More than a historical figure, Caius Marcius Coriolanus is a legendary one. He was a Roman general in the fifth century B.C., and what belongs to history and what belongs to the myth about him remains unclear. This chapter will address his (hi)story without the doubts and precautions that a historian would need to systematically indicate when recounting the same story.

Coriolanus’s story is brought to us by the 1608 play written by William Shakespeare. General Caius Marcius earns his name of Coriolanus by his glorious victory against the Volscian city of Corioli. Strengthened by this success, he is encouraged to run for Consul of Rome. Despite apparent support from both the Senate and the Plebe, he has to face riots from the latter. He finally publicly expresses his despise of democratic processes and exiles himself when he is condemned as a traitor. Later, he joins his former Volscian enemies and marches towards Rome. He remains insensitive to every request of his formers friends including his own wife, but finally accepts a peace treatise after being won over by his manipulative mother. Peace is signed between the Romans and the Volscians but Coriolanus is assassinated by the latter for his treason.

In 2011, actor and director Ralph Fiennes turned Shake-
Shakespeare’s dialogues into a contemporary version of Coriolanus. The Elizabethan language, as well as the classical Roman names contrasts with the images of our world that recall the war in the Balkans and numerous internal political intrigues and manipulations in Western representative democracies. Both the play and the film — Ralph Fiennes chose himself to play Coriolanus — are sympathetic to the Roman general who remains faithful to his principles and his honor until he cedes to his mother and accepts death for it. The plebe is pictured as a versatile horde that can be easily manipulated by politicians who are after their own ambition. When we look at it closely however, Coriolanus is a perfect embodiment of fascism — of course, it is an anachronism to talk about fascism both for classical Rome and seventeenth century England — where the military realm and the political one fuse into a new form of sovereignty.

Fiennes’s film opens with news images — he uses the power of the televisual medium in modern democracies in an evocative way — of the state of emergency declared by the Roman Senate when the city is facing riots against the public requisition of grain storage and the scarcity resulting from it. The state of emergency or state of exception is concomitant to the state of war, when military and politics become a single mode of sovereignty. Once the state of exception is triggered, there is a systematic effort from it, to sustain itself in time. This is even more true in our era — that is why Fiennes’s movie is so timely — as the state of war is not as clearly delimited as it used to be in the past when the belligerents were defined by their belonging to a given nation or city. Nowadays, the so-called “war on terror” has blurred the limits in time of the state of war, and therefore of the state of exception. War can be continuous when it is waged against diffuse international groups of people whose sporadic killings are made for symbolic spectacle — a pleonasm — of entrenched nations and
do not have actual military effectiveness, since these groups grow as the (often hazardous) strikes against them intensify. Meanwhile, the continuous tension that sustains the state of exception is organized through media outlets that propose a unique imaginary built on the fear of loosing the status quo.

Coriolanus does not constitute the paradigm of the contemporary sovereign. His personality and his military principles are distant from the ones of our current ‘leaders;’ this is also true for his refusal to use the spectacular mediums — a scene of the film shows him addressing the people on a television set — to embrace his ambition. However, the problem is not one of the people but rather of the systems in which they operate. Coriolanus may not be a paradigm of the Western democrat politician, but he is a paradigm of the form of sovereignty to which we are subjected: a perpetual state of emergency where military actions — surveillance of populations, NSA — and politics work together to sustain the exception in time.

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