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Barbarism in Simone Weil (1909–1943)

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The philosophical work of Simone Weil has two fundamental characteristics. The first one is the importance of *lived experience and action* in her reflections. The second one is, due to that vital way in which she constructs her reflections, that ideas move *dialectically*. These two elements are essential when categories are developed and this methodical stance is relevant to understanding her notion of *barbarism*.

Based on her experiences during the Spanish Civil War, Weil expanded on her notion of barbarism, taking into account the historical, anthropological and spiritual planes. As Canciani writes: “The war in Spain represents a moment of crisis in her intellectual and spiritual evolution and inaugurates a true change of perspective that is also reflected in the options of her glossary” (Canciani 2010, 130). New interpretative categories appeared in Simone Weil's thought, replacing and moving away from that of *social oppression*, which had been her most comprehensive topic up to that moment, certainly in the context of her studies about the struggle of the working class, thus also paving the way for the use of barbarism.

In her text “Réflexion sur la barbarie” she proposes to interpret barbarism as an essential basis for the formation of individuals: “I would like to propose considering barbarism as a permanent and universal character of human nature, which develops more or less depending on how circumstances are presented to them” (Weil 1960, 26). The development of this human essentiality depends on the circumstances in which the individual develops herself. Due to the circumstantial nature of the development of this feeling or action, her notion of barbarism, also, reaches a dimension that is not only metaphysical, but political. Therefore, she complements this definition of barbaric action in a society, as depending on the distribution of economic, political, social, and cultural forces. Societies, therefore, would always be on a scale of values ranging from bad (barbarism as evil) to good (absence of barbarism).

With the development of civilizations, the ways in which we understand the notion of barbarism have varied. Weil suggests it is a form of approach to the other, based on survival, competition and cruelty, which exists alongside spaces where the means of production are unevenly distributed and a hegemonic order prevails. A person who does

not have power cannot be barbaric against the one who does. Lastly, with the exception of a few human beings, Weil writes: "either by an exclusive and aristocratic esteem of intellectual culture, or by ambition, or by a kind of idolatry of history and a dreamed future, or because they confuse the firmness of the soul with insensitivity, that is, finally, they lack imagination, they adapt very well to barbarism and consider it as an indifferent detail or as a useful instrument" (Cf. Weil 1960, 28).

In this way, the metaphysical-political character of barbarism proposes to pay more attention, precisely, to the notion of barbarism, which can help us understand the human being living in communities.

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Keywords:

Barbarism, force, metaphysic, politic, experience, action