has this body absorbed? If such an equation holds, the self-burner condemns the violence of their situation—their life becoming

unlivable—by turning that violence against themself rather than directing it at those that they publicly blame for their suffering.

SELF-BURNING ON BEHALF OF OTHERS: 'GOOD' VERSUS 'BAD' DEATH

When self-burning makes for a public accusation sheerly by means of the place in which it is staged and then fails to politically mobilize the community of those who share the condition with the actor, the act falls under the category of a 'bad death', understood as surrendering to the disappointments of life. The phrase was coined in British anthropology in the 1980s (Bloch and Parry 1982: 16), and the notion is that individual suicide qualifies as a 'good death' when it presents a ritual in which a community is reborn: 'the rebirth which occurs at death is not only a denial of individual extinction but also a reassertion of society and a renewal of life and its creative power' (5). A 'good death' entails a transfer of the vitality of life: 'supreme altruistic gift of the martyr by whose death life is renewed' (Fierke 2013: 49). This moral distinction reveals the conventional criteria of instrumental action that operate in the judgements made about protests by fire in liberal thought. According to prevalent liberal debates on the politics of self-incinerations, if a person doesn't burn themself 'on behalf' of others, by explicitly furthering a political cause for a community, their act is not deemed political. Crosby, Rhee and Holland argue that the act of self-burning must express the concerns of the community in order to qualify as political protest (1977: 65). Building further on a pragmatist stance on performativity, Fierke and Michelsen have posited self-burning as a 'perlocutionary act', which must prove to have consequences in 'persuading, convincing, enlightening, inspiring' (Fierke 2013: 37) a community into a 'new social imaginary' and thus realizing its 'semiotic potential *vis-à-vis* restoration of the sovereignty of a liminal transcendent community' (Michelsen 2016: 62).

Judging the political character of self-burning by the criteria of instrumentality misconstrues the existential nature of corporeal performances of protest. As Banu Bargu has argued from a leftist perspective (2014), self-destructive practices of resistance paradoxically combine instrumentality and its abolishment. Inasmuch as the self-destruction of the body serves to publicly address a grave political concern—as is the case with self-burnings out of precarization, including, in the case of Anas K., when this self-destruction advances specific political demands—the body cannot be reduced to a mere medium of protest. 'Its deployment only by way of its destruction defies the distinction between means and ends and obliterates instrumental rationality' (Bargu 2014: 16).

The argument of instrumentality, which pits a 'good' death that communalizes others against a 'bad' death without a communal echo, is the product of the dichotomous conceptual framework in which self-burnings have been considered. Dating back to Émile Durkheim's notorious distinction between 'altruistic' and 'egotistic' suicide, the conceptual dichotomy of suicide versus self-sacrifice, victim versus martyr is the chief discursive obstacle to acknowledging precarization as a political motive of self-burning. 'Martyrs' are those who self-immolate in defence of 'a notion of truth' that they cannot surrender, 'whereas suicide is selfish', representing 'a failure of nerve, endurance, or patience and often an inability to go on despite grief, pain, dissatisfaction or deprivation' (Fierke 2013: 5). This line of argumentation has persuaded many leftist political commentaries to refrain from referring to these acts as suicides, since the term rhetorically relegates responsibility to the actor who performs the act of self-killing (Bargu 2014: 18; Ziółkowski 2020: 20–3) and over-individualizes the act at the cost of its political meaning. By contrast, Katsouraki (2017) has opted for 'political suicide' in her account of powerlessness and vulnerability caused by governmental precarization in 'post-austerity' Greece. Political suicide here stands for a deliberate act of political dissent that performs an 'act of evaluation, […] which discloses itself in the political subject's act of affirmation of the intimacy of life that can fully be revealed *only in death*' (Katsouraki 2017: 163). The argument of reclaiming life's value by death in protest over life's devaluation raises the question of necropolitics: is self-burning out of precarization an instance of succumbing

to necropower in Mbembe's sense, as the 'subjugation of life to the power of death' (2019: 76), or is it a form of 'necroresistance', political protest *by death*?

THE NECROPOLITICS OF PRECARIZATION

Necropolitics is bound up with governmental precarization as a regime of power that shapes life together with its 'attrition', whereby 'slow death', in Berlant's compelling phrase (Berlant 2011: 95–8), characterizes the physical, but also mental attenuation of life force. Letting die in the context of administrating life can be too passive and slow a process for its full, dire meaning to be registered. 'Slow death' might become indistinguishable from the routine stress of the underprivileged and disadvantaged. But then occasionally, this passive process of precarization 'amalgamates' (97) slow death in an act of self-destruction that fires into the public.

Self-burners appear to be subjects who have lost the structure of support that sustains their life. And having exhausted other means of struggle for basic sources of livelihood, they choose to end their life in an intense form of embodied protest. Their act suggests that we expand the category of the living dead to include, apart from slavery and work- and death-camps, also those who are left behind, dispossessed, whose lives are disposable and 'ungrievable' because they are devaluated (Butler 2015). With the recent self-burnings thus inscribed within the necropolitical frame of precarity, it becomes possible to properly examine the problem of self-sacrifice from the point of view of the 'social dramaturgy' of the act (Vujanović and Cvejić 2022). The act of self-burning marks a dramatic point in the struggle of a worker (whether employed or unemployed) who has used up all formal channels of address. Their last resort is to make their plea public by drawing public attention to their suffering and sense of injustice. Writing for the Institute for Palestine Studies about the wave of self-burnings in the Middle East and Europe after 2010, Rashid Khalidi remarks that these are 'ordinary people making eminently reasonable demands for freedom, dignity, social justice, accountability, the rule of law and democracy' (Khalidi cited in Fierke 2013: 222). Their final act results from a process of precarization that reaches a point in which injustice begins to have a humiliating effect. When injustice is experienced as humiliation, the person's dignity is violated. The dead letter of international law (United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, Article 1) would mean, in practice, that dignity relates not only to a right to life but to a right to quality of life.[6]

When the motives of self-burning are relegated to the personal, the values associated with the right to quality of life in the rationale of the act are discounted. The actor is regarded as an individual who personally suffers injustice, someone who is over-sensitive, inflexible or not robust and resilient enough to adapt to 'changes' caused by infrastructural failures. Rather than a martyr, who is applauded for audacity and generosity, the actor is regarded as a victim—someone who can no longer master their life but then becomes sovereign in refusing life under these conditions (Fierke 2013: 101–2; Michelsen 2016: 142). Any argument for individual sovereignty reflects the liberal habit of thought that consists in aligning agency with a strong notion of intentionality. This is characteristic of both the mainstream approaches that seek to politically ennoble the 'victim' by attributing them sovereignty in the last instance and leftist-militant views. Within the latter approach, 'necroresistance' is a prominent concept coined by Bargu in praise of a negative form of biopolitical struggle, a 'counterconduct to the administration of life' (2014: 85) 'based not on the affirmation of life but on its willful destruction' (27). Similarly, Katsouraki has argued that the will to self-destruct here also implies the destruction of the power regime that has hindered and diminished one's life. Thus, self-destruction figures as a 'second death' that, on the one hand, re-enacts the originary violence of precarization and, on the other, protests against it by reclaiming the life that was 'stolen' (2017: 151).

We have learned from the exemplary cases of Bouazizi and Louvradoux that it is not possible in all cases of self-burnings out of precarity to distinguish between spontaneity

[6] Article 1 of United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 states: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.' While the whole document emphasizes the notions of equality and freedom in the Western modern tradition after the French Revolution and its Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, it doesn't properly define 'dignity', but connects it loosely to 'brotherhood', as if solidarity arises from respecting the dignity of everyone. https://bit.ly/3gYtrEm

and premeditation in the act; in most cases the ground of strong intentionality isn't guaranteed. The claim that these self-incinerations transform the body from a 'site of subjection' to a 'site of insurgency' (Bargu 2014: 85) applies to politically articulated self-burnings, as is, exceptionally, the case of Anas K. By contrast, the self-burnings I am engaging with here are liminal, and their political import (qua forms of political protest) hinges on an interpretative intervention that elucidates the transindividual dimension of the act. Thus, in what follows I suggest that the focus ought to shift from the agency of the self-burner to the affective power of the act to 'transindividuate'.

TRANSINDIVIDUALITY IN SELF-DESTRUCTION

What enables us to regard self-burnings out of precarity as *transindividual* acts of dissent? The question is raised against the arguments outlined above, in which such acts are dismissed as highly individualistic actions even when they are granted the status of political protest. If we follow the argument about suicide as a 'bad death' then death by self-burning at first appears to counter-actualize the potential for renewing a collective because it subtracts the individual's power in a collective to co-evolve in relation to others. In Simondon's terms, self-destruction amounts to 'subjective disaster' of psychic individuation alone, which he described as 'anxiety':

> In anxiety, the subject becomes their own object, the problems surge back on them alone, without being resolved in the collective. There is no world, because the subject becomes the world, filling out the times and spaces in which problems emerge. (Simondon 2005: 250)

Reading Simondon with early Marx (1959), the purported individualism of the act is a result of alienation from oneself: the individual is degraded and desubjectified as their power for social transformation is weakened to the extent that they do not see another way out than death. But how do they enact death? 'The transindividual is defined by everything that surpasses the individual while it prolongs them' (Simondon 2005: 274). The conflict between the actor's witnessing the truth of injustice and the affective excess carried by this witnessing is amplified through the rage and self-consumption of the act of self-incineration. As emotions and actions, these are transindividual expressions that surpass the individual when they become public. Performing them in public doesn't restore sovereignty to the individual (as the liberal argument contends); on the contrary, the act opens up an opportunity for the public to understand the social interdependency that underlies all lives. It does so by posing a problem for the public witness in questions as to why, how, when and in relation to who and what has the individual decided to self-incinerate.

The sheer theatrics of self-burning in which an individual offers themself up, and the performances of the self in which the right to body, health, happiness and intense life is exercised, stand side by side. This juxtaposition forces a reflection upon the reasons for this irreparable act in relation to others, even if the act isn't explicitly framed as being committed on behalf of others. If the self-burner acts as a witness to social injustice, the public (even remote) bystander of the act becomes the second-degree witness to the act of self-annihilation. Bearing responsibility for things seen first- and second-degree, the bystander asks: how am I implicated in this act of self-destruction? To affirm the transindividual expression of the act, one puts themself in relation to it. This shouldn't be misconceived as guilting oneself for not having prevented a suicide. Rather, it compels one to engage in untangling one's own stake in the situation where some lives are enhanced and others are diminished. Such an operation is illustrated by the Adornian question that Butler elaborates in her *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015):

> Implicit in the question of how to live a good life in a bad life is the idea that we might still think about what a good life might be, that we can no longer think of it exclusively in terms of the good life of the individual. If there are two such 'lives'—my life and the good life, understood as a social form of life—then the life of the one is implicated in the life of the other. (Butler 2015: 214)

The implication of one's life in the life of the

other who chooses death over an unsustainable life brings forth the transindividual perspective precipitated by the ordeal of self-burning. 'If you don't see me, I will burn myself'—these words encapsulate the call of the public to be more than an audience of the ordeal. In Simondon's account of the transindividual, this means: 'To discover the signification of the message originating from one or several beings, is to form a collective with them, it is to individuate the individuation of the group with them' (2005: 298). The ordeal calls for a transindividual encounter in which the individual becomes aware of what in themself is more-than-individual, that is, held in common, and, in this case, it is the question of 'good life' and of dignity as the right to quality of life beyond survival. If the onus is on us, who attend to this act, to interpret the message by implicating ourselves, then our response might be to further the call for a transindividual politics dedicated to transforming suffering from a struggle to sustain one's life into a struggle to live within a just world.

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