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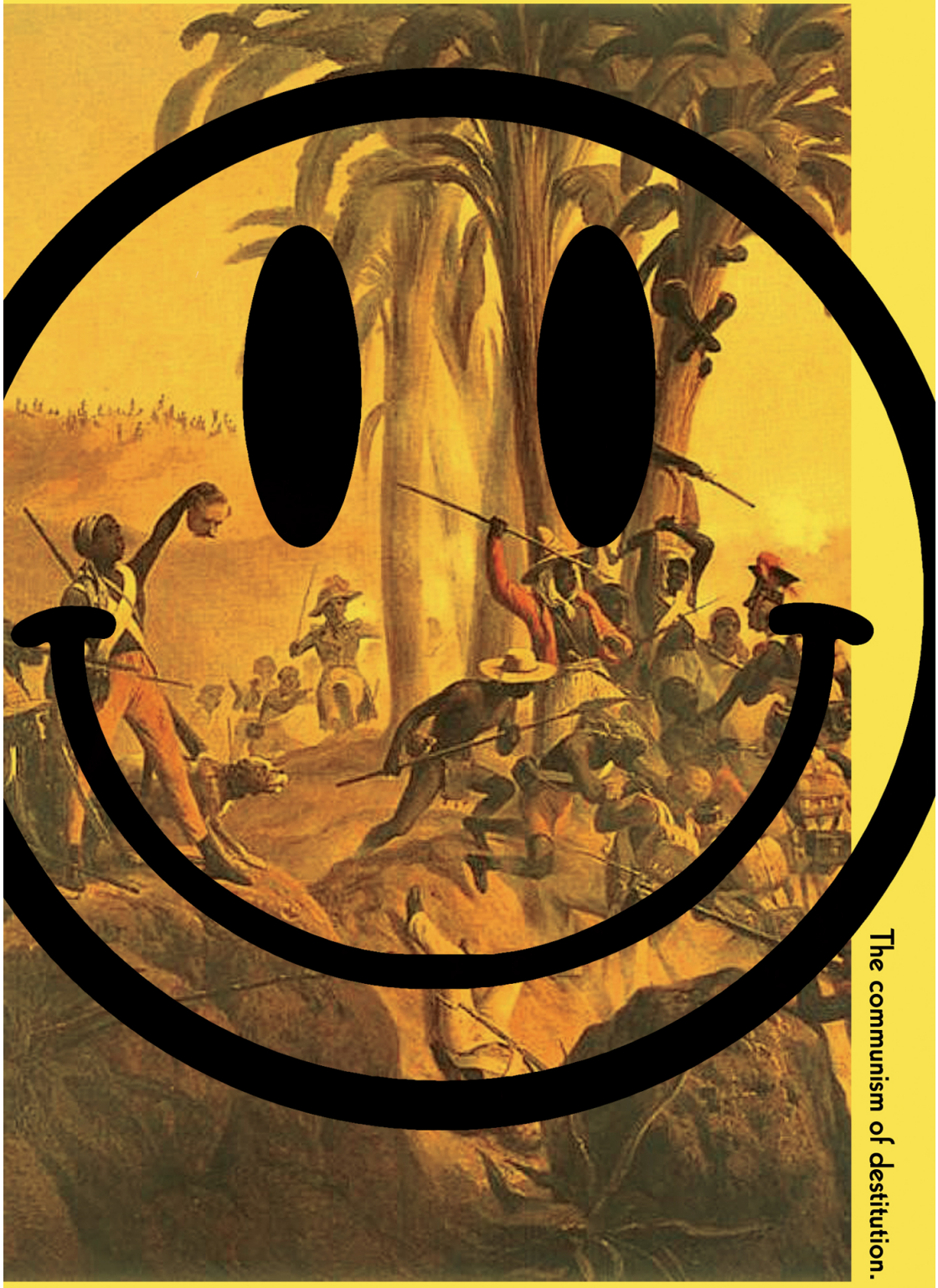

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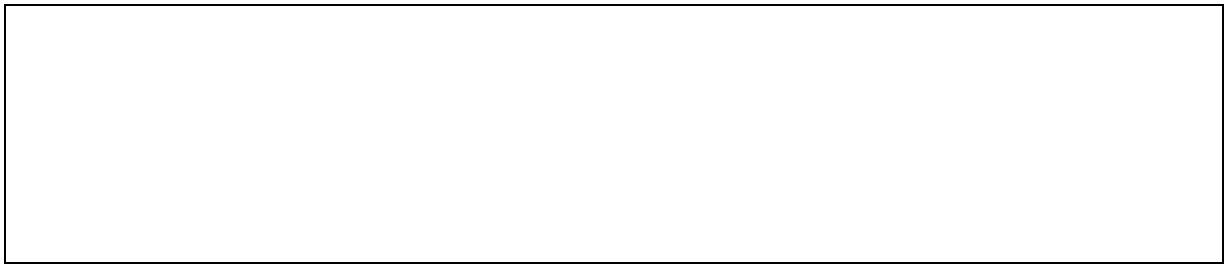

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Brooklyn, NY
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There Is No Unhappy Revolution: The Communism of Destitution
Marcello Tarì

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Translator's note

A central problem of translation in Marcello Tarì's text is that of the terms "destituent" and "destitution," a concept that lies at the heart of its argument. If unfamiliar to the Anglophone reader, it should be borne in mind that (linguistically speaking at least) it is simply the opposite of "constituent" and "constitution." The American Constitution has a constituent assembly; an act of "destitution" might have a corresponding "destituent" element. One builds, the other deconstructs; one "constitutes," the other "destitutes." A further distinction made is that between the words *potere* and *potenza*, which are rendered here as "power" and "potential." The division is important for Tarì because it identifies a qualitative difference between the form of power within a constituent process (*potere*) and that within a destituent one (*potenza*). On these points, also see Adam Kotsko's note to his translation of Giorgio Agamben's *The Use of Bodies*.

The notes have been used primarily to complete bibliographical information and help the reader navigate the author's textual coordinates. Wherever possible, quotations from previous English translations have been drawn upon and cited; otherwise, references have been made to texts in their original languages.

This translation was carried out over a few months of a year in which many of the concepts it contains became self-evident, a moment of rupture in which government melted away and new (and sometimes beautiful) forms of life appeared by both necessity and volition, and in which a new wave of Black-led uprisings burst out from within the heart of empire. My thanks to the author for deftly describing some paradigms of this surreal journey.

Richard Braude
Palermo, September 2020

Chapter 01

Preamble

When will someone finally come and straighten out this topsy-turvy world?[1]
—Franz Kafka, Letter to Milena Jesenská Pollak

How does an epoch become an era, and how does an era become an eon? Or: how does a revolt turn into an insurrection, and how does an insurrection turn into a revolution?

For centuries, each generation has found itself up against this unresolved yet unavoidable question. One might say revolutions arrive in the world at precisely the moment people begin to ask themselves this very question and, in dialogue with others, begin to develop some responses. This struggle, both worldly and spiritual, has given rise to extraordinarily audacious and adventurous experiments that—more often than not—end in defeat. It often happens that the struggle comes to an end because those who posed the question melt away. The cunning of history has always had the better of the scandal of truth. This is why Franz Kafka said that for revolutionary spiritual movements—which have always been movements running against the current of history—it is as if nothing has ever happened. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the question arises again and again from the ruins of time—intact.

Having arrived at the end of a civilization (our own civilization, of course—who else's would it be?), this line of questioning has acquired a new urgency. It can no longer be postponed, it feels even more rooted in current circumstances, and has become the silent reflection of an increasingly widespread disquiet. These are simple questions that have been repeated many times over in places very far away from each other. How to put an end to a form of rule that

does not want to end? How to put an end to the poverty of an existence whose meaning escapes us every which way we turn? How to put an end to this present moment, in which the architectural plan seems to map out a prison cell so vast as to contain entire populations? How to put an end to a catastrophe that can no longer extend any further because it is already everywhere and has even begun to dig down beneath the feet of the angel of history?[2] Last but not least: how do we shift the axis of the world to align it along the abscissa of happiness? The answer cannot be separated from the question, and for this reason, it must remain at a standstill but also utilizable by anyone who feels it arising within them. The true doctrine consists only of questions, as the historians of the Kabbalah know all too well. The answer is inscribed within existence itself, at the moment in which all of existence collides with the question.

In our own times, however, it seems as if our tired old world itself is interrogating us, before it gives up and takes its leave from the stage. It is tired because all possibilities have been exhausted. From now on, it is only the impossible that counts. When history approaches its end, it becomes far too heavy to bear. Indeed, for some time now, history's progression has meant only the intensification of its catastrophe. Buried under the mountains of the rubble of progress, the truth is that there has never been a single world (i.e., that of our present moment, closed within the quaternity of West-Modernity-Democracy-Capitalism) but an Earth that has never stopped mutating into a multiplicity of worlds seemingly unified through their divisions and hierarchies according to cybernetics, capital, metaphysics, and spectacle.

Until recently, there was the possibility (even if a subaltern one) of naming this plurality of worlds. But the current world, which presents itself as the one and only unity of meaning, canceled out even the modern definitions of the second, third, and fourth worlds from the ruling discourse—exactly as it did for class. There is only one world, the world of capital, and only one class: the planetary bourgeoisie. And yet it is precisely that *single* world, that concrete abstraction negating the existence of all other worlds—in a word, "civilization"—that is falling apart under the weight of its own catastrophic triumph. The gamble taken by revolutionaries is to

transform this collapse, this triumphant catastrophe, this impossibility, into the redemption of all the other worlds. Winning out over that single world because it collapses in ruin across all humanity is, fundamentally, the only logical way to confront the West's insane desire for the apocalypse.

Revolutionaries are activists of end-times. They operate within this temporality, working towards the actualization of a profane happiness—but they must always bear in mind that the exhaustion of possibility in this world also means exhausting the political activity that goes along with it. A political identity that, just like this world itself, has exhausted every possibility, that has to be laid aside if it does not want to continue its existence as the undead, a zombie. In order to grasp hold of the impossible, it seems, therefore, that the precious form of life, the mask, that has been represented by modern revolutionary militancy must undergo some change—a form that now survives only as a memory, reduced to tatters, fragments, and ruins. The historical ontology of this event has yet to be undertaken. This is one of the reasons our own relation to this form of activism remains that of unresolved mourning. The black-hooded sweatshirt, now a standard presence at every demonstration in which something actually happens, seems to be there precisely to remind everyone else on the march that it exists.

Let's be very clear, however, that we are not *against* militancy, whose history deserves our full respect. Instead, here we adopt the Pauline strategy of "as not" so that militants might act *as if they were not* militants. Giorgio Agamben writes: "The 'as not' is a deposition without abdication. Living in the form of the 'as not' means rendering destitute all juridical and social ownership, without this deposition founding a new identity."[3] This means, above all, freeing those who live within this form from the need to have to be *someone* —or rather (which is the same thing), of needing to live *as if* they were someone else or something else: never truly present but presented as an exterior objective. For the militant, living "as not" means dissolving the spell that invests them with an *infinite task* and an *absolute delegation of responsibility*.

The mask and the face can no longer be superimposed and separated at one's pleasure without repeating the tragedy of

professional revolutionaries that Bertolt Brecht dramatized in *Die Maßnahme [The Measures Taken*] in 1930. By now we know every face is also a mask, and it is up to each of us to decide which of these we want to remain faithful to. All of the characters in the play are in the wrong, both the party activists and the young comrade: the former because they swallow ideology whole and the latter because he is driven by a voluntarist sentimentalism. Even if that epoch is seen in hindsight as one of magnificent tragedy, for us there can no longer be a "line" that goes in one direction or is governed by a series of "tools" and "measures." Instead, it now has a curve of its own, a spiral, bending both inwards and outwards at the same time, without end, deprived of any real peak, just like Tatlin's Tower.

There is no need to allow one's own calling to escape in this manner. A philosopher might say that militancy can be "used," it can be put in tension with a revolutionary temporality, deactivating its tendency to become a tyrannical identity, a separate form of life, the conduction tube of moral substance that provides gestures and behaviors that can be easily separated from the subject that effects them. "You're no longer yourselves … but … blank pages on which the revolution writes its own commandments," says the party chief to the agitators in Brecht's didactic drama. The revolution has always meant the dissolution of the identities assigned to us by this world and continues to be this, but the activist can no longer be the quintessence of the politics of a means to an end, a body and voice that become *instruments* through which the progressive will of history is carried out; a vanguard that remains on the outside—external above all to itself, to its own life, and the lives of others. Indeed, in Heiner Müller's rewriting of the same play forty years later, the militant's action—killing the enemies of the revolution—is seen for what it has really become, a job, and the revolution itself a mode of production of enemies.

It thus falls to one's own self to dissolve the ego along with the enemy reality during the process of a revolutionary becoming. This self-destitution of the militant simultaneously consists of: allowing for the deposition of one's own social identity; the deactivation of the tool of ideology; and, grasping the power of that mask, of that

particular mode of existing that is militancy itself. It is a form of life one undertakes by performing a very particular relation to one's own role and to the world, founded on a commitment to the truth—the truth of that encounter which everyone experiences in their lifetime, not with any particular person or idea, but with a force. This force means that for revolutionaries, a real encounter is not one that allows for a political friendship, but one that offers each person the possibility of knowing one's true self, and it emerges from this moment of making a decision about one's own life, together with others. Employing the language of the first Christian communities, we might say that those who experience this encounter have received "grace" or "potential." Potential to be nothing; that is, to be everything. The real truth of the mask is that nothing is everything.

This strange figure of the militant living *as if there were not* a militant might seem almost incomprehensible within the boundaries of the particular dialectic that moves within and outside of one's own self. In a chapter on the concept of "grace" in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul of Tarsus describes the life of members of his community in precisely this way: "[We are present] in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God… We are held to be deceivers, yet we are true; as unknown, yet we are well known; as dying, yet behold, we live; as punished, yet we are not killed; as sorrowful, yet we are always rejoicing; as poor, yet we are making many rich; as having nothing, yet we possess all things!" This final phrase will return with strength and clarity centuries later in the famous lines of "The Internationale": "We are nothing, now let's be all." We might note, however, that Paul is more convincing in his insistence on the actuality of this power, rather than the "now let's be" of the proletarian hymn. Furthermore, the Greek line usually translated as "people who have nothing" [ωσ μηδηέν] clearly reprises ωσς μη, i.e., the "as not," and thus perhaps can be translated more appropriately as "people who are as if they have nothing," i.e., people who dismiss their having and neutralize their identities while nevertheless remaining themselves. The verb used by Paul in the second part of the sentence, κατεξω οντεσ, also means "to hold," to "conserve," "to hold still," and "to live," all meanings

that seem much more appropriate than the current translation used for the epistle ("we possess"). In this specific instance, at least, we can thus think in a different way about the usual *katechonic* function of the figure to whom he refers: it is precisely because they are poor, having deposed every form of possession and identity, that they have the strength to hold everything else with them, to conserve the truth, to hold their course, and to fully live out a form of life.

Marx—for whom the proletarian became a political subject and the emancipatory potential of all of humanity, being precisely there where there is nothing—would perhaps at this point absent himself with a small nod. "People who are as if they have nothing" clearly does not only refer to material goods, but also to socially valorized qualities and predicates that seem to enrich the individual, even though in truth they do nothing other than distance one from oneself and from potential, consigning one to the alienation of a form of collectivity without any soul precisely because it cannot provide a form of real experience. Poverty, in this sense—to be socially nothing—is the very form of our freedom because it allows one to make a radical experience of oneself, to become intimate with one's own existence. Getting this experience—which also means possessing, conserving, grasping, living a potential—is only possible together with others. It is also true that only a force made up of individuals who know what solitude means—being *only* that which you are, having a relation to life and death, and knowing what both happiness and sadness are, as well as both collective and individual resistance—can enact a true experience of this kind. The problem with collectives is as soon they become institutionalized they lose the very experiences that created them. Their strict informality is incapable of containing these experiences, the development of which requires the free expression of singularities and of communism as a discipline. Brecht has a wonderful way of showing how individual freedom can encounter collective discipline: "improvisation with a defined goal." No form of collectivization can ever artificially impose communism, nor can it substitute for or cancel out the self's work on itself. It is precisely those who begin to undertake this labor, one by one, who can then give life to a commune—which in turn constitutes the center of collective gravity

that corrects individual egoism. This is one of the differences—and not the least important—between a collective in general and a form of communist life in particular.

In any case, if that negation—"we are nothing"—contains the refusal of every incidental identity, every socially attributed valorization of the subject, its positivity—"and yet we are everything"—contains the claim of the potential to become a revolutionary. They are not two different stages, there is no before and after. *It is a single motion*. Destitution always opens up a becoming. What remains of the militant is the practice of a form of life that lives life as incompatible with the world as it is. The work of their existence is to render our present reality impossible.

Indeed, it is precisely against the present in which we are forced to live—a present in which one can consume and which consumes us but which it is forbidden to *use*—that our entire destructive potential ought to be marshaled. If struggling against history means casting judgment on every moment of the past, struggling against the present must invoke a complementary practice of casting judgment on the present itself. No other world exists, but there is the weak possibility of a different end to *this* world: the living present, the ruling present, must end in order for that which is coming finally to be lived through in full. It is neither the end of communism nor communism's ends, but "a communism of the end."

But "the people" are missing. And so long as this present continues, we will not find them. In the meantime, a breach opens up into revolt, which is one of the few ways this absence can appear to the world, even if only for a lightning flash. But can one really struggle against the present? Or is it necessary to think about how to evade it? To dodge an obstacle and keep on moving forward means confronting the need to open up other paths, other routes, other times. Opening that door will always mean the violence of the deed, though certainly not any old deed, nor any old violence. Evasion is not enough: the present has to be interrupted. The interruption creates the possibility of a gateway. Perhaps a revolutionary exit from the present is our only real choice if we want to resist the act of closure threatened by fascisms of every kind, whether institutional or existential.

The dangers hidden within the initial question on the ability to transform time stand there, before anyone who wishes to see them. First of all, we find the rigid, apocalyptic belief in a linear temporality that will lead us straight to the revolutionary eon. Alternatively, there is the version in which time always returns in the same way, hidden behind a mass pleasure in catastrophe. In the end they are the same thing. We are thus presented either with the tragic illusion that the limitless exercise of will might provide the key to victory, or with a demonic will that leads us to believe that power itself will give us the possibility of freedom. “One is never free by one’s will alone,” as Deleuze said to Spinoza. It’s the curse of the West. And yet, everything is already here: there is neither progress nor eternal return, only the conjuncture of a present that yearns to be insurmountable, eternal, infernal.

Will has to be burst apart, the power of capital must be annihilated, the enemy must be defeated.

It is not enough to simply ask ourselves the question, or to ask it of the people we already know—we must ask the question beyond these limits, to the unknown, and listen to the question that the world asks us. We must hear the rhythm deep within our own selves. Knowing how to listen is a fundamental aspect of revolutionary spirituality: the rhythm of the world mixes with that of revolt. Together with our friends, we must continually rediscover how to accompany the becoming-real of that which is already here, now, with us, among us—to be its *auxiliaries*. To organize ourselves so that, in turn, we might disappear within that becoming. Those who organize themselves as a revolutionary faction within the becoming of history have always known that true victory will coincide with their slow and happy dissolution. For them, there is no motto that proclaims “power to us!” or “power to our organization!” but to the people, the soviets, the communes. Indeed, this is one of Lenin’s main targets in his *April Theses* of 1917.

What is this “becoming”? Marx wrote that “the existence of men is their actual life-process,”[4] i.e., man’s process of becoming occupies the entire time of this process, an “unchangeable form” brought outside from within, saturated with a potential that beats loudly within those interruptions whose duration we can never

know ahead of time. Sometimes it comes as a lightning flash, at others it lasts for decades. Either way, it remains for a lifetime. Often we do not know how to use these ruptures, we do not grasp their potential, or we confuse them for an irritating interference in the relentless progress of history. We live as if we were in a doctor's waiting room. But this waiting makes us sick: the real seems to become flattened out, the possible becomes a colorful decoration to show to people around us, the world itself merely wants to end. It is judgment without redemption.

The rupture is not the time of waiting, but rather a time that brings with it the possibility to take a position against the present, always, in every moment, until each moment can become the decisive one. It is the end of apathy; the impossible that takes hold of the world. It is the time of minor heroism, an anonymous force that does not tolerate anything homogeneous, calculated, or constant. If one stands within it and listens, it has its own rhythm: at first imperceptible, then it begins to slowly pulse, accelerating like vertigo, and then breaks off. Paradoxically, its rapid improvisation slows history down, even bringing it to a halt, to a point when everything is static, immobile, caught "in the absurd present—unconditionally true and thus absurd—of the Messianic coming," as Furio Jesi put it.[5] In that moment of suspense, the past reaches out beyond the present with all the violence of a starry storm, taking on the image of a tangible form of becoming, an *us* that is simultaneously broken apart and united, a kind of crowded solitude —occupied by both the living and the dead—which is all that remains of the wheels of time, of the ever-arriving origin of every insurrection. It is within this form—a form that encircles a life in excess of everything it is—that one must learn how to smash the present into a thousand pieces.

Even if what is coming does not entirely depend on what this "us" will never be able to do, its taking form can help in leading "us" to either fulfillment or loss. "*Glück ist hilfe*" [happiness is help], as comrade Brecht wrote. "Mutual aid," another *revenant* concept, is not necessary in order to distribute goods, money, and commodities but instead represents a means to help one another on a daily basis through the process of a revolutionary becoming. And so, the

question arises: to fulfill our own selves or lose ourselves forever in the world? Perhaps the true victory would be both things together. True defeat, on the other hand, would be to lose both ourselves and the world.

We need to examine our lives more closely in order to extract an image from them, and then contemplate it as if it were something like a “device,” or those heraldic symbols that seal the existence of the baroque; in order to identify that particular moment of existential rupture that, in all its intensity, has marked our individual revolutionary becomings, whatever that might mean for and within our lives. This has to begin without any sweeping preliminaries; instead, it should teach us to stand upright, to laugh, feel pain, make use of our hatred of domination, interweave our friendships, and educate our sensitivity. To experience communism as a collective exposure to the extreme risks of mere existence, and to experience true solitude as that which communism delivers us to one by one. Life—like politics and poetry—is always a question of intensity. And of irreversibility: *true life* begins at the point of no return. You can fall into an abyss—where you writhe, write, crawl, and scry—and only just manage to climb out every now and again, pulling yourself up with your hands, thoughts, lips, and breath. It becomes more and more intense in encounters, in the spilling over of emotions, in ruinous falls, lifelong love, in the forest of desperation, in horrifying joy and overwhelming failure but, in the end, if you are left with anything at all—faith—it appears again, just as celestial objects seem to reappear in the sky as they move. The sky is a chart of our always unresolved yet always pressing process of becoming humans: detaching our gaze from that screen, reading the signs in the sky, and returning to Earth.

De revolutionibus orbium coelestium: the Sun is immobile, the Earth moves.

Rays, life, time. It is time.

This book is dedicated to a memory of happiness, one of those that, in order *to be*—as the poet said—one must be able to forget it and then wait patiently for its return, like one’s own blood, or gaze, or gesture without a name. It will be the return of a moment in

which there are no differences between the memory and one's own self.

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1. Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, ed. William Haas, trans. Tania Stern and James Stern (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), 42. [Translator's note.]

2. A reference to Walter Benjamin's figure of the "angel of history." See Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" [1940], in *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 2003), 392. [Translator's note.]

3. Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 274. [Translator's note.]

4. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 47. [Translator's note.]

5. Furio Jesi, "Bachofen e il rapporto con l'antico," in *Bachofen* [1973], ed. Andrea Cavalletti (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005), 39. [Translator's note.]

Chapter 02

The World or Nothing at All

Was ist ist
was nicht ist ist möglich
nur was nicht ist ist möglich.
—Einstürzende Neubauten[1]

Let us begin by assuming that, as uncomfortable as it might be to accept, all revolts and insurrections in recent years have been undeniably destituent revolts and insurrections.

From the Argentinian "*!Que se vayan todos, que no quede ninguno!*" [Everyone out, nobody stays!], to the Tunisian "*Degage!*" [Leave!], from the tumults in Tottenham to those in Rome, from the *res gestae* of the communes in Oakland and Taksim right down to the occupied squares of New York, Athens, Istanbul, and the Spanish 15-M—and then, beginning again with "le *monde ou rien*" [the world or nothing at all], that long, angry revolt in France in 2016, we have seen a range of events express themselves through a desire for destitution—whether the destitution of the power of markets or of politics, of authorities or big infrastructure—or even, more fundamentally still, of the impoverished form of life in which we are forced to live. It represents the final emergence—*au grand jour*—of an explosive continent, of the ungovernable, which always silently responds to the proposition of a new government with a disruptive "I would prefer not." The planetary vibration of a destituent power does not allow the possibility for any constituent power to take form within it. Governments can count on anything but the "support of all the people," and every discussion around "instability"—the word used by rulers to characterize the general sense of intolerability, the wild desire for an *exit* all around—is nothing other than a clumsy

rhetorical attempt to mask the persistent anxiety that characterizes those who are unjust and know it.

Nevertheless, the concept of destituent power and politics, even if empirically present in revolutionary processes of all historical periods, has never enjoyed its own literature; it always lies in the shadows of such processes. And in truth, it is their shadow. It is what Marx called the "secret" of the proletariat's existence—an *effective dissolution* of this world's order. It is the extinction of the state that Lenin saw in the Bolshevik cook who directs the state towards its own destruction. Read Maurice Blanchot on May 1968 and you get a giddy taste of it.[2] But it is only over the last fifteen years, with the world's violent transformation and the exposure of how "civilization" is shamelessly collapsing in every way, that we have begun to give this concept its true name. Its moment of readability has finally arrived.

Consequently, we have seen a handful of contributions that have attempted to identify, describe, and define it: a book by Colectivo Situaciones following the Argentinian insurrection of 2001, an interview with Mario Tronti following the revolt in the French *banlieues* [the working-class suburbs of the metropolis] in 2005, a recent volume by the Invisible Committee that places destitution at the very heart of the present moment, and—last but not least—the epilogue to the final chapter of a long period of research into the concept of the political Giorgio Agamben has conducted under the title *Homo Sacer*, a work that constitutes the richest theoretical text we currently have at our disposal.[3] We should also note the philosophical preparation represented by Reiner Schürmann's research in the 1990s into the collapse of the fundamental principles of the West, which the author subdivides into parts that reconstruct the establishment of various hegemonic and unifying principles followed by chapters on their respective destitution.[4]

This said, the incandescent nucleus for any political theory of destitution lies in the works of an old friend, Walter Benjamin. It is his spark that illuminates the present work, whose sole aim is to make a contribution to the process underway. It is a matter of attempting to walk along those paths that have only just begun to

open up, and retracing those which—on some distant day in the past—were interrupted or abandoned.

The destituent spirit that has distinguished recent uprisings seems to stand in contradiction to that stable, statuesque axiom of modern politics according to which a revolution can arise only if a constituting power opposes itself to a constituent power. From this standpoint, constituting power subjects or overthrows constituent power, as expressed in the well-known sequence that leads from the insurrection to a provisional government, which, after new elections, then declares a new constitution. A new legitimate government is thus established.[5] From one event to another, the world will bear witness to the usual massacres and, in the end, the logical undoing of the revolution.

Beginning with the great bourgeois revolutions of modernity—the English, French, and American revolutions—modern political theory has always hinged on this dialectical device that supposedly guides history itself. For those on the left who continue to believe in a constituent power, it has been a constant source of disappointment to admit that for recent uprisings, the destituent moment—which, in their view, ought to come to a close through an episode of blind destruction—has not been followed by a constituent one. An exception is the Egyptian situation, in which, due to internal limits of the insurrectionary movement, as analyzed by the Invisible Committee, there was indeed a constituent moment, but with the unfortunate defect of having established a tyranny even worse than what had only just been destituted.[6] This willful myopia is due to the fact that, for theorists of the left, constituent power is the natural substance of democracy, in the sense that it is always presented as a boundless source of freedom and progress. We have been the audience to a discourse that, in its variations, wishes to see in these revolts the work of a constituent power desperately searching for a juridical legitimacy, for which, despite everything, it cannot find a restless people who might act as its guarantor. In truth, as an excellent commentator on Gilles Deleuze has written,

this situation is due to the fact that the masses "can no longer form a unified subject able to act; it is as if they have been separated from the power that allowed them to constitute themselves into 'peoples,' that they have lost their constituent power."[7] The result is that, in the absence of this constituent motion or power, the radical left has compromised with or enthusiastically supported all of the current or possible experiments in "alternative" government—i.e., swallowing the pill of Tsipras, Iglesias, Sanders, Corbyn, and other holograms—in the hope that this might give rise to a decisive push, without realizing (or realizing only after a few months) their complete nothingness. In part, this is due to the ethical poverty of a certain political class. Everyone else, on the other hand, entirely aware of the impossibility of a unified subject, seems to be engaged across the board in reconnecting themselves with that dispersed potentiality through the fragmentary, tiring, vital reconfiguration of a revolution that is for the moment called "communalist." The Commune—and not *a* commune—is a constructive element that cannot be separated from the destructive one through which, *in our current moment*, one demonstrates destituent power. Yet again: "the origin is the endpoint."

The important thing is to understand that neither the paradigm of antagonism nor of the constituent is enough to face the challenges of our current epoch. One has to continually find a way to put into motion both a destruction of the present and an *exit*, a way out—not from Europe, or the Euro, or who knows what other governmental devilry—but from this compressed time, this relation of power and production, this stupid life, these tools of capture. An exit that reaffirms our being here and now. Only a presence of this kind can deliver redemption.

One can still faintly recall—with a certain repulsion—the orgy of the economists, during the initial period of the "crisis" in 2008, when social movement leaders seemed to have all subscribed to capital's daily papers. It seemed as if you could not speak about anything unless you imitated the coded language of the City, citing

obscure characters dedicated to the most trivial economic reasoning. Following the wave of uprisings in 2008–2011, within the more or less informal academies of the radical left, there was a period in which we saw increased dialogue with jurists. Not so much to turn them into our cavalry (or to push them to challenge the flood of juridical measures raining down upon dissenters across Europe), but in order to produce something that might marry revolt with rights and revolution with governance. This is an extremely ineffective strategy for neutralizing politics. Within this milieu, one finds that everyone claims to hate Carl Schmitt, and yet instead of drawing on the more interesting elements of his thought, they seem to simply cite his most conformist, easiest maneuvers, attempting a juridical reappropriation of that which has slipped through law's fingers, attempting to reestablish the correct dialectic between what is legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, order and lawlessness. Even the concept of love has recently entered the political agenda of these hardened juridifiers of life, who think of it as an institution like any other. The political-juridical debate around the so-called "commons," which momentarily rushed into the theaters and conference halls (a very brief moment, all things considered), had the same result. As a clever old man once said with a smile on his lips, "*Benicomunisti sono cose da comunisti per bene*" [communists for common goods are very *good* communists]. In other words, they are the petit bourgeois, with an unholy horror at the idea of revolution.

It would do us well to clarify from the start the juridical character of constituent power as theorized by leftist social movements today, because the question is often asked—in good faith yet somewhat naively—of how to oppose the destitution of constituent power. For example, there is the argument that "perhaps every real insurrection contains twin drives of deposing the old and constructing the new."[8] A more elegant version emphasizes the dangers of becoming stuck in a dialectic with no exit.[9] The question posed by destituent power does not lie in its supposedly dialectical antagonism to constituent power as such. Constituent power and destituent potential exist in a similar relationship to that between Euclidean and Riemannian geometry; in other words, a nonrelationship. They neither begin from the same premises nor do

they aim for the same kind of conclusion. The question is, rather, how to escape the double bind that has strangled past revolutions and ensure that the destituent gesture contains within itself both destructive and constructive moments, which then become indistinguishable, inseparable, a single level of consistency that interrupts the present and cuts across the real.

Above all, it should be stressed that what is destituted is not so much the "old" or the past, but rather the "present." A present is like an ice cube, trapping within it a past that does not pass and a future that does not arrive. Above all, it is a present that prohibits any exit, in whatever direction.

What is disingenuously described in the above quotation as the constitution of the "new" is, for the constituting party, an eminently juridical fact, a technology of constitution, in which the adjective "new" always precedes the subject, such as—the *new*, legitimate government. In this sense, constituent power always ends up being an affirmation of sovereignty.[10] Sometimes it seems like the echo of an old historical argument, such as the one the good Pashukanis pitched against the ineffable Vyshinsky in Bolshevik Russia: *is communism the extinction of the law or the constitution of a proletarian one?*

The left intelligentsia knows *there is an uprising* but always prefers to gloss over its destituent potential—at most offering some throwaway line to redeem itself—while searching for even the smallest grain of constituent power. According to the doctrine of state power, this ought to be an indefatigable "political will" (to use Carl Schmitt's phrase) which then takes form and gives life to a new constitution: "such will continues to live above and beyond the constitution itself," as the Fürher's own jurist put it. Will is power. Nevertheless, it is precisely in the context of what has happened in recent years that this metaphysical will seems to have been lost, expressed instead as an angry disappointment. For example, consider the opinion of Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito in 2013: "Instead of a constituent power, today's uprisings recall a destituent power—

capable of undermining the previous order but unable to create a new one."[11] In November of the same year, a meeting of European activists called "Agorà99" examined the riots breaking out in different cities and produced a document emphasizing "the urgent need to immediately develop these social movements in terms of their constituent basis—and not only a destituent one—in order to construct an alternative when attacking the tools of command." Or, we might turn to political theorist Sandro Mezzadra, who wrote in the same year: "This destituent dynamic—which must be worked up immediately and become a vital objective across struggles and movements—must be accompanied … by a constituent European program."[12] Or, as Michael Hardt concludes, contradicting the doctrine in a revealing way: "It is clear now the principal task is to develop, create and invent a constituent power."[13]

One could continue with many other citations of this kind of uncomfortable appeal, but ultimately they repeat the same thing, which can be summarized in the following manner: "we see that there is a destituent power in action, it would be stupid to deny it now, but a constituent power is entirely lacking, which for us remains essential."

This tendency maintains, in fact, the context in which revolts take place—which is usually if not exclusively in the metropolis—ought to be transformed by constituent power into a huge field of innovation through which to enact the democratization of metropolitan life. These two lines of development—democracy and metropolis—constitute, in fact, the main axes of a "new *governance* of the multitude."[14] In this doubtlessly modern, Western framework, living in the contemporary world means to identify entirely with living in a democracy, and indeed in the world-metropolis one can experiment with every kind of democracy, from the authoritarian to the participatory, from the representative to the self-managed, from fascist democracy to a cybernetic one. In this framework, it is even possible for all of these to coexist at the same time and in the same place. As Antonio Negri claims, with a peremptory tone, in the first line of his celebrated study of constituent power: "Discussing constituent power means discussing democracy."[15]

Formally speaking, the discourse pulls no punches: the task is simply to bring democracy to its full realization, its "authentic" version—as the manifesto for the new "cool politics" of DiEM25, as the party of the former Greek Minister of Finance would have it—as if until now we have only known its false or unreal version. This ignores the line of thought proposed by Tronti, in which real democracy is precisely that which we are living through, just as one once spoke of "actually existing socialism," which could not be anything other than what was really there.[16] Let us be clear, one must speak about these matters with a generosity of spirit, given that millions of people truly *believed* in actually existing socialism (we will happily leave the lament about betrayed democracy to others) at the expense of their lives. Socialism on the one hand, and democracy on the other, both represent the kind of enterprise that begins with great expectations, develops badly, and finishes in tragicomedy, leaving the world dirtier and more exhausted than before. If socialism—thanks to Vyshinsky—did not become anything other than the bureaucratic worker management of a deformed state, then similarly we might say that the global practice of democracy coincides with the international founding of a permanent state of exception that suspends not only the new but also the ancient "freedom of the moderns"—including formally, as recently took place in France, representing the intensification of a situation already present everywhere.[17] The realization of democracy thus also represents the beginning of a mass depoliticization—scuttling any idea of an absolute democracy—and a *soft* totalitarianism within which all imaginable forms of democracy might coexist. And who knows, perhaps even the democracy of a terrorist jihad intermixes with the homicidal-suicidal neuroses of the metropolitan individual. Both of these lash out democratically at anyone in their path, without distinction of class, color, or creed.

It seems democracy is the most difficult political instrument to destitute. Do we need to imagine, therefore, a destituent democracy, made up of institutions capable of destituting themselves? It would be a good start, but certainly one doubts whether such a thing is possible. At least actually existing socialism had the courage to *come to an end* when faced with its failure and the mediocrity of its

results. One can say many things about democracy, but we cannot claim that it is courageous enough to imagine its own end, despite the fact mediocrity has always been its societal rationale. If the state of exception has become permanent, if it is *the rule* of our current world, then constituent power, the activity of every classic, modern politics, has no potential in a revolutionary sense because everything is already absorbed within the sovereign power *that it already represents*. From this standpoint, what remains to be done is what Walter Benjamin described in a similar situation in 1940: "to bring about a *real* state of emergency."[18]

It is extraordinary that less than a year ago [2015], following a heated international demonstration to mark May Day in Milan, someone could write—arguing against those whose analysis and practice has long been based on the state of emergency as central to contemporary government—that "today's multi-polar governance is not that of the 'state of exception,' that is, the unified paradigm of the normally exceptional exercise of power following 9/11, the condensation of a legal civil war and thanatopolitics towards any enemy or resistant group,"[19] and continue by saying that those who err in their objective cannot but use the incorrect weapons. Indeed.

The theory of constituent power is neither particularly new nor original, in the sense that it functions entirely within the modern Western political tradition. It does not take much effort to see, in the understanding of its current supporters, the good old dialectic of progress at work beneath its reasonable radicalism—inasmuch as it presents a theory that lays its foundation for new laws not on a romantic clean slate, but on the depths of that which already exists, which then resolves itself through a continuity of power, thus exalting its ability to survive anything (whether a tsunami or an uprising)—and becoming a kind of "resilient power" more than a constituent one. These are the essential functions of government: always remain in action; guarantee at all costs the stability of a mass "crisis of presence"; always begin from the start; never lose control;

follow up with buzzwords, whatever may occur. We do not exit from this present; it repeats itself incessantly.

A variation within the discourse of constituent power also laments the fact that today we have finally overcome what was once defined despondently as the "divorce between democracy and capitalism," implying that if they were married, things might not have gone so badly and there would be no need to appeal to the political myth of modernity. This variation prefers to concentrate hope in a "constituent conflict" that might act as a bridge to some second marriages, a new *governance* to be precise. For leftist discourse, the stress is always laid on the constituent process of new institutions (which in truth is always absent, aside from some governmental stage scenery) while destituent power (evident wherever there is an uprising) is often painted with dark colors, as if one were diving into the abyss. Its appearance along the path is seen as an unfortunate accident, and even if it is sometimes recognized as a necessary gesture, it also represents the part of these events that needs to be immediately remedied, like a natural catastrophe. And yet, it is only in those moments—streets full of acrid fumes; skies heavy with black smoke that rises over the rooftops of crystalline palaces and renders every individual identity indistinct while simultaneously politicizing the lives of everyone; zones that secede from the state; anonymous gestures of sharing with which one can express the presence of communism—that one can really perceive the *demos* so deafeningly absent from the empty stages of actually existing democracies. There is further evidence of this too: when the "people" are in the street and the squares, the government does not govern. The revolutionary problem becomes how to ensure that this potential is not foreclosed; how to prevent it from being captured in a form of government.

In the discourse of the radical left, there is often a nod to the fact that capitalism and its institutions should be overcome, but they also tell us—following a hackneyed Marxist interpretation—there is no need for a solution of continuity *now* because development itself will lead us to communism. The challenge, then, is simply to wait for the moment when the growth of the productive forces has reached a turning point, and in the meantime, to assist measures

such as a citizens' income or the governance of city councils. There is even a recently formed enthusiastic sect that gathers its members from the "creative class" and bases itself on a kind of doctrine of cybernetic predestination, claiming that the left still has a duty to *accelerate* the course of production and technology towards history's moment of ecstasy.[20] The fact that this form of leftist Prometheanism has already led to the devastation of the planetary ecosystem and that its acceleration would simply mean speeding up the "end of the world" does not seem to be among their main concerns.

Fundamentally, the admiration that certain Latin American projects have garnered from the European radical left—most importantly the governments of Lula in Brazil and Morales in Bolivia, if not necessarily Chavism in Venezuela or Kirchnerism in Argentina, and much less the "bizarre" project of the Zapatistas in Mexico—similarly derives from this affection for these countries' image of constituent power as a new law and government, as well as an admiration for the proposal of a continent-wide neocapitalism, managed by protagonists arising from the rank and file of the unions and parties of the "New Left," thus ready to slide into communism democratically without needing to make recourse to the irritating hiccups of history that characterized the twentieth century. These progressive governments have, quite clearly, provided an alternative to communism, an intelligent project of counterrevolution accomplished *before* the revolution. The confused withering away of these experiences of government—between the corruption of progressive elites, the total prioritization of the economy, the devastation of natural resources and the communities that inhabit them, new anti-governmental uprisings and the ferocious repression of autonomous communalist projects by these very same governments—has simply added a bitter aftertaste to the already disappointing absence of constituent spirit within current uprisings across the globe. The Zapatistas, meanwhile, who arose with weapons in hand back in 1994, and who have never wanted to know anything about *governance* or *Bolsa Família*, continue to calmly say "*aquì estamos*" [here we are].

A small aside on this point: unfortunately, we Westerners, unlike the Zapatistas or other Indigenous peoples, do not have any Mayan tradition at our disposal, no ancestral knowledge, not even a liberation theology to serve as the living fabric of revolution. All we have is the possibility to learn how to use the field of ruins—of tradition, knowledge, and theology—that characterizes the landscape of our completed modernity, the reign of the absolute commodity. As we have been taught, making good use of ruins does not mean digging up the past "exactly as it was," but "appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger."[21] An extremely significant example was seen in those years when, in the flames of conflict, there arose from the ruins an image of enormous potential, a word like a banner: the Commune. It is the only *fully meaningful term* able to confederate all revolts, from one side of the world to another.

In the end, it is as if the supporters of constituent power believe that the truly "political" occurrences in the world are refusing to align themselves with reality, or rather with the rule of real democracy, as if this were the final truth of history and thus also of modernity. This conviction does not entirely lack foundation. For revolutionaries, in fact, the problem has always been that of creating a collision between these two sides: a politics against history and a communism stronger than modernity. Because, these two crumbling columns—history and modernity—are in the end, part of a single pillar: *das kapital*.

Nevertheless, upon reflection, perhaps the metaphysical separation within democratic modernity—which is caused by capitalism—is no greater than the separation between reality and truth.

For contemporary Western civilization, reality is radically abstract and without its own content. It is a "hyper-object" whose main feature is its being deprived of truth. This is no longer reality, but rather the deformed image of the real that has lost every sense of reality. A world that lacks the sense of reality is not so much a world without quality but a world in which the good life is identified with narcissism, illusion, and the hypertrophic ability to sell and consume everything, beginning with ourselves. The lightly

anti-Brechtian use of *illusion* as a tool for activism employed by the Spanish leadership of Podemos is symptomatic of this.[22] Introduced by the leader during the last stage of his election campaign, the announcement was made with the bombastic keywords "law," "order," and "fatherland"—a triptych of illusions and modernist fictions well known for its material effects in every corner of the world.

Truth, on the other hand, is widely mocked by both dominant political thinking and the mass media, as if it were an ancient and "well meaning" belief held by primitives of every kind. At most, it is presented as the "light" version of a reality that can be denied at any moment, precisely because in the realm of general equivalence —one head and one vote; an object and a corresponding price—one knows all too well that one thing is equal to any other, whether material or immaterial. What is important is that truth never *chooses a side* in the current war. Today the parrhesiastic Jesus of Nazareth would speak like Christ in Brigitte Maria Mayer's film: "I am the insurrection, the hatred, the fury, and the desperation."[23] This is why we willingly sacrifice the truth in favor of the democracy of a reality built on hypocrisy, illusion, and opportunism. Indeed, what could be more undemocratic than truth?

But this is precisely how government works today: it neutralizes feelings by liquidating every truth that arises from the texture of reality, because the truth represents an unveiling and thus also the possibility of destituting reality. In our current reality, truths have been replaced by opinions; in other words, by something measurable and external to sensible, sensory life.[24] Opinions represent a kind of claim that does not require we put our own lives at risk, and in the end become the famous neoliberal "there is no alternative," or its apparent contradiction, "there is an alternative," one need simply participate in the next election and desperately hope in "the coming government." All the recent events surrounding the leftist government in Greece have moved within the limits of this false alternative, a "no way out" in which the people's "No" became the government's "Yes," and the people's "Yes" became the government's "No." That government did not betray anything, because one can only betray a truth. What it did instead was take

account of the reality assumed by the dominant knowledge-power and act, conscious of the fact it was nothing more than one government among many. One cannot paraphrase, even rhetorically, that old Deleuzian-Spinozan question—"What can a body do?"—in relation to a government, because everything is already inscribed within the limitations of its economy. Externally, you can kid yourself and raise expectations, but everyone knows all too well, deep down, that no government has any possibility at all of disordering the world order, only of reaffirming it. Government is precisely the persona in which the dominant nihilism and the technopolitical economy crystallize. Governments of "actually existing democracy" cannot do anything but extend and intensify the catastrophe underway.

Without truth, reality is nothing but a lie, just as truth without reality is simply powerlessness. There is no political (or apolitical) realist who can deny this claim. Yet who among us thinks and acts, loves and hates, by commencing from a truth? What is reality in a world whose physical features are designed by algorithms?

Reality and truth, when separated out and taken on their own, are of little interest. They only become interesting when and if they converge and initiate an act of becoming—when they provoke a transformation of the world. Making recourse to a principle of reality without an ethics of truth is not only reactionary—it is acceptance of the status quo.

Revolution could be defined—among many other possible definitions—as that moment in which a reality and a truth converge, beginning with a "dialectical image" in which history is suspended, to see matters from comrade Benjamin's point of view. If an uprising is an event—about which many will shake their heads, eliminating it as if this were the relic of some ancient belief system—it is only so if it appears as a rushing forth of truth. And if reality is not always pleasant, neither is truth. If one lives in a world in which the real is made of lies, exploitation, and cynicism, truth all too easily appears in the hyperrealist guise of an avenging angel.

The meeting of reality and truth within history is a sensory, enthusiastic experience, one that crosses the threshold, abandoning narcosis and reaching the point at which we are no longer prepared

to tolerate the intolerable. We fight and build anew upon this threshold of the impossible. These are fragments of an experience in progress: in France, where the "*cortège de tête*"[25] continuously breaks with the state of emergency; in the Syrian desert, where a comrade from Turin makes an appeal not only to defend the revolution of the Kurdish communes, but invites people to construct a revolution in Europe; in Rome, when an anonymous hand writes across the walls of the most gentrified neighborhood in the city: "la *catastrophe è esistenziale*" ["the catastrophe is existential"]; in Valencia, where feminist exiles from Italy share their lives with African migrants in an urban commune. This experience exists in thousands upon thousands of communes, visible or otherwise, large or small. Each is changing perceptions of life and preparing exits from the present. It exists in the solitary desertion of this world and in the collective discipline of the fighting exodus. These are fragments of a coming communism.

The most significant contemporary uprisings are those which—precisely because they derive from a shared reality and truth—do not cede even one inch, demonstrating that the world cannot be reduced to that of television, the Internet, newspapers or the police, but can *consist* of a hardened, populous zone that becomes a zone without end, expressing itself through another way of making claims, another language, moving towards the moment of *the world or nothing at all*.

This is precisely what undermines any *apocalyptic* vision of destituent power. Whoever has lived within the fires of struggle in recent years knows that blocking a road reveals a thousand winding paths, that cities on strike allow for the invention of other forms of living, that stopping a government from governing does not only mean the eruption of a new dimension of existence but also reveling in the collapse of a spectral "society of individuals," that doing away with representation and delegates is a gesture of dignity for a political society that no longer has either meaning or honor. It is the growth of the world of truth within the world of lies. It is the coming Commune.

The constituent party is guilty, above all, of not knowing how to recognize the truth spreading through the existential fabric of

contemporary uprisings. The constituent party aligns itself instead with the reality of governments, the same thing it supposedly opposes. Its misunderstanding of destituent power derives from this mistake, as does its disappointment in the absence of any coincidence with constituent power.

In the end, however, what exactly is this destituent power perceived by everyone but so scarcely theorized? And can it really be formulated as a revolutionary strategy?

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1. "What is, is / What is not, is possible / Only that which is not is possible."

2. Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill Press, 1983). [Translator's note.]

3. Colectivo Situaciones, *19 & 20: Notes for a New Social Protagonism*, trans. Nate Holdren and Sebastián Touza (Brooklyn, NY: Common Notions and Minor Compositions, [2002] 2011); Mario Tronti and Adriano Vinale, "Potere destituente: Una conversazione con Mario Tronti," in *Potere destituente: Le rivolte metropolitane* (Milan: Memesis, 2008), 23–44; The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (South Pasadena, Semiotext(e), 2015); Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016). The same question had been raised by Agamben the previous year, at the opening of a seminar series in the French countryside which saw the participation of five hundred people from across the globe. The transcription of the conference (in French) can be found at https://lundi.am/vers-une-theorie-de-la-puissance-destituante-Par-Giorgio-Agamben.

4. Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

5. On constituent power, see: Carl Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, trans. Jeffrey Seitzer (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999).

6. The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*. [Translator's note.]

7. David Lapoujade, *Deleuze: Les mouvements aberrants* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2014), 250.

8. Editorial board, "A nos amis … o dell'entusiasmo!" *Infoaut*, October 24, 2015, https://www.infoaut.org/notes/a-nos-amis-o-dellentusiasmo.

9. Gigi Roggero, "Che cosa sono i nostri amici?," *Commonware*, October 25, 2015, www.commonware.org/index.php/gallery/623-che-cosa-sono-i-nostri-amici. Both this and the previous citation are reviews of The Invisible Committee's *To Our Friends*. [Translator's note.]

10. The difficulty in distinguishing constituent power from sovereign power is precisely the critique Agamben undertook in the first volume of *Homo Sacer*. See

Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 39Z–48.

11. Roberto Esposito, "Perché le primavere non cambiano il mondo," *La Repubblica*, July 23, 2013, https://www.repubblica.it/la-repubblica-delle-idee/mondo/2013/07/22/news/ perch_le_primavere_non_cambiano_il_mondo-63453074/. [Translator's note.]

12. Sandro Mezzadra, "Per una politica costituente europea," *EuroNomade*, August 20, 2013, www.euronomade.info/?p=168.

13. Anna Curcio and Gigi Roggero, "Un'alternativa in cerca di autori," *il manifesto*, October 9, 2013. Available at http://www.drittiglobal.it/2013/09/unalternativa-in-cerca-di-autori.

14. Sandro Mezzadra and Antonio Negri, "Lotte di classee-ricomposizione politica nella crisi," *UniNomade*, January 12, 2011, http://www.uninomade.org/lotte-di-classe-e-ricomposizione-politica-nella-crisi/.

15. Negri, *Insurgencies*, 11. In the introduction to the 2002 Italian edition, Negri expresses some doubts about the current state of constituent power: "perhaps today we have gone beyond the modern, and probably beyond constituent power." Despite this doubt, it seems that up to the present moment, he has chosen to remain within the limits of modernity.

16. "Political democracy needs to be realized. We need to talk about real democracy just as, not so long ago, one spoke of real socialism. Not so as to distinguish it, as we used to do back then from a socialism that was still possible but different from a degenerate version—but in order to say that socialism was simply that, and that if one wanted something else, it would be necessary to find another word. It is the same for democracy today. The moment for a different usage of the concept has expired." See Mario Tronti, *Dello spirito libero: Frammenti di vita e di pensiero* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2015), 183.

17. A state of emergency was declared in France in November 2015 following a series of violent attacks in Paris, which continued for two years until the "emergency" powers were effectively incorporated into standard police power. See Rona Lorimer, "French Strikes in the State of Exception," *Endnotes*, October 18, 2020, https://endnotes.org.uk/other_texts/ en/rona-lorimer-french-strikes-in-the-state-of-exception. [Translator's note.]

18. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" [1940], in *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 2003), 392. [Translator's note.]

19. Editorial board, "Teologia degli storni," *Dinamo Press*, May 10, 2015, www.dinam-opress.it/news/teologia-degli-storni. The same website—which demonstrates a certain obsession with destituent power and its theorists, and is generally accused of holding to a political theology in the same way that, once upon a time, the terms Trotskyist and subjectivism were thrown around—felt the necessity to write an article with a slightly different tone following the declaration of a state of emergency in France, in which they maintained (attempting to not

contradict prior positions) that the issue was only just opening up for Europe then, in the Winter of 2015–2016, following the "formal" declaration of a state of emergency, because in their view *only the juridical is material* [sic!], while everything else—which in truth is the most important thing—is simply fiction. See: *Di Redazione* [editorial board], "À la guerre comme à la guerre: Note sullo stato d'emergenza in Francia," *Dinamo Press*, November 23, 2015, https://www.dinamopress. it/news/a-la-guerre-comme-a-la-guerre-note-sullo-stato-d-emergenza-in-francia/.

20. The founding text of this group (the Accelerationists) is the 2013 *Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics* by Alex Williams and Nick Srinceck. It was quite literally demolished by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Débora Danowski in *Hâ mundo por vir? Ensaio sobre os medos e os fins* (Destero: Cultura e Barbárie Editora, Instituto Socioambiental, 2014). In Italy, the *Manifesto* was discussed by some of the supporters of the constituent hypothesis. See, for example, Matteo Pasquinelli, *Gli algoritmi del capital: Accelerazionismo, macchine della conoscenza e autonomia del commune* (Verona: Ombrecorte, 2014). For the *Manifesto* itself, see Robin Mackay and Armen Avenessian (eds.), *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth: Urbanomic Media, 2014), 347–362.

21. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings, Vol. 4*, 391.

22. The fact that this plays on the ambiguity of the term *ilusiòn* in Spanish, which implies both illusion and hope, does not fundamentally change the *suggestive* meaning of the term. Indeed, it reinforces it. all too well that one thing is equal to any other, whether material or immaterial. What is important is that truth never *chooses a*

23. *Jesus Cries*, directed by Brigitte Maria Mayer (Germany, 2015). In the film, Jesus and the apostles (male and female) are represented as a contemporary revolutionary group. The story is constantly interrupted by images that evoke the uprisings of recent years.

24. "Opinion is false subjectivity that can be separated from the person and incorporated into the circulation of commodities." Walter Benjamin, "Karl Kraus" [1931], in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2: 1931–1934*, ed. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1999), 439.

25. "Cortège de tête" refers to the practice of activists seizing a place at the front of a large demonstration and pushing it in a more confrontational direction. See "Cortège de tête," *Saisons*, Spring 2016, https://mauvaisetroupe.org/spip.php?article216. [Translator's note.]

Chapter 03

Another Thought About War

Some days there is no need to have fear of namingthose things that are impossible to describe.
—René Char, *Recherche de la base et du sommet*[1]

In the end, any 'modern society' concedes rights. And this is simply another way to ensure power for those who already command.
—Mario Tronti, *Dello spirito libero*[2]

Among those who have dealt with the concept of destitution, the most important text is the one written by Walter Benjamin in 1921 under the Marxian heading "Critique of Violence."[3] This essay is one of the most commented upon political-philosophical essays of the twentieth century, due to its hermetism, its disturbing appeal to the pure violence of the oppressed, and its always being out-of-time. In any case, it represents one of the very few texts through which one can find a different way to think about revolt, insurrection, and revolution, and thus contains the outlines of a strategy for the deposition of the politics of modernity. In this context, we can recall that the word *Gewalt*—which is always given in Romance translations of the essay as "violence" [*violenza*]—in German also means "legitimate power, authority, and public force." Thus, the title could also have been, among its many meanings, "Critique of Government." Aside from the powerful charm of Benjamin's writing, what we continue to find of interest in this essay is not so much a question of philology (which many have already worked through very well) but rather a question of gathering together some of the lines of force that cut through it, curving them towards our own *Aktualität*.

It is worth stating that Walter Benjamin cannot be reduced to the wretched characterization of "a great writer of the twentieth century," but instead represents a messianic force that runs across time in every direction, a revolutionary potential that pulsates violently beneath the crust of history, a blazing standard planted in the darkness of the present. Only in this way might we call ourselves Benjaminian.

As has been well noted, Benjamin's aim is to outline a theory of destitution by moving away from an integrated critique of law, inasmuch as law is originally produced by a constituent violence. In fact, Benjamin distinguishes between a violence that *founds* and *conserves* law, i.e., constituent and constituted, which is pushed towards the dimension of myth, and a violence as "pure means" that *deposes* (or destitutes) which is also the image of divine violence. For Benjamin, this revolutionary potential has to be not only able to appropriate the forces of intoxication but also disciplined. Here, we find in his work a communist potential that uses an anarchist potential[4]—while never becoming a constituent power, that is, an authoritative unity interconnected through the concept of Right, dominated by an unknowable Law, and held in motion by Economy. If anarchism corrects a communism that, as Benjamin says, pursues absurd goals, and communism does the same with anarchism, which makes political use of inconsistent means, in the end it is the practice of communism itself that corrects its own goals, especially "because there are no meaningful *political* goals."[5] For this reason it is daily life—"the every day as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday"[6]—that is the true field for the application of communism. Communism not as an *idea* of the world, but the unraveling of a praxis within the world.

Constituent violence is a machine that continually produces further violence, beginning with the need to conserve the law that it has produced. Indeed, Benjamin indicates that in modern democratic states police represent precisely that moment at which foundational and conservative violence meets a level of

indistinguishableness which allows them to act, both through law and beyond law itself. Police violence is the greatest institutional expression of the confusion of constituent power, in all its creative arbitrariness, and constituted power in all its conservative tendencies. It is precisely the actions of the police, then, that make visible that "capturing of anarchy" by governments, as Giorgio Agamben has highlighted.[7] The police are the intoxication of power. Is it surprising, then, if today the police seem to be the only institution of the modern state that has survived the long, continuous shipwreck of sovereignty? Is it surprising that the most common chant on the streets of France during the protests supposedly against a labor law was "*Tout le monde déteste la police*" ["the whole world hates the police"]? The police cannot be dealt with simply as the people standing between "us and power." We might say that this is part of a tactic, but strategically, they need to be destituted inasmuch as they are "the anarchy internal to power."

Destituent violence, on the other hand, is not only a form of violence that presents itself with a quality entirely distinct from what came before, inasmuch as it has no need for any exterior end as its criteria for justice, but by virtue of the fact that it acts outside of law and deposes every constituent and conservative pretext—thus breaking apart state sovereignty at its very core—it has the potential to put an end to every kind of violence. Destituent violence, therefore, rediscovers the space and time of justice within its own execution.

The centuries-long paradox in which we live consists of the fact that while power is normally represented as peaceful and only violent when forced to be so, destituent power—in other words, revolutionary power—is normally represented as violent and only peaceful when forced to be so by the coercive strength of the law. As far as sovereign power in the West is concerned, the only exception—and never was a term so apt—was established in the previous century by the fascist dictatorships, all of them founded on the subsumption of specific popular movements within the state-

form. All were experiences of government that claimed their exercise of power to be a public, radical display of a constituent violence for a new world order which, at the same time, denied the existence of all other worlds.

The problem, however, is that one never speaks about the same thing even when one uses an identical word. That upside-down mirror image of reality derives from the specific way the West has thought about war and violence, the relation between the two, their essence, for 2,500 years. It is one of the reasons, for example, that it has become so hard for Westerners to understand the insurrectionist strategy of the Zapatistas or the Aymara uprising. But being Western does not simply mean living in a geographical region called the West—there are plenty of "Westerners" today in Brazil, China, Africa, and India—but having become functions of a specific metaphysics, propagators of a techno-nihilist creed, actors in a history that is always that of the victors. Can we become-other-than-Westerners in the West? Perhaps this is the true revolutionary gamble of our present moment, a less absurd gamble than one might initially believe: surely by now we might admit that the October Revolution happened *despite* the West?

In the dominant narrative about violence and war, there is in fact an anthropological Western machine which has not only produced the extraordinary ethical void of the *modern individual*, but has also never managed to understand the endemic presence of war to primitive communities, other than as a sign they were essentially apolitical. Only Pierre Clastres[8] managed in the 1970s—both with and against Lévi-Strauss and in sympathy with Nietzsche and Heidegger—to open up this representation, demonstrating how the guerrilla violence of primitive tribes plays a role in their political and existential autonomy, and for this reason violence is always both a potential and an action. Or, in Roger Caillois's words, for primitive peoples, "war and peace coincide and are both permanent."[9] For primitive peoples, war is a means for preserving one's own being, Clastres concluded, reprising the Spinozan dictum.

Primitive war thus has nothing to do with the will to power, nor with economic reason—it has more to do with the "political." Through war, the primitive community *a priori* destitutes the state,

identified as the enemy *par excellence*—while also developing a whole series of techniques that keep the state at a distance, thus blocking any attempt at creating a hierarchy within any centralized form of economic-political control. For this reason, such a community uses a form of guerilla violence that would hardly be recognized as such by a Westerner. The figure of the "leader" is something that tribe makes use of, but in itself represents the image of a perfect ineffectiveness of power. If, as Deleuze and Guattari suggested, the state has always existed as potential—and thus we can imagine it will continue to do so—the strategies of evasion developed by the primitive community can still inspire us. Because, even while admitting that the state as a threatening hypothesis cannot be eliminated, there is always the possibility of resisting it and putting some distance between the state and ourselves.

Once the state has established itself, not only does it wage an external war to trace its borders over and over again, but—dismayed at the primitive Hobbesian war—uses the external war to cancel out the internal one. It continuously carries the intensity of a technified violence over its own borders in order to deny any other truth, every genuine form of autonomy. In this sense, if external war in the West is the continuation of politics by other means, then it is also true that "politics is the continuation of the civil war" within the state itself (*dixit* Foucault). The politics of state and capital block society's dispersal and inhibit the existence of any *ethos* incompatible with the state's own reasoning, while also imposing the insolubility of its own bonds and dissolving all forms of life outside of those defined by the state's economic and social norms. Violence, in this instance, is always constituent of a cursed "social right" established and then maintained through the exclusive monopoly on violence held by the state. No revolution against the state is possible today if it does not concern itself with corroding these bonds, the real discovery of the triumphant modernity of the nineteenth century, which is the "social" as the surrogate for communism. The commune and the social are sites whose intensity derives from being alternatives to one another.

Modern politics is marked by an unlimited violence and tends towards massacre. With few exceptions, this has historically been

the Western approach to war since ancient Greece, and immediately excludes the possibility of war conceived as a method of meeting or collision between forms of life that wish to remain internally united but nevertheless persist in their ungovernable multiplicity. What we call primitive is a form of politics that, therefore, has to try and deactivate the very possibility of the limitlessness of violence and, at the same time, the self-organization of the warrior and the merchant —the black seed of the state and capital—allowing for forms of life to follow on from conflict not as clear distinctions from its means but as an indivisibility, without ever allowing those in power to trace a line of separation that might irreversibly prejudice this form of life. For this reason, war—the continuing development of the figures of friend and enemy—is the relation with *others* as practiced by primitive peoples, and tends towards inhibiting the birth of a government of men and things, or a caste of warriors who might dominate everything by constituting themselves as a class separate from the tribe. But it is also a method of truly entering into contact with *others* and maintaining a destituent power: "war is contact, war is dialogue, war is free time."[10] It is a form of violence that the West, in reality, has known many times throughout history, but it is difficult to make out precisely because it shows itself in ways that are external to the ruling logic.

Nevertheless, it is through appealing to *this* meaning of violence that someone can write today: "In reality, violence exists for us *as that which has been expropriated from us*, and as that which we must reappropriate today."[11] Thus the primitive war is suddenly still *intra muros* [within the (city) walls; internal]. This is what the police and the media across Europe are discussing when, in the *casseurs* [rioters], hooligans, *autonomi* and the black bloc, they see something extraneous to but nevertheless present within the realm of civilization. It is never the number of *things* destroyed that truly causes the scandal, but rather the inexplicable presence of something barbarous that attacks power and its foundations, in other words, the demonstration of an absence—and thus the illegitimacy of every extant power—which at the same time indicates that there are other ways of living in this world, even of dying. Benjamin would have spoken of those who manage with

little, of those who respond to the poverty of experience by cleaning up and establishing new beginnings, searching for a way out of the present via the ruins of existence: a "positive barbarism."[12] On the other hand, war is by now an antiquated term in the West, which prefers its massacres to be discussed as "police operations." Indeed, the constituent power of *nation-building* is conferred on this global police force, after having scientifically destroyed everything that predated it. For the West, politics and the police have long been overlapping concepts.

It might seem strange to the citizens of the metropolises, but after the failed attempt of the workers' movement, the only method of civilizing war is to render it "primitive" once more.

Pierre Clastres—an ethnologist and activist in close dialogue with Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari—wrote about these matters in 1977. It would be disingenuous to not recall that he wrote about them while reflecting on the conflict that shattered Europe between 1968 and the end of the 1970s, with its subsumed communist parties absorbed into the democratic capitalist machine, and its armed groups that were becoming a separate wing of the movement, the West was within spitting distance of its appointment with the becoming of the revolution. Within these radical groups, there were some who rambled about the construction of metropolitan machines that might create a new future socialism through the formula "assemblies plus cybernetics." We have seen what became of this. A revolutionary becoming has always implied an attempt to slow down history while allowing the coming of the revolution to speed up. The time of capital, however, has always been characterized by a frenetic acceleration, partly in order to not provide the time necessary for—and thus slowing down the subjective development of—revolution. In any case, instead of working towards expanding and defending spaces for slowing down, the left tends towards acceleration at every level, discovering again and again that capital cannot be fought on its own terrain. Not even the most interesting European revolutionary movement of the twentieth century—Italian

autonomia—managed to provide the correct rhythm to these two temporal dimensions, and perhaps this is one of the reasons for its defeat. If the chance for a victory over capitalism exists, it lies in slowing down temporality in horizontal spaces of autonomy and—at the same time—accelerating and verticalizing on the outside, at the moment when a hostile temporality can be blocked. It should remain very clear through all of this that the strategic objective is to sabotage the train of progress and not jump on top of it in order to continue the journey forever. The armored train of revolution is always on the move, but slowly. It is not a TGV[13] but one of those provincial trains that makes a stop in every small, barely-known station. In a moral sense, left accelerationism is a form of impatience, which as Kafka said, is a cardinal sin. It is because of this impatience that humanity was chased out of paradise and it is always due to impatience that we do not manage to find our way back.

If progress, acceleration, and constituent violence are the necessary elements of history, well, so much the worse for history (as Clastres's reasoning seems to conclude). Following from this, it makes sense to think about revolutionary conflict beyond being *en partisan* and instead as conducted *en primitif*. Paraphrasing an old saying sometimes attributed to Napoleon, and which Carl Schmitt studied in his *Theory of the Partisan: "il faut opérer en partisan partout où il y a des partisans*" ["we must operate as partisans wherever there are partisans"].[14] We might uncouple and overturn its meaning (because here it is the state that speaks with Napoleon) and replace it with *il faut operér en primitif partout où il y a des occidentales* [one must act as a primitive anywhere that one finds Westerners]. A great French poet who cut his teeth in the Resistance said it even better: "act like a primitive, plan like a strategist."[15]

What does it mean to speak of partisans and primitives? First and foremost, it means acting locally, but strategically speaking, it means never letting an institution of any kind confiscate common power. It involves taking a position without any resolution of continuity between the local and the global—that is, refusing both universalism and parochialism—while at the same time following Mao's advice that it is better for ten people to win against one so

that, once the enemy has been defeated in one place after another, it will be possible to win with one against ten in the strategic battle. It might mean to follow the asymmetric rule of war formed by T. E. Lawrence, to accept that one is weaker than the enemy except at a point of our own choosing, and then to aim at winning without a final battle, without extermination, because the real victory is always only political. The simple reason for that is, as Lawrence noted, those who fight for freedom wish to enjoy the fruits of victory while they are still alive. It might mean never allowing the war to be guided by the imperatives of economics and production, the symbols of the capitalist war, as W. G. Sebald shows in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, recounting the story of an American general who, at the end of World War II, justified the hellish bombardment of German citizens without any strategic interest by pointing out that the bombs were "expensive items…. In practice, they couldn't have been dropped over mountains or open country after so much labor had gone into making them at home."[16] It might mean forging alliances on the basis of friendship and never calculation. It might mean acting so that each victory does not become a system of law, because this is never *the same thing* as justice. It might mean continuing as potential, forever. It might mean evading power for as long as one can.

Destituent power is therefore defined *ab origine* [from the beginning] as simultaneously against the state (Clastres) and against history (Benjamin), a primitive exteriority to Law, Government, and Capital that abides as a possibility that is *always present because it persists in its untimeliness*. '"Primitive society,' in short, is one of the conceptual embodiments of the thesis that another world is possible: that there is life beyond capitalism, as there is society outside of the State. There always was, and—for this we struggle—there always will be."[17]

If the introduction of new law is followed by the action of conserving it, inscribing itself into the historical community through a political act that requires law to be used as a means of coercion to

maintain government's rule over forms of life, its deposition can only arise through a modification in the experience of time. Not being afraid of one's time, of resistance, is a question of space, of freeing up life, the freeing of worlds against this world, all of which is only possible by beginning from a tangible change in the quality of time. At the end of the 1970s—the very moment when the autonomists' insurrection faded out into a "withdrawal," socialism too began to fade away, and a new capitalism reordered the world—Giorgio Agamben issued a warning to those at the helm: "The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to 'change the world' but also—and above all—to 'change time.'"[18]

This means creating a deformation in the warp of the world, which begins with a temporal discontinuity, an interruption in history by which destituent time—which interrupts into the present by forging itself with the past of the oppressed—breaks through the crust of ordinary time, irreversibly altering its course, both past and future. In the time of destitution it becomes possible to depose our current enslaved life while proposing the profane possibility of a form of life directed towards happiness, a form of life outside of laws—not against or through laws, but outside of them. It exits law, economy, and government rather than dialectically counterposing them and yet also recomposes their constitution. Communism becomes a state of fact, not a state of law.

It is easy to forget that war has no exclusively spatial dimension and that instead it is time that constitutes the decisive factor. Advancing the revolutionary war in time means "having time," in other words, creating distance from the present and reducing it to an extraneous factor—"you can only see matters at a distance … those who remain in the middle of things learn nothing."[19] Thus, it means interrupting time in order to free it from that void that holds us prisoner in the circular community of catastrophe. And if the present seems like a force to be cast out, then it is clear that it is not be enough to sabotage it from within: it needs to be attacked from outside as well. Therein lies the difficulty of the situation, the attempt to imagine this *outside*. In any case, it is a problem that cannot be avoided, because only those who manage to live fully in

this other time understand its joints and fractures and can live a form of destituent life.

To destitute, in this sense, means finding a space of absolute exteriority (the Great Outside), which needs to be carefully distinguished from another, hostile form of exteriority. For the moment it is enough to say that absolute exteriority coincides with a similarly absolute interiority (the Great Inside) and that this coincidence—which represents the neutralization of the possibility that either this interiority or this exteriority might become an instrument—appears as destituent violence, while within the constitutent sphere violence (un)measures itself against an external factor that entirely dominates its operation, beginning with a fundamental temporal division. Indeed, the value of its ultimate goal determines the quality of the means used today. Or, vice versa: it is the means used "according to the law" that determine the correctness of its end. It is in this manner that constituent exteriority —subsuming and "legitimately" grinding up anything that presents itself as irreducibly extraneous—becomes the suffocating *inside* of government, with all its perverted messianism, creating an eternal present with neither exit nor redemption.

There are those who identify the coincidence of absolute exteriority and interiority with transcendence, and others who name the coincidence of the outside with the inside as immanence. These are mysteries of thought. The important thing to understand is that only by beginning with this moment of coincidence—as the Latin brocard goes, "that which stands together, falls together,"[20] or in other words, by beginning with their simultaneous destitution—that one can be in the world as a revolutionary becoming and imagine what their "organization" might mean today.

In normal times, we are never truly contemporary with the present. There is a kind of break between the sensible world I experience and historical time that moves intangibly through the container of the present. There is no real relation between revolution and *this* time other than war. Coincidence is that moment

which remains in a subversive relation to hegemonic time, allowing the possibility of thinking through that break—not by identifying it with the present moment but by making it explode. This is precisely that temporal fragment through and within which we can claim to be present in ourselves. It is the copresence of the untimely alongside the timeliness of revolution. What is certain is that, taken on their own, neither good exteriority nor good interiority are adequate dimensions for the revolutionary becoming: our history, our *tradition*, is quite clear on this matter. It is what we call certainty.

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1. René Char, *Recherche de la base et du sommet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 3. [Translator's note.]

2. Mario Tronti, *Dello spirito libero: Frammenti di vita e di pensiero* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2015), 23. [Translator's note.]

3. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" [1921], in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1996), 236–252.

4. Where communism is the unapologetic art of the theoretical-practical exploration of individual and collective existence and its organization; the claiming of a form of life pervaded by justice and equality. In a letter, Benjamin once compared the depth of the most banal communist declaration with the flatness of bourgeois eloquence, appealing to the Talmudic doctrine of the forty-nine meanings for every passage of the Torah. Following in the footsteps of Emmanuel Levinas, by *an-archie* we mean a negation without affirmation, which means it does not prefigure any new principle (as was the case with classical political anarchism) but provides a name for expressing the destitution of every principle: one can speak of an-archie, but it cannot rule.

5. Walter Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, May 29, 1926, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 301.

6. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" [1929], in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1: 1927–1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1999), 216.

7. Giorgio Agamben, "For a Theory of Destituent Power," public lecture in Athens, Greece, November 16, 2013, http://www.chronosmag.eu/index.php/g-agamben-for-a-theory-of-destituent-power.html. [Translator's note.]

8. Pierre Clastres, *Archeology of Violence*, trans. Jeanine Herman (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), [1994] 2010).

9. Roger Callois, “Le vertige de la guerre,” in *Quatre essais de sociologie contemporaine* (Olivier Perrin: Paris, 1951), 75–153.

10. Heiner Müller, “Denken ist grundsätzlich schuldhaft,” in *Jenseits der Nation* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1991), 37.

11. Tiqqun, *Contributions à la guerre en cours* (Paris: La fabrique éditions, 2009), 21.

12. Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty” [1933], *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Pt. 2*, 731–737. [Translator’s note.]

13. *Trains à grand vitesse* (TGV) are high-speed rail lines operated by the French government. In 2008, French authorities arrested nine militants for allegedly sabotaging the overhead wires used to power the trains. In 2018, the defendants were cleared of these charges. See “The Tarnac Verdicts: Unraveling the Logic of Anti-Terrorism,” *Crimethinc.*, April 12, 2018, https://crimethinc.com/2018/04/12/the-tarnac-verdicts-unraveling-the-logic-of-anti-terrorism-after-ten-years-the-tarnac-affair-concludes-in-france. [Translator’s note.]

14. Carl Schmitt, “Theory of the Partisan: Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political (1963),” *Telos* 127 (Spring 2004): 11–78. [Translator’s note.]

15. René Char, *Leaves of Hypnos*, trans. Jackson Matthews (New York: Grossman, 1973), 12. [Translator’s note.]

16. W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), 65.

17. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “The Untimely, Again,” in Clastres, *Archeology of Violence*, 15.

18. Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 91.

19. “Ein Gespräch zwischen Wolfgang Heise und Heiner Müller,” in Heiner Müller, *Werke, Band 10, Gespräche 1:1965-1987* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), 164–178.

20. The Latin brocard “*aut simul stabunt aut simul cadent*” is generally translated as “they will either stand together, or fall together.” [Translator’s note.]

Chapter 04

Destituent Strike I: Justice vs. Law

Nothing remains in its proper place.
Everything is somewhere else.
—Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*[1]

In his essay on *Gewalt*, Benjamin draws on the "proletarian general strike" as an example of pure destituent violence. He maintains that —unlike the "political general strike," which always aims for some partial, exterior result and thus acquires the character of a constituent violence—the revolutionary/proletarian strike might begin from the normal right to strike but its true meaning can only be realized through the destruction of state power, involving the immediate destitution of law and the suppression of wage labor. It forces the suspension of law to coincide with the end of the violence of exploitation. A strike becomes truly destituent when it no longer allows for the reconstruction of the enemy's power. The problem to be teased out here is thus not only how to create a destituent strike but also how a political strike might transform itself and enter into a revolutionary becoming.

Some advice before use: when considering the Benjaminian strike, we must approach it as a *gesture* and a *citation*, while nevertheless carefully avoiding any identification with the figure of the twentieth-century worker. The proletariat is constant; the worker is contingent. It is also entirely clear that when Benjamin says "proletarian general strike," he is talking about an insurrectionary hypothesis within a revolutionary process. In the end, his working method teaches us that it is possible to save a fragment of the past only if we are capable in the present moment of ripping it away from its determinate historical conditions and

recomposing it within a new constellation that can subvert historical becoming.

In a political strike, the next day everyone returns to the factory —a site which is today both everywhere and nowhere—and in the best of cases they return with some new law or perhaps a few more cents in their pockets (i.e., with an *exterior* change to working conditions). In any case, they remain submissive, and the chain of events and of existence—the "catastrophe"—continues yesterday, today and tomorrow: *as always*. In the second version, however, the interruption of work, the exit from the ranks, the arrest of normal time, the abandonment of the relationship with power all coincide with the beginning of a destituent project.

In her polemic against both anarchists and reformists, Rosa Luxemburg framed the question excellently, maintaining that what she called "the mass strike" cannot be produced "artificially"—from the outside, "decided upon" by someone, "propagandized"—but instead always arises out of a "historical necessity," which itself arises out of an encounter between a reality and a truth. If the strike is reduced to a defensive action or subordinated to the dynamics of representative democracy (or even to a "big day out"), it slips away from both reality and truth. According to Luxemburg, the real strike is not a one-time event but a process, and ought to be understood within a much larger historical process of revolution. The so-called Italian "long '68" was such a process. If we want to better understand the pre-insurrectionary character of the strike that shook France in 2016, we first would have to understand that the *terminus ante quem* was 2005–2006, with the revolt of the banlieues and the movement against reforms to the public sector employment contracts. Indeed, as Rosa Luxemburg wrote: "The mass strike is rather the sign … of a whole period of the class struggle lasting for years, perhaps for decades," but that "in reality the mass strike does not produce the revolution but the revolution produces the mass strike."[2]

The destituent strike exists in a temporal discontinuity, a space of autonomy within a revolutionary process that moves in fits and starts, in contrast to the political strike which stands as a single point within a continuous dominant temporal line. This is a

critically important element: the destituent strike is not a detached fact but a constellation of events and counter-events. Within this discontinuity we find the forging of alliances and the organization of enmities, until a cascade of fragments from the oppressed past encounters the coming future in the destruction of the present. This is none other than the becoming of that historical force we call communism. In order to better understand it we must always pay careful attention: on the one hand, to the discontinuities in the process, to that which happens (or does not happen) during the interruptions suffered by or imposed upon it; and, on the other, its being characterized by multiple fires, never a central one from which the strike spreads out.

In the end, if the political strike can be preceded by law and also aims at producing a new one—thus, never positioning itself outside of the juridical sphere of the state—then the proletarian general strike immediately positions itself heterogeneously, refusing to occupy any seat of power, to engage in any simple substitution, and instead wants to destitute power. *The destituent strike demands nothing; it makes a negative claim*. Perhaps Pasolini was not thinking of something very different in his famous and much discussed poem *Il PCI ai giovani* [The Communist Party to the youth], provocatively addressed to the students of ’68, but apparently never read through to the end where he lashes out: “Stop thinking about your rights, stop demanding things of power.”[3]

Give up on law and power. This is how Benjamin imagined destitution as the authentic revolutionary gesture. The entire vexed question of “reform or revolution” is completely swept away once one moves radically away from the viewpoint of dominant political thought (including revolutionary thought) according to which correct activity generally resolves into either “taking power” or the infinite wait for an apocalyptic phantasmagoria with a final palingenesis. It has not escaped our attention that in Benjamin’s choice of words to distinguish the two forms of strike (in which he follows Georges Sorel), not only do we find a clear, sharp critique of modern

political activity, but also, here only the revolutionary-proletarian dimension can grasp the *political* as such, the true break from the current state of things. *The real alternative to modern politics is thus not to be found in what we usually call an "anti-politics," which is merely a variation on the same theme, but instead in revolutionary becoming.*

The destituent gesture—which need not be specified as the action of citizens in general, nor of a homogeneous and empty "humanity," but rather as the proletariat's *use* of the political—first and foremost creates a fork in the spatial-temporal and ethical-political road: the division between *justice* and law. True justice is no longer identified with an authority or with virtue, but—as Benjamin himself wrote—with a "state of the world." Fighting injustice means struggling to exit from the current state of the world and helping to establish a just one. Rising up and destituting government means making its laws unenforceable through a gesture that has no juridical end or meaning but that, even while externally destituting the current world, is in itself the production of another state of the world.

Unlimited bloody, radical violence (so writes Benjamin in 1921) only seems so at first glance, from the perspective of the extrinsic politics of the law and the police, those who conserve the current state of the world, and not within the gesture of destitution, which in actualizing justice at the same time configures itself instead as a *means of pure destruction*. "Justice too, therefore, is also destructive, by putting the brakes on the constructive ambiguities of law."[4] Among the many (and frequently reactionary) configurations of the *katechon*, "justice" is that which most closely fits its revolutionary version.[5] From this perspective, any constituent/constituted power must remain beneath—far beneath—justice, if it is to get anywhere at all. This is why, for instance, the left has always had its hands dirty with the blood of those it would defend, thus making itself—through a whole series of actions deprived of justice—a "brake" on the coming transformation of the world.

The appearance of justice is always that of a world of truth that begins to grow within and against this world of lies. Then, when its path meets a historical realty coinciding with it, it becomes

heterogeneous: the “within and against” transforms into an “outside and against,” a shift that Benjamin defines as an “awakening.” Remaining stubbornly “within and against” means to linger indefinitely within a dream realm. There can be no doubt “one needs to dream,” but never waking up can soon become a place of comfort. It ends up being an incomplete, insufficient position. It is at the meeting point of these two worlds, the moment when they reach a decisive threshold, that the present explodes and we witness their conflict. Now that the sphere of hostility has been burst, they become mutual enemies.[6] Juridical violence against pure violence, mythic violence against divine violence. Revolt clarifies what is usually confused, anarchically embracing the oscillations in time suspended between waking and dreaming. It creates that *outside* where one can attack the fortress of the present. *Kommunismus* is the attempt to make this outside coincide with our individual interiority.

It is precisely because we are so used to residing within this time of weary, artificial slumber that we are unsurprised to find lies within the revolutionary camp. “Everything, even lies, advances the truth,” Kafka warned his young friend Janouch.[7] We know all too well how to dig up the shrapnel of redemption lodged deep within enemy territory. Revolutionary ethics similarly have few moral quibbles. So long, that is, as one knows how to distinguish between the shards. This is why one must remain awake even while rummaging through dreams.

In the world of generalized hostility we live in, everything is presented to us as *equivalent*, as if *everything were the same:* truth and lies, good and evil, domination and subjection. As if all terms are empty of meaning, neutral objects, unreal existences, things that can be equally exchanged with other things, and easily translated into the sulfurous language of general equivalence. The rules of revolutionary forms of life are the following: to identify and annihilate the lie; to be capable of material determination within the stirring of spirits that agitate the world; to know how to recognize and endlessly recompose all the fragments of redemption that make up the world; and, to “make them endure, give them space.”[8] The profane world cannot but be composed of fragments, “a

world where many worlds fit" (as the Zapatistas say), but revolutionary practice restores their singularity. It restores their true, profane, transient reality.

Hostility is annihilated; the enemy is defeated. But if it is true that revolutionary becoming is made possible during this process of recognition, recomposition, and a constant attention to the series of events, then it is also true that constant belief in the existence of revolutionary subjects who willfully produce a revolutionary reality hypostasizes a division between subject and object. Both subject and object are then internally divided again: we find the activist who seems to be split in two, a moral subject who acts for a true subject but always takes the form of an institutional exteriority. This same activist imagines their object to be the raw material of history, which then becomes the product of their labor—replicating an illusion that has unfortunately been present throughout revolutionary movements.

What needs to be recomposed is neither a subject nor a social state but a world and a form of life: a world of potential that takes form in a multiplicity of worlds. This means there has never been any unity within profane history, no perfect totality, but instead, every fragment that has taken form can be that unity in itself, the persistence of fragments will always impede Law from reconstructing itself and continuing its function.

The first area in which we must point out lies and fragments of redemption, in order to recognize friends and give a face to our enemies, is that of our own, anonymous, individual lives. Because here too there is a world of potential that hardens into a form.

"The old mole" keeps on burrowing—but it is nearly blind, as everyone knows. It does not follow a direction formed out of its subjective vision; it has no plan for the future to be completed, its outlook aims elsewhere. Indeed, touch is its most developed sense. As with Benjamin, touch means the ability to treat social relations as if they were natural relations, so as to bring us closer to our real, "paradisiacal" being-in-the-world.

One day the mole disappeared down a distant tunnel, and its existence was then known only through the molehills and burrows it had dug when alive. Its life became indistinct from its territory. And then, all of a sudden, we find it here, close to us, even within us. The mole has burrowed down into our lives and dissolved within them: now our lives, our forms of life, have become the mole's territory, and the world above falls in. Marx called this collapse "revolution."

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1. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Richard Manheim (New York: Schocken, 1969), 112. [Translator's note.]

2. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike" [1906], in *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Helen Scott (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), 141, 147.

3. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Empirismo eretico* (Milan: Garzanti, 1972), 151–159. [Translator's note.]

4. Walter Benjamin, "Karl Kraus" [1931], in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Pt. 2*, 439.

5. For more on the *katechon*, see Chapter 1.

6. For the "sphere of hostility," see Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*, trans. Alexander R. Galloway and Jason E. Smith (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010). [Translator's note.]

7. Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, trans. Goronwy Rees (London: Andre Deutsch, 1971), 128. [Translator's note.]

8. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt, 1974), 148. [Translator's note.]

Chapter 05

Destituent Strike II: “No Future for Us”

I use the best
I use the rest.
—Sex Pistols, “Anarchy in the UK”

In recent years, we have asked many questions about the strike: is it still valid? Is there some remnant of it that still interests us, now that we are living after the end of the workers’ movement? How can we understand the strike today *à la* Benjamin, as a destituent strike? How might we *rescue* this gesture?

The question of the strike has always been a question of temporality. The classic strike, which with Benjamin we will call the political strike, has a foreseeable beginning and end, a reactive temporality subordinated to negotiation and, in the best of cases, aims at achieving surface-level improvements. It represents a temporality controlled and commanded by an economic logic, a calculation made in the short term in order to indicate a distant future in which everyone is better off, works the right amount for the correct sum, in which citizens no longer need to strike because the law will always be on their side. Now, omitting the many other problems such an idea of the strike bears today—not least of all, the disappearance of all forms of political-juridical mediation that once permitted that kind of activity—the main question consists of the sacrifice of the eventual potential of the strike. The potential of an interruption that overcomes singular existences, basing itself in that collective enthusiasm by which one can grasp the revolutionary moment for the sake of a future that no longer exists in our times. Or better still: the future that exists today is merely an idea of the future, and nothing other than a tool of domination. In the hands of capitalism, it is manipulated and conserved within its grasp. The future is used as a threat against us, blackmail by which we must

accept the present as it is—"may it live as long as possible!" This situation is tangibly expressed in the demonstrations that accompany today's political strikes, which everyone knows have no use at all other than to serve as a confirmation of the present, because nothing is meant to actually happen. They do not even make the most cosmetic of changes, unless you want to see them as the pure demonstration of a state of being that somehow still *resembles* life at the very least: a zombie strike.

Any credible discussion around "crisis" today has to admit the idea of the future no longer has any emancipatory value. If we look at the history of the last century, this was a concept that only meant anything so long as the world was divided into two camps, between capitalism and socialism, a division that in turn allowed other divisions, other possible becomings. The end of that division, which has spread as a tangible, comprehensible civil war across the world since 1917, also meant the end of a desirable future, an inability to perceive the depths of history, and a widespread feeling of fear in relation to any alternative dimension of time, imprisoning the world in the present, in our present. And yet the collapse of that division also generated a great possibility for revolutionaries—as Heiner Müller noted in his own time—a possibility which seems to still require reflection, i.e., the separation between communists and power.

In today's info-communicational language, "crisis" means that those who govern must politically manage historical temporality by making use of an illusion of deferring a final catastrophe—the eco-political apocalypse—in order to make citizens believe in a present represented by a government conceived as a dam erected to defend society. We are meant to believe in a catastrophic lie because the apocalypse, in truth, is clearly the *Stimmung* [mood; atmosphere] that reigns over capitalism as it is, aside from being that time period in which we have been living metaphysically ever since John of Patmos announced its arrival.

The political strike in the crosshairs of Benjamin's critique has the same features of an infinite deferral of the final reconciliation or mystification, and in this sense it is an *apocalyptic strike* that is satisfied with a distant point in time, beyond the end times. The

other form of strike, the destituent strike, is clearly a *messianic strike*, which has to effect an interruption *now*—a "now" that is always in process and potentialized—that breaks through normal time and takes effect through this interruption, from within the rupture of the present, destituting the world as it is. Communism is not another world, but another use of this world, conquered through another use of itself and time. In this version, the Day of Judgment is not beyond the end-times but represents the end disseminated within every present, a force that erupts into profane time. Today, in the absence of any autonomous future dimension, we might say that the partisans of this counter-present act not so much through a spirit of optimism and progressiveness, but in all likelihood, through a "constructive defeatism," an apt and polemical concept coined by Heiner Müller.[1] Or, to speak with Benjamin once again, through organizing pessimism.[2]

As far as the current radical left is concerned, we have to be careful not to reduce its apocalypticism to those theories that insist, along with a particular reading of Marx, on the imminent "collapse of capitalism" due to its own crises.[3] This is not the most widespread form of apocalyptic thinking on the left, however. That which seems much more widely felt is an approach to temporality that understands the future to have been "stolen" and needing to be retaken, or hidden and needing to be pushed out into the open, producing a life perched upon a present without end that *imitates* messianic time. Here the eternal present of capital is also the mockery of God, the apocalyptic "time of the Antichrist." Then there is the version that believes we must accelerate and embody ourselves *within* the techno-cybernetic development of capitalism in order to finally overcome the future, as if to claim that the *operaist* "within and against" has now become an apocalyptic condemnation. Then, there is the apocalypticism that says we must wait for the moment that will come, but that it does not depend on us but on the laws of capital, society, the science of Marxism or because more people need to convert to militant anarchism first. Finally, there are

those versions that predict the return of a "radical humanism" that could restore a dear old notion of the subject (a Kantian constituent subject, it goes without saying) in a way that might buy a little time, and while you wait, support some humanist candidate or other in the latest election. This is familiar, linear, Western time, a distressing rhythm already well known from the Book of Revelations. According to this theory, the activist waits impatiently for a clarifying event that is always around the corner, to be searched for everywhere. The trade unions continue to defer a catastrophe that will never exist at any point in the future because the function of government is for the catastrophe to exist now. The old activist holds to the development of the productive forces or the tendency for the rate of profit to fall, because his Marxist sect's handbook says so. The anarchist produces an infinity of "actions" that—despite having no contact with normal life—are meant to transubstantiate in the consciousness of the "exploited." Etcetera, etc., etc.

In the meantime, capitalism *revolves* around catastrophes, crises, pandemics, even uprisings, trying each time to carve out its own method of governing, some earnings for its businesses, and last but not least, the production of apocalyptic subjectivities. For government, the crisis-apocalypse is an exemplary political technology. It is a regulatory method for managing the catastrophe that reproduces itself in every movement and through which it tries to mold the mass perception of reality in a way that suggests government is here to secure the perpetual deferral of the end. It even does so while making it into an advert that grabs your attention: "Thanks to security, technology, and the police, you have a little more time to live it up!" We are living in a time of happy hours, cocktail buffets, and evenings spent pumped full of MDMA in the metropolis's hippest bars to mourn a community that never existed. Or, evenings spent full of regrets that are only superficially more sober, time passed with a petit bourgeois and only slightly alternative family after a day's hard work of selling smiles to clients, bosses, managers, the village co-op, the social center in the gentrified neighborhood. Anything goes, so long as we avoid

thinking about the catastrophe or the iron-and-carbon face of the freedom offered to us by the present moment.

The apocalyptic model offered by governance is not, therefore, a sign of capitalism's terminal crisis, but is instead a part of its hellishly mechanistic vitality. We live in a non-world that *functions* but has nevertheless become *unlivable*, a non-world that continues to *produce* but has become *uninhabitable*. Our subjectivity is not external to all of this; it also functions and produces but is both unlivable and uninhabitable. Generating apocalyptic subjectivities means producing subjects that habituate themselves to the catastrophe, smiling about it for the most part while establishing aseptic environments, preferably digital ones, that are abodes of enforced confinement. They have even given a more modern and *smart* name to this new technology of governing survival: they call it "resilience" precisely to indicate the absence of exits from the present location, the very equivalent of confirming the necessity to remain happily there where one merely exists and does nothing.

Deleuze already noted this: "The apocalypse is a great machinery, an *already industrialized organization*, a Metropolis…. The Apocalypse is not a concentration camp (the Antichrist); it is the great military, police, and civil security of the new State (the Heavenly Jerusalem)."[4] There is more apocalypse in the open museum nights organized by metropolitan governments than in the news stories that take place in the suburbs that mankind forgot. Capitalism is like a Bible in which all the symbols and rituals are the same as they have always been—but are now inverted, mutilated. Just as revolutionaries have done many times throughout history, perhaps we need to expose and unleash this desire to *end things* contained within the apocalypse. The end of normality and the beginning of redeemed life—without any transition.

At any rate, it has been the virtue of the great revolutionary spirits to concern themselves very little, or not at all, with the future of the revolution and instead dedicate all their time and energy to its becoming and how to make it happen. Bertolt Brecht said: "I need

the actual, real revolution; in short, I can think only as far as where the revolution begins; I must omit the revolution from my thinking."[5] It is only from the moment when one begins to be concerned with the future, even before having carried out the revolution, that this virtue is turned into cynicism and opportunism.

In this very precise way, *the revolution has no future*. It has never had one, because the revolution is not a destiny. The revolution is not an end to reach in the future through an infinite accumulation of technological, juridical, or moral instruments; the revolution is a process that can only be declined in the potential present. It is a process without progress that realizes itself, always and forever, in each gesture that opens up an exit from the present as organized by domination. The only form of accumulation that concerns the revolution is a discontinuous one: the accumulation of these gestures in the past that make up its tradition. The coming revolution is not something that awaits us in a distant room in the palace of the future. Either it is already here, among us, or it is nothing at all. That the distances between us—and, between us and the revolution—can seem insurmountable is another story, one that does not concern the future but rather our own faulty perception of our epoch. It is the difficulty in developing a shared strategic line of thought, and the widespread disbelief in the idea that a revolutionary process might have something to do with a reality pregnant with truth. And this is all, of course, aside from the evident inability to direct our lives towards a worthy form of experience.

Everything that feels like progressivism must therefore be perceived, now more than ever, as something deeply hostile. It is like an affection that tries to corrupt our energies, to sow within our minds the slothful doubt that the only bulimic hope available to us is that of a time we will never live to see, and in reality, no one will live to see precisely because the future of this world is already engulfed by the present. Capitalism has not been progressive for some time now; the proletariat has never been. In the end, only the left continues to stubbornly bow down to this idol of modernity. *No future*, the punk slogan of the 1970s, perhaps had a meaning different from the flatly nihilistic one that many—including ourselves—attributed to it during the epoch of its declaration. In

this sense, punk was a great moment of truth about the end of an age, standing on the worthy shoulders of the ancient Greek cynics.

On the other hand, it is well known that the only current idea of the future in global public opinion is constitutively apocalyptic. That this world will come to an end is no longer the cry of Christ's priests, nor of philosophers burdened with an impotent pessimism, but constitutes the daily sermon of Western scientists—the principal actors in the contemporary apocalypse—along with journalists as its heralds. Even preaching of a constituent power now always seems merely the promise that we can delay an end of the world we are all waiting for together, with the hurried search for an agreement on the present, and a final future reconciliation. In the meantime, we are content with having found some breathing space. But, the apocalypse is not a prophecy, it is a description of the present: "The fact that the world is destroying itself is not a hypothesis: it is in a sense the fact from which any reflection on the world follows."[6] Contemporary literature and film have made a successful genre of productions in which the apocalypse has occurred in a past that resembles our present, and in which the present is identified with living through a post-apocalyptic world. But, as Kafka warned us, writing does not dwell in itself.[7] It is futile to wait for the spectacular end of the world, replete with a bloodbath and glorious final explosions. The truth is, in fact, that this world has already ended; it exists but no longer has any meaning. *A world that functions but is empty of meaning is no longer a world, it is a hell.* Pasolini warned us the evening before he was assassinated on the beach at Ostia, a Roman banlieue: "Hell is rising up toward you."[8]

Helping to think through what to destroy in the hell of the present is the only positive function of political utopia, Benjamin once observed. The world "as we wish it were," a utopia, is not an image that helps us plan the future. Rather, careful observation of elements of the present that do not appear in the utopian world help us to identify what must be confronted now because it *deserves* to be destroyed, because it literally no longer has any place in this world. Utopia is a form of fiction that illuminates the evil of today more than the good that is to come. It describes less the bliss of the future than the dystopia of the present; it discusses less what should be

added than what should be *subtracted* from today. A form of revolutionary thinking that could make use of utopia would thus define an operation of subtraction and attack, within and against the present, in order to bring it out from itself and not as an exponential expansion of today into the future. Utopia is another of those instruments (and in this case, a meaningful one) that constitute the *outside* from which one can lay siege to the fortress of the present.

The golden rule of the historic revolutionary is to carve out a space freed from the enchantment of commodities, to tear aside the hypocrisy of social relations, to neutralize the black magic holding us in its grip through the political economy of life itself. It means to cut oneself off from "memory without benefit" (in the words of Ernesto de Martino), to take up and avenge instead the memory of the defeated, to restore objects to their reality, to exit from the world of valorization, to desert the West, to desert even one's own ego. In the end, this is more worthwhile than occupying any old place without knowing how to live there or commemorating victories of the past in order to console ourselves about our current impotence. It means never identifying ourselves with any of history's victors. Only once this destructive operation has been completed will it be possible for other things, beings, and lives to be present in that space and that time to make free use of it, which is to say: to be present in justice itself without claiming any right to it.

That this world lives without meaning, however, shows that it is *already* in a messianic time which, even if stuck in a kind of indecision that blocks its arrival,[9] can be freed through a power that destitutes the chaos, confusion, and generalized meaninglessness government anarchically manages for its constant functioning. The barrier to be torn down is the ironclad normality that this hellish state of the world has reached. Men and women in the West (the "Mahagonny men") are so completely inured to this that they cannot imagine anything worse or better. This is why they can so easily pass from being the damned that must serve their sentence to the devils that inflict terror and misery.[10] It was Hannah Arendt who, in reflecting on the socialization of Nazism, discovered this extremely modern phenomenon by which the *economic* needs of an era such as our own can, in any moment, transform the industrious

citizen and family man into the "mob man, and make him the instrument of whatsoever madness and horror."[11] And, we know too well that all kinds of pogroms are possible every day, as much in the working-class suburbs of the metropolis as within the gated communities of bourgeois neighborhoods. It is not one's sociological class, but whether or not one is at peace with our current epoch and world that makes the difference, that decides not *who you are* but *how you are that which you are*. The revolutionary class has never been an economic class; for this very reason, it has the faculty to carry out acts of justice.

Another problem presented by the political strike, and classical political discourse in general, is that of hypostasizing a *subject* of the strike (and of the revolution), modeled on the figure sculpted by modern philosophy and centered on a socioeconomic identity synthesized within it. This subject, then, has its own deputy or substitute from whom it requests representation, whether in a party, trade union, nation or—even if not directly, as is often the case today—government. The "strategic subject" almost always means establishing the centrality of a specifically economic figure asked to represent and provide holistic expression to current conflicts but also to the landscape of the future.

The party ought never have been merely the deputy of this subject; instead, it should have been the continuous plane across which revolutionary potentials could circulate and organize. What happened instead is that both party and state, confused with one another, became the terrestrial reflection of a golden celestial body that orbits a world imagined as if it were fixed in space, despite its countless shifts and motions, and that only the party-state, the true center of the cosmos, can politicize matters through the extension of its rays. But it is the sun that stands still and the Earth that moves, along with its inhabitants. And on Earth there is no single center; there is a multitude of centers that revolve around a central void. For revolutionary becoming, *I* am not the center of anything. The center is always outside and shifts along, moving with the motion of

the world, through meetings, experiences, uprisings. Each horizontal dislocation outside of me corresponds with a vertical movement within me; there is uprooting from deep within ourselves. It is within the coincidence of these two dimensions that we find the vertical of the revolution, that which storms heaven; in other words, the "*we*," the historical party to which we belong.

The "strategic subject" of modern politics, on the other hand, is imagined through a Bellarminian geocentrism. Here, it is the activists who occupy themselves with the "false motion" of the world—and it is precisely this Ptolemaic political cosmology that has always defined the challenges for revolutionaries.[12] The surrealists already understood this in the 1920s. The revolutionary subject is a fiction that no longer functions as it once did, as a magnet that attracts all layers of "civil society," partly because there is no longer any civil society to be activated. And, Marx would have added, luckily so. To compensate, everyone is held in a permanent state of motion, which means that the revolution only works through interrupting it and not further accelerating it.

Right down to the most recent waves of struggle, organizations structured on the constituent model always attempt to recreate a centralized subject externally, given the absence of a subject historically bound to modernity's struggles for freedom, such as the working class. We have seen over and over again the fiction of a mobilizing centrality of students, immigrants, cognitive workers, urban youth, the indebted, 'citizens,' and so on, all of whom supposedly "coalesce" to form a single governmental subject meant to reflect its image onto all other economic-political subjects imagined at one time or another as the hypostatized embodiments of the revolutionary subject. This concept has become so flexible as to lose all meaning.

In the opening of his conversation on "destituent power," Mario Tronti notes that what has radically transformed the question of the political can be understood through the fact that "the arc of modernity, passing from the single subject, the individual subject, to the social subject, has concluded the history of the subject as such…. My impression is that with the emergence of the working class, of the worker as a subject, of worker subjectivity, the modern

history of the subject was brought to its conclusion."[13] The constituent tool only functions when coupled with a subject. Once this has been removed, the tool spins and spins around within a void.

What has occurred over the years is regularly presented in the form of great conflicts deprived of a relevant subject, signifying, for the most part, opacity of the subjectivities involved. Or, more importantly, moments of intensity in which the actors remove their social masks, under which is revealed yet another: a *common mask* that, without any mediation, exposes a nameless force. This is an event to which governments, the media, and even a fraction of social movements themselves have often tried to respond by laying on other, more fictitious subjective identities that they objectify each time as "the enemy within": the dark cloud of the black bloc, the anarcho-autonomist bogeymen, the specter of the rioters, or simply "terrorists." Faced with the clear impossibility of choosing the "subject of transformation," there are those who try to shift the discursive framework by speaking about a generic struggle between the caste and the people, between the powerful and the poor, or even entrusting themselves to a statistical game, the famous "99 percent." They do this while continuing to search for some centrality to produce and represent them from above and from below. This is generally resolved in the figure of government, a symmetrical "counter-government"—or even more frequently, a mixture of the two generating the umpteenth chimera—and believing that somehow this will simplify and resolve the problem. So long as we do not grasp that the moment when each life *feels* within itself a destituent potential is decisive for every revolutionary becoming, we will simply continue to circle around a problem with the help of nothing but fake discussions.

We are living through an era in which the subject of modernity faded away many decades ago. It is precisely this fact that pushes some of our most intelligent thinkers to believe we are living, sadly, in a "time without epoch." In truth, the modern epoch chose self-consciousness as its ordering principle—i.e., "the Subject"—following the end of the principle of the One and then of Nature, as Reiner Schürmann (in whose work the term "destitution" figures

prominently) has shown so expertly.[14] Once the principle of the subject also collapsed, a new epoch opened up that can be defined as the epoch of the collapse of principles, the an-archic epoch without fundamentals, the epoch of total destitution. And thus, it is an epoch without a subject: we live in the epoch of the *non-subject*.[15] This is the process of mourning that many friends have not yet managed to undergo. It would be as myopic to deny this an-archic epoch as it would be to praise it. We need to soberly accept it and act with knowledge of this fact.

Today, what is miserably presented as the subject is constructed from outside, by governmental knowledge-powers, splitting open life itself and operating on a hollow skeleton—or perhaps, on "bare life." The subject of modernity meditated upon by our ancestors was certainly capable of resistance—and even beginning revolutions—but, enclosed within its dense social identity, it also gave power a number of footholds. These disciplinary techniques are applied to and through the body via work, the family, sex, school, religion, war, and countless other moments, so that the subject is almost entirely wrapped up and molded by a web of domination. The modern subject's potential for freedom thus logically resided in its estrangement from production and in the subversion of sovereignty, gaining strength through refusal, right up to the revolutionary leap. Nevertheless, it never managed to free itself from that grasp. Current Western-metropolitan subjectivity, on the other hand, is entirely evanescent—or, someone has said, "liquid"—and estranged above all from itself. This is both its original sin and its greatest potential, precisely because it cannot provide power with any substantial hook, any point from which power can take hold, if it is not produced *just in time*, like furnishings for its interiors. The bottom line is that metropolitan subjectivity is now entirely contained within a dozen applications on a smartphone. It is a pocket subject, packed up in objects that demonstrate how production, circulation, consumerism, and control have now become phases literally indistinguishable from the process of capitalist production. Just as "government is no longer in the government," so too work is no longer work and the subject is outside of the subject.[16] The true producers of subjectivity today are the designers

of technological devices, just as real power is in the hands of the technological ordering of the world. Today, more than ever, it makes sense to speak of *alienation* as a condition of generalized exteriority—the self is always somewhere else, never "here and now," its empty place has been occupied and colonized by power—and of *estrangement* as an interior condition we feel when faced with the world as it is and its pseudo-object: the "mass bourgeoisie," as Tronti has described it for some time now. This represents a potential, because whatever is finally perceived as extraneous can be destroyed without any remorse. It reminds us that rather than producing another alienated subjectivity, we need to first of all dedicate ourselves to understanding how to de-produce those that already exist by pushing the extraneity of the *non-subject* to its very limits. The extraneous and "self-estrangement" [*Selbstverfremdung*] are among the key principles of revolutionary messianic thought. From classical antiquity down to Marx, becoming conscious of that estrangement from ourselves is precisely that to which work, property, the nation-state, this time and this world all condemn us. It is the road that brings a person out of their abode, to themselves. At the same time, self-estrangement is one of the techniques we can call on to create some distance between ourselves and the present, between us and whatever rules us, and thus to grasp reality. To rescue singularity, to reunite the within and the without, to heal the divide between inside and outside, Marx is insufficient; we have to look to Kierkegaard: "The fusion of inside and outside can only be attained if one is prepared to abandon the territory which holds Marx and Kierkegaard, even in their opposition, captive."[17] To simultaneously destroy all that renders us extraneous to the world and ourselves, this is the truly revolutionary, vital task. Benjamin warned us about the alternative, which lies at the very heart of the fascist project: a self-alienated humanity that may eventually "experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure."[18] A mass enjoyment that, as anyone can see, is currently underway.

According to Jean-Luc Nancy, the *non-subject* finds its positivity in the fact that it represents what would happen if politics and sovereignty were separated, or rather a politics that no longer projects itself into or onto a subject, but consists "in the order of the

subjectless regulation of the relation between subjects," whether individuals or groups. In this sense, one can imagine "regulation by an equality and by a justice that would not postulate an assumption of a subject."[19] In fact, it was precisely this separation between communists and sovereignty wherein Müller saw the greatest possibility for the end of actually existing socialism: communism too would have to become estranged from itself in order to destroy that which blocks its actualization.

The contemporary subject-non-subject is instead a *creature*, in the Benjaminian sense of the term: a persona without content, a nature without grace, deprived of foundation, suspended between an under-humanity and an over-humanity, a kind of life adequate to the state of exception[20]—half "Mickey Mouse existence" and half Chaplin angel—but which, precisely because of this state of emptying out and estrangement, has the chance of surviving the end of capital's civilization and accessing another dimension of life.[21] This is because the creature is that form of existence through which a minor use of potential becomes possible. Benjamin, when he tried to explain what politics was for him, wrote that it is "the fulfillment of un-intensified humanness," or the non-potentiated human.[22] The creature is the becoming-proletariat, a social nothing, and thus not only has nothing to lose but has within itself—through its own powerlessness—the potential to be everything. But, it can only access this fullness upon agreeing to destitute everything that it is.

The angel of history turns his back towards the future; his gaze is directed towards the historic past that becomes a mass of ruins accumulated at his feet, which means that the creatures, in turn, have the possibility of looking him in the face. If they manage to detach their own gaze from the chain of events that hypnotizes them, they would notice that the angel does not see but rather feels the accumulation at his feet, while the storm of progress pushes him backwards into the future. The creatures are gripped by this catastrophe, continually called upon to participate as so many ruins. If the angel managed to close his wings, to stop himself, then perhaps he could save them, tearing them away at the very last moment from the annihilating storm of progress and thus recomposing the break *beyond* the present "where origin and

destruction come together."[23] The angel can grasp the possibility of seeing this only when there is no longer any hope in the future or in the present.

As an early symptom of our new epoch, the new angel seems to have become "a hapless angel," as Müller wrote in an eponymously titled poem of 1958.[24] An angel who no longer looks to the past, on which he now turns his back, and while the past casts down ruins upon his wings, the storm coming from the future beats his whole body, pushing in his eyes, rendering him speechless, and thus the angel stops, hoping to return to flight through the stone wall that has meanwhile appeared. In another poem dedicated to the angel of history, written long after the first one—in 1991, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the untrammeled rise of capitalism—the angel is stationary, with neither past nor future to look at. It is blocked in a present enclosed within the catastrophe—"after the wall, the abyss"—within which the angel's own form is confused, radically blocking the creatures from seeing him. By now they can only hear him, perhaps they can hear his voice—"I still hear the angel"—but it no longer has a face, other than "the you that I do not know."[25] However, the terrifying promise of the angel of despair remains unchanged: "my flight is the revolt / my sky is the abyss of tomorrow."[26]

The creature is thus the singular, anarchic, solitary embodiment of a profane, innumerable, fragmented, minor class, without qualities and deprived of hope. But, precisely in being without this foundation, the creature can destitute the world, if it only knew how to stop the storm of progress that blocks the angel from effecting the highest gesture of messianic recomposition; if only it knew how to *hear* its lament.

In the end, the creature is none other than the image of the plebian as described by Michel Foucault, the remnant of all subjectivities that constitute the limit of every power and which, nevertheless—more than being the other pole of the *dispositif*, as the French philosopher seems to sometimes maintain—is always distinguished by a condition of non-power. Logically, there is a non-power that corresponds to a non-subject. The task of revolutionary theory today, if it has one, is to investigate the form of potential of

this non-power, and the form of life of this non-subject. Both are forms that can be fully explicated only if the self is put into tension with the first-person plural. Each time we say *I* externally, there is a *we* that reverberates within—if we are paying attention. And vice versa. This is "the we that I am" at the root of all past experiences converging on the present, but it is also the "we" that is forming in the battles to come, in contact with the extreme risk of destruction. The angel of history is perhaps none other than the messianic figure of this "we" that still has not managed to see itself as such.

There certainly exists a "we" of the revolutionary becoming, but this cannot exist before the moment when each of us enters into war with this world; far less can it be contained within the limits of a sordid socioeconomic and techno-political identity. In particular, it can never be external to the experiences and zones through which it is being generated. But, lest it be forgotten, it is a "we" without hope.

Here we find that red constellation that binds together Benjamin, Kafka, and Brecht, who come to our aid in the moment of danger. Brecht often repeats that being without hope is the necessary condition for revolutionary becomings, for example at the end of *The Threepenny Opera*, when "before concluding the *inquiry* he indicates the only condition that renders the authentic universal judgment of social revolution possible: in order to defeat the executioners, the exploited must first liberate themselves from their comforters; in order to win they must renounce every hope."[27] Brecht and Benjamin meet on this point in a comment the latter made on the former's unfinished play *Fatzer:* '"Go on, sink!' Fatzer must find a foothold in his hopelessness. A foothold; and not hope. Consolation has nothing to do with hope. And Brecht offers him consolation: a man can live in hopelessness if he knows how he got there. He can live in it because his hopeless life is then of importance. To sink to the bottom here means always: to get to the bottom of things."[28] Then, of course, there is the famous phrase in Benjamin's essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities:* "Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope." The essay ends with this phrase, but only in order to introduce us to the revolutionary-messianic dimension.[29]

Finally there is Franz Kafka—who perhaps directly or obliquely influenced the other two—who wisely advised his friends that hope, infinite hope, exists, *only not for us*. Which means: the "we" of the present, the singular and collective "we" that we are now, must melt away, must pass over into another dimension of the self and the world, must find the entranceway—or rather, the exit—in a different time in order to access hope and its intimate content. Kafka's *we without hope* might seem like a powerless "we" because it has (still) not come into contact with the messianic—the messianic that is already here, even if dispersed, present in the form of shrapnel, shards, a "lady stardust" nestled in the corners of obscurity and disgrace of the empire of nothingness. Those who manage to notice it, feel it, touch it, are gifted with the hope of recomposing the dispersed fragments of a life that has lost its form and thus also its meaning. But going even further than "the root of matters," which is always and at the same time the root of both the epoch and of ourselves, we might find that being without hope means indicating the state of those who no longer require hope; they have already met the star of redemption and thus have no need to sustain the feeling of anxious anticipation. In this case, Kafka's "terrible" sentence, drawing on a heroic pessimism, opens a breach with the present and becomes a manifesto for a revolutionary enthusiasm that can be summarized in the claim: "precisely because each of us is without help, *we* have stopped waiting." This is what it means to live communism *here and now*, and to listen to the angel's lament.

Communism has meaning but is not in force: this is what we must try and resolve practically and without waiting, to bring the revolutionary process into reality. By communism, we mean the real movement that *destitutes* the present state of things.

For those who await and are affected by hope, it is as if they are trapped in a situation of powerlessness in terms of the present, and of fear/hope in terms of the future. In reality, these are not mutually exclusive perspectives. They are dialectically connected, and can be perceived as if they were gradations of our being in the world, signaling the only thing that matters: the dominant present, the present as it is, understood between ourselves, is oppressive and

ought to be deposed. Pessimism needs to be organized. The destitution of the present begins with the strike of bourgeois sentiments, those affects induced and produced by the subject-device.[30] Only in this way can a new sentimental education be commenced.

Only by losing all hope in the ruling present can we have any hope at all. On the other hand, who would be mad enough to propose that true hope can be found in a shopping mall, in a smartphone, in a democratic referendum on the troika or a government of digital populists? We need to go deeper still: we cannot have hope even in the victory of the revolution. Becoming revolutionary, today, means destroying stupid progressivist optimism and organizing pessimism instead. It means utilizing fantasy, freeing the imagination, and living all of this with the enthusiasm of a child who is discovering the true meaning of a fascinating and mysterious word for the first time. As it has already been shown, it is in childhood, in its secret gesture, that the one finds the true revolutionary sign. The coming people will be made from today's *enfants perdus* [lost children].

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1. Heiner Müller, *Explosion of a Memory*, trans. Carl Weber (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1989), 163. [Translator's note.]

2. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" [1929], in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1, 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1999), 217. [Translator's note.]

3. As is the case, for example, with most of the authors of *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth*, ed. Sasha Lilley, David McNally, Eddie Yuen, and James Davis (Oakland: PM Press, 2012).

4. Gilles Deleuze and Fanny Deleuze, "Nietzsche and Saint Paul, Lawrence and John of Patmos" [1978], in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Verso: London and New York, 1998), 44–46.

5. Erdmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Christine Shuttleworth (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 205. Conversation between Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Herbert Ihering, c. September 1930.

6. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 35.

7. Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1914–1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg (Schocken: New York, 1949), 201. Excerpted from Kafka's diary entry on December 6, 1921. [Translator's note.]

8. Pier Paolo Pasolini [interview with Furio Colombo], "We're All in Danger" [1975], in *In Danger: A Pasolini Anthology*, ed. and trans. Jack Hirschman (City Lights: San Francisco, 2010), 233.

9. See Giorgio Agamben, "The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin" [1992], in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 160–176.

10. "Mahagonny men" refers to the playboy protagonists of Kurt Weill's satirical play, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930). [Translator's note.]

11. Hannah Arendt, "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), 129.

12. Roberto Bellarmino (1542-1621) was the Italian cardinal who led the official opposition against Galileo and his heliocentric beliefs. [Translator's note.]

13. Mario Tronti and Adriano Vinale, "Potere destituente: Una conversazione con Mario Tronti," in *Potere destituente: Le rivolte metropolitane* (Milan: Memesis, 2008), 23.

14. Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, trans. Christine-Marie Gros (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

15. David Bowie expressed this status of the non-subject very well over the arc of his artistic career. His continuous identity transformations were never undertaken as an enthusiastic ode to change in itself, a euphoric hymn to the flexibility of the self, but represented a dramatic, tragic contesting of the nothingness of the subject in the world as it is. All of his lyrics are filled with negativity; with the nihilism Western civilization is itself emblematic of. Even the messianic figure of Ziggy Stardust—created by Bowie in the early 1970s to "save" those young creations lost within the catastrophe—could only last one season, after having to "commit suicide." His last work, *Black Star*, is in the same vein, with the test of the eponymous song lost within a series of "I'm nots": I'm not a pop star, I'm not a film star, I'm not a star's star, I'm not a gangsta, etc. Yet, despite this desolate situation of being nothing at all—or perhaps because of it—we find the beauty of the non-subject and the possibility of becoming heroes of any kind, of being "us." In this weak heroic moment there is also the promise of love and redemption, because it is within this catastrophe, as Ziggy Stardust sings at the peak of his desperation, "I've had my share, I'll help you with the pain. You're not alone." Real strength lies in conquering the desert through sharing, through aid within

pain, even for one day, but that day is *decisive*. For an unconventional reading of Bowie's work, see Simon Critchley, *Bowie* (New York: OR Books, 2014).

16. The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2015), 85.

17. Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 191.

18. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" [1935], in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 2008), 42.

19. Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, 105.

20. See Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Santner's argument begins with Rilke's use of the term creature in eight of ten *Duino Elegies*, and Heidegger's critical engagement with this. [Translator's note.]

21. For Mickey Mouse, see Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty"; for a Chaplin angel, see Benjamin's "Ibizan Sequence, 1932." For both texts, see Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2: 1931–1934*, ed. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings, and Gary Smith (Cambridge MA and London: Belknap Press, 1999) [Translator's note.]

22. Walter Benjamin, "World and Time," in *Selected Writings, Volume 1:1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1996), 226.

23. Benjamin, "Karl Kraus" [1931], in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Pt. 1*, 457.

24. Heiner Müller, "*Glücklose* Engel," in *Werke, Band 1: Die Gedichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 53.

25. Müller, "*Glücklose* Engel 2," in *Werke, Bd. 1*, 236.

26. Müller, "Ich bin der Engel der Verzweiflung," in *Werke, Bd. 1*, 212.

27. Franco Buono, *Bertolt Brecht: La prosa dell'esilio* (Bari: De Donato, 1972), 126.

28. Walter Benjamin, "From the Brecht Commentary," in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 30.

29. Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, 356.

30. Artistic practices can be the means for great potential in this regard, so long as they consciously maintain themselves as *minor* practices, as Deleuze and Guattari put it. An interesting example of such practices are those of *Ideadestroyingmuros*, a group of artists which defines itself as a "transcultural collective of poetic militancy and dis/educational activism" and founded in Venice before "exiling itself" to Valencia, Spain. See www.ideadestroyingmuros.blogspot.it.

Chapter 06

Destituent Strike III:Revolt Against the Metropolis

Whenever a radiant city is programmed, we can be assured that it is a way to destroy the world, to render it "uninhabitable," and to begin the hunt for the unspecified enemy.
—Deleuze, Nietzsche and St Paul, "Lawrence and John of Patmos"[1]

Not so long ago, even the most classic form of the political strike contained an undeniable strength due to the presence of an organized class, and thus every work stoppage in the factory, the fields, or the ports left the trace, however exterior, of the claim to potential. Today the question must be put in very different terms, as is clear not only from transformations in modes of production but in the forms of life radically implied by this.

It is only in the last decade that we have begun to ask ourselves what strike form might be possible today, after the neutralization of the factory as a laboratory of struggle. It has been asked, for example, what a "metropolitan strike" might mean. If it is true that the metropolis has replaced—or, more accurately, *absorbed*—the factory, including the "social factory," then it is nevertheless also the case that these are not two superimposed realities. On the contrary, continuing to confuse them impedes a political practice adequate to the "spirit of the times." Recent experiments in the metropolitan strike include: struggles against pension reforms in France and the consequent oil refinery blockades; the occupation of Tahrir Square in Egypt; the blockade of the port of Oakland at the height of the commune founded in Oscar Grant Plaza during the Occupy "moment"[2]; the occupation of the squares in Barcelona and Madrid during the 15M movement, as well as those in New York and then Istanbul, all of which constituted forms of braking planted

in the hearts of the great metropolises of flows; the occupation of the *bocage* [a landscape of mixed woodland and pasture] in Notre-Dame-des-Landes against the construction of an air base, with frequent incursions into the urban zone of Nantes. The struggle underway in France against labor reforms, finally, seems not only to represent the *summa* of all the forms of metropolitan conflict that have occurred during the last ten years, but also (and above all) the emergence of an overall political conflict: there is finally an attempt at *true* verticalization.

As far as Italy is concerned, unless we consider the exception of the long struggle in the Val di Susa [Susa Valley] against the Treno Alta Velocità (TAV) high-speed railway as a metropolitan strike (and there are good reasons to support this hypothesis), there have only been confused allusions made, for example, to waves of housing occupations and eviction resistance, or—with an unexpectedly strong presence of the non-subject—in the tumults that have broken out in big demonstrations over recent years. All of these, however, seem to fizzle out without a trace, save for the consequent court cases, and without anyone trying to understand why. In the Italian case, and doubtless in many other places, one must search for the signs of a destituent strike in the various forms of interior desertion that so many creatures have undertaken in silence, in sickness, or even in more degenerate forms, pushing towards the most radical form of human strike: the permanent strike against life itself. When everyone strikes on their own, it usually ends in a recusal from the world without the possibility of creating other forms of life. Unless, of course, one meets the other strikers, swears a pact of mutual support against the army of the present, and—who knows?—gives birth to a commune.

While presenting itself in diverse images, this rich phenomenology of early twenty-first-century striking has found maximum intensity in those encounters it knows how to materialize. For example, outside of the French refineries, where all kinds of urban oddballs met “outside of their spheres” and refinery workers were a minority,

just as those who mounted the strike at the Port of Oakland were by no means composed mainly of port workers, a fact even clearer still in the occupation-dwellings of the squares, in which the *Idealtypus* of the inhabitant was precisely anyone at all.[3] It was an encounter that—through practices put in place to attack, defend, and persist—alluded to another possibility of inhabiting our own time and thus to transformation of the form of life. If the "general proletarian strike," in its exit from the production and reproduction of law and labor, locates the limits of state potential/power, then the metropolitan strike, in all of its articulations, finds an exit from the constant function of the metropolis. In other words, the interruption of the infinite circulation of command gives rise to the strike-encounter, putting each person's singularity in the context of a collective event where we have glimpsed the potential to generate worlds. It is here that the "shards" condense and allow each of us to access what is most in common. And, it is from here, from the ruins of the West that massacred the angel of history, a light shines out: we are most ourselves when we become a commune, even if "just for one day."

The politics of the squares, occupied in order to be *inhabited*, identified themselves substantially with the life that was organized within them and then, often enough, was imitated by the surrounding neighborhoods, with effort and enthusiasm, in order to build the material preconditions for the next siege. Because, for some at least, it is clear enough that one-off demonstrations, occupations, and riots are necessary but insufficient steps to secede from the present. At the very least, their chain of events forms a *plane*, in the sense of the concept given by Deleuze and Guattari, of permanent intensity.[4] It is no longer enough to slavishly repeat formulas from long ago, or simply to rubber stamp the postcard of postmodern militancy, that activism which haphazardly chases after "social struggles." The urgency lies in constituting oneself into a *historic force that destitutes the present as it is*, because "the only thing that is great, or called to greatness, is that historical movement or political subject able to translate the contents of that which has been into the forms of that which is coming—always, always, always against the present."[5]

What reality tells us today, when we encounter a truth, is that present forms of destitution leave us with the riot, the occupation, the barricade, and the blockade as the only synchronic sequence with which you can reply to the question: "what is a strike?" This sequence always has the commune in the background, the material and spiritual realm in which one can inscribe a form of destituent life.

Joshua Clover—a communist poet who participated in the Oakland Commune—recently wrote an interesting book on this matter, beginning with the striking claim: "a theory of riot is a theory of crisis."[6] He defines this new sequence as corresponding to the hegemony of circuits of production in the present configuration of world capitalism. The new forms of strike, all of which are variations of a gigantic international strike *against* the metropolis, clearly demonstrate that their goal is not contained in any specifically economic or juridical demand, and that behind them there is no classic demand of future closure—something that became even more explicit during the revolt against the French labor laws—but expresses itself instead through blockages of normal social functioning on the one hand, and the immediate material transformation of life and how we think about life on the other. The more intense the form of the strike, the more intense becomes the ungovernable nature of the form of life that expresses it.

In this sense, the days of the Free Republic of Maddalena in the Susa Valley in 2011 represent the closest Italy has come to a general proletarian strike, a vast act of sabotage against the unceasing metropolitanization of existence. Furthermore, the allusion to secession from government and the construction of a commune was more than a mere allusion, as the president of the business confederation said first and, following this, a magistrate, who declared during the trial: "The real occupation of the valley was undertaken by the Free Republic of Maddalena, removing a portion of territory from the state itself."[7] The negative suspension that emerged in this period was no doubt due to the fact that the movement was unable to actualize its real slogan—"bring the valley into the city"—to sabotage the metropolis and create communes

wherever possible. Perhaps we did not believe enough in this world that was so loudly knocking at our doors?

The metropolis is the technological organization of generalized hostility, the extensive and radical instrumentalization of a particular emotional tonality which has to be broken if we are to discover "the character of our problem"; that is, of the enemy. This is the main target of a "logical revolt" at the very height of the epoch. This is also why we must understand how to destitute it and its icy ability to keep us trapped in a nihilist tension with an uncertain future.

In "Berlin Chronicle," Benjamin tells us something very important about the construction of a method (in its etymological meaning as a reflection *after a journey*) for the use of the self in relation to the metropolis. Recalling his childhood difficulties in finding his way through the city of Berlin, he maintains that in order to become a real expert, to reach perfection in anything, one first has to have known powerlessness in the face of it, and to have grasped that this powerlessness is not experienced in the beginning or end of an effort to overcome the challenge in front of you, but at its *center*. In the *milieu*, as Deleuze might say; or, as Agamben would say, at its *medio*.[8] Indeed, Benjamin described this moment *in the center* of his life as "a period of impotence before the city." A few lines later, he recounts how for some time he has nurtured the idea of graphically organizing the space of his existence (his *bios*, he adds, in order to pinpoint that he is talking about a form of life). He wants to make a map of his life, drawn up in that manner which only soldiers are capable of. And, in one of his involuntarily prophetic spasms, he complains about the fact that such maps of a city center do not exist, "because of ignorance of the theater of future wars."[9] Thus, we find ourselves thrown into our own period, in which such maps do indeed exist and are implemented on a daily basis by Google Maps, and in which the theater of war is occupied down to the very last centimeter by what happens everyday in the arcades of the global metropolis. Only the resistance of a dreamer,

always teetering on the edge, such as Benjamin's own, could read the signs of the war to come. Nevertheless, the most interesting thing that emerges from his bio-cartographic project is imagining how his very existence, in a city plunging—after an intense crisis—towards the fascist apocalypse, might take the form of a map of war, moved by the winds of a revolutionary spirituality and rich with temporary material landings. The problem resolved itself into thinking of his own life as a battlefield, a redemptive quest, as if it were the diagram of a "real war," as René Daumal might have said, or what Benjamin, intensely, called "the sabotage of real social existence."[10]

What Benjamin had in mind was not a particularized narrative of his past life, i.e., a biography, but a cartography of affects, a map marked by the places where his friends live, of various groups, of the headquarters of young communists, cafés, the "decisive" benches on which he sat to contemplate moments of his existence, the brothels he frequented, the walk to school, favorite places of women he had loved, and all those tombs that in the end contain our encounters. The map of a life ends up as a labyrinth, with a center whose points of access are made up of encounters and the overlappings which constitute them, right up to providing a single figure that is *true life itself*. It is within this overlapping that we can find potential, or better still, life as potential. Chris Marker once said that we need to stop thinking of individual memory as if it were a kind of history book, or to see ourselves within it as if we were characters in a classical novel, and that—with more humility, but also more truth—we ought to consider the fragments of our memory in geographical terms, because every life contains continents, islands, deserts, over-populated territories, and even *terrae incognitae*.[11]

The map Benjamin wanted to sketch out had a different color for each "station," and was meant to contain everything that had constructed the form of life his name now indicates, recollecting the experience of happiness in that life. This geographic work allows memory to be configured as the scene of a unique metropolitan guerrilla war in which sites of affection and encounter become a series of sentimental interruptions into the urban continuum, oases

dispersed across the metropolis, barricades that are erected against the advancing enemy, waiting for the chance to trigger an offensive against our gradual loss of a world disfigured by economy. This is a form of life that becomes a ballistic weapon against a generalized hostility, growing ever more evil, aiming at the destruction of every possibility of having any experience of the world and of existence itself.

We have all felt what Benjamin thought to be a necessary precondition to mastering a particular field of thought or life: that moment when you feel powerlessly faced with that which exceeds your will. A symbol of our problem, one of our introductions into the heart of the contemporary world, has no doubt been the powerlessness we have felt when faced with the metropolis; in other words, faced with the world as we have known it. This moment cannot be reduced merely to passivity but, if it is not properly thought through, risks misleading us in our research. This is another reason that, years ago, many of us held onto the illusion that some form of freedom could be found within the metropolis itself. We pushed ourselves, foolishly, to imagine something along the lines of the long-gone modern city of factories and workers, even if a transformed one. But it is not the case that the contemporary metropolis stands in relation to the factory as the new multitude does to the old working class; this is an equation that—like all historical-sociological equations—errs due to its inability to recognize the ontological and political seismic shift between the Subject and the non-subject, between political economy and cybernetics, between state sovereignty and *governance*, between principles and anarchy. Powerlessness thus risks becoming ideology in the most classic sense, a topsy-turvy reality, and the metropolis becomes a mega-device of power, that can nevertheless appear to be the promised land. But with every passing day, you realize that it was promised to fascism, not to us. Even if there are many people who remain locked in the stage of enchantment with the “radiant city,” the conflicts that have overtaken the world in recent years clearly show another perspective. To recognize, describe, live, and move with reality means to already situate oneself within the sphere of potential.

The *city* and everything that goes along with it is by now something that belongs to civilization's historic memory. That which exists "is no longer properly 'urban'—either from the perspective of urbanism or from that of urbanity—but megapolitical, metropolitan, or co-urbational."[12]

One needs to constantly position oneself in the center of that Benjaminian effort and—in contrast to the utopian gesture—bring to the surface that which, within this landscape, has been irremediably lost to us or hidden from view by the thick web of infrastructure, but which precisely for this reason deserves to be redeemed. It is impossible to love the metropolis as cities were loved once upon a time. All that remains to love is anything that pertains to the non-metropolis that we have met in our pilgrimages across it: friendship, love, revolution, leisure, contemplation, even death. Privileging these encounters, these intense moments, in the struggle against the metropolis means creating the possibility to slow down the cybernetic velocity, i.e., to win out against a fundamental aspect of nihilism. This is no easy task because, as Ernst Jünger wrote, "it is infinitely easier to accelerate the motion than bring it back to a calmer path. This is why nihilists have the advantage over everyone else."[13] But if we cannot manage to nurture a slowing down, no experience will be granted to us.

This destitutent tension towards the metropolis is criticized in various ways—some of them intelligent, with others being frankly stupid. One clarification in this regard is useful, if not strictly necessary. The idea of struggle against the metropolis does not mean cultivating bucolic utopias or a pseudo-aristocratic detachment. Our predecessors—the revolutionary workers and militants in the factories and neighborhoods of the modern city—were politically at ease *precisely because* they wanted to destitute reality. In the same way, today we are not aliens in the city: it is precisely because we want to destitute it that we believe we must know it first, even better than its managers do, without nevertheless fooling ourselves into easy continuities. The first thing to be understood properly is the pain and unhappiness that the city inflicts upon each of us through its material expressions.

The passage across the threshold that takes us from powerlessness to a place of potential is neither at the beginning nor the end of a journey—as we have said—but in its *middle*. Just like at the end of childhood, or finishing school, when one stands in a middle period of life, a threshold to be crossed, in which one begins to find one's way in the forest of existence, learning to distinguish what increases our potential from what diminishes it. This is one of the formulas we can turn to today, to understand what communist inquiry might be. And then, we must multiply the thresholds for each obstacle we find in our way.

To stand in the middle of things means the appearance of a potential does not have to include the elimination of powerlessness. Instead, we are faced with understanding that the latter is in a state we must abandon ourselves to in order to understand what potential might be, and especially to not drown beneath the waves of a sentimental voluntarism. Agamben has written, "Having a potential in reality means: being at the mercy of one's own impotential."[14] This abandonment to powerlessness is what allows a group of comrades to have the courage to challenge enemy forces far more equipped than they are in that moment. Obviously, nothing guarantees that on the other side of the threshold we will know how to do and think the correct things, but at least we will have gained the ability to move ourselves, beginning with the only thing that makes this possible: taking a position in the face of a specific problem.

The conflicts we see today are within this *middle*. Their position is suggested by the practices we see on display in uprisings across the world: a global uprising of "territories" and their memories against the globalized metropolis. And in turn, each revolt exceeds militants' will for potential. We need to become aware of this and not stubbornly insist on trying to superimpose an ideological view upon reality, as noble as this might seem. At the same time, we also need to realign our ability to perceive the truth *carrying* these struggles along and abandon ourselves to its desire to meet with reality itself.

It was Frank Lloyd Wright who, in 1958, in the throes of the cybernetic revolution, first theorized the new city as a space that embraced a whole country, or rather the nation as a single, homogeneous, continuous, and empty metropolis.[15] We have been in a para-imperial dimension for some time, and today the metropolis extends across the entire world space, while Calvino's city of Trude has gone from being an invisible city to a tangible reality.[16] It "does not begin and does not end," but has to be *interrupted*.

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1. Gilles Deleuze and Fanny Deleuze, "Nietzsche and Saint Paul, Lawrence and John of Patmos" [1978], in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Verso: London and New York, 1998), 44–46. [Translator's note.]

2. It is interesting how some of the protagonists of Occupy retrospectively developed the idea that what they lived through was not a "movement" but a "moment," i.e., a certain temporal quality, and that this was a kind of rejection of traditional forms through which "social movements" usually organize. It is only by thinking through the experience in terms of the transformation of time and of the self that it is possible to conserve some *residue*, a truth that still beats under the thick crust of American reality. For example, see the article Natasha Lennard wrote on the fifth anniversary of Occupy at https://theintercept.com/2016/10/01/occupy-wall-street-brooklyn-bridge-five-years/.

3. Here, Tarì is drawing on the Weberian concept of "ideal types." See, for example, Max Weber, "The 'Objectivity' of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy" [1906], in *The Essential Weber Reader*, trans. Henry A. Finch (London: Routledge, 2004). [Translator's note.]

4. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 293–295. [Translator's note.]

6. Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 1.

5. Mario Tronti, *La politica al tramonto* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998), 203.

7. The magistrate in question was Manuela Pedrotta. See Xenia Chiaramonte, *Governare il conflitto: La criminalizzazione del movimento No Tav* (Milan: Meltemi, 2009). [Translator's note.]

8. For *medio*, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 27–29. For *milieu*, see Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 23–40. [Translator's note.]

9. Walter Benjamin, “Berlin Chronicle” [1932], in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2: 1931–1934*, ed. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1999), 596.

10. Benjamin, “Berlin Chronicle,” Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Pt. 2, 600. [Translator’s note.]

11. Chris Marker, *Immemory* [CD-ROM] (France: Centre Pompidou, 1997). [Translator’s note.]

12. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 33.

13. Ernst Jünger, *Strahlungen* (Tübingen: Heliopolis, 1949), 8.

14. Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 276.

15. Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Living City* (New York: Meridian Books, [1958] 1970).

16. Trude is a dystopic city described in Calvino’s postmodern novel, *Invisible Cities:* “You can resume your flight whenever you like … but you will arrive at another Trude, absolutely the same, detail by detail. The world is covered by a sole Trude which does not begin and does not end. Only the name of the airport changes.” Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt, 1974), 128. [Translator’s note.]

Chapter 07

Destituent Strike IV: The Nomos of the Commune

The desert was held in a crazed communism by which Nature and the elements were for the free use of every known friendly person for his own purposes and no more.
—T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*'[1]

Given the fortune that the term "territory" continues to find within activism's lexicon, and the important place that it has occupied over recent years in order to name those places in which fragments of a destituent strategy have been developed, it seems like a good idea to focus a little on this concept—which, despite its popularity, has remained somewhat murkily defined and thus a little confusing.

We know that, in modernity, the word "territory" has usually been associated with the state. This is essentially a definition of a territory with legally recognizable borders. However, in ancient Rome, the word *territorium*, according to the first-century authority Varro, indicated common agricultural lands—"ab *eo colonis locus communis*"—which even when within sacred borders could be both external or internal to a city like Rome.[2] Varro identified the word as deriving from the noun *terrae* and the verb *terere* [to plough or turn the earth]. In the second century, the jurist Sextus Pomponius proposed a double etymology of a very different type, deriving *territorium* from the verb *terrere*, to induce terror, referring thus to a space within which an authority exercises its rule. There are plenty of other examples after this, in which *territoria* are understood as sites within the empire but occupied by barbarians. Territory has always been a concept that indicates a certain ambiguity—and even conflict—between outside and inside, a concept that acts as a political technology in and of itself.

If we use the term in its original meaning, we might therefore think of territories entering into a revolutionary becoming as a kind

of *outside* internal to the metropolis. On the one hand, this means being a space for common use, and, on the other, one that tends to remove itself from power, law, and metropolitan terror. Given that the contemporary metropolis does not have a real geographical outside, this internal exteriority is essentially spiritual-political and can appear anywhere. That is, anywhere there is an interruption in the continuum of metropolitan government. It is important not to undervalue those "poetical-political" experiences, big or small, which have taken root in the countryside and mountains of the West in recent years. These experiences are not *outside* the metropolitan government but sit at its limits, where its influence is reduced—the best of which are inhabited by "creatures" who not only have found the strength and intelligence to maintain old friendships dispersed across the world, but also to construct places that help to weave together new ones. These experiences can be imagined as a kind of network of abbeys of the revolution. At the same time, only a form of living can reconfigure the outside and inside of a territory, destituting its damaging dialectic and providing the possibility to truly depose the power of the metropolis. "Those who have wanted to take up arms against their own epoch have always found forests in which to take refuge," as some friends have written while following that same path.[3] And, in the present configuration of the world: "the forest is everywhere—in the wastelands as much as in the cities, where a forest rebel may hide or live behind the mask of a profession. The forest is in the desert, and the forest is in the bush. The forest is in the fatherland, as in every territory in which resistance can be put into practice. But the forest is above all behind the enemy's own lines."[4] Clearly there is no single kind of rebel, as Jünger's aristocratic fantasies would have us believe. At the very least, such a figure cannot exist without other rebels passing through the forest.

A warning to deserters, however: it is impossible to think of territories and encounters that try to put a certain distance between themselves and the metropolis like comfortable oases in the desert of the present and believe that for this reason they are destituent. They become destituent only to the extent that they are places that "let us live in the desert without becoming reconciled to it," as

Hannah Arendt wrote, defining them (in reference to the *roman à clef* about an alternative community written by her friend Mary McCarthy) as "oases": oases *within* the desert but not *of* the desert.[5] The philosopher added that the moment we "search for refuge," when we think of using the oases to flee from the war against the present or, more simply still, to flee from our dissatisfaction with the life we are living, fooling ourselves into thinking we can push the ugliness of the world to one side and rest in the shade instead of fighting the desert, these oases are destroyed. The desert wants precisely this: that everyone becomes used to its presence, that they passively accustom themselves to it, giving tacit support to its ceaseless, pacifying violence. Whoever flees inevitably brings the sands with them, hidden in the folds of their clothes and their lives. The sand begins to corrode that which is at rest. Hostility returns and moves freely within the oases—communes, friendships, lovers, research—making them at first emotionally and then materially identical to all the rest; that is, mediocre and uninhabitable. The miserable games of self-valorization, jealousy, egoism, affective insensitivity, lying to oneself and then to others, the hidden reappearance of property relations, productive relationships, and petit-bourgeois family relations become lumps of sand that slowly occupy and dry out the oases, which gradually return to being part of the metropolitan continuum. Once one arrives at this point, it becomes increasingly difficult to admit one's failure, and instead one continues as if nothing happened. In reality, the problem is not on the surface but rooted deep down, as McCarthy recounts, in the belief that one is following "an ethical demand" while in reality one only follows a "mental desire."[6] The failure of collective undertakings is usually due to this form of self-delusion, in which the protagonists themselves—sometimes with an aggravating factor of naivete—produce the annihilation, and therefore, the repression of experience.

Above all, the question is one of trying to understand what kind of otherness these so-called territories can configure, what distance from the present might nurture them to the point of a spiritual and material secession, becoming a world among worlds. It was, again,

Foucault who suggested a way for understanding the alternative character territories might have in relation to governmentality.

Foucault defines "territory" by maintaining that in the modern West, territory certainly corresponds to a geographical notion, but above all has a juridical and political character and, fundamentally, a military one. Territory is "the area controlled by a certain kind of power."[7] More interesting, however, in terms of our current discussion, is when he notes—speaking of the pastor as the archetypal form of government as we know it—this is distinguished from traditional sovereign power precisely because it no longer has territory as its main object. Pastoral government "does not reign over a territory, it reigns over a multiplicity of individuals."[8] In another article, Foucault continues this discussion in opposition to Machiavelli—who for him represents a sovereign fully exercising power over a territory and only secondarily over the subjects who live there—with a more modern La Perriére, who speaks instead of a "government of things" and repeats that governmentality does not have a territory as its objective.[9] Instead, it is a complex of men and things, their *bonds* (both between men themselves and between them and things), and finally *also* with territories. What Foucault describes as governmentality is in fact power over "men in their relationship with other things, such as customs, habits, modes of acting or thinking, and finally, it is men themselves in their relationship with things that can include accidents or disasters, such as famine, epidemics, death."[10] In other words, governmentality directly exercises itself over those forms of life it destroys, modifies, or molds. It is a form of power that they want: it is guardian of their *bonds*.

Thus, territories are secondary variables with respect to the material and affective bonds with which a population is formed, by producing new ones and destroying old ones. A population only emerges once a people or a form of life is detached, expropriated, and isolated from its location. "Location" does not exclusively mean a geographical region but also a spiritual, linguistic, and imaginative region. The "state of government," following those of justice and administration, is "no longer essentially defined by its territoriality, by the surface it occupies, but by a mass: the mass of population,

with its volume, density and obviously also the territory across which it extends, but this in a certain sense is only one among other components."[11] Governmental borders are traced out, beginning with the inside of each individual, and then totalized through a population that "grazes" across a territory corresponding to the nation as a whole. From the eighteenth century onward, state territory begins to be thought of according to the model of the great cities, i.e., a metropolitan schema.[12] After this, the city will never again be the exception within a heterogeneous territory made up of fields, forests and roads (an exception that evades the *jus commune*), but instead becomes the exemplar for all territories, of whatever nature, to which they must conform, and the police become the form of rationality demanded by governments, thereby transforming all other places into "desert."[13] A society dominated by security devices—such as our own society—corresponds to this form of governmental art alone.

The "metropolitan model" has become the matrix for regulating the entirety of the state. Given the interest Foucault claimed government has in connections, we know very well what this means: a government based on security is principally a government of affects and the policing of their circulation. Today, fear is simply the most obvious emotion in play, but anxiety, melancholy euphoria (deriving from the paroxysmal consumption of commodities in place of affective relations), depression, jealousy, and egoism are all produced and manipulated within a technology of governmentality, from the molecular to the molar. That which we call egoism, at a molecular level, is called property at a molar one; anxiety about the end felt on an individual basis is collectively governed through security devices; depression has a corresponding construction of material, pharmaceutical, and virtual territories to distract people, along with the most trivial forms of entertainment, etc. Absorbed within a dynamic of government, affects thus become a multiplicity of connections not only between "free" persons but also between them and power itself.

Not only has this transformation pushed aside urbanism, in its true sense, from the center of the governmental state's concerns; what we see here instead is infrastructure: "Those who believed that

space was [no longer] for architects but rather for engineers, the builders of bridges, roads, overpasses, railways."[14] This transformation in the art of government did not escape the attention of Pasolini, who diagnosed it within developments in spoken Italian following the war, in the moment of Italy's total, ferocious industrialization and metropolitanization. Pasolini wrote, "I believe that there has been a *substitution, as a linguistic model, of the languages of infrastructure for the languages of super-structure*."[15] There is nothing more revealing about the modifications to a form of life than its language, and this depoliticizing passage noted by Pasolini indicates not only that a new kind of power was in the making, an infrastructural power (he was referring to discussions around power in relation to the vast road network being built in the period), but that ordinary citizens themselves were being transformed into nodes of governmental infrastructure.

This secondary rank of territory, after government's primary interests, signals not only its substantial marginality in relation to dominant politics (for capitalists, any given space can easily become a garbage dump or a consumerist theme park) but also the potential that territory might contain for revolutionary becomings, precisely due to the nature of it being a *lesser* object of government. For this very reason, today's governments are encountering difficulties, not so much due to the thousands of demands made against austerity, the financial crisis or regarding labor, but due to the thousands of territories that refuse to change themselves yet again in order to follow the flow of civilization. Or, due to the conflicts that create combative oases where once there was only desert. Or still more, due to those who work towards the destruction of governmental bonds in order to build new existences and at the same time, new forms of life. This is another reason the battle must reach even into language itself, destituting its info-communicative value, its function as an infrastructural connection that cuts through, changes, and dominates creatures from the outside.

Up until now, power has always tried to set itself up at the highest point from which to rule *one* world.[16] Fundamentally, the word "globalization" simply names the operation of gazing out onto the world, as if it were a single, unified territory, from some distant

celestial location. And yet, it is precisely this effort at an ongoing flight to the top that contains one of the greatest risks power must constantly confront: that of being so high up, so far from the surface of its territories that it cannot control them any longer. This is why in modernity, power has always needed those inhabiting the surface to become its own hands, eyes, legs, just as Étienne de La Boétie noted in his *Contr'uno*.[17] And, it is for this reason that today power attempts to divide the world up, taking refuge in secure zones from which to dominate the rest or perhaps, to escape from the rest. This escape from the rest of the world can be noted in mirror image, in the lifestyles of "alternative communities." Yet, we are quite sure that there will never be a "gated community" far enough away to entirely eliminate the possibility that "the rest" destroys it, perhaps simply by letting it go to rot. Or, alternative communities that sooner or later are no longer reachable from within or without, corroded and destroyed by the sandstorms kicked up by the *nomos* of the metropolis. Simultaneously, we are also quite sure that the dominion spoken of by La Boétie does not lie in any natural fact, or any juridical one, and not even in any issue that we might traditionally call political, but rather in the generalized expropriation of the Earth, i.e., of *inhabiting a world*. To be reduced to voluntary slaves means, in the end, the consensual expropriation of our ability to *use* or *make use* of: intelligence, technique, language, things, ourselves, the world, *potential*. In a political sense, autonomy does not mean finding a tactic for fighting in the streets or a strategy for taking power from below, but rather points to the space and time for a recovery of use; that ability to freely live according to the rule contained in a form of life that we have decided to perpetuate.

We should not seek a point of view that matches the height of the government's—which we don't have the means to do, anyway—but rather one equipped with a verticality that knows how to go deep down into the depths of the Earth, time, and the self. The strategy is to gain proportionality through intensity and thus turn the attack back on the outside. Kafka said: "Man does not grow from below upwards, but from within outwards."[18]

In order to become destituent, territories must be deeply inhabited and intensely populated by ungovernable affects. We probably need to rely on other senses and leave limitless seeing to unbelievers and assassins.[19] Remember, *we have become the mole's territory*. It is only by developing a revolutionary spirituality that can we reach such depths.

It is also necessary to recall that since La Boétie's own times, much has changed and we Westerners are no longer so tenaciously attached to the Earth. Capitalism has found ways to break those connections that inhibit its movement and slow down its flows. It has produced other ones, detaching human existence from its material conditions, and—it goes without saying—from its natural ones. This does not mean returning to an anti-ideological stance of putting our feet on the ground and holding our heads high. This world is built so as to make us live in an abstract dimension of the Earth; we *float* within the flow of the metropolis. There is no place in the West—whether in the countryside, the city, the mountains or on the coasts—that has not been reached by these flows. The only option is to interrupt them. It is no exaggeration to say that for the majority of metropolitans, i.e., Westerners, life is lived according to the mediation of thousands of technological devices through which capitalism has obtained not only mind-bending profits but also the possibility to control and shape our lives on a day-to-day basis, down to the most intimate level. We no longer live in a world, but within an "operative space" that imitates it, totally covering it over. We would need a new Ernesto de Martino to fully understand the meaning of our lives. Phone apps, technopolitical gadgets that refashion our lives from heel to throat, that mask over and maintain a generalized "crisis of presence" as well as determining our gestures and choices, day in and day out. In truth, the only real insecurity is an existential one.

We are living through the situation expressed metaphorically in the film *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013), the story of two astronauts lost in space, desperately trying to *return to Earth*.[20] The only way that we too might return to Earth" is not so much via the frantic hurried search for territorial identities or roots, but through the individual development of life itself and a collective openness to it.

Only by developing our form of life with intensity can we reclaim the ability to live on Earth, to explore its surfaces vertically, to imprint a new *nomos* upon it. Not in the stale meaning of law, but in that definition pregnant with dwelling and musicality: *the nomos of the commune*.

This means thinking of a spatiotemporal alterity that beats within the metropolis from which it attempts to secede; it is a heterogeneity that cannot be taken for granted. Not even a territory that is in the process of resisting can be said to automatically have destituent potential. Occupying a space, taking a building, a plot of earth, or a farm does not mean much at all unless one is able to inhabit these places. It is important to recall that the desert of capital is uninhabitable. We pass through it as enemies—it is good to be aware of this. With the growth of this awareness, there is an increasingly shared feeling of the need to go beyond resistance. As we said at the beginning of this text, acting as a partisan is not enough. One must act as a primitive, and even then, only in the awareness that it is not enough, and frequently ruinous, to depend exclusively on an elusive and illusory "territorial rootedness." It is only by inhabiting a world that one acquires a potential worthy of the name. A world is not only a territory enclosed within its political, productive, ethnic, or ideological boundaries, but it has its own habits, cosmologies, stories to tell, musical rhythms, experiences to share and transmit, a unique wholeness that can be told in a thousand ways, porous forms of life, and a strength that defends it. Modes of existence are expansive so long as they verticalize themselves as a force of interdiction against governance. It is a world that possesses a fragmented geography. It is where we find our friends and even enemies to be fought. It is where we love and we find war, where we share and are free to make use of ourselves as much as we like. Finally, it is where we find the possibility of a crossroads in the path of history. A world our memory is a part of, if we are able to use it in the sense of remembrance and not as a reserve of resentment or a *refugium peccatorum* [refuge of sinners]. To go beyond resistance, we must position the territory within a becoming-world. This time, the wall

built against our enemy will not be made of concrete, but of time itself.

Just as there is a messianic time that pulses within the time of history, so too is there a destituent territory within the constituent one, a messianic territory within the mythic territory, and it is there in excess. No, one cannot truly live within the uninhabitable. *What we can begin to inhabit is neither the metropolis nor the territory, but the excess of the antagonistic relation between them: its remainder*.

Perhaps we might speak about a *bare territory* in the same manner as "bare life," looking at governmental territories as the result of an original separation, a constituent division absorbed into the body of the Earth, which has "Westernized" the form, consigning it to that device of inclusion/exclusion studied by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer*. What is captured by this device is "dwelling."

In his discussion on the meaning of *nomos*, Carl Schmitt interprets the word by appealing to a one-sided etymology from the Greek word *nemein*, in typically Western terms of appropriation, distribution, and production.[21] Indeed, he reads these actions, one after the other, within the history of law, and he was certainly correct to accuse socialism and liberalism of having bracketed off the first term—of covering over appropriation—in order to concentrate on distribution and productivity. Schmitt was right because Western history is to be found within that initial, *constituent* gesture; one finds the key to all that comes after, representing the heart of every constitution. If the first gesture of taking immediately becomes the *right to property*, it is certain that the two following moments do not present us with any easy solutions. If that initial gesture is resolved, instead, through *free use*, then it would be possible for the two terms to be led back to sharing and the development of a happier, more just form of life. The issue of Earth/territory carries with it the question of law, because every appropriation/occupation of a territory corresponds to a first act of measuring that constitutes the measure/ foundation of everything that comes after, beginning with the establishment of property. This

measure—as Schmitt maintains in *The Nomos of the Earth*—also contains that which (abusively, we might add) will don the robes of justice, and soon overlap with the law. It is precisely for this reason that the destitution of the law always begins with the Earth, with territories.

The occupation of a territory, Schmitt claims, determines a fundamental movement both internally and externally. In the first instance, by deciding on the property regime, which—and here Schmitt reprises Kant—"creates a kind of supreme ownership of the community as a whole."[22] In the second instance, through substantially modeling the relations of friendship and enmity with other groups: one always occupies something that is either empty (rare and perhaps impossible) or where someone is already to be found, and in this case it is clear that problems begin. Western occupation/ appropriation gradually extended itself up to the point of involving all possible space. Exclusion becomes more and more clearly an internal exclusion, and it is no accident that the current governmental paradigm has been framed not as "territory" but as "field"—with its contemporary specificities, such as *zones* and *clusters*. Again, it is important to imagine the field not as a physical or geographic location but as a *condition* of government that is simultaneously spatial, temporal, and existential.

The creation of a territory—a place in which the device of inclusion/exclusion can function—perhaps represents the first action of law that defines political space in terms of the management and neutralization of conflict between different forms of life. The messianic character of a territory is provided by the potential to deactivate a gesture of appropriation; that is, the recomposition of division by destituting that which maintains separation, thus allowing full inhabitation of the Earth, which becomes a world.

Since antiquity, the home itself has been the original technical device to create these spaces of inclusion/exclusion. This division was certainly established in the split between *oikos* and *polis*, but also exists within the home itself: spaces for men and spaces for women, for parents and children, masters and slaves, for criticism and pleasure. The home is automatically the anthropological location in which the fundamental political wounds occur, the civil

war that continues to cut through our territories. The most interesting part of the division returns us to the original meaning of the ancient Greek word *stasis* [στάσις], usually translated as "civil war" but which Nicole Loraux notes "refers etymologically only to a 'position'; that the position should become a party, that a party should be constituted for the purpose of sedition, that one faction should always call forth another, and that civil war should then rage."[23] What is always fundamental in this strange motion, then, is *taking a position in the permanent civil war*. No revolutionary discourse is possible without this act. If we look at the matter closely, we see that every revolt contains the opening of a possibility without precedent, a multiplication of the normally prohibited or taking a position on every aspect of daily life, beginning with the very smallest. It is only through these moments, and by learning to take a position, that it becomes possible to revoke every aspect of the current state of things. Walter Benjamin noted this during his journey to Bolshevik Russia, during an exceptionally revolutionary space and time: "It obliges everyone to choose his standpoint."[24] Division, faction, position, and party are all terms that necessarily recall sedition, revolt, insurrection, and revolution. Beyond all of this—which, for better or worse, we already know—the destituent moment consists of suspending the validity of every "principle" that precedes the constituent division.

Again, as Loraux notes, the word *stasis* has a double meaning that political philosophers all too easily pass over: it relates to movement or agitation, and also means to stay still, stationary, immobile. Loraux concludes that *stasis*—a word intimately connected with the meaning of insurrection—is "movement at rest," a suspension from which unprecedented possibilities can become real.[25] We could say, along with Benjamin, that it represents an image of the dialectic in a state of immobility—"*Dialetktik im Stillstand*"—a monadic structure. Benjamin writes, "In this structure he [the historical materialist] recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."[26] Insurrection is therefore not simply mass agitation, a chaotic tingling or series of actions, but rather a stoppage, an immobile movement, the blockading of history

itself. It points towards another use of time and the political. It was not for the sake of romance that, before Marx and Lenin, insurrection was always spoken of as an art and never as a science. Insurrection is the art of suspending politics.

A destituent territory will be, above all, able to slow down the anarchic flows of the capitalist metropolis, to block the proliferation of commodifying actions, to trap within a dialectical image the incessant functioning of productive, emotional, and ethical relations that allow the civilization of capital to continue. And, it will bring forth from this, in the multiplicity of positions taken, the figures of the friend and the enemy. In this immobile movement, it will make the revolutionary chance shine out.

Jean-Paul Dollé has reminded us of the diabolical connection contemporary capitalism establishes between territory, dwelling, and private property: "The appropriation of one's own body passes through the appropriation of the space in which one acts out one's life. The home becomes an extension of the self."[27] Not only has modernity made us think that dwelling must be substantially identified with an apartment, but in recent years it has also brought the belief that owning a house makes us more free, while in truth, it has simply made everyone more reactionary. The subprime mortgage crisis put this free-market equivalence up for discussion, which conflates being a homeowner with freedom itself. Today's proletarians are not only unfree because their bodies are bought by the bosses, they do not even have a home as the crystallization of freedom. And, if credit means living in the future, then the homes proletarians live in (when they are not actively expelled from them), acquired with debt that becomes increasingly inexhaustible, is inhabited in a time that is not the historical present but a present projected into an impossible future extinguished by the debt crisis. This gives rise to the latest condition—both material and existential—of widespread uninhabitability; the unlivability of the present moment. The metropolis becomes not only formally but truly uninhabitable and unreformable. The uprising (the interruption of

the metropolis's incessant functioning) is, therefore, the only way to begin to truly inhabit a place. The suspension of the current order, the slowing down of time, allows one to take the world in hand and change it, making it the means of sharing, of a common development that removes itself from the nihilism sustained by the illusion of private property and law. A territory that enters into a destituent process can somehow be perceived through the image given to it by a revolt that puts the brakes on existence, where everything takes on its *correct* form and "sheds" its ordinary one.

A destituent territory might mean a *medial territory*, to reprise Agamben's proposal of a medial ontology that introduces us to a new figure of human praxis. "Every use is first of all use of self: to enter into a relation of use with something, I must be affected by it, constitute myself as one who makes use of it. Human being and world are, in use, in a relationship of absolute and reciprocal immanence; in the using of something, it is the very being of the one using that is first of all at stake."[28] Following this line of thought, it is the territory, then, that affects someone who makes use of it, who in this manner becomes its inhabitant; and vice versa, the inhabitant affects and indeed creates a territory through the use they make of it. But in this world, leaving behind the division between external and internal, a territory effectively stops being territory as such.

In relation to this *medial* character, Bertolt Brecht also thought that communism is not extreme or radical, but rather the "midpoint." It is radical capitalism inasmuch as it represents a truly nihilistic force that goes to the "roots" in order to destroy every intensity and bond. Communism does not eliminate the bonds that lie within territories nor does it solicit them, it undoes them. Or better still—as Andrea Cavalletti has shown—in Benjaminian terms, it does so through a work of "loosening [*Auflockerung*] antagonisms capable of deactivating the social *depositif*."[29] And it does so, as Benjamin said, with the aid of solidarity, a kind of intensity that can never be *external;* it can never come from outside the revolutionary class. In this moment, from within, one can try and transform the very function of the bonds, looking to their unexpressed potentiality. This has more to do with Giordano Bruno's natural

magic than with social engineering. Therefore, one has to think not simply in terms of the occupation or destruction *sans phrase* of a territory when it presents itself, within the metropolis, as saturated with hostility (e.g., in gentrified neighborhoods or fascistic suburbs), but instead in terms of the possibility of disintegrating it from within, of loosening it and examining the possibility of composing it differently, not in the abstract but in life itself. By analyzing the relation between things and people that exists in a given territory, unleashing the antagonisms internal to the "class" who lives there, recognizing the civil war where it has always been, taking a position, and transforming the territory through an operation of solidarity that, above all, destitutes the first gesture of law, i.e., appropriation as an act of *possessing* a place. And, by always paying attention to the fact that obstacles are never "places" as such, insofar as they are a condition of government, a condition that is above all temporal and existential.

If a medial territory means that the subject is within the territory but also that the territory is something internal to the subject, this means the two are in a relation of reciprocal immanence that neutralizes the traditional pairing of subject/object that defines a relation dialectically. Usually, the relation between a subject and a territory resolves itself through the appropriation and exploitation of the second by the first, or in the subject becoming one of the functions of a constituted territory, enclosing the two poles within a device subjected to the exterior force of government. The fact that destituent potential is contained within a territory means both the destitution of its subject and the deposition of the two possibilities of relation offered by the metropolis—property or device—in order to enter into a different kind of becoming. In which, not only is the abusive relationship between the poles deposed, but the separation between territory and subject falls away, and in falling changes into something else. This modification begins the separation between form of life and territory. Whoever said that it is necessary to "become the territory" was correct, therefore, in the sense of destituting it rather than producing, occupying, or enduring it. Making use of a territory would thus mean exactly this: neutralizing its specific economy by decomposing its elements, dissolving its

bonds, searching for another form of contact that can create the space and time of dwelling—and thus also of use—both for (non)subjects and for places themselves. This would mean, in other words, *inhabiting it and destituting it through use*.

The difficulty in dwelling lies in the challenge of making use of something that, as is the case with territory, is born as a device for capture. Furthermore, it is difficult to abandon oneself to places, to allow them to do the taking rather than to take them oneself; to disappropriate rather than reappropriate. Reappropriation—by now a "key word" widespread among antagonist movements—is even more ambiguous in this sense, because if it is not preceded by, executed, and completed through a "common sense"—shared meaning, the loosening of internal antagonisms, and acts of solidarity—then in the best of cases, it will lead only to an imitation of the constituent gesture of law. Perhaps it will be reformulated as an "alternative" style, but it will always be revocable, and in any case, will participate in the continuity of the enemy's history.

The act of dwelling must be rethought in a destituent sense.

In his diary entry of June 8, 1931, Walter Benjamin refers to a conversation he had with Brecht about possible ways of living.[30] He recounts that he had tried to shift the dialogue with the playwright away from the level of principles and onto that of concepts, towards a concept of "habits," or ethics, and for this reason they naturally ended up discussing dwelling. According to Brecht, there is a first way of living, which he defines as "sympathetic" [*mitnahmen]:* shaping an environment and making it functional, so that whoever inhabits a place in this way always feels at home and is in turn functionally determined by it. This is the bourgeois mode of living, a scenographic dwelling, as Benjamin comments. Brecht opposes this model to another one, his own, which is that of always feeling oneself to be a "guest," without any responsibility towards those things of which one makes use and who at any moment can be dismissed by those very things. This is a form of dwelling that leaves as little trace of the subject as possible on any given environment,

and is typical of the clandestine militant. In turn, Benjamin brings to light a different dialectic of dwelling: that which confers the greatest quantity of habits and that which confers the fewest possible. Both, in their different extremes, can become pathological. In the first case, the dweller becomes a "function" of the things around them, a kind of appendix to these devices. In the second case, we see a form of habitation that tries to form a minimum of habits, a mere "lodging." This form of habitation is not only precarious but also destructive. It impedes habits from simply forming themselves, since "it constantly clears away its basis: the objects." It is interesting that Heiner Müller—whose poetical and theatrical works burst open the legacy of both Benjamin and Brecht—himself said that "the concept of dwelling does not have any particular importance for me … I am a cave dweller, or a nomad … I cannot manage to free myself from the feeling of not belonging to any place. Given that I cannot have a castle, I have no home, only temporary lodgings and workplaces. I am comfortable in … my apartment in Friedrichsfelde in Berlin, a new prefab construction typical of the DDR … it cancels out every concept [*aufhebt*] of living, at least of living understood as domicile."[31]

Indeed, it should be clear by now that "to inhabit" does not simply mean being domiciled in one place or another—whether an apartment, room, hovel, or wherever. Rather, it is a verb that indicates a condition: the "how" each of us is in the world, the relation to the self and to the world, inasmuch as this is a development of a form of life. Fundamentally, Benjamin states that it is the use we make of things, and the use they make of us, that for the most part decides this mode of living. For him, the problem is not so much which things are present or absent, or that each of us has a particular relationship with some things, but that of the destitution of the *thingly* possibility (i.e., efficiency and instrumentality) of constructing things and our mode of living. We need to be able to use them in a "poor" way, neither owning them —"being in charge of things, without taking possession of them"[32]— nor subordinating ourselves to them, but rather, when the conditions are right, relating to them with affection. This different use of the self in relation to things can at a certain moment

demonstrate that poverty—"not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects—can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism."[33] It begins from here, from the destruction of the state of things, thus working towards their communist transvaluation, in the sense defined by Aleksander Rodchenko, who said that objects—especially those of everyday use—can become *comrades*, just as human beings can.

Some friends wrote a few years back, in an anonymous *Call* that left its mark on the revolutionary movements of our times, that we ought not think of "the party" anymore as a bureaucratic organization or as a substitute for the family, but as a "a collection of places, infrastructures, communized methods, and the dreams, bodies, murmurs, thoughts, desires that circulate among those places; the use of those methods, the sharing of those infrastructures … the formation of intuition as a force … the deployment of an archipelago of worlds."[34] All of this—bodies, souls, and things—will be in the commune that our comrades will inhabit.

This is what we can imagine as the first lines of a prolegomena towards a destituent dwelling.

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1. T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (London: Jonathan Cape, [1926] 1940), 85. [Translator's note.]

2. *De lingua latina*, Book 5, Chapter 4. [Translator's note.]

3. Bianca Bonavita, *Humus: Diario di terra* (Savona: Pentagora, 2015), 68.

4. Ernst Jünger, *The Forest Passage*, trans. Thomas Friese (Candor, NY: Telos Press, [1951] 2013), 66.

5. Hannah Arendt, "Epilogue" [1955], in *The Promise of Politics*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 203; Mary McCarthy, *The Oasis* (New York: Random House, 1949).

6. McCarthy, *The Oasis*, 173.

7. Michel Foucault, "Questions on Geography," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 68.

8. Michel Foucault, "Sexualité et pouvoir" [1978], in *Dits et écrits, Volume 3* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 561.

9. Foucault, "La gouvernementalité," *Dits et écrits, Vol. 3*, 635.

10. Foucault, “La gouvernementalité,” 643–644.

11. Foucault, “La gouvernementalité,” 656–657.

12. See Michel Foucault, “Espace, savoir et pouvoir” [1982], in *Dits et écrits, Volume 4* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 1089 onward.

13. The question of defining the relation between the metropolis and the rest of our *desertified* territory has always been a central one in France. We need only mention the ultra-reactionary geographer Jean-Francois Gravier, whose most celebrated work, published in 1947, bears the significant title “Paris and the French Desert.” From Charles de Gaulle onward, this became the reference for a completely failed decentralization—and it could only be a failure, given that it was controlled by the metropolitan center.

14. Foucault, “Espace,” *Dits et écrits, Vol. 4*, 1094.

15. Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Dal laboratorio,” in *Empirismo eretico* (Milan: Garzanti, 1972), 65.

16. “Sovereignty designates, first, the summit.” Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 96.

17. Étienne de La Boétie, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, trans. Harry Kurz (New York: Black Rose Books, 1997). [Translator’s note.]

18. Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, trans. Goronwy Rees (London: Andre Deutsch, 1971), 36. [Translator’s note.]

19. The reference is to Grégoire Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: New Press, 2015). Chamayou emphasizes that the desire to “see everything, always” lies at the basis of current technopolitical forces and the development of a new strategy of counterinsurgency.

20. Stephanie Wakefield has written an interesting essay on the meaning behind this film. See Stephanie Wakefield, “Man in the Anthropocene (as portrayed by the film *Gravity*),” May 13, October 2014, https://www.mayrevue.com/en/lhomme-delanthropocene-tel-que-depeint-dans-le-film-gravity/.

21. Carl Schmitt, “Appropriation/Division/Production,” in *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the* Jus Publicum Europaeum, trans. Gary Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2006), 324–335.

22. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 45.

23. Nicole Loraux, *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens*, trans. Corinne Pache with Jeff Fort (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2002), 24.

24. Benjamin, “Moscow” [1927], in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1: 1927–1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1999), 22.

25. Loraux, *The Divided City*, 108.

26. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” [1940], in *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 2003), 396.

27. Jean-Paul Dollé, *L’inhabitable capital* (Paris: Lignes, 2010), 14.

28. Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 30.

29. Andrea Cavalletti, *Class*, trans. Elisa Fiaccadori (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2019), 34.

30. Benjamin, “May–June 1931,” *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Pt. 2*, 479–480.

31. Heiner Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht: Leben in zwei Diktaturen* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch Verlag, 1992), 308.

32. Reiner Schürmann, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart’s Mystical Philosophy* (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2001).

33. Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Pt. 1*, 22.

34. Anonymous, *Call*, trans. Lawrence Jarach (France, 2004), 22. Available at https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/anonymous-call.pdf. [Translator’s note.]

Chapter 08

The *Byt* Front (Destituent Bolshevism)

Le monde est fini, le voyage commence.
—Benjamin Fondane, *Ulysses*[1]

The destituent strike can be understood as a pure means to destroy the present while recomposing its fragments of dispersed life, the fragments of the "we *that I am*" whose spatial and temporal coordinates we have lost. That disintegration of being, shot through with feelings of despair, that Benjamin thought of as the main product of the cult we call capitalism. The destituent strike permits us to concentrate, in a single gesture, the possibility of restoring form to this scattered, dispersed being; to be its *tiqqun*.[2] This gesture of abolition—and at the same time, of the discovery of hope—is carried out by that living form generated by the suspension of the production and reproduction of the present. It does so by blocking the normal apocalyptic functioning of "society," but also through the deposition of the Ego that vanishes into the incandescent landscape of the metropolis in revolt. It comes from the stoppage of the present, *when everything stands still*, which is the recurring nightmare of the metropolitan government. Beneath the infrastructure, the pixels, the thousands of screens that separate us from the world and from each other, we find a long, deep landscape: "Landscape has a longer life than the individual. It awaits the disappearance of man, who exploits it without thinking of his own future of belonging to a species."[3] Beneath history, beneath modernity, there is not the beach, but the people we are missing.[4]

History is suspended in order to bring a new time to the surface and not to enter into the eternal return of the same form of time. For the

Western creature, possibility does not lie in *continuing* to produce new technology, in the infinite pursuing of an unattainable future, the construction of history deprived of justice, but instead in *interrupting* the depressing repetition of these actions. It is in composing, from within the rupture, everything "just a little" differently, as in the rabbinic parable that Gershom Scholem told Benjamin, which he in turn transmitted to Ernst Bloch: in the reign of the Messiah, "everything will be as it is now, just a little different."[5] The flipside to this is Kafka's claim, in *The Trial*, that in the world of law, evil presents itself through the arrangement of everyday things in a seemingly identical way, but just a little different from how they ought to be. "Everything was *almost* exactly as before,"[6] K thinks to himself in his room, looking around after realizing that he is inexplicably deadlocked. This small, powerful shift in the axes of the world is perhaps the true meaning of the Messianic strike evoked by Benjamin. It is a strike that does not end in the return of the same, that cursed, homogenous, empty time that strips down and removes any meaning from our existence, and which, instead of expending itself in the superficial satisfaction of claiming a right, provokes a small shift in the metaphysical axis of the world. This allows access to another form of life, another truth of the world, an original moment that is also the end goal, offering the material and spiritual conditions for possibility. It is an intense line of flight away from the present and, at the same time, the gateway to a new historical epoch. The strike thus becomes one of those transformative *thresholds* Benjamin discusses in his *Passagenwerk [The Arcades Project*]. It is a strike *without end*—and thus not infinite. A *passage* into another, superior "state of the world."

For this reason, every true strike is also a strike against ourselves: in the same way the working class used to strike and struggle for its own destruction, inasmuch as it was a part of capital. For revolutionary becomings, this means making Michel Foucault's words a rule of life, when he wrote (perhaps with a hint of critical disenchantment about post-'68 France): "Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be."[7] The

destituent strike, therefore, must pass through an inevitable desubjectification, as well as the overthrow of the authority that subjectivity places before itself. It must pass through a suspension of its own contingent identity, as well as through the destruction of the accumulation of oppression that each and every one of us suffers on a daily basis. Only this would be a correct and 'just' strike.

Imagining the destituent strike as a process that begins with a rupture means, on the one hand, to individually intensify such interruptions; on the other, it means allowing all those practices of destitution that have been sown everywhere to spread further and organize: at work and in relationships, in friendship and in thought, in living and in fighting, in love and in art. It means making all of this into a front for subversion that, in one blow, leaps over that false division between internal and external fronts. It means bringing to light *the front of the forms of life*.

In the 1920s, many Bolsheviks spoke of *novy byt*—the new form of life—as one of the main battles to be won in the revolutionary process, for example, through the creation of communes.[8] The battle was lost in the following decade, from the moment of the Central Committee of the Communist Party's meeting on May 29, 1930, when Stalinism managed to restore the ideological conditions of the petit bourgeois form of life, denouncing those projects pursuing new forms of life as "extremist," "without foundation," and "quasifantastical"—all compliments, we should note. Mayakovsky had already killed himself a month before this sentence.

The novy byt, as with Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* —an anti-monument made of glass, steel, and revolution, as Viktor Shklovsky put it—remained an unfinished project of the October Revolution. It represents another vision of the end of modernity, another anthropology in progress. The one pursued by the practical imagination of the communards, and not a dream of regression to old ways or little projects just sufficient to satisfy the needs of a handful of friends—even if it is from the truth of revolutionary friendship that everything takes form.

On the other hand, perhaps the Situationists were right when they said that the apparent successes of the workers' movement were its true defeats—reformism, state bureaucracy, the industrialization of life itself—and that the loss of its revolutionary claws was its real success, precisely because it is these that remain as striking images of the future to come; questions that remain open, incomplete.

It is extremely interesting that the question of novy byt, during the early years of the Bolshevik Revolution, lay at the center of discussions and projects animated by the most committed and visionary communist architects, buttressed by the powerful rhythms of Mayakovsky's poetry.[9] Moisei Ginzburg, Ivan Léonidov, Yuri Larin, the Vesnin brothers [Leonid, Viktor, and Alexander], Andréi Burov, Mikhail Barshch, and many others posed the question of reconstructing a form of life, beginning with everyday objects and then moving on to projects that involved entire territories. They did so without ignoring affects, their composition, and the possibilities (or impossibilities) that they contain. These architects asked themselves the following questions: how can we believe that we are carrying out a revolution in an environment dreamt of and built by the bourgeois mind? How can we imagine transforming the structures that might allow the revolution to survive if we do not first transform life itself, our way of living in the world? What kind of revolution would it be, if it were not concerned, above all, with destituting the form of life conceived by the world we fought against? The collective appropriation of the means of production and exchange was not enough, apparently, to transform life itself. The fulcrum of their concerns was the transformation of existence within the new space and time opened up by the Revolution. Furthermore, the transformation of the form of everyday life constituted a good antidote to the inevitable reformist thrust of the petit-bourgeois spirit during the NEP.[10] This is something the partisans of the novy byt were more than aware of; they knew Lenin's appeals to discipline were not enough. The problem was not so much that permission was given for parts of the old economy to continue—even if under the strict control of the Bolsheviks—but rather, the refusal by the party bureaucracy to consider everyday

life as the *true* question of the revolution. The Left Front of the Arts was one of the few collective bodies at the front line of this operation of the "art-construction of life," because it had a refined understanding of civil war: "The bourgeoisie and the nobility—the exploiters—have been militarily and politically defeated, but their influence is still here, it remains among us. It is more present than that of the revolution, because every object, every building, every painting, every monument, every cultural testimony is full of the values of the bourgeois class, which has created them in its image, for its own use, and for its own pleasure. Daily life, our entire environment, is that of yesterday, and thus so too is morality and ideology."[11] The commune movement of the 1920s essentially contravened official ideology (Marxist perhaps, but certainly not communist), which proposed that without an initial total change in the relations of production, the so-called superstructure could not undergo any modifications at all. The communes ignored this article of faith and put themselves forward as experiments in the construction of communism *here and now*, through building "communes of the form of life."[12] They represented a material rupture in the continuum of traditional forms of life while making themselves into "switches" that produced new configurations of the world. And there were plenty of them: in 1930, just before their excommunication, there were seventy-seven communes in Leningrad alone, each with its own way of being, its own form, its own lifestyle. Alongside productive efforts and technical acceleration, the continued construction of sites in which one could experiment with communism in spaces that privileged slowing down and enrichment would perhaps have allowed something quite different from state socialism, which in the end pushed them aside, replacing the communes with the far more prosaic "collectives." Collectivization was the errant turn of communism, and its true realization—as Müller correctly notes—is to be found not in socialism but in the monotony of the faces and souls that pack into a McDonalds.[13]

The constructivist architects intervened in this climate of the 1920s and 1930s, arguing that in order to make a commune, to follow a communist form of life, you need a dwelling adapted to your needs and desires. One of their strongest ideas was that of

“social condensers”: an abode, architectural complex, or even an entire city with qualities similar to an electric condenser. It could transform and maintain the commune’s energy forever. A habitable space traversed by a constant current that always anticipates the intensity accumulating at its external borders. A time and place in which individual and collective forces, working together, can transform the form of life through two lines of flight: first, the material construction of a new habitat that embraces and allows the enrichment of new practices of life; secondly, by running through today’s anticipation of the future to come, recuperating the meaning of the classic *obshchina*, functioning in the end as a powerful disseminator of such practices.[14] A social condenser had to provoke a shock; a visual, concrete, and emotive interruption in the continuum of the old city, grafting a dialectical model onto the heart of traditional, bourgeois ways of living. This was a *condenser of intensity*, because anything, when it reaches a certain level of intensity, becomes political. They soon arrived at planning the “non-cities,” passing through the communal house [*Dom-Kommuna*] into the revolution of the entire territory.[15] At this point, it became clear that one could not think about truly revolutionizing life without changing the entire context in which the new forms of living would be born. It is in this realization that one finds the most fascinating ideas and intuitions. The communist architect Leonid Sabsovich went to far as to claim that, sooner or later, they might need to cancel “all existing cities and villages from the face of the earth,”[16] destituting all preexisting relations between men and women, between workers and means of production, between city and countryside. And he proposed this without falling back on the barracks-socialism that was already implanting itself across the Soviet Union, instead planning something that could entirely break away from that sad human picture.

There were so-called “Urbanists,” such as Sabsovich, partisans of a progressive decentralization and socialist reconstruction of the cities—which, in their view, should not contain more than forty to sixty thousand inhabitants—in which a form of life could be organized, that would have to be thought up immediately, collectively, in every place: “We have to discuss *how we organize*

ourselves not only in the factories, but also in the clubs, in every habitation."[17] But, it was above all the "Disurbanists," such as Mikhail Okhitovich—characterized by elements of what we have called a primitive politics—who established a theory of revolutionary living that conserves interesting strategic aspects, even if today one would need to speak of "de-metropolitanizing" life rather than "de-urbanizing" it. And it was precisely by taking into consideration the totality of the territory that the Disurbanists proposed their assault on the bourgeois environment.

First of all, for them, the end of the separation between city and countryside was indispensable, an objective already present in Engels's writings, which had remained blocked at the stage of ideological sloganeering. Politically, the dispersion or diffusion of the habitat—in their own words, the "de-densification of the city"—and its ways of energizing and provisioning itself had to respond *offensively* to the political and productive centralization the 1920s had begun to impose in the Soviet Union. According to Okhitovich, for example, communist countries did not need a "center"; instead, they needed to destitute the political function of capital cities. Today, this kind of communist planning would clearly invest in digital infrastructure, both in the sense that this would be useful for its practical realization, as well as in the sense of destituting such infrastructure's current totalitarian vocation. It is clearly neither possible nor desirable, from the standpoint of novy byt, to manage everything through a single "plan": *one thousand plans for communism*.[18]

During this period, Moisei Ginzburg wrote to Le Corbusier: "We are making a diagnosis of the contemporary city. We say: it is sick, fatally so, but we do not want to heal it. We prefer to destroy it and dedicate ourselves to a new method of territorially dividing the people."[19] As if to say: *a new nomos*.

It was the Disurbanists who criticized the communal house as it was being presented to their contemporaries, pointing out everything that needed to be done away with as soon as possible:

the filth and clutter in the corridors; the barracks-style canteens; the infinite queues to eat, wash, and get dressed; the similarity of supposedly socialist collective residences to depersonalized ant farms, rather than places of collective living for free and conscious workers; the police-led Taylorization of daily life. For the Disurbanists, these were not communes but "common lies." They also set their crosshairs on that kind of exasperated collectivism which they saw as the other side of individualism: "Personal property, personal needs, personal initiatives, personal development, personal hands, feet, heads, and brains not only should not disappear [in socialism] but will become accessible for the very first time."[20]

Another interesting idea of theirs was the planning of modular housing complexes that could be disassembled and transported, against the idea—according to them, a petit-bourgeois one—of the house and the city as eternally fixed to a single place. They imagined a kind of "nomad-city," as Deleuze and Guattari would call them many years later, in a seminar on the city in the early 1970s showing the influence of the revolutionary nucleus around Disurbanist planning, i.e., the destitution of bourgeois living and the construction of a new form of life: "Prodigious utopia of the 'Disurbanists': to produce flow-cities, nomad-cities, running across the immense Soviet territory, supplied by sources of natural energy transformed into social energy…. The Disurbanists proposed the construction of a network that could relaunch energy and power plants across the whole territory, through a nomadic, light-weight, individual, disassemblable habitat … so as to regroup and compose a collective habitat that can be easily disaggregated … non-familial nomadic cells. This utopia exists outside of the family. Its objective is the disappearance of the division between center and periphery, city and countryside."[21]

Along this line of subversion, *the byt front*, we find the fork in the road of history arriving at its maximum point of tension. Today, that crossroads has to center on the struggle to define our own concept of life, of "*buen vivir*," as the Indigenous people of Latin America put it. A good life, as such, that is never only *for me* but rather *for* us. If a dominant power invests the constitution, pseudo-autonomy, and

the supposed well-being of the Ego with sacred value, I know all too well that within the realm of justice, "I am not centered in myself,"[22] but always outside, and thus the Ego has to be profaned and destituted.

We need to do away forever, once and for all, with the pseudoanarchistic infantilism that continues to identify thaumaturgic virtues in the modern individual, along with the stupid belief that the freedom to individually choose and do whatever you want is somehow revolutionary. We need to stop playing at being extremists of Western ideology.

In order to provide a strategic position to this argument on the destituent strike, we need to reprise an old saying of Mario Tronti's: "*The working class, rooted in a struggle within the relations of production, can only win from time to time; from a strategic point of view, it does not win; strategically speaking it remains, in any case, a dominated class*."[23] The upper limit of revolutionary politics has always been the assumption that political economy and production represent the central, decisive front against capitalism. In reality, it is precisely there that one cannot undermine the stability of power, inasmuch as it always remains *within* this relation. Even when dealing with the "critique of political economy," abandoning oneself entirely to this politics means closing oneself off within a device (struggle/ development, conflict/law, etc.) that imprisons the potential of the proletarian revolution within a state of eternal adolescence. All the recent movements against austerity have quickly burnt themselves up or were soon defeated because they clung to the rocks of such demands, finding themselves shipwrecked on the impossibility and inability to exit from the "capitalist discourse"—by now identical to the "democratic discourse." The paradigm is the Greek Affair in the summer of 2015.

On the other hand, every time a window has been opened, when the impossible became a line of flight, it was possible because the emergence of a destituent power placed the entirety of the world in question, beginning with an urgent, partisan question: *how do we*

live where we live? This allows one to experiment—albeit only momentarily—with a life that suspends the present domination by capitalist happiness to which we are all, each and every one of us, *condemned*.

The revolutionary becoming cannot be anything but a poetics of the revolution.

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1. Benjamin Fondane, *Ulysses*, trans. Nathaniel Rudavsky-Brody (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, [1933] 2017), 77. [Translator's note.]

2. *Tiqqun* [תיקון] is a Hebrew word meaning "mending" or "fixing." As well as being an important concept in Kabbalist thought, it is also the name of a French revolutionary journal that, among others in its milieu, has drawn on the thought of Giorgio Agamben. [Translator's note.]

3. Heiner Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht: Leben in zwei Diktaturen* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch Verlag, 1992), 322.

4. A reference to the old situationist slogan "Sous les pavés, la plage!" [Beneath the pavement, the beach!]. [Translator's note.]

5. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 52. [Translator's note.]

6. Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Mike Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6. [Emphasis added.]

7. Michel Foucault, "Why Study Power," in *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. Hubert L. Dreyfuss and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 216.

8. Aside from the range of experiences that took place in Soviet cities—e.g., those studied by French architect Anatole Kopp—there were also many communes in the countryside. On this matter, see: Eric Aunoble, *Le Communisme, tout de suite! Le movement des Communes en Ukraine soviétique (1919-1920*) (Paris: Les Nuits Rouges, 2008). Richard Stites reports that in 1921 there were 3,000 rural communes across the revolutionary territories. See Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 209.

9. Anatole Kopp, *Changer la vie, changer la ville: de la vie nouvelle aux problèmes urbains, U.R.S.S. 1917–1932* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1975). Tarì's point of reference here is this volume by Kopp which has unfortunately not been translated into English. However, Kopp's 1965 survey of the same themes has been, see Anatole Kopp, *Town and Revolution: Soviet Architecture and City Planning 1917–1935*, trans. Thomas E. Burton (New York: George Braziller, 1970), especially Chapters 6 and 7. [Translator's note.]

10. "NEP" is the acronym for the New Economic Policy of Lenin's government in 1921, which reintroduced elements of market capitalism into post-revolutionary Russia. [Translator's note.]

11. Kopp, *Changer la vie*, 138.

12. Kopp, *Changer la vie*, 162.

13. “The capitalist offer relies on the anxiety of loneliness. McDonalds is the absolute offer of collectivity. Everyone in the world sits in the same restaurant; you eat the same shit and everyone is happy. Because McDonalds provides collectivity. Even the faces of people in McDonalds branches are increasingly similar to each other.” See Heiner Müller, *Jenseits der Nation* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1991), 58. [Translator’s note.]

14. *Obshchina* is a prerevolutionary Russian term denoting a rural peasant commune or assembly. [Translator’s note.]

15. Kopp, *Changer la vie*, 197. See also Kopp, *Town and Revolution*, 130. [Translator’s note.]

16. Kopp, *Changer la vie*, 282.

17. Kopp, *Changer la vie*, 289.

18. In the original Italian [“Non è evidentemente possibile né auspicabile, dal punto di vista del *novy bit*, gestire tutto attraverso un solo e unico «piano»: *mille piani* per il comunismo], the wordplay is a reference to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (Mille piani).

19. Kopp, *Changer la vie*, 292.

20. Mikhail Okhitovich, cited in Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 194.

21. François Fourquet and Lion Murard (eds.), *Les équipements du pouvoir* (Paris: Union Générales d’Éditions, 1976), 112–113.

22. Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 55.

23. Mario Tronti, *Sull’autonomia del politico* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1977), 52–53.

Chapter 09

Interruption I:
“There Is No Unhappy Love”

Everywhere, therefore, where my reflection wants to comprehend love, I see only contradiction.

—Søren Kierkegaard, *In vino veritas*[1]

The gateway to the transformation of self and world doesn’t lie in the reform of the state or in its technological acceleration. It is not to be found in ‘collectivization’ or in the affirmation of will. All of these means merely erect screens between the truth and the reality of existence so as to never let them meet. They are exteriorities with their own ends, connected to each other in a space and time from which we are separated by a thousand screens. For this reason, during any revolt, the first reflex is to destroy these screens, perhaps symbolically, but nevertheless in the greatest number possible. One does so in order to feel, individually and collectively, finally, in the *here and now*. One does so to restrict the space that separates us from each other and to increase the distance from that which we perceive as hostile. It is this search for immanence in oneself and in others that naturally leads us to consider how experiences of revolution and love are so similar that they communicate with one another.

Taking a close look at the situation, it seems as if the desire to cancel out the experience of communism over the last decades may have proceeded, step by step, with the desire to cancel out the experience of love. Just as communism has been replaced by an infinite, inconclusive negotiation over rights, so too love has become a contractual affair, an engagement to barter about as if it were any other aspect of existence. Love no longer even has any experience of

the end: one is fired, perhaps with an SMS, and if it's worth the trouble you can put it on your CV.

One reason for the analogy between the two might lie in the fact that both communism and love have the same relation to time: they struggle against the present, against dominant reality, and their possibility of becoming always stands in relation to the impossibility of the present moment. Both share the desire to suspend history, both establish a state of exception, both want to shoot the clocks, for both every moment is decisive. Communism and love, finally, are connected through a desire to share intensity in more ways than one. Therefore, given that one no longer knows what a revolution might be, one does not yet know what love might be. And conversely, the more we understand one, the more we will be able to understand the other.

That the Ego loves an Other, that one can experience love, simply reveals the insufficiency of the Ego to undergo any experience at all, and, on the other hand, reveals the happiness of the pure experience of sharing. This is why affective experience destitutes *both* the Ego and the Other, revealing their names to be entirely inadequate. Love, as Gilbert Simondon says, is maximally *disindividuating*, because not only is "the affective problematic … the experience in which a being feels that they are not an individual" but is also that experience which "suspends the functional modality of the relation to others and in which another subject—destituted from its social function—appears to us as more than individuality."[2] I destitute the Other while they do the same to me, and within this "immobile movement" there is a common experience of the world. Frequently one discovers this *afterward:* in the experience of suffering at the end of love, all at once we know that the pain comes from the break of this being-with that implies a multitude of other creatures, objects, narratives, sounds, and images that make up the contained world that love constitutes. Such a form of love lives, in its turn, within a "transindividual" constellation, for which reason it has an antisocial calling but not an antipolitical one. The pain comes from this, and

not from an offense against the Ego. Indeed, on this occasion, the Ego appears to be not only artificial but even an obstacle in explicating that world. We feel this intuitively when we recognize the lability of the borders of the Ego within the experience of love; it is bound by an epidermis that dies and regenerates every day and night. It is a joyful experience. Love appears in the place where the Ego disappears, and in turn, it disappears when the Ego becomes once more. There are two who remain in love but, making a singular use of the self via this affect, they are no longer *themselves*. In unlove, the *self* returns to occupy its ancient location. Love can be a destituent potential because it belongs among those rare experiences through which we naturally access a different and free use of the self and life itself, something we can either abandon ourselves to or not. But it is not a choice; it is a decision.

Gershom Scholem, writing about Benjamin in his book on the story of their friendship, looked with irony upon something about his friend that he could not understand, which Benjamin repeated to him frequently and stubbornly. It is a misunderstanding that seems to fit with the Kabbalist's profound incomprehension of Benjamin's version of communism: "there is no unhappy love," Benjamin implored.[3] Scholem held that such a conviction was contradicted by his friend's stormy love life, a thesis not only unconvincing due to the poverty of its argument, but because it reveals a total misunderstanding of what Benjamin meant by happiness.

One might say, on the contrary, that there are unhappy *individuals*. Because, despite employing all the strength we are capable of, we have not been able to avoid the return of the liberal individual; one cannot to access the experience of love because one fails to depose the Ego. Or further still, because the individual loses itself in an injunction on thinking of happiness as something that one either does or does not possess, like any other object, thus dooming it to failure right from the start. Or, again, through imagining happiness as something that one completes or brings to a conclusion in the future, trivially summarized today when someone says: "I have a thing going on with them." Love, like other *oases*, can be a refuge for the individual, but it can all too easily be confused

with the desert if it becomes individualism in itself; that is, if love is content to be merely the sharing of a second-rate narcissism.

Nevertheless, when it materializes against all odds, precisely inasmuch as it appears in the world as a form of shared happiness and is therefore not appropriable, love is able to cut across even the most disastrous failures without losing an iota of its potential. It is as destructive as it is creative. It is both poor and powerful, present even in its absence, like the revolution. It can enter into life in any moment, like the Messiah. Love remains a happy experience even in abandonment and the most impervious of difficulties. It can overturn every kind of obstacle that it faces, by making use of a primitive violence. Anyone who has loved knows this all too well. Love is continually traversed by a line of extreme intensity, which makes it an exquisitely political affect. Claiming that there is no unhappy love means taking a position against one of the strongest and long-lasting myths of Western civilization: that of unhappy love, of the *guilt* and *destiny* of suffering to which humanity is condemned.

One day in 1983, during a lesson in his course on cinema, Gilles Deleuze discussed Nietzsche and his conception of love, truth, and the potential of perception. At a certain point, he said, even during a doomed love affair we can find joy, if the experience has allowed us to perceive something we previously did not have access to. Love is one of the possibilities—the most powerful one—that increases the potential of existence, precisely because it allows us to perceive dimensions of existence that we previously could not, and thus, to destitute the superstitions we were subjected to, such as those represented by destiny or by an inextinguishable debt. Conversely, the inability to make love last exposes us to the diminution of that potential.

Deleuze feels it important to clarify that neither he nor Nietzsche are partisans of existential liberalism or what today we call “polyamory.” They are not telling us to gather the largest possible collection of amorous relationships, but that “the more you love someone, the more you increase your potential to exist and the more

you become capable of perceiving things, according to the needs of a different nature."[4] In other words, one perceives things, the same things as before, but in a different way. Here we always have a slight shift in the axes; the axes of how life is lived this time around, its actual becoming. The definition of potential here is exactly that given by Deleuze: it does not consist in the relation, as such, but in affect, together with perception. Love is how we become aware of what it means to pass from one phase of life to another, from one intensity to another, more powerful one—and for this very reason, even a defeated, failed love, a love gone wrong, is nevertheless still an experience of happiness, so long as it witnesses this growth in potential. Given that perception through an affect means having a perspective on time and within time, Benjamin maintains that happiness has no need or desire for the future, but is entirely absorbed in the epoch in which we are living: "Happiness for us is thinkable only in the air that we have breathed, among the people who have lived with us. In other words, there vibrates in the idea of happiness (this is what that noteworthy circumstance teaches us) the idea of salvation."[5] This is the only sentimental education appropriate for revolutionary becoming, i.e., in which love can be defeated, but precisely because of our inability to face it, remains irreducible as an experience of happiness if we are able to redeem it in remembrance. That the being one loves *exists*, desire itself might be now, and one has an infinite potential to *remember* it represents the melancholically joyful fact that changes our perception of the world, even if that being might be distant or even lost forever.[6] Its fulfillment is not a matter of history. This is why Heloise, in responding to her now distant, lost lover Abelard, always maintains that she prefers to *remember* and thus continue to love him against every prohibition of his philosophy or their social morality. This is love against history. Everything that is true for lovers counts as well for the commune, for a people yet to arrive, a revolutionary class, because if it is true "I am not centered in myself,"[7] then in the center, between the *I* that deposes the Ego and the *we* that is me, we find the self that experiences the world *with* the other. Only those who have experienced love can access communism immediately.

And, logically, the more we know how to love someone, the greater the possibility of communism's arrival.

Capitalist happiness is entirely projected into the future; all that is allowed to us in the present is to live its abstraction collectively, reified in the commodity that we ourselves become: measured, valorized, indebted lovers. Everyone knows in this world love is exchanged with things and can be consumed without end. This is a form of happiness that does not give us access to any true experience, one that instead of increasing perception tangibly diminishes it. It is a state of being that lives through the absence of the past, of feeling, of truth, and thus of redemption. Is there such a thing as capitalist love? This is not an easy question, but what is certain is that there is a liberal version of love that affects every place and existence, just as every flow of capital does. It defines itself through a lack of sensitivity, through being opportunist and calculating, deprived of its own language. It is where the body is usually an exchange value, a currency of flesh, in which the good of the Ego functions as the treasurer and absolute legislator (I must put *my* well-being above all else) of unhappiness, which, sooner or later, returns fatally from whence it came, condemning the Ego to an existence deprived of truth, and thus of love. It is the ultimate unhappiness.

It is clear, as Foucault taught us, that it is not sex, i.e., "sexuality" as such, which can tell us anything about "the truth of the self and of love." What saves us is the fact that, through this affect, we are able to tolerate such intensity on every level of life, to exercise the ability to perceive that at least for one day we have seen through the eyes of another, and even the infinite ability to live happiness through fragments, beyond the present, beyond abandonment, beyond the pain of existence. And perhaps its secret is what, in his essay "Goethe's Elective Affinities," Benjamin calls "the unexpressed," which is defined as a halt in appearances that allows the truth to emerge. Perhaps in that which remains unexperienced of a love—and for love that lasts a lifetime, maybe this is even the most true—dwells its deepest truth.

"*You're the revolution*," said the lover's lover one day. On second thought, it was not a statement but a question. As always, the reply —if one is necessary—is to be found in life itself.

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1. Søren Kierkegaard, "In vino veritas" [1845], in *Kierkegaard's Writings, Volume 9*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 33. [Translator's note.]

2. Muriel Combes, *Simondon: Individu et collectivité* (Paris: Puf, 1999), 55 and 67.

3. Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), 55.

4. Gilles Deleuze, "Cinéma cours 49 du 13/12/1983," transcribed by Daniel Rayburn, available at www.univ-paris8.fr/deleuze/article.php3?id_article=273.

5. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 476 [N13a, 1].

6. Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1:1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1996), 356.

7. Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 55.

Chapter 10

Interruption II:
To Save Tradition, We Must Interrupt It

Will must break apart into a thousand pieces.
—Walter Benjamin, *On Morality*[1]

There is another problem for revolutionary becomings, one which also involves a kind of bifurcation: *to continue* an old tradition one assumes might still help to guide activity or *to interrupt it*, which does not mean to deny or ignore it, but to create a space that allows for it to be revised, in which some threads can be carried through to their conclusion and others finally abandoned.

Although destitution represents an operation that deprives contemporary power of every foundation—juridical, ethical, existential—it can never be accomplished through a single gesture, declaration, or event. Instead it represents an *atmosphere* in which these gestures, words, and moments can take place, an air that we breathe. Walking through it, we can perceive the intensities that carry us beyond a certain threshold of ethics and politics. The revolution—like justice or love—is not an institution, nor is it a particular form of morality, nor is it a virtuous historical adventure. Rather, it is a "state of the world." It can be defeated, but *there is no unhappy revolution*. However, there are certainly many unhappy revolutionaries.

To interrupt the revolutionary tradition means that, in order to access it and make it one's own experience, one has to interrupt everything that doesn't deliver to us the praxis of impossibility, but instead traps us in a paralyzing device. We know—all too well—what happens in this case, when tradition devolves into conformism: it sets itself up against that which is to come; and, it becomes the prison of its own "gatekeepers."

In one way or another, it is necessary to follow the Brechtian advice of Heiner Müller: bury the doctrine deep enough—so that not even the dogs can get to it—and exhume it only when an exit from the present opens up. Make space; clear out the attic, keeping only that which saves us. Dismantle the material and spiritual obstacles, one after another, we find within and before ourselves. It is only from the break between revolutionary tradition and the present requirements of its organization that is possible to create a revolutionary becoming. This is why pessimism about the present must be organized and not optimism for the future—it is a future capitalism has already organized—in order to set its broken roots in the past of the oppressed and in the catastrophe of the present, against the inconsistent totality of the nihilistic hope of the religion of progress. And even this is not enough: one has to transform the qualitative character of time itself, both that of the present and that of the past.

The twentieth century of the great revolutions cannot be ignored, deprecated, or thrown into the fires of Gehenna. It must be accepted in its incompleteness, in what it could have done but did not do, in what it did do and might not have done, to speak with those who understand something of that century. Relatedly, it is worth noting the insult has become a leitmotif for a certain postmodern left individual who, when addressing those who *still* talk about communism, exclaims: "It's like you've walked out of the twentieth century!" Nothing is more vulgar, since, in its ignorance, it is unaware that it too perpetuates a tradition that was very much alive for the entire twentieth century: that of the extremists of progress, the bureaucrats of the new, the *coryphaeus* of technology as commandment—that of the victors who continue to revel in their victory.[2] If there is anyone who is truly interested in wiping out the memory of *that* twentieth century, its storming heaven, then it is capitalism itself, with its whole series of *neo-* this and *post-* that, generated over the last thirty years of its poisonous winds. Those impoverished prefixes, as Mario Tronti observed some years ago, are there precisely to block us from thinking further. *For half a century now, capital has been searching for the algorithm that destroys*

revolutionary experience. And one has to admit, it is no longer at the beginning of this research.

To speak of the twentieth century means referring to texts bearing the signatures of Franz Kafka and of Autonomia in 1977, the Bauhaus and Tristan Tzara, the Shanghai People's Commune and the Weather Underground, Malcolm X and Carla Lonzi, the Republic of Councils and Red October, Buenaventura Durruti and Radio Alice, Alexandra Kollontai and the Vietcong, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Stanley Kubrick, Jimi Hendrix and Paul Klee, to name but a few. Who could possibly feel it "necessary" to throw all of this into the dustbin of "they've no longer got anything to offer us" [i.e., history]?

In order to escape from conformism and build a different historical dialectic, we need to take history itself, and then an epoch in particular—the twentieth century in this instance—i.e. a life, and break it apart with careful attention to every supposed continuity, to suspend every reflection on the historicist accumulation of the facts. Today's revolutionary possibility exists in each of these fragments. Walter Benjamin: "The historical materialist blasts the epoch out of its reified 'historical continuity,' and thereby the life out of the epoch, and the work out of the lifework. Yet this construct results in the simultaneous preservation and sublation of the lifework in the work, of the epoch in the lifework, and of the course of history in the epoch."[3] Surely here we find one of the meanings of destitution, the removal of all of that provides an obstacle to the pure exposition of potential. Furthermore, this gesture of "extraction" leads one to embrace the unique experience of a given form of work, life, and epoch once it has been torn away from the *continuum* and appreciated in its *idiosyncrasy and originality*, thus allowing it to live as an intensity within the present; an intensity that explodes the empty, continuous line of history. Intensity derives from the perception of the "the woof of a past fed into the warp of the present." But, Benjamin continues, that object of the past has no analogy with current times because it cannot exist as an objective fact before the materialist's operation. Instead, it "constitutes itself in the precise dialectical problem which actuality is obliged to

resolve."[4] Yet again, destruction and creation are present within the same gesture.

In his most recent book, Mario Tronti returns to the question of the revolutionary tradition and the relation that one can establish with it each time around. In a way, his definition completes and summarizes the exploration already undertaken by Benjamin: "Tradition is not the past itself, but the remnants of the past that remain in our hands and cannot be reduced to the present."[5] It is neither the past, present, nor future: tradition is an "absurd" time, to paraphrase Furio Jesi. And, in relation to Tronti and tradition, perhaps the moment has arrived to admit to ourselves that what remains in our hands from his *Workers and Capital* lies not within the passionate exhortations of *operaismo's* teachings from the 1960s, but within its fragmentation, as suggested by another, more recent series of writings he began in 1992 with the publication of *With the Future Behind Us*, followed by *Politics at Sunset*, and concluding with the recent *On the Free Spirit*.[6] In its own way, what lies in these essays is an exercise—a practice—of the definition of tradition transcribed above.

For this reason, the work of Tronti that speaks to us *here and* now, and which makes his book from more than fifty years ago still legible, tearing it away from continuity and conformism, is precisely this collection of fragments that attempt not only to understand the conjuncture in which we find ourselves and to learn from past defeats and errors but—after the failed uprising of the 1960s and 1970s, and thirty years of counterrevolution—to try and rethink what communist freedom might mean today. One can certainly disagree, as we do ourselves, with his tactic of "double truth" and a consequent "double existence," with his outward consent to the lie —but if one reads them in good faith, it is difficult not to perceive the truth of a life contained in that thought *beyond* the present.[7] And truth, when it is revolutionary, sets people free. To speak with Kafka again: even lies help the truth. Communism is omnipotent because it is true. End of excursus.

Thinking about tradition and experience in these terms brings us back to where we began, i.e., to the fact that destituent potential is above all a potential that materially affects the perception of time,

destituting the role of contemporary capitalist experience, where historical continuity is tightly bound to a future suffocated by the conjuncture of an eternal present.

For this reason, in order to try and understand what destitution might mean, and thus what a revolutionary praxis might mean, we need to first grasp how it distances itself from dominant and (it goes without saying) constituent praxis. In order to be destituent, the action of a "real politics" must free itself once more from any progressivist distractions and the consequent idea that salvation lies only within the unceasing march towards the future. Destitution, on the other hand, takes off from a maxim that overturns the common sense of the petit bourgeois: it is never what is produced in the future that defines the worth of a given action. This is perhaps the dividing line between desitutent and constituent power: the latter is conceived in terms of the future, even in its more "extremist" offshoots. Antonio Negri, for example, writes that "in the concept of constituent power there is thus implicit the idea that the past no longer explains the present and that only the future will be able to do so."[8] In this framework, time remains prisoner to a tautology of the future that explains what is to come: itself. On the contrary, time can be subverted when one says, for example, that it is what is occurring *now* that renders a particular past possible; it becomes possible *once more*. This is why it always seems like a past revolution lives with any given new one, as if there were a kind of intratemporal communication between one and the other. The revolution *today* does not only allow one to understand the revolution of *yesterday* but, through freeing this from history's force field, allows one to experience it as an ongoing task, to bring it to its true, transitory conclusion. It is only by making the particular historical object that is revolution one's own—along with its *inextinguishable execution*, the praxis of its impossibility—that it can bear fruit. At the same time, the horrors of yesterday, so deeply impressed upon the memory of the defeated, can in this way be made definitively null and void, and thus forgotten. In order to do so, one must have the courage to dig up the dead and allow them—together with the living—to become protagonists of this forgetting.

This, too, is the task of the angel of history: “I am the knife with which the dead open their coffin.”[9]

Walter Benjamin scandalously maintained that while “providing fruit” for posterity is a prerogative of collective action (the good kind, at least, *true* action, which thus becomes a kind of nonaction), its value lies within itself, a potentiality that cannot be separated into an exterior dimension. This means we cannot claim the goodness of an action is decided by its future results, by the coming of Paradise, results that are separable from the action itself in both a temporal and a moral sense, the cursed technology of ends that justify the means, such as a violent act meant to educate the masses. Instead, the action’s worth must be contained within itself, in its immediate explication, its being good or just. If the ethicopolitical message of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” is to live every moment as if it were the moment in which the Messiah will arrive, this is because in that moment each action, each epoch, each thought, and each life can be judged individually. That judgement puts an end to the continuity of history in which all of these fragments are located by the victors. To give the future the power of judgment means to postpone justice *ad infinitum* while nevertheless legitimizing its contemporary ministers, consigning works, epochs, thoughts, and life to an ethical relativism soaked in nihilism. For just action in a decisive moment, it is not always possible to provide a guarantee of legitimacy, but nevertheless one must assume a historical responsibility. Anyone who measures the validity of an action by what follows merely wants to bring it back to today, so as to continually re-subjectivize it from the outside, establishing their own political power, and substituting themselves “legitimately” for those who came before. Conversely, those who pose themselves in a destitutent dimension, by not entrusting anything to a future yet to come, avoid interpreting their gestures as if they were something that could draw a division between subject and object, cause and effect, before and after, active and passive, or constituent and constituted. This blocks any definition of the action

by an external dimension. This is, above all, because it becomes impossible to derive that acting/not-acting from an alleged subject that will apparently realize itself in the future, and separate it from the immediate modification of the world and ourselves. Destituent praxis resolves subject and object, construction and destruction within itself. it resists the separation between cause and effect and lives within its immediate capacity for transformation. Breaking from hostile exteriority means reprising the stoic canon by which it is possible to affirm our "not being caused by anything that is independent of ourselves"—in other words, our autonomy.[10] Nothing of *us* is to be left to the government; everything is needed to build "our party."

One of the great blind spots of revolutionaries has always been contained in the assumption that the revolutionary organization might be the moment of mediation between theory and praxis. These are considered as separate functions, with a void between them that needs to be filled, making "others" dependent on the organization's activities and the organization itself dependent on criteria (e.g., of efficiency) that are entirely external to life as such. But, given that there is no such thing as a void, either in nature or in politics, it is precisely this (only apparently empty) space of mediation that will be immediately and externally occupied by the "new"—a new domination, a new governmentality. In this sense, destituent power is emancipated from the classical concept of political action understood as organization and rule external to everyday life. It becomes possible to sabotage the device of reification that the West employs in its relation to the use of things and bodies. This becomes—in its exteriorization—work, while the use of politics becomes government.

With the immediacy of a simple gesture, Jesus healed the flesh of those he met and who believed in Him. He did not tell them: "You are healed, yes—but in the future." The Gospels clearly demonstrate how the Messiah's acts included the transformation both of Jesus and of the men and women He met. Everyone increased their

individual potential, which, at the same time, always became an increasingly communal potential, without a subject. The revolutionary experience is no different, in the sense that it is nothing if it does not allow a change in both the historical situation and in the non-subject of experience—which, through experiencing a truth, and through *encountering it*, forces open the door of the present and enters into a revolutionary becoming. In the end, perhaps, only a destituent revolution will restore a "subject" to the world, but it will be a subject that will no longer aid any sovereignty at all.

The line of inquiry Giorgio Agamben recently "abandoned" with the final volume of his *Homo Sacer* series concentrates on "use" as a category that, in politics, could replace those of activity and production.[11] In this sense, "use" allows one to imagine a process by which the subject does not preexist, but comes into contact with the experience of carrying out a particular gesture, work, or life. It is in this way that we need to grasp that the subject of insurrection does not exist before the process occurs. There are no revolutionary peoples before the revolution is revealed in the world. As Eric Hazan has rightly observed: "it is through shared activity that a true politics emerges, and not vice versa."[12] Or, to return to Rosa Luxemburg: "the organization does not supply the troops for the struggle, but the struggle, to an ever-growing degree, supplies recruits for the organization."[13]

Just as insurrectionism only exists as an ideology when there is no insurrection, populism only exists when "the people" are missing. Organized populism—which today has a whole array of avatars in Europe, on both the left and the right, only emerged when that "people" who began to create themselves during uprisings was once again annihilated, only once the insurrections had been repressed or burned themselves out through their own limits. Post-insurrectionism, on the other hand, seems to reside in texts full of the resentment that derives from the awareness of not having been able to reach the peaks of the epoch—or better still, its *depths*—so it takes refuge in a clownish nihilism that merely adorns that of the mass bourgeoisie.

In the case of the "use" of politics in uprisings, we never find an exteriority of the subject in relation to the object, because the first desubjectifies itself as soon as it overcomes the threshold between normal temporality and the time of revolt: "The instant of revolt determines one's sudden self-realization and self-objectification as part of a collectivity. The battle between good and evil, between survival and death, between success and failure, in which everyone is individually involved each and every day, is identified with the battle of the whole collectivity."[14] "Destitute" is thus a verb that indicates an intensity of the political, and which demonstrates above all a polemical neutralization of the classic separation between a particular subject of a particular politics and its object. Given that in the Western tradition the subject—preexistent, separate, and constituent—maintains a key position, at least at the level of dominant discourse, it is clear that the destituent process cannot carry itself out if it does not first dethrone this superstition.

In our own days, it seems as if—following the decaying figures we listed before—it might be "territory" that has taken the place of the subject within current conflicts. Without having to list them again, whoever has some knowledge of the more meaningful struggles of recent years will not have seen the emergence of a classical subject at the center of the moments of contention or as the motor of conflict, but rather *places*—existential territories as much as geographical ones—that come into conflict with capitalist governance. This much-praised maneuver takes hold and geographical territory—the banlieue, the mountain, the square, the neighborhood—becomes *the* subject, i.e., it appears as a "central subject." On second glance, however—as we have already said—one realizes that these territories arise from within struggle and do not preexist it. Better still, whatever preexisted has little relevance for that which emerges from the unraveling of the conflict. Furthermore, territories are inhabited, but there is no *a priori* commonality between the creatures that inhabit them, other than the act of fighting *within, across, and with the territories themselves*. Territories are thus neither the subject nor the object of struggle, but rather its means and medium, and it is for this reason that one ends up inhabiting them. Those same creatures who populate territories

under secession, in truth, have formed themselves within the conflict itself, newly generated through the encounter with the territory and the other beings and objects that inhabit it. At the end of the day, it has always been so.

According to individual inclinations and preferences, some will say the subjects of struggle are these human creatures, while others will say it is the territory itself that occupies the otherwise empty space that contains the subject, or by which it is contained. However, perhaps we ought to look at matters in a different way: there is neither subject nor object but instead a process of the subjectification of territories that is simultaneously accompanied by a territorialization of the beings that inhabit them, and that in any case both territory and creatures must desubjectivize and deterritorialize in order to access this new dimension of life and struggle. Neither is the subject of the other, nor is anyone the other's object; they both flow into a revolutionary becoming to the extent that they destitute those categories, while attempting to lay claim to an indivisible, *common existence*. It is never individuals who inhabit a territory, but potentials; it is not a population that can inhabit a place, but forms of life; it is not a subject who drives forward the struggle, but a nameless force. In conclusion, one never lives in a home, territory, or plot of earth as such, but within a world that changes within that home, territory or plot of earth. "The horizons of dwelling contain all revolts."[15]

We can say the use of destituent potential is without subject: it is anonymous and impersonal. This is not because it avoids signing communiques of demands or belongs to small, pseudo-conspiratorial groupings, but because it destitutes its subject in the process of becoming real. *Only that subjectivity that deposes itself while destituting operations of power is truly subversive*. The justice of the revolutionary act does not pass through the self-recognition of the subject, but rather through ignoring itself. The paradox of revolutionary subjectivization is that it can only happen by passing through an inevitable moment of desubjectivization—or, to be more explicit,

through the destitution of the subject. Indeed, if the true subject is subjected to and by power, if the creature is deprived of content, if the revolutionary territory becomes as such only upon exiting from dominant geography, then that which forms within the destituent process is no longer a subject or even a territory, but that which (by common use) we now call "forms of life" and "the world."

The revolutionary tradition today lives through its own deposition, thus consigning itself to a different use. To make revolution means to forget the history of the "fact" of the past, doubtless the realm of the victors, while remembering the Unfinished—which is, on the other hand, the realm of the defeated.

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1. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 55 [fragment 34]. [Translator's note.]

2. From the ancient Greek *koryphaios* [κορυφαῖος]: the leader of a chorus, such as in the theater. [Translator's note.]

3. Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" [1937], in *Selected Writings, Volume 3:1935-1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 2002), 262.

4. Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs," 269.

5. Mario Tronti, *Dello spirito libero: Frammenti di vita e di pensiero* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2015), 23.

6. Mario Tronti, *Con le spalle al futuro* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1992); Mario Tronti, *La politica al tramonto* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998); Tronti, *Dello spirito libero*.

7. Here, Tarì is doubtlessly referring to Tronti's participation in the Senate of the Italian Republic (since 1992), and membership in the Italian Democratic Party [Partito Democratico (PD)] since 2007. [Translator's note.]

8. Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 10.

9. Heiner Müller, "Ich bin der Engel der Verzweiflung," in *Werke, Band 1: Die Gedichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 212.

10. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 66.

11. Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016). [Translator's note.]

12. Eric Hazan, *La dynamique de la révolte* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2015), 28.

13. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike" [1906], in *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Helen Scott (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), 158.

14. Furio Jesi, *Spartakus: The Symbology of Revolt*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2014), 53.

15. Emmanuel Levinas, “Le vouloir” [1955], in *Oeuvres complètes, Tome 2*, ed. Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalier (Paris: Grasset, 2011), 242.

Chapter 11

Interruption III: Destitute Everything, Including the Revolution

Something entirely different is necessary, or: something entirely different from revolution, so that the forming of people might have something that remains, something that remains entirely and goes beyond.
—Gustav Landauer, *The Revolution*[1]

When we write of "power," we do not refer to any eternal substance or idea, but to that which is before, around, and within us, i.e., the power of capital. This is what we know, this is what we live, this is why we fight. There can be little doubt, however, that the issue of power in a general sense, as a verticality of command, is a question that has an inevitable impact on the revolutionary camp.

If it is difficult for someone to imagine what it might mean to destitute oneself as a revolutionary subject, they should merely think of what happened to the figure of Subcomandante Marcos. Reflecting not so much on the famous faceless silhouette that everyone has known over the years but on his final dissolution as a character, a leader, and global icon for uprisings against neoliberalism which—for a moment—the Zapatista insurrection embodied as if it were a "puppet" to deceive the means of communication. In his farewell communique, he wrote: "Those who love and hate the *SupMarcos* now know that they have loved and hated a hologram. Their love and hatred has been, useless, sterile, empty." As if to say: those who believed that there was an incarnation of the global revolutionary subject, when there was merely its 'use,' the use of an empty signifier.

Once the moment had arrived, Marcos did not wait to be hated and abandoned by the people, as keeps happening to the leaders of the left. Instead, in a unique gesture, he abandoned himself to a self-

destituting process and was reabsorbed into the body of the Zapatista community, composed not only of those present today but all the dead comrades, thus finally explicating what he had said from the moment of his origin: “We are all Marcos.” Everyone, alive and dead.

The destituent gesture always moves in an inverse direction to the constituent one: “Decisive as the masses are for the revolutionary leader, therefore, his great achievement lies not in drawing the masses after him, but in constantly incorporating himself into the masses, in order to be, for them, always one among hundreds of thousands.”[2]

In the case of constituent activity, that which is present or inscribed in the past counts for nothing. It is always the future, which does not exist at all, that decides temporality. Indeed, Benjamin accused social democracy of having brought about the defeat of the workers’ movement precisely through its adherence to this apocalyptic progressivism: a temporality in which the infinite is opposed to eternity, aside from the potential of here and now, to put the matter in eschatological terms. The Messianic is in truth a *third time*, different from the Apocalyptic and from the Katechontic, both of which it *makes use* of.

In his preparatory notes to the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin notes how thinking of the ideal as an “infinite task” is a neo-Kantian idea, as it represents the same virtue that for Kant is progressive and substantially impossible to reach. He connects it to the idea of social democracy, which he calls the “scholasticism of the social-democratic party,” which still today maintains its own educational institutions. In the progressivist and social-democratic hypothesis, today’s activity does not respond to the present, and even less to the past, but instead to a mythic posterity. This postponement of efficacy into an infinite future clearly requires that we do not interrupt the continuity of power today. This is why democracy, which is formlessness *par excellence*, represents power’s perfect material conductor. This is how the catastrophic idea of infinite debt is maintained, with its concatenation of duties that continue to demonstrate the infernal capacity of government. The left—which keeps on creating ever

more devilish ways to save capital and the state, as if it exists only to negotiate without end the *quantum* of our daily catastrophe, embodying a kind of apocalyptic trade unionism—is thus blocked from confronting the deposition of this world, as communism. It is not only the *infinity* of progress that ought be rejected, but also the *task* as a measure of a revolutionary form of life, because every task is always an external finality: it comes from outside and never from within. This is why we have to learn once and for all to think about social democracy not only as a doctrine and practice of reformist government but also as a philosophy of history, a morality, and a metaphysics: all are edifices to be torn down, along with their horrific economic calculations.

Italian autonomist feminists of the 1970s understood very well the extent to which the future can be a fearsome apparatus of capture. Carla Lonzi lucidly expressed what a destituent attitude on the part of its adherents might be: "The feminist movement is itself the means and the end of any basic transformation of humankind. It needs no future, it makes no distinctions—bourgeoisie, proletariat, race, age, culture, clan or tribe. It comes neither from above nor from below, from the elite or from the base, it needs neither leadership nor organization, neither diffusion nor propaganda. An entirely new word is being put forth by an entirely new subject. It only has to be uttered to be heard. Acting becomes simple and elementary. There are no goals, there is simply the present of our here and now. We are the world's dark past, we are giving shape to the present."[3] The revolutionary gesture aims at destituting the power contained in political action. If power consists in the capacity to divide, separate, and set asunder that which was united—or to unite that which is not, posing two dimensions in a continuity of cause and effect without end, *infinitely* referring the effectiveness of its juridical pretext back to a spatial and temporal exterior—then destitution opens up the immediate possibility of a recomposition in justice (vindicating the oppressed of the past) and seceding from that which divides, all the while pulsating at the center of the space it has liberated through its gesture. Revolutionary power certainly exists, but it is a power that destitutes itself while taking action against an enemy power that is destined, at the same time, to de-

densify itself among the revolutionary masses. “All power to the Soviets,” “All power to the people,” or “All power to the communes” simply means the destitution of the revolution as an institution of power.

Constituent power, on the other hand, will always find it necessary to be represented, to have an external prosthesis in order to become concrete, the double motif of “government and leader,” in which the current hyper-personification of the latter is merely an index of the hyper-abstraction of the former. In reality, this is the only phenomenology we are allowed to truly know. Power resides in exteriority: there is no heart to attack. There does not and cannot exist a virtuous dynamic between autonomous movements and government (as some have recently maintained), precisely because revolutionary autonomy and government, more than simply opposing each other, posit themselves on two entirely different, heterogeneous planes. The exteriority of government to common life cannot meet with the intimacy of autonomous forms of life except in a destructive sense. It is a classic conflict between forms, but while by now, the form of government has claimed informality as its own mode of activity, destituent forms of life can exist only through their attempt to persevere within the autonomous indissolubility of form and life.

Destituent politics, it is worth emphasizing, is based on forms and not on that informality in which some would have us believe masses (or movements, if you prefer) base their activity. In reality, informality is a technique of government, practiced by small groups of various backgrounds and ideological disciplines, including but not limited to the police. Informality and formlessness have become symbolic of all operations of democratic government, which has slowly dissolved all forms of modernity in order to allow its flows to circulate with increasing freedom. The “governance of finance” that has been much discussed in recent years is nothing other than the near-perfect government of a formlessness that can take on—but not be—any form at all. It fluctuates equally through software, an all-night bar, a platoon of police, a railway line, an economic reform, and a large warehouse. Inasmuch as it now has form, our current democracy is a police government, as Benjamin had already

observed, noting: “[Police] power is formless, like its nowhere-tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states.”[4]

In effect, power does not have its own form; it exercises itself through specific points. Power flows, it is attached to nothing at all. It is the freedom of the moderns. It is also in this sense that both Benjamin and Pasolini spoke of the anarchy of the bourgeois order or the anarchy of power. In order to function, government *needs* an absolute freedom from forms and their bonds. The most interesting aspect for us is that power is exercised in its turn upon a material that still has no form. It does not aim directly at objects or individuals, but at their possibilities, their potentialities. Foucault said that the typical action of power is in fact that of inciting, of provoking. For example, it is not power itself that teaches, cares for people, or administers justice; instead, it acts through the potential to teach, care for, and judge. And, it is only after this activity we find individuals who have the power to teach, care, and judge. Thus, it is within that middle time—formed between power and potential—that destitution poses its own revolutionary praxis.

The modern state was a form for representing power that produced further forms and institutions, which in turn established and stabilized knowledge and specific functions of control aimed toward a certain end. Government, on the other hand, no longer identifies itself with the state, nor with any particular institution. At most, it would say that it has preceded and followed them. Today, significantly, it is the management of the informal that comes to be called *governance* and *flexibility*, which become “management of the crisis” on the one hand (the political version) and “precarization” on the other (the economic version). Government’s power continues to exercise itself upon formless material, on potentiality, but no longer aims at recoding this into particular identities or subjects, Instead, it tries to maintain informality and flexibility. This is why the truest form of democracy lies in the absence of its own form. It is from here that the need to provide adjectives derives: representative democracy, direct democracy, council democracy, popular, socialist, authoritarian, etc.

Consequently, the decline of the modern state and its institutions ought to be read as government's definitive expulsion of form, inasmuch as the latter represents an obstacle to the free flow of value—and by that, we mean economic-existential values. To claim that today's power resides in infrastructure—considering the hegemony of the circulation of production—does not mean that power has produced new forms, but on the contrary, that it has liberated itself from form entirely.

The only remaining politics of form—or, rather, of the conflict between forms—is communism. And if we insist on the importance of forms of life, it is simply because only these have the ability to oppose the informal stabilization of government functions. As an old friend once said: form is a judgment that life makes of the world.

The problematization of the political concept of "social movements" in recent years needs to be read within this dialectic between form and formlessness, in order to retain its true sense. A social movement is typically unformed material over which power (whatever power it might be) acts in order to direct it, change it, and seize its potential. Victory always resides in the crossing of that threshold that leads movements to transform themselves into a revolutionary form.

It is apparently a paradox that only in the twentieth century, that century of totalitarianism and dictators, was it possible to find a virtuous relation between movements and the people, between the party and the state. The very fact that this was possible does not, of course, apply any veneer of legitimacy. On the contrary, we need to continue to ask ourselves—even today—what a movement is or might be, but also, about the significant ambiguities that enter into play every time there is someone in government who we declare (or think) to be a representation or expression of social movements. The leadership of Podemos in Spain, and of other European populist parties, might continue to claim that they are not interested in the old dichotomy between left and right (which signals another and extremely deeply rooted dissolution of form). Nevertheless, in their

actions, they clearly express the vices of both. Here, populism is nothing other than a continuous, depoliticizing action imposed upon a formless mass that never becomes "the people," much less a revolutionary class. This might even be a good definition of contemporary populism *in general*.

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1. Gustav Landauer, *Die Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten & Loening, [1907] 1923), 90–91. [The standard English translation unfortunately omits this line. Translator's note.]

2. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" [1935], in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 2008), 50.

3. Carla Lonzi, "Let's Spit On Hegel" [1970], in *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 59.

4. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" [1921], in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1996), 243.

Chapter 12

Interruption IV: The Heroic Cessation

An Epic for the Revolution

We can be us.
—David Bowie, "Heroes"

To act well, Benjamin asked, perhaps we need to be able to respond to the question of how "to enter anew into the interior of a mode of behavior"?[1] How can we imagine a political act that can be shared, rendered communal, citable, habitual, porous, and usable, without ever referring to something external?

Faced with this need, one can easily see how the concept of political action dominant in the West has nearly always been *constituent*, even when it supported a revolutionary movement. Rethinking the concept of revolution requires rethinking that of political action and vice versa. It is true that we find destituent tendencies throughout all revolutionary passions. In Lenin and Bakunin, in Saint Paul and Ulrike Meinhof, in Rimbaud and Mao Tse Tung it is easy enough to make out the secret shadow of destituent power. The remaining problem is to understand not only where and why destituent power was blocked, but also how it functions.

Following his reflections on Brecht's theater, Benjamin tried to understand how it was possible to establish destituent potential within political activity, transforming such activity into a *gestus* through a concept that immediately refers back to a praxis that we have already cited many times above, i.e., *interruption*. In truth, Brechtian theater allowed Benjamin to clarify politically something he had already begun to meditate on, discussing his style of thinking and writing since his work on *Origin of the German Trauerspiel:* "Renunciation of the unbroken course of intention is its immediately

distinguishing feature. In its persevering, thinking constantly begins anew … what is specific to writing is that with every sentence it stops and starts anew…. Only where it obliges the reader to pause at stations of reflection is it sure of itself. The greater its object, the more interrupted this reflection…. The concept of philosophic style is free of paradox. It has its postulates—namely, the art of interruption, in contrast to the chain of deduction."[2] This is the theoretical background that leads him to focus his attention on the interruption of politics *par excellence*, the state of exception, as well as a form of interruption on an even grander scale—the cosmological—through the concept of the *catastrophe*.[3]

The Brechtian epic is not active but narrative. It favors a literary approach over one focused on action, decisions rather than emotions, neutralizing the merely suggestive and bringing consciousness to the surface, opting for a curve with peaks and troughs rather than simple linearity, breaking up continuity in order to emphasize the separation of various elements. It does not just illustrate, it picks a side; its heroes are not spotless but rather corrupted both inside and out; the interruptions help the spectators free themselves from conventional representations of the world through an estrangement of the self from the scene before them.

The question of revolutionary becoming—of contributing to the emergence in the present moment of possibilities of redemption—is always dealt with by Benjamin as the generation of a discontinuity, a suspension, right up to *another* state of exception from which another mode of viewing a situation can arise, another mode of detecting a rhythm and communicating, another mode of living. This new mode can only appear as the result of a constellation that connects the present to a past that, in turn, has been interrupted in its process of transmission. Benjamin claims that every moment contains within it the possibility to decide, to bring justice to bear upon a specific episode of the past that leaps out from historical continuity, and never upon the future, which can only be grasped in the form of *that which is to come* after that which already exists, i.e., from a current potential. Possibility flashes up at the moment one makes a decision in and about the present, beginning with its impossibilities, interrupting the present and awakening within a

space-time that is no longer external to us. This signals our ability to be free. It's like a revolutionary inversion of Stoicism in which, as Pierre Hadot writes, "becoming conscious of the present means becoming conscious of our own freedom."[4]

The *present* has two aspects here. One is the catastrophe of history, while the other indicates a kind of anticipation—it stands before something—which means that this thing is here but also connected to a time that is coming to meet us. That which is *coming* —"philosophy," "community," "insurrection," or even the "world" that is yet to arrive—can only be understood through a moment that makes real what was always already arriving, and, when it finally becomes present, explodes the catastrophe of the present, casting shrapnel in every direction. The doctrine of the *coming* was already there in the medieval Kabbalah. Indeed, restoring to language its messianic quality, Scholem recounts how one of the first Provençal Kabbalists, Rabbi Isaac the Blind, interpreted the Hebrew word *'oth* [letter, sign, signal], along with the plural *'ototh* [divine sign, miracles] and the form *'othiyoth* [alphabetical and graphic signs] as all deriving from the verb *atha* [to come], in the sense that letters make up the alphabet and can potentially provide things, beings, and worlds with a form.[5] Signs refer back to hidden causes from which they derive, and thus the plural of 'othiyoth was translated as "that which is to come." Paralleling interruption—or rather, within it—we find a form of *repetition and anticipation* in the language that we experience, which allows "the past to be redeemed," bringing that which is to come to its fruition. "Entering anew into the interior of a mode of behavior," means, above all, a certain *citation* of a gesture, a work, a life, an epoch. For revolutionaries, citing that which has been and responding to the call of that which is to come acquire the same intensity. "Citation" here means bringing to light a form from the past, bringing justice to bear upon that particular past *now*, at the very moment the conditions that had imprisoned it within history—or perhaps, within myth—are destroyed. In salvaging a fragment from the past, one destitutes the present and opens the gateway to what is to come. The repetition contained within citation is never repeated *in the same way*, clearly, but neither is there a simple *difference;* it is, rather, a second attempt that

nurtures an incomplete possibility within what has already occurred: it is the nonoccurrence within that which has occurred. And what happened, for us, for our tradition, is defeat. Communism is the highest form of tragedy that humanity has ever lived, is living, and will ever live. This occurs with increasing intensity, following every revolutionary rupture; it is only by crossing that threshold that humanity can have access to the entirety of existential possibility. In the past of the oppressed, in that time of defeat, there is still an unfinished residue that contains the potential for victory. Perhaps repetition can be better understood through the words of another old friend from the theater: "fail again, fail better." *Fail right up until victory*—a victory that, just as with the Messiah in those rabbinic stories that Bloch and Benjamin loved to recount—perhaps will only come the day after, when there will no longer be any need of Him. A subject without a victory is a victory without a subject.

While annotating Brecht's *Untergang des Egoisten Johann Fatzer [Downfall of the Egotist Johann Fatzer*], Benjamin purposefully points out that revolutionary victory, in order to be truly a victory, must immediately neutralize the device of victor/defeated, so that the victor also bears the experience of defeat. It must destitute both the glory of the victor and compassion for the defeated: only in this way can one take true ownership of a situation of extreme conflict and simultaneously destitute it as a subject of the revolution: "Honor without glory. Greatness without splendor. Dignity without mercy."[6]

The true "beginning" lies not in the *launch*—possibly heroic but nevertheless glorious and constituent—but rather in the weak heroism of *cessation:* "the 'start' is dialectically made new. It does not manifest itself in a fresh beginning but in a cessation. The action? The man must leave his post."[7] Here, "leave" means "cessation." This means, in Latin, "to remain inoperative," which is simply another way of saying to "strike." For example, in the sense of abandoning one's place within the schema of government, letting the social bond that keeps us tied to the present unravel, putting an end to work, putting an end to the separation not only between subject and object but also between theory and praxis. To stop the victory from being associated with a victorious subject means it is the revolutionary process—not revolutionaries—that wins time after

time, place after place, fragment after fragment. It is precisely in order to prevent this process from ending that, immediately after any victory or defeat, every revolutionary leader must destitute themselves, abandon their position, cede their place.

It is in this process that we find our potential, and from within which we can experience the messianic. As far as the revolution is concerned, it remains the only thing that can be definitively finished from "outside"—but this "outside" is the Messiah, over whom we have no power at all. Those in the party who have attempted to identify this "outside" and its will to power have only accelerated the end of the revolutionary process. As Müller tells us, "Little by little Marxism was defeated by the state and the party: the revolutionary discourse ended up suffocated by that of the state. It was now the Marxists who were dangerous."[8]

In a well-known passage of *Crowds and Power*, Elias Canetti celebrates the virtue of the mass cessation of production. The strike is seen as an expression of a *negative crowd*, in other words, "a large number of people together refuse to continue to do what, till then, they had done singly…. Stopping work makes the workers equal."[9] As Franz Rosenzweig wrote in his discussion of the Hebrew Sabbath [Shabbat], in the paradigm of redemption: "Rest is intended to signify redemption and not a period of collecting oneself for more work. Work is an ever new beginning."[10] The ultimate meaning of destituent insurrection should not be seen, therefore, as "the great beginning" but as a suspension of the catastrophe, a strike at history. This is why insurrection potentially opens up a inoperability rather than the work of government; it interrupts dominion without necessarily proposing another. In the end, the strike, the insurrection, the revolutionary process represent a concatenation of gestures that can only be brought to a conclusion by a we, i.e., by a *historical party* that saves singularity while deposing identity, not only that of the individual but also that of the mass or the class. The idea that equality can be confirmed economically or socially was an illusion of the modern subject: we become equal above all through

the use that we make of our lives during the war we wage with this world.

To avoid confusion—given the bad faith certain critics approach the destituent hypothesis with—we will specify that Benjamin does *not* say that one needs to stop doing anything. On the contrary: he means, "ceasing to do an outward thing."[11] To "remain inoperative" is thus directed essentially towards the deposition of every exteriority that posits itself as commanding over life, beginning, obviously, with the organization of labor. All the misery and setbacks of modern politics, including revolutionary defeat, derive from this continual process of exteriorization (one need only reflect on the often inglorious events of the "external vanguards").[12] Doing something externally, by definition, simply means putting into production something that is necessarily exterior. To stop doing something externally simply means finishing it—not with production as such but with the metaphysics of production. If production is put in the place of command and transformed into the "principle of the epoch," then it will always end dominating everything else from the outside. Perhaps it is possible to produce a subject in the same way one produces a car, but one certainly cannot do the same with a revolution. Or, perhaps one can, and that revolution will necessarily be constituent, posing anew the same problem of violence and law, and thus of the state and the police. Marx himself defined freedom as that state of the world characterized by the absence of an exterior objective, and perceives it as *outside* of production: "The realm of freedom really begins only where labor is determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature *beyond the sphere of material production proper*."[13] The exercise of thought is never in relation to that sphere either, precisely because true thought cannot come from an outside, nor can it be reduced to the work that results from it. As Mario Tronti says: "The point is this: thought, in both its content and form, cannot come from outside. Either it arises from within, or not at all."[14]

Here we must stress again that we are not proposing that the category of production should magically disappear, but that we depose it from the metaphysical primacy it has enjoyed for far too

long in Western history, especially following the rise of capitalism. A festive celebration, for example, still requires activity, but it is not productive, meaning it is not generated from an outside and does not aim at acquiring or producing something external to it. The party is the paradigm of the interruption of ordinary time, but it has no end other than that which is declared, an "end unto itself." This is why there are no real parties today, because every form of festivity contributes to an entirely extrinsic end.

Neither does this mean opposing interiority to an exteriority. Instead, we must imagine a gesture that deposes both dimensions; only in this sense can it be *fulfilled*. The fulfillment of a destituent gesture can only be reached in relation to the impossibility of separating the external from the internal, but at the same time, it must generate a becoming, its own threshold. Indeed, the ancient mysteries were described as a "fulfillment," and even Christian baptism, the moment of initiation into truth, the exit from the shadows, and the entrance into "true life," bears the same name. Fulfillment is an end that is also a beginning, even if no one can say exactly at what point one thing ends and another begins. For us, it means the beginning of a communist form of life and the end of universal separation.

What, then, is an example of a finished action? We can turn to the example of the shared meal that characterizes festivals and the Sabbath: "Here each is the equal of every other; each lives for himself and yet is joined with all the others."[15] The shared meal, by repeating the gesture that allows our bodies to regenerate—here, collectively—shows that one aspect of redemption lies in the communism of renewing bodies and spirits. In turn, this is not precisely a beginning, but a fulfillment in which one finds another dimension of time and of life. The meaning of the word "companion" already contains this repeating Sabbath of redemption: breaking bread is perhaps the very first destituent gesture, one that has given its name to those who have continued for generations to recompose that "missing people" so important to Deleuze. The people are missing when there is no table around which they can share a meal, a story, a struggle, an emotion, or even life itself. They are missing when there is no shared experience, something we

witness every time we traverse the metropolitan desert that is now to be found everywhere. It is missing when we fail to put an end to the dominant present. If we can be so bold as to diagnose our current state, we would admit that it is more than coincidental that the most meaningful struggles over recent years—from the Spanish *acampadas* in Puerta del Sol, to the vast range of campsites organized against giant infrastructure projects, and further still to the organization of metropolitan neighborhoods—have all viewed the construction of shared kitchens and moments of coliving as inseparable from the experience of struggle. In this sense we certainly see a return to origins.

In order to interrupt the dialectic between the internal and the external that dominates the device of political activity, we now impose upon it another kind of dialectic, to be found within the destituent gesture. To arrive at this dialectic, one must first interrupt both the exterior action underway and the features that allow it to function. One needs to destroy its context and identity by destituting the action underway as well as its subject, making space for a gesture that (in contrast to political activity and its "outcomes") does not have a simple beginning and end, but a character that opens up a new kind of *situation*. Brecht's songs interrupted the dramatic action by creating a strange place in which each person can take a position, a "side," thus modifying the material and spiritual conditions of how one views a situation (and creating it anew). This is the same way in which we should understand those forms of interruption and estrangement that allow one to suspend, to deactivate, to make political action "inoperative," as Agamben would say. Why? Because in this manner, through interruption and deactivation, one creates a situation in which, above all else, everyone can take sides in front of a pure display of politics and arrive at a different composition of space and time, language and gesture. It is within this interruption that one decides who is a friend and who is an enemy, with the awareness that friendship, for us, constitutes the organized element of struggle. This form of

organization is never external, but moves through the experience of its own discontinuity: those encounters the organization alters and that allow the organization to grow in the future. It is a form of life that is simultaneously a mode of organization.

We need to know how to reply to the question, what it would mean to interrupt a demonstration, a march, a strike, an assembly? But even this is not enough; we need to understand what it would mean to interrupt any activity or relation at all: writing, a job, painting, a friendship, a love affair. *Taking a position a hundred times a day, living in the state of exception: this is what living in revolutionary time means*. This does not mean losing oneself in "activism" or being a slave to voluntarism. On the contrary, it means gaining the time and space in which one can truly *listen* to the angel's murmur and *contemplate* the world, in order to be able to make a *decision*. All of our frustrations and consequent nihilistic behaviors—in politics as much as in love, in struggle as well as in thought—derive each time from our not being able to identify and grasp this interruption, this taking a position. This failure depends, in turn, on our indolence, impatience, or cowardice, in addition to our poverty and very modern disbelief in the reality of worlds.

Classical political action and classical theater share the production of identification and forms of suggestion by which one can impede the possibility of taking a position, through an illusion of continuity that exists only onstage, whether political or theatrical. This illusion leads the audience or electorate to imagine they have their own opinion—which is, nevertheless, always the dominant one—even while they are under the suggestive effect of the Spectacle. Interruption, as it is practiced in both politics and art, is both a powerful instrument of counter-suggestion and of dissipating ideology. Only by knowing how to use our rationality against the magic of capital, and how we too can use magical forms to provoke confusion and dissolve the bonds that keep us connected to the enemy, will we be able to advance revolutionary becomings with greater determination.

If power, according to a celebrated Foucauldian definition, is an action upon an action, then the problem to be solved is how to remove oneself from this dialectic of action and replace it with the

epic dialectic *of gestus*.[16] Short-circuiting that dialectic which defines the relationship of power itself means interrupting it, negating the relation, and exiting from it. It means thinking of the destituent gesture as a wedge that inserts itself between action and potential. The multiplication of gestures corresponds to a decrease in action; a decrease in the productivity of law corresponds to an increase in use; an increase in potential means a decrease in power. Gesture *interrupts* while action *identifies* and poses a continuity that is both "homogeneous and empty," that is to say, formless. Gesture means correcting this negativity so that is appears as a form. Gesture blocks the flow that constitutes the context of action, and from within this interruption, form emerges. However, distinct from action, gesture does not interrupt only that which is external to itself, but also works down within itself. It is in this manner, at the meeting between the two—in the *middle*—that the impossible arises: the possibility of becoming. If action is always oriented towards an end (and in this sense it is always *economic*), then gesture destitutes action insofar as it dissolves both the subject and its economy. Unlike action, gesture does not need to conclude in an end, but instead remains a becoming. Gesture allows each and every subject to decide the correct and just way that something might end or begin. In this sense, the gesture that interrupts is always a desubjectification, whereas action presents a subject that is always acting and continuously present. Gesture views the crisis of the present positively, opening up the potential to become another while *remaining* oneself.

The method of interruption, as Benjamin knew well, brings to light a tangible break in terms of the modern revolutionary tradition, i.e., in terms of the primacy of action. Indeed, for Benjamin the most important political problem is to understand how to interrupt, block, and render something inoperative. For Benjamin, *action* and *fecundity* are in contradiction to each other; the former is characterized by detachment, the second by intimacy. If revolutionary becoming represents a question of intimacy and connection with the world, every government action is typically an arid detachment from it. In this sense, the destituent gesture is not only different from constituent action in terms of the doctrine of

ends and means, but begins from an entirely distinct *a priori* claim, which is another reason that its contents exist within a dimension of active *estrangement* from the Western political tradition.

Classical politics, whether revolutionary or pertaining to the nation-state, has always imagined political beings from the standpoint of their incessant action, their ability to become part of a chain of infinite productive effectiveness and thus ungovernable. The destituting gesture exists beyond this practical-discursive device, beyond the senseless division between theory and practice. Its first priority is that of life as ungovernable potential. From this angle, the historic concept of revolution seems inadequate to encompass what, from Benjamin onwards, has been defined as a destituent politics. To call ourselves revolutionaries who hold to this position only makes sense if one acquires some distance from that philosophical-historical-political inheritance and takes up a position at the peak of the present. And at these heights we find Guy Debord's dry claim: "Revolutionary theory is now the enemy of all revolutionary ideology, *and it knows it.*"[17]

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1. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 6*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 206 [fragment 180].

2. Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2019), 3–8.

3. Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*, 49–50.

4. Pierre Hadot, *La citadelle intérieure: Introduction aux Pensèes de Marc Aurele* (Paris: Fayard, 1992), 149.

5. Gershom Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah," trans. Simon Pleasance, *Diogenes* 80 (1972): 166.

6. See Detlef Holz [Walter Benjamin], *Deutsche Menschen, eine Folge von Briefen* (Lucern: Vita Nuova, 1936). The quoted material is the inscription of *Deutsche Menschen [German People*], a collection of letters (from 1783–1883) Benjamin published during the Nazi era under the pseudonym Detlef Holz. [Translator's note.]

7. Walter Benjamin, "From the Brecht Commentary," in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 29–30.

8. Heiner Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht: Leben in zwei Diktaturen* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1992), 123.

9. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1962), 55–56.

10. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, [1930] 1971), 314.

11. Benjamin, "From the Brecht Commentary," *Understanding Brecht*, 30. [Translator's note.]

12. "External vanguards" refers to groups of militants organizing workers but not by entering the factory itself. The author is referring to the history of the strategy used by Italian revolutionaries in the late 1960s to early 1970s. [Translator's note.]

13. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 3*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 958–959.

14. Mario Tronti, *Non si può accettare*, ed. Pasquale Serra (Rome: Ediesse, 2009), 14.

15. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 315.

16. "Epic dialectic" refers to Brecht's form of theater. For Tarì's use of "gesture" see Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 135–140. [Translator's note.]

17. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 65.

Chapter 13

The Destituent Insurrection

What happens next? At least no exploiter will suddenly pop up; and should something even worse happen, well now the tables have been cleared and you can see what might be wrong with free men and women, or what is not wrong with them yet.
—Ernst Bloch, *Traces*[1]

The first discussions of "destituent insurrection" in recent times were presented by militant researchers Colectivo Situaciones, in a book written in the wake of the Argentinian insurgency of Winter 2001, and concentrated in particular on two insurrectionary days, December 19 and 20, of that year.[2]

In their text, Colectivo Situaciones claims those two days in December represented a series of problems for those trying to read the insurgency in more-or-less traditional Marxist or anarchist terms. Even if they themselves remained strongly bound to those categories, faced with the facts of the Argentinian situation, they managed—with a visionary realism—to describe certain features that have today redefined the revolutionary question. Here, once more, we find that *subject* and *object* are not mere givens: "we intend to develop a style of thought constituted not by the preexistence of its object but by its interiority with respect to the phenomenon we are thinking about."[3]

Colectivo Situaciones's book has been translated and discussed in many languages, but their novel definition of the insurrection did not find particular resonance at the time. It found none whatsoever, to tell the truth. This was, in all likelihood, because it posed contradictions to the political grammar utilized by the Argentinian

group's "sympathetic readers": principally made up of Italian-influenced post-operaists, and then Latin American neo-Marxists. In fact, Colectivo Situaciones soon abandoned this line of research and language, returning to more orthodox modes of expression and eventually bringing their project to an end.[4]

Unsurprisingly, the post-operaists did not grasp the crucial importance of destitution, preferring instead to continue to focus on the old category of counterpower. Others, at different latitudes, who perhaps might have grasped it, were either prejudiced or otherwise distracted. In reality, that book contained a range of inventive elements ahead of its time, even if other elements were destined to wane away—and not only those connected to traditional categories of left-wing political thought, but also the antiglobalization movement that was, quite rightly, fading out that same year.

Indeed, 2001—the Year of the Snake in Chinese astrology—signaled the end of the alter-globalization movements and the beginning of a new cycle of global civil war: the snake shed its skin. In rapid succession, we saw the events of the G8 in Genoa, the explosion of the Twin Towers in New York, the beginning of what became known as the "permanent and continuous war," the implosion of Argentinian neoliberalism—the precursor of the "financial crisis," concentrated in a single country—and, within that context, the appearance of a strange insurrectionary practice that announced the form of revolts to come. The following appeared in prompt succession: the uprising of the French banlieues in 2005, the Greek insurgency of 2008, and then a rapid crescendo that culminated in the burning of the world between 2010 and 2011. A new episode emerged in 2016, with the massively popular French revolt against the new labor law reforms.

One might propose that the Argentinian insurrection constituted a paradigm—an *exemplum*—of those struggles that commenced following the declaration of a "state of global crisis" in 2008.[5] Frequently, in opposition to a certain form of mechanistic Marxist historicism, the form of struggle—a paradigm, in a quite precise sense—is revealed to the world *before* the so-called "objective" conditions have matured. It is as if there is a kind of practical prophecy, heralding a politics yet to come. It represents a call to

arms that interrupts the continuum of the revolutionary tradition—better yet, a tradition that has become conformism. The left complains, every time in fact, new forms of struggle suddenly and noisily appear: "Now is not the moment, we need to wait for the 'objective conditions' to mature. The people won't understand. This is a gift to reactionary forces: you're merely provocateurs." For the left, the objective conditions obviously never mature, while in a short period of time, these same conditions mature for governments in terms of counter-insurrection.

We are not saying anything particularly original, in writing that forms of struggle come before dynamics of power. Foucault claimed on more than one occasion, "resistance comes first," thumping his fist on the table. Mario Tronti wrote in the 1960s that the principal factor is the struggle of the working class and not that of capitalist development.[6] E. P. Thompson described the "making" of the English working class, demonstrating its autonomous origins—it was not simply a byproduct of capitalist industry—and that capital instead had to wage a social war against the class, beginning with a close study and then dismemberment of proletarian forms of life and struggle. In other words, we can say with a certain level of antihistoricist authority, new forms of struggle and resistance appear *before* certain forms of power, giving real meaning to the word *reactionary*. In this regard, the real question to confront has always been that of breaking apart the circularity discovered by operaismo between struggle and development, between resistance and the reconfiguration of power, which seems to necessarily tie the two together. The revolutionary question lies for the most part in bringing an end to this infernal cycle, and destituent power, perhaps, simply names this "bringing to an end." In any case, we cannot apply the same mechanism in the opposite direction by attempting to claim that struggle automatically anticipates the future and, moreover, produces the conditions for its defeat. Common sense teaches us that things do not always go the same way. *No one knows what a form of struggle can do, because no one knows what a form of life can do*.

That a contextual form of struggle can reconfigure the general form of a conflict to come depends on something that has little to do

with classical politics and even less with political economy. Forms of life, in their simplest outlines, generate, within and around themselves, forms of struggle. It is only when a form of life and a form of struggle coincide in time, becoming indistinguishable from each other, becoming one with each other, that we witness a revolutionary phenomenology in action. Whoever in our own times manages to grasp the fragments of a form of life that exist, relatively speaking, outside of government and capital and enter into a revolutionary becoming, manages to read a trend, to see not so much what is moving from today in a straight line towards tomorrow, but that which is coming towards us, in leaps and bounds, as a result of the short-circuiting of the past and the present. Conversely, those who grasp nothing whatsoever—for example, the contemporary urban uprisings in Europe and across the world—fail to understand them. They are obsessed with the future. They ignore—consciously or otherwise—the experiments in life that are taking place everywhere in recent years, from Rome to Athens, from Rennes to Barcelona, from New York to Chiomonte, from Cairo to San Cristóbal de las Casas, which in their turn represent a paradigm. The error that seems to repeat itself every time is that of *a posteriori* dividing forms from one another, giving a position of primacy to the form of "struggle" that should be bestowed upon that of "life."

To say that the Argentinian insurrection is a paradigm does not mean insisting it is a "model" to be followed and reproduced everywhere, as in the era of Marxism-Leninism, when the Bolshevik Revolution and everything that happened in the USSR had to be painstakingly followed by Communist Parties and organizations across the world, on the basis of the belief that Marxism was a science on a par with meteorology or marine biology. Even less does it mean we must trust timeless "actions" meant to instill a certain consciousness in the oppressed masses. When one speaks of paradigms, without doubt, one refers to a certain regime of truth, but this does not mean a scientific or voluntarist truth so much as those truths that involve zones of existence that science fails to recognize as sources of truth. These are truths that the Invisible Committee says "are felt but cannot be demonstrated." In other

words, these are “ethical truths,” *truths from within*, which are no less strong than those of the outside. On the contrary, they are more powerful in relation to the world because they come from inside, from interiority, and jut out until they touch the limit of their own enunciation, which is always material. It is important, nonetheless, to specify that these truths are always *contextual*, determinate—they are neither moral truths (as is often the case with anarchism), nor universalisms (as happens with the left), nor relativist (as with the fanatics of deconstruction). Precisely because they are determinate, they are truths that move, and by moving they encounter other questions, other peoples, other friends of the truth who are transformed by it and in turn actualize and change it through use. “Logic goes right to the very depths. The truth is extremist,” wrote Henri Barbusse in 1920 in a letter to Antonio Gramsci’s *L’Ordine Nuovo*.[7] A truth that does not go to the extreme is no use at all, other than—in the best of cases—as a form of self-consolation.

The Argentinian insurgency is paradigmatic because it illuminates the epoch not from a site of transcendence, looking down upon the world, but from the depths of its catastrophe—in itself a truth—and *communicates* from there. It becomes aware of its singularity through that of the event which is being expressed around it, first locally and then radiating a sense of existence and struggle everywhere around it, a strategy for life and a tactic for fighting, a form of life and a form of organization that *builds through destituting* and that we magically saw again, even if only in fragments, years later in places far from Buenos Aires. In Badiou’s words: “an insurrection can be purely singular and at the same time universal: purely singular, because it is a moment, the pure moment; and universal, because finally this moment is the expression of general and fundamental contradictions.”[8]

Above all, saying that the insurrection that takes place in a particular country, in a particular moment, constitutes a paradigm means avoiding reducing it to street-fighting techniques adopted during the uprising, and instead leads one to think about whether its quality—that it was destituent—might have something to do with a broader range of deep-rooted and far-reaching phenomena. This means reflecting on how it might be disseminated in every field of

life, thereby redefining politics as well. Precisely due to its idiosyncrasy, the Argentinian insurrection renders intelligible a whole series of phenomena belonging to a single unity of which it is part and, at the same time, helped to create.

The appearance of a new paradigm, whether scientific, political or aesthetic, clearly signals a break with the recent past and a total dislocation of the terms in which a certain thing, event, or state of the world can be defined. In our own case, it represents *a partial viewpoint because it is contextual but, through resonating with other places and times, illuminates a general form that is nonetheless never totalizing*. The Argentinian destituent insurrection is not the origin point of all subsequent insurrections or their archetype; it is a particular image that, through communicating *a priori* all the other particular images that are part of the same insurrection, renders them intelligible along with a constellation of phenomena that define the contours of the epoch. Viewing ourselves through its lens means being able to grasp something more about the uprisings of the present and the tumult of the recent past, as much as the techniques of counter-insurrection and the thousands of maneuvers governments have enacted to block *that which is coming*.

As the Argentinian collective noted, a destituent insurrection of the kind they describe cannot be thought of in classical political terms, by measuring its effectiveness based on its immediate and surface-level political achievements—another right gained or one minister less—but instead has to be understood as the opening of a field of possibility. The Argentinian insurrectionary paradigm thus finds its point of no return in the temporal and subjective "deformation" that it impressed upon the world and not in any progressivist effect. In this sense, the surfacing of an insurrection has more to do with fantasy than with economic-political reasoning.

Benjamin writes that "fantasy" is something for which even its manifest appearances represent "a decomposition of the forms … from which its appearance derives."[9] An "authentic fantasy" is the process of dissolving what exists, even the forms that manifest

themselves in the act of dissolution, a "purely negative" practice that is neither entirely destructive nor productive of further works. It is *a pure destitution of the dominant forms* that always and only arrives "from within, free and therefore painless," thus without the stigmata of exteriority. Benjamin continues: "Furthermore, in deformation … it reveals the world to be caught in an infinite dissolution, but this also means: in eternal transience." Authentic fantasy is, in this sense, perfectly an-archic and dovetails with the process of the ordering of the profane described in the well-known *Theological-Political Fragment*. Here a true, free happiness is when "all that is earthly seeks its downfall … nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away."[10]

This is why insurrection, before it is an art, is borne of an exercise in fantasy. But since, as Benjamin continues, "fantasy is the foundation of every work of art" but is incapable of constructing it, insurrection defines itself and experiences its limits through becoming a form of art, a *téchne* in the true sense of the term, even if only in a second moment when the work of the imagination is complete. Only by remaining faithful to the auroral gesture of fantasy can this generation of forms avoid becoming a governmental structure. It is only the deforming, transient action of fantasy—which neither contains nor creates principles—that can effectively oppose the phantasmagoric productivity of government. All of this, in the end, can be summarized very simply: an insurrection is not made by pursuing and imagining productive forms of the future, but through a collective exercise in fantasy that, in a single gesture, deforms the past, present, and future.

The student movement of 1968 erred in wanting to put this fantasy into power. The Italian movement of 1977 did better, preferring to write on the walls that fantasy would have destroyed it, but even then, they did not manage to truly grasp the question. One needs to go further and think of fantasy as a preliminary form of destitution, as that which, through the dissolution of dominant forms, allows for new forms of life and thus of politics to be generated.

It is within these fantastic fault lines, in the temporal break to be found within insurrection, that we should look for the tangible

changes of revolutionary subjectivity, rather than in some new institution or other created by the revolt, and even less in the composition of government that sooner or later follows it. Indeed, we might propose the thesis: *those governments that enter into power following insurrections witness their own defeat; their inability to dissolve those forms of evil against which they rose up*. It has always been the case that a lack of fantasy spells certain defeat for revolutionaries. The very limited space dedicated to this practice or a lack of faith in one's own imagination hurls them into the trap of calculating reason.

Beginning in the early 2000s, the Argentinian crisis was an experiment that heralded the planetary crisis that would explode seven years later: financial, institutional, political, and categorical. It represented a radical "crisis of legitimacy" for governments, in the context of a capitalist turmoil that yet again—as had so often occurred already in Latin American countries—served as a localized laboratory for the global restructuring of rule. Argentina, in this case, functions as a neoliberal *fab lab*. A deafening crisis of legitimacy quickly overwhelmed every form of institutional body, right down to the oldest such body in the West, the Catholic Church, with the unprecedented resignation of Pope Benedict XVI and the arrival of his successor, Francis I. He arrived from Argentina, no less, the country in which destitution arose at the turn of the new millennium with unforeseen force. A paradigmatic force, one might say.

The Argentinian insurgency situated the insurrectionary dynamic outside of those models so dear to the radical left, while also representing a turning point for Latin America as a whole that would be difficult to reverse. Unlike those who insist that the Argentinian insurrection was the more ferocious twin to Lula's parliamentary taking of power in Brazil,[11] it is important to emphasize that the black bloc in Rio de Janeiro in 2013, during the demonstrations against the World Cup, resonated throughout the country and with all other revolts across the world in the previous

five years, contributing its own revolutionary idiosyncrasies. As the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has written: in the Brazilians becoming Indigenous and the Indigenous becoming the black bloc.[12] This episode leads Viveiros de Castro to claim that, strategically speaking, this was not a revolution in a traditional sense but instead means we have to think of a "state of permanent insurrection as a form of resistance" adapted to our times.[13] In the mid-2000s, the polemic between the Zapatistas and those aligned with the Lula Effect—in which the former supported strategic autonomy from any kind of involvement in electoral systems and the latter the importance of supporting all the progressive governments advancing across South America—had echoes and resonances far beyond that continent. Today, faced with a Lulaism that has been overtaken by corruption and the rage of the people, it is easy to claim in hindsight the Zapatistas had seen things correctly. And yet, this observation has little use if one does not grasp what is truly at stake here. The problem of Brazil today and of Argentina yesterday, in fact, is not that of a different, alternative, or more radical government, but of governmentality in itself—something that, beyond any contingent illusions, is just as important for Greece and Spain, Italy or France and, indeed, everywhere.

In our own coordinates across the world's surface, the perception of this crisis of legitimacy for ruling bodies was translated as a "crisis of representation," an issue about which much ink has been spilled, even heralding "the end of the left." Nevertheless, the question remained ambiguously suspended, precisely because speaking about a crisis of representation does not mean doing away with the idea of government, and many of those who once shared this analysis (and at the time wrote entire tomes about "being done with the idea of the left," mocking every attempt to rebuild it) now actually accept its new "left-wing" representatives, justifying themselves by claiming that the problem facing social movements is the appropriation and management of power by an institutional road. In other words, for them it is not a problem from "within," a weakness of the movement-form, but the lack of an extremely classical external force. They call this contortion the "verticalization" of movements, a kind of corrective measure for an

excess of horizontalism that, in their view, afflicted the Occupy and Indignados cycle of struggle and which, in practice, has become a form of explicit support for—when not a direct engagement with—new party formations and experiments with radical-left-but-governmental forces more generally. Nothing new here, then. While in the past, the subject of verticalization—for some of those same theorists who are putting their trust in the new parties of today—was a group of Marxist-Leninists in armed struggle. Today, it is the technocratic politics of Podemos or the social democracy 2.0 of Syriza. They continue as before, without ever understanding that the opposite of being right-wing is not the left but the revolutionary becoming, as Dionys Mascolo already noted more than fifty years ago.[14]

This "verticalizing" position, which currently has its European epicenter in Spain, finds its own programmatic horizon within the slogan "now is the time to take power," canceling out with a flick of a pen the entirety of Foucault's thought and everything that came after it, which had otherwise seemed to have been well absorbed, at least in certain circles. One recalls that according to Foucault, power is not something that one can "possess," but only "exercise" (and eventually "take," in a figurative sense, only *after* it has been exercised), because above all it is not a "thing," it has no autonomous substance, but, as many Marxists who have bathed in the waters of the Seine are fond of repeating, it is a "relation"—or better still, a *diffuse relation*. The call to "take power" seems more like an erroneous attempt at a weak version of the autonomy of the political, spoken in a whisper and without any of the tragedy or depth with which Mario Tronti experienced it more than forty years ago.

Faced with the defeat of the revolutionary hypothesis of the 1960s, Tronti attempted to bring the party of the Italian working class to power, attempting to take hold of the machine of the bourgeois state, hoping for a movement in two directions—from above and from below—that might at least resist the molecular free-market revolution that was spreading through out the early years of the 1970s. Today, however, it is far from easy to understand who should take power, even without taking over the state, whose

sovereignty—at least as it was once described—has been fundamentally eroded. Not so long ago, many spoke of an Empire. If one wants to be consistent, it would be necessary to say that "we want to participate in the Imperial Government, yet from the left," and not play with an improbable and caricatured reprise of the autonomy of the political. This is impossible because there is no longer any expression of the party of the class. Social movements are not a class, and yet the mania for waging everything on a "movement" has been a characteristic vice of the left from the Second International onward, and has never truly gone away.

In any case, the problem for revolutionaries today is not so much the state, but government. It is not that of taking or destroying power but rather of destituting its products and relations. Indeed, it is the *destitution of the relation* as such, the conquering of absolute autonomy—*absolutus*—that is free of every bond.

Perhaps there is only one possible way revolutionaries can interpret the autonomy of the political, one that Tronti himself had already indicated before driving himself in the direction of elections supported by class forces. This is what he advocated during the combative days of the journal *Classe operaia* in the 1960s, when *operaismo* still had no name, a period to which we will now embark on a small excursus.

If there was a serious political mistake over recent years, it was that of indulging the belief—above all in praxis—that every movement appearing on the world stage could and had to be governed, that is, submitted to a particular *economy*. For example, that they ought to possess reasonable demands, find good mediators, know how to withdraw or repress force, have good journalistic and political representation. Movements were never perceived as partial embryos of a "historical party" but found their immediate outlet in some administrative adjustment, which furthermore is always either denied or achieved in the most impoverished fashion through some administrative concession to mere survival. For this reason, we often find governors-in-waiting instead of the end of governors. We

observe a management of conflict that does not aim at "making revolution," but much more modestly asks to participate in the planning of capital, and furthermore, when capitalists themselves are not able to advance it, proposes itself as a better and more trustworthy planner. Unaware of the oxymoron, it calls this "democratic revolution."

On a more essential level, given the fashion for *leftist* rhetoric, for the most part these are positions within movements that function more or less through economic and/or juridical demands, in the sense of "rights." One of the merits of large-scale conflicts—such as that in Argentina and the entire sequence of uprisings, insurrections, revolts, and disturbances over recent years—is to have liquidated this position *in practice*. It is a position which, in the past, enjoyed a certain hegemony. It is precisely because it was defeated in the streets that it now reappears as "taking power," thus situating itself within the so-called Palace, trying to recover the most backward aspect of the autonomy of the political, which interpreted the idea to mean the autonomy of a new political class. If one follows events carefully, in fact, one sees that each time this position takes a step forwards toward the Palace, strength and credibility take a step backwards in the streets.

Back when operaismo was still without a name, Mario Tronti had already rejected every illusion of this kind, maintaining that the class could not become revolutionary by accumulating capital through the politics of demands, in order to then use an economic self-valorization to gain power—as occurred with the "bourgeois revolutions"—but through accumulating strength, by immediately presenting itself as a figure of the political, as the party of the revolution. "The working class does not grow as an economic category within bourgeois society at all, it does not grow through the taking of economic power, through the ability to economically manage a predetermined social structure; all of these things are typical of a reformist standpoint … the revolutionary break, and thus the development of the working class within the economic system of capital, immediately presents itself as a political development…. Inasmuch as it is a directly political revolution, it presents itself truly as a revolution, precisely because the other path

led towards a gradual change, the possibility of not breaking with anything at all, of never violently cracking open the old relations, but instead of co-existing with them right up to the point in which one might create a maturity within a process that allowed such a movement in the first place."[15]

What is of great interest to us here is that this position on the autonomy of revolutionary politics is situated in polemical opposition not to those who do not even pose the question of revolution, but to those who try to convince us that demanding an improvement in the mode of production, of gaining the ability to consume more, to directly manage large sections of the economy, to reinforce productive cooperation within the very same capitalist mode of production, to govern the metropolis, "to save capital from itself," slowly leads society into a sort of reign of cyber-communism, a kind of secular, stagist eschatology, a "divergent agreement" with capital's apocalypticism.

The conclusion of Tronti's discussion assumed that the revolutionary situation would be confirmed when the sides are swapped around—operaismo's famous "Copernican revolution." Capital would find itself needing to make demands, come cap in hand, and the class would simply *refuse*—to collaborate in development, to make any kind of positive demands—and indeed, would relaunch the struggle against the entire horizon of development. This requires a very clear approach in which one refuses the economy as a key to the vault of power. It explicitly requests that politics be used against the economy, to make it subaltern. Indeed, it is at this point that class is no longer subaltern, that it is no longer "within and against" but *outside and against*—which is the only location in which any "class" can place itself in a revolutionary sense. It is here that the messianic time of the end gains the upper hand over the rhetoric of the end-times, when every day can be the "day of judgment" and every moment contains within it the revolutionary chance. It is here that the state of exception is overturned destructively against the governmentality of capital.

The sloganeering that draws on the phrase "within and against," originally an operaist idea, sounds more like a retreat. It is as if the

Marxist mole has been convinced that the most important thing now is to take comfort inside the burrow, given that it can no longer come up from below. There is never any "outside" in these very sensible discussions; indeed, right from the start, it excluded the possibility of any outside from the realm of thought. This is why the position of the current Greek prime minister, aside from his being "cool," seemed so reasonable to those who want to "take power." But it did not seem so to his *demos*, who immediately understood the situation for what it was. When it comes to capitalism, one can only win by looking outside and against. Perhaps only in communism is it worth remaining within and against.

For us, Tronti's mistake lies in putting the relationship between proletariat and the working class into tension, which undervalued the former and bet everything on the latter: "… the difference between the proletariat and the working class. Proletarian demands are usually presented in a fractional list of positive demands that all consist in a request for an improvement in economic conditions … a request that is essentially a demand for an improvement in the conditions of exploitation."[16] It seems to us the opposite occurred, as diagnosed by Pasolini, without any tears for the roses. In any case, history itself has taken on the responsibility of dismantling that vision, declaring instead: "the fact that the proletariat ends up being identified over time with a determinate social class—the working class that claims prerogatives and rights for itself—is the worst misunderstanding of Marxian thought. What for Marx served as a strategic identification—the working class as *klesis* and as historical figure contingent on the proletariat—becomes instead a full-blown social identity that necessarily ends in losing its revolutionary vocation."[17]

The Trontian hypothesis could only have won if the Italian Hot Autumn [*Autunno caldo*] of 1969 had immediately become a workers' revolution. However, this could never happen because by that point capital had already begun restructuring the government of things and men.[18] Political economy was being replaced by cybernetics as means of government *and* of production, which thus led to a zone of indistinction: every act of commodity production is

now immediately also the production of control, and thus, a function of government.

The fragmentation of the proletariat following this capitalist reaction, on the other hand, could only find a response in a diffusion of conflict, a tactic of offensive separation, the patient construction of revolutionary forms of life, a strategy that was partly followed in Italy—so long as it was possible—by the culture of *autonomia*. The characteristic feature of this standpoint is that it does not claim its basis to lie within a class that is abstractly always-already present, but precisely on the grounds that a form of life is a *habitual, multiple, and contextual use of potential*. This kind of use allows revolutionary becoming to emerge from within the masses, by disarticulating them.

The error of so-called *post-operaismo*, alternatively, lay in the fact that, while accepting the waning of the working class as a revolutionary subject, it never grasped that "rule of the political" Tronti spoke about in the mid-1960s, that the revolutionary proletariat was slowly disappearing, giving way to socioeconomic figures who, by definition, cannot go beyond the threshold of a certain enlightened reformism but which nevertheless, in *post-operaist* discourse, maintain the fetishistic status of revolutionary subject. As Gigi Roggero has written, the limit of post-operaismo lies in its fascination with the technical composition of labor that, through an elegant maneuver, immediately becomes politics through an appeal to the "automatic emergence of a new subject, which has been given the name of immaterial worker, among many others."[19] From this follows its constant withdrawal into making demands, its irritating acceptance of reformist solutions, its enthusiasm for the politics of rights, as well as its confusing position on fundamental questions such as that of destituent potential, insurrection, and even revolution. In the end, in fact, post-operaismo seems to have become the fashionable socialism of a fraction of the "creative class," and the least interesting fraction, moreover. The greatest problem for this position is that it considers questions posed by movements themselves as economic-juridical ones, i.e., manageable and governable—at least after the fact. Behind every contemporary "constituent" position, we always find

this *economy of movement*, which has sunk the left's boats ever since the Second International.

For example, the catchphrase of a "citizens' income" used by some sectors of the movement is not wrong because it would be better to struggle over the wage (as some comrades claim), nor because it is unrealistic (as others maintain, like overzealous building managers), but because this physiocratic argument proposes precisely one of those reformist measures by which one imagines to empower "the class" through an economic demand that would expand its neutral capacity for production/consumption, because they imagine the very structure of "cognitive capitalism" is *in itself* creating the conditions for the arrival of communism. Thus, once the conditions are mature, with an economically strong "cognitive proletariat," it will be child's play to go further. Here the "inside" never becomes an "outside." Communism is always something external, while subalternity remains the default position —partly because in such a situation capital maintains its ability, possibility, and strength to refuse every economic demand. Furthermore, silence falls over the fact that the penetration of *oikonomia* into the proletariat is the surest way to make it become a compact mass of petit bourgeois ready to take on a role as guardian of order and the economy, in other words, of government. The problem is not one of being for or against a proposal such as a "citizens' income." The real problem is how to live daily life in a way that subverts the space money occupies in relationships between individuals and groups in order to change them, dissolving the mercantile separation between individuals and allowing groups to become communes. The question is how to act *practically* so that the distance between one being and another might be redefined, beginning with a material critique of money. How do we act so that solidarity, and not exchange, functions as the model for communicating with the "class." If something like a citizens' income has any sense at all (and one could extend this discussion to many similar examples), then it is only immediately *after* the revolutionary break, as maintained in a recent Benjaminian work entitled *First Measures of the Coming Insurrection:* "The aim of the revolution is to shift money to the margins, to abolish economics;

the trouble with the guaranteed income is that it preserves all the categories of economics. We do not say that it would make no sense, in the emergency of the first few months after the insurrection, to pay everyone a certain sum levied from the accounts of the rich or the multinationals. That would allow time for life to be reorganized without the pressure of lack of money, in a period when there was a temporary lack of structures making it possible to live without money."[20] Even Tronti himself—his depressing political realism notwithstanding—is not in disagreement at a strategic level when he writes: "I am convinced, through both reflection and experience, that a moderate, gradualist, reformist politics ought not precede but should follow the revolutionary act of taking power, when this becomes indispensable and the conditions are ready."[21]

The proletariat as a revolutionary class, in any case, *never* defines itself through economic categories but rather through its destructive force and acts of solidarity, which together constitute its *potential*. Even in Marx, the proletariat is never defined as an economic class. Instead—employing a messianic language—he wrote that the proletariat "is the factual dissolution of the world order."[22] The revolutionary class is destituent, or it is not at all.

For this reason, every time current events are described in terms of the "social composition of the streets," a strong suspicion arises that fundamentally, this is a return to sociology that undermines the best intentions of operaismo. This is also true when the subjectivity being expressed is labeled with some *economic* name: the "precarious," "knowledge workers," or simply "working" citizens and/ or "consumers." The revolutionary process is only revolutionary if it pushes the economy to the margins of collective existence and, during this process, engages in the destitution of *every* relation of production. Political economy is always capitalist politics, and the politics of capital is the economy. For revolutionary becomings, the critique of political economy is therefore inefficient; it is necessary to destitute the economy as a metaphysical category and a technology of dominion, and this is only possible if destituent forms of life and revolutionary praxis become a single and consistent plan.

But let us return to Argentina in 2001.

We recall the destituent slogan of those days very well, which has been reprised by many movements over recent years: “They all must go, not even one can stay.” If the global success of this slogan confirms the paradigmatic nature of the Argentinian event, it also needs to be said that the second half of this phrase has often been ignored, despite containing the fundamental strategic principle. “Not even one” underlines the fact that the strategic vision of insurrection does not allow for any exceptions to the act of destitution (which represents, in fact, its own specific state of exception) and that *afterwards* there will be no new representative to take the place of the destituted. When that part of the phase is removed, it can occur—as did indeed take place in Egypt after the “revolution” of 2010—that a form of power even worse than that preceding it can occupy the place those words intended to definitively evacuate.

The slogan has both a disarming simplicity and a charming arrogance. That *everyone* has to go here means all governors, all bosses, all liars, all politicians, all cowards, all leaders, all those who are corrupt or corrupted—all of them must go. And they must *go*—not be shot down or guillotined; they must simply go, *now*. This is destituent violence. The fact that not even one person is meant to remain is in truth a preliminary warning to any opportunists—who are never far away in revolutions—i.e., to those who are thinking about taking advantage of the moment in order to enter government, those who imagine insurrection as if it were an alternative road to elections that arrives nevertheless at the same destination, to all those who believe deep down that we need to save capitalism from itself, to those who dream of becoming leaders of a new historical epoch embodied in a miserable parliament, to those professional gravediggers who spread like a cancerous fungus across the surface of any uprising. Is this a program? Clearly it is not, and yet it contains a force that no electoral program will ever have—the force of justice. That “not even one can stay” suggests, furthermore, that once government has been destituted, the center of power will remain empty but also that this emptiness will no longer be hidden away, it will not be invisible, as it is now, but will be exposed for what it is, an-archia.

The comrades of Colectivo Situaciones wrote: “The unfolding of popular powers in the city actualized the recurring image of the commune.” At the time, the antiglobalization movements, deafened by the events of Genoa and then suddenly lost within the antiwar movement, failed to grasp the importance of what was happening in Argentina, and even less this reference to the commune, continuing for a few years in the inherent dispersion of an activism that tended to spread itself across the globe, without much concern for those sites where daily life continued and where cybernetification was taking giant leaps forward. The commune exists only on the condition that there is a “territory” to be undone, a place from which to begin and towards which one can move. It seems, in fact, that the commune appears not only when the present state of affairs is questioned, beginning with a specific place, but also when that place exceeds itself during the initiation of a new mode of living in the world, new forms of being together, of dwelling against the metropolis, and the spreading of a revolutionary ethic. In Argentina, all these things began to appear years before the insurrection of 2001. In a very real sense, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo are the mothers of that commune.[23]

The commune is invariably in the tradition of the oppressed—from the Anabaptist communities of Münster, through the Paris Commune of 1871, right down to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the global movement of 1968. It has resurfaced across the globe, from the Oakland docks to Taksim Square in Turkey, without forgetting that the last appearance of the alter-globalization countersummits in 2007—against the G8 in Rostock, Germany—marked an important change of strategy for movements at an international level. The International Brigades signed their communique to the riot that began the *real* summit with the slogan: “Long live the commune of Rostock and Reddelich!” And thus the road was prepared.

Colectivo Situaciones began their analysis of the Argentinian insurrection with a significant theoretical gesture, defining it not as a large-scale social movement or a political practice (however extraordinary) but instead as an “ethical operation.” Knowing how to make this distinction between social movement, political practice,

and ethical operation is no easy exercise, given how much we are used to putting homogeneous labels of “movement” and “politics” on an extremely diverse array of events and processes, without any clarity as to what these words might even mean. In reality, if one reflects on these terms well, one sees that social movements—those we discuss at least—only exist when there is neither an insurrection nor a revolution underway. A social movement can march through cities and perhaps block the streets, occupy houses, and, if it is strong enough, even declare a strike—but in an insurrection a people is born, in a revolution a class is constituted. It represents an existential storm for whoever enacts it. And then there are events—such as those in Notre-Dame-des-Landes or the Susa Valley, the Kurdish communes in Rojava and the Zapatista ones in the Lacandon Jungle—that cannot be thought of in terms of social movements. In truth, these are revolutionary experiences in which autonomy, dwelling, and self-organization are already here. As Raúl Zibechi calls them, these are “new worlds.” Social movements are themselves destituted by insurrections. They are subjected to a pressure so great that the choice they are faced with grants no alternative other than opening up to revolutionary becoming or turning back, reprising old practices, and in the majority of cases, dissolving into nothingness. The Argentinian comrades saw in the unfolding of the events of 2001 a fast, deep, and widespread transformation of “radical subjectivities,” which—unlike those who today speak of “market subjectivities”—acted according to a “concrete” and thus “restricted” plan. In their view, these two elements are characteristic of a “situation” and, furthermore, always allow those who act in a “situational” manner to remove themselves from “biopolitical networks.” The Argentinian collective saw this kind of removal as one of the fundamental elements within a much broader strategic offensive, given that contemporary power no longer functions “via the means of state institutions but mediates the [otherwise] direct intervention of capital’s flows, forms of consumption and the society of the spectacle.” It was still too soon, in 2001, to have a developed and strategic line of thought that could have identified the essential nodes of this power flowing through infrastructure, logistics, and metropolitan architecture. The insights

made by Colectivo Situaciones in their book were precise and were confirmed only a few years later on the other side of the world. All the same, we cannot overlook the fact that the Argentinian insurgency was known across the globe by the subjective name of *piqueteros* [the picketers], because the main form of conflict was constituted by a generalized picketing that blocked the city's political-economic flows. Interrupting flows means direct action upon the networks of control and breaking apart the representation they project of a unified world kept alive through the ubiquity of a techno-police system. Spectacle, commodities, police, and infrastructure constitute an apparatus of government that molds contemporary subjectivity through a securitized environment enacted by each of these devices, each one folding inside the other, right up to the current moment, in which "smart cities" are planned that favor the autonomy of devices connected to each other more on an individual level than that of the population as a whole. Thus every single individual becomes simultaneously (or alternately) commodity, policeman, actor, and, above all, a piece of infrastructure. This is why there are no longer "masses" in the modern sense of the term—another moment of mourning to be worked through. Above all, this is also why the grounds of conflict are, by their very nature, ethical. The administration of flows is the direct production and management of subjectivities. I, you, her, us: we are all infrastructure. If this last claim seems a little bizarre, try a simple experiment by ignoring your cell phone, your computer, and your credit card for one month. You not only begin to question your very existence but everything that surrounds you will begin to have strong suspicions about you. As a piece of living infrastructure, every human being is *expected* to allow information, signs, and money to pass through him or her. The more we empty ourselves out, the more flows can pass through the appendage that goes by the archaic name "the body." Indeed, an integral part of the activity of capitalist flows is that of ridding us of any possible hindrance to their circulation, such as affects that are too intense, ideas with too many consequences, or truths that are too extreme. The more one impedes these flows from calmly doing their work upon us, the fuller our existence becomes. This is something we are not used to

and can easily mistake for bad feelings or even illness. Many of the *symptoms* that so often affect us, frequently and deliberately classified as signs of depression, melancholy, or neurosis, are actually telling us that we have passed over into *life itself*, and that we have inadvertently sabotaged the infrastructure of which we are but a node. Transforming the symptom into strength and organizing it is part of the revolutionary process.

If, as Foucault maintained, the goal of government is that of directing conduct (and therefore acting on the level of ethics), then we might say today this is carried out through a subtle and powerful infrastructural network informed by a cybernetic form of command. The strategic horizon of struggle against infrastructure cannot be considered without grasping that it requires all singularities, communes, and revolutionary becomings to struggle against elements of infrastructure in each and every one of us. The motto "you have to change your life," which seems to be inscribed in every uprising today, means, right from the start, "you have to destitute your Ego in order to free the self and encounter that which we all have in common." This is both the opening and the final limit of every current revolutionary gesture.

The time has come to claim that whoever denies or underestimates the ethical dimension in the development of historical conflict is at the very best naive and at the worst an enemy. In his courses at the Collège de France, Foucault demonstrated that the strength of bourgeois rule has been built—even before its economic factors — on two centuries of ethical struggle, of transforming morality, of a generalized dictatorship over behavior and attitudes. Here we see once more that it is the struggle around a definition of the form of life that, in turn, defines the terms of both command and resistance.

The social crisis ended decades ago with the burial of "society" itself. A critical threshold was overcome, redefining the current situation as a crisis of civilization caused by the collapse of those principles that had sustained civilization throughout the modern era. This is the context within and upon which the idea of

revolution means the construction of destituent forms of life. And this context, as always, is one of civil war.

In recent years, a certain stratum of academics who enjoy playing at politics has ironically ridiculed the idea of civil war, but none of these critiques have ever gone beyond nervous laughter. The problem of civil war as a political paradigm lies neither in exalting or rejecting it, but simply in understanding its forms and its place in the struggle. In his course on the "punitive society,"[24] Foucault is very clear about the centrality of civil war as a paradigm, not forgetting to say that "the disavowal of civil war, the assertion that civil war does not exist, is one of the first axioms of the exercise of power … civil war is the accident, the abnormality, and that which has to be avoided precisely to the extent that it is the theoretical-practical monstrosity."[25] This is our response to the professional pseudo-Foucauldians (who in the end are the only true Hobbesians left, in the same sense in which one also says "Machiavellians"): take this up with Foucault himself.

Foucault did not say that civil war is an exception to the unfolding of historical conflict, but rather, it is civil war—and not class struggle—that represents the *permanent status:* civil war is "the matrix of all struggles of power, of all strategies of power, and, consequently, it is also the matrix of all the struggles regarding and against power."[26] His analysis continues with a sharp clarification between civil war and social war. The "social war" is not that of the proletarian against the boss but "the war of rich against poor, of property owners against those who have nothing, of bosses against proletarians."[27] The realm of the social has always been that in which power makes easy gains, and certainly does not represent the wellspring of the revolution.

Let us quickly summarize Foucault's thesis: (1) there is never a civil war that is not also immediately a collective matter, a conflict between collectivities; (2) civil war does not only bring these groups, these collectivities, to the fore—it also reconstructs them; (3) civil war never precedes the constitution of power, nor is it necessarily the element that makes power disappear; instead it occurs "in the element of constituted political power";[28] (4) civil war reactivates fragments of the past—as both Walter Benjamin and

Furio Jesi understood very well—and its revolts aim not so much at destroying symbolic elements of power but in taking ownership of them in order to provide them with different roles; it thus reactivates, overturns and profanes the dominant symbolic apparatus; (5) the daily exercise of power should be considered as civil war and, "if it is true that external war is the continuation of politics, we must say, reciprocally, that politics is the continuation of civil war."[29] In the Foucauldian narrative, civil war substantially replaces the role that class struggle had in historical materialism, or rather: it turns class struggle into a mid-period episode in the eternal event of *stasis*. If in the modern epoch analyzed by Foucault, the social-criminal enemy was to be found at the center of state production in the civil war—the enemy of society itself—today we find instead the terrorist-criminal, humanity's new absolute enemy. Just as the social-criminal was a product of interacting forces within capitalism and the state, through which it attempted to negatively produce and order entire populations, today the same is also true for the terrorist, a claim that can be expressed in the following thesis: *antiterrorism is a method for governing populations that produces its own object*.

If the objective of the production of modern subjectivity was to construct a disciplined workforce, today it aims at making every human being a good cyber-citizen. Nevertheless, both approaches have the same goal: to *reproduce* the present, to *make* the economy. The basic problem for government has not changed: how to reduce or eliminate entirely those forms of behavior that capitalist ethics judges to be anti-productive, disorderly, lazy, absent, anti-economic. These forms of behavior seem not so much moral vices but an *ethos* in and of itself. Novelty is to be found in the fact that if the prison appeared in modernity as a productive tactic in the realm of civil war, the question now poses itself in an essentially different way, in terms of problems that cybernetics sought to address following the Second World War and which produced the current doctrine of government by security. Strategically speaking, what directs government today in its tactics of civil war is, on the one hand, the relation between territories and governmentality and, on the other, the enforced production of relations between a non-subject and

machines for producing subjects. The ethical element is to be found, therefore, not only at the center of historical conflict but also at its margins, i.e., *everywhere*.

Colectivo Situaciones emphasizes that it is important to not confuse the concept of the *situation* with that of the *local* because "the situation consists in the practical affirmation that the whole does not exist separated *from* the part, but rather exists *in* the part."[30] This, for them, is distinct from the local or the particular, which seems to exist only in relation to the globalized whole, in which every local aspect, practice, or thought is part of that whole and therefore does not contain within it any determinate truth, while the totality that guarantees the coherency of globality is increasingly abstract and distant. In this important passage we find the reprisal of a Trontian *dictum* on the totality, according to which it can be grasped and confronted only through a partiality—but this time the theoretical shift makes different use of it, beginning with the substitution of the "situation" for "political subjectivity," a category that the Argentinians by now recognize as insufficient and even deleterious—for the present moment. Indeed, they wrote: "The new social protagonism is not, nevertheless, a 'new subject.'"[31]

Tronti himself, as we saw shortly after the publication of the Argentinian text and with reference to the revolt of the French banlieues, reflected—in an important intervention entitled simply "Destituent Power"—that now, the question had to be put in such terms precisely because the kind of subject past revolutions relied upon in order to develop a constituent power no longer exists. If where there is a subject there is also constituent power and vice versa, it follows that without one there is no longer the other.[32] This, however, is the limit point of Tronti's analysis, which does not manage to provide any positive definition of destituent power in such a context, a point to which he has never returned—at least, not in the written word. There is, however, a video interview, in which Tronti, although not saying much more on the issue, nevertheless contributed as important phrase that helps move us towards a

definition, albeit negatively.[33] Substantially, Tronti suggests that it is not correct to speak of destituent "power" [*potere*], which in fact represents a terminological contradiction because power can only be constituent; he thus is indirectly agreeing with those who, like Agamben, have preferred to speak of destituent "potential" [*potenza*]. One notes that the distinction is not only a formal one: *where there is the constituent there is also power, and vice versa; where there is the destituent there is potential, and vice versa*.

In replacing the subject with the situation, we also see a strategic intuition. With the disappearance of the subject as a center of action, something else enters onto the scene, which includes within it a place and form of life that acquires a certain consistency and duration. A place and a form of life that, in conflict, become indistinct from each other, and create a world in itself. *These* are the forms of organization, according to Tronti, that today's social movements lack. They place a new contradiction at the center: it is no longer the wage, labor, or welfare (as many post-operaists, post-Marxists, and post-democratic thinkers continue to maintain) around which the fabric of struggles can be woven and eventually verticalized, but *life itself*.

This substitution of the political subject with what Franco Piperno would call the *genius loci* [spirit of the place] is extremely important, and only in this way can we better understand the substance of many contemporary struggles.[34] The occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York City during the Occupy "moment" is incomprehensible without appreciating this viewpoint. Certainly, if one examines the experiences of "movements" in the West over recent years, they have not truly lacked anything. One cannot ask social movements to fill in for the absence of a revolutionary force. If we want to think about them in terms of a historical destituent force, however, then we must pose the problem of a widespread consistency in "our party" and its offensive potential. This is the direction we must take to interpret many of the experiences that have arisen following these destituent moments, or better still, built up upon their *residues;* experiences of constructing "red bases" in metropolitan neighborhoods, connected with areas in the

countryside, the mountains, and other similar experiences around the world.

According to Colectivo Situaciones, the gesture that they experienced was what subsumed politics within an ethical operation: "We think that an ethics has, as it were, two parts: a) subtraction with respect to the given conditions; and b) affirmation in the situation that transforms the determination into condition."[35] This important passage is given an offensive slant by the Invisible Committee in their text *To Our Friends*, in which they write: "Perceiving a world peopled not with things but with forces, not with subjects but with powers, not with bodies but with bonds. It's by virtue of their plenitude that forms of life will complete the destitution. Here, subtraction is affirmation and affirmation is an element of attack."[36] There is one important difference, however, between the first and second versions, which lies in the fact of understanding that there are not two parts, two distinct aspects, two times here, but one single gesture.

If the great discovery of the Argentinian collective was that the insurrection they experienced was strictly "without a subject," where could this claim be verified better than within language itself? Words had suddenly begun to circulate in a different way: "they resounded together with the *cacerolas*, but without replacing it." They made no demands. They did not communicate through some prepackaged emotion: "words had no meaning, they simply resounded." They were the sounds of a celebration, a party of fantasy that preceded its transformation into an insurrection. How can one not recall the wild noises of the Fiat occupation in Turin in 1973, or the programmatic meaninglessness of the Movement of '77—the two events that bracketed the Italian Autonomist experience? And how can one not think that these two moments of our revolutionary history were not, in fact, two large-scale examples, even in all their brilliant failure, of what "destituent potential" means?

The idea of "resonance" is particularly suited to describing the specific way the spirit of destituent insurrection spreads out, as a musical rhythm. To return to the Invisible Committee once more: "Revolutionary movements do not spread by contamination but by

resonance. Something that is constituted here resonates with the shock wave emitted by something constituted over there. A body that resonates does so according to its own mode. An insurrection is not like a plague or a forest fire—a linear process which spreads from place to place after an initial spark. It rather takes the shape of a music, whose focal points, though dispersed in time and space, succeed in imposing the rhythm of their own vibrations, always taking on more density. To the point that any return to normal is no longer desirable or even imaginable."[37]

The insurrection of December 19 and 20, 2001 took place notwithstanding every centralized organizational form, something that is often interpreted as a defect but which in this context turns out to be its true strength. As Colectivo Situaciones wrote, it arose through a collective development that exceeded any organizational structure and which, for this very reason, was blocked from hegemonizing and symbolizing the constitution of a movement. The thesis they advance is that "the neutralization of the potentials of the state on the part of a diverse set of reactions was possible precisely because there was not a central call to assemble and a central organization."[38] Not allowing that kind of centralization of an insurrection does not mean, of course, being disorganized. Nevertheless, it poses the question of organization on a level that wants to be and remains immanent to each "situation," which, resonating with all the others, creates the stuff that communes are made of on an increasingly broader plane. So many times throughout history, the revolutionary meaning of the words "centralization" and "verticalization" resides in focusing on their capacity for attack; the possibility of breaking the inexorable mechanism of governmental temporality at several points. Centralization truly lies in the potential to stop that form of time—to shoot the clocks—and constitute revolutionary forms of life. True verticalization lies in the ability both to express material force, whether defensive or offensive, and to develop a spirituality capable of perceiving the beauty of a landscape as much as that of a wall of

shields raised up in front of the phalanxes of cybernetic nihilism. The interconnection of the two dimensions configures the diagram of revolutionary organization, whose plane of immanence is as global as its material existence is situational, rendering both dimensions permeable—or, as Benjamin would say, porous.

From a strategic point of view, the Argentinians claim, there was a tangible difference from insurrections of the past in terms of temporality; indeed, the movement did not organize itself on the basis of a promised future but by seeking immediate satisfaction: no program, no second coming, no triumphant future—an end to perpetual waiting and the beginning of becoming itself, within the here and now of the insurrection.

They concluded those days were in fact "a *destituent* action" and not "a classic *constituent* movement." For them, this was evident, by way of example, in the fact that there was no struggle to create "a situation of situations," such as a form of centralization that might replace the state. Destitution appeared clearly as an operation that proposes, as a pure revolutionary means, that political gesture which pushes aside every form of representation, e.g., that of sovereignty. The political hypothesis, the gamble made by that book, is declared in the following manner: "the positivity of the negation lies as much in the destitution of the existing political forms, both representative and institutional, as in the becomings it opens."[39] It is precisely this non-exhaustion within a "new political conjuncture" or in traditional, immediate political gains that allows insurrectional events such as those of December 19 and 20, 2001 to acquire a value of paradigmatic irreversibility, which represents the true victory, one that cannot be identified with progress but instead with a tangible mutation of temporality itself, passing down to us a new affective tone for the revolutionary becoming.

Another theme dealt with by Colectivo Situaciones, which recurs in every revolutionary wave, is the question of violence, whether state violence or insurrectionary violence. It is worth recalling that a state of siege was declared over those days in Argentina, but the

astuteness of the insurrection lay in not accepting any frontal conflict with state power, instead exploring the possibilities of "emptying it out," aiming at neutralizing and dispersing the police thanks to the movement's non-centralization, while at the same time not promoting any demands but simply exploring a destituent form of life. In essence, it attempted—and discovered—a method of *asymmetrical* combat, both in terms of tactics (the street war) and strategy (the construction of the commune). This was another way of facing the battle tactically, through forms of insurrectionary violence that "count on neither 'explicit rules' nor mediations, and which are regulated by codes that are unintelligible for any external agent."[40] This kind of potential, which knows how to be porous for its friends and entirely impermeable when observed from the outside, has already gained an enormous force. This aspect of the opacity of revolutionary forces in relation to the enemy gaze is an important argument—yet again, already noted by Benjamin—and is not limited to the moment of the revolt, but becomes a *habitus* in and of itself: "for those who belong to one of the two classes—whether that of the rulers or of the oppressed—it can seem useful, and even necessary, to observe those of the other class: but being the object of such a gaze is perceived as unpleasant, even dangerous. This produces the tendency to immediately beat back the gaze of the enemy class."[41] This reflection becomes even more important in a world such as our own, in which the paranoiac dystopia of he power to see everything has always become one of government's main technologies. Developing one's own invisibility at different levels is not a whim, but an essential way for the revolutionary becoming to continue to exist. Nevertheless, one has to be careful: invisibility does not mean organizing a coven of professional conspirators or even going underground. It means finding a way to deform the perception of presence or absence of the subversive element within the enemy camp.

Furthermore, in cases such as the Argentinian one, there is no problem of legitimizing insurrectionary violence, because such legitimacy is "self-conferred," Colectivo Situaciones writes.[42] In a certain sense this statement is self-evident, as there cannot exist an insurrection that is legitimated by a preexisting institution. The

crisis of legitimacy for power is unmatched by any form of institutional legitimacy for revolutionaries, which could be revoked at any moment by any institutionally stronger actor—something that has happened many times over, including recently. The insurrection has only one way to persist and transform itself into a revolution, and that is by remaining porous and alive, accessible and determinate, expansive and territorialized: the revolution wins only by establishing a permanent state of exception that, through indefinitely suspending the validity of law, allows it to never close in on itself, to never *end* in an institution. Yet again, the revolution is a state of fact, not a state of law.

The context of an insurrection is usually asymmetrical, in which the classic rules of war no longer apply, such as the declaration of war followed by a reciprocal recognition—which is precisely the trap some people fell into at the G8 protests in Genoa in the same year. Struggles contain their own criteria of justice and it is here, according to Colectivo Situaciones, we find the "fundamental aspect of this fundamental asymmetry." Asymmetry reveals itself in the use of violence by one side towards the other: while governmental apparatus works upon the population by trying to lead each person back to a dimension of bare individuality, fomenting fear and betrayal, the insurrection acts through connections, dissolving them and recreating others, forming collective communes and concatenations that resound and potentialize the taking of both the space and time of the world.

The essential characteristic of the destituent process is the refusal to work towards the establishment of new institutions and instead towards the construction of worlds, remaining faithful to the *a-representative* virtue of the insurrection and, still more than this, relaunching the revolutionary process through the processes of becoming all that its force can express. Just as Francis of Assisi declared when describing his own Rule, the question must be understood *sine glossa* [without comment]. "Everyone must go! Everybody out" does not ask experts to interpret what the text suggests we do, but demands gestures that crystallize a situation and carry out that which the declaration has *already* established.

There is no political subjectivity that is invested with the title "the subject of destitution," yet the comrades of Colectivo Situaciones—and perhaps this was their greatest naivety—attempted to name the "who" of the insurrection nevertheless, relying on a weak concept of "new social protagonism," which clearly does not mean anything at all. However, they do say some interesting things about this non-subject. For example, they say that—unlike in classical political subjectivity—it has a "nonknowledge" of the situation, which does not simply mean ignorance but rather an admission that there exists no universal knowledge that is valid everywhere, in all contexts. The fact that there is no "party line" emanating out from the center, the authors claim, does not mean there is nothing to be done. On the contrary, it means that in this situation, "doing" has to take on everything that is "unprecedented and uncertain" within it. The destitution of assumed knowledge goes hand in hand with the abandoning of those guarantees that the old subjectivity seemed to ensure. And it is only in this way, they conclude, that one can "find a territory in which creation is on the agenda."[43] In this last point we find an example of what it really means to make politics "inoperative."

The destituent insurrection, inasmuch as it exposes a multiplicity, does not recognize possible inclusions and exclusions. It comes into being through the creation of destituent forms of life. This is one of the reasons why, according to Colectivo Situaciones, it is not correct to say that classes do not exist, but rather, *classism* as an interpretative paradigm is incorrect because it "reduces the emergent multiplicity to the economic conditions in which it originates."[44] All those discourses that rely on such a reduction are forms of enunciation that work against the insurrection. This is precisely what power requires in order to continue playing its game of representation, which, in the end, it reduces to the triad "party, candidates, men of government." And so we return to today's current situation.

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1. Ernst Bloch, *Spuren* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, [1930] 1969), 31–32; Ernst Bloch, *Traces*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 18. [Translator's note.]

2. The version of neoliberalism that developed at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s in Argentina, under the government of Carlos Menem, was not very different from what we saw in the USA under Reagan, in the UK under Thatcher, or in Italy under Berlusconi. This includes promises of wealth and accelerated "deregulation," and generalized "cutting back" beginning with the traditional functions of the state. What made Argentina different was that it was exiting a decade of military dictatorship, and also, Menem ensured impunity to the military coup's leaders through official pardons issued during the first two years of his mandate. Over ten years, he managed to "rebuild" Argentinian politics and economics, thanks in part to practices of corruption that, soon enough, led the country into a state of crisis. During the 1990s, there was an uninterrupted series of revolts, borne out of the experience of the *HIJOS* [Children for Identity and Justice Against Forgetting and Silence]. This group of young militants, following the project of the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* [The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo], invented the *escrache* as a form of struggle, which consists of actions that disturb the peace outside the houses of soldiers and figures involved in the dictatorship. Later, they adopted tactics of the *piqueteros* [picketers]—which involved a "surplus" layer of the population: the unemployed, the precarious, and proletarians in a broad sense, especially by using massive street demonstrations to block important nodes in the metropolitan structure. As the economic situation worsened, forms of popular resistance developed, such as the spreading of informal barter markets throughout entire neighborhoods—the so-called *trueques*—and more generally searching for modes of living outside of monetary circuits. In the end, faced with the financial crash of 2001—itself caused by a huge, inextinguishable public debt that saw massive capital flight and a state block on cash withdrawal—popular protest exploded right up to the point of the two insurrectionary days in mid-December and the consequent state of siege.

3. Colectivo Situaciones, *19 & 20: Notes for a New Social Protagonism*, trans. Nate Holdren and Sebastiàn Touza Brooklyn, NY: Common Notions and Minor Compositions, [2002] 2011), 24.

4. Some of its members later founded the Instituto de Investigaciones y Experimantación Polìtica.

5. This notion of paradigm is inspired by the chapter "What is a Paradigm?" in Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. Luca d'Isanto with Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

6. Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, trans. David Broder (London and Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2019), 65.

7. Henri Barbusse, "L'insegnamento delle rivoluzioni passate," *L'Ordine Nuovo*, May 8, 1920: 6. [Translator's note.]

8. Alain Badiou, "The Enigmatic Relation Between Philosophy and Politics," in *Philosophy for Militants*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (Brooklyn, NY and London: Verso, 2012), 61.

9. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 6*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 114 [fragment 82]. [Translator's note.]

10. Walter Benjamin, "Theological-Political Fragment" [1938], in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*, ed. Michael W. Jennings and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 2002), 305–306.

11. Antonio Negri, "La ballata di Buenos Aires," *il manifesto*, March 13, 2003. In which Negri writes: "The distance between the Argentinian *piqueteros* and Lula, whatever it may be, is nevertheless both subjective and minimal."

12. Rafael Cariello, "O antropólogo contra o Estado," *Revista piauí* 88, January 2014, https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/materia/o-antropologo-contra-o-estado/.

13. Alexandra Lucas Coelho (interview with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro), "A escravidão venceu no Brasil: Nunca foi abolida," *Publico*, March 16, 2014, https://www.publico.pt/2014/03/16/mundo/entrevista/a-escravidao-venceu-no-brasil-nunca-foi-abolida-1628151.

14. Dionys Mascolo, *Sur le sens et l'usage du mot 'gauche'* (Paris: Lignes, [1955] 2011).

15. Mario Tronti, *L'operaismo degli anni Sessanta*, ed. Giuseppe Trotta and Fabio Milana (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2008), 292.

16. Tronti, *L'operaismo*, 294.

17. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 31.

18. For more on the Italian "Hot Autumn," see Primo Moroni and Nanni Balestrini, eds., *The Golden Horde: Revolutionary Italy 1960–1977*, trans. Richard Braude (Calcutta: Seagull Books, forthcoming). [Translator's note.]

19. Gigi Roggero, *Elogio della militanza: Note su soggettività e composizione di classe* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2016), 132.

20. Eric Hazan and Kamo, *First Measures of the Coming Insurrection*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Zed Books, 2015), 53–54.

21. Mario Tronti, *Dello spirito libero: Frammenti di vita e di pensiero* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2015), 240.

22. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right*, 'trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 142. [Translator's note.]

23. Madres de la Plaza de Mayo is the movement of Argentinian women whose children were disappeared during the military dictatorship of 1977–1983. [Translator's note.]

24. Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France 1972–1973*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

25. Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, 13.

26. Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, 13.

27. Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, 22.

28. Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, 29.

29. Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, 32.

30. Colectivo Situaciones, *19 & 20*, 38. [Translator's note.]

31. Colectivo Situaciones, *19 & 20*, 38. [Translator's note.]

32. Mario Tronti and Adriano Vinale, "Potere destituente: Una conversazione con Mario Tronti," in *Potere destituente: Le rivolte metropolitane* (Milan: Memesis, 2008), 23–44. [Translator's note.]

33. Mario Tronti (in conversation with Oreste Scalzone, Giuseppe Mulè, and Alessandro Scalondro), "Alcune domande a Mario Tronti," Rome, April 4, 2014, www.youtube.com/ watch?v=6l3sJl1sUBI.

34. Franco Piperno, *Elogio dello spirito meridionale: genius loci e individuo* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1997). [Translator's note.]

35. Colectivo Situaciones, *19 & 20*, 40. [Translator's note.]

36. The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2015), 79.

37. The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 12–13.

38. Colectivo Situaciones, *19 & 20*, 47. [Translator's note.]

39. Colectivo Situaciones, *19 & 20*, 64. [Translator's note.]

40. Colectivo Situaciones, *19 & 20*, 72. [Translator's note.]

41. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe, Band. 5, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1999), 607. [Translator's note.]

42. Colectivo Situaciones, *19 & 20*, 73. [Translator's note.]

43. Colectivo Situaciones, *19 & 20*, 173. [Translator's note.]

44. Colectivo Situaciones, *19 & 20*, 176. [Translator's note.]

Chapter 14

An Enchanting Horror

SO THAT SOMETHING CAN COME, SOMETHING MUST GO. THE FIRST SHAPE OF HOPE IS FEAR. THE FIRST MANIFESTATION OF THE NEW IS TERROR.
—Heiner Müller, *Mauser*[1]

In 1921, Benjamin expressed the concept of destitution using the German noun *Entsetzung*, which originally means "the despoiling or removal of something or someone from a place that has been occupied." In the Middle Ages, the verb *entsetzen* meant to "deprive," "rob" or even, by association, "to fear," "avoid," "pass over." *Entsatz* and *enstsetzen*, furthermore, were the old German terms to indicate a military operation for relieving the siege of a castle or troops encircled by an enemy; nowadays, it simply means "liberation." It is easy enough to see how *Entsetzung* and the corresponding verb *entsetzen* acquired the meaning (including in a political sense) of "deposal," "removal," "destitution." In Benjamin's case, the *removal* of the law from its bastion; that is, the *destitution* of the state and the *liberation* of the proletariat from its containment.

As others have noted,[2] Benjamin penned a fragment following his essay "Critique of Violence," called "Schönes Entsetzen," which we might translate as "the beautiful horror" or "the enchanting horror."[3] Indeed, the second meaning of the German verb, confirmed in its modern usage, is that feeling of "horror" or "fright." For Benjamin, the use of words was an integral part of his political-philosophical practice, and thus he was no doubt aware of the disturbing duplicity of the term in question—liberation or horror, destitution or fright.

In this fragment, he observes a particular July 14 in Paris, the day on which the French Revolution is traditionally celebrated, and describes the atmosphere. He is particularly struck by the fireworks,

not so much for the pyrotechnic spectacle but the emotion aroused in the masses watching them and celebrating; an emotion that expresses itself as a kind of widespread intoxication, a form of both excitement and horror:

> Is this dull multitude not waiting for a disaster great enough to strike a spark from its own inner tension: a conflagration or world-end, something that could suddenly convert this velvet thousand-voiced murmuring into a single cry … ? For the piercing cry of horror [*des Entsetzens*], panic dread, is the other side of all authentic mass celebration. In the unconscious depths of mass existence, conflagrations and celebrations are both only so much play, preparation for its coming of age, the hour when panic and celebration, now recognizing the other as a long-separated brother, embrace one another in the revolutionary uprising.

Unlike the cold ethnologist, Benjamin seems to *see* that which the people themselves *see* within the enthusiasm of the revolutionary celebration, he feels within himself the *rhythm* that runs through it and gives it form. To borrow Furio Jesi's words, Benjamin sees with the eyes of the seer, and not those of the voyeur.[4] For Benjamin himself, "the power of the seer is to see that which is taking form."[5] His approximation of the festive spirit to the messianic expectation and then to the end-times as marked by a fire that is exoterically destructive or esoterically redemptive leads us back to many of his writings, in which catastrophe and redemption are contained within each other. The crowd—precisely by being a crowd as such—can only be *negative* during this waiting period (dull and unaware, as Benjamin writes) but within the interruption of historical time enacted by the celebration, the crowd crosses over a threshold and becomes something else. The men and women recognize each other after a long separation and now, and only now, are a community. This community becomes aware of itself not through the mediation of its socioeconomic positioning but within the revolutionary celebration that does away with every identity.

Thus, we have here a destitution of historical time and a simultaneous destitution of the crowd. The first becomes an insurrectionary celebration, while the second becomes a revolutionary potential, such as a compact, struggling class, as Andrea Cavalletti has demonstrated in his commentary on another Benjaminian maneuver in his book *Class*. But here we also find, in the end, the destitution of the discursive, theoretical subject. Benjamin not only gave himself the general rule of never using "I" when writing publicly but, suspending himself from the role of author and becoming a seer, here he disappears into the crowd at the moment that it becomes a class, dragged along by intoxication, the celebration, the revolutionary insurrection: one among a hundred thousand and without any obligation to do or become anything to anyone. As Cavalletti notes, this is because the true "theory of revolutionary class is itself revolutionary: it frees itself from action while freeing it in turn."[6]

But on the other hand, what does everyone else see? That is, everyone who sees the revolutionary celebration only from the outside, in particular the enemies of the revolution?

There are two possible ways of reading the relation between destitution and the feeling of horror. On the one hand it can produce a kind of *horror vacui*, a feeling of terror when faced with the void one believes creates the destitution of law and thus the end of the state, the collapse of government into the abyss and the beginning of a "kingdom of anomie." Without doubt, this fear of the void—of the "abyss of freedom"—is a feeling shared on both the left and right of the traditional political topography; both left and right are *external* to the revolutionary becoming—this is one reason why the real vanguard can only be internal to the revolutionary class, in contrast to the catechisms of both Marxism-Leninism and anarchoinsurrectionalism. A certain exteriority was perhaps once possible in absence of the class, but when the crowd lost its solidity and the revolutionary class appeared, this moment of exteriority no longer existed; potential withdrew entirely into the revolutionary becoming. Its successive separation inevitably signaled the defeat of the revolution.

Nevertheless, Benjamin adds something else: an attention to the feelings that circle within the crowd and to the conditions under which these can be transformed into an insurrectionary force. He laments the scarce or even entirely absent capability of the revolutionary left to understand the physics of these feelings, unlike the fascists: "The ambiguous concept of the masses, and the indiscriminate references to their mood, which are commonplace in the German revolutionary press, have undoubtedly fostered illusions which have had disastrous consequences for the German proletariat. Fascism, by contrast, has made excellent use of these laws—whether it understood them or not."[7]

For our own part, we can only confirm the extent to which such questions are effectively ignored by today's social movements and the ability of contemporary fascisms to manipulate them. This is evident enough simply by scanning through the numerous documents that deprecate those who, in their eyes, "write poetry," engage in "revolutionary lyricism," or are overly attentive to the fact that a situation can suddenly become a "condenser of intensity"—a little like how in Italy in 1977, certain Autonomist writers were accused of following in the footsteps of d'Annunzio, on the basis that any form of "intensity" is a mere emotional fact without any tactical or strategic importance.[8] This marginalization or even disapproval of an ethical-existential aspect means that even supposedly revolutionary forces are in fact still part of the left, whose tradition refuses to break with the economic paradigm in which everything eventually depends on the Great Structure of Production. That is, on an exteriority, and never on something which comes from within the formation of the "class" itself, from its *feeling*. This economistic view blocks any comprehension of those great affective and poetic undercurrents that decide the fate of any movement.[9] Left theorists and activists today who politely discuss "affective labor" are in general only interested when those affects are wages—i.e., measured—without contesting the fact that they have become economic instruments, valorized and exchangeable like any other commodity. Forms of life are discussed as if they pertain only to other people. They are all blind to the true revolutionary force of affects, which is distinguished not for its

political-economic significance but, together with perception, for its potential to build worlds and destitute the petit-bourgeois masses once and for all.

On the other hand, from within, we see that horror can actually be confused with a certain feeling of pleasure, expressing the other face of festive celebration. Panic and pleasure coincide in the moment of revolt, in the emotive flames of the insurrection, preceded by that anarchic moment that Benjamin managed to pick out—with his proverbial, childlike exaltation—in the ecstatic cry of the people of Paris. Pleasure, furthermore, lies at the basis of a new conception of an experience of time: "He who, in the *epoché* of pleasure, has remembered history as he would remember his original home, will bring this memory to everything, will exact this promise from each instant: he is the true revolutionary and the true seer, released from time not at the millennium, but now."[10]

The thought of Furio Jesi is illuminating on the interaction between revolt and revolution and on the problem of revolt, with its immediate creation of "monsters," "demons" that *represent* the enemy, the bourgeoisie, or—better still—the use that the revolutionary class makes of those "symbols of power"[11] which emanate horror and thus deserve to be destroyed by the revolt—even at the cost of the revolt itself being destroyed in turn. However, Jesi adds, these monsters are not in the present but belong to the past, that past which can be exorcised and definitively destroyed not in the moment of the revolt but only on a "day after tomorrow" when "freedom" has emerged. We thus have, along with Benjamin, the need to cite the past in all its monstrosity and horror, destroying its historical context and making it reappear within a redemptive form that implies the coming of justice. However, with Jesi, we need to focus greater attention on the fact that often during a revolt—due to its very character—the people rising up can take on values and virtues propagandized by the enemy (as was the case with the Spartacist Revolt analyzed by Jesi). What might we identify as the virtues of today's rulers? They are certainly no longer those of

Thomas Mann. Nor, for that matter, could we use those of the old communist tradition. The question becomes one of a revolutionary ethics that must be constituted now, given the fundamental importance of paying attention to the development of forms of life. We have the entire past of the conquered at our disposal, the entire history of the oppressed and all of our contemporary moment, the difficult present of our existences, from which to construct an ethics stronger than the moral economy of the rulers.

But if the revolution speaks to today and prepares for tomorrow, as Jesi writes, then a revolt lives within the suspended time between the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow. It does not prepare the day after tomorrow, but evokes it, and "evokes its advancing epiphany (alongside defeat in the present)," including through the contradictory devastation of the monsters of the past.[12] Insurrection—which we might define as both an extensive and intensive codification of revolt and destituent behaviors—does not elicit class consciousness, but rather that of the species, even using reactionary symbols, profaning them in order to exasperate the enemy, working not within the long term but in the longest of terms. The revolutionary break is necessary, therefore, to create the place and time in which to struggle towards the fulfillment of the construction of our forms of life. It is likely that we must, at this point, imagine overturning the classic sequence and, beginning from the interruption provoked by the insurrection, propose the revolution in the realm of tactics, and revolt in that of strategy, and draw the necessary conclusions.

Deciding what kind of approach is most adequate to horror and pleasure means choosing between catastrophe and redemption, between *continuing like this* and *cessation*, between the apocalyptic, infinite certainty of nothingness and the messianic possibility of a *new life*.

To each their mask.
But the revolution is the mask of masks.

Rome, 27 October 2016.

1. Heiner Müller, *Mauser* [1970], in *Theatremachine*, ed. and trans. Marc von Henning (London: Faber & Faber, 1999). [Translator's note.]

2. See Irving Wohlfarth, "Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part 2," *Radical Philosophy* 153 (2009): 12–25.

3. Walter Benjamin, "Schönes Entsetzen," in *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 4, ed.* Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 434–435. English translation by Irving Wohlfarth, "Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part 1," *Radical Philosophy* 152 (2008): 7.

4. Furio Jesi, *Materiali mitologici: Mito e antropologia nella cultura mitteleuropea* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), 94–95.

5. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 6*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 116 [fragment 82].

6. Andrea Cavalletti, *Class*, trans. Elisa Fiaccadori (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2019), 38.

7. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" [1935], in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 2008), 32–33.

8. Gabriele d'Annunzio, the Italian poet and soldier (1863-1938), was well known for his energetic, highly emotional lyricism and, later, for his Fascist propaganda. [Translator's note.]

9. On the poetic experience as a subversive one, see Furio Jesi, *Spartakus: The Symbology of Revolt*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2014), 26.

10. Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 105.

11. Jesi, *Spartakus*, 67 onward.

12. Jesi, *Spartakus*, 141.

About the Author

Marcello Tarì is a “barefoot” researcher of contemporary struggles and movements. He is author of numerous essays and books in French and Italian, including *Il ghiaccio era sottile: Per una storia dell’autonomia* (DeriveApprodi, 2012) and *Autonomie!: Italie, les années 1970* (La Fabrique, 2011). Tarì has lived in the last few years between France and Italy. *There Is No Unhappy Revolution* is his first book translated into English.

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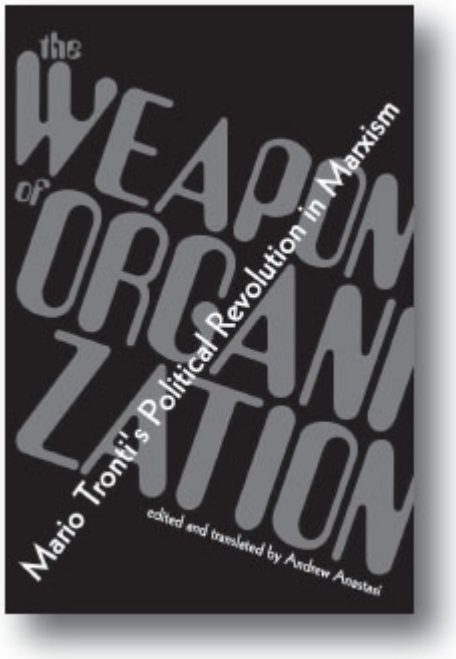

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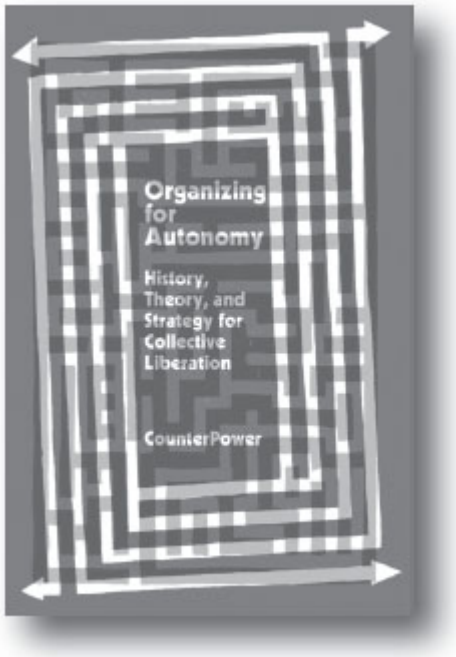

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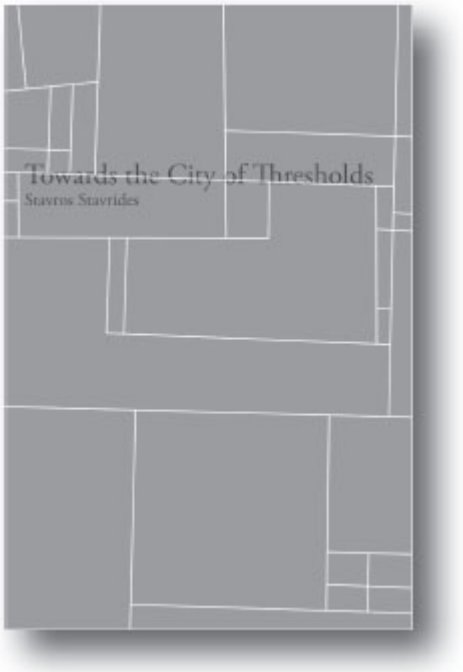

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