# Chapter 5
# Simone Weil's Social Philosophy: Toward a Post-Colonial Ethic

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**Abstract** In 1943, at the request of the Free French Committee in London, Simone Weil wrote "*The Need for Roots*," a manuscript outlining the possibilities for renewing France after the war. In it, Weil outlines the primary needs of the human being for *rootedness* and the (im) possibilities of the state in accommodating these needs. The state of France was unable to do so because it was engaged in colonialism.

I will argue that Weil makes three important points as regards the possibilities of politics. First, she locates European (and specifically French) colonialism historically in the collusion of Christianity and the Roman Empire in the fourth century. It was this collusion, she argues, that created the dominant ideology of the west, that of progress. Second, she shows how this ideology functioned (and, I will argue, still functions) in the destruction and uprooting of countless *other* peoples and cultures. She then tries to expose this ideology as producing the uprooting, violent and totalizing tendencies of Europe (whether that be fascism, communism, colonialism or even present day democracy). Third, I show how Weil's critique of this ideology is rooted in two unlikely sources: (1) a rigorous materialism, grounded in a reading of Marx, and (2) the ideal of *justice* found both in the French Revolution and the Gospels. These sources allow her to offer a critique, like that of many feminists, of the omnipresence of western power. Weil undertakes her critique in the hope of minimizing some of this violence so that France and her citizens could be *properly* rooted—in work and toward her neighbors.

**Keywords** Simone Weil · Rootedness · Colonialism · Materialism · Marx

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> *In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and third World people, working-class people, older people, and women.*
> (Lorde 1984, p. 114).

> *We all live by treading on human beings, but we do not give it a thought; it takes a special effort to remember them.*
> (Little 2003, p. 168).

## Introduction

At the height of World War II, while working for the Free French in London, Simone Weil produced several articles on the challenges her country would face after the war. Of primary import to her was colonialism. "The problem of a doctrine or a faith to inspire the French people in France, in their present resistance and in future reconstruction, cannot be separated from the colonial problem" (Little 2003, p. 106). Her conviction was that France's "undoing" in the war was due to her "colonial greediness and ill-treatment of foreigners."[1] She concluded that it would be impossible for France to be rooted after the war, either socially or politically, if she participated in the destruction and uprooting of others. Weil wanted to minimize these tendencies so that France could become a less oppressive society. In order to do so, she argued that France must have a firm grasp of the very real structures underlying colonialism. Without this, she predicted that her country would be consigned to reproducing this destruction, as became fatefully clear in the Algerian war.

Weil's task became uncovering the social structures that produced and promoted colonialism. Her thinking began with the assertion that colonialism revealed a society motivated, in the words of Audre Lorde, by profit rather than need. I will use the word *profit* broadly in this chapter to signify a society motivated by what the early Marx called a "sense of having."[2] As we will see later, Weil rooted this desire for profit in what she identified as a tension within collective existence. On the one hand, this desire to have more helps ensure safety and security for individuals and communities. On the other, it creates rivalries among social groups for resources. This in turn leads to suffering and oppression, as evidenced by colonialism. For Weil, it is a paradox: human beings must live together, but this living together inevitably produces various rivalries and causes oppression.

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[1] Weil (2001, p. 86). See also Little (2003, pp. 29–30).

[2] Marx (1992, p. 351). Europe, in Marx's eyes, is contaminated by this "sense" of having. Kristeva offers another approach to this problem of "having" when she notes that even *love* has become determined by political forces. See Kristeva (1987, pp. 1–18).

This chapter suggests that Weil's analysis of colonialism offered a way to rethink this social tension by unmasking the tendency toward profit in French society. I begin by briefly discussing Weil's assessment of her contemporary situation and the uprooting it caused. Next, I turn to an exposition of her methodology, which is rooted in a unique appropriation of three seemingly unrelated sources—Marx, Greek philosophy, and Christianity. I show how this fusion of sources produced a radical conclusion: that any social production—political, religious, or economic—necessarily oppresses. Then, I move on to discuss how Weil employs this methodology to understand the particular dynamic of French colonialism. This entails unmasking an ideology that lay hidden at the heart of French society: progress. Rather than freeing society, Weil argued that *progress* increasingly pushed it towards profitability. In concluding, I will present the possibility that Weil offered French society for re-rooting itself. Her answer was rooted in what is both *un*profitable and *un*social: attending to need. Throughout this chapter, I propose that this attunement to need, along with an awareness of the complex hybridity of late modern existence, and use of Marx links her work to that of later anti-colonial thinkers, feminists, and even postcolonial theorists.

Basically, I show how Weil's critique of the dominant western ideology of progress is rooted in two unlikely sources: (1) a rigorous materialism, grounded in a reading of Marx, and (2) the ideal of *justice* found both in the French Revolution and the Gospels. These sources allow her to offer a critique, like that of many feminists, of the omnipresence of western power. Weil undertakes her critique in the hope of minimizing some of this violence so that France and her citizens could be *properly* rooted—in work and in attending to her neighbors.

## Uprooting

Writing a decade after Weil, the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire observed that European civilization had wrought two major problems in the world that it refused to address: the proletariat and colonialism (Césaire 2000, p. 31). To this assessment, Weil would have added a third: war. Reflecting upon French society before and during World War II she saw only impoverished workers, dead soldiers, and dehumanized people in the colonies. Whereas Marx spoke of alienation, Weil diagnosed the situation as uprooting: of worker from the means of production; of soldier from homes and families; and most significantly, of the colonized from their land, traditions, and histories. "Every time an Arab or an Indochinese is insulted without being able to answer back, beaten without being able to fight back, starved without being able to protest, killed without recourse to justice, it is France that is dishonored. And she is dishonored in this way, alas, every day" (Little 2003, p. 48). What Weil pointed to was the dual nature of France's destruction—not only in oppressing others, but also by sanctioning this destruction through various policies at home.

The most profound and violent form of uprooting was manifest in colonialism, for it denied others of their histories, cultures, and traditions—their roots.

> The harm that Germany would have done to Europe if Britain had not prevented the German victory is the harm that colonization does, in that it uproots people. It would have deprived people of their past. The loss of the past is the descent into colonial enslavement. This harm that Germany tried in vain to do to us, we did to others. Through our fault, little Polynesians recite in school: "Our ancestors the Gauls had blond hair and blue eyes...." Alain Gerbault has described, in books that have been widely read but have had no influence, how we make these populations literally die of sadness, by forbidding their customs, their traditions, their celebrations, their whole enjoyment of life.... By depriving peoples of their tradition, of their past, and thus of their soul, colonization reduces them to the state of matter, but matter that is human (Little 2003, pp. 110–111).

Here Weil exposed the very real existential effects of colonialism.[3] I propose that this concern with uprooting links her to anti- and post-colonial thinkers, like Frantz Fanon and Edward Said.[4] Fanon echoed her concern later, writing, ". . .every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality" (Fanon 1991, pp. 18, 34).

It is ironic, Weil argued, that France emphasized her own culture, history, and roots but refused to see that of others. This situation revealed that France, thinking only of its own good, produced a society that ignored the needs of others. In Weil's thinking, rootedness occurred when societies were attuned to the needs of individuals, fostering the fulfillment of material and social needs. In a crucial caveat, however, she disassociated rootedness from nationalism. She is clear that nationalisms, especially in her time, only produced destruction, whether in the form of fascism, communism, capitalism or democratism.[5] These nationalisms, as we will see later, were tied to specific notions of conquest that Weil rejected. Having briefly identified the destruction caused by France's colonialism, I now turn to Weil's analysis of the conditions that produced this destruction. And for this, we will have to look to her Marx.

## A Marxist Method of Social Analysis

I suggest that Weil's reflections on colonialism are rooted in a specific appropriation of Marx. Like many anti-colonial and postcolonial thinkers, she did not accept

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[3] "Every one knows that there are forms of cruelty that can injure a man's life without injuring his body. They are such as deprive him of a certain form of food necessary to the life of the soul" (Weil 2001, p. 7).

[4] See Fanon (1991, 2004). Also, Said (1994, 2003).

[5] "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" (Weil 1962, p. 159).

Marx categorically or literally follow *what* he said about colonialism.[6] Rather, she employed his *materialist* method to read France's situation.

> 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, the method of production. The materialistic method—that instrument which Marx bequeathed us—is an untried instrument (Weil 1973, p. 46).

For Weil, a materialist analysis meant addressing these "certain fixed conditions." This implied asking questions about the structuring of society: why is it construed a certain way? What interests does it serve? How does it operate? Who does it benefit?

Beginning materially allowed Weil to provide some answers to these questions, by dealing with the social aspects of existence.[7]

> Marx was the first and, unless I am mistaken, the only one—for his researches were not followed up—to have the twin idea of taking society as the fundamental human fact and of studying therein, as the physicist does in matter, the relationships of force. Here we have an idea of genius, in the full sense of the word. It is not a doctrine; it is an instrument of study, research, exploration and possibly construction for every doctrine that is not to risk crumbling to dust on contact with a truth.[8]

What Weil took from Marx was a desire to provide a genealogy of social forces.

In order to explain these social forces, she made a unique move and linked Marx's materialism to Greek philosophy.[9] Because they began thinking with the *polis*, she argued that the Greeks engaged in a certain form of materialism. Her Plato, for example, is much more concerned with contemplating social relationship (as we will see in the discussion of the Great Beast below) than with any forms.[10] Clearly, this is not the traditional Plato. However, the central Greek text on social force was for Weil even more ancient—Homer's *Iliad*. This work already revealed society in all its nakedness, governed by force, or might.

> And as pitilessly as might crushes, so pitilessly it maddens whoever possesses, or believes he possesses it. None can every truly possess it. The human race is not divided, in the Iliad, between the vanquished, the slaves, the suppliants on the one hand, and conquerors and

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[6]For a more detailed and complete view of Weil's Marxism, see Weil (1973) and Blum and Seidler (1989). For a more complete view of the limits of Marx's ideas about colonialism, see Young (2001, Chapter 8).

[7]Historically, she followed Marx in asserting that social relationships underwent a radical transformation when human beings were no longer subject to material forces (nature) and instead, became subject to one another. As human beings increasingly subdued nature, or material forces, Weil observed that they became more oppressive toward one another. Instead of directing force onto matter, human beings started to level it onto one another. See Weil (1973, pp. 37–56).

[8]Weil (1973, p. 171). Blum and Seidler (1989, p. 76). See also Balibar (1996).

[9]It would be interesting to explore the relationship between Weil's Plato and her Marx. How does her reading of Marx influence her Plato and how does her version of Plato affect her understanding of Marx?

[10]Weil (1998, p. 132). See also Weil (1973, p. 180).

> masters on the other. No single man is to be found in it who is not, at some time, forced to bow beneath might (Weil 1998, p. 31).

Homer revealed might as the central force of social life, ruling over all, oppressed and oppressor alike.[11] From this, Weil offered a dire conclusion: "Human history is simply the history of the servitude which makes men—oppressors and oppressed alike—the plaything of the instruments of domination they themselves have manufacture, and thus reduces living humanity to being the chattel of inanimate chattels" (Weil 1973, p. 69). Weil concluded that might was foundational to society; it is a force that is outside the purview of any one person and to which all are subject.

Whereas the Greeks identified might as very real, they also designated it as mysterious, or the work of the gods. In other words, might for the Greeks was real, but not intelligible. Weil suggested that Marx's genius lay in clarifying this seemingly mysterious might. He did so by proposing to understand social forces "as a physicist understands matter" (Weil 1973, p. 71). Although they are constantly changing and increasingly intricate, "an extraordinary tangle of guerilla forces," these social forces could be delineated (Weil 1973, p. 180). In one essay, Weil suggested mapping them just as astronomers map the heavens. "It is useful to make an abstract diagram of this interplay of actions and reactions, rather in the same way as astronomers have had to invent an imaginary celestial sphere so as to find their way about among the movements and positions of stars" (Weil 1973, p. 71). That is, although the social relationships that determine might are incredibly complex and not self-evident, there are nevertheless *real* connections between them.

For Weil these underlying relationships of might were constituted by a very real material desire that demands expansion.

> For Marx showed clearly that the true reason for the exploitation of the workers is not any desire on the part of the capitalists to enjoy and consume, but the need to expand the undertaking as rapidly as possible so as to make it more powerful than its rivals. Now not only a business undertaking, but any sort of working collectivity, no matter what it may be, has to exercise the maximum restraint on the consumption of its members so as to devote as much time as possible to forging weapons for use against rival collectivities; so that as long as there is, on the surface of the globe, a struggle for power, and as long as the decisive factor in victory is industrial production, the workers will be exploited (Weil 1973, p. 40).

What interested Weil were these rival collectivities. To her they revealed an "absurdity" at the heart of social existence: that every collective, every social group has a necessarily unlimited desire for power, or expansion.[12] That is, social forces—not any one individual—are constructed by an insatiable desire for more, for profit.

The interest of any collective is to multiply, increase, progress, or profit. The growth of *nations*, like the production of *capitalism* clearly revealed to Weil the dynamic of insatiable desire. The necessary characteristic of any society (at least in the west), however small, is profit, or expansion, or progress. Weil echoed Marx in asserting that this drive for profit does not occur simply for the sake of having

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[11] This is an idea suggested by the Ghanaian leader, Kwame Nkrumah, see Young (2001, p. 47).

[12] Weil (1973, p. 71). See also Blum and Seidler (1989, p. 73).

more, but rather because of the dynamic of rivalry. "Every power, from the mere fact that it is exercised, extends to the farthest possible limit the social relations on which it is based; thus military power multiplies wars, commercial capital multiplies exchanges" (Weil 1973, pp. 73–74). National powers must multiply their resources, so they colonize. The colonies provide new resources for the state of France to function on a larger scale.

Weil argued that this logic of profit determined all social relationships in the west. Although this appears to be a universal pronouncement, she complexified it by noting that these relationships are incredibly complicated and ever changing: social forces in France differ from England, and social forces within France within different spheres mesh with and differ from each other. I suggest that this attention to these "tangles of guerilla forces" has similarities to the notion of hybridity proposed by post-colonial thinkers, like Homi Bhabha.[13] Their various permutations make them difficult to map, or understand and underscore the way in which all persons are enmeshed, entwined within them.

The most insidious aspect of this logic of profit in Weil's eyes was its determination of the moral sphere. To express this point she offered a provocative reading of Plato's *Republic*. She began by arguing that Plato's "Great Beast" in the *Republic* is social force and that this "beast" determines all reality. ". . .[S]ocial matter is the cultural and proliferating medium par excellence for lies and false beliefs. . . all men are absolutely incapable of having on the subject of good and evil opinions other than those dictated by the reflexes of the beast" (Weil 1973, p. 180). In an even more provocative move, she suggested that Plato's cave offered a paradigm for how social forces acted. In this myth, human beings are "chained" to a cave wall where they take reality to be the images that they see appearing on the walls. Little do they (we) know that these images are projected onto the wall by puppets. Weil surmised that the puppets represented the social forces that determined the "images" human beings take as reality. Society understands them as real, rather than projected by specific forces.

Human beings are, Weil concluded, incapable of seeing what projects/determines their reality: be it moral, religious, political, or economic forces. What is important to Weil is that no one can escape these social forces; they are beyond the control of any one individual. If this logic of profit is definitive and does indeed determine everything, Weil's conclusion is dire: colonialism and Hitler are not aberrations, but rather logical extension of western power. It is because colonialism was seen as profiting French society that it was determined as good, or just, or necessary for France. This is why there was so little opposition to it. The natural attitude became one of colonizing. Social forces projected the image of colonialism as profitable onto the screen of French society.

Having located the insatiable desire for power as the social force that defined France in her time, she asked how this desire was propagated. The answer was

[13] Weil (1973, p. 180). See also Bhabha (1994).

provided by another Marxist term—ideology. "We must pose once again the fundamental problem, namely, what constitutes the bond which seems hitherto to have united social oppression and progress in the relations between man and nature?" (Weil 1973, p. 78). Although it seems that progress should make society less oppressive, Weil argues that it has not. This is the case because the idea of progress both reflects and masks the insatiable desire for power underlying it. In order to reveal this ideology, Weil turns to an examination of French society.

## Mapping French Society: An Ideology of Progress

Given the underlying forces of society described above, I suggest that Weil saw the western attitude as a colonial one from its very inception. As regards France, she observed that the nation was "brought about almost exclusively by the most brutal conquests" of "the inhabitants of Provence, Brittany, Alsace and Franche-Comté" (Weil 2001, pp. 145, 144). The defining characteristic of French society was conquest in any of its various forms—war, feudalism, slavery, capitalism, democracy, or colonialism.[14] Her critique of France was rooted in what many contemporary political theorists identify as uneasiness with the idea of progress.[15] This idea suggested that society, or politics was constantly improving itself and becoming better. Often this idea was attributed to Enlightenment notions of individual rights and autonomous subjects, ideas of freedom and democracy, and an emphasis on scientific discovery. However, unlike political theorists and perhaps even Marx, Weil located the problem of progress prior to the Enlightenment—in the fourth-century collusion between Rome and Christianity.

What makes Weil's critique of colonialism unique in this respect is its positioning in a much earlier Christian and imperial logic.

> The modern superstition in regard to progress is a by-product of the lie thanks to which Christianity became turned into the official Roman religion; it is bound up with the destruction of the spiritual treasures of those countries which were conquered by Rome, with the concealment of the perfect continuity existing between these treasures and Christianity, with an historical conception concerning the Redemption, making of the latter a temporal operation instead of an eternal one. Subsequently, the idea of progress became laicized; it is now the bane of our times (Weil 2001, p. 229).

For Weil, the collusion of Christianity and Rome determined the fate of western European power and France for the ensuing centuries. This union produced a marriage in which both systems benefited. The state was given a religious justification for its conquests, and the church received the tools of the state to enhance its power. This in turn provided profits in the form of money, property, and citizens/converts

[14] In this way she differs from Sartre, who distinguishes between annexation, colonialism, and genocide, and Young, who distinguishes between colonialism, imperialism, neocolonialism, and postcolonialism. It is not that Weil would disagree with their analysis, it is that she would place them all under the same oppressive French *system*. See Young (2001) and Sartre's "On Genocide."

[15] See Brown (2001).

(albeit forced). Locating the historic roots of colonialism was important to Weil because the *idea* of Rome continued to shape politics in her time. Césaire made a similar connection: "that colonial enterprise is to the modern world what Roman imperialism was to the ancient world: the prelude to Disaster and the forerunner of Catastrophe" (Césaire 2000, p. 74). For Weil, colonialism revealed France's inability to extricate itself from the Roman view.

This view was shaped by what I will call an *ideology of progress* that Weil argued was rooted in a reading of Christianity that prioritized the idea of teleology. This reading advanced the notion that history was moving toward a specific goal; whether the realization of the kingdom of God, the triumph of the empire, the actualization of consciousness or in a more contemporary example, the development of global markets.[16] For Weil, as we will see in the final section, this form of Christianity was a lie, contrary to the *real* Gospel message. The lie that rooted the ideology of progress was that salvation could be found in society, in this finite world, through the church and state. For Weil, this ideology materialized in two dominant forms—Christian and scientific.

The first and earlier form concerned the idea of salvation history. This was rooted in the dominant theology that developed after the fourth century: a belief that with the coming of Jesus, human history was altered in a fundamental way that would determine the future of all humanity. The salvation brought by Jesus and later bestowed by the church would help humanity progress toward the kingdom of God. Building this kingdom depended upon a clear rejection of other forms of religion (as well as states and cultures) as regressive, barbaric or primitive. This type of "exclusivist" Christianity only produced uprooting, negating what Weil saw as the very heart of the Christian message. Paradoxically, she observed that "missionary zeal has not Christianized Africa, Asia and Oceania, but has brought these territories under the cold, cruel and destructive domination of the white race, which has trodden everything."[17] This, for Weil, revealed the way the church, no less than any other institution, was dominated by the logic of profit.

The second form taken by the ideology of progress arrived with the advent of modernity when the faith once placed in Christianity became transposed onto science. Just as much as the previous religion, Weil argued that science could function as an *opiate* of the people: demanding absolute belief and promising salvation. The mission to convert was replaced by France's mission to civilize mission (*mission civilisatrice*). Instead of promoting the cross, or Jesus, it now brought modernity through the guise of French values, education, language, science, and technology. It was no longer religion that was forced upon those conquered, but rather a language and civilization "benevolently bequeathed" to the colonized. Weil is clear that both

[16]This notion of teleology could be seen as culminating in Hegel's philosophy of history.

[17]Weil (2003, p. 42). "...[In] any case Christ never said that warships should accompany, even at a distance, those who bring the good news. Their presence changes the nature of the message. It is difficult to retain the supernatural virtues attributed to the blood of the martyrs when it is avenged by force of arms. You are asking for more trumps in your hand than is allowed when you want at one and the same time Caesar and the Cross" (Little 2003, p. 108).

forms of conquest—Christian and scientific—are equally problematic. They both serve and are intimately linked with state interests to maximize the profits of those in power, be they priests, politicians, scientists, technocrats, or capitalists (all of whom assume that they govern by divine right).

Weil also emphasized one of the most insidious aspects that developed from this ideology—that of the centralized state.

> The relative security we enjoy in this age, thanks to a technology which gives us a measure of control over nature, is more than cancelled out by the dangers of destruction and massacre in conflicts between groups of men... In the end, a study of modern history leads to the conclusion that the national interest of every State consists in its capacity to make war... What a country calls its vital economic interests are not the things which enable its citizens to live, but the things which enable it to make war. 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 (Weil 1962, p. 154).

It is this idea of statehood—rooted in and perpetuated by Christianity and modern technology—that characterized France in Weil's time.

Having mapped the structure of this ideology of progress in France, I now turn to show how Weil described its deleterious effects in French society. The first was the emphasis on the state, or group, over the individual. As previously noted, in understanding society, Weil posed the paradox of collective existence: it is both necessary and at the same time oppressive. On the one hand, community "roots" individuals. On the other, any collective or social group demands the suppression of the individual by imposing various limits. In order to progress, the state demands sacrifices: workers forgo material needs, soldiers give their lives and colonials are stripped of their independence and roots. The power of this ideology of progress was in having convinced its citizens that this oppression is either necessary and/or normal.[18] That is, society accepted that sacrifices are perceived as "necessary" for the progression of French society.

More profoundly, Weil noted the insidious character of this (and any) ideology: it permeates and determines the course of French society—without being recognized—from its inception. Ideologies are problematic because they are unseen and yet pervasive.

> Marx's conception is that the moral atmosphere of a given society—an atmosphere which permeates everywhere and combines with the morality peculiar to each social group—is itself composed of a mixture of group moralities whose dosage precisely reflects the amount of power exercised by each group. . .. Everyone will be governed by it, but no one will be conscious of the fact, for each will think that it is a question, not of some particular conception, but of a way of thinking inherent in human nature (Weil 1973, p. 183).

Given the power of ideology in shaping morality, it was no surprise to Weil that the majority of French did not oppose colonialism. Because colonialism was perceived

[18] What was important to Weil was that this *convincing* occurred through fixed conditions, not through conscious arguments.

as necessary to France, and to France's strength as a nation, it was sanctioned. The French *natural attitude* (in all its phenomenological resonance) accepted the necessity of force underlying French society and the ideology that perpetuated it.

The second dynamic unmasked by Weil concerned relationships between individuals. Because social forces are constantly trying to maximize their profits, they ignore the humanity of individuals. That is, people are seen and treated as objects, or things, rather than subjects. This is clear in colonialism, where human beings become "subjects" to be converted, civilized, and exploited for the benefit of the interests of the state of France. Weil observed that already with the *Iliad*, might was understood as transforming human beings into things (Weil 1998, p. 45). Because French society was concerned with its own progress as a world power, it used its individuals: workers, soldiers, and those colonized. Human beings were treated like *tools* that could be used for creating profit. Weil argued that this destructive tendency must be addressed.

However, Weil's conclusion appears dire: if French society, in the name of progress, necessarily breeds oppression, colonialism is no aberration, but rather a logical outgrowth of French society. For Weil, as for Césaire and Fanon after her, colonialism and fascism should come as no surprise, because the conditions for their possibility are embedded in the foundations of French and western society. Given the power of these ideologies, Weil realized the impossibility of any real change in France. That is, she saw French society as continuing to function under this ideology and thus perpetuating its power and progress in various forms, as may be evidenced more recently by global capitalism.

## Conclusion: Risking *Good*

With a Marxist approach to history, Weil revealed French society to be structured by an ideology of progress that is characterized by a desire for power and a suppression of individual needs in favor of the collective. Although she had little hope of society transforming society, she did suggest a way to address, and perhaps even minimize, the oppressions they produced. The key was not to produce more of "the same." If society is necessarily oppressive, the tools for questioning it cannot be found within any social structure, whether political, economic or religious. That is, social forces cannot counter other social forces in hopes of producing change.

> To imagine that we can switch the course of history along a different track by transforming the system through reforms or revolutions, to hope to find salvation in a defensive or offensive action against tyranny and militarism—all that is just day-dreaming (Weil 1973, p. 117).

This idea that social forces cannot transform themselves would be echoed years later by Audre Lorde when she wrote, ". . .the master's tools will never dismantle

the master's house."[19] Adopting the tools and tactics of social forces would eventually perpetuate those same social forces, albeit in a different guise. As an example, Weil cites revolutionary movements that have overthrown an oppressive regime only to then perpetuate a similar oppression.This idea, of a different method links Weil also to other later feminists, who would propose a "third way" of approaching, or thinking, society.[20] However, Weil acknowledged that doing so was almost impossible.[21]

Her approach is rooted in a very specific understanding of what she terms *good*, that she found in both Greek philosophy and Christianity. Because this good cannot be achieved through social processes, it lies outside the traditional social order. Mary Dietz observed that for Weil, "Homer's gift is his ability to reject a social reality in which force is perceived in terms of 'strong versus weak' and conceive of a deeper reality in which both Greek and Trojan are recognized as equally human and equally vulnerable before force" (Dietz 1988, p. 91). Good, for Weil, could not be produced by any ideology. It always exceeded social constructions of strong/weak or good/evil. That is, Weil's *good* is situated *outside* any symbolic/social ordering.

Likewise, the good exceeds materialism. This materialism was crucial to Weil, because it provided an understanding of the very real social forces that shaped reality. However, what materialism could not account for, precisely because it was not materially located or manufactured, was the good. Whereas Marx gave her a way of accounting for social force, the Greeks and Christianity offered Weil an idea of what *exceeded* this force.[22] This was not any one thing, or idea, or ideology, or morality, or even religion. Rather, it was supernatural, transcendent and beyond this world. Neither could this good be understood as some abstract Platonic form, floating above society. Weil argued that it was *beyond the world* in order to show that it exceeded the ordering of society along various ideologies. The crucial point she made was locating the good not above the world but within it: the good is known in its enactment—where it appears. In order to illustrate this, she offered numerous examples.

The first was Antigone, who in burying her brother, rejected the laws of the state in favor of unwritten laws, whose "life is not of today or yesterday but from all time and no man knows when they were put forth" (Weil 1998, p. 454). The second

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[19]Lorde (1984, pp. 110–113, 123).

[20]See Anzaldúa (1999), especially "La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness", and Kristeva (1984). For Weil, this "third way" was already present with the Greeks, especially Plato (see Weil 1998).

[21]Weil acknowledges the difficulty when she writes: However, events do not wait; time will not stop in order to afford us leisure; the present forces itself urgently on our attention and threatens us with calamities which would bring in their train, amongst many other harrowing misfortunes, the material impossibility of studying or writing otherwise than in the service of the oppressors. What are we to do?" (1973, p. 60).

[22]In Weil's view, Marx's account of society, in which everything was determined by force, was limited. Although she agreed with Marx that relationships of force are determinative, she wanted to maintain a space for countering this force. This space, however small, was composed of what she would call *good*, or justice, or love. See the discussion in Weil (1973, p. 171).

example was from the Gospels: the Samaritan who cared for the man beaten and left for dead by the side of the road. Weil offered other models: Prometheus, Electra, Plato's "just man," Job, Jesus, Arjuna, and Joan of Arc (but not the one propagated by the State). These specific individuals and their actions are not derived from social forces. In fact, they all contradict social forces in one way or another. As such, they can be designated good, or even religious. However, when they appear, the social forces at play would rather repress them. As regards France, she noted with frustrations the case of Messali Hadj (the father of Algerian independence) who was continually imprisoned and tried by the French government (and a liberal one at that!), for demanding Algerian independence.[23]

These examples provide numerous illustrations of the good, but not a systematic explanation of it. As Antigone insisted, the good is always unwritten. Thus, one cannot offer a definitive description of it. By its very nature, it defies explanation. In fact, there is no actual *nature* for good because, like God, it remains mysterious and unknowable. And here we start to get a picture of Weil's Christianity. As noted above, Weil rejected the Church's institutionalization that began in the fourth century. The problem was that the Church wanted to prescribe this mystery—of God, of good—by creating various rules, dogmas, or formulas. Weil suggested that this desire to systematize Christianity ran counter to the Gospel message, that good remains hidden, or secret. Instead, she proposed completely rethinking Christianity.[24] That is, Weil believed there was a powerful Christian inspiration provided in the Gospels. But the inspiration remained hidden, inaccessible to socialization. It was known in its revealing, which remained unpredictable. Of import to Weil was that this inspiration had more in common with other religions than it did with any church dogmatics.

Although one cannot systematize the good, it can be recognized and Weil's examples provide glimpses of what this involves. One definitive image is that of the singular, the individual. The good is revealed through individuals, not through any group. This is critical. If social forces tend toward oppression, by limiting individuals, the only real *resistance* can arise from individuals. And in particular, the individual that resists. This individual is primarily characterized by an attentiveness to need—rooted in an obligation to the other, that she described as universal. "So it is an eternal obligation toward the human being not to let him suffer from hunger when one has the chance of coming to his assistance. This obligation being the most obvious of all. . ." (Weil 2001, p. 6).

What characterizes this obligation and Weil's individual is a particular renunciation. That is, good involves sacrifice, but a completely different sacrifice than the one demanded by the state. The final image for the good offered by Weil is a poignant one: the Gospel passage that calls for "losing the self." Here again, she has an interpretation that differs from traditional ones. Losing the self involved giving up the fixed realities we find ourselves in. That is, rejecting the very real

[23]This was the socialist led Popular Front government. See Little (2003) and Young (2001).

[24]This rethinking is the subject of Weil (2003).

social forces that determine our existence. Losing the self implies giving something up: the socially constructed self—the self that measured itself by and acted in accordance with social norms. The trick becomes not being duped by social forces (no matter how noble their motivations). She noted that this was, for most, impossible. Even if one can come to the point where they see the power of social forces, it is impractical to renounce them or change them. Human beings do not want to give up their safety and security, the reassurances offered by religious, economic, political and social systems. However, it is only by renouncing these negative social occlusions that one has *room* to respond to the other. Antigone and the Good Samaritan, in different ways, set aside their own safety, their own good, to respond to a need. Here Weil clearly identified how painful this good could be: countering social force required risk. Often, it involved great loss, or more likely, death. Most individuals are not willing to take this risk. If it is difficult for individuals to "lose themselves," for the sake of the good, it is practically impossible for social groups.

As regards France, Weil suggested that she risked all by renouncing her colonies. She had come to the conclusion, as Blum and Seidler observed, that "a precondition of the development of a politics adequate to human need is the institution of a voice for the oppressed at its center" (Blum and Seidler 1989, p. 192). For France to turn to those oppressed, she would have to renounce her colonies and improve working conditions at home. Doing so would most likely diminish her status in the world. This, Weil argued, was a risk for France, and one that most societies would not take, because it would be risking its very existence. Because societies are oriented around progressing and insuring their survival, they cannot afford this risk: it is always unprofitable. Although she pointed to the impossibility of this good being embodied in any social system, she does offer one counter-example, that of the Cathars. This was a unique group of Christians residing in the south of France in the fourteenth century. They were known for their tolerant and equitable faith. However, because of their heterodoxy, they were destroyed by the Albigensean crusade.

Weil's analysis of colonialism, through Marx's materialism, revealed the impossibility of any real change on a social level in France. However, it did open up the possibility of lessening oppression, in two ways. First, by constantly posing the question "what constitutes the bond which seems hitherto to have united social oppression and progress in the relations between man and nature?" Second, and most importantly, she offered the idea of lessening oppression through enactments of the good. These actions are rare, risky and seemingly insignificant. However, as Weil observed: "The decisive operation of the infinitely small is a paradox; the human intelligence has difficulty acknowledging it; but nature, which is a mirror of the divine truths, everywhere presents us with images of it. Catalysts, bacteria, fermenting agents are examples" (Weil 1973, p. 175). This infinitely small is the mustard seed found in the Gospels. Although rare, it is nevertheless, Weil concluded, incredibly effective and could just possibly help minimize France's colonizing tendencies.

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