

# Introduction

They say that they foster disorder in all its forms. Confusion troubles violent debates disarray upsets disturbances incoherences irregularities divergences complications disagreements discords clashes polemics discussions contentions brawls dispute conflicts routs débâcles cataclysms disturbances quarrels agitation turbulence conflagrations chaos anarchy.

Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, translated by David Le Vay, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007, p. 93.

## A political anthropology of civil conflict

This book analyses the conventions of the use of violence in managing a wide range of conflicts, in a colonial and subsequently a postcolonial context, taking occasions of resorting to violence, segmentary disputes and internal wars as a central theme, and a lens through which to analyse social relations in Houaïlou, New Caledonia. In short, as Michel Foucault suggested, I want to ask: ‘Can war serve as a useful tool for analysing relations of power?’ (Foucault 2003, p. 18). Through this approach, I hope to make visible a set of rationales for action deployed by the inhabitants of this region, the historical context of the problems they face and the categories of analysis that can be used to describe them. Examining social relations through the lens of conflict and segmentarity should thus make it possible to counter ‘an implicit definition of anthropology that identifies it *de facto* with a suspension of the political’ (Loraux 2006, p. 50). Nicole Loraux demonstrates how productive this approach can be in her article ‘Ares in the family’, a theme to which she returns in *The Divided City*, where she develops her analysis of *stásis*, ‘internecine war installed in the heart of the city’ (p. 35).

In his 1976 lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault argues, in opposition to juridical discourse, which is based on the sovereignty of the ruler and the subject's obligation of obedience, that there is a need to make space for a non-state discourse that reintroduces the complexity of real actions, confrontation and the defence of the rights and interests of the individual. Taking into account actual practices in conflict situations, investigating the detail of mechanisms, taking as a starting point power relations in all their diversity, their heterogeneity, their historicity and their complexity – in other words, as far as this study is concerned, taking seriously the statements of my Kanak interlocutors, whose discourse is always circumstanced, contextualised, and bound up with the relationship between the speaker and his interlocutors, means that the study needs to be firmly embedded within the field of empirical human sciences.<sup>1</sup> It also implies that politics needs to be thought within the spaces of autonomy that each individual strives to construct in the set of social situations s/he encounters, rather than purely within institutions. The key is to reintroduce the discourse of violence and contingency into our analysis of social relations:<sup>2</sup>

Explaining things from below also means explaining them in terms of what is most confused, most obscure, most disorderly and most subject to chance, because what is being put forward as a principle for the interpretation of society and its visible order is the confusion of violence, passions, hatreds, rages, resentments and bitterness; it is the obscurity of contingencies and all the minor incidents that bring about defeats and ensure victories. This discourse is essentially asking the elliptical god of battles to explain the long days of order, labor, peace and justice. (Foucault 2003, p. 54)

Such a perspective, Foucault tells us, 'develops completely within the historical dimension' (p. 55). My analysis, which continually links the description of spaces of political action to their historical context, will take this path.

In addressing 'conflict', my intention here is in no way to advance a specific theory of the nature of violence or the conflictual character of social relations, but rather to examine a number of social situations that have a political dimension, and show similarity in their combination of collective mobilisation and the use of physical violence. 'Violence',

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1 Foucault 2003, p. 40.

2 Foucault 2003, pp. 53–54.

as I propose to interpret it, is thus not an ontological category – a tragic figure of the impoverished human condition – rather, it constitutes a heuristic lever through which to approach social relations in both their singularity and their ordinariness.<sup>3</sup> Foucault, describing the new historico-political discourse that emerged in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, sums up one of its features thus: ‘War has not been averted’ (Foucault 2003, p. 50); in the view of the authors he goes on to consider, particularly Boulainvilliers, war continues under the ostensible rule of law. The present work similarly evokes the dual sense of the multiple meanings contained in the French word ‘*conjuración*’.<sup>4</sup> This seems to me an apt description of the Kanak social and political relations on which I seek to shed light here. Starting from the first sense, that of calling forth, I shall attempt to understand the place given to physical violence in social relations in Houaïlou, and to what extent local conflicts prompt interventions aimed at preventing them from degenerating, averting war and controlling violence. But drawing on the second sense, that of banishing, I shall counter this juridico-philosophical perspective, based on sovereignty, the chieftom, contractualisation and the ordering of collectively inhabited spaces, which is also that of Kanak public ceremonial discourse, with an oppositional reading that places emphasis on the historical and political dimensions of social reality. It will be understood that one can conjure war as conspirators, as rebels, as bandits and by preparing war in secret, as the *Conspiracy of the Comte de Fiesque* showed.<sup>5</sup> There is in fact an extensive Ajië<sup>6</sup> lexicon relating to secrets, dirty tricks and ambushes. In short, while conflicts can be ‘shut into the pot’ (*uxöwî*), compensated, settled and forgotten in order to better restore the social contract, following the Greek model of amnesty, there are contrary means – transmission of knowledge being one – of fanning ‘the fire under the pot’<sup>7</sup> in the dark, in the home rather than in front of others, maintaining a private hatred alongside public politeness: ‘For the universal principle of reciprocity that

3 Naepels 2006a. See Collins 2008; Nassiet 2011.

4 In the original French title, *Conjurer la Guerre*, the word ‘*conjurer*’ connotes both the sense of ‘conjuring up, summoning, plotting’ and that of ‘conjuring away, averting, banishing’ [trans.].

5 *La conjuration du Comte Jean-Louis de Fiesque (The Conspiracy of Count Jean-Louis de Fiesque)* (1665), in Cardinal de Retz, *Œuvres (Complete Works)*, Paris, Gallimard (1984), pp. 1–50. Translated from the Italian by the young Cardinal of Retz, this account relates to the history of Genoa in the 16th century.

6 In this book I use the spelling Ajië for the name of the language spoken in Houaïlou, as proposed by Aramiou, Euritéin and Kavivioro (2001) and Lercari (2002).

7 To adopt René Guiart’s phrase (2001).

applies to barter and gifts also applies to revenge' (Sofsky 2003, p. 195). And in effect, in New Caledonia a degree of accumulation of obligations and debts can be observed as much in violence as in exchange.

In this book I present a series of cross-sections through the colonial and postcolonial history of Houaïlou, an analysis of some historical moments and particular structures of power, which I have sought to reconstitute in their full density by depicting the interlocking contexts in which political action is played out. I focus particularly on two interconnected domains. Firstly, I examine practices of war, the forms and conventions of the use of physical violence, and the changes in these from the mid-19th century to the present day. Secondly, I strive to describe the social forms of mobilisation, the modes of constitution of collectives, particularly around institutions, that are sometimes treated as self-evident, such as the chieftdom and the council of elders, but also around forms that are more obviously historically contingent, such as ceremonial collectives or political parties. These two dimensions are linked on a number of levels: some inhabitants of Houaïlou were able to mobilise for the purpose of exercising physical violence, constituting ad hoc collectives (for example, during the pre-colonial or colonial wars analysed in the first three chapters, or at the height of the independence struggle described in Chapter 5); in other cases, mobilisations aimed at bringing order to villages' communal spaces led indirectly to violent action being taken (for example, in the context of the changes in governance structures that followed the ending of the *indigénat*,<sup>8</sup> in the 1950s, and since the 1990s, following the 'events' of the 1980s;<sup>9</sup> these periods are addressed in chapters 4 and 6 respectively). Focusing on the forms of physical violence, the efforts made to avoid it and the modalities by which it is instrumentalised leads me to touch on certain forms of subjectivation, whose complexity I have attempted to convey.

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8 The French colonial system of indirect rule exercised via indigenous rulers, organisations and officials. It was governed by the Code de l'Indigénat [trans.].

9 Disturbances and acts of violence (including hostage-taking) that followed the adoption of a series of statutes [trans.].

## Political anthropology, colonial and postcolonial history

In his essay ‘Three concepts of politics’, Étienne Balibar puts forward an analysis of the articulation between social relations, conceived as the pre-existing conditions of any political action, and power relations, conceived as constitutive at the scale of micropolitical strategies. It is at the intersection of these two dimensions, he suggests, that effects of subjectivation can be articulated:

Subjectivation is the collective individualization which occurs at the point where change changes, where ‘things begin to change differently’ – that is to say, wherever the *tendency* immanent in the system of historical conditions finds itself affected from within by the action of an equally immanent *counter-tendency*. (Balibar 2002, p. 13)

My argument is organised around the central thread of analysing episodes or scenes that take place precisely at such unresolved moments of change, where the modalities of government of the self and of others are rearticulated. These are as follows: the repressive operation conducted by the French military in 1856 (examined in Chapter 1), a further military operation conducted in 1867 in the Houailou valley (Chapter 2), the appointment of four paramount chiefs in the territory of Houailou municipality<sup>10</sup> in 1912 (Chapter 3), a witch-hunt conducted in the latter part of 1955 (Chapter 4), the period of the ‘events’ at the time of the mass independence movement between 1984 and 1988 (Chapter 5), and finally the situation during the early 2000s (Chapter 6). By focusing on such moments I am able to give an account of what can be known about subjective experiences, moral sentiments, and modalities of work on the self through ecstasy, rage, exaltation and laughter. These moments, and the scenes of violence that unfold within them, thus constitute my point of entry in attempting to understand social relations and modes of political thinking that may not have a distinct temporal demarcation. While the various chapters follow a roughly chronological sequence, I have sought to embed different timescales within them, by combining the description of scenes that show political actors in action at a particular moment with broader movements. Thus I have chosen discord, division,

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<sup>10</sup> ‘*Commune*’: administrative district in France and French colonies [trans.].

disputes, violence and compromise primarily as guiding threads or levers, in both my field research and my analysis, to understand the rationales for action of the inhabitants of Houaïlou.

The nature of the violence described in the successive chapters of this book clearly reveals the fact that the history of Houaïlou, like that of New Caledonia as a whole, has for more than a century and a half been tied to developments in French colonisation. Choosing a local scale of analysis thus makes it possible to reflect on the concrete methods through which colonial governance is operated; I focus particularly on the invention, import or adaptation of repressive techniques used in Houaïlou that are closely linked to the French colonial experience in Algeria. This approach also makes it possible to reflect on colonial and postcolonial history without reducing it purely to the coloniser/colonised binary, but at the same time without losing sight of the dissymmetry of their respective positions in war and conflict. Indeed, the moments of violence that I shall analyse take on different meanings depending on the perspective from which they are viewed; colonial and postcolonial situations cannot be reduced to a great divide between two types of actors, and the forms of action that unfold within them cannot always be easily categorised according to a binary logic. Some moves towards partial decolonisation can thus be viewed as recolonisation, and instances of resistance or collaboration as constructions of internal relations of inequality. At the level of my analysis, politics can only be understood in the framework of a contextualised history.

## Poetics and pragmatics

This book is thus consciously situated within a broad movement of historicisation of anthropological knowledge, and seeks to contribute to reflection on the relations between history and anthropology.<sup>11</sup> Hence it will be understood that it also constitutes an attempt to write an action-centred anthropology, in a resolutely pragmatic mode.<sup>12</sup> The text is articulated around a detailed description of episodes of violence (from the repressive operations of the 19th century to contemporary village conflicts, via the ‘events’ linked to the Kanak independence movement between 1984 and 1988). While it is organised chronologically, it strives

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11 Naepels 2010a.

12 I give a detailed account of the epistemological bases of my method in Naepels 2011.

to draw out thematic resonances between the different chapters, without falling into a form of causal demonstration or a culturalist claim that Kanak violence is in any way specific. Descriptions of particular social situations allow us to analyse the interweaving of various different contexts within a given situation, to reveal the various rhythms and to show how a particular place is altered by the currents that flow through it. This close description thus offers scope for broadening the view both spatially and temporally. The fact that an idiographic investigation of a present or past situation implies the invention of a praxeography (as Jean Bazin put it), a cartography of possible actions,<sup>13</sup> in other words, essentially a writing, constitutes an example of what Claude Imbert refers to in 'Le cadastre des savoirs', as one of the most important epistemic shifts contributed by the social sciences in recent years: 'Were we to borrow from ethnography, focusing on a "micro-history", the anticipated advantage is not an excess of concrete detail, but rather to offer scope for other perspectives on the real, at the cost of a different intelligence' (Imbert 2005, p. 257).

In my view, this pragmatic, non-causalist perspective is the best way to reveal the practical inventiveness, ingenuity and the intelligence and reflexivity of the actors (here Kanaks) involved in political (here conflictual) relations. Thus, following the themes of mobilisation, the chieftom, war and witchcraft enables me to reveal the historicity of these social realities without thereby engaging in establishing the causes of evolving dynamics. These themes emerge as a series of contrapuntal lines, while the combination of various temporalities in each chapter reveals the harmonics of personal investments within each of the social situations considered.

In terms of empirical materials, my approach requires me to point out the difficulties inherent in the articulation between oral and archival sources. In order to understand what the characters in my story are doing, we must constantly ask how the testimonies were gathered, what were the positions of my interlocutors and what was the position of those in the past who produced the written documents and archival sources. If we assume that, empirically speaking, we can sometimes know what such and such a person is saying in certain circumstances, but cannot have access to what they are thinking, the support of detailed history and linguistic anthropology are indispensable. In my view, if we hold to this critical

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13 Bazin 2003.

nominalism, much more can be drawn out of the collected historical and ethnographic documents than if we seek to integrate them in their entirety with generalising considerations that are both elevated and hypothetical. My aim is therefore not to offer explanations of the social facts observed, but rather to articulate a question (that of the relationship between conflict, violence and power) with a particular way of describing reality. Ultimately, I have attempted to look at the history of Houaïlou differently, through the interlocking, collating and the heterogeneity of the documents cited and their registers of analysis. My descriptive journey through a series of moments in the history of Houaïlou leads me to return several times to the same places, the same hamlets, and to meet the same family names several times over. These echoes are deliberate, a way of revealing the historical thickness of the subjective experiences of my Kanak informers. But it will be understood that at the same time, this text does not aspire to be exhaustive or complete. I am fully aware that I know only some aspects of the reality of which I speak, and only a small part of the events that make up social life in Houaïlou. There are many other ways of telling this story.

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