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The political logic of destituent power: time, subjectivity, and revolutionary violence

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THE POLITICAL LOGIC OF DESTITUENT POWER:
TIME, SUBJECTIVITY, AND REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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APPROVAL SHEET

THE POLITICAL LOGIC OF DESTITUENT POWER:
TIME, SUBJECTIVITY, & REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE

Kieran Aarons

Read and approved by:

Co-Director__________________________________________________________

Co-Director__________________________________________________________

Committee Member___________________________________________________

Date ________________________________
For my mother, with love and gratitude;

And for my friends, who know where they can find me.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Giorgio Agamben


RT ——— (with Eric Hazan), “Remarks on the Occasion of the Republication of *Tiqqun.*” Talk
Video transcript available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Me0gcIqDvA0


TL ——— “The Time That is Left,” Epoché, Vol. 7 (Fall 2002).


Other Works


INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of every history aimed at ensuring security and making peace with death, it shall be written: ‘In the beginning, there was the word.’ At the dawn of every new temporal order, however, it shall be written: ‘In the beginning, there was violence.’ (OLV 109)

The following study investigates the relation between time, subjectivity, and violence in revolutionary social transformation. What does it mean to say that revolutionary violence ‘suspends history’? What is the internal form of ‘suspended’ time and of the subjectivity that inhabits it? Is there more than one way to suspend, break-apart, or transform historical time? If so, what forms of community and collective action do each make possible? What promises and pitfalls accompany them?

In what follows, we will wager a response to these questions by differentiating between several logical and temporal schemas of revolutionary and insurrectional experience. Our basic assumption is that, in its deeper significance, revolutionary violence is not a means to an end, but must be grasped as a ‘subjectivizing’ process. By this, we mean that violence is best approached not through the ‘tasks’ it apparently aims to accomplish here or there, but first and foremost through the relation to the world, to oneself, and to others that it serves to install. What makes a violence revolutionary is not the ideology it incarnates, but its power to revolutionize our relation to the real.¹ We argue that distinct mutations of temporal experience correspond to distinct regimes of political subjectivation, and therefore how we relate to and ‘inhabit’ time has a direct bearing on our vision of revolutionary transformation, and of politics more broadly. The term ‘vision’ is not used metaphorically here, but literally: we argue that the essence of revolutionary violence lies in its capacity to alter the experience of perception, the way we attend to, speak of,

and practically engage with each other and with the world, and that this alteration can take distinct and contrasting forms. We do not regard these perceptual or ‘visionary’ mutations as either epiphenomenal or derivative of a purportedly ‘deeper’ stratum of socio-historical causality, but as constituting the very ‘substance’ of the revolutionary process, the very meaning of revolutionary ‘becoming’. The deepest level of power’s operation lies right at the surface, in its capacity to mold and shape our very sensibility, our contact with the world; it is therefore at this level that violence must accomplish its most urgent transformation. We will defend a vision of communism—a ‘visionary communism’, we might say—adjusted to this perspective. In sum, it is our contention that by attending to the qualitative forms through which violence disrupts and alters the experience of time, we may arrive at a better understanding of the limits and obstacles of the revolutionary movement in the 21st century.

Our empirical case studies will be drawn from early-20th century proletarian revolts (the Spartacist uprising) and current-day territories of collective struggle (the ZAD in Notre-dame-des-landes), although we will also turn to cinema at times to illustrate a point. The theoretical movement of the text will be rooted in close readings of philosophical texts by Giorgio Agamben and the critical mythology of Furio Jesi.

An essential component of Agamben’s political philosophy lies in his effort to think a non-foundational or ‘an-archic’ conception of the time of political action. At the heart of this project lies an effort to rethink the temporal logic of revolution. The core assumptions behind such a theoretical endeavor are laid out in his essay “Time and History”:

Every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to be elucidated. Similarly, every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience. The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to ‘change the world’, but also—and above all—to ‘change time.’ Modern political thought has concentrated its attention on history, and has not elaborated a corresponding concept of time (IH 91).
For Agamben, the experience of time is not simply a transcendental condition of possibility of political action, but is the very register of revolutionary transformation. Revolutionary violence does not simply usher in, but in fact *coincides* with, a new temporalization of experience. However, this clearly makes the matter of ‘strategy’ somewhat complicated, since the achievement of a revolutionary end *across* time now finds itself transected by a rupture of the phenomenal fabric of time itself. A revolution would appear to have the paradoxical status of a ‘conditioned’ event somehow able to redistribute its own existential condition of emergence. How is it possible to change the experience of time from ‘within’ time?

One response holds that revolution suspends or halts historical time itself. The appeal of this notion resides in its power to complicate the instrumental, progressive, and ‘constituent’ understanding of revolutionary violence typical of social democratic historicism. If revolutionary violence must suspend the very time that conditions its emergence, it cannot be reduced to a calculated or technical means to a pre-ordained end, nor to an overarching narrative of social progress. ² We will associate this notion of ‘pulling the e-brake’ on historical time with a distinctive mode of subjectivation that we will term the “insurrectional ban,” and which we explore in Chapters 1 and 2 through a consideration of two texts composed contemporaneously in the final months of 1969.

The first text, which figures among Agamben’s earliest publications, is a short but dense reflection on Benjamin’s concept of violence, entitled “On the Limits of Violence.” It was Benjamin who demonstrated that any effort to differentiate violence according to its ‘ends’

² It is perhaps for this reason that, in a fragment from his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin speaks not of a ‘program’ but of revolutionary *measures*: “Definitions of basic historical concepts: Catastrophe—to have missed the opportunity. Critical moment—the status quo threatens to be preserved. Progress—the first revolutionary measure taken.” Walter Benjamin, “Convolute N,” in *The Arcades Project*, Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 474.
ultimately proves to be reliant on a dogmatic metaphysical acceptance, on little more than a pure postulate. His distinction between law-preserving and law-deposing violence consequently sought an immanent differentiation among means \textit{per se}. Agamben’s analysis proceeds by identifying two limits of this analysis. Owing to Benjamin’s emphasis on the ‘grounds’ of legitimation, his criterion of distinction still resides in the projected outcome of its exercise (the deposing of law), and therefore fails to overcome the logic of ‘ends’. As Agamben argues, if revolutionary violence is to sever the extrinsic relation between means and ends, it must do so within its very exercise. What is needed, therefore, is a renewed understanding of the position of the subject \textit{within} the experience of violence, which remains incomplete in Benjamin’s account. To fulfill Benjamin’s critique, Agamben shifts the site of transformation, locating the creative or ‘maieutic’ moment of violence in the subject’s relation to their own act and to the world. If the criterion of revolutionary violence cannot rest on its extrinsic opposition to state law (an outcome-dependent schema), its capacity to nullify law must rather assume the mode of an ‘internal’ departure from it, a desertion or deactivation sufficient unto itself. The truly immanent criterion of violence lies in its capacity to transform our experience of the world, to dissolve our paralyzing distance from ourselves (the ‘self-parenthesis’ that shelters the identity of the agent from the violence of her act), and reattach us to our lived situation. These rudimentary logical premises mark out the basic orientation of Agamben’s understanding of revolution throughout all of his later work. However, the logic of this internal relation between subjectivity, time, and violence will undergo a decisive change. Our argument is that what provokes this change is a recognition of the perilous reliance on the mythic experience that the idea of ‘suspending’ historical time entails, a lesson that (we claim) he learns from Furio Jesi. It is in his effort to deactivate what Jesi identified as the ‘mythological machine’ internal to revolutionary becoming
that Agamben is eventually led to formulate his later theory of messianic destitution. By developing the important influence that Jesi’s critique of insurrectional myth exerted on Agamben, not only are we better able to understand the shifts that Agamben’s own conception of revolutionary violence underwent between his early and late work, but we are also in a position to appreciate more fully the political stakes of his concept of destituent power.

In his early work, Agamben frames revolutionary violence within the grammar of class war, and in such a way that it necessarily implies a confrontation with the class enemy. How can such violence avoid becoming teleological and/or strictly negative, if it is defined by its extrinsic negation of the other? Agamben’s early solution consists in the identification of revolutionary violence with a process of ecstatic self-abolition. Since its criterion lies in an inner modulation of experience, it is therefore never exclusively defined by its negation of an external enemy, and therefore avoids being subordinated to an ‘end.’ This also allows Agamben to explain how time comes to be suspended from within. By awakening the consciousness of death, by transporting the agent beyond the limits of language, violence annuls the self-preservative distance put in place by the rule of instrumental or historical time. It is the risk of self in the danger of battle that suspends historical time, and restores her participation in this world. To the extent that it serves to reconnect the protagonist to her world by annulling self-parenthesis, revolutionary class violence enacts a form of creation in and through its very elaboration, and apart from any end. We will characterize this creation—which may serve as a definition of revolutionary violence in Agamben’s early work—as a ‘partisan reinsertion into the relational mesh of the lived situation, which restores our participation in the creation of the world.’

However, if the annulation of self-parenthesis is only accomplished by the risk of death in insurrectional confrontation, not only does an extrinsic enemy seem to be structurally
presupposed in this schema, but it begs the question: is a ‘just’ act really only possible through the exceptional schema of a battle, in the bloody fray and ‘festivity’ of revolt? If it is the ‘limitless’ character of the encounter with death that affords this early schema its hard-fought ‘self-sufficiency,’ how can this avoid becoming a sacrificial death rite?

Chapter 2 responds to these problems through an extended commentary on Jesi’s *Spartakus: The Symbology of Revolt*, a study of the relation between mythic and historical time in the Spartacist insurrection of 1919 in Berlin. Jesi’s work allows us to see the inadequacy of the schema of violence and temporal ‘suspension’ on which Agamben’s early conception of revolution depends. By indexing the split between ‘normal’ and ‘suspended’ time to that between revolution and revolt, Jesi also reveals a number of other perilous obstacles that attend the effort to rethink revolutionary praxis in a non-teleological manner.

If a revolutionary measure can be defined by its capacity to “create the irreversible,” why do revolts so often manage at best to produce only a fragmentary and broken chain of ‘insurrectional measures,’ before eventually terminating in the restoration of normal time? Revolts might manage to *evoke* the ‘inauguration of a new epoch’, but they are frequently unable to give it a consistency that would allow us to *inhabit* it. Jesi is convinced that this failure to make the leap into a revolutionary sequence cannot be explained solely by accidental, logistical, or historical causes. There is something in the very experience of the ‘suspended time’ of revolt that, notwithstanding its profound transformative power, obstructs the necessary task of severing and *reorganizing* time. What is this *katechon* internal to revolt that seems everywhere to hold it

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3 After all, given the logical function entailed by death in this schema, to de-emphasize the presence of the enemy therein would risk an even more paradoxical image of struggle: are we to revolt strictly for the sake of abolishing our self-suspension, without any consideration of winning or (at the very least) of limiting our defeats?

4 See Hazan and Kamo, *Premières mesures révolutionnaires* (Paris: La fabrique, 2013), Ch. 2. The English version was regrettably retitled as *First Measures of the Coming Insurrection* (Zed Books, 2015), which distorts the thrust of the book, for precisely the reasons we are indicating here.
back? In a word, Jesi’s answer is: “myth,” or more precisely, a ‘mythological machine’ that ‘suspends’ time only by generating a symbolic experience of being ‘excepted’ from history. While this transformative rupture accounts for the tremendous creative power of revolt, it also signals its greatest danger: if the experience of freedom cannot escape the closed circle of suspended time, the ‘waking state’ it induces risks descending into a dream and becoming trapped in a mythical image of its own activity, ultimately descending into a sacrificial death rite. What we will call the ‘insurrectional ban' refers to this simultaneous open-and-shut motion, whereby the ‘opening’ of historical time onto an Outside in fact serves to close perception anew within the narrow walls of mythical identification.

Chapter 3 argues that Agamben’s theory of messianic destitution is consciously designed to neutralize the presence of the ‘ban relation’ as it surfaces within revolutionary violence, thereby inviting us to rethink, from the ground up, the basic premises of insurgent practice and temporality. We claim that the development of this theory required Agamben to revise his understanding of both the nature and the ‘means’ of revolutionary creation. One the one hand, this entails a shift from a negative, quasi-Marxist logic of self-abolition to one of ‘deactivation’ or destitution; on the other hand, revolutionary temporality will no longer be understood as a suspension or ‘halting’ of historical time, but with what Agamben calls ‘operative’ time, a discontinuity within historical time that allows us to deactivate juridical and factical ‘vocations’ without having recourse to the mythologeme of extra-historical powers. In plain terms, destitution must bring the existence of power back down to Earth by forcing it to coincide without reserve with its operations, while stripping the latter of the ulterior powers to which they allude. Here, as elsewhere, what is at issue is the relation between subjectivization and time. As we show, destitution accomplishes a twofold operation: by emptying historical time of its
pretension to unity (‘the World’), it fragments time, inserting perception into a plural field of ongoing operations; on the other hand, this fragmentation appears as the sole condition on which an experience of the creation of worlds (plural) can be ‘restored.’ The destitution of the time of the World forms the precondition for the restoration of operative time, the time of world-making. The former is linked to Agamben’s expanded interpretation of what the linguist Gustav Guillaume calls “operative time,” the experiential time it takes for historical time to ‘construct itself,’ yet which never coincides with it; the latter is linked to the Pauline strategy of ‘revocation’ that Agamben associates with the gesture hos me, or the power to inhabit our factual-juridical conditions ‘as not.’ Taken together, the two concepts offer an original concept of revolutionary violence and temporality, and a new set of premises from which to broach the question of communism in the 21st century.
CHAPTER 1.
REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE AND THE SUSPENSION OF
HISTORICAL TIME IN AGAMBEN’S EARLY WORK

Maieutics and Violence

In February of 1970, Agamben wrote to Hannah Arendt to express his gratitude at the discovery of her work, noting the affinity he felt for her thought and the urgency of pursuing the “direction [she] pointed out” (OLV 103). To the four-sentence letter was appended a short essay, “On the Limits of Violence” which, he added, could not have been conceived without her guide.\(^5\)
The purpose of the essay is to determine “the limits— if such limits exist—that separate violence from the sphere of human culture in its broadest sense” (OLV 104). Taking its cue from Georg Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence* and Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” Agamben proposes both to widen the scope of their analyses and to ‘fulfill’ their analyses by adding his own.

According to Agamben, while Benjamin’s *Critique* is concerned with the relation between violence and law, what is needed is think its relation to ‘politics’ more broadly. If the relation between violence and politics has become questionable again today, the urgency stems from the dangers of the current epoch, which is marked by a two-fold transformation of violence. On the one hand, humanity exists under “a constant threat of its own instantaneous destruction” by a form of violence that has “ceased to exist on a human scale,” surpassing anything Benjamin or

\(^5\) Giorgio Agamben, “On the Limits of Violence”, Trans. Lorenzo Fabbri, *diacritics* Vol. 39.4 (2009) 103–111. Cited henceforth as OLV. While it is unclear exactly when the essay was written, the letter to which it was appended was sent in February of 1970. Agamben’s letter and Arendt’s response are held in the Correspondence File (1938–1976) of the Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress.
Sorel could have known. While the threat is not explicitly named, post-Hiroshima fears of a nuclear war between East and West seem likely to be in view. Facing down the catastrophic prospect of total extinction, the essay explores the hypothesis is that the only remaining violence that “might still exist on a human scale” is revolutionary violence (OLV 104).

However, the violence hemming in human life is not exclusively extrinsic or militaristic; in fact, the latter fades from view as quickly as it surfaced, not to be mentioned again. Of arguably greater importance is the evisceration of the ballast against violence that the space of the political was once imagined to provide. Agamben’s debt to the opening chapters of Arendt’s *Human Condition* is clearly acknowledged here, as he traces the distinctive marks of classical politics back to an Ancient Greek understanding of the term. Politics, for the Greeks, was less an institution than a “form of life founded on the word, and not on violence” (OLV 104). For the Greeks, the properly political form of life was premised on “the principle that everything should be decided by the word and by persuasion,” rather than by force alone. As the Socratic art of maieutics demonstrated, “free linguistic relations” could allow the inner creative spontaneity of the mind to shine forth, offering the surest proof of the power of truth over human life. To the extent that politics could ground itself in such a persuasive experience, it was said to provide the “only way of life in which language alone had meaning” (ibid), while non-political encounters (e.g., with slaves or barbarians) that fall outside its purview remain *aneu logou*, not an absence of language *per se* but a use of language marked by the absence of its vital or authentic form.6

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6 Benjamin makes a similar argument concerning the absence of a sanction on lying: “[T]he exclusion of violence in principle is quite explicitly demonstrable by one significant factor: there is no sanction for lying. Probably no legislation on earth originally stipulated such a sanction. This makes clear that there is a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of ‘understanding,’ language.” See Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence”, in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1, 1913-1926*, Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), Vol. 1, 244-245. Cited henceforth as CV.
The West’s abiding model for demarcating the “limits of violence” was therefore the non-violent communication characteristic of classical politics. By contrast with free linguistic exchange premised on truth, violence figures as “an irruption of the outside that immediately denies the liberty of its victim” addressing human life only in its “bare corporeality” (OLV 105). Concerns about the violent perversion of the truth-function of language were, of course, already present in Ancient Greece, chief among them perhaps being the trial and death of Socrates himself. As Agamben notes, if Plato felt the need to eject the poets from the city, this was in an effort to safeguard the maieutic power of speech—its nonviolent use—from its “emotional effects of rhythm and music,” which exert a persuasive reaction in our bodies lacking any inherent relation to considerations of truth.

Today any relation between language and non-violence has been thoroughly severed. The fragile space of transparency and dialogue once thought to mark political ‘appearance’ has been foreclosed by an “organized linguistic violence” operating directly upon our bodily instincts, “overpowering the will and reducing human beings to nature” (OLV 105). As poetry and (from the nineteenth century onward) pornography, propaganda, and other “modern techniques of reproducing spoken and written language” all attest, “language can do what what violence does: arouse” (ibid). Anticipating theses that will culminate two decades later in his “Marginal Notes on the Comments on the Society of the Spectacle”, Agamben draws a straight line between the “eclipse of classical politics” and the colonization of linguistic communicativity.7 The

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7 For example: “The ancient home of language…has been, by now, falsified and manipulated from top to bottom. […] The spectacle is language, the very communicativity and linguistic being of humans…[Capitalism] not only aimed at the expropriation of productive activity, but also, and above all, at the alienation of language itself, of the linguistic and communicative nature of human beings, of that logos in which Heraclitus identifies the Common…what we encounter in the spectacle is our very linguistic nature inverted.” Giorgio Agamben, Means Without Ends, Trans. Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000), 76, 81. Cited henceforth as MWE. It is not unreasonable to suspect that Debord’s theory of the inversion and expropriation of human linguistic capacity under conditions of ‘spectacular’ capitalism already exert an influence on Agamben’s thought in this early
impossibility of demarcating the space of linguistic communication from state and economic violence “forms a dividing line between our experience of politics and that of the ancients; any political theory founded on Greek suppositions is inevitably unreliable today” (OLV 104).

Contemporary life thus testifies to a two-fold transformation of violence. As we face down the extrinsic threat of weaponized technological extinction, our most intimate and proper access to the “Common,” our principal vessel of truth-telling—linguistic communicativity—is captured by an impersonal power of suggestion, exhaustively falsified, until it is inverted and turned back against us in the spectacular form of an image. If not only language, but also the life of impulse and emotion that it now serves to capture and model have become means to the deployment of social violence, the limits of violence can no longer be sought in a qualitatively non-violent form of activity. If “truth in politics cannot persuade against violence” (OLV 104), such limits can only be sought within a use of violence itself. When the maieutic practice once associated with nonviolent speech can no longer be held distinct from violence, violence can discover its limit only through an internal asymmetry of its means and modes.

From this perspective, the Marxist theory of class struggle represents a decisive transformation of the classical theory of maieutics, and of the relation of violence to politics more generally. Violence, Marx writes in Capital Vol. 1, is “the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one.”8 The midwife no longer refers to the actuality of a nonviolent political form of life, one that violence would interrupt from outside, but the violent interruption of constituted social forms that assists in the birth of new ones. If the question of locating a violence on a ‘human scale’ is the same as that of the relation between violence and politics, this is

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because today politics can only recover its maieutic value—its capacity to “reveal inner creative spontaneity”—by an act that deposes extant, law-preserving violence. The ‘specific difference’ of politics as maieutic creation thus corresponds to the difference between law-preserving violence, which “opposes change of any kind,” and a “violence that demolishes an old social order by exercising maieutic violence upon a new one,” being fundamentally “oriented towards something radically new” (OLV 106). Given such a criterion, it would seem that at this early stage of his work, revolutionary violence represents in Agamben’s eyes the only ‘genuinely political’ act remaining, for it is only here that politics is able to mark off its internal difference. Politics is therefore no longer distinguished from violence, but emerges solely through the modal distinction between its maieutic and repressive forms. Its preliminary question is: ‘how can violence ‘legitimately’ call itself revolutionary?’ What is the internal limit or difference of violence that allows us to define its revolutionary use? If Agamben spends little time convincing his reader of the need for revolution as opposed to reform, this is because—as we have noted—the linguistic purchase of such an argument has no ‘neutral’ or non-strategic terrain on which it can be meaningfully contested. The question of politics must therefore be situated immediately and irreducibly within a field constitutively shot-through with violence, yet lacking any distinctively ‘political’ substance or domain with reference to which one could contrast it from other modes of existence. Revolution surfaces in Agamben’s early thought not as a political ideology juxtaposable alongside others, nor as a ‘real movement that abolishes the current order of things’, but the question we are left with after the closure of the political. Revolutionary violence appears not a specific political project, but the possibility of thinking a determinately ‘political’ act per se. The question of revolutionary violence functions, in this respect, as something akin to a meta-political problem in Agamben’s thought, since its internal
differentiation from repressive violence would simultaneously circumscribe the domain in which ‘politics’ could once again be meaningfully spoken of. If it is true, as he will go on to insist on numerous occasions, that “classical politics has undergone a lasting eclipse”\(^9\), then the very condition of possibility of thinking a specifically ‘political’ philosophy coincides with the effort to differentiate the ‘properly’ political use of violence from its pseudo-revolutionary claimants. Finally, if the criterion for the political use of violence is its maieutic creativity, its orientation toward the ‘radically new’, then the exclusive and proper ‘object’ of political philosophy is revolutionary creation.

**Means and Ends**

‘DOES THE END JUSTIFY THE MEANS?’ this is process, there is no end, there are only means, each one had better justify itself.

To whom?

-DIANE DI PRIMA\(^{10}\)

A contrast with historical Darwinist maieutics allows Agamben to bring his own conception of creation into clearer relief. According to a late-nineteenth century discourse sometimes associated with ‘orthodox Marxism’ but in fact traceable to a “bourgeois sociological construction of history influenced by Darwin” (OLV 106), revolutionary violence was said to be legitimate where it accords with the scientific laws of historical development, themselves modeled on a (purportedly) mechanistic natural causality. Through a clumsy and simplified conflation of the Marxist dialectic of Man and Nature and the Hegelian reconciliation of freedom

\(^9\) Cf. P 111, HS 1, 4; HS 2.1, 88, 129, 175; WA, 22-24; HS 4.2, xxi. The theme is present in numerous interviews, lecture courses and shorter texts of this period, e.g. TSE, SaT, FSC, etc.

\(^{10}\) Diane Di Prima, “Revolutionary Letter #26,” in Revolutionary Letters (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2005), 39. [Orig: 1971]
and necessity, History was herein reduced to a “steady advancement along a predetermined route of linear time” (OLV 106). This vulgar progressivist concept of time embeds the problem of violence within a natural-historical framework of ends. Where every violence “hastening or facilitating” the laws of Historical development can be deemed just, the revolutionary becomes “the naturalist who discovers a plant species destined for extinction and then uses everything in his power to hasten its demise so that he may realize the laws of evolution” (OLV, 106).

Needless to say, whether the law one hastens is natural (‘the superiority of the Aryan race’ according to Hitler) or historical (as with Stalin’s purges of 1935), once ‘just violence’ becomes the exclusive purchase of those with an authoritative grasp of the laws of historical development, we are presented with a perfectly tautological pretext for the totalitarian administration of society.

Still, however empathetic we might feel with its victims, noisy denunciations of dictatorship do not address the deeper issue, particularly when they issue from liberal partisans of democratic human ‘rights’. As Benjamin shows in the opening pages of the “Critique of Violence,” the effort to legitimate violence by reference to ‘justified ends’ will always terminate in tautology, irrespective of the specific political ambitions served. What is at issue, in fact, is a specific case of a larger pattern of transcendental dogmatism originating in an externality of ground to the grounded, condition to conditioned. In other words, it is the extrinsic relation between legitimating ends and the means they legitimate that condemns the law to tautology, not accidentally but essentially. If the problem leads inexorably to antinomy, this is because the formal nature of positive law is such that it cannot avoid positioning the ends of action outside violence itself, which it may consider exclusively as a licit or illicit means. It is this ‘neutrality’

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11 Agamben will come to associate such dogmatism with the very essence of the state form, understood as a topological structure he calls (after Jean-Luc Nancy) the “ban relation.”
(with respect to ends) of the *operation* of positive law that demands that its ends be positioned outside and prior to any constituted legal statutes themselves. In other words, the ends of positive law must be structurally positioned as *extra-juridical* givens. Given this externality, the question unavoidably arises as to the origin of such ends. Positive law claims it serves justice, but it must point outside itself in order to explain how. To what does it point?

It is precisely here that the relation of means and ends reveals its tautological character. What we discover, on Benjamin’s read, is that, owing to their extra-juridical position, the proof of the alleged *de jure* superiority of ends is invariably *de facto*, resting on the acceptance of metaphysical or historical *facts*: the individual’s “*de jure* right to use at will the violence that is *de facto* as his disposal” (CV 237). Seen from this perspective, constitutional-democratic appeals to the ‘self-evident’ and ‘inalienable’ rights are every bit as tautological and circular as the invocation of divine providence or mechanistic progressivism. Wherever the justice of *ends* demands the presupposition of a metaphysical ‘given’, we will never manage anything larger than an empirical justification of this or that *application* of violence. What is never justified is “the principle of violence itself,” which always retains the opacity of a dogmatic factual postulate: we either accept it, or not (OLV 106).12 Whence Benjamin’s conviction that a critique of violence in its relation to law becomes possible only once it has been dissociated from the problem of “legitimate application” and the correspondence of means and ends, i.e. from “a standpoint outside positive legal philosophy, but also outside natural law” (CV 238).

Likewise, for Agamben the task of differentiating a revolutionary use of violence from those “involutionary processes” that have shipwrecked “authentic revolutionary movements”

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12 The circularity at issue here reveals itself most clearly wherever ‘justified ends’ and the ‘legality of means’ enter into conflict (e.g. in the effort to actualize the right of extreme necessity). Since no criteria exists to resolve the disagreement, the dogmatism of the respective terms terminates in an “insoluble” antinomy (CV 237).
requires a wholesale abandonment of historical theodicy. It is “meaningless” to seek a
cosmological or historical telos with which to validate political violence or console ourselves
that history is on our side (OLV 106). What differentiates revolutionary (or ‘political’) violence
cannot be its justification by noble ends, but its paradoxical self-sufficiency. What must be
thought is a violence that “needs no justification, that carries the right to exist within itself,”
being “by its very nature irreducible to any other” (OLV 107).

If revolutionary violence is to sever the tautological nexus of means and ends, it must be
clearly distinguished from the creation of new laws. For his part, Sorel therefore drew a hard line
between (socialist) state-making violence, what he called force or power, and whose essential
flaw was to model itself symmetrically on the bourgeois violence against which it competed, and
an (anarchist) state-abolishing proletarian violence, best exemplified by the proletarian general
strike. As is well-known, it was on the basis of Sorel’s account that Benjamin formulated his
own distinction between mythic or law-making violence and a “pure and immediate violence”
that “ousts the law and the force that upholds it, the State.” What distinguishes the latter is not
only that it deposes state power without imposing a law of its own, but the temporal rupture that
accompanies it, which “breaks apart the continuity of time” and “inaugurates a new historical
epoch” (OLV 107; CV 251-252).13

While Agamben will frequently return to the “Critique of Violence,” particularly in his
Homo Sacer series, it is rarely in order to criticize the concept of divine violence. “On the Limits
to Violence” marks something of an exception to this pattern. It must be admitted, he argues
here, that in the search for a violence that needs no justification, because it contains its own

13 “On the breaking of this cycle maintained by mythic forms of law, on the suspension of law with all the forces on
which it depends as they depend on it, finally therefore on the abolition of state power, a new historical epoch is
founded” (CV 251-252).
immanent principle, Sorel and Benjamin appear to have left the task only ‘half fulfilled’. When he declared that “the violence of an action can be assessed no more from its effects than from its ends, but only from the law of its means,” Benjamin carried the question to its “outlying threshold,” marking-off the shape of the question (CV 246; OLV 107). Yet, Agamben argues, in both Benjamin and Sorel’s work the criterion remains, in the last instance, teleological: “the end of ousting the State and instituting a new historical order is the determining factor” (OLV 107). The phrase “half-fulfilled” points not to a disagreement with the direction or premises of Sorel or Benjamin’s accounts, but to their incompleteness: while there is no question that revolutionary violence deposes the state without imposing a new law, it cannot be in this alone that its immanent justification consists, since this would once again risk grounding the concept of violence in an end extrinsic to the act itself.

To return to the frame from which we began, if it is first of all by means of its maieutic or generative dimension that political or revolutionary violence differentiates itself, two decisive questions remain unanswered: “Isn’t violence divorced from the assertion of power a contradiction in terms?”; “What gives revolutionary violence the miraculous ability to blast open the historical continuum, beginning a new era?” (OLV 108). How can the “rebirth” of time avoid being construed as an end?

At this point, the argument of the text makes a rather abrupt and unannounced swerve, drawing upon the anthropological and mythological study of “sacred violence” and mythic ritual in primitive societies. The attentive reader may understandably find such a paradigmatic leap questionable, particularly given that the experience of the sacred in question is acknowledged as being “situated outside our ‘civilized’ experience” (OLV 107). However, as the latter remark appears to suggest, perhaps Agamben’s intent is less to establish a direct continuity between
contemporary revolutionary struggle and ancient experiences of the sacred than it is to draw upon the latter as a paradigmatic figure from which to reflect on the relation between the experience of history and the process of creation (OLV 107).

Anticipating his later analyses of “inoperativity” in antinomian festivities, feasts and potlatches, Agamben recalls that pre-Western civilizations have long been familiar with rituals in which “sacred violence” served to “rupture the homogenous flux of profane time”:

These rituals resurrected primordial chaos, making humans contemporaries of the gods and granting them access to the original dimension of creation. Whenever the life of the community was threatened, whenever the cosmos seemed empty and vacant, primitive peoples would turn to this regeneration of time; only then could a new era (a new revolution of time) begin (OLV 107).

Although the ritual conjuration points ‘back’ to an original violence (the “violence at the origin of history,” “primordial chaos”), its function is not to restore a prior state but to “grant access to the original dimension of creation,” one that will allow a “new era (a new revolution of time) to begin” (OLV 107, emphasis added). Violence functions as a means of rendering the presencing of the world participable: it was a device for “regaining the authority to participate in the

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14 See especially Nudities, Ch. 9, 104-112.
15 As no source is cited in the text for this discussion, it remains unclear from whom Agamben is drawing this analysis. A similar analogy, this time between primitive festivity and the experience of art, appears in Agamben’s first published book, The Man Without Content, also omitting any citation or reference: “That art is architectonic means, etymologically: art, poiesis, is pro-duction of origin, art is the gift of the original space of man, architectonics par excellence. Just as all other mythic-traditional systems celebrate rituals and festivals to interrupt the homogeneity of profane time and reactualizing the original mythic time, to allow man to become again the contemporary of the gods and to reattain the primordial dimension of creation, so in the work of art the continuum of linear time is broken, and man recovers, between past and future, his present space” (MWC, 101-102). Thematically, Mircea Eliade’s concept of “eternal return” seems a likely source of inspiration. On mythic time, see Chapter 2.
16 In his 1982 article “Walter Benjamin and the Demonic: Happiness and Historical Redemption”, Agamben will follow Benjamin in distancing the concept of ‘origin’ from that of ‘genesis’. In his “Epistemological-Critical Preface” to The Origin of German Tragic Drama, Benjamin insists that, “origin, although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis” (Cited at P 156).
creation of culture and a historical world” (OLV 108)). If it need not enforce or construct a law, if its sufficiency is immanent, this is first of all because its sufficiency is accomplished through its very enactment, by reattaching the human being to its world, allowing him to “fully engage with the cosmos” (OLV 108).\(^\text{17}\)

Two aspects of this analysis deserve to be emphasized. First, if the rupture of homogeneous time confers on human life a power, the latter is not fulfilled by being distended into the realization of an end (a new law), but is so immediately, by the installation of an attachment or consistency between living beings and their worlds. Although Agamben does not himself use these terms, what is at issue is less a pouvoir (a power ‘over’ the world or others) than the puissance of an intensified capacity for participation in the creation of the world.

Second, the notion of the ‘originary’ clearly has a complicated status here. On the one hand, what is ‘restored’ is not a prior state of affairs but a dimension of experience. On the other hand, even considered strictly on its own terms as an origin-principle (which it certainly is), the dissolution and regeneration of form that defines Bacchanalian ‘chaos’ is qualitatively distinct from the archē that typifies metaphysical principles (e.g. that of Aristotle’s substance or ousia). The origin invoked by sacred violence cannot straightforwardly name a formal principle conferring a binding unity on phenomenal presencing, for the reason that the human being’s access to it implies a passage beyond the limit of the sayable. There is no experience of

\(^{17}\) The relation between the use of the sacred as an access to ‘origins’ and the ‘authority’ this confers will be significantly deepened and complicated later, certainly in Homo Sacer 1, but already in the final chapters of Language and Death. As Agamben specifies, it is not a question of naturalizing sacrifice, but of recognizing in sacrifice the capture of what is ‘originally an-archic’ (if such a thing can be said) in human action: “ Violence is not something like an originary biological fact that man is forced to assume and regulate in his own praxis through sacrificial institution; rather it is the very groundlessness of human action (which the sacrificial mythologeme hopes to cure) that constitutes the violent character (that is contra naturam...) of sacrifice. All human action, inasmuch as it is not naturally grounded but must construct its own foundation, is, according to the sacrificial mythologeme, violent. And it is this sacred violence that sacrifice presupposes in order to repeat it and regulate it within its own structure”, in Giorgio Agamben, Language and Death, Trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). 105-106. Cited henceforth as LD.
Dionysian creation that does not entail a “proximity between life and death, violence and creation,” a proximity situated only “in a sphere beyond language.” Hence, if the ‘origin’ names the coincidence of death and creation, it ‘grounds’ experience only by subjecting it to a universal ungrounding in which the homogeneous or profane time sustaining cultural forms are halted or dissolved, allowing a “new experience of temporality” to be birthed. Hence, while there is undoubtedly an origin principle at work here, the limit experience generated by its evocation performatively undermines its metaphysical use.

How do these insights allow us to ‘fulfill’ Sorel and Benjamin’s notion of proletarian revolutionary violence? By its emphasis on the relation between violence and law, the strategy of Benjamin’s *Critique* consists in exhibiting the tautology that results from the externality of means and ends, the extrinsic relation between an act and its grounding legitimacy. Although Benjamin recognizes the need for an immanent differentiation between ‘means’ themselves, his emphasis on the ‘grounds’ of legitimation leaves the position of the subject *within* the experience of violence undeveloped, with the result that the criterion of distinction remains a projected outcome of the act (the deposing of law), and therefore still at risk of remaining within the logic of *ends*. To remedy this shortcoming, Agamben’s strategy will be to retain the focus on the critique of externality while shifting its position or its *site*, if you will, transferring it ‘inside’ the act itself. The critique of violence must no longer hang on the extrinsic relation between means and ends, but on the annulment of an externality *within* the very exercise of force or violence.

The difference between these two approaches can be elucidated by contrasting their respective reading of the symmetry between the figure of the criminal and that of the sovereign. For both Benjamin and Agamben, the ‘delinquent’ or transgressive violence of the criminal has something fundamental in common with the repressive violence of the State whose laws he
breaks. At the limit, they form two terms or poles of a single apparatus of “legal violence,” or what we might refer to as its ‘major’ and ‘minor’ premises. Benjamin (following Sorel) establishes this symmetry in terms of the ends pursued by each: whereas the repressive violence is “law-preserving,” the transgressive violence of the “great criminal” confronts the state with “the threat of declaring a new law” (CV 241), an end that we may consider as already achieved so long as the criminal operates uncaptured. From the point of view of the legality of their ends, the two violences logically contend over a common site. The symmetry reaches its apogee in the empirical practice of modern policing, in which the two poles of the apparatus merge and become indiscernible: on the one hand, the police are “lawmaking, because [their] characteristic function is not the promulgation of laws but the assertion of legal claims for any decree;” on the other hand, the measures they take to (purportedly) stop crime rely upon and reproduce delinquent milieus, with the result that the police must constantly ward off their formal indistinction from the criminals they pursue.18

For Agamben, law-making and law-preserving violence have more in common than simply their relation to the ends of law. A symmetry can also be registered immanently. From this point of view, what binds both delinquent and sovereign is a distance internal to the act of violence itself, one that serves to shelter the identity of the agent from the violence: “in each case, negation of the other fails to become negation of the self” (OLV 108). While Agamben

18 CV 241-243. On this paradoxical merger of delinquent and law-preserving violence in the practice of policing, see Grégoire Chamayou, Manhunts. A Philosophical History, Trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), Ch. 8: “To track down criminals, one must not only know them but also identify with them, melt into their milieus, adopt their customs, their language, their clothes, their attitudes. This is another great cinematic theme: the mirror relationship between the cop and the criminal, the secret affinity of hunter and hunted, who may go so far as to exchange faces. […] The problem is not only that the police associates with and instrumentalizes the delinquent milieu, but also that its action helps organize and structure it. Long before Foucault, nineteenth-century thinkers had noted this structural failure of the prison and emphasized the irony of a hunt that in reality produces the game that it is supposed to hunt down” (91-93).
does not use this term, lawmaking and law-preserving violence is defined by an existential posture that we will call ‘self-parenthesis’.

By contrast, if proletarian violence has an immanent criterion of distinction, it lies not in the deposing of law, but in its way of intimately implicating the selfhood of the agent in the experience of violence itself. For Agamben, the essential criterion of political or revolutionary violence is that it *annuls the preservative distance of self-parenthesis*. Revolutionary violence (the negation the other, here figured as the class enemy) never leaves the self intact, but “awakens a consciousness of the death of the self, even as it visits death on the other” (OLV 108). For this reason, it is never exclusively directed at an external enemy, since it aims at the same time to abolish the relations that subsume the identity of its agent along with it. Its ultimate horizon is not the destruction of the other, but the abolition of the *self*. Revolutionary (or simply ‘political’) consciousness cannot be reduced to an ideological conviction or self-awareness but is purchased only through an intimate risk of self-negation and self-sacrifice. The exposure to risk and the potentiality of death invests the agent with a *vital* and immediate stake in the process, forming the enabling condition allowing the overthrowing class to (as Marx put it) “rid itself of all the muck of ages.”

If genuine political action (revolutionary violence) cannot be restricted to the friend/enemy divide, this is because it is never exclusively defined by the enemy it fights. While it cannot shirk from the need to attack enemies, extrinsic negation alone does not constitute an immanent criterion. Unlike its repressive or transgressive uses, the revolutionary use of violence is premised on the immanence of the transforming subject to the world it transforms. As “a violence that negates the self as it negates the other,” its proper specificity lies not merely in its

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designation of its enemy but in the transformation of the agent, in the annulment of self-parenthesis and its partisan reinsertion into the relational mesh of the concrete situation. It is never the action of a subject upon the other (or the world) without also placing the self at stake in a vital way. In this, it renders impossible the ex-capere or ‘holding-outside’ of oneself, i.e. the capacity of the ego to suspend its relations to the world and relate to its being or identity as if it floated above the field of forces, suspended out of their reach, its essence fixed in a substantial beyond. The distinguishing trait of authentically ‘human’ violence consists in its power to render the subject indiscernible from its situated relations, without remainder.

As a dynamism oriented around the horizon of self-abolition, revolutionary violence intimately implicates the self in a process that is essentially inappropriable: “Violence, when it becomes self-negation, belongs neither to its agent nor its victim; it becomes elation and dispossession of the self—as the Greeks understood in their figure of the mad god” (OLV 109).

Much hangs on the precise nature of this inappropriability. Is violence inappropriable because the self is transformed through the process, and therefore no longer coincides with its previous identity? This might ensure a sort of ‘formal’ inappropriability, but it would always remain recuperable in the end. Agamben is insistent that the inappropriability in question cannot be comparative, premised solely on the before-and-after of a caesura of the subject, but must be so immediately and immanently, owing to the qualitative content of the act itself. It is not simply the transformation of self that prevents violence from being “attributed” to a subject, but the exposure to death as such, and, in particular, its significance for linguistic expression. In its sacrifice of self-preservation, in the danger and risk inherent in violent insurgency, there is a passage “beyond language,” an experience that is essentially unsayable: a threshold is crossed, beyond which explanations can no longer be offered:
The living cannot recognize their own essential proximity to death without negating themselves, and this contradiction acts as the seal guarding the most sacred and profound mystery of human existence. As an experience of self-negation, revolutionary violence is the arrheton par excellence, the unsayable that perpetually overwhelms the possibility of language and eludes all justification (OLV, 109).

If revolutionary violence contains its own immanent justification, this is paradoxically because it carries us to a dispossessive threshold situated beyond all explanation. Only what is essentially inappropriable can properly contain its own immanent justification.

This allows us to clarify the relation of violence to “culture” invoked at the outset of our discussion. If (as Agamben proposes)²⁰ cultural production can be regarded as a way for humans to “make peace with death,” to reconcile us with our own finitude by providing a means to partially transcend it, then the distinction between culture and ‘politics’ can more easily be understood now. If language is this “power we wield against death,” the reconciliation offered by cultural works remains bounded by the limits of linguistic expression. Culture extends as far as the sayable, yet it “can go no further without negating itself” (OLV 109). By contrast, in the conscious confrontation with her own negation, the revolutionary is not only carried to the limits of language, speech and legitimation, but her life becomes itself the site of an existential rupture impossible by means of cultural production alone. As the rituals of sacred violence once offered an entry into the chaos of creation for primitive societies, it is the “stunning realization of the indissoluble unity of life and death, creation and negation” that breaks apart the sedimented unity of words, gestures, and things. As Agamben writes,

It is precisely by going beyond language, by negating the self and powers of speech, that humanity gains access to the original sphere where the knowledge of mystery and culture breaks apart, allowing words and deeds to generate a new beginning. […] This is both the limit and the insuppressible truth of revolutionary violence. By crossing the threshold of culture and occupying a zone inaccessible to language, revolutionary violence casts itself into the Absolute (OLV 109).

²⁰ The source of this definition of culture is not stated in the text.
Creation and participation are broached only from within an experience of self-abolition and dispossession. The American poet Diane di Prima offers a memorable image of such militant self-immolation in her *Revolutionary Letters*, composed contemporaneously with Agamben’s own essay:

**REVOLUTIONARY LETTER #12**

the vortex of creation is the vortex of destruction
the vortex of artistic creation is the vortex of self destruction
the vortex of political creation is the vortex of flesh destruction
  flesh is in the fire, it curls and terribly warps
  fat is in the fire, it drips and sizzling sings bones
  are in the fire
  they crack tellingly in
  subtle hieroglyphs of oracle charcoal singed
  the smell of your burning hair
for every revolutionary must at last will his own destruction
rooted as he is in the past he sets out to destroy

**Conclusion**

The critique of violence sketched thus far appears to land us in a liminal position, stretched between the “eclipse” of the classical image of politics and the impossibility of formulating a new political philosophy from ‘within’ the present historical situation. In its effort to develop an immanent criterion of revolutionary action, the argument of “On the Limits of Violence” leaves us straddling two difficulties, the first epistemological and linguistic, the other existential and temporal.

(i) On the one hand, positive political philosophy appears to be imperiled by its own critical strictures: the sole action philosophically qualifiable as ‘political’ is positioned in a

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threshold recalcitrant to abstract linguistic signification: revolutionary action is defined by its unrepresentable and unclaimable, anonymous and immersive character. If we consider these qualifications to be critical limits, i.e., ways of circumscribing the condition of possibility of doing political philosophy within a context of differentiated but ubiquitous violence, philosophy appears to be able to say what these limits are in a quasi-translatable way, but not to pass through them. No general account of the experience of violence itself would appear to be conceivable, in large part because Agamben has rather brutally circumscribed the possibility of expression within it.

On the one hand, to try and ‘legitimate’ a revolutionary act by rendering it legible as a ‘signified’ within a framework of ‘just’ ends is problematic, and Agamben’s arguments to this effect seem well-founded, albeit cursory. At the same time, no other use of speech or linguistic signs are given consideration here (e.g., expressive rather than signifying speech). In his emphasis on the excess of violence over speech, its passage beyond the limits of language, we are left without an understanding of the role of speech or language in partisanship.²²

As a result, there is something deeply claustrophobic and ‘fusional’ about this early concept of authentic human action. Immanence appears to be won only by a total immersion of self in violence, one reminiscent of Bataille’s fusional idea of ‘inner experience’ as the ‘loss of self’. How are we to understand this fusion? In primitive societies, symbolic reference to an ‘originary’ chaos allowed a suspension of the profane order of time, permitting a new organization of words and things. Is there a corresponding use of symbols in the case of

²² It will not be until the seminars published as Language and Death (1982) and, much later, in The Sacrament of Language (2008) that the attempt to position the proper site of language precisely in an unrepresentable and untranslatable existential bond between subject and world will come into view. We will return to this problem in our development of the relation between destituent power and the ‘pledge’ below, where a vital attachment merges with an expressive (rather than signifying) partisan gesture.
proletarian revolt? What delimits the time and space of modern violence in Agamben’s account? How does the experience of risking death overcome personal finitude? What is the nature of the personal will vis-à-vis the collective with which one fights? How does the breakup of words and things also reorganize the relation between public and private space? Does the intimacy of an individual’s inner symbolic life merge (or not) with the collective assemblage of enunciation of insurgent violence? Since it is premised on a *participatory* relation to situated conflict, it is certain that the suspension of historical time must take on spatial components. How is this suspension circumscribed? How can the moment of immanent justification—the passage beyond all *signification of consequential ‘ends’*—take practical and symbolic form? Is there an immanent, self-justified use of signs or symbols?

(ii) How is political philosophy to reconcile its position within history with that of its proper object, this act that ruptures the causal nexus of historical time, suspending historical time? In spite of his emphasis on the importance of this “messianic halt” effected within the revolutionary act (OLV 109), it remains largely unclear how the criteria of revolutionary action (the rupture of words and things, the re-attachment to the world and the transformation of the self) directly alters the specifically temporal fabric of experience. Although the desubjectifying confrontation with death undoubtedly upends the coordinates of the subject, it is difficult to avoid the impression that it forms yet another *precondition* for creating a “new chronology, and a new experience of temporality,” without *actually describing this new experience itself*. A remark from Marx (cited by Agamben) would seem to reinforce this suspicion. If revolution, Marx writes, allows the insurgent class to “rid itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew” (OLV, 108, emphasis added), there is a risk that this rupture with time has again been placed ahead of the action, in the anticipation of a new foundation. The suspension of time
would appear to be a preparatory means toward the end of reorganizing it, again opening the way to its instrumentalization. Is it possible to imagine a creation that would not have as its terminus a constituent gesture?

(iii) As Benjamin noted, a violence that is neither lawmaking or law-preserving, one that “lays claim to neither of these predicates…[is one that] forfeits all validity” (CV 243). “On the Limits of Violence” appears to be marked throughout by an indecision as to whether to retain or abandon the framework of right. On the one hand, Agamben admits the impossibility of the very idea of justification or legitimacy (e.g., a ‘right to violence’ as the innocence of a ‘just’ struggle); on the other hand, the text constantly risks toppling back into a renewed conquest of innocence, as in the ritualistic restoration of pre-historical authority. By the end of the essay, the status of legitimacy is left hanging in a precarious ambivalence: bound to a confrontation with death and the inappropriable, legitimacy is conquered only through a moment that, by definition, cannot be claimed by a subject. Nowhere is this tension more evident than in his claim that, “only the revolutionary class can have the right (or perhaps, the terrible imperative) to violence.” The critique of violence here appears to straddle two arguably incompatible grammars: on one side, a language of ‘legitimacy’, and on the other, one of ‘vital necessity’, which can never be universal but only differential. As in the previous two points, what is again lacking is an immanent account of the rationality of insurgent practice on its own terms.

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23 The tension was perhaps inevitable given the frame from which the text set out. The distinction that permitted Agamben to widen the scope of Benjamin’s Critique and develop his own original reading—namely, that between legal and political questioning—in the end prevents him from seeing the link between his own concept of ‘externality’ (self-parenthesis) and that of Benjamin’s (ground/legitimacy). The first attempt to think these two externalities together will occur in Language and Death. However, it will not be until the preparatory studies for Homo Sacer that Agamben will recognize the immanence of the problem of legal foundation and subjective suspension. The problem will finally come to a head only much later in The Highest Poverty, without being finally resolved until the chapter on “The Inappropriable” in The Use of Bodies.
The success of “On the Limits of Violence” lies in having shifted the site of the critique of violence, a shift Benjamin calls for, without fulfilling. The essay identifies the task of political thinking with the modal differentiation between forms of action differentiated according to their maieutic or creative capacity. If revolutionary action inaugurates a ‘new historical epoch’, this will not be by realizing a strategic plan unfolded over a homogeneous time, but by the modal rupture it introduces in the nature of subjective and collective praxis itself, by its ‘suspension of time.’ In other words, Agamben succeeds in showing that to this suspension of profane time there must correspond the suspension of the hypostasized subject. While Agamben’s account of self-parenthesis and the vital risk of the experience of finitude get us closer to an immanent asymmetry in the theory of revolutionary action, this immanent phenomenology of insurgent action falls short in its account of (i) temporality, (ii) of language or signs, and (iii) of legitimacy.

Such an account is, however, found in another text composed almost exactly contemporaneously with “On the Limits of Violence”. Barely a month before Agamben would mail his essay to Arendt, Furio Jesi completed a study of the Spartacist uprising in 1919 that—without any direct influence, to our knowledge—has deep resonances with Agamben’s early theory of revolutionary action.24

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CHAPTER 2
FURIO JESI AND THE INSURRECTIONAL BAN

When freedom is practiced in a closed circle, it fades into a dream, becomes a mere image of itself.

GUY DEBORD

(They cannot grasp one another who lived together in remembrance.)

FRIEDRICH HÖLDERLIN

Introduction

In December of 1969, fifty years after the commencement of the German Revolution of 1919, the self-taught Germanist, philosopher, and mythologist Furio Jesi completed Spartakus - The Symbology of Revolt, a phenomenological study of the role of myth in the ‘Spartacist’ revolt in Berlin. Like Benjamin’s Critique of Violence (1921), itself published amidst the final throes of the failed revolution, Spartakus is an effort to work through the defeat of a mass uprising. A year earlier, when the risings at Nanterre and the Sorbonne led to barricades in the streets and a rapid-fire wave of wildcat factory takeovers, Jesi traveled to Paris to participate in the May insurgency. At its height, two-thirds of the country joined a nationwide general strike

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27 Placed in scare quotes because the Spartacist League in fact neither organized nor spearheaded it, and in some cases (Luxemburg among them) even argued against it, though they participated until its final moments anyway. For primary source historical materials related to the German Revolution, see Gabriel Kuhn (ed), All Power to the Councils! A Documentary History of the German Revolution of 1918-1919 (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 24-142.
28 Biographical information is drawn from Andrea Cavalletti’s editorial introduction (SSR, 5-9). Cavalletti discovered the lost manuscript of Spartakus in 2000, twenty years after Jesi’s premature death in 1980 (apparently due to a carbon monoxide poisoning accident, according to his Italian Wikipedia entry). It is perhaps worth noting that, according to David Kishik, Agamben was also in Paris in May of 1968, although little is known of either his or Jesi’s participation therein. See David Kishik, The Power of Life. Agamben and the Coming Politics (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 1.
that brought the entire French economy to a halt. When the movement was eventually routed back into parliamentarian channels and ‘normal time’ was restored, he returned to Northern Italy. As he neared completion of *Spartakus*, his hometown of Turin became the epicenter of the ‘Hot Autumn’ of 1969, a wave of strikes, occupations, sabotage, riots and bombings that spilled beyond the walls of the factories and universities, enveloping wide sections of the population and setting in motion a plurivocal wave of social struggles that would continue to rumble across the industrialized north of Italy with increasing ferocity for nearly a decade.29

Situated between a revolt that failed and another sequence of struggle just gathering steam, the hypothesis of *Spartakus* is that the failure to reckon in a sufficiently immanent way with the epiphanic character of insurrectonal experience has elided the strategic significance of the event of ‘revolt’ for revolutionary politics. Jesi aims to respond to this lacuna by elevating the phenomenon of insurrection to the status of a determinate *concept*. At issue is a space and time of ‘pure revolt’ with a distinctive mode of collective subjectivization, marked by a precise phenomenological and mythological regime of truth and action (SSR, 69).

It must be noted that such a point of view is in no sense conventional. From at least as early as Marx and Engels’ polemics against Stirner and Bakunin, insurrection has long been maligned and overlooked by the revolutionary Left, which has either marginalized and dismissed it, or subsumed it within wider causal and strategic dynamics to which it must be subordinated and contained.30 Stripped of its inner political content by reactionaries seeking to reduce it to antisocial criminality, or condemned by historicists as a ‘mistaken’, ‘harmful’, and ultimately

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30 See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, Book 3, Ch. 2.
doomed deviation from long-term, gradual revolutionary strategy, the effort has rarely been made to understand it on its own terms, through what it immediately brings into being. A theory of insurrectional *maieutics* would appear to be sorely lacking.

Jesi insists on the inadequacy of explaining revolt through economic, ideological, or instinctual mechanisms: the *event* of revolt has a positivity and objectivity that must be understood on its own terms. It does no good to simply critique it from the outside, considering only its ideological content, or its technical-instrumental consequences as they relate to long-term strategic ‘ends’. To grapple with its strategic dilemmas and dangers, a critical understanding of revolutionary violence requires we interpret these means and measures ‘internally.’ A phenomenological theory of insurrectional action must do several things:

First, it must construct the specificity of the concept of revolt by marking off its difference from ‘revolution.’ To this end, Jesi proposes a “symbology” of insurgency, in which revolt figures as a distinct regime of incorporeal transformations. Revolt alters the experience of political-ideological signs, suspending their historical-strategic signification, distilling them into ‘genuine collective symbols’ on the basis of which a collective and partisan inhabitation of the situation becomes possible.

Next, this transformation of signs must be given a genetic account. How is it inscribed within the conditions of concrete time and space? Unlike the ‘dynamic’ genesis characteristic of historical time, in which events follow one another along a continuous series of causal concatenations, revolt figures among those phenomena whose genesis is apparently ‘static’,
marked by the quasi-miraculous character of being born fully-formed or self-contained. They mark a point of bifurcation, an interruption of the actual causal series. An insurgent symbology therefore demands a non-historicist account of insurrectional temporality, or what (following Benjamin) Jesi will refer to as a ‘suspension of historical time’. The experience of suspended time or ‘instantaneity’ fundamentally alters the nature of choice and action, opening up a new existential vista from which to assess the apparent *immediacy* of the meaning of political violence to its protagonists. By the same token, however, the power generated by the incommensurability of the two temporal orders can become an impassible aporia if we remain incapable of thinking the conditions that permit one to ‘leap’ from revolt into revolution, from a temporary to a durable suspension of time, from the suspension of time to its *reorganization*. For a variety of reasons, it will not suffice to simply re-toggle the idea of a ‘permanent revolution’ into the permanence of a collective refuge in the symbolic space and time of revolt. Given that its modality is one of ‘suspension’, and given that one cannot live forever in suspended time, the central problem raised by Jesi’s symbolistic phenomenology will naturally be to identify the conditions under which the energies typically directed into revolt could be granted a lasting consistency. To this end, the identification of the power of revolt must be coupled with a sober assessment of its dangers and limits. What are the symbolic mechanisms that work to block the transformation of revolt into revolution, that trap an uprising at the stage of the riot, or, more precisely, of the riot conceived of as the *battle*? What sacrificial traps and mythologemes does the crystallization of time in events of revolt carry with it? The identification and neutralization

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31 The opposition is borrowed from Gilles Deleuze’s *Logic of Sense*, Trans. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), *passim*, esp. Ch. 19 and 21: “Humor is the art of the surfaces and of the doubles, of nomad singularities and of the always displaced aleatory point; it is the art of the static genesis, the savoir-faire of the pure event, and the ‘fourth person singular’—with every signification, denotation, and manifestation suspended, all height and depth abolished” (141).
of vestigial survivals of ‘bourgeois’ myth constitutes a terrain of struggle specific to the scholar, a practical means to carry the embers of insurgency into the domain of theory and continue the fight at another level. Jesi’s term for such a theoretical struggle is demythologization.

Finally, the problem of historical memory proves decisive on two accounts here, in both active and passive roles. On the one hand, the revolutionary tradition has frequently made a propagandistic or technical use of myth to achieve its ends. It is extremely common for militants to ‘actively’ draw on the mythic power enveloped within the memory of past revolts (as exemplified by the choice of the name “Spartakus,” which calls up the famous Roman slave revolt). By inscribing these charged symbols within the present of historical time, revolutionaries make a mythical use of historical time that proves decisive for the modification of experience within revolt, conferring a symbolic cohesion on the insurgent collectivity. Yet this active invocation can—now in a passive mode—generate harmful effects in the moment of revolt, giving rise to vilifying hallucinations of the class enemy that render them blind to considerations of strategy and leave them open to manipulation by their enemies. An insurgent symbology must therefore reckon with the use of memory internal to the suspended time of revolt, which proves to be a double-edged sword, a pharmakon to be handled delicately. On the other hand, after the event has been crushed or routed, a separate danger arises, namely the mechanisms that ‘capture’ insurgent memory within the apparatus of revolutionary hagiography. Positioned within, and therefore beholden to, the ‘normal time’ whose restoration was purchased by their very murder at the hands of counter-revolutionaries, such hagiography risks strengthening the link between revolt and sacrifice, which only buries the dead even deeper. How can we free what is powerful in the memory of past revolts, while avoiding the thanatological trap of heroism and martyrdom?
Before turning to Jesi’s analysis of it, a brief recapitulation of the context and themes surrounding the Spartacist uprising, as well as the presence of a ‘constituent’ workerist ideology therein, will help to establish its relevance to the wider concern of our study, namely the problem of destituent power.

**Historical and Ideological Backdrop of the Spartacist Uprising of 1919**

In the wake of the Russian revolution, a wave of mass strikes in Germany toward the end of the First World War began to take on the form of soviet-style ‘councils’, in whom authoritative or ‘legitimate’ political power was held by their protagonists to reside. As the Revolutionary Steward leader Richard Müller put it in late 1918, “the workers’ and soldiers’ councils…represent the sovereignty of the state.” However, in spite of their tremendous social power and the widespread presence of explicitly revolutionary aspirations, the majority of the trade unions proved “unable to overcome the simulacrum of parliamentary democracy within their own ranks.” This tension surrounding the contested notion of constituent power and its role within the dynamics of counter-revolution forms the decisive backdrop to the Spartacist uprising.

In late October 1918, when the High Command of the German Navy ordered its fleets to fight a final, almost certainly futile battle, sailors at the Kiel and Wilhelmshaven navel bases

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32 Richard Müller, “Report by the Executive Council of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils of Great Berlin,” speech given at the General Congress on December 16, 1918. Reprinted in Kuhn, *op cit.*, 32. Müller was a leading figure in the Revolutionary Stewards.

mutinied and seized the ships. On November 4th, they formed themselves into soldiers’ and workers’ councils and took over the city of Kiel. The next day, mass demonstrations in support of the mutiny erupted in Hamburg and Lübeck. In Hamburg, a general strike broke out, as crowds took hold of warships, occupied the port, trade union offices, and train stations. After a gunfight at the barracks that left several dead, the workers armed themselves. Yet rather than engaging in redistribution and communization of food or expropriations of factories, the council instead opted for a mutual recognition agreement with the city government, and—counterposing ‘proletarian’ to ‘bourgeois’ democracy, yet without rejecting the latter—set about organizing its own council elections.

By November 7th, mass demonstrations had spread to Bremen, Stuttgart, Munich, Frankfurt and Brunswick. King Ludwig II abdicated the same day, and with Kaiser Wilhelm III out of the country in Belgium at the time, the old governmental order collapsed. Between the 1st and the 15th of November, soldier and worker councils managed to seize control of numerous major German cities—Leipzig, Hamburg, Bremen, Brunswick, Düsseldorf, Hanover, Mülheim

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an der Ruhr, and elsewhere—but undertook no revolutionary measures of the sort Lenin would recommend the following April, effectively leaving the ruling bourgeois institutions in place.\footnote{“[H]ave councils of workers and servants been formed in the different sections of the city; have the workers been armed; have the bourgeoisie been disarmed; has use been made of the stocks of clothing and other items for immediate and extensive aid to the workers, and especially to the farm laborers and small peasants; have the capitalist factories and wealth in Munich and the capitalist farms in its environs been confiscated; have mortgage and rent payments by small peasants been cancelled; have the wages of farm laborers and unskilled workers been doubled or [tripled]; have all paper stocks and all printing-presses been confiscated so as to enable popular leaflets and newspapers to be printed for the masses; has the six-hour working day with two or three-hour instruction in state administration been introduced; have the bourgeoisie in Munich been made to give up surplus housing so that workers may be immediately moved into comfortable flats; have you taken over all the banks; have you taken hostages from the ranks of the bourgeoisie; have you introduced higher rations for the workers than for the bourgeoisie; have all the workers been mobilized for defense and for ideological propaganda in the neighboring villages?” V.I. Lenin, “Message Of Greetings To The Bavarian Soviet Republic”, \textit{Collected Works}, 4th English Edition, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1972 Volume 29, 325-326. Online here: https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/apr/27.htm ; Cf. Dauvé, \textit{op cit}, Ch. 6.}

In the space left open by the abdication of the old order and the absence of revolutionary measures on the part of the councils, not one but three ‘republican declarations’ occurred within three days. Kurt Eisner (Independent Social Democratic Party, or USPD) declared Bavaria a republic that same day on November 7th, while two days later in Berlin Philipp Scheidemann (Social Democratic Party, or SPD) and Karl Liebknecht (Spartacist League) each respectively declared Germany a ‘republic’ and a ‘socialist republic’ only hours apart, each from different points in the city. What ensued was an object lesson in what Agamben will call the ‘dialectic of constituent and constituted power.’

A provisional government was formed on November 10th, drawn equally from SPD and USPD members. It consisted of a twenty-four member Executive Council of the worker and soldier councils of Berlin in whom political power was formally vested, and a six-member Council of People’s Delegates. Although the latter’s sole official purpose was to administer the councils’ interests, the relation between the two bodies quickly became contested. The Delegates quickly began acting independently, refusing to recognize the authority of the councils, even...
frontally attacking their more radical factions.\textsuperscript{36} On December 6, counter-revolutionary army units acting under the auspices of the SPD attacked an unarmed demonstration of left-wing soldiers in Berlin, killing sixteen; four days later an armed group of former Royal Guards entered Berlin and pledged allegiance to the Council of Peoples’ Delegates, but not to the Executive Council of workers’ and soldiers’ councils. The identity of the ‘constituent’ power in the situation had become a battleground fought over by divergent constituted factions, a “relationship of competition rather than collaboration,” as Müller lamented (ibid). As Luxemburg put it on December 11, “political sovereignty lay with the Executive Council, while Ebert and his colleagues had managed to seize actual political power.”\textsuperscript{37}

From December 16-21, 1918, a General Congress of Councils took place in Berlin. The revolutionary steward Ernst Däumig hailed the event as the “first revolutionary parliament of Germany,” still holding out hope that the councils might take their ‘sovereignty’ seriously and begin flexing an authority that had thus far remained largely nominal. The SPD factions had been strongly pushing for a constituent assembly to occur as soon as possible, which would be tasked with deciding the form of the future German republic. As the SPD leadership saw it, now that the ‘party of the working class had seized [parliamentary] power,’ the violent and mass action phase of the revolution was a fait accompli, and the rest was just a matter of time, i.e., a slow and peaceful process of socialization contingent on the maturation of the productive forces to their ‘ultimate stage’. It was this same viewpoint that had led SPD trade union leaders to sign a cooperation agreement with industry leaders a month earlier on November 15th, at which point

\textsuperscript{36} For a point-by-point description of how this relationship “became unbearable,” see Müller’s address to the General Council on December 16, in Kuhn, \textit{op cit.} 35-37, and Luxemburg’s article entitled “The Executive Council” from December 11, likewise in Kuhn (96-98).

\textsuperscript{37} Luxemburg, “The Executive Council” (\textit{Die Rote Fahne}, no. 26, Dec. 11, 1918), in Kuhn, \textit{op cit.}, 97.
its chairman Friedrich Ebert had promised the heads of industry to ‘maintain order’ by suppressing the radicals in their ranks.\textsuperscript{38}

If the SPD’s maneuver was to identify the revolution with the constituent assembly, forcibly insisting upon the representative identity of the constituent power of proletarian legitimacy and its appearance \textit{within} the constituted institution of bourgeois democracy, the left-wing’s riposte attempted to pull them apart, in order to preserve the independence of one side, by identifying the gains of the revolution exclusively with the self-governance of the councils. As Hugo Eberlein stated, “The industrial organizations must enjoy complete autonomy.”\textsuperscript{39} Revolutionary Stewards like Müller and Däumig fervently opposed the national assembly as nothing but a “political suicide club,” the “imminent self-castration of the [council] congress, and hence, [of] the revolution.”\textsuperscript{40} The national assembly, Däumig stated, would be a “death sentence” for the council system, since the latter would of necessity find itself marginalized and eventually run out of the factories and shops. In their eyes (as for the Spartacists), the council system “is, and \textit{has to be}, the organizational structure of modern revolutions.”\textsuperscript{41} As Luxemburg had stated in an article in \textit{Die Rote Fahne} a month prior, the intention of those pushing the assembly was “to sabotage any further revolutionary progress and to protect bourgeois property and capitalist exploitation.”\textsuperscript{42}

However, when the dust settled on December 21st, the Social Democratic Party had managed to convince a majority faction of the General Congress of Councils to proceed with the

\textsuperscript{38} Martin Comack, \textit{Wild Socialism, op cit.}, Ch. 8.
\textsuperscript{40} Ernst Däumig, “The National Assembly Means the Councils’ Death,” a speech given at the first General Congress of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils of Germany in Berlin, December 19, 1918. Reprinted in Kuhn, \textit{op cit.}, 41, 43.
\textsuperscript{41} Däumig, “The National Assembly,” \textit{op cit.}, 42.
\textsuperscript{42} Rosa Luxemburg, “The Usual Game”, in Kuhn, \textit{op cit.}, 85. Originally published as “Das alte spiel” in \textit{Die Rote Fahne}, no. 3, November 18, 1918.
constituent assembly, which was scheduled to occur a month later. While certain regions opted for a more radical approach—in Bavaria, Saxony, Brunswick and Braunschweig the councils deposed local authorities and seized power—at a national scale, the councils had for all intents and purposes ceded political power to the Council of Peoples’ Delegates, and restored bourgeois parliamentary democracy. “After having seized power, the council immediately relinquished it, seeking legitimacy instead.”

The left-wing’s fears had not been misplaced. No sooner was the National Assembly approved, than Ebert (SPD) kept his promise to the capitalist industrialists, and set about wiping-out the remaining concentrations of armed revolutionary forces. He began by provoking 3000 left-leaning Volksmarinedivision who had traveled from Kiel to Berlin to ‘defend the conquests of the revolution’, by denying their pay. On December 24th, when the soldiers responded by occupying the Chancellery, Ebert directed security forces to launch an artillery offensive, killing and wounding 60, a slaughter halted only by a spontaneous mass demonstration that surrounded the counter-revolutionary soldiers and forced them to retreat. For many on the left, the Weihnachtskämpfe (‘Christmas clashes’) shattered any remaining hopes of a revolutionary use of parliamentarian institutions. USDP members withdrew from the Council of Delegates, with many others defecting from the party altogether. Among the SPD figures who replaced the departed USPD delegates was Gustav Noske (SPD), who would mastermind the notoriously bloody suppression of the proletarian uprisings across the country over the next two years.

With the SPD openly collaborating with the bourgeoisie to suppress politically contentious workers, no ‘class party’ remained in Germany, an organ many deemed essential for the progression of the revolution. At the Spartakusbund Congress on December 31, a motion was

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43 Dauvé & Authier, op cit., Ch. 5.
consequently passed to form an independent party, leading to the founding of the German Communist Party (KPD). While it is true that the January uprising emerged as a more or less spontaneous response to the unexpectedly large crowds that took the streets on January 5th to oppose the SPD’s dismissal of Emil Eichhorn, the decisive anti-parliamentarian turn that informed this spontaneous action had been sealed a week earlier at the KPD’s inaugural congress. Although all who were present at the Congress recognized the priority of action in the streets or the factories, certain left factions still entertained the possibility of using bourgeois democratic forums prior to the revolution. Their suspicions of the constituent assembly notwithstanding, a heated debate at the KPD’s inaugural Congress took place concerning the possibility of a purely ‘tactical’ use of parliament. Luxemburg argued vehemently in favor of using the National Assembly as a tribune to inspire the masses to abandon electoralism, but failed to win over a majority. The KPD’s supposedly ‘politically inexperienced’ members no longer wanted to “hear any nonsense about classical politics,” and their “hostile shouts often interrupted the speeches of Luxemburg and Levi.” For these young left-communists, no participation in bourgeois democracy was any longer imaginable—even for propaganda, even as a tribune. To this majority, the ‘constituent’ assembly signified nothing more than a partisan maneuver by hostile constituted powers aimed at derailing the implementation of substantively irreversible revolutionary measures. ‘The truth of social democracy is the Freikorps’—this sensible evidence formed the shared perception of those who would seize the moment during the

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44 Emil Eichhorn was head of Berlin police at the time, and a vocal member of the USPD. His refusal to attack demonstrators during the Christmas Clashes provoked his dismissal on January 4th, 1919.
45 Dauvé & Authier, op cit. Ch. 6.
Eichhorn demonstrations a week later, spearheading the uprising. Dauvé and Authier sum up the sentiments of those who undertook the January uprising as follows:

Elections and electoral institutions are some of the most effective ways to detour revolutionary energy, and drown the radical minority under the opinions of proletarians who are still under social democratic influence. The only way to free them from that influence is action in the factory and the streets, not the utilization of an institution which is alien to the revolutionaries and in which they will always be sure to end up losing, no matter how many delegates they elect.

The Spartacist uprising arose from a desire to pull apart the binary machine of constituent and constituted power, by splintering the bourgeois democratic form along class lines, thereby exposing its treacherous, ballistic implications. To sever the representative identity between the councils and their constituted parliamentary representatives, the class enemy had to be dragged down to the level of the streets, where it would be forced to exhibit the unseemly truth of its false universality. Rending its two poles apart did not, however, mean destituting the constituent/constituted opposition, which continued to function: a ‘legitimate’ constituent subject of the revolution was held to exist, it simply resided outside electoral politics, in the rank and file councils of the working class. This led to an ambivalence where the question of state power was concerned: on the one hand, there was an effort to shatter the symbols of power, to drag the state back down to earth, to expose its lie, to strip it of legitimacy; on the other hand (as Jesi will show), these same symbols continued to exercise a “fascination,” i.e., they continued to appear as “objective and transcendent symbols of power that today belongs to the exploiters and

46 As Johann Knief put it in January, 1919, “universal suffrage has been…a sign that the bourgeoisie has defeated the working class.” Johann Knief, From the Collapse of German Imperialism to the Beginning of the Revolution, in Invariance, Texts of the Revolutionary Workers Movement, No. 4, 1996. Cited in Dauvé & Authier, “Epilogue.”
47 Dauvé and Authier, op cit., “Appendix.”
48 As Hugo Eberlein declared, “The organizations of the old SPD, except for periodic elections, were inert and empty. […] We must construct our organization on totally different foundations. We demand that the workers and soldiers councils exercise all political power. The factory councils are the basis of power. Our organization must be adapted to this situation. It would then be best, probably, to create communist groups in the factories. It cannot be tolerated that orders should be imposed from above. The industrial organizations must enjoy complete autonomy.” Waldmann, op cit., 155-156.
tomorrow will belong to the exploited” (SSR 80). The conviction that the revolutionary form of the councils represented the truly ‘sovereign claimant’ meant that the councils opposed themselves not to a democratic state *per se* but to one managed by the class traitors of the SPD. As Däumig put it in his address to the General Congress in December of 1918, “with socialism emerging as the new foundation of the world, bourgeois democracy will inevitably be replaced by proletarian democracy, expressed in the council system.”49 This faith in the essential legitimacy of workerist sovereignty generated, as Dauvé and Authier note, “an attitude informed by opposition to the State, but which did not seek its destruction”:

> The extreme left mobilized not to destroy the State in leftist guise…but to purge this Statist left of its reactionary elements (the SPD); it intended, therefore, to purify the State…What was tragic about this was not the fact that some revolutionaries tried to carry out an action which would be judged *a posteriori* to be hopeless, but that once they went into action they would only go *halfway*.50

This ambivalence as regards the state—the end result of a faith in constituent democracy—sapped the revolutionary purpose of many participants in the Spartacist uprising. Already on the second day of the uprising, portions of the USPD (the other main block of participants, alongside the KPD) began unilaterally negotiating with Noske, even violating the confidence of their own ranks who had committed themselves to the battle. Their indecision bought the counter-revolutionary forces crucial time to prepare the crushing of the insurrection: “the reconquest began on the 7th and showed no mercy. The besieged occupiers of *Vorwärts* were murdered when they left the building under the terms of a cease-fire” (ibid).

49 Däumig, “The National Assembly,” *op cit.*, 43.
50 Dauvé and Authier, *op cit.*, Ch. 7.
Myth, Propaganda, and the Phenomenology of Subversion

Why do insurrections fail? If the principal problem lay in the limitations placed on the insurgents’ strategy by an ideologically ambivalent concept of ‘workerist sovereignty’, it could hypothetically be solved by a combination of radical agitation or consciousness-raising and a corresponding long-term strategy based on a correct assessment of the economic and social forces composing the given situation. Beginning at least with Marx’s analysis of the Paris Commune, the effort to assess defeats has frequently emphasized this collusion of strategic and historical factors on the one hand, and the imposition (or not) of irreversible measures on the other. Such a line of thought might resemble the following:

Was the situation genuinely revolutionary? Was the legitimacy of the ruling order discredited to the point where the dominant classes could not govern in the old way? Did the oppressed classes no longer want to be governed in the old way?\(^1\) If so, were the insurgent forces sufficiently organized? Did their strategic maneuvers allow them to secure the material means to prevent being isolated, and ensure the spread of the movement (adequate fuel and rations, access to logical flows such as roads and ports, efficient local and regional coordination, effective use of media and communication technology, etc.)? Were the counter-revolutionary forces scattered wherever possible, and prevented from regrouping? Were key sectors of the economy blockaded, ensuring the halt of everyday life and the polarization of moderate and centrist elements? Were battles conducted so as to ensure maximal damage and minimal losses for the weaker force? Were the material assets of the bourgeoisie seized and redistributed, the state coffers emptied, factories and large estates repurposed? Was the ballistic asymmetry simply too great to overcome?

In short, there is a tendency to look to the constellation of causal forces within the given, those that compose the present situation in its given actuality. Yet, its evident importance notwithstanding, there remains a flaw in this way of thinking. Whatever the circumstances, the fact is that the time is never ripe. The reason for this lies neither exclusively in the socio-ideological consciousness of the masses or the vanguard, nor in the material dynamics of the movement itself, but in the very nature of revolt qua event. If Jesi’s intervention is strategic and

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\(^1\) This two-fold definition of a revolutionary situation is taken from Lenin. For Jesi’s remarks on it, see SSR, 174. For Lenin’s strategic recommendations to the Bavarian Soviet Republic, see footnote 34 above.
partisan, he will nonetheless not pass directly to such logistical or ideological problems, but first of all to what we might call ‘existential’ or phenomenological considerations. There is, he argues, a mutation in the experience of time, choice, and meaning that is indissociable from moments of revolt, one that no amount of planning or preparation can dampen or circumvent. To say this is not to dismiss ideological or logistical considerations; it is, however, to grant situational or phenomenological priority to the existential register, on the grounds that it is on this terrain that the relation between ideological symbols and logistical-ballistic movements on the ground are configured (for example, if the selection of targets depends on how the symbols of the enemy disclose themselves and are interpreted, and if the latter are subject to a mythic crystallization transforming the collective subjectivization of the combatants, then this will have direct implications for what transpires in course of the battle).

Jesi’s way into the problem will be through a polemical and ironic adoption of Karl Kerenyi’s distinction between ‘genuine’ and ‘technicized’ mythic experience, which (modified accordingly) will allow him to isolate the dangerous survivals of bourgeois myth inside the experience of proletarian insurgency, the symbolic lures that trap insurrectional events on the path of a suicidal and sacrificial Manichæism (SSR, 23). What is a ‘symbol,’ on Jesi’s view? What conception of myth is at work here?

In his first book, Secret Germany (1967), Jesi likens the presence of myth in 20th century German culture to a pharmakon: “medicine but also poison, a source of renewed humanism and an instrument of barbarism and crime.” Myth can be a ‘source’ enveloping a power drawn from the deepest wells of human experience, or it can find itself reduced to an ‘instrument’ in the

service of a pre-determined goal. The distinction is not so much moral as it is qualitative, with each pole having its own characteristic dangers. For example, while genuine myth has, on the whole, played a “positive and beneficent” role in human history, its concrete entry into human affairs (particularly in artistic, and—as we shall see—political life) can nonetheless be marked by “dark and terrifying” metamorphoses, passive syntheses that transform their bearers into patients of disturbing visions. Inversely, although it has at times been deployed in ‘criminal’ and ‘iniquitous’ ways, there is nothing a priori immoral about the instrumental use of myth, since its moral significance (albeit lacking genuine mythic character) is relative to the ends it serves.

The distinction between ‘genuine’ and ‘technicized’ myth originates in the work of Karl Kerenyi, Jesi’s mentor in the mid-1960’s. Kerenyi belongs to a generation of post-WWI historians and mythologists who sought to rescue myth from its derivative status as a pre-civilized ‘savage’ stage in the progressive development of human thought. 19th century positivist comparative mythology had refused to recognize myth as a specific form of human expression, a system of language unto itself that deserves to be decoded. The positivist tendency was to reduce myth either to a phantasmatic aberration of a primordial and naturalistic logical structure of thinking, or else to little more than the index of a disjointed series of religious rituals and social facts having no internal coherency or consistency, and least of all any claim to legitimate meaning in the face of conceptual reason.53 The general conviction was that “mythology is really something otherwise than what it purports itself to be (the infancy of reason, proto-science, archetypes, the despotic musings of power hungry priests, the overarching ambitions of a poetic

instinct, culture-wide delusional thinking, etc.).”\footnote{54} Although they were anticipated in certain respects by Schelling’s philosophy of myth, it was the ‘symbolists’ (and later, the structuralists) who most forcefully pushed back against this reductionistic teleological positivism. For thinkers such as Cassirer, Eliade, Jung and Kerenyi, it is an error to evaluate mythical symbols according to the standards of conceptual knowledge, to accept or reject its contents as either ‘irrational’ or ‘proto-rational,’ for mythic symbols envelop an altogether distinct type of expression.\footnote{55} The force of the symbolist approach to myth lies in their insistence on the qualitative difference between the mythical symbol and the sign. A sign, it will be recalled, has what Saussure famously described as an ‘arbitrary’ relation to the signified, and, being reversible and interchangeable (a given signified can always function as a signifier at another level), it can only operate diacritically or ‘allegorically’ within a referential system that confers on it determinate rules and operations.\footnote{56} By contrast, for the symbolists there is “something ‘natural’ or ‘concrete’ about the symbol.”\footnote{57} The symbol does not refer to an object outside of itself; rather, as the late

\footnote{54} Jason M. Wirth, “Forward,” in F.W.J Schelling, \textit{Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology}, Trans. Mason Ritchey and Marcus Zisselsberger (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), xii. Cf. also Mircea Eliade, \textit{Myth and Reality}, Trans. Willard R. Trask (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1963), 1-3: “To grasp the meaning of these strange forms of behavior, to understand the cause and the justification for these excesses…is to see them as human phenomena, phenomena of culture, creations of the human spirit, not as a pathological outbreak of instinctual behavior, bestiality, or sheer childishness.”


\footnote{56} Modern (i.e. post-Saussurian) linguistics is premised on the idea that, as Benveniste summarizes it, “a linguistic form constitutes a definite structure: (1) it is a global unit embracing various parts; (2) these parts are in a formal arrangement that obeys certain constant principles; (3) that which gives the character of a structure to the form is that the constituent parts serve a function; (4) finally, these constitutive parts are units on a certain level, each unit of a specific level becomes a subunit of the level above”. The outcome of this view is that “language is a system in which nothing is significant in and of itself, but in which everything is significant as an element of the pattern; structure confers upon the parts their ‘meaning’ or their function.” By contrast with the symbol, therefore, a system of signs “is characterized less by what it expresses than by what it distinguishes at all levels. […] [Within] the synchrony of a system…all values are values of opposition and are defined only by their difference” See Emile Benveniste, \textit{Problems in General Linguistics}, Trans. Mary Meek (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1971), 20-21, 48 [\textit{Orig}: 1962]. On the confusions surrounding the term ‘arbitrary’, which in fact concerns not the internal nature of the sign (the relation of signifier and signified at a given level, all of which are strictly ‘necessary’) but only the extrinsic relation between the sign and the ‘material objects’ referred to in speech, see 43-48.

\footnote{57} Vernant, “Reason and Myth,” \textit{op cit.}, 237.
Schelling put it (borrowing a term from Coleridge), its nature is “tautegorical.”  

It is neither a reflective sign by which an individual constructs an arbitrary ‘reality’ of their own making, nor can its origin be understood by reference only to other symbols. Rather, standing on its own, constituting a presence unto itself, the mythic symbol is ‘self-interpretive.’ We might say (with Vernant) that it “belongs to what it expresses,” that it is what it symbolizes. On some accounts, such symbols may be held to issue from a pre-reflective immersion of the human soul in the divine substance of the cosmos (as with Schelling). In any event, we are dealing less with an act of intellectual comprehension than an affective and libidinal aspiration that finds itself imaginatively projected onto external representations. The symbol is “associated with the effort to translate that which, in the intimate experience of the psuchē, or collective unconscious, cannot be contained within the limits of the concept and eludes the categories of the understanding.”

Although this projection of humankind’s deepest longings and “intimations of the sacred” might not possess the stability of a body of conceptual knowledge, its significance lies elsewhere. What the study of mythic symbols seeks to think and recognize is not a proto- or alter-conceptual system, but a dynamic and living tension that installs itself between the human and these fluid, diffuse, and polysemic forms, a tension that has continuously marked the history of humankind for millennia. At its heights, the symbolist interpretation will see in this tension something on the order of a universal anthropological truth, a “constant impulse aiming toward

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58 “In consequence of the necessity with which also the form emerges, mythology is thoroughly actual—that is, everything in it is thus to be understood as mythology expresses it, not as if something else were thought, something else said. Mythology is not allegorical; it is tautegorical.” F.W.J Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, op cit., 136. For an insightful interpretation of Schelling’s conception of myth in its relation to the sociology of Eric Voegelin, see Jerry Day, *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), esp. 71-74.


60 Cf. “To re-experience that time, to re-enact it as often as possible, to witness again the spectacle of the divine works, to meet with the Supernaturals and relearn their creative lesson is the desire that runs like a pattern through all the ritual reiterations of myths.” Mircea Eliade, *Myth and History*, *op cit.*, 19.
something beyond,” the fluidity of which at the same time allows it to be “constantly charged with new meanings.”

In a 1964 lecture delivered in Rome, Kerenyi accordingly defines ‘genuine myth’ by its power to install a collective linguistic reality, a single world or ‘cosmos’ in which its adherents participate. As Enrico Manera notes, for Kerenyi ‘genuine myth’ refers to “a force that ‘grabs and shapes’ archaic man's consciousness,” a “spontaneous form uninterested in the mind, a sort of constituent, imaginative faculty inside which elements of the reality of a social group are formed.” The mythic images, statues and stories of Antiquity provided a site through which human beings could restore contact with what Goethe refers to as an Urphänomenon, a “festive experience in which the community made contact with itself.” In keeping with the symbolist interpretation outlined above, for both Kerenyi and Jesi the self-sufficient character of mythic symbols as “closed in” or “resting in themselves” (as Bachhofen put it) is essential to their capacity to function as anchors of collective experience (SSR 36). If the appearance of such symbols contains a self-sufficient truth, this is not by their capacity to represent a reality external to themselves; for the Ancients, the inverse was rather the case: so-called ‘real’ or historical events in the present “reflected themselves in myth so as to acquire reality and truth…the experience of reality was, above all, mythical” (SSR 35-36). It was not the evidence of the present, but the latter’s reflection in the ‘true history’ of myth that authenticated a truth.

61 Vernant, “Reason and Myth,” op cit., 237-238. Jung and Eliade represent its most universalist tendencies.
64 Kerenyi, ibid, 4.
In modernity, however, access to such symbolic epiphany has become rare and specialized. Genuine experiences of myth have been supplanted by popular, degraded, and purely instrumental forms of ‘technicized myth’ that are as far as possible from an immediate collective experience of the world. For Kerenyi, nothing is more exemplary of the voluntaristic invocation of ancient mythologemes than modern political propaganda (of which Sorel offered a key example). Whereas, in the decade prior to 1919, Sorel’s passionate defense of the myth of the proletarian strike in his Reflections on Violence succeeded in provoking a reappraisal and renewed experience of myth as a perennial reservoir latent in human beings, by the end of the Second World War an understandable backlash against Himmler and Goebbels’ technicization of myth had generated a deep suspicion, if not discredit, of its political value. Nowhere is this suspicion more clearly voiced than in Thomas Mann’s Dr. Faustus:

Sorel’s unrelenting prediction of war and anarchy, his characterization of Europe as the soil of armed cataclysms, his theory that the nations of this continent have always been able to unite around only one idea, that of engaging in war—all that entitled this to be called the book of the age. And what justified the term even more was his insight and declaration that in the era of the masses, parliamentary discussion would necessarily prove utterly inadequate as a means of shaping political will; that in the future what was needed in its place were mythic fictions, which would be fed to the masses as the primitive battle cries necessary for unleashing and activating political energies. This was in fact the book’s crude and intriguing prophecy: that henceforth popular myths, or better, myths trimmed for the masses, would be the vehicle of political action—fables, chimeras, phantasms that needed to have nothing whatever to do with truth, reason, or science in order to be productive nonetheless, to determine life and history, and thereby to prove themselves dynamic realities.

By imposing a hard distinction between genuine and technicized myth, Kerenyi sought to rescue ‘genuine’ mythical experience from modern decadence, by driving a wedge between its authentic truth and its abuse at the hands of politicians and militants. As a result, its authentic experience will end up being the exclusive purview of an elite few, ‘true teachers’ and ‘poets’,

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65 Cf. “[T]he technifiers of myth: those who enslave myth for their own ends, mutating it and losing its original reality.” Jesi, Secret Germany, op cit., Ch. 3.
such as his friend Thomas Mann. Kerenyi’s thought thereby drifts toward a conservative esotericism, wherein the condition for safeguarding a genuine experience of mythic truth—itself inherently collective—becomes the foreclosure of any collective participation in it.

Jesi does not deny that genuine forms of myth enter into crisis whenever a “personal path to truth” takes precedence, “excluding the great common denominator of myth and its ancestral truthfulness” (SSR 37). However, while Kerenyi is certainly right to emphasize the permanent risk of pseudo-myth in modern propaganda (“deformed” and “monstrous” survivals, or simply “organized lying”), this need not entail a simple identification between the two (SRR 38). Nor does it imply that genuine myth must be remain the exclusive purview of elite teachers and scholars. The ironic maneuver of Spartakus consists in remaining faithful to Kerenyi’s symbolist criterion of ‘genuine’ mythic experience, while simultaneously stripping it of its elitist implications, allowing it to assume a renewed political significance.

If “the fate of myth [has today come] to be identified with that of propaganda,” this does not entail that genuinely collective experience of either as truth has become impossible (SSR 37). In fact, Jesi argues, it may even be precisely in forms of revolutionary propaganda that an authentic experience of myth is most visible in the contemporary world. However, there is a clearly an analytic hurdle that must first be overcome. For, given that every recourse to myth for the sake of propaganda is by definition ‘technicized’ in as much as it serves strategic ends (e.g., the strengthening of anti-capitalist struggle through the promotion of militant class consciousness), to speak of an ‘authentic’ propaganda implies that the experience of its truth can be internally or phenomenologically distinguished from the cynical lie or propaganda. How can we parse the authentic from the false? By what criterion can genuine invocations of myth in propaganda be distinguished from their deformed technicized abuses, from ‘organized lying’?
Jesi’s argument in *Spartakus* departs from an affirmation: “I believe that both ideology and poetry evoke a collective reality, a living together” (SRR, 28).67 In other words, there is a qualitative difference between the immediate epiphany and subversive novelty of both poetic and political ideas and their “defensive reduction” in bourgeois society to “ideological formulae.” What is meant by “bourgeois” society here?

The young György Lukács’ analysis of bourgeois cultural forms offers a rubric against which the epiphanic experience of ideology can be contrasted. In his study of Theodore Storm in *Soul and Form*, Lukács defined the “historical feeling” of the bourgeois life-form through its conversion of professional obligation into a law “independent from and alien to ourselves.”68 What is decisive is the *vital* significance Lukács accords to the impoverishment of ideational experience, i.e., the relation between truth and life. For Jesi, the fact that the bourgeois life-form is marked by, as Lukács put it, a “primacy of ethics over life—life dominated by something that recurs systematically and regularly,” indicates *eo ipso* the fate that awaits both genuine myth and subversive ideology in such a world. The bourgeois life-form will react against any subversive

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67 It is not for nothing that the declaration is made in the first person. By issuing from the “I” of the thinker, the statement functions not simply as a theoretical axiom, but also wagers a personal conviction, as if it were not simply a statement *about* an experience (as from a scholarly or quasi-neutral point of view), but *from out of* this experience, on its basis. We will return to Jesi’s distinctive theory of the ‘I’ of the mythologist below.

68 György Lukács, “The Bourgeois Way of Life and Art for Art’s Sake,” in *Soul and Form*, Trans. Anna Bostock (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 75-76, 82. What Storm’s characters display is a form of life accorded value only through the regularity and systematicity of its fulfillment of duty, in which “purpose and meaning” are won exclusively through the fulfillment of socially-respected work. According to Lukács, while this “shift of the center of life outward” onto the norms of professional life might in some respects have succeeded in purchasing a relative stability for interior subjective life, its certainties come at a heavy cost. On the one hand, the momentary life of sensation and desire tend to find themselves subordinated to the abstract rule of order and the rote iteration of roles, leading to an inward neutralization of the passionate faculties; on the other, wherever dutiful obedience empirically fails to avert catastrophe, the quasi-immutable external norms that supply the bedrock of subjective certainty can offer little help, leaving a fatalistic fortitude as the only possible response to the unforeseen perils of chance. The “historical feeling” of the bourgeois therefore finds its ultimate confirmation of self in its dignified *submission* to the necessity of whatever befalls it, a paradoxically serene ‘affirmation’ of passivity in the face of history: “These men are truly strong only in their endurance…their most virile gesture is that of seeing something pass fleetingly by—life, or happiness, or joy—and merely watching it pass, eyes darkened with unshed tears. It is a strength of renunciation, of resignation, the strength of the old bourgeoisie in face of the new life;…Something vanishes, someone watches it pass…and goes on living, and is not destroyed.” (82)
ideology through a twofold ‘defensive’ mutilation, *relativizing* its contents and *externalizing* its form (i.e. removing it from the realm of desiring-attachments).⁶⁹

This two-fold character of bourgeois mutilation makes it possible to complicate Kerenyi’s account of technicization. In order for them to ‘evoke a collective experience’, poetry and ideology must possess the power to reorganize the experience of the subject around the exigency of symbols, as opposed to an extrinsic obedience to transcendently-positioned signs. Such a transformation, Jesi writes,

…affect[s] the reality of their protagonists in its entirety, showing that they are all-encompassing experiences…populated by emblems and symbols [that are] all the more real the more man—the ideologue, the poet—has transfused into them his living reality, sacrificing himself (SSR, 28).

Bourgeois society will react against such subversive experiences with the mutilation of its “leveling effect,” rigidifying the fluidly-lived exigency of *symbolic* subversion into the relativity of *signifying* paradigms. Once transposed into an abstract continuity of historical memory, calcified into systematic doctrine, ideologies may then be juxtaposed and compared from a relativistic distance, their contents transformed into ethical principles to be obeyed in the form of impersonal commandments. From a mobile and lived spark of subversion, ideas are transposed to the status of a paradigm or ‘mirror,’ rendering "every subversion relative" (SSR, 24-25). The opposition in question here is less ‘political’ than existential: not ‘Right versus Left’, but the subversive force of novelty enveloped by the idea versus its “defensive reduction” by life-forms threatened by it: “memory and continuity are thus counterposed to epiphany and subversion” (ibid).

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In order for it to evoke a collective existence, a “living together,” the idea must cease to be indifferently contemplated or extrinsically compared and instead take on a ‘global’ significance in the existence of the protagonist, altering their very experience of being. Genuine propaganda opens up a singular use of language, a distinctive mode of speaking truth (SSR, 28, 13). In a manner strongly reminiscent of Agamben’s criterion of revolutionary violence (see Ch. 1), Jesi defines genuine propaganda by the “total commitment [of its purveyors] to the struggle,” a relation to truth engaging both the rational and irrational dimensions of the psyche. Here we rediscover the theme of a political truth won precisely through the exposure to death. Genuine propaganda is “morally possible only if one is truly ready to risk one’s soul, and not just one’s official persona” (SSR 38). In the first weeks of January 1919, Luxembourg and Liebknecht proved the veracity of their propaganda by paying the ultimate price for it:

To wage one’s person on the border of death while the streets of Berlin’s newspaper quarter were a battlefield meant suturing together genuine myth—surfacing spontaneously and disinterestedly from the depths of the psyche—and authentic political propaganda. Propaganda was thus the manifestation of truth, or at least of that truth in which the victims of its epiphany believed (SSR 41).

However, for Jesi it is not the intensity of commitment alone that provides an internal difference of genuine propaganda, but the militants’ recourse to mythic symbols, which for Jesi is linked to a distinctive use of historical memory for partisan purposes. To ‘use’ history means in this case to transform it into a symbol, thereby making it “coincide with the immobile time of myth” (SSR 40). The decision to name their revolutionary Bund ‘Spartakus’ finds its ultimate meaning in the frightful final moments of danger where, risking their lives on the streets of Berlin, Luxemburg and Liebknecht positioned their conviction beyond any mere technical or instrumental relation of means and ends. Their use of mythical symbols has its meaning not in the pursuit of an anticipated outcome within the concatenation of historical causes, but in the effort to rip a certain ‘part of historical time’ out of the past, in order to use it immediately in the present:
[The name *Spartakusbund* is an effort to] encompass, within a determinate domain of images and moral values, an immediately useable part of historical time...[It was] a strategic crystallization of the historical present so as to evoke the epiphany of mythical time—of the days in which the ancient Spartacus led the revolt of the slaves (SSR 40).

Genuine propaganda engages in a *use* of images and moral-political principles that alters our relation to history, forcing a mythic past to collide with a historical present. Jesi places great emphasis on the paradoxical temporality of myth, which “has always existed and continues to exist for the first time in each of its renewed epiphanies” (SSR 27). To *evoke* an epiphany of the past is never simply an iterative signification of an empirically particular past event. It is not a ‘bare repetition’ of a past event; nor is it a *commemoration* on the order of a ‘Bastille Day’ celebration, or a primordial *restoration* that installs us directly within the cosmogenic sacred ‘Time’ of Divine acts. While mythic time necessarily appears as quasi-eternal from the point of view of history, it is a repetition that introduces a difference, breaking up the “thread of memory” of cyclical history. For Jesi, it is precisely because mythical epiphany is ‘new experience’ that it can be said to be subversive of the systematic regularity of society.

If mythic epiphany is subversive of bourgeois society (as Lukács had defined it), this is first of all because it can only occur starting from the point where thought has tethered itself indelibly to a *gesture*, thereby restoring a practical link between ideas and their final, worldly consequences. As Kierkegaard taught us, “only those who execute a gesture are destined to confront the illuminations and terrors of the epiphanies of the true” (SSR, 129). Similarly, if the authenticity of Luxemburg and Liebknecht’s propagandistic use of myth attains its final confirmation within the moment of revolt, then it is ultimately with reference to the latter’s

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70 The opposition between commemoration and reiteration is frequently employed by Mircea Eliade, who relates it to the difference between “chronological time” and sacred or “primordial Time.” See Eliade, *Myth and Reality, op cit.*, 19.
distinctive phenomenological traits that the relationship between partisan conviction and the
mythic symbol can be clarified. How does the presence of mythic symbols within the phenomena
of revolt accomplish a ‘break’ in the thread of time? What is the difference between a strategic
and a symbolic experience of revolutionary violence? Why does mythic time present such a
stumbling block for revolutionary strategy?

If the “symbolization” of perception that defines the subjectivation of revolt succeeds in
installing a participatory experience of space and time (or what Jesi on several occasions terms
‘use’), it does so primarily by autonomizing the fabric of experience. What phenomenologically
distinguishes the event of revolt from the perspective of revolution is its autonomization of at
least five aspects of experience: (i) the perception of signs; (ii) the decisional mode of action;
(iii) the rhythm and dimensional distribution of time; (iv) the propriety of space; (v) the relation
between individual and collectivity (including the political party). As we shall see, on the one
hand, to ‘autonimize’ functions like an un-binding that binds, a rupture of everyday rhythms of
separation that forcibly restores a direct, immediate, and common participation in the world. On
the other hand, however, the condition of this unbinding permanently risks tumbling into a
hermetic isolation vis-à-vis the world it wrenches us out of, landing us in a sacrificial black hole.
Symbolization therefore carries both strengths and weaknesses that must be navigated. The
question is not whether it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but rather, as David Lapoujade admirably puts it,
how we can “avoid being carried away by too much speed, by powers beyond our strength”?

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318 [Orig: 2014].
The Autonomy of Revolt (1): the Symbolic Suspension of Historical Experience

If revolt is counterposed to ‘revolution,’ what is understood by the latter term? As does Agamben (see Chapter 1), Jesi positions the grammar of ‘revolution’ within the secularized eschatology of historicist Marxism, according to which history appears as the development of a contradictory whole, a complex yet ultimately linear temporal schema. Jesi defines revolution as a “strategic complex of insurrectional movements, coordinated and oriented over the mid-to-long term towards ultimate objectives,” a “conscious wanting to alter in historical time a political, social, economic situation,” in which plans are made by “constantly considering the relations between cause and effect in historical time, within the most far-seeing perspective possible” (SSR, 51-52). ‘Revolution’ here refers less to a discreet event than “a political orientation, and the philosophy of history that corresponds to it,” an orientation that sees this or that revolution (cum discreet event) as the ultimately inevitable outcome of an internal dialectic between reciprocally-constituent powers or terms. The revolutionist approaches the actually existing situation as a player seeking to advance her position on a unitary game board, where the dynamism of the game is rooted in the internal laws of interaction between its pieces. As an empirical event or outcome, revolution therefore appears as a function of a “fated correspondence” between the economic laws of capitalist development and the struggles of the dispossessed proletariat (SSR 44-45). If materialism requires that socialism should “in all its facets have its premises in capitalism,” and if the progressive proletarianization and pauperization resulting from the expanded reproduction of capitalist relations of production across the globe also necessitates the emergence of an increasingly more disciplined, concentrated, and organized labor force, the whole process should (presumably) be accompanied by growing resistance among the organized proletariat. Since we are dealing with an internal
dialectic, the advance of one term (Capital) cannot take place without an inevitable accentuation of the contradictions that comprise the internal relations of the objective totality. Certainly, setbacks and defeats may occur along the way, but the complex of upheavals and reaction plays out within a dialectical totality the development of which remains an “inalterable and unstoppable process.”

What is to be done? From the perspective of revolution, political strategy consists in the ‘correct’ interpretation and description of our actual socio-economic configuration of forces in light of their position within a long-term development of the consciousness and organizational capacity of the proletariat. In short, we must study (the signs of) the present, with a view to the gradual preparation (of the forces signified) for the clash to come. For the militant engaged in a strategic assessment, the present appears as an instrumental nexus of causal signifiers, mappable in principle, if not always in fact. Whence the permanent temptation of scientism as a theoretical bulwark against ideological distortion and tactical myopia (the need to believe, as Foucault put it, in “signs that exist primarily, originally, actually, as coherent, pertinent, and systematic marks”); whence also the centrality, for militants like Luxemburg, of propaganda as a tool for educating and radicalizing the masses, who must “consciously accept the views, the goals, and the methods of the Spartacus League” prior to revolt breaking-out, if the latter is to produce a desirable strategic outcome.72

While it may regard revolt as a necessary moment within the long term development of the contradictions of history, the perspective of revolution implies an instrumental relationship to it, considering it principally with respect to its causal outcomes. This unwillingness to consider the nature of revolt on its own terms, to reckon with its distinction from revolutionary

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temporality, is, on Jesi’s reading, a decisive stumbling block of revolutionary politics. At issue is not a difference at the level of explicitly sought ends, since both revolt and revolution might try to seize or to depose power, but a difference that revolt introduces into the very shape of experience. Whereas its mid- to long-term strategic horizon ensures that the perspective of revolution is “immersed in historical time,” revolt is a “sudden insurrectional explosion” that suspends historical time (SSR, 46). While we might attempt to account for revolt within a strategic horizon, its own internal mode of existence eschews long-distance calculations and preparations, placing history itself in parentheses. The suspension at issue in revolt affects not only time, but, as we indicated already, touches on at least five interrelated registers, since it also alters the character of decisional action (the will), the sensitivity to signs and symbols (perception), the inhabitation of space (the body), and the relation between the individual, the collective, and the Party qua organ of collective strategy (group subjectivisation).

In his memoir of the German Revolution, first published in German two years after the completion of Spartakus, the former-Spartacist and KPD militant Karl Retzlau paints a picture of the disorganized and spontaneous experience that initiated the January rebellion:

When the people of Berlin got to know about the planned dismissal of Eichorn, several hundred thousand spontaneously gathered at Alexanderplatz to express their solidarity with him. The day was Sunday, January 6, 1919. I was one of the people there. I joined a big crowd heading to Alexanderplatz together with other members of my youth education association. The crowd grew consistently as we approached the square. Outside police headquarters, Eichorn and USPD leaders spoke to the masses. Everyone mentioned the particularly scandalous slander by the Vorwärts. When the speeches were over, chants of ‘Go to the Vorwärts!’ rang out. These were echoed by thousands. Immediately, a crowd of several thousand men formed, me included. We got on our way. At the entrance to the Vorwärts offices there was a short scuffle with some security guards, but they had no means to stop us. We occupied the building and the security guards were sent home together with the employees. No guns had been used, no one had been killed. In the building, we found a selection of light and heavy weaponry, from handguns to mortars. No one will ever know who started the ‘Go to the Vorwärts!’ chants. There have been many theories about possible agents provocateurs. This is a possibility. But it might as well have been a protestor excited by the moment and
the enormous crowd. This is how spontaneous mass actions emerge: someone puts a sentiment into words that everyone is feeling. This is what happens in agitated times.\footnote{Karl Retzlaw, “Noske and the Beginning of the Comrades’ Murders,” originally published as “Noske und der beginn der Genossenmorde” in Karl Retzlaw, \textit{Spartacus—Aufstieg und Niedergang. Erinnerungen eines Parteiarbeiters} (Frankfurt: Neue Kritik, 1971). English translation in Kuhn, \textit{All Power to the Councils!}, \textit{op cit.}, 130. Jesi regards the theory concerning the role of \textit{agents provocateurs} to be a confirmed by “reliable witness reports,” reinforcing his view that the January revolt was, in important respects, actively incited by the SPD, conferring on it an extrinsically ‘technicized’ or ‘manipulated’ prematurity that proved strategically advantageous to the bourgeoisie (SSR, 64, 80). We will return to this below.}

After the occupation of the \textit{Vorwärts} office, which was “neither planned nor organized,” thousands of workers spread out across the \textit{Zeitungsviertel} [the printing neighborhood], occupying strategic positions. None of this took place under the direction of Luxemburg, Liebknecht, or others on the revolutionary committee [\textit{Revolutionsausschuss}], which “never did anything other than [declare] the Ebert government unlawful. Then it dissolved” (ibid).

While it is of course true to observe that the revolt had a ‘spontaneous’, experimental, and groping character, in no way resembling the realization of a pre-existing plan, this does not does not really touch on the essential. On the one hand, it verges on a platitude—as Retzlaw himself observes, “\textit{no} revolutionary force in history has followed a laid-out path, assessing its power calmly and carefully every step of the way. In the beginning, no one knows where the limits of power are.”\footnote{Karl Retzlaw, cited in Kuhn, \textit{All Power to the Councils!}, \textit{op cit.}, 130.} On the other hand, the notion of spontaneity is both too voluntaristic and not enough, as it fails to capture the event-like transformation of the will itself, its character of \textit{immediate sufficiency}.

What is the character of the will, absent a plan? Jesi’s thesis is that the eruption of an insurrection effects a \textit{symbolic} transformation exhibiting structural similarities to that of mythic epiphany; i.e., it imposes an experience of presence that has four distinctive phenomenological
traits, whose meaning we seek to unpack in what follows: it is “objective, collective, exhaustive, [and] exclusive” (SSR 58).

Jesi’s point of departure lies in an empirical observation, one confirmed by Retzlaw’s account, among others: it is a characteristic feature of revolts that only a small fraction of their total participants will ever possess a global perspective on the battle’s strategic significance and concrete position within the long-term chain of historical causality. As a result, “the greater part of those who take part in a revolt choose to commit their individuality to an action whose consequences they can neither know nor predict” (SSR 52).75 In the moment of battle—and “every revolt is a battle”—there is a suspension of instrumental-ideological significations (e.g., of Marxism as a dogma, science, or referential schema of historico-political interpretation), in the place of which a symbolic polarization of the field of perception takes takes hold. As Jesi writes, “the clash of the revolt distills the symbolic components of the ideology that has put the strategy in motion, and only these are truly perceived by the combatants” (SSR, 53, emphasis added). In this quite precise sense, the political content of the insurrection is irreducibly aesthetic, in that it does not occur without bringing about a mutation of the fabric of the sensible.

What does it mean to ‘perceive’ an ideology symbolically? As we noted above, whereas it is in the nature of the sign to be anchored analogically or diacritically in a referential system, what characterizes the mythic symbol is its peculiar capacity to stand on its own, to constitute a quasi-objective presence unto itself, to be ‘self-interpretive’, ‘resting in itself’. The mythic

75 The quantitative implication of this claim (‘the greater part’) may appear to open up an ambivalence in the concept, leaving it unclear as to what the experience of time would be for those who maintain such a long-term perspective? However, the preeminent case of such a character is, of course, Rosa Luxemburg herself, who opposed the revolt on the grounds of its premature character, yet threw herself into it nonetheless, refusing to save herself in its final moments by fleeing to Frankfurt. Although it undoubtedly envelops its own internal dangers (see below), Luxemburg’s intransigent refusal to abandon her comrades in arms by saving herself is an example of the irreversible character of committed choice Jesi associates with the suspension of time.
symbol tightly adheres to the matter of its expression, making it possible to say (with Vernant) that it ‘is what it symbolizes’. This does not necessarily mean that we encounter the essence or ‘substance’ of myth per se in the mythic symbol, but rather, that the effects it generates cling to the particularity of the matter in which they are inscribed.\textsuperscript{76} Epiphany names this redistribution of the given by which a symbolized perception of existence and of oneself is installed. For Jesi, insurrection confers on objects the gravity of a symbolic truth, a ‘true’ and ‘real’ character that tightly embeds each of them within an active and dynamically lived polarization of friends and enemies that circumscribes the entire field of the given in a self-contained manner. In such moments, “the adversary of the moment truly becomes the enemy, the rifle or club or bicycle chain truly becomes the weapon, the victory of the moment—be it partial or total—truly becomes, in and of itself, a just and good act for the defense of freedom, the defense of one’s class, the hegemony of one’s class” (ibid). The weapon one wields becomes not only adequate to its situation, it exhaustively and exclusively belongs to the battle, merging completely with its position in ‘the battle’, without remainder. This symbolization-effect wraps the entirety of the perceptual environment into its polarizing mesh, conferring on all that it touches the effect of being at once eternal and immediate. This expressive truth conferred upon objects and occurrences has as its correlate a deliberate decision to participate made by each combatant, a choice that Jesi regards as ‘closed in on itself’. However, it would be imprecise to frame the transformation in question as occurring along two parallel series. While both the symbolic object

\textsuperscript{76} Jesi will later distinguish between the essence or substance of “myth”, the existence of which a “mythological machine” (here, the perception of the insurgent under the sway of the event) alludes to, from “mythological materials,” which are the products of the machine (here, the symbol). It is not possible to study ‘myth’ directly, rendering the “science of myth” the science of the non-knowledge of myth (its absence in history). To this is contrasted the “science of mythology”, which studies the workings of the mythological machine and the linguistic circulation that mythologizes experience, a science of which Spartakus constitutes an early example. See “When Keyenyi Diverted me From Jung”, in Furio Jesi, Time and Festivity, Ed. Andrea Cavalletti, Trans. Cristina Viti. English translation forthcoming in Fall 2018.
and the decision of the subject become ‘closed’ in on themselves, the symbol is neither ‘in’ the object *qua* artifact, nor ‘in’ the psychological fact of a decision to wield it against the enemy. What is at stake is an all-encompassing redistribution of presence undergone by a subject who has thrust herself into a gesture, staked herself on a life-or-death fight. Whence this unifying or syncopating factor of revolt? It must be sought in the temporalization of the symbol, an existential mutation that, for Jesi, constitutes the very essence of genuine mythical experience.

If it is imprecise to speak of subject-object as parallel series—since the effect of the symbol is precisely to install a new relation *between* decision, gesture, and the world—the same cannot be said of the temporalization that confers a consistency upon them. Mythic epiphany is indeed precisely marked by a double-temporality, a ‘conjunctive series’ (to borrow a term from Deleuze) straddling two levels or modes of synthesis. Epiphany is not a flight from this world into a transcendent or supernatural one, for the breach occurs in *this* world, its effects are registered entirely within the finite human duration of earthly repetition. Nonetheless, everything takes place *as if* the ‘natural’ (or historical) series of successive human time were intersected diagonally by a pure past. It lies in the essence of the mythic symbol to confer a quasi-eternity on earthly events, to impose upon ‘natural’ time a type of formal coherence and necessity, gathering them into an order and a totality. The eruption of the symbolic coherence has the character of a *caesura* that itself is irreducible to any given present, as it is a *pure relation* between them.

This subversive eruption of symbolic time within history may be clarified by an analogy with the role of Ancient Greek tragedy. In the study of tragic drama, a *daimon* refers to a divine force that transects the tragic hero, whose supernatural *mania* imposes a force of terrible necessity upon human endeavors. The entry of such extra-human forces into the sphere of human
action brings about a previously unseen necessity between past, present and future, introducing a
destinal order within the dramatic succession of events. As Vernant describes it,

The moment Agamemnon sets foot on the carpet the drama reaches its consummation. And even if the play
is not quite over, it can introduce nothing that is not already accomplished once and for all. The past, the
present, and the future have fused together with a single meaning that is revealed and encapsulated in the
symbolism of this action of impious hubris. [...] At this culminating point of the tragedy, where all the
threads are tied together, the time of the gods invades the stage and becomes manifest within the time of
men.77

The time of coexistence arrives with the shattering force of an event, the defining feature of
which is the power to impose a new relation between empirically-lived present moments.
Gathered under the symbol or within its vicinity, gestures now assume a new significance vis-à-
vis each other, sheltered by the new distributive totality (“the weapon,” as a symbolic component
of “the battle”). What characterizes this formal order and totality? In his meditations on
Sophocles’ Thebean tragedies, Hölderlin draws attention to a distinctive feature of the event: at a
certain moment in the course of a tragic drama, the natural time of the responsible human agent
is ‘thrown out of joint’—the cardo, the joint, becomes dis-located.78 The interruption of divine
time is signaled by the overthrow of cardinal time (1, 2, 3…) by an ordinal distribution
(1st...2nd; or ‘before/after’). For Hölderlin, the essential structure of tragic drama resides in this
inaugural rupture, which purifies itself of the progressive rhythm of intentional human life. The
term caesura names this “tremendous” fracture that severs time, a “boundless union purifying
itself through boundless separation.”79 By wrenching apart the ‘natural’ interrelation of discreet
present moments, it establishes a new formal order of communication between them, a “counter-
rhythmic rupture” that arrays them on either side of its dividing line, their relational significance

47-48.
78 Friedrich Hölderlin, “Remarks on ‘Oedipus’”, in Essays and Letters on Theory, Trans. Thomas Pfau (New York:
consisting henceforth in their relative position before or after the event. As a purely formal distribution of the unequal, the caesura imposes upon the experience of time a pure order, which, since it is no longer derived from or dependent upon the dynamic movements of empirical succession, must strictly-speaking be described as a ‘static synthesis’. If, as Deleuze contends, Hölderlin’s tragic conception of the event exhibits a decidedly post-Kantian valence, this is because it was with Kant that time was first “liberated from the overly simple circular figure, freed from the events which made up its content, its relation to movement overturned.”80 Within this rupture, future and past cease to be dynamic emergences or empirical occurrences, instead becoming “fixed and formal characteristics which follow a priori from the order of time.”81 The decisive point is this: it is precisely because this event that breaks apart and regroups present moments within its totality cannot itself ‘take place’ as a concrete empirical present, that the destinal necessity it introduces into human action can only present itself as a symbol. If the experience of mythic symbolization is essentially temporalizing, this is because it is in the nature of the symbol to envelop within itself a paradoxical simultaneity of before, during, and after, each being a valence or a distinct way in which the meaning of an act may be lived by the actor. The symbol of the act folds the time of the whole drama into itself, such that this or that particular gesture is suddenly invested with the magnitude of the encompassing event.

Of course, the Spartacist revolt was not a “poetic operation” but a “clash between classes, with all the social political, economic, psychological and military features proper to such a clash” (SSR 100). However, here too we find “exceptional features which…confer upon it especially symbolic qualities…[which position it] at the intersection between mythical time and historical time, eternal return and once and for all” (SSR 100). When the revolt kicked-off that first week

81 Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, op cit., 89.
of January, 1919, an “atypical” time was suddenly instituted, one which exhibits a recognizably ‘caesuric’ division. As Jesi writes, “every revolt is circumscribed by precise borders in historical time and historical space. Before it and after it lie the no-man’s-land and duration of each and everyone’s lives in which uninterrupted individual battles are fought” (SSR 53, our emphasis). If the insurrectional suspension of time is not a magic spell but rather the “only waking state,” if it is “only in destruction [that] time is both suspended and truly passing,” its ‘woke’ character is indexed not to the Cartesian epistemic opposition between clarity and obscurity (a criterion of ‘knowledge’), but to the symbolic relation introduced by this caesura, which shelters actions within the symbolic walls of its order and totality (21). If the slumber of ‘normal’ or historical time is defined by the concatenation of successive instants, the experience of revolt is inherently evental, walled-in by the pure difference of life before-the-event and its still-uncertain outcome.

Jesi has two ways of characterizing the paradoxical overlap between immediacy and eternity that marks insurrectional time. From a first point view, we may think of it qualitatively as a time of “extreme speed,” which he attributes less to the rhythm or pace of action than to the form of a doing undertaken for its own sake. By suspending the ‘intermediate’ time of preparation, revolt collapses the extrinsic relation between means and ends, shifting the center of gravity inside the act itself. Acts assume the character of a pure mediality, or ‘means without ends’ (to borrow Agamben’s turn of phrase): “everything that is done has a value in itself, independently of its consequences and its relations within the transitory or perennial complex that constitutes history” (SSR 46-47). Once the anticipatory horizon of progressive time is placed in parentheses, gestures assume an “autonomous” quality marked by both self-sufficiency and immediacy: “the fruit of the action [is] the content of the action itself” (SSR 47).
The time of the Great War had been one of ‘waiting’, the day-to-day psychic life of the population organized by the anticipation of the next enemy maneuver, everything ordered within an overarching horizon of the final victory (or loss) to come. Seen in this light, the concept of ‘speed’ describes not only the self-sufficiency of pure mediality, but also the end of waiting, the restoration of an immediate link between one’s symbolic perception of the situation and the elaboration of gestures appropriate to their significance within the battle. Where the appropriation of time no longer arrays itself in a genetic or developmental series (the durée of ‘preparation’), success becomes subject to a different sort of ethical test. The adequacy of an act is now based not on a final outcome, but on a specific mode of syncopation between actor and situation, a concordance or ‘agreement’: all irrevocable and decisive choices are felt as “in agreement with time,” whereas every moment of waiting or hesitation places one outside of it (SSR 47). The merger of thought and gesture in insurrectional symbolism, this phenomenal modality of lived speed or pure mediality, is the time of the “once and for all.” It represents the first of two dimensions of time, the aspect which bears most directly on the nature of choice (we will return to the second, ‘the day after tomorrow,’ below).

‘Sheltering’ its actors between the walls of its caesura, quickening the relation between perception, gesture, and time, the revolt opens up a collectively-shared experience of symbols and a partisan form of spatial inhabitation. Jesi here anticipates a problem that will preoccupy Agamben in the Stasis lectures from 2002, namely, that it would appear to be the paradigmatic feature of civil war to destabilize the boundary separating the polis from the oikos. As Agamben writes, “civil war marks the threshold through which the unpolitical is politicized and the
political is ‘economized’.”\textsuperscript{82} For his part, Jesi describes a similar twofold transformation: at the same time as it distills politico-ideological signs, revolt collectivizes and extends the symbols of private life outward. Two problems surface in tandem here: on the one hand, it is this simultaneous double movement of contraction and expansion, of political crystallization and oiko-nomic extension, that opens up the potential of the city to become a space of use. Put otherwise, it would appear that for Jesi, it is only in revolt that a ‘free use of the proper’ becomes possible (to borrow a turn of phrase from Hölderlin, dear to both Heidegger and Agamben alike).\textsuperscript{83} At the same time, the peculiar character of group subjectivization that accompanies the insurrectional inhabitation of the city lies at the root of the troubled relation between revolt and the political Party qua organ of collective strategy, a major aporia with which Spartakus seeks to grapple. It is to these intertwining problems of spatial inhabitation and group subjectivity that we must now turn.

Given the way it foreshadows his later concept of the ‘mythological machine’, it should be noted that by the late 1960’s Jesi already regards the passage from ‘normal’ time to the time of revolt as a leap from one experience of ‘walls’ to another. The image of ‘walls’ describes not only the caesuric temporality of revolt, but also the ‘normal’ time subjected to ‘bourgeois manipulation’. The portrayal of bourgeois society as a psychic space carved up by ‘solid walls’ forms a central motif in Secret Germany:

\textsuperscript{82} Agamben, Stasis. Civil War as Political Paradigm [HS2.2], 22: “Just as in the state of exception, zôê is politicized and included in the polis, through the stasis, so, analogously, the oikos is politicized and included in the polis through the stasis. What is at stake in the relation between oikos and polis is the constitution of a threshold of indifference in which the political and the unpolitical, the outside and the inside, coincide. We must therefore conceive politics as a field of forces whose extremes are the oikos and the polis; between them, civil war marks the threshold through which the unpolitical is politicized and the political is ‘economized’ […] [P]olitics is a field incessantly traversed by the tensional currents of politicization and depoliticization, the family and the city.”

\textsuperscript{83} The quote (“The free use of the proper is the most difficult thing”) appears as an epigraph to The Use of Bodies (HS4.2, xii).
A basic foundation of the bourgeois spirit is a tendency to organize life within a microcosm, in which social relations reveal the presence of solid walls: those of the house, of the family business, eventually of the city. This tendency towards a restricted, autonomous community corresponds to the notion of a collectivity which does not damage the interests of the individual in any way, which is engaged with the organization of life in such a way as to erect solid barriers between oneself and things, and the external world (emphasis added).^{84} The image of walled-in life returns two years later in *Spartakus*, as the psychic backdrop against which the space-time of the insurrectional city will explode. In a society parceled up by the domination of the commodity-form, individuals construct a private symbolic life as a form of ‘shelter’ from the daily battle of social existence, an inner world of mirrors and private refrains we hum to ourselves to temper the chaos of callous and lonely competition on the market. As in *Secret Germany*, Jesi again links this individualized space of ‘refuge’ to the division between the *oikos* and the *polis*:

Until a moment before the clash...the potential rebel lives in his house or perhaps his refuge, often with his relatives; and as much as that residence and that environment may be provisional, precarious, conditioned by the imminent revolt, until the revolt begins they are the site of a more or less solitary individual battle which continues to be the same as in the days when the revolt did not seem imminent—the individual battle between good and evil, survival and death, success and failure (SSR 54).

Revolt expands the symbolic life that is normally confined to private space in an outward way, conferring on the space of the city the character of a participable, immediately recognizable collective truth. As Andrea Cavalletti remarks, it is a question of an “inner space [that] is revealed in the space of the city when myth coincides with history” (SSR 21). In a dense and important passage, Jesi describes this mutation by which the *stasis* of the battle expands the circumscribed world of the *oikos* into a space of collective shared life:

Every revolt is a battle, but a battle in which one has deliberately chosen to participate. 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—everyone has the same weapons, everyone faces the same obstacles, the same enemy. Everyone experiences the epiphany of the same symbols—everyone’s individual space, dominated by one’s personal symbols, by the shelter from historical time that everyone enjoys in their individual symbology and mythology, expands, becoming the

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^84^ Furio Jesi, *Secret Germany, op cit.*, Chapter 3 (emphasis added).
symbolic space common to an entire collective, the shelter from historical time in which the collective finds safety (SSR, 53).

To this must be added a passage that Agamben will later describe as “among the most beautiful things ever written on the relationship between the city and politics,” one bearing the “unmistakeable accent of personal memory.” As Jesi writes,

You can love a city, you can recognize its houses and its streets in your remotest or dearest memories; but only in the hour of revolt is the city really felt as your own city—your own because it belongs to the I but at the same time to the ‘others’; your own because it is a battlefield that you have chosen and the collectivity too has chosen; your own because it is a circumscribed space in which historical time is suspended and in which every act is valuable in and of itself, in its absolutely immediate consequences. One appropriates a city by fleeing or advancing, charging and being charged, much more than by playing as a child in its streets or strolling through it with a girl. In the hour of revolt, one is no longer alone in the city (SSR, 54-55).

The passage from normal to suspended time collapses the proprietary walls of bourgeois social and psychic space, opening onto a singular mode of collective inhabitation. As we have already indicated, this use of the city has its precondition in a symbolic distillation of proletarian ideology that inscribes objects and places within the polarized walls of the battle. Clearly, to ‘appropriate’ the city cannot entail the recovery of an object or a territory by a stable subject; it cannot be the recuperation of a title to ownership, or the restoration of an alienated possession, for the simple reason that the subject that appropriates does not preexist the gesture of revolt itself—or not in this mode, in any event. The ‘self-realization’ to which it is linked is therefore a complex one, bringing with it four overlapping problems:

(i) *The gestures Jesi associates with the appropriation of the city are of a purely dynamic sort.*

During a revolt, the fixed, disjunctive geography of owners and renters, housed and houseless, proletarians, employers and police is transformed into an intensive *locus*, i.e. a space

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individuated by gestures and movements rather than juridically identifiable claimants repossessing what is ‘rightfully theirs’. Such moments exhibit a mode of inhabiting the city defined by the dynamisms that populate it: advance and retreat, attack and defense, flows that move versus those actively blockaded, etc. As Brecht wrote, “Of these cities all which will remain is that which passes / Through them: the wind!” How can such a dynamic spatium be considered a mode of ‘appropriation’? Key to understanding this claim is the order of priority in his account of collective subjectivization. This brings us to the second point.

(ii) An insurrectional use of the city is possible only once we have ceased to be “alone in the city.”

The self-realization at issue in the appropriation of the city is hatched from the experience of a common perception, a shared attunement and a sensible attachment to a situation animated by collectively-felt dangers and problems (‘the same weapons…the same obstacles…’). The phenomenological genesis of such collective attunement undoubtedly figures among the most difficult and original features of Jesi’s conception of insurrection. How does this “expansion” of individual symbology outward take place? What is its meaning vis-à-vis the freedom of the individual? As we saw above, whereas Agamben’s early treatment of revolutionary violence allowed an ambivalence to remain concerning the relation between (i) individual, (ii) the collective-in-struggle, and (iii) the ‘class’ identity in the process of abolishing itself through its confrontation with death, for Jesi the three moments refer to distinct modes of psychic experience that must be teased apart.

The self-realization proper to mythical temporality is clearly not a loss of individuality tout court. The symbolic walls of the event do, however, redraw the phenomenal lines of conflict in which subjective life is submerged. What must be explained is how individual choice takes on an inherently collective sense. Individuality for Jesi is not indexed to the exercise of voluntary choice per se, but to a consequentialist mode of decision-making. For example, when a revolt fails and normal time is restored by force, if “historical time is not further suspended in circumstances and for reasons that may even differ from those of the revolt,” then “everyone goes back to being an individual,” which implies that “every happening is once again evaluated on the basis of its presumed or certain consequences” (SSR, 55). As this passage makes clear, it is not the fact of choosing, but the form of the choice that distinguishes the individual battle (private life, or the bourgeois structure of the oikos as seen through proletarian eyes) from the collective one. It will be recalled that the modality of speed proper to revolt was less a function of the rhythm or pace of events than the power of the symbol to confer an immediate situational sufficiency upon gestures. To decide upon the symbol is to decide upon a horizon of choice that is inherently collective, enveloping a distinctive temporal dynamism. Not only would it be absurd to deny that participation in a revolt is on some level an individual choice; for Jesi it is even the free existential choice par excellence:

In revolt, every man is engaged by his free choice. Even if the circumstances favor the revolt—even if, as with the Spartacist revolt, it appears as the explicit result of a provocation—the rebel still retains that free choice to err towards which Dostoevsky directed all of his love-hatred (SSR, 80).

The difference is perhaps that what I decide upon is not exclusive to me: what must be decided is my position within a polarization that is irreducibly bound up with a collective world, a shared horizon of the important and unimportant, the interesting and the uninteresting, etc. As Vernant put it (above), the nature of the mythical symbol is to ‘belong to what it expresses,’ such that it is
what it symbolizes. This helps elucidate the character of ‘appropriation’ at issue in the use of the city. It is not the ‘individual’ who appropriates the city unilaterally; rather, to experience the collective epiphany of symbols from within the caesuric horizon of the event is, for the individual, to ‘belong to what the symbol expresses,’ to deduce one’s self from the collective meaning symbolized therein, to feel intimately claimed by it—‘I am a communist at the moment I decide which side I am on in this battle’, a battle that inherently outstrips the ‘I’, a battle whose mode of appearance leads us to recognize in it a quasi-objectivity all its own. The decision to wield the weapon, to defend the space held open on this side of the barricade, positions us within one of the “groups of contenders” between which the situation is polarized (SSR 58). To borrow a term from Reiner Schürmann, for the city to be felt as ‘your own’ and as belonging to ‘the others’ depends upon the “practical a priori” of the gesture: the choice we make is individual, but the dimension of ‘self’ we stake upon the symbolic matrix of the battle is not the same one who slept in their private bed the night before, for it emerges through the taking-on of this collective risk. The caesura, therefore, passes not only between the ‘inner space’ of the event and the historical time bordering it at its edges, but also through ourselves. What is the relation between these two modalities of individuality?

(iii) As it suspends the oikos / polis division, revolt (on Jesi’s reading) does not exactly destroy the structure of the exception, but tends to re-inscribe it on either side of the polarized, symbolic walls of the event.

If it is not incorrect to postulate that the oikos/polis division forms the material backdrop enabling the psychic structure we described above (see Chapter 1) as that of ‘self-parenthesis’—i.e., the possibility of a subtractive distanciation of the ‘I’ from the dynamism of

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87 We will return to this claim in our discussion of the modern state in Chapter 3.
struggle, such that the negation of the other is prevented from jeopardizing the coherence of the self—then, for the city to really be ‘felt as your own’, the status of the oikos as an exceptional instance or an inclusive exclusion vis-à-vis the polis or public life must in some way be rendered inoperative. In revolt, the space of the city is no longer structured by the included exception of the oikos from the polis, of individual symbology from juridical civic belonging, since both poles of what we might call the ‘civic ban-relation’ are pushed outside the caesura. On one side, as we have seen already, the oikos is displaced into a “no-man’s-land” eclipsed by the temporality of the battle. As for the polis, there are two aspects of its suspension. The friend/enemy (included/excluded) distinction becomes subject to a twofold suspension and re-symbolization. On the one hand, it belongs to the nature of revolt that the combatants aim in one way or another to destroy the symbolic basis of the enemy’s power, symbols that—once accorded a mythical significance—can become replete with dangers. On the other hand, the form that revolutionary self-organization previously took during normal time—the party, the council—finds itself likewise pushed outside the caesura, eclipsed by an informal group subjectivity born from the specific conditions of insurrection.

(iv) The self realized in a revolt coincides immediately with a self-objectification as part of a collectivity.

By suspending the oikos/polis division, the caesuric symbolization of perception accomplishes a reconciliation of personal and collective meaning otherwise impossible during normal time: “the possibility [for the individual] to vanquish his love-hatred for the mass and to melt into it, overcoming…the inevitable obstacles and sacrifices imposed by participation in and devotion to the group” (SSR, 69). However, the exceptional character of this insurrectional group
subjectivization accomplishes this effect only by suspending the operative conditions of the Party in a more or less total way.⁸⁸

There is, Jesi argues, a “basic contradiction between party and revolt.” The function of the proletarian political Party is to serve as a mediation between individual and the class-based collective during normal time, permitting a strategic organization of partisan forces in view of the long-term revolutionary clash. Once the separation it bridges has been rendered inoperative, it loses its anchoring horizon of significance, and finds itself confronted with the competing objectivity of the caesuric event. What is at issue is not a contradiction between two groups of people but between two “intrinsically autonomous” modes of existing as a group, each with its own values, one of which finds itself excluded by the caesura of the event, the other inhering only by virtue of its ‘shelter’:

Class parties and unions are collective realities to the extent that they are objective realities. In other words, these realities are collective inasmuch as they objectively constitute the structures of the complex of relations that exists within the class and between the class and the outside. Because of this exhaustive character, class parties and unions can turn out to be hostile to the imminent revolt. In a revolt, a reality manifests itself that is also objective, collective, exhaustive, exclusive. *Parties and unions are driven back by the revolt into the ‘before and ‘after’ of the revolt itself.* Either they accept to temporarily suspend their self-consciousness of their own value or they find themselves in open competition with the revolt […] [O]nce the revolt begins they become simple instruments to guarantee the operative affirmation of values that are not the values of the party and the union but only the intrinsic value of the revolt. The ideologies of the party and the unions can be the same as those of the rebels but, in the instant of revolt, the rebels perceive only the symbolic components of these ideologies (SSR, 57-59, emphasis added).

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⁸⁸ Here and there, Jesi will complicate the antagonism between the two modes of collective organization, without softening the conflictual character of the choice that these modes imply for their participants: “A class party or union cannot be involved in a revolt because their scale, their collective reality, their values cannot be those of the revolt. But this is really a theoretical argument. Even if they are not implicated in the sense we speak of, the class party or union are inexorably forced to endure the consequences of the revolt, if it takes place. What’s more, on the occasion of the revolt, their most responsible members are confronted with extremely serious problems and contradictions, in the face of which every choice has decisive consequences for the future life of the party or union and for the class struggle. And it may turn out that, in the hour of revolt, those in charge of the party or union must choose to favor the revolt they did not want, all the while energetically criticizing it” (SSR, 60). A prime example of this tension lies in Luxemburg and Liebknecht’s decision to remain in Berlin rather than flee to Frankfurt as their comrades urged them to. See SSR, 84-89.
On the one hand, the restricted, autonomous community of revolt remains a proletarian insurgency organized around a class antagonism. Given the autonomy (vis-à-vis the party leadership) of the symbolic collectivity organized around the immanent symbolism of combative gestures, we might be tempted to read Jesi as claiming that insurrection is essentially an extension of a ‘wildcat’ tendency within labor movements. Certainly, May of 1968 took on such a character at various points. However, beneath the organizational question of whether workers wait for union authorization or permission from higher-ups in the Party before engaging the class enemy (a matter that can be quickly corralled into ideological-strategic debates), there is an existential mutation playing itself out at a different, sensible level. Revolt, on Jesi’s understanding, is never actually undertaken exclusively as a strategic consideration, nor is it reducible to a matter of class-consciousness or political-economic grievances, but is, on some essential level, chosen for its own sake:

Participation in revolt is determined by the choice of an action closed in on itself, which from outside can be seen as inserted in a strategic context, but from inside appears as absolutely autonomous, isolated, valid in itself, independently of its non-immediate consequences (SSR 59).²⁹

An intimate scission transects the will of the militant, who finds herself split between mutually exclusive modes of engagement: either we affirm the collective attachment of the event, and submit to the quickening walls of its immanence, or we cling to our developmental strategic sobriety at the price of maintaining a (cowardly or cynical) distance from the revolt; a sobriety which, it must be added, by assessing the outcomes of the revolt in a purely ‘external’ fashion,

²⁹ “In the phenomenon of spontaneous insurrection…a role is played by the urge to rebel for the sake of rebelling, independently of the face or nature of the enemy. It is true that the ‘irrational’ urges to rebel for the sake of rebelling remain the intimate prerogative of the exploited and oppressed, and seem aptly to reflect their material situation (leading to the formulation of a simple framework of cause and effect). We believe, however, that the condition imposed upon workers by the capitalist system is not the only (and reasonable) impetus to rebel. In the phenomenon of spontaneous insurrection are also present numerous elements of rebellion born from ‘private’ individual frustrations, alien to the framework of class consciousness and class struggle, as well as the impulse of individuals to benefit from the experience of collective force, the force of the group” (SSR 68-69).
cannot avoid “instrumentalizing” the rebel actors, whose actions are “capitalized upon and employed by those for whom the revolt was a strategic choice” (SSR, 59-60). The power of suspension that gives revolt its existential force, finally reveals itself to be struck by what we are tempted to call an historical autism: the caesura suspends the rigid proprietary walls of bourgeois time only by walling us into the closed world of the insurrectional symbol, a black bloc in a black box, unable to reckon materially and projectually with its historical conditions, and deprived, therefore, of the means for prolonging itself.

**The Autonomy of Revolt (2): Symmetry, Monstrosity, Sacrifice**

On Jesi’s assessment, in the half century separating the Spartacist revolt from May, 1968, proletarian movements made regrettably small progress toward reconciling the tension between strategic organization and the autonomizing undertow of revolt. Ultimately, what would be needed is a way to “channel into the process of development a potential for struggle otherwise destined to issue not into revolution but into revolt” (SSR, 57). In other words, it is necessary to think the conditions under which the suspension of time could be given a consistency in a durable, collective form of life. The more profound interpretation of the notion of ‘permanent revolution’ therefore appears to be trapped on the other side of an aporia, since it consists in the

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90 Given his participation in May of ’68, Jesi was in all likelihood aware of the important role that informal left-communist and anarchist groupings played in deliberately tipping the situation at Nanterre into an upheaval. It is therefore a curious fact that Jesi remains largely unwilling to countenance the possibility that the autonomization of revolt from the Party-form could in fact accord with the strategic aims of certain post-left factions of the proletariat. On one of the rare occasions that he does entertain the possibility of a non-party form of strategic organization, Jesi appears to dismiss the suggestion out of hand (“The replacement of party political leadership with the pure and simple expression of the rebel’s will to fight is [not] a realistic proposal” (SSR, 57)). However, the suggestion that a ‘pure will to fight’ is the only alternative to ‘party political leadership’ depends upon a false alternative, as would be flagrantly demonstrated throughout the entire course of the Italian Autonomia movement of the 1970’s. For an exploration of this tension in the Autonomia movement, see Tiqqun’s “This is not a Program,” in *This Is Not a Program*, Trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2011) [Orig: 2001], and Marcello Tari, *Autonomie!, op cit.*
paradoxical necessity of thinking a suspension of time “at each and every moment,” the possibility of an enduring “collective refuge in the symbolic space and time of revolt,” which therefore requires a deactivation of the exceptional logic of ‘suspension’ as such (54). However, before this deeper concept of permanent revolution can begin to be thought, two additional dangers must first be brought to the fore, each of which plays a role in ensuring the restricted and exceptional character of the revolt:

(i) First, whenever political struggles undergo a mythical temporalization, there is a risk that a “reversion of myth” will take place, wherein the positive creative powers of the collective unconscious succumb to a death-bound desire, transforming mythic symbols into a site of horror, capturing us within a “religion of death,” a vicious sacrificial logic of absolutized good and evil.91 The caesuric symbolization of the friend/enemy relation must therefore be subjected to an internal ‘demythologization’.

(ii) Second, the exceptional character of revolt can serve as a counter-revolutionary lever for the restoration of ‘normal’ time. The fragility of the existential mutation at play in revolt leaves it susceptible to an extrinsic instrumental or ‘technicized’ manipulation, not only by its ‘comrades’ in the Party, but even more importantly, by its counter-revolutionary enemies. If the former danger demands that we introduce an asymmetry into the friend/enemy distinction (a destitution of the enemy’s mythically-projected image of its own power), the latter demands we recognize the trap that allows the revolutionary’s own exceptional status to function as a form of governmental capture. In both cases, whether conscious or unconscious, the abject symmetry of a normal/abnormal binary must cease to conjugate the terms of revolutionary antagonism.

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91 For a lengthier treatment of the idea of “mythic reversion” and the “demonic,” see Jesi, Secret Germany, op cit., Chapter 1.
To treat the latter danger first, the suspension of both historical time and the strategic apparatus of the party exposes revolt to the risk of being leveraged by the ruling powers. The danger of a technicization of the insurrectional state of exception (the suspension of historical time) leads Jesi to theorize an opportunistic mode of governance premised not on averting crisis, but one content to induce manageable crises so as to pilot them in directions strategically opportune for the restoration of ‘normal time’.  

The war was an exception unto itself, during which “ordinary time was not in force.” The tightly-regimented rhythm of guard-duty shifts, meal-times, night-movements, etc., wrapped the entirety of daily life into a technicized time of ‘waiting’, a “forced construction of things to be awaited” in which “every decision that mattered was postponed until after the war” (SSR, 63). Once it ended, a catharsis was necessary for which an outlet had to be found, a pressure-valve capable of altering the shape of time. For this, the Kaiser’s all-too-brief abdication in November of 1918 offered an “all-too-modest gospel” (ibid). The somber truth is, Jesi argues, that “every true change in the experience of time is a ritual that demands…a determinate cruel sacrifice.” For a ruling order facing a crisis of authority and an uncertain future, to allow the accumulated social tension to fester runs the risk of it assuming a spasmodic form, or worse, being transformed into “organized revolutionary energy.” It being preferable to let the tension be burned off through the temporary suspension of a revolt before it builds up the steam necessary

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92 Jesi here anticipates a key trait of what Agamben (in the wake of Foucault and Deleuze) will identify as the essence of the securitarian paradigm of control governance: “Since governing the causes is difficult and expensive, it is safer and more useful to try to govern the effects. I would suggest that this theorem by Quesnay is the axiom of modern governmentality. The ancien régime aimed to rule the causes; modernity pretends to control the effects. […] European governments today gave up any attempt to rule the causes, they only want to govern the effects…[This makes] understandable a fact which seems otherwise inexplicable: I mean the paradoxical convergence today of an absolutely liberal paradigm in the economy with an unprecedented and equally absolute paradigm of state and police control. If government aims for the effects and not the causes, it will be obliged to extend and multiply control. Causes demand to be known, while effects can only be checked and controlled.” See Giorgio Agamben, “From the State of Control to a Praxis of Destituent Power” (FSC). The concept appears as early as Means Without Ends, in the article “Sovereign Police” (MWE, 103-108).
for a full-blown revolution, it becomes “good policy” to provoke the release under desirable circumstances. Under conditions of heightened social antagonism marked by widespread disaffection and class hatred, a premature insurrection may in fact be the straightest line for the ruling class and its social-democratic running dogs to re-solidify the dominance of ‘normal time’, which is itself nothing other than the “bourgeois manipulation of time” ensuring the “calm endurance” of commodity society (SSR, 61-63). The lesson here is that, appearances notwithstanding, crisis governance is not inherently opposed to insurrection, but only to revolution.93

This recognition—namely, that our “masters…always need a suspension of normal time in order to organize their cruel maneuvers”—offers a new critical vantage point from which to grasp the opposition between revolt and revolution (SSR, 61-62). Far from representing an intrinsically autonomous life won through struggle by its combatants, revolt appears to be one pole of a two-pronged apparatus that swings between ‘normal’ (manipulated) and ‘suspended’ (polarized) time. The bourgeois technicization of revolt pushes the hostile forces who push against its rigid walls from within to the ‘outside’ of history, the better to neutralize its internal enemy and restore its dominance over the very terrain from which these antagonists will suspend themselves. Put otherwise, in place of a naïve view of revolt as a ‘radical’ derailing of normal temporality, Jesi calls us to see the stasis as a contest between two uses of the exception: on the one hand, a technicized suspension of normalcy aiming to restore the ‘calm endurance’ of the bourgeois experience of historical time (all contestation of which must either be internalized as ‘dissent,’ or else find itself positioned in a criminal ‘outside’ of history); on the other side lies the

93 In this respect, the effort made recently to distinguish between “constituent” and “destituent” insurrections would appear to be of profoundly Jesian heritage. On this distinction, see The Invisible Committee, Maintenant, op cit., 73-75.
task of the politics to come, which must achieve a paradoxical ‘enduring suspension' of the bourgeois manipulation of time per se (a neutralization of the whole bi-polar machine), a coincidence of genuinely insurrectional experience of mythic time within history, rather than excepted from it.

As a preliminary to this new task, Jesi embarks on what Andrea Cavelletti characterizes as “a critique of the Spartacist representation of the enemy,” i.e., a critique of the revolutionary mask of bourgeois power.\(^9^4\) Having been goaded by agents provocateurs\(^9^5\) into the ‘outside’ of history—i.e., pushed between the walls of the caesura—the temporality and self-parenthesis of bourgeois life may find themselves modally suspended, but the symbolic face of bourgeois power continues to radiate blindingly in the eyes of the insurgents.

Why is it so effective to push insurgents into the caesura? Jesi’s thesis is that the distillation of ideological signs into symbols can create a tactical and ethical blindness affecting the very course of the battle itself. Taking the symbolic structures of their adversary as their own model,

…class parties and unions [become] subject to the indisputable power of fascination exerted by their capitalist counterpart, and they strive to counter it by transforming themselves into organs that are basically similar to those that characterize capitalism. […] One of the most fearsome conquests of capitalism consists in having conferred a symbolic value of strength and power to its structures—a symbolic value whose recognition is not escaped even by many of those who aim to bring capitalism down (SSR 67).

Once it is subjected to the epiphanic undertow of insurrectional symbolization, the selection of ‘targets’ to be prioritized—ordinarily, a strategic calculus—can wind up being delineated “within the ambit of symbols and pseudo-myths” propagated by the bourgeoisie about itself. In other words, wherever a revolutionary ideology is distilled into a purely symbolic polarization, there is

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\(^9^4\) Andrea Cavelletti, “À l’heure de la révolte, on n’est plus seul dans la ville'. Discussion avec Andrea Cavalletti a propos du Spartakus de Furio Jesi,” Lundi Matin #87, January 4, 2017. Our translation.

\(^9^5\) See footnote 45, above. [UPDATE]
a risk that “the institutions of capitalism appear to the exploited as non-contingent symbols of power” (ibid).

At the December 31st KPD congress, Luxemburg cautioned her comrades against the illusion “that it is sufficient to overthrow the capitalist government and to set up another in its place in order to bring about a socialist revolution.” For Luxemburg, this meant not allowing the class antagonism to be circumscribed within the narrow confines of a change of ‘political’ leadership. Yet, is it really the case that when the majority faction—those who no longer wished to ‘hear any nonsense about classical politics’—voted against participating in the elections, this was due to a failure to distinguish bourgeois political revolutions from genuine social revolutions? Arguably, the problem was not that they viewed the institutions of bourgeois power as the *terminus* of socialist power—they were councilists, after all. It was rather that, having foreclosed upon the parliamentary tribune, to attack the *symbolic* citadels of the enemy’s power appeared as the sole means remaining to advance the social revolution. To eliminate the obstacles to the social revolution—the treacherous SPD, first of all—was precisely seen as the Party’s most urgent task. The alternative presented itself as a choice between ‘classical politics’ and ‘direct battle’, such that, while wanting to destitute and expose the void of parliamentarian legitimacy and advance the social revolution, they saw no other option than to confront the enemy ballistically. For Jesi, this slippage—especially once distilled into the quasi-objectivity of *symbols*—highlights the ambivalence and danger of a *symmetrical* understanding of power: to perceive one’s enemies as so many “heads to topple, symbols of power to conquer” leads to a “certainty that conquest of the *symbols of power*—especially the conquest of Berlin— would

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necessarily mean total victory” (SSR, 50). The caesuric symbolization of revolt always risks reifying the pseudo-objectivity of the enemy’s mythic legitimacy, leading insurgents to waste their energy and resources destroying the empty symbolic citadels of its power, believing, “by a kind of non-contingent objectivity,” them to be symbols of strength that must be “taken possession of in order to win the battle” (SSR, 67-68).

There are two dimensions of this ‘lure’ of symmetry enveloped within the symbolization of friend and enemy. The first concerns the targets of attack, i.e., the insurgents’ understanding of the basis on which the enemy’s power rests; the second concerns the “face of the enemy against whom one rises up.” Here we may return to the second of two temporal dimensions configured by the symbol. If, as we saw above, the first aspect (‘once and for all’) described the speed of pure mediality and its associated mutations of perception, the latter (‘eternal return’) refers to the quasi-eternal dimension of the symbol, its capacity to appear as a ‘pure past’. While the former is more directly responsible for suspending the historical-strategic temporality of the party, the latter carries with it the powerful sentiment of participating in an eternal truth (the battle). However, as is true of all mythic epiphany, when the symbol becomes a site onto which is projected a guilty or death-driven conscience, this absolutizing quality can lead to a dangerously moralistic erasure or numbing of any situational sensitivity. Wherever mythic temporality takes over, Jesi warns, there is a permanent risk that the face of the enemy will pass from being a personification of “political and economic relations” (against which one wages what he calls a “technical insurrection,” aimed, perhaps, at blockading and sabotaging the material-infrastructural underpinnings of market society) into a kind of Manichæan moral terror in which the enemy suddenly appears as a “hideous,” inhuman, and monstrous negativity to be
vanquished at all costs (SSR, 68-69). Once the *objective adequacy* of symbolic epiphany makes it such that one is no longer fighting a battle but *the* battle, no longer an enemy but *the* enemy (“the same enemy as ever”\(^9\)) , a deadly sacrificial lure risks opening up:

The lethal spellbinding force of the capitalist symbols of power persists even when it is no longer a question of conquering those symbols—there remains, in fact, the certainty that those symbols are in some (perhaps horrid and culpable) way an ‘apex’, an epiphany of power; that they must be countered by an epiphany of virtue if one wishes to acquire the same power. The monster reveals itself to be the holder of *a* power when its adversaries feel the need to counter it with the power of heroic virtue (that is, with the death of the hero). And the monster has the fearsome faculty of determining the formation of its own myth, of interfering in a fundamental way in the process of the mythologization of class struggle at the precise point where revolutionary denunciation would seem to manifest itself (SSR, 90).

With the strategic horizon of perception transposed onto a plane of moral eternity, partisans find themselves transformed into sacrificial ‘heroes’ who “dangerously underestimate the strength of the adversary,” hurling themselves into battle in a “concentrated expenditure of energies…that could almost be regarded as a spasmodic preparation for triumph or death” (SSR 86).

Such a mythical and moralistic tone of sacrifice marked the rhetoric of the Berlin militants from the earliest moments through to the end. On the morning of January 7th, the first issue of *Vorwärts* (now published by the paper’s revolutionary occupiers) carried explicitly sacrificial overtones: “Workers! Comrades! Everyone out onto the streets! The Revolution is in danger! You must prove that you are ready to make sacrifices! Confirm what you have shown yesterday, namely that the entire proletariat of Great Berlin is willing to stand up and to fight for the

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97 In his Introduction to *Spartakus*, Andrea Cavalletti offers a helpful gloss: “On the one hand, the face of power appears to the rebels as demonic and monstrous, so that instituted power is rightly recognized by them as a form of cruel domination. On the other hand, an enemy identified as monstrous dictates, negatively, the attitude of those who rise up and challenge it. Opposing themselves to the enemy-monster, the rebels *must* behave, at all costs, like humans—they must be virtuous and loyal to the point of self-sacrifice. As the fantasmatic abyss of bourgeois ethics and humanism, it is the monster that paradoxically defines the values of this ethics and this humanism and, in the generous and desperate acts of the Spartacists, it is the monster that becomes the ‘depository of a power’” (SSR 15).

98 Jesi makes this minor but significant addition when he imports (otherwise verbatim) the related passage from the unpublished manuscript of *Spartakus* into his article “A Reading of Rimbaud’s ‘Bateau ivre’” (1972). The latter is forthcoming in English, in Furio Jesi, *Time and Festivity*, ed. Andrea Cavalletti, Trans. Cristina Viti, 2018.
revolution…”99 The call would not be answered by Berlin’s one million inhabitants, “almost all of whom remained passive.”100 When government troops advanced on the building in the cover of darkness, “we realized to our dismay that the Vorwärts was not occupied by a disciplined fighting force,” and that any lingering hopes that “the workers of Berlin would come to our rescue” were, tragically, “all illusions.”101

A week later, a day before his arrest, torture, and murder, Karl Liebknecht described the defeat of the Spartacists in tones that merge historical, instinctual, and moral-theological registers:

Yes, the revolutionary workers of Berlin were defeated. They were defeated because they had been abandoned by the ones they relied on: the sailors, the soldiers, the security forces, the people’s militia. […] It was a defeat that followed the law of history. The time was not ripe for victory yet. And still, the struggle was inevitable. It would have been disgraceful to surrender the police headquarters, this palladium of the revolution, to Ernst, Hirsch, and their cohorts without a fight. The struggle was forced upon the proletariat by Ebert and his gang, and the masses of Berlin responded instinctively, despite all doubts and concerns.102

In other words, it was historically necessary to have fought, and to have been defeated; it was also morally necessary to have fought, as dignity demanded it; and finally, the struggle having been technicized, or instrumentally provoked by the counter-revolutionary SPD, thrust upon the workers by Ebert and his gang, it represented an instinctual response among the Berlin proletariat. Liebknecht’s remarks assume the form of a vengeful prophecy, seeking both to redeem and honor his fallen comrades, and to lay a curse on their murderers. The Spartacists, he writes,

[H]ave spilled blood for a sacred cause, and their blood has been sanctified. From every drop of it avengers will emerge; from every frazzled fiber new fighters for the mighty cause will grow, a cause as eternal and as unfading as the firmament. The defeated of today will be the victors of tomorrow (123).

99 Karl Retzlaw, cited in Kuhn, All Power to the Councils!, op cit., 131-132.
100 Karl Retzlaw, cited in Kuhn, All Power to the Councils!, op cit., 131-132.
101 Karl Retzlaw, cited in Kuhn, All Power to the Councils!, op cit., 132-133.
If the struggle is eternal and unfading, its cause ‘sacred’ and its bloodshed ‘sanctified’, this is because the “unstoppable growth” of the “forces of the social revolution” is “the natural law of social development.” Yet, no sooner is the law of this historical necessity invoked, than we immediately pass to a moral-theological one (good and evil). Comparing the SPD to the betrayals of Judas, Liebknecht calls upon a biblical imagery of treason:

Never before has the world seen Judases like them who not only betrayed what they considered holy but also nailed it to the cross. In August 1914, German social democracy sank lower than any other; today, at the dawn of the revolution, it is uglier than ever.

The article then closes with a mythical-prophetic invocation of the vengeful destiny of the proletariat victory:

[T]hey can drown the proletarian revolution in blood, but the revolution will rise again like a giant, and its first words will be: ‘Down with Ebert, Scheidemann, and Noske, the assassins of the workers!’ […] ‘Spartacus on the Ground!’ Wait! We have not fled yet, we are not defeated for good. Even if they put us all in chains, we will still be here, we will remain, and victory will be ours! Spartacus stands for the fire and the spirit, the soul and the heart, the will and the deed of the proletarian revolution. Spartacus stands for all the misery, longing, and determination of the class-conscious proletariat. Spartacus stands for socialism and world revolution. (123)

Thus did the Spartacist effort to force myth to coincide with history terminate, as Cavalletti puts it, in an “unconscious yielding to mythologies orchestrated by power,” subjugating its protagonists to a ‘fascination’ with the figure of its enemy, and leading to a prophetically heroic Manichæan sacrifice, a “death rite that locked the circle shut.”103 Thus, likewise, was it reduced to playing the role of an ‘interlude’ preparing the restoration of normal time.

Whether it consists in a common site of political-symbolic legitimacy over which both sides contend (e.g., the ‘legitimate’ claimant to the sovereignty of proletarian democracy), or a

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moral binary (heroes/monsters, good/evil), in each case the trap consists in the assumption of a symbolic symmetry between the insurgent forces and the world against which they revolt. Jesi’s proposed solution—which we will have the chance to reflect on critically with Agamben below—is twofold. On the one hand, we must introduce an asymmetry into the friend/enemy polarization, an asymmetry that implies a rupture not only with bourgeois values, but with the narrow scope of workerism per se.\(^{104}\) For Jesi, this implies a struggle not simply in the name of the ‘working class’ but a struggle over the very idea of a “human” community per se:

The organizations of this class, parties or unions, have yet to understand how necessary it is for their reality to present its own structures rather than the ones imitated from the rival class. The collective, organized realities of the exploited become ever less collective to the degree that they imitate the structures proper to the class of the exploiters. Class consciousness is not just consciousness of the economic relations that determine classist differentiation, it is also consciousness of the human experience that characterizes belonging to the class of the exploited (SSR, 73).

The preliminary basis for an effective struggle is the ability to shift to another plane of perception, another idea of happiness and of living. On the other hand, however, arriving at such an asymmetrical perspective is only possible provided we find a way to neutralize the conscious and unconscious grip that the enemy’s mythical self-projection holds over us. This is precisely the task of “demythologization.” In other words, it is a matter, first, of seeking a genuinely autonomous premise for collective life (the introduction of an asymmetry between ideas of life and the basis of collective power). Second, it presupposes the capacity to exhibit the nullity and poverty of the enemy’s projected image of itself. It is a question, therefore, of delegitimizing not only this or that particular enemy (e.g., the SPD), but, what is much more important, the very image of life, of happiness, and of the relational

\(^{104}\) “Revolt does not favor the maturation of class consciousness. […] The epiphany of today or tomorrow, always joined to the preparation for tomorrow, is the maturation of class consciousness. The epiphany of the day after tomorrow is the maturation of a human consciousness, for which it would be limiting to speak of class consciousness” (SSR, 142).
basis of collective existence on which its power rests (e.g., its evaluation of the important/unimportant, the alluring/repugnant, but also its fictional appeals to ‘constituent’ legitimacy, ‘popular’ representation, etc.). We must already move on another plane, in accordance with a different evaluation.

If demythologization is something distinct from “demystification,” this is because it is not a matter of purging the experience of suspended time—the time of the battle—from proletarian struggle (which would mean purging revolution of revolt, an impossible task). On Jesi’s view, what is needed is to free this experience of false myths. The trap of a symmetrical understanding of power is premised on “non-genuine myths for the exploited, but [which exercise] the dangerous power of effective myths” in the course of struggle (SSR 73). At the same time, it is also a matter of preventing the genuine myths of the exploited from becoming the sole basis (or lack thereof) of revolutionary strategic thinking, since using such myths to ground a strategy of struggle will inevitably lead to “imitating the adversary and his strategic behavior” (SSR, 74).

This raises the delicate problem of the partisan significance of revolutionary history, in particular the relation of current-day struggles to past defeats. What is left to preserve from the event of a defeated revolt? If, as Cavelletti rightly notes, “to demythologize means not to fall into the trap of technicization, [and in this way] to keep revolt alive,” this certainly will not be accomplished by inventing imaginary victories for struggles after the fact, nor by a hagiography of revolutionary martyrs (SSR, 19). As Dauvé is right to remind us, “the bourgeoisie likes dead revolutionaries. The same German state that murdered Luxemburg issued a postage stamp in her memory.” Following Benjamin and Nietzsche, Jesi underlines the importance of distinguishing the historiographical content of memory from its untimely epiphanic meaning. In

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105 Dauvé and Authier, The Communist Left in Germany (1918-1921). [CITATION]
our relation to struggles of the past, we should not emphasize the ‘preparation’ of tomorrow that protagonists consciously plotted out, the diagram or plan of action they proposed (in this sense, historiography belongs to the perspective of ‘revolution’, which sees in revolt only a string of failures and defeats). Instead, we should look for the “advance epiphany” of the “day after tomorrow” to which every revolt testifies, the upheaval in sensibility they brought into being.\(^{106}\) Such an attitude toward the past looks not simply to what ‘happened’ in this or that event, but to what it expresses or ‘evokes’. From the perspective of the philosophy of history, the positive content of revolt lies not in its outcome, but in the “violent epiphany” by which it “conjures up the ‘day after tomorrow’” (SSR 142). Such a rupture is never located in the continuous chronology of historical time, it is not a datum of recognition to be ‘realized’ (a model). Rather, it ‘flashes up’ like a dialectical image that we assume or take-on in a moment of danger, a potentiality that can be fulfilled only through a new creative act. It is this larval, inexistent ‘day after tomorrow’ of the event that must be retrieved and rescued from the burial grounds of historical causality that necessarily efface it.\(^{107}\) The past is more than the sum of completed facts, for it is also the site of potential encounter in the here and now. Its defeats still exert a pressure on us, they demand to be re-potentiated.

**Conclusion: The Insurrectional Ban**

Our exploration of Jesi’s phenomenological symbology of insurrectional action both confirms and complicates several features of Agamben’s early view of violence that we outlined

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\(^{106}\) Jesi is adapting a formulation from Nietzsche’s characterization of the German spirit of music. Germans, Nietzsche wrote, “are of the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow—they have as yet no today” (cited at SSR 139).

\(^{107}\) It is precisely because the moment of this fulfillment cannot be dated or known in advance, that Jesi will describe the ‘medium’ through which historical events communicate as an ‘eternal present’ (SSR 155).
in Chapter 1. What Jesi shows is that the process of deactivating historical time harbors the danger of trapping partisan experience within a ‘ban’ structure of its own, one which, while distinct from the self-parenthesis of normal or historical time, ultimately works to reinforce it in the long run. In other words, there is a danger that the suspension of the state of exception structuring historical time—what Jesi refers to as the “bourgeois manipulation of time” that serves to “wall-in” the social divisions of the city through the bi-univocal opposition of private and public life—can lead to a distinct yet reciprocal ex-ceptio of its own. We will refer to this danger as the “insurrectional ban.”

As we have seen, Agamben claimed that revolutionary violence ‘creates’ by rendering the presencing of the world participable. Our exploration of Spartakus has shone considerable light on how this takes place: in the mutation of experience induced by the event of revolt we glimpse (albeit fleetingly) the internal form of a violence whose effect is to install a collective, creative, and partisan experience. As the criterion of immanence demanded, this experience is indeed defined less by its ends than by the use it makes of symbols, objects, and the world (in this case: Berlin). The decision to take sides and hurl ourselves into the battle suspends the reign of privatizing separations that compose the ‘normal time’ of urban pacification, unleashing a shared epiphany of symbols crystallized in practice through an immediately-collective use of the city. By suspending the ‘preparatory’ horizon of planning and management, insurrectional violence shows itself to be marked by a radical immanence of its gestures (or ‘means’) to the lived situation. It would therefore appear that we have located what we sought in Chapter 1, namely, a form of violence in which the reciprocal immanence of destruction and creation alters the experience of time, enacting a ‘dimensional’ expansion of experience that restores participation in the world. A collective use of the city is made possible by the symbolic caesura of an event
that contracts the field of perception into a now-time by transposing the meaning of our gestures onto the symbolic plane of ‘eternity’ (“the Battle”). The polarizing tension of insurgent experience is fundamentally defined by this bifurcating temporality: eternity and ‘now’, the “day before yesterday” and the “day after tomorrow” (SSR, 139-167). In this way, Spartakus confirms two fundamental associations established in Agamben’s early work: first, the link between the experience of suspended time and the subject’s assumption of mortal risk in the battle; second, the link between this shattering experience and the temporality of ‘sacred’ time. However, it also raises two associated pitfalls: (i) exceptionality and (ii) sacrifice.

(i) The danger of ‘exceptionality’ arises within the mythic symbolization of insurrectional subjectivization, where the latter introduces a caesura in the fabric of time, wrenching the temporalities of revolt and revolution apart. From this point of view, the insurrectional ban is an example of what Jesi will later call a ‘mythological machine’. It operates at the level of perception, by breaking time into “two intrinsically autonomous realities,” forcing the preparatory chronological temporality of “parties and unions…into the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of the revolt,” and leaving in their place a collectivity unified only by “the flag of revolt” (SSR 59, 56). Through the caesura of the event, it allows the experience of revolt to appear as an exception from history, as history ‘suspended’; in Agamben’s terminology, the machine installs us in a relation of inclusive exclusion from history (a ‘ban relation’). Wherever the time of revolt ‘autonomizes’ itself extrinsically from history, we may say that mythological machine of the insurrectional ban is functioning. While this transformative rupture accounts for the tremendous creative power of revolt, it also signals its greatest danger: if the experience of freedom cannot escape the closed circle of suspended time, the ‘waking state’ it induces risks descending into a dream and becoming trapped by a mythical image of its own activity.
(ii) The second danger (‘sacrifice’), concerns the ambivalent status of the ‘enemy’ that enables the desubjectivizing power of revolt to function. Wherever the symbolic experience of combat merges with the Manichaean negativity of a ‘battle-against’ (“and there is no revolt that is not essentially ‘Manichaean’”) the shared strategic perception afforded by the experience of collective struggle risks being hijacked by technicized mythological schemas which, although they exercise the “dangerous power of effective [i.e., genuine] myths,” tend to cloak the enemy in an illusory mask (SSR 73). What may have previously appeared as so many obstacles to the growth of our autonomous collective power now becomes the index of an ‘inhuman’ and

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108 SSR 82. If this statement turns out to be true, the problem of a non-sacrificial revolutionary violence seems virtually insoluble. However, it is our view that the concept of ‘double Sophia’ developed in the final chapter of Spartakus, as well as the many attempts to theorize methods for dismantling ‘mythological machines’ in the essays collected in Time and Festivity, both testify to Jesi’s conviction that this inevitability is not insurmountable. For example, in the final chapter of Spartakus, Jesi distinguishes between two interpretations of Manichaeism: “Manichaeism does not simply mean the dogmatic opposition of light and darkness, God and matter; it also means the horror of chaos, the exaggerated dread at the disordered teeming of forms that a famous psalm from Turpan [The Book of Giants] evokes as the special attribute of the Prince of Darkness” (SSR 158). Against the dogmatic and canonical interpretation of Manichaeism, which depends on the binary moral opposition between light/dark qua good/evil, Jesi’s counter-reading proposes that Manicheism’s “great spiritual crisis” arises not from an inability to “dominate,” but simply to “order the multiform reality of matter” (SSR 158-159). If Heracles’ victory over the Nemean lion serves as the archetypal symbol of the domination of nature, the Manichaean anguish that drives Goethe’s Doctor Faust into his pact with the Devil does not stem from a drive to “gain sovereignty over [his] demons,” but a recognition of the impossibility of order (SSR 159). This attempt to wrench Manichaeism away from a binary schema begins to make sense when we consider the fate of the Spartacists. Since the insurrectional ban transports insurgent perception onto the symbolic plane of a ‘final battle’ between two symmetrically opposed forces (human and monster, etc.), a non-binary Manichaicism would allow us to frame the encounter with the ‘teeming forms of death’ not exclusively as hostile impingements from outside us (originating in the ‘enemy’), but as forces acting no less from within us. The experience of combat would then coincide with the subject’s consensual submission to a field of exteriority. We would suggest that what Jesi wanted with this alternative Manichaeism, and with his concept of ‘double Sophia’ more generally, is something not so different from what Deleuze had in mind when he contrasted a negative logic of ‘war’ (premised on a transcendent form of ‘judgement’) with the positive image of what he called the “combat between Oneself.” As Deleuze writes, “[The] external combats, these combats-against, find their justification in the combats-between that determine the composition of forces in the combatant. The combat against the Other must be distinguished from the combat between Oneself. The combat-against tries to destroy or repel a force (to struggle against ‘the diabolical powers of the future’), but the combat-between, by contrast, tries to take hold of a force in order to make it one's own. The combat-between is the process through which a force enriches itself by seizing hold of other forces and joining itself to them in a new ensemble: a becoming.” See Gilles Deleuze, “To Have Done With Judgement,” in Essays Critical and Clinical, Trans. Dan Smith (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1997), 132.
absoluted moral ‘evil.’ Whereas the pitfall of ‘exceptionality’ results from an autonomization of the time of revolt from that of revolution, here the danger is the inverse: the temptation of a mimetic or ‘symmetrical’ image of power. As Jesi puts it, “the collective organized realities of the exploited become ever less collective [vis. autonomous, immanent] to the degree that they imitate the structures proper to the class of the exploiters” (SSR 73). As long as the Manichaeism of insurrectional battle provides the sole means to annul the preservative distance of self-parenthesis, the “temptation of fatalism”—a black hole threatening to annul not simply the reactionary preservation of the ‘ego’, but the preservative life-impulse tout court—will always haunt us. In short, the use of battle as a means of annulling self-parenthesis—which Agamben left us with in Chapter 1—appears to harbor the permanent risk of being flooded by powers beyond our strength. On Jesi’s view, it was precisely this ‘psychosis of revolt’ that ultimately took Red Rosa down:

> Luxemburg could not totally dissociate revolt from revolution. She could not totally dissociate the Spartacist revolt from her person […] [I]t was precisely [this] superior ethico-political vision…that made her more susceptible to the flash of knowledge implicit in revolt. Like a spell, it placed before her—she who had been such an incisive investigator of the economic structure of capitalism—the adversary as a demonic enemy (SSR 89, emphasis added).

In other words, the inability to dissociate enables the “spellbinding force of the capitalist symbols of power” to become mythically transformed into the symbols of an evil that must be heroically (sacrificially) destroyed, at all costs. It suspends our strategic grip on the relative contingency of the clash, leaving us incapable of limiting our defeat. For this inability, Luxemburg paid the ultimate cost. In the end, the technicized myths propagated by bourgeois

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109 A fruitful comparison might be made here to Deleuze and Guattari’s analyses in A Thousand Plateaus of the black holes of ‘faciality’, as well as the danger of a ‘war machine that no longer has any object other than war.’ We will reserve this analysis for a future text.

110 The danger is inscribed in the very grammar of ‘class war’ (or its expanded syntagm, ‘social war’). It is for this reason that both Jesi and Agamben will associate the overcoming of bourgeois order not with a ‘class victory’ but with the emergence of an emancipated ‘human experience’ (Jesi) or a ‘happy life’ (Agamben), since both terms make room for irreducibly asymmetrical forms and expressions.
society about the ‘non-contingent’ ground of its power defeat us not only by making us docile, by reinforcing our cowardice, apathy, or timidity, but by turning our courage and determination to resist awry, unconsciously inflating us with powers beyond our strength, turning our own virtues against us.

By the term ‘insurrectional ban,’ we wish to highlight the way in which these two pitfalls, that of hyper- and hypo-autonomization, merge and reinforce one another. The ‘fatalistic’ inability to dissociate the vital stakes of a revolt from our personhood is the combined effect of a hyper-autonomization of temporal experience and a hypo-autonomization of our own idea of happiness and life (i.e., of our own power) from that of our enemies. By their power to wrench us ‘outside’ of historical time, mythical symbols enclose the perceptual field of partisan action within the symmetrical image of an eternal battle (“the same obstacles…the same enemy as ever”). The power of the symbol to suspend historical time rests on its capacity to allude to an eternal present, to generate the emotional experience of a participation in eternity; it is precisely this subjectivizing experience of feeling as if our acts were indexed to an ‘elsewhere’ that creates the optical illusion of fighting ‘the same enemy as ever’. The effect of this apparent exception from the course of history is to symbolically position our consciousness within a closed symmetrical field transforming this or that historically contingent clash into an emanation of ‘the Battle’, leading us to fight not in history but as if on the sacrificial plane of eternity. The insurrectional ban may therefore be defined as the simultaneous open-and-shut motion, whereby the ‘opening’ of historical time onto an Outside in fact serves to close perception anew within the

111 Furio Jesi, “A Reading of Rimbaud’s ‘Bateau ivre’”, in Time and Festivity, op cit. What pertinence this has in a post-ideological period wherein the myth of ‘class struggle’ no longer organizes the major battles of our time remains an open question in Jesi’s work. That said, Jesi’s sustained meditations on the impossibility of the festival in the 1970’s would appear to offer a clue to the response.
narrow walls of mythical identification. It converts a historical *rapport de force* into what Andrea Cavelletti has described as a “death rite that locks the circle shut.”\(^{112}\)

On the one hand, all of this indicates clearly enough the ambivalence of the idea of an ‘annulment of self-parenthesis’ in Agamben’s early vision of revolutionary violence. On the other hand, as Jesi observes, not only is there “no liberation, no liberating reality, without the gesture” (SSR 135), but every authentic gesture places the coherency of the self in question:

> [G]esture…is the reality in which form lives, in which life is true and absolute. But that means that there opens up, before the one who [commits it], the labyrinth of being. This is because only those who execute a gesture are destined to confront the illuminations and terrors of the epiphanies of the true (SSR 129).

As Agamben adds,

> A life is ethical not when it simply submits to moral laws but when it accepts putting itself into play in its gestures, irrevocably and without reserve—even at the risk that its happiness or its disgrace will be decided once and for all.\(^{113}\)

Yet, given that such epiphanies also open the door through which reactionary powers of myth lay hold of us, how can revolutionary violence make the leap out of its closed circle? A new strategic approach is needed.

The menacing danger of the insurrectional ban compels us to pose the problem of the relation between time and violence in a new light, generating a new series of questions: is there a common point of intersection between the suspended temporality of revolt and the historical time of revolution? Is there a mode of violence that can install us in the very *site* of this divide, without being wrenched from one pole to the other? Is it possible to desert or deactivate historical time *within* history? Can we think a consistency of communal life that is genuinely asymmetrical with the present course of historical time, yet whose condition of perseverance

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does not depend on its being in suspension from it? It is our contention that these are the questions that frame Agamben’s messianism, which forms the central problem through which his ‘destituent’ political logic will be developed.
CHAPTER 4
DESTITUENT COMMUNISM

The path that we must take in order to enter into community with
the world doesn’t go toward the outside, but the inside.
GUSTAV LANDAUER\textsuperscript{114}

Je continuerai à ouvrir des mondes tant que ce sera possible.
YLDUNE LÉVY\textsuperscript{115}

Introduction

When Agamben introduces the concept of a ‘destituent potential’ in the “Epilogue” to
\textit{The Use of Bodies}, he explicitly frames it as an effort to circumvent the pitfalls of 20th century
revolutionary strategy: “[I]f to constituent power there correspond revolutions, revolts, and new
constitutions, namely, a violence that puts in place and constitutes a new law, for destituent
potential it is necessary to think entirely different strategies, whose definition is the task of the
coming politics” (HS4.2 266). In this chapter, we will attempt to specify how the concept of
messianic destitution presents an ethical and gnoseological strategy for neutralizing the presence
of the ‘ban relation’ as it surfaces within revolutionary violence, thereby inviting us to rethink,
from the ground up, the basic premises of insurgent practice and temporality.

\textsuperscript{115} ‘I will continue to open worlds as long as this is possible.’ Yldune Lévy was among the eight accused in the anti-terrorist ‘Tarnac Affair’ in France. This is the last thing Lévy said to her judges in her closing statement on the final
day of the trial, March 30, 2018. As reported here: https://twitter.com/lundimat1/status/979747410594246657 (accessed 3.30.2018). For Agamben’s solidarity statement with the Tarnac defendants, see Giorgio Agamben,
translation of the joint solidarity statement of Alain Badiou and Eric Hazan (“Who are the Terrorists?,” \textit{Politis},
If Chapter 1 dwelled on Agamben’s early work, this is because, in order to appreciate the destituent strategy, it helps to see the subtle but important shift this theory required in his own theoretical development. Alongside the new diagnosis of bio-political sovereignity developed in *Homo Sacer* Vol.’s 1-3, Agamben’s theory of political violence and revolutionary time will undergo a shift in the 1990’s. While the definition of revolutionary violence (‘restoration of participation in the creation of the world’) remains constant, both the nature and the ‘means’ of this creation shift. Specifically, we will emphasize two developments: first, a shift from a negative, quasi-Marxist logic of ‘self-abolition’ to one of ‘deactivation’ or ‘destitution’; second, an identification of messianic time no longer with the suspension or ‘halting’ of historical time *per se* (the ‘inauguration of a new epoch’), but with ‘operative’ time (a term he borrows from linguist Gustav Guillaume), i.e., a discontinuity *within* historical time that allows us to deactivate juridical and factual ‘vocations’ without having recourse to the mythologeme of extra-historical powers.116

What provokes this shift is the recognition of the ‘ban relation’. While Agamben’s theory of the ‘ban’ is frequently regarded as forming the metaphysical underpinning of state and economic governance in the western political tradition, we contend that this is only half of the story. The mythologeme of the exception also endangers revolutionary movements from within. This danger is observed already in the “Introduction” to the first volume of *Homo Sacer*:

The weakness of anarchist and Marxian critiques of the State was precisely to have not caught sight of this structure and thus to have quickly left the *arcanum imperii* aside, as if it had no

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116 As a clue to this shift, we may note the subtle difference in the way Agamben rephrases the object of ‘inauguration’ when summarizing Benjamin’s ‘divine violence’ in *The Use of Bodies*. Whereas “On the Limits of Violence” had described it as inaugurating “a new chronology (a *novus ordo saeclorum*) and a new experience of temporality—a new History” (OLV 108), *The Use of Bodies* now substitutes the term ‘new reality’: “In the difference between *veranlassen*, ‘to induce, to provoke,’ and *vollziehen*, ‘to complete, to realize’, is expressed the opposition between constituent power, which destroys and re-creates ever-new forms of juridical order, without ever definitively deposing it, and destituent violence, which, insofar as it deposes the juridical order once and for all, immediately inaugurates a new reality [*una nuova realtà]*” (HS4.2 269).
substance outside of the simulacra and the ideologies invoked to justify it. But one ends up identifying with an enemy whose structure one does not understand, and the theory of the State (and in particular of the state of exception, which is to say, of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the transitional phase leading to the stateless society) is the reef on which the revolutions of our century have been shipwrecked (HS1 12; cf. P 170).

However, as our investigation of Furio Jesi has sought to demonstrate, the logic of the ban is not restricted to constituted formations of sovereignty; it also finds an inverse and tragic expression in the revolts that strove most earnestly to topple them. In spite of some obvious overlaps, what we have called the ‘insurrectional ban’ is therefore not exactly identical to the problem of the transitional phase in the passage above. Certainly, both testify to the danger of a ‘fascination’ with the mythic symbols of bourgeois power, which, in the case of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat,’ drove the newly victorious Bolshevik leaders to regard the conquest of state power as the unavoidable path toward the proletariat’s liberation. However, were this the only issue, the problem of the ban would indeed remain (as Agamben puts it) a matter of the ‘theory of the State’, effectively situating it once again within the purview of ‘constituted’ sovereignty, only this time in the contradictory form of a ‘worker state’. By contrast, if we are justified in claiming that Jesi’s work forms not simply a useful comparative, but an essential complement to Homo Sacer, this is because he shows that the danger of the arcanum imperii does not await the moment of ‘victory’, but already threatens from the earliest moments of an insurrection. When the two thinkers are placed together, it becomes possible to claim that the logic of the ban presides over the very distinction between revolt and revolution.

At the same time, Spartacus challenges the suggestion—defended by Agamben in the early period of his work—that the mode in which revolutionary violence restores our participation in the world should be linked to (i) a risk of death undergone by a subject in battle, and (ii) a mythic suspension of historical time. The two features we have associated with the insurrectional ban line up more or less directly with Agamben’s two-fold criterion: (i) hypo-
autonomization from our enemies (or a *symmetrical* understanding of power) (ii) a *hyper-*

autonomization of temporal experience (a formal exteriority of ‘now-time’ from historical time). As we have seen, revolt accomplishes a ‘suspension of historical time’ only at the expense of dissociating its agents from the preparatory chronological time associated with revolution. The power of the symbol to suspend historical time rests on its capacity to *allude* to an eternal present, to generate the emotional experience of a participation in eternity divorced from historical duration. And it is precisely this subjectivizing experience of feeling *as if* our acts were indexed to an ‘elsewhere’ that creates the optical illusion of fighting ‘the same enemy as ever’, in a battle justifying all sacrifices, up to and including death. The dyad “revolt/revolution” is thus revealed to be a product of a mythological machine that “keeps myth constantly separate from history, and while doing so give us to understand that it comes to us from an ‘other’ world.”

Agamben’s early criteria for an ‘immanent’ conception of revolutionary violence thus turns out to coincide with precisely those elements that inwardly unraveled the Spartacist revolt, making Noske’s counter-revolutionary task a straightforward one. As a result, the nature of the transformation of time associated with revolutionary violence must be rethought.

The analysis carried out in Chapters 1 and 2 laid out the conditions that a revised conception of violence would have to fulfill: *if* (i) the essence of myth consists in a use of language that enables it to allude to its own pre-existing ground outside of historical time, thereby remaining in ‘suspension’ from its own factual-juridical situation, and *if* (ii) the ban relation constitutes a partisan use of myth that allows violence, whether state or revolutionary, to appear ‘as if’ it were grounded in a supra-historical instance, *then* (iii) for destitution to deactivate the ban, it must enact an operation of demythologization. In plain terms, destitution

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must bring the existence of power back down to Earth, by forcing it coincide without reserve with its operations, while stripping the latter of the ulterior powers they allude to. As elsewhere, Agamben will think this possibility by attending to the relation between subjectivization and time. For a destituent politics to be possible, not only must there exist a demythologizing use of language—i.e., a counter-mythological use of the structure of “infancy”—but there must also exist an experience of time capable of interrupting the ethical paralysis that the spectral existence of contemporary life installs in us (our historical ‘desubjectivation’) without grounding itself in an ‘ulterior’ origin, i.e., without suspending its contact with the world.\textsuperscript{118} Destitution accomplishes a twofold operation: by emptying historical time of its pretension to unity (the World), it fragments time, inserting perception into a plural field of ongoing operations; on the other hand, this fragmentation appears as the sole condition on which an experience of the creation of worlds (plural) can be ‘restored.’ The destitution of the time of the World forms the precondition for the restoration of operative time, the time of world-making. The task of the present chapter will be to understand the coincidence of these two maneuvers. The former is linked to an expanded interpretation of what the linguist Gustav Guillaume calls “operative time,” the experiential time it takes for historical time to ‘construct itself’, yet which never coincides with it; the latter, to the Pauline strategy of ‘revocation’ that Agamben associates with the gesture hos me, the power to inhabit factual-juridical conditions ‘as not’. Taken together, the

\textsuperscript{118} Another way to think about this, would be to ask: given the desubjectification to which contemporary life attests, the destruction of all those great ‘political antagonisms’ organized around molar identities (worker, subaltern, third worldism, etc.), is there a politics that can free the act of strategic situational assessment without inscribing it within re-substantialized ‘subject’ (a subject with a determinate enemy)? Is there a way to think about political-strategic experience and action that destitutes both the identity of the insurgent and the resubjectivizing pole of the ‘enemy’? Can we think a politics in which the subject is ‘subject only of its own desubjectification?’ On the latter point, see BM 117-118. On the need to link this conception to a theory of situational assessment, see the ‘discussion’ in Giorgio Agamben (with Eric Hazan), “Remarks on the Occasion of the Republication of Tiqqun,” Talk delivered Spring 2009 in Paris. We have assigned it this title, as it had none originally. Online here: https://anarchistwithoutcontent.wordpress.com/2010/04/18/tiqqun-apocrypha-repost (accessed 3.23.2018). Cited henceforth as RT.
two concepts offer an original concept of revolutionary violence and temporality, and a new set of premises from which to broach the question of communism in the 21st century. However, in order to appreciate how this messianic conception of violence functions, it is first necessary to get a sense of Agamben’s diagnosis of our contemporary situation. If messianic life is a calling, this means that it is a response. To what situation does it respond? Where do we find ourselves today?

**Paralyzed Messianism: The State of Exception and the ‘Days of the Messiah’**

Agamben’s concept of messianism has two valences. Life under the state of exception is what he will refer to as a “petrified or paralyzed” messianism, the “imperfect nihilism” of a ruling order that cannot finish finishing, that has nullified the law, but “maintains the Nothing in a perpetual and infinitely deferred state of validity” (P 171). The ‘Nothing’ is not an obscure metaphysical element, but an experience of the world in which events “happen without happening,” a paradoxical relation of non-relation that causes time to slip out of our grasp, and in which “every gesture becomes unrealizable” (P 169, 174). Imperfect nihilism is the effect of a mode of governance that seeks to ensure that [the] Nothing happens, rather than the world.

Against such epochal paralysis, Agamben will oppose not the positivity of a non-alienated or integral form of subjectivity preserved from the destruction of experience, but the “perfected” nihilism of messianic fulfillment, which achieves redemption by an “overturning of the Nothing” of our time (ibid). As we shall see, the latter is nothing other than the ‘reduction’ of the former, a way of inhabiting and repopulating the fringe of desubjectification it installs in our relation to the world. If the aim of revolutionary violence is the restoration of participation in the creation of the world, the challenge consists in understanding how violence ‘creates’ a new relation simply by
neutralizing and exhibiting an absence. What does it mean to ‘fulfill’ the Nothing of our age, to *return Nothing to nothing*, by ‘exhibiting’ its emptiness? What is the relation between messianic time and the ‘Nothing’ that our age guards at its center?

In its religious connotation, the “days of the Messiah” refers to the period after the resurrection, yet prior to the abolition of history. Although earthly law remains ‘in force,’ the messianic event has left it in a perpetual state of suspension: “the time under the Law is over, and yet the Messiah has not yet come” (P 168). If Agamben sees in this an analogy to contemporary life under the permanent state of exception, this is because, from the moment that the juridical order ‘grounds’ itself directly in the emergency, not only does the law divest itself of any transcendent authority, but the very framework of prescription and proscription lose their meaning *tout court*. Like the “original form of the Torah” in the Kabbalistic tradition, which is composed of a “medley of letters without any order; that is, *without meaning*”—yet which, for the same reason, can be said to “contain all possible meaning”—the self-derogation of law in the exception ultimately reduces the pronouncements of law to a senseless jumble of words, a “commandment that commands nothing” (P 165-167; HS1 52). Yet, contrary to appearances, what is signaled here is not the disappearance or lack of law, but a shift in its way of exerting power over a subject. That it no longer speaks to us of prohibitions does not weaken, but in fact intensifies its hold over us. As Jessica Whyte observes, as soon as “no act can be understood to be in accordance with the law,” it follows that “no space can safely be assumed to be outside its grasp.”119 Once it has become *a priori* impossible to distinguish transgression from observance, the legality of an act becomes fundamentally undecidable. From the militarization of public space to the complete surveillance of the smallest minutia of private life, today everything

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conspires to remind us that the most innocent gesture can be criminalized at any moment (or vice versa), that inside the most harmless of citizens there lurks an anonymous potentiality for terrorist violence.\footnote{“It is only an apparent paradox that the harmless citizen of postindustrial democracies (the Bloom, as \textit{Tiqqun} has suggested he be called) who readily does everything that he is asked to do, inasmuch as he leaves his everyday gestures and his health, his amusements and his occupations, his diet and his desires, to be commanded and controlled in the smallest detail by apparatuses, is also considered by power—perhaps precisely because of this—as a potential terrorist. [...] The more apparatuses pervade and disseminate their power in every field of life, the more government will find itself faced with an elusive element, which seems to escape its grasp the more it docilely submits to it” (WA 22-23). Cf. HS 57: “[A] person who goes for a walk during the curfew is not transgressing the law any more than the soldier who kills him is executing it.”} As Agamben remarks, “the unspoken principle which rules our society can be stated like this: every citizen is a potential terrorist.”\footnote{For a deeper elaboration on this point, see the talk delivered in Athens in November 2013. Giorgio Agamben, “From the State of Control to a Praxis of Destituent Power.” Accessible online at https://roarmag.org/essays/agamben-destituent-power-democracy (accessed 3.29.2018). Reprinted in \textit{Resisting Biopolitics - Philosophical, Political, and Performative Strategies}, ed. S.E. Wilmer (New York: Routledge, 2016). Cited henceforth as FSC.} In fact, this potentiality is nothing other than the symmetrical image of the groundless violence projected upon us.\footnote{Agamben concludes a talk in 2009 with the following illustrative story: “I would like to conclude by recalling a story told to me by a great friend of mine, José Bergamin, who fought in the Spanish civil war in 36, and they had sent him, a poet and an intellectual, they had sent him with another poet, Rafael Alberti. The republican government had sent him to the United States to seek support from the government there, but they were stopped at the border by the police who had already began endless interrogations, accusing them of being communists. Ten hours of sustained interrogation, after which of course they still wouldn’t let them in, my friend told them: ‘Listen, I am not, and never was a communist; but what you call a communist, that I surely am’. And I think today we have to say: ‘We are not, and will never be terrorists; but what you seem to designate by the word terrorist, that we are’” (RT).} To live under the state of exception is to be perpetually ‘abandoned’ to an unlocalizable authority whose jurisdiction is unlimited, yet whose demands are inscrutable (SE 38-39). Sovereign violence hovers like an indeterminate element over us, a powerfully present absence that acts upon us no longer by means of delegation and interdiction, but through exposure. To be ‘governed’ today is to experience a graduated spectrum of vulnerability to a non-localizable potentiality for violence suspended over us, punishment becoming a mere afterthought, and perhaps even a relief, the confession of guilt having become the only way to bring our endless trial to a conclusion.

If the state of exception tends to culminate in what Agamben calls the “lasting eclipse of classical politics,” this is for two reasons: (i) once governance no longer aims at anything other
than administration, it effectively becomes anti-political; (ii) the counter-subjectivities that in previous generations opposed it have today either collapsed under the weight of repression or become thoroughly internalized within the system. Since messianism must negotiate both sides of this tension, which form the two faces of imperfect nihilism, it is necessary to say a word about each before passing to Agamben’s positive proposal.

Governing today has become little more than the disordered and tautological administration of a social order that has emptied itself of any positive reason for being, yet which continues to anarchically persist, ‘without why’. Having placed itself beyond every historical justification, sovereignty inhabits historical time exclusively in the mode of a deferral of its own imminent end, assuming the form of a perpetual crisis management operation. If life under the state of exception is a “petrified or paralyzed” messianism, an “imperfect” nihilism, this is first of all because it has become constitutively incapable of even imagining (never mind actually working toward) a future that could look any different from the present. As a graffiti painted on a wall during the 2016 struggles in France against the Loi travail distilled it: the future is canceled.

To return once more to religious imagery, our society resembles a world that, having deposed the law, now expends every effort to delay the arrival of the Kingdom, and this because, having abandoned all relation to transcendence, it can no longer imagine its end as the end of a world, but only as the end of ‘the world’ per se. The temporality of such decadence takes on the form of an endless end: a world that cannot imagine continuing, and yet for this reason is all the more incapable of having ‘done’ with anything. The ‘end of history’ is, in reality, simply its deferral

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123 On the transformation of modern sovereignty into a regime of crisis management and securitarian governance, see FSC, passim. Agamben adapts the thesis of ‘control societies’ put forward from Gilles Deleuze: “The state in which we live now is no more a disciplinary state. Gilles Deleuze suggested to call it the État de contrôle, or control state, because what it wants is not to order and to impose discipline but rather to manage and to control. Deleuze’s definition is correct, because management and control do not necessarily coincide with order and discipline.” For Deleuze’s concept of ‘control’ (the development of which he credits to William Burroughs), see “Postscript on Control Societies,” in Gilles Deleuze, Negotiations, Trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia, 1995), 177-182.
and postponement, its transformation into a senile dream of eternity modeled on the empty principle of the reproduction of the Same.

This insight is important for grasping the political contours of contemporary governance, which Agamben will interpret—in accordance with his own distinctive conception of revolution—as ‘constitutively counter-revolutionary’ (our term). Although any suggestion that the state of exception can be governed by law is strictly “mystical” and “fictitious,” this does not prevent it from being an effective partisan strategy (SE 39). At issue is a logical and rhetorical operation on the part of governing forces to present themselves as an inevitable destiny, and thereby foreclose all paths of escape. By positioning the ground of the law outside of itself, by appropriating anomic as its own ‘inner’ principle, the logic of the exception maneuvers to recuperate any revolutionary violence that would oppose it—the law is outside itself, therefore “there is nothing outside the law” (P 170). The argument runs as follows: if every effort to counterpose lawlessness to law simply transforms us into newly-constituent sovereigns, then all attempts to sever our ties with the juridical order will only direct us back to its own channels. Anomie is only apparently ‘opposable’ to the state; in fact, it is its internal anchor (SE 59-63). If anarchy and law are but two poles of a single machine, every exit only establishes the premises of its inevitable incorporation within a new sovereign decision. L’anarchie? C’est moi.

Bong Joon-Ho’s 2013 film Snowpiercer provides an instructive case study. Curtis’ insurrection is premised on a linear and constituent strategy, directed toward the symbolic center of power: “We control the engine, we control the world. If we don’t, we get nothing. Past revolutions all failed because they failed to take the engine.” The insurgents do not target the apparatus of the train, but its personnel. Their aim is not to escape it, but to seize control of its ‘sacred engine,’ replacing a tyrannical mechanic with a ‘legitimate’ one (“You [Gilliam] should
govern the train now, not Wilford”). However, after much bloodshed and sacrifice, Curtis’ trajectory leads him to a tragic epiphany: not only is his insurrection revealed to be premised on a “technicized myth”—in truth, it is an internal mechanism for the cybernetic management of the train’s population—but the ‘sacred engine’ is in fact nothing but an empty living room staffed by a tired functionary who has been secretly sending him cryptic messages to goad him along, in the hopes of replacing himself. In the end, Curtis’ victorious insurrection only fulfilled the inner condition of the system’s own self-regulating equilibrium. Far from being an exception to the ruling order, it fulfilled the necessary condition for its continued persistence. Curtis collapses, overwhelmed by the futility of all he has fought for. The state of exception? It is only the chaos necessary for the internal regulation of the Divine machine. Revolt? It is the governmental pressure valve that guarantees the reproduction of the impassive One through a periodic sacrifice of its creatures. Wilfred and Mason signify the division of powers that allow the unity of the machine to function: the ‘Kingdom’ and the ‘Glory’, the Father and the Son, being and praxis, transcendence and immanence, eternity and history, political theology and economic governance.124 All doors lead back to the law, don’t you see? The children’s chorus sings the glory of the providential order: *What happens if the engine stops? We all freeze and die*.

However, not everyone is bewitched by the self-presupposing eternity of the train’s mythological machine. The two Koreans that Curtis’ cadre must enlist to open the doors of the train inhabit and move along another plane of perception, one asymmetrical with their own. Before being imprisoned, they lived in the front of the train, and know that it offers only an

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124 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, Trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (with Matteo Mandarini) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 140-141 [Orig: 2007]. Cited henceforth as KG. As Agamben shows, if a bi-polar order is necessary, this is, first of all, so that “the second level [can present] itself as an execution (executio) of what has been arranged and ordered on the first (ordinatio),” and secondly, because governance must presuppose the ‘freedom’ of those it governs (141).
alternate form of the same misery. They know that “the train itself is the catastrophe from which they must be freed.”¹²⁵ Unlike Curtis—the false prophet attempting to decipher the enigmatic scraps of paper Wilfred smuggles him—they have not forgotten the world from which the train’s desperate circular motion strives to separate them. They remain attentive to its signs. They scan the horizon for the return of animal life, the gradual thawing of ice. For them, the historical situation still has an inner motion to it. In their attention to the tiniest signs of life, they offer a paradigmatic illustration of what Agamben means when he says that “another world and another time make themselves present in this world and time” (P 168).¹²⁶ For them, history has not yet terminated in the eternal management of an unending present. They still have time. They are not oriented by the classical linear schema of revolutionary violence (the conquest of the center of power); they accompany it, they need it in order to move, but they remain to the side, on the lookout for signs of the decisive moment (Kairos) when the world will once again become habitable. If Curtis’ revolt is bicephalous, they are its destituent current. To the sacred eternity of Wilfred’s engine and its glorification by the terrestrial and repressive forces of Mason’s governmental management, they oppose no new subject or ‘legitimate’ claimant to the throne.

We are never told why they were imprisoned; it is as if they formed a pure movement ‘alongside’ or beside history, but which never mounts the stage of historiographical representation, as if remaining uncounted by it. Their access to the world lies in their ability to organize their experience around two powers or capacities: vision, and a collection of détourned technical means and know-how that they deploy in response to this vision. The father is a


technician, skilled in repurposing and deactivating the locks, controls, and doors that enclose and functionalize train life; the daughter, a seer, attentive to finest of signs and sounds, who notices what others do not. Moving along their divergent plane of perception, they follow the signs of the world that flash up within the present, yet to which no one else seems attentive. For them, the train has been stripped of its veneer of eternity, its ability to encompass the whole field of the possible, becoming merely a collection of partial operations or apparatuses, with no inherent value or meaning in itself. It is a set of obstacles that must be negotiated or dismantled, sidestepped if possible, destroyed if not. Swept along by the possibilities of life the signs of the world envelop, they deactivate and repurpose the infrastructure of the train, opening the way for Curtis’ constituent conquest of the engine, while already inhabiting the time of its end. Accompanying Curtis along the major arc of his historical sequence, they quietly assemble the e-brake that will unravel its false prophecy and derail the train.

On the linear trajectory of historiographical time, there is the ‘main door’ that places violence in the service of the central clash, the dialectical confrontation, with its self-regulating unity of opposites. But there is also a door next to it, a side door leading not to the front of the train, but back to the world (TR 71). The destituent exit lies not in the shift of position from one car to another (the conquest of state power), nor in opening all the doors from front to back (parliamentary inclusion and recognition), but in the recovery of the world that the entire motion of the train prevents us from experiencing. What matters for our purposes is not the explosive Hollywood’esque crash ultimately required to exit the train in Snowpiercer, but the perspective opened up along the way. We could just as easily point to the subtler but no less decisive gesture that enables the quiet victory of Kafka’s parable, “Before the Law.” For Agamben, it is the story of a standoff: confronted by the law’s Geltung ohne Bedeutung, the man from the country
remains immobile, neither retreating nor advancing, neither entranced by the symbols of bourgeois power, nor negating them. When the dust settles, the anonymous man, the remnant, remains outside; having divided the division between oikos and polis (he is neither in the countryside, nor in the City, but in the ‘tensor’ between the two), it is the law that must now shrivel and retreat into itself (P 172-174; HS1 49-62).\(^{127}\) The Nothing is returned to nothing.

However, the destituent exit is not without its obstacles. A central lesson of the gigantomachy between Schmitt and Benjamin that Agamben stages in State of Exception is that an order that has “survived its own effacement” will expend all its strength to obstruct any effort to desert it (SE Ch.4; TSEa). Agamben’s assessment is uncompromising: having stripped itself of any appeal to a grounding norm or telic principle, governance today “aims at nothing other than its own replication” (WA 22; HS4.2 209). Seen in this light, emergency law does not aim not to preserve order, but to introduce into the lives of its subjects the necessary degree of disorder and confusion allowing the reigning order to prolong its parodic afterlife. It will do so by continually constituting all internal threats to itself as crises to be managed.\(^{128}\) Governance is only unified in an a posteriori fashion, as the ‘summary judgement’ [Standrecht] of all that threatens to undermine or desert it (P 160-161). Whether ecological, economic, or social, crisis is “pronounced only in order to summon the means of averting it, which is to say, most often, the necessity of government.”\(^{129}\) Every constituted authority operates in the mode of a katechōn, working tirelessly to conceal and “delay the unveiling of the ‘mystery of [its own] lawlessness,’” by rendering its subjects’ “every gesture unrealizable” (P 169; TR 111). At the limit, their senile

\(^{127}\) “The Messiah will be able to enter only after the door is closed, which is to say, after the Law’s being in force without significance is at an end” (HS 57). We will return to the concept of ‘tensors’ below.

\(^{128}\) “No one said it more clearly than the Italian police officer, who, after the Genoa riots in July 2001, declared that the government did not want for the police to maintain order but for it to manage disorder” (FSC).

persistence is made possible only thanks to an immense administration of phenomenality intervening at every level of the subject’s entrance into the ‘Open’. Today, the entire surface through which subjects enter into contact with reality has been front-loaded with desubjectivizing apparatuses designed to attenuate every ethical intensity, to suspend all decisive contact with the world, and to preempt every effort to desert the “colossal parody” of our inert social tissue, by capturing our “all-too-human desire for happiness” and transporting it into a realm beyond our reach (e.g., the iPhone as a “sophisticated absence outfit” [WA 16, 20-24; TOF 31]). As Reinhart Koselleck’s work serves to remind us, this flooding of our lives with apparatuses in fact only completes the long process of depoliticization in which the modern state took its point of departure.\textsuperscript{130} It is no accident that the culmination of the passage from the rule of law to a “pure activity of governance”\textsuperscript{131} over the past two generations has coincided with the

\textsuperscript{130} Reinhart Koselleck, \textit{Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society} (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988 [Orig: 1959]). As Koselleck shows, the modern state arose through the effort to immunize the space of the political from the local ethical hostilities of vernacular and spiritual life. It is born as a series of “locally differing solutions to sectarian conflicts.” This means that it is, by its own account, \textit{second} with respect to the reality of civil war, and is invented as \textit{a means} to overcome this war. As an artificial and ‘technical’ instrument for ethical neutralization, the modern state presents itself as a ‘supra-partisan’ space of public legitimacy. To this end, its theorists consciously sought to introduce a “break” within the psychic and social life of their subjects, whose individual and collective faculties of judgment would be henceforth stripped of all political responsibility and power-sharing and confined to the privatized space of moral conscience: “man is fractured, split into private and public halves: his actions are totally subject to the law of the land, while \textit{his mind remains free}” (37, our emphasis). Detached from all political responsibility, divorced from any gesture linking him to the lived world, the subject is banished inward, his epistemic freedom having as its condition of operation that it never emerge in public—“to survive, the subject must submerge his conscience” (37, 19). Although stripped of any political responsibility beyond mere obedience, man remains “in secret free,” as Hobbes put it (\textit{Elements of Law}, II, 6). It was on this depoliticized soil of ‘interior conscience’ that the tradition of Enlightenment critique took root. What makes Koselleck’s analysis so singular and valuable is this attention to the inner link between statecraft as a technique of ethical neutralization and the rise of moralism, that is, the technicized ideological production of a sphere of ‘inner conscience’ stripped of any relation to external action. The state coincides with the production of a depoliticized and moral experience of political problems, an “apolitical” political sphere. It is Koselleck’s great contribution to have shown that official state politics (the space of ‘political innocence’) cannot exist without the perpetual dissociation of the ethical subject from their \textit{lived worlds}. In this, he allows us to understand the historical genesis of the contemporary liberal subject, the impotent indignation of the ‘engaged citizen.’ If liberal moralism presupposes the neutralization of all ethical attachment, this is because in order to ‘denounce,’ we must first \textit{exempt} ourselves. Liberal ‘critique’ is inseparable from the gesture of ethical self-parenthesis.

final neutralization of the great political antagonisms that shaped the first half of the 20th century, that the “real identities” that once defined the field of political polarization (Workers, Bourgeoisie, Subaltern, Pan-Africanism)\textsuperscript{132} have all inwardly collapsed, ceding their place to that “docile and cowardly” citizen of postindustrial democracy that \textit{Tiqqun} and Agamben have dubbed the \textit{Bloom} (WA 22-23; RT passim).\textsuperscript{133} Neither communism nor revolutionary violence will return the same way they left.

The peculiar mode of alienation to which the concept of the Bloom points is important, as it forms the ‘subjective’ premise of Agamben’s messianism. Bloom is the last man, the final outcome of the vast campaign of social violence capitalism has directed against any immediately shareable experience of the world, the war of annihilation it has waged against what Ivan Illich

\textsuperscript{132} “[T]he society of the Spectacle…[is] one in which all social identities have dissolved” (MWE 87-88, cf. 110). On the one hand, it is legitimate to be concerned about Agamben’s neglect of questions of race, gender, queer identity, and the variegated forms that suffering takes in the modern world. On the other hand, if he is right that the various social contradictions and oppressions that, in the mid-twentieth century, managed to harden into antagonistic points of political subjectivization can no longer crystallize into counter-subjectivizations in the ways they once did, then what they primarily serve to mark off is the intensity and quality in which a generalized void of law expresses itself according to this or that social positionality. There are, we might say, many ‘imperfect nihilisms’ depending on the complex grammar of negativity that structures different identities. However, since messianism begins \textit{from where one already is}, and deposes social conditions without founding a new identity, it arguably does not need to \textit{first} address this difference in order to offer a logical schema for undoing the Nothing. This point is, admittedly, a sticky one. Some preliminary considerations of the problem (beginning from the side of critical race theory, and working backwards to Agamben) have been proposed here: K. Aarons, “No Selves to Abolish. Afropessimism, Anti-Politics, and the End of the World,” \textit{Mute Magazine}, Feb. 29, 2016. http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/no-selves-to-abolish-afropessimism-anti-politics-and-end-world (Accessed 3.28.2018).

\textsuperscript{133} The first draft of \textit{Théorie de Bloom} appeared in \textit{Tiqqun} v.1, \textit{Exercices de Métaphysique Critique} (1999). It was later published separately in expanded form in 2008 by \textit{La fabrique}. Both versions exist in English translation. For the original, see “Theory of Bloom,” in \textit{Tiqqun 1, Exercises in Critical Metaphysics} (San Francisco: Little Black Cart, 2013); for the expanded version, see \textit{Theory of Bloom}, Trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: Little Black Cart, 2012). On several occasions, Agamben has publicly acknowledged his involvement in both volumes of the journal, as well as in the revisions of the 2008 re-edition (cf. RT \textit{passim}; BM 120). As a matter of historical reference, it will be recalled that the second of the lecture series that became \textit{The Time that Remains} was delivered at the University of Verona in the winter 1998-99, while Vol. 1 of \textit{Tiqqun} was first published in Venice (an hour’s drive away) in January, 1999. In the Luria Kabbala, the word \textit{Tikkun} means ‘messianic restoration,’ or the “mending of the world” (BM 120). On this term, see Giorgio Agamben, “Postface to the Italian Edition of \textit{The Coming Community}” (2001), Trans. David Kishik. https://notesforthecomingcommunity.blogspot.com/2008/04/tiqqun-de-la-noche.html (accessed 3.29.2018).
refers to as “vernacular communities.” He is the self-fulfilling prophecy of the modern state form, which, through four centuries of colonization, forced migration, slavery and exile, has finally managed to perfect in practice the atomization it had always presupposed in theory, by stamping out all non-marketized forms of collective belonging. As such, Bloom is not an identity, but a way of giving a name to the paradigmatic Stimmung of our age: the experience of no longer coming from anywhere, of being a foreigner everywhere, “a guest in one’s own family.” In phenomenological terms, it describes the experience of inhabiting a body whose mutilated ‘corporeal schema' immunizes it from all meaningful attachments to the people, places, and beings around us. It signals less the ‘absence’ of all taste or inclination, than a “taste for absence,” an inclination to nothingness, a way of abstracting or exempting ourselves from any decision on our lived situation. It is what Arendt called the ‘desert’: our habit of becoming spectators of our own experience, of relating to the world as if we did not belong to it, as if we were not party to it—“spectators who look at the time that flies without any time left, continually

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134 From the sharing of traditional knowledges such as medicine, contraception and child-rearing, to collective forms of reproduction such as commoning and informal exchange, Illich shows how the emergence of capitalism implied a ruthless war on any material and linguistic complicity or cooperation that proved incompatible with the wage relation as the dominant form of social interaction were subjected to a systematic annihilation. This entailed a shattering of experience, a replacement of “sustenance derived from reciprocity patterns imbedded in every aspect of life [with a] sustenance that comes [exclusively] from exchange or from vertical distribution.” See Ivan Illich, “The War on Subsistence”, in Beyond Economics and Ecology: The Radical Thought of Ivan Illich, ed. Sajay Samuel (New York: Marion Boyars, 2013), Chapter 1. Originally published in Shadow Work (New York: Marion Boyars, 1981). In his article “What is a Destituent Power?” Agamben highlights the importance of Illich’s studies: “the importance of research such as that of Illich, of Clastres, and of Sigrist [lies in] showing that there are vernacular figures of anomic communities that have a completely different character. When one wants to recover life, anarchy, anomy, and adem in their truth, it is necessary therefore first to release oneself from the form that they have received in the exception. This is not, however, only a theoretical task: it can occur only through a form-of-life” (WDP 73).


missing themselves” (TR 68). In this, Bloom sets the stakes for what messianism will attempt to ‘fulfill.’

Agamben offers an important distillation of the concept, which simultaneously points in the direction of its overturning: Bloom, he writes, is the name for “the new anonymous subject, these “whatever singularities” that are emptied out, open for anything, which can diffuse themselves everywhere and yet remain ungraspable, without identity, but re-identifiable at each instant” (BM 120). It is decisive to note that the anonymity of this contemporary ‘man without content’ is not defined by an absence of identity per se, but by the presence of a destabilizing nothingness that insinuates itself between the subject and each of its factual-juridical predicates or qualities. This Nothing is not reducible to a biographical or sociological epiphenomenon, for it touches all who live in our time to greater or lesser degrees. It is the introjected mirror of the anarchic groundlessness of an age in which all the hegemonic fantasies that once stabilized the economy of presence have either withered or been systematically trampled-out. As Reiner Schürmann captures it, “the rallying point of moderns, their home and focal point—the ‘I think’—undergoes displacements somewhat in the manner of...a childhood memory wandering off in a conversation, continuing, in the new site, but no longer going without saying.” The contemporary colonization of interiority by the Spectacle shatters the coherence of the ‘I’

137 As Arendt was acutely aware, our current political crisis lies in our inability to even feel the depoliticized desert to which we’ve been consigned. In the moving and disconsolate passages that make up her “Epilogue” to The Promise of Politics, Arendt writes that, “the modern growth of worldlessness, the withering away of everything between us, can also be described as the spread of the desert [...] What went wrong is politics.” See Hannah Arendt, “Epilogue,” in The Promise of Politics (New York: Schocken, 2005), 201-204 [Orig: 1955].

138 See Reiner Schürmann, Broken Hegemonies, Trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 562. Originally published as Des hégémonies brisées (Mauvezin: Trans-Europ-Repress, 1996). On this point, see Stephanie Wakefield, “Reiner Schürmann’s Faultline Topology and the Anthropocene,” in The Anarchist Turn, Ed. Jacob Blumenfeld (New York: Polity, 2013), Ch. 10: “When the great sheet of constellations that fix things in constant presence folds up, closes in on itself, the principal reference still exists, we still have the sense of identity of self with self, but it is dislocated, plurified and decaying: the figure of the human is One and nothing. In this context, ‘to ask what ought I to do? is to speak in the vacuum of the place deserted by the successive representations of an unshakable ground.’
through its incessant proliferation of artificial and abstract (viz. uninhabitable) images of selfhood. However, at the same time as it empties identities of their historical substance, Bloom’s nothingness allows the subject to be ‘re-identified’ at each moment. Since our dis-located interiority forces us to remain continually on the lookout for schemas of identification, we harbor the potential for a different mode of reattachment, a different mode of relation, new ways of sharing gestures, words, other modes of inhabiting the spectral world into which we have been born. Bloom does not spell the end of identity tout court, but the opening up of a newly non-substantial and purely contextual-strategic relationship to it.

The question posed by contemporary desubjectification is certainly not ‘how can we breathe new life into the great political Subjects of yesteryear’? As Tari is right to remind us, “the exhaustion of the possibilities of this world also includes the forms of political action that accompanied it.” The sad Trotskyists hocking their century-old workerist newspapers outside Whole Foods offer a routine reminder that, “unless we wish to persist in the mode of the undead, as zombies, a political identity that (like this world) has exhausted every possibility can only be laid to rest.” Of the mask that ‘revolutionary militancy’ once was, only fragments and ruins remain. While its courageous legacy is deserving of our respect and admiration, its operative premises—its historical tasks, but also its image of life and happiness—can no longer be our own.

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139 Marcello Tari, Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice, (Rome: Derive approdi, 2016), 7-8.
140 Tari, ibid.
Our question is different: how can we can imagine a politics that would not be grounded in a pre-existing subject?\(^{141}\) As Agamben observes, “what is often lacking, also [in today’s] movements, is…the awareness that every time one takes on an identity one is also subjugated. Obviously this is also complicated by the fact that modern apparatuses not only entail the creation of a subjectivity but also and equally processes of de-subjectivation” (M). The real problem, is how to intervene in this process, so as to redirect it toward an increase of our power of thinking, sensing, and acting: "what, in the processes whereby a subject somehow becomes attached to a subjective identity, leads to a change, an increase or decrease of his/her power to act” (ibid). How, without resubstantializing the subject by means of yet another newfangled mythologeme, can our anonymity make the “leap beyond itself” that would allow it to be converted into a “zone of communal life” that maintains its own non-coincidence with itself, abiding in the “no-man’s-land” between identity and non-identity (BM 120)? How can the anonymous desubjectification to which we have been reduced recover a common power that is nonetheless singularly its own? How, without reconstituting subjectivity, can we deactivate the fixed ‘vocations’ to which our social situations consign us, opening them to an anonymous and common use? If messianic life describes the experience of a subjectivity (and it does), it does so

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\(^{141}\) “Political theories were always built on the premise that there was a subject bearing some sort of meaning, with certain needs and certain desires connected to them. [Today] it seems very important to me to attempt to re-think political action without the anthropological reference to a subject” (RT). Cf. BM 116: “It’s a problem that is always essential in classical politics, when it’s a matter of finding who the revolutionary subject is, for example. There are people who continue to pose this problem in the old sense of the term: in terms of class, of the proletariat. These are not obsolete problems, but from the moment one positions oneself on the new terrain we are speaking of, that of biopower and of the biopolitical, the problem is difficult in a different sense. Because the modern state functions, it seems to me, as a kind of desubjectivation machine: it’s a machine that both scrambles all the classical identities and, as Foucault shows quite well, a machine (for the most part juridical) that recodes these very same dissolved identities. There is always a resubjectivation, a reidentification of these destroyed subjects, voided as they are of all identity. Today, it seems to me that the political terrain is a kind of battlefield in which two processes unfold: the destruction of all that traditional identity was (I say this, of course, with no nostalgia) and, at the same time, its immediate resubjectivation by the State—and not only by the State, but also by the subjects themselves.”
“only within the framework of a strategy or tactic” (BM 117). What is this strategy, and what tactics does it deploy?

**Operative Time and the ‘Morphology of the Inside’**

In order not to have a ‘heroic’ idea of war, one must first of all avoid a beggarly idea of peace.

LUCIO CASTELLANO

Le Tiqqun dégage les lignes de rupture dans l’univers de l’indifférencié.
L’élément du temps se résorbe dans l’élément du sens.
Les formes s’animent. Les figures s’incarnent. Le monde est.

TIQQUN

Agamben’s messianism has nothing to do with a theological-metaphysical conceit concerning the existence of the Divine. At issue is an ethical and epistemological schema through which a deactivation of the sovereign exception can be thought from within historical time. The Messiah, he writes, is “the figure through which religion confronts the problem of the Law, decisively reckoning with it” (P 163, our emphasis; cf. HS 56). At issue is the search for a non-dialectical schema for confronting and annulling the destructive ‘emptiness’ of the state of exception, of which Bloom’s ethical nullity constitutes the subjective expression. If the archaeological significance of messianism consists in its having brought to light for the first time the *arcanum imperii* of the law, its ethical significance therefore lies in the response it enables to it, the disposition by which it takes its condition up. At issue is not the foundation of a new law, but a *mode of relation* to the groundlessness of the law in which we live: messianism relates to

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142 “[T]he outcome of conflicts depends on this: on the power to act and intervene upon processes of subjectivation, in order to reach that stage that I would call a point of ungovernability. The ungovernable where power with its figure of government becomes shipwrecked, the ungovernable that I think is always the point of departure and the line of flight of all politics.” Giorgio Agamben, “Metropolis” *op cit.*


the nullity of law through the lens of its ‘passing-away’. Against the reign of managed disorder of the state of exception and its diffuse ethical paralysis, messianism responds by introducing a clarifying disposition that experiences its contact with the world as a call to *decision*. The messianic calling does not represent the limit-concept of the state by abstractly contemplating a world ‘without law’, located who-knows-where, at the ‘end of time’. Rather, it describes a way of relating to or negotiating law, a way of *inhabiting* the temporality of the state of exception, of ‘fulfilling’ it. If its violence can be considered (following Benjamin’s suggestion) as “unalloyed” or “pure,” its purity cannot lie in itself. As we saw in Chapter 1, this would risk once again subordinating it to an end, thereby introducing a new form of juridical legitimacy that it would then need to preserve. Its purity lies solely in the clarifying neutralization by which it deposes the law, which is to say, it lies only in its relation to *something else*; it is “always subordinate to a condition,” arising only from its *situation*. Messianic violence is exhaustively situational. But what is a situation, and how do we ‘enter’ it? How are we to understand the scope and meaning of this situated response to the state of exception? What must change in us, for this to occur? If, as Agamben reminds us, “the state is founded not as the expression of a social tie but as an untying (*déliaison)*,” and if messianism responds by reducing this Nothing, this *déliaison*—as that which breaks our contact with what is common—thereby restoring our contact with the world, we need to know two things: how does this ‘reduction’ occur? And how is operative time in ‘contact’ with the world? What does it mean to live messianically?

While *The Time that Remains* is by no means Agamben’s first treatment of messianic time, it offers his most thorough statement on the matter to date (cf. P 138-174). Originating in a

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145 Giorgio Agamben, *Karman. A Brief Treatise on Action, Guilt, and Gesture*, Trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 81. Cf. SE 60-61: “[T]he purity at issue…is not a substantial characteristic belonging to the violent action in itself; that is to say, the difference between pure violence and mythico-juridical violence does not lie in the violence itself, but in its relation to something external.”
series of lectures delivered between 1998-99, its stated aim is to “restore Paul’s Letters to the status of the fundamental messianic text for the Western tradition” (TR 1). In this, Agamben distinguishes his reading from two millennia of commentaries and translations that, intentionally or not, have suppressed the messianic content of the Letters, by presenting Paul as the founder of a ‘new religion’.

Although the matter may at first glance appear to be a purely scholarly or hermeneutical one, it also sets out the political stakes of the problem clearly: at issue is a form of lived experience whose consistency is not premised on an extant institutional mediation, and whose elaboration does not found a new institution, but which instead works to depose those that exist. The experience of time that underwrites messianic life is irreconcilable with the effort to found an earthly institution (“a messianic community that wants to present itself as an institution faces a paradoxical task” [TR 1]). This is not, however, to suggest that the messianic is ‘otherworldly’, which would be to fundamentally misunderstand Agamben’s philosophy. As he insists in a contemporaneous interview, “I believe the messianic is always profane, never religious.”

146 For example, on the resistance to messianism within the Jewish rabbinic tradition, see Jacob Taubes, “The Price of Messianism,” Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies (1981), 99-104. As Taubes writes, “Every endeavor to actualize the Messianic idea was an attempt to jump into history, however mythically de-railed the attempt may have been. It is simply not the case that Messianic phantasy and the formation of historical reality stand at opposite poles... If Jewish history in Exile was ‘a life lived in deferment’ [Scholem], this life in suspension was due to the Rabbinic hegemony. Retreat from history was rather the Rabbinic stance, the outlook that set itself against all Messianic lay movements and cursed all Messianic discharge a priori with the stigma of ‘pseudo-messianic.’ Living in the ‘four yards of Halakha,’ Rabbinic Judaism developed during centuries of Exile an extraordinary stability of its structures. From the Mishna of Yehuda Hanassi to the Mishna Berura of the Chafez Chajjim, the community of the ‘holy people’ continued to live in history ‘as if nothing happened.’ For all practical purposes, we existed outside history. Only those who jumped on Messianic bandwagons, religious or secular, giving themselves entirely to their cause, burned themselves out in taking the Messianic risk.” The influence of Taubes’ reading on Agamben is acknowledged from the first pages of The Time that Remains, the whole of which is dedicated to his memory.

147 Giorgio Agamben, “‘I am sure you are more pessimistic than I am...’: An Interview with Giorgio Agamben”, Trans. Jason Smith, Rethinking Marxism, 16.2, April 2004, 120. Originally published as “Une biopolitique mineur”, in Vacarne no. 11, (December 1999). Cited henceforth as BM.
The two questions that structure *The Time that Remains* (‘what is the messianic life? what is the structure of messianic time?’) undoubtedly signal an intervention, but not into Christian theology, or ‘Christology’ (TR 18). Rather, what we would suggest is at issue is nothing less than the concept of *communism*.

Agamben’s theorization of revolutionary violence has always centered on the internal form through which it transforms the experience of time. We should, therefore, not be surprised to see Agamben claim that the essence of messianic community can only be grasped in terms of the “internal form of the time [Paul] defines as *ho nym kairos*” (‘now-time’), the latter being importantly understood as a “paradigm of *historical* time” (TR 3).

A false alternative has long organized the temporality of the revolutionary theory of action: do we intervene now, and accelerate the coming collapse (activism, voluntarism), or must we refuse all separations between us and ‘the working class’, and wait for the masses to act on their own (objectivism, historicism)? Vanguardism, or mass movement? The great evening, or the process? Or else, do we hedge our bets, by regarding our interventions here and now as positive or negative ‘prefigurations’ of the ideals and practices that will shape the world we would like to see ‘after’ the collapse, in the hopes that our little oases of ‘radical culture’ will function like seeds that germinate and generalize when the time is ripe, or at least leave us a little
better prepared? At base, the debate is theological in origin: do we wait for the coming of the Messiah, and remain in the post God assigned to us, or do we hasten the second coming, the eschaton? In either case, the arrival of the Kingdom is construed as an exceptional event; redemption coincides with a sudden and cataclysmic bisection of history by an intransitive and intransigent ‘other time' that either breaks it in half, or abolishes it.

The Pauline klesis or ‘calling’ responds by dividing this division. In contrast to the polarization ‘historical time/eschatological suspension’, Agamben aims to show that there is another experience of historical time, in which its linear or historio-graphical representation of life is, in a certain respect, already suspended—not extraneously, but internally, at every moment. Historical time envelops a remainder, a ‘remnant’ that divides the opposition between chronology and ‘the end of time’, allowing time to be seized upon and ‘brought to an end’. The division at issue here does not assume the exceptional character of a sudden interruption, nor is it a fact to be instigated or anticipated, but already has an existence. What we wish to understand is the relation between this alteration in the schema of time and revolutionary action. If the Kingdom is already here among us, then the apostolic calling is neither the projection of an event to come, nor the effort to instigate one by fiat (with its attendant dangers of ‘technicization’), but

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148 For a positive take on prefiguration, see Cindy Milstein, Anarchism and its Aspirations (San Francisco: AK Press, 2010). On the concept of “negative prefiguration,” see Jasper Bernes, “Square and Circle: the Logic of Occupy,” The New Inquiry, Sept. 17, 2012. https://thenewinquiry.com/square-and-circle-the-logic-of-occupy/ (accessed 3.24.2018): “[T]he Occupy camps [do not] really resemble—in any literal, structural or even symbolic way—the kinds of social arrangements we might see during or after a revolutionary transformation of society. They are not really an image of the future I want. But the camps do anticipate, in some regard, the kinds of questions, problems, and logistical challenges such a transformation might require. In other words, they allow people to experiment with solutions to problems for which capitalism has, for the most part, ready-made answers (destructive ones) or no answers at all. They therefore perform a certain negative prefiguration. The real value of these experiments lay not in developing tactics and methods which could be used in a future revolutionary situation but in making clear what the problems and challenges are.” For the hardline objectivist position, see Monsieur Dupont, Nihilist Communism. A Critique of Optimism, the Religious Dogma That States There Will Be An Ultimate Triumph of Good Over Evil, in the Far Left (San Francisco: Ardent Press, 2009).
assumes the character of a response. To what is the ‘calling’ a response? And what is the nature of this response, what is the ‘messianic vocation’? On what does the messianic event demand that we ‘decide’? For both the temporal form as well as the political stakes of Agamben’s concept of messianic time to become clear, we must differentiate it from three other schemas with which it risks being conflated: prophecy, apocalypticism, and (for lack of a better word) ‘transition’.

(i) Prophecy, Eschatology, Transition

In The Courage of Truth, Foucault describes prophetic epistemology and temporality as follows:

[T]he prophet’s posture is one of mediation. The prophet, by definition, does not speak in his own name…[H]is mouth serves as intermediary for a voice which speaks from elsewhere. The prophet, usually, transmits the word of God…The prophet’s position is intermediary in another sense in that he is between the present and the future. The second characteristic of the prophet’s intermediary position is that he reveals what time conceals from humans, what no human gaze could see and no human ear could hear without him. Prophetic truth-telling is also intermediary in that, in one way of course, the prophet reveals, shows, or sheds light on what is hidden from men, but in another way, or rather at the same time, he does not reveal without being obscure, and he does not disclose without enveloping what he says in the form of the riddle.  

Prophetic experience is marked by a double extraneity, affecting both its relation to speech and its temporal logic. On the one hand, the prophet announces a message that originates elsewhere (e.g., “thus speaks Yahweh”); on the other, the message itself anticipates an event located elsewhere, in the future, in a time still-to-come. Although he has an immediate relation to the spirit of God, from whom he receives the message, the prophet “receives a word that does not belong to him.”

Like Rimbaud, who declares in the “Drunken Boat” that he has “seen what

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151 Giorgio Agamben, “The Time That is Left,” Epoché, Vol. 7 (Fall 2002), 1. Cited henceforth as TL.
other men believe they have seen,” the prophet *evokes* a truth that cannot itself be presented.152 His truth arrives in the mode of withdrawal: it is unrealizable in the present, suspended from us in that ‘other’ world from which it ‘comes to us’. Prophetic time stretches us toward a ‘coming’ time whose reality remains inaccessible, one that nothing in the actual situation could ever suffice to break open. The prophesized event will come *soon*, and we are invited to make use of historical time to prepare ourselves for it. Ultimately, though, what we must do is *wait*. Prophecy is defined by this twofold condition of mythic ‘evocation’ and temporal deferral. Not unlike the ‘floating indeterminacy’ of the law’s being-in-force—likewise predicated on a ground it can only ‘evoke’ but never present—the vital significance of prophecy lies in its power to situate us in relation to a truth we cannot properly *assume*. It allows only two questions in response: ‘has the prophet seen the truth?’ (i.e., is the mythological machine full or empty?); and, if the prophet speaks the truth, ‘how long?’ (TL 2).

In the same lecture course, Foucault distinguishes the *prophet*—who speaks not in his own name, but in the name of an ulterior future—from the *parrhesiastes*, who has the courage to say what is true today in his own name.153 Whereas Foucault did not regard them as fundamentally separable figures, Agamben pries them apart, identifying his own messianic politics exclusively with the latter.154 The motivation for this separation is less ontological than historical, and it serves to highlight a key political dimension of messianism. There is, Agamben argues, an intimate link between the disappearance of the figure of the Prophet in our contemporary epoch, and the exhaustion of a revolutionary politics premised on programs

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154 BM 120. The claim that Foucault did not fully separate the two figures of the prophet and the parrhesiast is Agamben’s. While it is perhaps debatable, we will not do so here.
‘ends’) and the party-form. The link comes out in a 1999 interview with the French activist journal Vacarne, in which he states,

The figure of the prophet was that of the political leader until fifty years ago. It has completely disappeared. But, at the same time, it seems to me that it is no longer possible to think a discourse addressing the future. It’s the messianic actuality, the kairos, the now-time that must be thought. […] Benjamin writes somewhere that Marx secularized messianic time in the classless society. This is completely true. But at the same time, with all the aporias this engenders—the transitions, etc.—it is a type of snag on which the Revolution failed. We don’t have a model of time available that permits us to think this (BM 120, our emphasis).

Agamben’s reading of Paul responds to the exhaustion of futurity by separating the messianic deposition of law from eschatological and transitional logic. The Pauline calling is neither a “perpetually deferred” eschaton (the liberal interpretations of Scholem and Derrida, which only mirror the imperfect nihilism of our time), nor is it a “transitional time” situated between two epochs, one from which it departs, the other toward which it strives to fulfill itself (the ‘dictatorship’ phase of Marxism-Leninism). In the end, both approaches lead to at the same impasse, since neither can deliver the actuality of the experience on which they are premised. Either we perpetually delay the decisive moment, or we bend our idea of happiness toward an ‘end’ that seemed designed to place it out of reach: “every transition tends to be prolonged into infinity and to render unreachable the end that it supposedly produces” (TR 70). There is no greater misunderstanding of messianism than to equate the time that ‘remains’ with a ‘waiting’, an anticipation of what is to come at some later time (TR 62). To refuse the schema of prophecy means that there is no preliminary to communism. Taken to its logical conclusions, this means that whatever we mean by communism, it clearly cannot refer to a new institutional schema for the distribution of wealth, the organization of labor, or the management of society.

155 In spite of its many merits, this is the mistake that ultimately unravels Jessica Whyte’s otherwise insightful study of Agamben. See Jessica Whyte, Catastrophe and Redemption, op cit.
Strictly speaking, it cannot be an ideal or ideology at all, since this too would have to await its realization in a state of things. A thorough refusal of preliminaries only leaves us with two options: either we renounce communism entirely, or we understand it as an ethical disposition, a way of entering into contact with, and being affected by, the common potentiality in what is taking place. If we see Agamben as taking the latter approach, the exigency to which the term communism responds can only be situated within the occurring of the present, in the concrete situation in which we find ourselves. By contrast, if the time of ‘transition’ leaves it suspended and unreachable, this is because it continues to be understood as a ‘transition toward an end’. For Agamben, the problem of communism has nothing to do with a ‘future society;’ it names an ethical process that proceeds from sparks or potentials already operative in the present. It is transitional, but not ‘toward’ anything else—it is pure transition, the accomplishing of shared worlds in the process of their own construction, and never an ‘accomplished fact.’

Paul is not a prophet, but an apostle. For him, the Messiah has already arrived; the age of the prophets is over. To live in the days of the Messiah, is to live ho nym kairos, in the ‘time of the now’. Yet, if the prophecy has been concluded, if the decisive event is now ‘behind us,’ are we not at the end of history? Is time concluded? How can we distinguish the Pauline calling from the apocalyptic announcement of the eschaton?

(ii) Apocalypticism and Operative Time

To live in the apostolic calling is, Agamben tells us, is to experience not the “end of time, but the time of the end” (TL 2; TR 62-64). It is “not the instant in which time ends, but the time that contracts itself and begins to end…[i.e.,] the time that remains between time and its end” (TR 62). What does it mean for time to have not yet concluded, but to have already ‘begun to
end”? The messianic is not a time anticipated, but a time that is ‘seized,’ ‘contracted’, grasped and rendered *habitable*. It is “a bit of time taken from the profane that, all of a sudden, is transformed” (BM 120).

Since revolutionary violence is bound up in the transformation of time for Agamben, a lot is riding on this difference between the eschatological concept of the ‘end' and the messianic ‘event’. The Pauline *hos me* (deactivation, revocation) offers the most fleshed-out positive example of destituent power in the “Epilogue” to *The Use of Bodies*. Hence, if “it is because messianic *klēsis* is caught up in operational time that it can take on the form of the *as not*, the constant revocation of every vocation” (TR 68), then it is no exaggeration to say that his entire conception of destitution hangs on this distinction. If we wish to understand how and why Agamben believes it can reframe the shape of political violence, and the meaning of communism more broadly, it is necessary to work out the logic of the argument in detail.

As Bergson highlighted over a century ago, the attempt to think time often makes a troublesome reliance on spatial schemas or figures. In accordance with these schemas, time is figured as a line, one end of which is represented by the past, the other by the future, with the present forming a caesura down the middle [p——/pt——f]. If we rely on such a schema, the messianic event will be forced to appear either as one punctual occurrence or ‘point’ among others in the chronological sequence of historical time, or else as the abstract contemplation of the *last* day (the day of Wrath), on which the series is finally abolished (the ‘end of the line,’ as it were). As Agamben observes, this would appear to be the alternative presented by the apocalyptic Jewish rabbinic tradition, which associates the distinction of two worlds (*olamim*) with that of two temporal orders (*aiones*). On the one hand, there is the *olam hazeh*, the chronological time extending from the creation of the world to its conclusion (*aion touto, ho
kosmos outos, this world, this time); on the other, the olam habba, the next world to come, the eschaton that abolishes the series (ho aion mellon) (TR 62; TL 2-3). While both olamin appear in Paul’s writings, Agamben is insistent that the time to which the apostle responds corresponds neither to a point on the sequential line, nor to a world that begins only ‘after’ history’s conclusion. After all, in neither case would the event, strictly speaking, be experienceable. In fact, the deeper meaning of messianic time is precisely to call into question “the very possibility of drawing a clear distinction between the two olamin” (TL 3). If it cannot be represented either as a line, point, or ‘end’ of time, this is because the time of the “remnant,” holds itself out between the two.

Still, even if it is neither a point nor an end-point, the ‘betweenness’ of Messianic time would, at face value anyway, still appear to imply a progressive development. For example, in its religious connotation, the idea of ‘arrival’ can easily lend itself to a tripartite division: (t¹) the profane time of chronos extends in linear fashion until the event of the resurrection, whereupon (t²) time “contracts itself and begins to finish”; henceforth, it ‘remains’ in the ho nyn kairos until the parousia (t³), the full presence of the Messiah at the end of time. To represent this schema on a line, we would present a straight line which, broken by a caesura, continues in contacted form until it breaks off:

________________________//- - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
profane time    Event    contracted time

Given this schema, messianic time could be conceived of as the contracted space ‘between’ the broken points. The ho nyn kairos would here refer not simply to the transitional chronological span that falls ‘after’ the resurrection and ‘before’ the parousia, but to the mutation of chronological time itself that the event introduces. There is a sense in which Agamben accepts
this schema; or rather, he thinks it gets at something essential, namely, that messianic time is “not exterior to chronological time,” it is a *portion of secular time* that undergoes a “transformative contraction” (TL 3, TR 64). The trouble is that, since this figuration of time remains spatial, it is virtually impossible to appreciate the *vital significance* of this contraction without relating it to the course of the line, which would once again devolve into a form of futural ‘anticipation’. What cannot be grasped in the spatial schema is the reality of its lived experience. Yet the lived experience of transformed time is the core of the revolutionary problematic for Agamben. Another approach must therefore be found.

Agamben turns to the work of linguist Gustave Guillaume for a solution, and in specific to the two studies collected in his book *Temps et verbe* (1929 & 1945), which offer the first worked-out theory of what the linguist calls ‘operative’ or ‘chronogenetic’ time, a time ‘interior’ to chronological time, on which the latter relies without being able to ‘encompass’ it representationally in a ‘time-image’.

According to Guillaume, traditional linguistics has tended to consider language only from the point of view of the meaning-effects at the level of its actuality in speech, by systematizing the formal rules that obtain at the level of its signifying effects in discourse. This overlooks “the true reality of a form” that is not located in the “multiple and fleeting effects of meaning that result from its employment [emploi],” but in the “operation of thought…that presides over its
definition in the mind.”¹⁵⁶ The “multiplicity of consequences” that the linguistic sign generates in real speech must be referred back to the “secret operations” in “the virtuality of langue” [la langue virtuelle] (TV 133). These cannot be studied by directly consulting phenomena, but are accessible only by analysis: “direct observation of sensible phenomena can offer linguistics only ‘meaning effects’ of form; this is because it only becomes possible at the moment where form has been incorporated in thought [la forme à pris corps dans la pensée], which is to say, after its mental expression” (TV 133, emphasis added). What the direct observation of the actuality of discourse misses is the “preparation of form… the operations of thought that create them” (ibid, emphasis added). These "necessarily elude [échappe] the speaking subject studied by traditional linguistics,” since “once we attempt to become aware of these operations, they have already taken place and disappeared,” without leaving any memory of them. The true domain of temporal form in language is therefore not that of “pensée pensée, in which things present themselves as already formed and conceived,” but what Guillaume describes as the “deeper and to some extent pre-existent one of pensée pensante, wherein things—still in their genesis—are not yet sufficiently incorporated to leave an imprint on our memory” (TV 133). As with Benveniste’s distinction between the semiotic and the semantic—which forms the basis of Agamben’s conception of “infancy,” or the human being’s thrownness into language, which internally separates us from our own ‘speaking being’—for Guillaume the two domains are

¹⁵⁶ Gustav Guillaume, Temps et verbe. Théorie des aspects, des modes, et des temps (Paris: Librarie Honoré Champion, 1968), 132-33. Cited henceforth as TV. The book has been out of print for a long time. Guillaume’s papers and lectures have been placed in an archive at the Université de Laval, and have begun to be slowly published over the last decade. To date, the only English language collection of his works is Foundations for a Science of Language. Gustave Guillaume (1883-1960), Trans. Walter Hirtle and John Hewson (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984). Cited here as FSL. This collection is composed of excerpts from Guillaume’s seminars, and includes several valuable discussions of operative time, (see esp. Part IV, “The Act of Language” and Part IV, “Thought and Language”). In an effort to distinguish Guillaume’s conception of langue from that of Saussure, Hirtle and Hewson render Guillaume’s use of the term as “tongue.” We find this unhelpful, and hence will retain the French term throughout. For their account of the terminological difference, see FSL xx-xxi.
separated by “language itself, which creates, so to speak, the wall between between them” (134). As soon as language is expressed, what we have before us is pensé pensée, whereas la pensé pensante that gave rise to it is “closed, dead” (TV 134). The constituted actuality of discourse everywhere depends on an “ideal” systematic plane, the properties and laws of which linguistic analysis must discover (TV 6). Guillaume therefore proposes to study the existence of expressive forms in their “genetic phase, anterior to their actualization in speech” (ibid). For this, we must seek, now on the side of thought, the ‘morphology of the inside’ that serves as both the ‘cause’ and the integrating mechanism of the system’s diachronic transformations.

How, from the multiplicity of possibilities of langue, does a speaker select and construct the words that will be employed in a sentence? Guillaume’s great insight proceeds from a simple observation: when we reach for a word to use in a sentence, we must, in fact, mentally reconstruct the word. And this process, which is immanent to every instance of enunciation, takes time. Even if it is brief, this time is not infinitely small. And since the passage from the semiotic to the semantic must (as Benveniste showed) traverse a ‘gulf’ or ‘void’ that prevents any logical derivation of the latter from the former, the time in question cannot be understood as a ‘realization’ or extrapolation of a pre-given rule or possibility, but must be conceived of as an

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157 To the two “faces” of the phenomenon of language, “external” and “internal”, corresponds a methodological distinction between “mechanistic” and “psychological” explications. On the one hand, signs can be grouped into formal systems by virtue of their respective ‘base’ oppositions and parts of speech. These formal traits can be traced historically or diachronically by attending to the ‘phonetic accidents’ and variations through allowing this or that form to become ascendent at a given moment, either within or between languages. While such a study has its relative scientific validity, it fails to explain the divergences and resistances that give rise to this variation itself. See TV, “Introduction” (1-6).
operation of construction. When this constructive or operative time is taken into account, the lexical system of langue no longer appears simply as a static repository of formal relations between fixed terms (as Saussure had presented it), but as fundamentally linked to a process. The actuality of discourse depends upon a “virtual” micro-time required for differential preconscious mental operations. At issue are the mental operations that immediately precede an act of expression, the “the preparatory phase” or “phase of tension, [which will be] followed by the instant of release and the phase of impulsion, to use Bergson's terms” (FSL 79). These operations underlie all signifying systems, including that of the word. In theorizing this process, “[Guillaume] was establishing the necessary basis…to explain syntax and not merely ‘account for it’ through a more or less arbitrary description or set of rules.”

The originality of Temps et verbe lies in Guillaume’s attempt to describe the system of the verb in terms of successive moments or ‘phases’ within the mental process that construct the configuration of the sense of time in the instance of speech (aspect, tense, and mood, which comprise the ‘width, height, and depth’ of the expressed form of time), and which can be detected by the complexity of form and surface usage. Guillaume links these phrases to a

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158 "Semiotics (the sign) must be recognized; semantics (the discourse) must be understood. The difference between recognition and comprehension refers to two distinct faculties of the mind: that of discerning the identity between the previous and the present, and that of discerning, on the other hand, the meaning of a new enunciation [...] From the sign to the sentence there is no transition, either by syntagmatization or otherwise. A hiatus separates them. Consequently, we must admit that language comprises two separate domains, each of which requires its own conceptual apparatus.” Émile Benveniste, “The Semiology of Language”, trans. Genette Ashby, Semiotica, 1981, 5-23. Reprinted in Robert Innis (ed.), Semiotics. An Introductory Anthology (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 234 [Orig: 1969]. The theory of this gulf separating the sign from its deployment in discourse was first introduced in the article “Levels of Linguistic Analysis.” Reprinted in Problems in General Linguistics, Trans. Mary Meek (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1971): “With the sentence, a boundary is crossed and we enter a new domain” (108).

159 "The act of language, taken as a whole…can be divided into two phases: (i) an initial phase of potentiality, from the formative elements of the word to the constructed word; (ii) a final phase of actuality, from the word to the sentence, that is, from the unit of the potential to the unit of the actual” (FSL 82-83).


division between potentiality and actuality. As Walter Hirtle explains, here *langue* exists “not in an abstract norm as Saussure suggested…but as a potential in the mind of each speaker,” albeit one situated below or behind the threshold of consciousness.  

162 For instance, every grammatical morpheme is part of an operational system that selects “meaning potentials” not otherwise discernible. Articles no less than words exist as systematically related meaning potentials in the preconscious mind, “ready to be actualized in order to express what the speaker has in mind […]” This insight later led [Guillaume] to characterize *langue* as *un univers regardant*, a viewing universe, a mental universe for viewing our ongoing experience of the universe around us.”  

163 This ‘universe’ is neither empty nor indeterminate; it is fully populated, not with pre-existing solutions, but with ‘problems’ of a purely virtual nature. As Guillaume writes, “everything that takes place in discourse stems from *problems* posed by *langue*, by [its] virtuality” (FSL 5).  

164 In sum, in every language act, an extra-discursive experience conditions the discursive sense-effects that result from it. Guillaume hereby brings the study of language down to the here and now of an *act* that unfolds in a situation, by converting “the observed result [speech, representation] back into a process, a genetic process”:

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164 This explains why Deleuze was able to mobilize Guillaume’s work in his critique of the shadow of the ‘negative’ in structural linguistics. As Deleuze explains, what Guillaume showed is that “morphemes, which on their own account bring into play the virtual whole of the language, are the object of a progressive determination which proceeds by ‘differential thresholds’ and implies a purely logical time capable of measuring the genesis or actualization. The formal reciprocal determination of the phonemes refers to that progressive determination which expresses the action of the virtual system on the phonic matter; and it is only when the phonemes are considered abstractly—in other words, when the virtual is reduced to a simple possible—that their relations take the negative form of an empty opposition, rather than that of filling differential positions around a threshold. The fundamental lesson of Guillaume’s work is the substitution of a principle of differential position for that of distinctive opposition. This substitution takes place to the extent that morphology is no longer simply a continuation of phonology, but rather introduces properly problematic values which determine the significant selection of phonemes.” In other words, the ‘negative’ only appears as foundational from the side of the constituted actuality of discourse, whereas it is in fact the ‘shadow’ of the differential process of operational time. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 205 [Orig: 1968]. Since *Temps et verbe* was published the same year as Deleuze’s study, Deleuze’s account relies rather on Guillaume’s *Conferences de l’Institut de Linguistique de l’Institut de Paris* (1939), and on the summary of Guillaume’s work offered by Edmond Ortigues in his *Le discours et le symbole* (Paris, Aubier, 1962), Parts IV and VI.
Everything in *langue*, in fact, is a process. And the results that we observe are, if I may say so, illusions of sorts. There is no substantive; in *langue* there is simply a substantivation that is arrested early or late in its movement. There is no adjective; rather, there is an adjectivization that has run a certain part of its course when the mindprehends it. There is no word; rather, there is an extraordinarily complicated genesis of the word, a lexigenesis. There is no tense; rather, there is a phenomenon of formation of the time image — chronogenesis—which must be retraced if one is even to begin to understand the systematics of the French moods and tenses (FSL 133, translation modified).

The spatially-flattened or “panoramic” time-image we represent with the line/point schema is an image of time in its already-constructed state. What is missing from it is the experience of time as it is “still being constructed in thought,” as well as the various states it must pass through along the way. As Agamben observes:

Guillaume is able to complicate the chronological representation of time by adding a projection in which the process of forming the time image is cast back onto the time image itself. In so doing, he comes up with a new representation of time, that of chronogenetic time, which is no longer linear but three-dimensional. The schema of chronogenesis thus allows us to grasp the time-image in its pure state of potentiality (time in posse), in its very process of formation (time in fieri), and, finally, in the state of having been constructed (time in esse) (TR 66).

In this way, Guillaume allows us to complicate the ‘time-image’ of politics. Not only speech, but the very experience of action and thought have their genesis in the three-dimensional or triphasic zone of chronogenesis, a zone of pure praxis or operativity. On the basis of this pre-thetic field composed of virtual or potential problems, there issue pure acts of *chronothesis* or time-positing, “within which the human mind establishes itself” (FSL 7). Chronothesis is not the voluntary act of a pre-existing subject, but an act that delineates the perceptual coordinates on which the conscious subject relies. In order to consciously construct a representational or linguistic schema of time, chronothesis must intercept the field of chronogenesis, though what Guillaume calls a “prehension” or “cross-cut”: “Chronogenesis is the genesis of the potential to construct time, and chronothesis is the exploitation of this potential as it is being acquired. Every time such potential
is exploited, the process of acquiring it is intercepted at a characteristic point and a cross-section taken. Each cross-section thus obtained constitutes a mood” (FSL 134). There is, therefore, no one ‘synthetic’ time in which the mind inheres, but only partial operations of sectioning, interrupting, and cordonning-off. The subject is situated in the ‘transitional operation’ between chronogenetic time and the chronothetic construction of the time-images that issue from it, an operation that takes place through our impersonal engagement with the problematic potentialities of the situation in which thought finds itself embedded. Chronogenetic time is never itself representable, since the time-images that we produce by means of it cannot themselves ‘say’ the time of their own construction. The result is, as Agamben puts it, a “disjointedness and delay…in the very foundation of subjectivity and consciousness,” a “lapse” (TR 66-67). If the thought of time and its representation never actually coincide, this is because there is an “act of thought” within us that moves along another time, a “time within time—not ulterior but interior—which measures my disconnection with regard to [chronology], my being out of synch and in non coincidence” with it (TR 67). However, this delay is not inherently a sign of a powerlessness of subjectivity; it points to an impersonal activity of evaluation enveloped within every instance of discourse or representation. In fact, Agamben will turn things around: it is only because operative time is out of synch with chronology, that time can be “taken hold of” and “achieved” (TR 67).

In fact, Guillaume’s thesis is even more radical than we have let on. Let us consider the level of chronogenesis: here, what is in question is a field of tensions that induce an act that—prior to speech or representation—evaluates the pure potentialities of its situation, that seizes them and constructs sense out of them. At this level, time is not yet unified into a coherent whole

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165 As Guillaume reminds us, that operative time has no representation does “not mean that it has no existence in human thought, but that it exists in thought only as our experience does” (FSL 6).
or ‘panorama’, but rather merges with the very procedure of evaluation itself. Operative time itself is an evaluation that coincides completely with the experience of time at its deepest level. This means that, prior to their being posited, neither time nor sense are formally unified or systematized, but are bound up in a partial process or “operation” that synthesizes and constructs germinal forms out of meaning-potentials, gathering shards or fragments of time. It is for this reason that—in an extremely bold assertion—Guillaume will later follow his own argument to its logical conclusions: “the representation of time differs only because the representation of space differs” (FSL 7). In other words, the shape of the time-images inscribed in our language depend upon the regional and historical shape of our lived world, whose meaning-potentials they respond to. There is a common World only at the level of representation; at the level of experience, there are worlds, and the time-images that proceed on their basis testify to the genetic plurality that they simultaneously efface in their actuality. At this point, we may draw the unavoidable conclusion: the time that is “seized,” the time of the evaluation of potentiality, the time of evaluation from which all overt external action proceeds, is never a unified time, but is irreducibly fragmentary, modulated in accordance with the encounter between thought and its lived situation (it will be recalled that what Agamben calls a “remnant” is neither general nor particular, but the division of this difference—a fragment).

Operative time is that by means of which we construct the meaning of the situation in which we find ourselves, on the basis of the “meaning potentials” of sense it envelops at a virtual level. It refers to an impersonal dimension of perception, an always-localized survey on the basis which we construct the sense of what ‘there is’ to say. If operative time is a ‘viewing universe’, this is because the time that is real, the time that we are, is modulated not by the ‘thetic’ result of posited time-images, but by this inherently local act of surveying the meaning-potentials of the
situation, through an *attention* to the potentiality of our lived situation, on the basis of which we first of all come to be able to speak and act. What the ‘viewing universe’ of lived time ‘sees’ are not the constituted forms that we eventually become conscious of, but the ‘preparation of form’ itself; not possibility as the abstract and probabilistic mirror of the factual given, but *possibilities of life*.\(^{166}\) If operative time is tri-phasic, the order of its genesis refers:

1. first, to an evaluation of the *livable*, the *thinkable*, and the *sayable*;

2. this ‘exploitation’ of potential is *expressed* as possibilities of life, shards or fragments of ‘living form’ in the process of being assembled and evaluated (life *becoming*-form, ‘assembled evaluations’);\(^{167}\)

3. finally, to their actualization in this or that act, statement, gesture, or representation.

Guillaume is insistent that, at the level of the evaluation of meaning-potential, it is not possible to detach the form of time from the time of thought’s own lived operation (FSL 6). This means that in operative time the formal division between *quid facti*? and *quid juris*? has not yet been accomplished; it will be so only at the moment of its interruption or ‘sectioning’ by chronothetic prehension. We might say, following Lapoujade’s felicitous formulation, that in its first two phases, evaluation dramatizes a different question: *quid vitae*?\(^{168}\) This question receives its answer not, first of all, through the explicit representational time-image that eventually results from it, but already in the form that our attention to the potentiality of the *livable*, the *thinkable*,

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\(^{166}\) For a usage of this term that resonates with our present reading, see François Zourabichvili, “Deleuze and the Possible. On Involuntarism in Politics,” Trans. Kieran Aarons and Caitlyn Doyle, *Theory & Event*, Vol. 20, Number 1, January 2017, 152-171 [Orig: 1998]: “[A] possibility of life expresses a mode of existence: it is the ‘expressed’ of a concrete assemblage of life…[T]he expressed is never a signification or a collection of significations. It is an evaluation: not simply the evaluation of the possibilities of life, once we have already apprehended them as such; but the possibility of life itself as evaluation, a singular manner of evaluating or apportioning the good and the bad, the distribution of affects. A possibility of life is always a difference. The invention of new possibilities of life therefore presupposes a new way of being affected. […] Politics is therefore first of all an affair of perception” (156, 157).

\(^{167}\) This corresponds to what Guillaume calls “acts of expression” (FSL 6).

and the sayable. All perception envelops a selection and distribution of the interesting/uninteresting, alluring/repugnant, a sensitivity to this or that set of signs, a characteristic way of being affected by the world, etc. There is no ‘attention’ in general, only this or that way in which we are led to seize upon, and are seized by, the potentialities of the pre-individual milieu from which thought and gesture draw their power, in this or that factual situation. Between the virtual potentiality of chronogenesis and the constituted actuality of representation, there is the expression of possibilities of life, which refer to these larval forms drawing together shards of time edge-to-edge, fragment-to-fragment, that our pre-individual attention to our situation takes. It is within the frame or coordinates opened up by these expressive forms that representational time-images will be inscribed; they draw up a logical-existential plane or zone ‘within which the human mind establishes itself.’ As Agamben observes, all attention “brushes up against an impersonal power, something both surpassing us and giving us life” (BM 124).\(^ {169}\) It is at this level—always singular, always situational—that what is common between us must be sought.

It has been a perennial mistake of the far-Left to believe that the ‘beginning’ of politics lies in posing the ‘correct’ question, of initiating ‘an epistemological break’ that will free our thought from ideology. In fact, such ideological ‘beginnings’ always begin too late, and only re-entrench an abstract and disembodied conception of politics, deprived in advance of the very substance of what is shareable between us. The Western tradition has offered us a fictional and amputated image of political life: “by abstracting humans from their worlds, by disconnecting

\(^ {169}\) Among clearest statements of how Agamben understands this pre-individual ‘zone of non-consciousness’ may be found his essay “Genius.” See Giorgio Agamben, Profanations, Trans. Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 9-18 (cited henceforth as Pr). Agamben’s concept of this ‘impersonal’ or ‘opaque’ zone is a synthesis of Deleuze’s conception of a plane of immanence (cf. P 220-240), Simondon’s concept of individuation (Pr 8-19), and Furio Jesi’s concept of ‘constitutive esotericism’ (FMM 7-23; O 89-92; N 113-114).
them from the network of things, habits, words, fetishes, affects, places, solidarities that make up their world, their sensible world, and that gives them their specific substance."\textsuperscript{170} Politics is construed as “the assembly that…gathers all human beings in abstraction from their respective worlds.”\textsuperscript{171} In reality, every question we explicitly pose is already a response to a way of seeing what lies before us, the dramatization of a regime of attention.\textsuperscript{172} What matters is not who is employing the same pseudo-scientific Marxiological concepts and categories to describe things, as this tells us nothing decisive about how they perceive the lines of force arraying themselves here and now. How many “Marxist” graduate students act like perfect liberals when ethical polarizations surface within their professional lives? What really matters is, within a substantive situation, who sees the same lines of force, the same potentialities, that we do? Whose gestures respond to a problem in a way that resonates with our own? Whose dispositions testify to the presence of an impersonal ‘demand’ that places us on a common plane? Only substantive situations can tell us this. And, often enough, it will not be those whom we might have expected.

We are now able to clarify the distinction between messianic and apocalyptic time. The vital significance of apocalypticism lies in its capacity to “generate a kind of time, in which we dwell, that in itself prevents us from experiencing it.”\textsuperscript{173} Agamben contends that once the discrepancy between the experience of time and its representation is taken into account, the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{170} It is in this way that Hobbes’ inaugural gesture in \textit{The Elements of Law}, in which he asks us to first annihilate the world in order to proceed with its nominalist reorganization at the level of ’images’ and concepts alone, must be interpreted. See Thomas Hobbes, \textit{Elements of Law}, I, Ch. 1, 8.
  \item \textsuperscript{172} As Emmanuel Coccia beautifully puts it, “every cosmic knowledge is only a point of life (and not merely a point of view), every truth is only the world in the mediated space of the living. We can never know the world as it is, except by passing through the mediation of a living being [un vivant]. On the contrary, to encounter it, to know it, to say it always means to live according to a certain form, with a certain style.” Emmanual Coccia, \textit{La vie des plantes. Une métaphysique du mélange} (Paris: Rivages, 2016), 34-35. Our translation; emphasis added.
  \item \textsuperscript{173} The quote is from Giorgio Manganelli. Cited at TR 70.
\end{itemize}
eschatological notions of ‘progress’, ‘development’, and the ‘end’ of history all reveal themselves to depart from a common amputation or impotence. Under the guise of optimism or ‘hope’, they work to maintain us in a condition of passivity. If apocalypticism should be aligned with ethical self-parenthesis, this is not only because it asks us to wait on what is ‘to-come’, but because to orient ourselves around the ‘end of time’ is already to begin too late. It offers us only a ‘knowledge’ of time in its already-constructed state, which therefore cannot possibly be experienced. By substituting a time-image for our experience of time, apocalypticism directs action toward an uninhabitable abstraction, distancing us from the potentialities of own lived situation, which alone can be seized-upon. Since there is no experience of the ‘end of time’, the horizon of action is always infinitely postponed. In short, there is only an ‘end’ of time provided that time has first of all been conceived of as an homogeneous, spatialized panorama. It is the same with the forced choice between ‘activism/mass movement’, ‘voluntarism/objectivism.’ In both cases, it is necessary to first imagine the locus of action as an homogeneous temporal field, which will either develop sequentially of its own internal accord (the unfolding of the historical contradiction), or else which must be subjected to a shocking interruption aiming at ‘hastening the end.’ Like all time-images, their alleged self-sufficiency is in reality only an illusion premised on the effacement of their own genetic conditions of emergence. Too often, once we restore the vital significance of the evaluation that attended their genesis, we find the same ethical impotence of a need to ‘believe’ in another world, the believer having at some point or another become incapable of assuming this one.

In fact, the problem should be reversed: when we consider the genesis of time-images in experience, it is not operative or messianic time that interrupts chronology; rather, it is chronological time that interrupts, sections-off, and detaches itself from the immanent
multiplicity of operational time that constructs it. Only once we have detached ourselves from the affirmative evaluations of operative time that we are, only once we have placed our own becoming in parentheses, does it then become necessary to imagine political possibility through the schema of a cataclysmic rupture of chronology. In reality, such a rupture can never truly be lived, but can only assume the status of an abstract article of faith. Both activism and historicism betray a common reliance on the hypothesis of a global or encompassing chronological time, yet the latter is only a ‘conclusion’ divorced from its premises.

Just as Guillaume’s methodology proceeds by converting “the observed result back into…a genetic process,” Agamben’s messianism “decomposes” the unity of homogeneous time, not by breaking it in half or suspending it through a mythic epiphany from ‘elsewhere,’ but by exhibiting the nullity of the unity of representational time, thereby allowing time to once again be ‘seized’ and fulfilled (TR 70). It is precisely because chronological time is defined by an amputation of its internal multiplicity that messianic destitution can take the form of a ‘restoration’ through fragmentation.

Let us consider once more how Agamben defines messianic time. To live in the apostolic calling is to experience not the “end of time, but the time of the end”; it is “not the instant in which time ends, but the time that contracts itself and begins to end…[i.e.,] the time that remains between time and its end”; it is the form of time that presses within chronological time, “working and transforming it from within,” which is never unified, but exhibits a “uni-dual structure…comprised of two heterogeneous times, one kairos and the other chronos…coextensive, but which cannot be added together” (TL 2; TR 62-64). The prefix ‘uni-’ should not mislead us: messianic time is not unified in itself but refers to an individuating temporal form (a shard, fragment, or ‘remnant’) that has not yet divorced and detached itself
from lived experience. If the Pauline calling is not a “third eon” situated between two *olamin*, but fractures or ‘divides’ the representational division between the present and the ‘end’, thereby causing chronological time to ‘begin to end’, it refers to a specific sort of gesture, in which we seize upon our representation of chronology and “take it for a remnant,” thereby *restoring form* to its internal fragmentation (TR 83). If *kairos* is nothing other than ‘seized *chronos,*’ this is because it refers to a gesture that restores our lived experience of time to the partiality of a form-under-construction, by destituting the illusion of a unitary historical World. *To inhabit messianic time coincides with the gesture of fragmenting time.* It is to strip representational time of its power to generate the illusion of a *single* common world, the mask of totality that allows it to conceal, in plain sight, the evaluative asymmetries that continuously clash within it. Messianism is neither ‘another time’ that would signal the total effacement of chronology, nor “another day homogenous to the others,” but a way of seizing upon the operative time that presses upon chronology from within it, its “internal pulsation,” in order to fragment it (TR 72). Fragmented time is “the only real time, the only time we have” (TR 68, our emphasis).

Critics often accuse Agamben of being vague or abstract when he defines politics as the site in which “the event of anthropogenesis—the becoming human of the human being—is still happening” (HS4.2 208). In fact, there is nothing more concrete: it means not only that politics is *exhaustively situational*, but that the situation does not have the finality or coherence we often attribute to it. What messianism ‘achieves’ is not a magical transfiguration of this world into another one, but a change of state in our *contact* with this one. Agamben’s message is simple: stop waiting for another world, learn how to *look* within our situation for the potentialities that allow us to *hold a world in common.* In this way, he directs us to where we already are, and tells
us something very simple: the world is ours, but only “for use as not-ours.”\textsuperscript{174} What there is of communism will be worked-out here and now, in our capacity to perceive a common world, and to engage our concrete situation on the basis of this shared perception, through a common use without ownership.

\textbf{Desertion and Flight}

We may now conjoin the two components of messianic violence announced at the outset of this chapter. The general movement of destituent violence consists in subjecting the unity of chronology to a movement of decomposition, a fragmentation of the World, nullifying its fictitious unity. The asymmetry of operative time from chronology provides the transcendental condition for a destituent elaboration of common worlds. Yet what is needed is a gesture through which to assume this time, to restore contact with the preparation of form that our attention to the world, our lived experience, already envelopes within it.

All perception envelops lived forms. It is the imperfect nihilism of our time that, by rendering all gestures “unrealizable,” by making all futurity unthinkable, maintains us in suspension from them. Hobbes once described the idea of the state of nature as an analytic principle that is revealed when the State is “considered as if it were dissolved” \textit{[ut tanquam dissoluta consideretur]}\textsuperscript{175} If Agamben often characterizes our situation as one of “global civil war,” this is because, in the state of exception, any formal ‘togetherness’ previously associated with the notions of ‘civil society’ or the state is today lived as if dissolved\textsuperscript{176} The object of


economic governance is to produce a “bare life that has been separated from its context,” and as such, it administers all relations between human beings as if our lives lacked any internal form, as if we were nothing but ‘surviving machines,’ bundles of self-interest surrounded by a void of relation (HS1 100). Only once beings have been wrenched from their worlds, stripped of all lived attachments, can the political task of re-assembling the atomized particles make sense. What economy separates, classical politics serves to re-gather, only as separate. It is the function of the Pauline hos me (or ‘as not’) to demythologize both ends of this apparatus.

The destituent operation of the hos me works like a ‘perceptual machine’, i.e. a regime of attention, that dislocates our ascriptive historical vocations and identities (e.g., the impoverished conception of happiness as ‘self-interest’), restoring contact with the operative time of a world-in-construction.177 To the extent that it enacts a transformation of perception, it therefore has something common with the structure of the insurrectional ban. However, a decisive difference separates the two. Let us recall that, for Agamben, the ‘ban relation’ installs itself in us by means of mythologemes (‘caesuras’) that rend-apart our factical experience, in order to maintain or hold us in relation to an instance we cannot properly assume (HS1 26-27; HS4.2 236-237, 265). As we saw in Chapter 2, the mythic symbolization that characterizes revolt generates an experience of suspended time by causing historical signs to ‘allude’ to a mythological plane of eternity on which actions are played out. In this, it is without a doubt a mode of ‘contracting’ historical time, but one which simulates an experience of being ‘excepted’ from historical time, of not participating in its chronological duration. When political-ideological signs and subject-positions become symbolized through the mythic time of revolt, they are not loosened but hardened, becoming intransigent markers within the situation, around which sensation becomes suddenly

polarized. While the preparatory strategic rationality of the Party is annulled in such moments, the ‘historical task’ that oriented it, as well as the relative subject positions it served to mark out not only *remain*, they now assume a quasi-eternal status (*the* enemy, *the* weapon, *the* defense of one’s class, etc.). Mythic symbolization operates by means of an ‘as if’ that gathers historical time into a new order and totality, by projecting the ideological vocations assigned to us onto an ulterior plane that absolutizes them. In this, *the insurrectional ban leaves the unity of historical time in tact*, inhabiting it in the mode of an ‘exemplary’ exception. As we shall see, the *hos me* is contrasted point for point with the insurrectional ban: in place of an ‘as if’ that suspends our relation to history, destitution coincides with an ‘as not’ that exhibits the nullity of our identities, making them strategically *usable*. Destituent communism advances not by a hardening of ideological vocations in preparation for the final battle, but by means of a ‘revocation of all vocation,’ the desertion of a way of relating to the world that divorces us from our collective power of action.

Let us return to the questions we posed earlier in this chapter. Given the *desubjectivation* to which Bloom attests, can we think a politics that would not depend on a resubstantialization of the subject? What would a political polarization look like, if we nullified both the identity of the insurgent *and* the resubjectivizing pole of the ‘enemy’? Can we think a politics in which the subject is subject only of its own desubjectivation?

Paul says, “let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called [*en tē klēsei he eklēthē*]. Art thou called being a slave? care not for it: but if mayest be free, use it rather” (1 Corinthians 7:17-22; TR 19). The elementary misunderstanding of this passage would be to see it as telling us to ‘wait’ for the coming of the Messiah, to remain patient and docile, in the hopes of a future redemption. On the contrary, the Pauline gesture consists precisely in *not sidestepping*
the situation we find ourselves in. That there is no preliminary to communism, means that it is a potentiality in every situation, anywhere time takes form in a factual condition. This is the first point: to ‘remain’ means to begin not from an ideal state of political action, the hallowed moment in which the ‘time is ripe’, but from right where we are, from the factual condition in which we find ourselves.

What does it mean to ‘begin’ from the calling we are given? How are we to relate to the roles, identities, and social determinations to which this world has consigned us? Paul describes the messianic event as follows:

[B]rethren, time contracted itself, the rest is, that even those having wives may be as not [hos me] having, and those weeping as not weeping, and those rejoicing as not rejoicing, and those buying as not possessing, and those using the world as not using it up. For passing away is the figure of this world. But I wish you to be without care. (1 Cor. 7:29-32; TR 23).

Messianic life lives its worldly vocations ‘as not’. The hos me does not oppose one referend or predicate with another (‘anarchism’ versus ‘capitalism’), it does not “entail substituting a less authentic vocation with a truer vocation” (TR 23). Nor does it refuse to speak, remaining in silent withdrawal from all reference to itself or to the world, as if in contemplation of the ‘obscure God’ awaiting us at the end of history. Instead, it induces a movement allowing the subject to place its predicates in contact with the operative time of its lived experience of the situation, the time they take to be constructed. At issue is an “anaphoric gesture,” that induces an “immobile shifting” in our relation to our own identities (TR 22-23). The term ‘immobility’ should not mislead us: it does not mean that ‘nothing’ has occurred, but signals that was has occurred has not based itself on an ulterior or pre-supposed ground. If the hos me is immobile, this is because

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178 Cf. BM 121: It is a “question of thinking a flight that would imply no evasion, a movement on the spot, in the situation itself” (our emphasis).
the messianic vocation has no ulterior or particular content of its own, it does not construct a new political or mythic identity by which to replace the ones are are offered; it is “nothing but the repetition of those same factual or juridical conditions” (TR 23). The only way that a "movement sur place” can induce a change is if the situation in which it operates were already out-of-place, dis-located, outside of itself. As we have seen, Bloom is nothing other than a dislocation of all identity; it is to this condition that the Pauline hos me responds. Through it, our vocation does not change, but a repetition takes place that introduces a difference in our relation to it, one that—by introducing a new perspective upon it, a new evaluation—“works it from within and hollows it out, nullifying it in the very gesture of maintaining and dwelling in it” (TR 24). That a repetition is needed in order for this revocation indicates the origin of the change: it is by re-attaching our factual condition to the singular evaluation of the meaning-potentials that pass between us and the world, that we succeed in situating the nothingness of our identities within the operative time of the world. It is by inhabiting our condition, by restoring (in thought) the operative time it takes to construct itself, that we “revoke [our] condition from top to bottom” (ibid). The hos me is the becoming-situational, the becoming-operative, the becoming-practice of the world. To inhabit is not to negate our condition, but, first of all, to exhibit the always-partial and incomplete operations on which its power relies, and thereby to win a point of entry (a ‘side door’) through which a strategic perspective can be assumed. However, since the kairos is nothing other than ‘seized chronos’, operative time does not exhibit a deeper or ‘truer’ meaning to us, but allows our non-coincidence with our ascriptive identities to be felt. As Agamben shows, by allowing us to ‘dwell’ in our condition, the hos me enacts a peculiar sort of relation, one which distances us from the time-image of ourselves, by de-distancing us from the time of its construction. Here medieval grammar offers an explanation:
Medieval grammarians did not interpret the comparative as an expression of identity or simple resemblance, but rather, in the context of the theory of intensive magnitudes, they interpreted the comparative as an (intensive or remissive) tension that sets one concept against another…The Pauline 

*hos me* seems to be a special type of tensor, for it does not push a concept's semantic field toward that of another concept. Instead, it sets it against itself in the form of the *as not* ‘weeping as not weeping.’ The messianic tension thus does not tend toward an elsewhere, nor does it exhaust itself in the indifference between one thing and its opposite. The apostle does not say: "weeping as rejoicing" nor "weeping as [meaning =] not weeping," but "weeping as not weeping." According to the principle of messianic *klesis*, one determinate factical condition is set in relation to itself—the weeping is pushed toward the weeping, the rejoicing toward the rejoicing. In this manner, it revokes the factical condition and undermines it without altering its form…In pushing each thing toward itself through the *as not*, the messianic does not simply cancel out this figure, but it makes it pass, it prepares its end. This is not another figure or another world: it is the passing of the figure of this world. (TR 24)

Marcello Tari offers a fruitful example of this tensor in the context of the revolutionary tradition.

On the one hand, militant revolutionary subjectivity will certainly not return the way it left—the exhaustion of the possibilities of our world also brings with it the exhaustion of the subject that struggled within this framework. However, as what Guattari called the “winter years” of the 1980’s and ’90’s demonstrated, such exhaustion can lead to the dangerous temptation to discard the problem of revolution *tout court*, to throw the baby out with the bathwater, terminating in a quiet apology for the status quo. Against this slippage toward reformism or quietism, Tari points to the need simultaneously to assume and to nullify the identity of the revolutionary, to nullify it without distancing ourselves from it:

Let’s be careful to not pit ourselves against the militant, whose history deserves our respect. Instead, let us adopt the Pauline strategy of the ‘as not:’ militants are *as not* militants…In the first place, this would mean freeing those who live in that form from the obligation of being *someone*, or, what amounts to the same thing, to live *as if* they were something they are not, something never really present but positioned ahead of them as an exterior end. To live ‘as not’ means for the militant to dissolve the spell that invests him in an infinite task and an absolute delegation. Mask and face can no longer be superimposed and separated at will, at least if we do not wish to repeat the tragedy of the professional revolutionaries […] There is no need, therefore, to flee our vocation. Militancy, as the philosopher might say, can be ‘made use of.’ It must be placed in tension with revolutionary temporality, deactivating its inclination to become a tyrannical identity, a form separate from life, the conducting thread of a moral substance from which one
proceeds by means of gestures and behavior so easily separable from the subject who performs them.\textsuperscript{179}

However, if an ‘exhibition’ of the nullity of our identities were the only aim, deconstruction’s deferral of all presence would be a satisfying strategy. This is not Agamben’s view: the introduction of non-coincidence into chronological time through the restoration of its ‘contact’ with operative time does not simply allow our factual identities to appear as the ‘masks’ that they are, it also allows them to be seized upon, inhabited, and thereby \textit{decided}. The messianic calling is not a perpetual deferral of decision, a distantiation of the subject from all identity.\textsuperscript{180}

On the contrary, by introducing a non-coincidence into the ascription of predicates to our life (worker, queer, ‘anarchist,’ ‘terrorist’, etc.), the \textit{hos me} nullifies language’s allusion to its own pre-existing ground, transposing our relation to these determinations onto a field of ‘pure praxis’ (TR 28). Nor can the “revocation of every vocation” that “nullifies the entire subject” be understood, in the fashion of contemporary left-communism, as a process of ‘self-abolition’ (TR 41). Instead of abolishing the subject, messianism transforms the experience of identification into a \textit{problem} to be broached exclusively from within a situational strategy.

For this reason, it would be inaccurate to present messianism as a rehashing of the Heideggerian problem of authenticity. The subject’s \textit{assumption} of predicates, vocations, and juridical identities must be regarded as an operation undertaken within the situation, as a “free use of the proper,” to be sure, but never as an object of appropriation. On Agamben’s view, Heidegger betrayed his own profound insight concerning the strictly modal difference between authenticity and inauthenticity: if authenticity is only inauthenticity that has been seized upon, to regard this operation of ‘seizing’ as one of ‘authentic appropriation’ rather than as one of ‘use’

\textsuperscript{179} Marcello Tari, \textit{Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice}, \textit{op cit.}, 8.
\textsuperscript{180} On the “thwarted messianism” of Derrida, see TR 103.
risks reintroducing the very coincidence between experience and historical time that operative
time serves to fragment and singularize. To reinsert the Pauline strategy into the dialectic of the
‘proper’ and the ‘improper’ would deprive it of its usefulness in an era of generalized
desubjectivation—Bloom has no Heimat to which he can return. For Agamben, there is no
‘authentic’ appropriation, there are only strategic uses of inauthenticity, negotiated by means of
our contact with a concrete situation: “messianic klesis is something to use, not to possess” (TR
26). When Agamben writes that “messianic vocation is not a right, nor does it furnish an
identity,” we may understand him as saying that identity is never wider than its deployment
within a situation, where every situation refers to a field of operations in which we are called, not
to stake a ‘claim’ to legitimacy, but to take up a position.  

What does it mean to make a destituent “use of worldly situations” (TR 26)? How does
this help us refashion the distinction between revolt and revolution? How do we pass from the
desertion of our ascriptive identities to a “zone of communal life” (BM 119)? How can the
inhabitation of the world ‘as not’ provoke a new form of shared attention, placing us on an
asymmetrical plane of sensibility, accomplishing an internal rupture from the course of historical
time? As Agamben puts it, it is a question of creating “a space that escapes the grasp of power
and its laws, without entering into conflict with them yet rendering them inoperative” (TR 27).
Yet, if Jesi is right that “every revolt is a battle,” it cannot be a question of avoiding
confrontation per se, but rather of finding an asymmetrical or non-dialectical (non-synthetic, but
also non-Manichaean) premise from which to understand the inevitable polarizations that crop up
within situations. Where it becomes necessary to fight, we must fight obliquely, rather than head-

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181 As Agamben puts it: “[T]he as not is by no means a fiction…It has nothing to do with an ideal. The assimilation
to what has been lost and forgotten is absolute: ‘We are made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things’
(1 Cor. 4:13). Pauline klesis is a theory of the interrelation between the messianic and the subject, a theory that
settles its differences once and for all with presumed identities and ensuing properties” (TR 41).
on, and with a different idea of the meaning and stakes of war itself. Destituent partisanship does not confront the state directly, but only from a perspective of intimate exteriority: we must be ‘in but not beholden to’ history. Instead of defining the community of resistance negatively, through its opposition to its enemy, it is a matter of seeking a genuinely autonomous premise for collective life, an asymmetry between incommensurable ideas of life and the basis of collective power, and of discovering gestures that permit us to inhabit them. Rather than replacing one whole with another, we must affirm the autonomous and positive value of the fragment, we who remain, like a remnant, in secession from the whole whose value we have deposed, while continuously working to tease out the passages—friendly or hostile—that lead from one fragment to another.

The messianic klesis or ‘calling’ does not negate the existing law and social institutions in order to constitute new ones a moment later, but “coincides completely and constitutively with their destitution” (HS4.2 277). The violence that deposes our identities is not carried out in the name of a new and more universal identity, but rather refers to a process through which all identities cease to coincide with themselves, and thereby find themselves deactivated. Destitution is not a prelude to a new legal order, but the very means by which communism is elaborated. At the same time, once violence ceases to be conceived as ‘maieutic,’ as resulting in a product or ‘work,’ it loses its strictly negative or ‘destructive’ character and becomes a process we immediately inhabit. However, if destitution is not an interval between epochs, but the very means through which communal life becomes livable, the existence of the messianic community—or, communism—cannot have the status of a substantive, it cannot be a ‘factual’ event or ‘state’ that occurs at a given moment, or at which we have finally ‘arrived.’ It names an experiential process through which time is actively seized upon and constructed from fragment
to fragment. Its exteriority is won not by suspending history, but by *intensely* inhabiting it through non-coincidence, by moving on another plane of perception, informed by another idea of happiness and of living: not as new institutions, but through the proliferation of experimental forms-of-life, zones of communal life wrenched away from the course of the world and *seized* as fragmentary laboratories of collective power.

How does the revocation of vocation alter the relation between between revolt and revolution? Agamben presents three schemas through which the process has been approached. On the one hand, there is an individualist “ethical-anarchic schema” proposed by Max Stirner in *The Ego and Its Own*, according to which revolt appears (as Marx and Engels summarized it) as “an uprising of individuals…without regard for the institutions that develop out of it…It is not a struggle against what exists, for if it prospers what exists will collapse of itself; it is only the setting free of me from what exists” (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, cited at TR, 32).

While Agamben has no interest in individualism, what Stirner is right to highlight is the affirmation of *exteriority* that orients the process of desertion: destitution is first of all defined by the positive restoration of the world through the deposing of vocation, i.e., as flight, subtraction, and fragmentation, rather than direct confrontation. This much, Stirner got right. However, if Marx and Engels “succeed in ridiculing Stirner’s theses,”—namely, by highlighting the futility of wagering politics on individualism—their effort to think the unity of revolt and revolution only produces an aporia of another sort: how can the Party be “identical to class while simultaneously differing from it” (TR 32)? In the end, the paradox of the Party becomes the same as that of the relation between the Church and the messianic community: “once the *ekklēsia*, the community of messianic vocations, wishes to impart to itself an organization distinct from the community while pretending to coincide with it, the problem of correct doctrine
and infallibility (i.e. of dogma) becomes crucial” (TR 33). In other words, the failing of Marx and Engels lay in the effort to unify the messianic community of revolt ideologically, which only results in reintroducing the separation between thought and life, between the lexical ‘identity’ of the world we share and our existential care for and attention to it. On this account, Agamben argues, Heidegger is right to claim that “what is essential in Paul is not dogma or theory, but factual experience, the way worldly relations are lived” (TR 33). Between the first two schemas, we have a contradiction: desertion lacks direction, yet the effort to resolve this by means of the organ of the Party (as the vessel of class consciousness) reintroduces the very amputation between the political form of belonging and lived experience that the hos me sought to ‘repair.’

Is there a way around this dilemma?

Here Agamben introduces a third option, an “anarchic-nihilist interpretation” drawn from Jacob Taubes and Walter Benjamin.182 This option “plays on the absolute indiscernibility between revolt and revolution, worldly klēsis and messianic klēsis,” by refusing to distinguish between “an awareness of the vocation [and] the movement of its tension and revocation in the as not” (TR 33). As an illustration of this indiscernibility, Agamben cites Paul’s claim that he “does not recall seizing hold of himself, but only of being seized, and from this being seized, straining forward toward klēsis” (Phil. 3:12-13; TR 33). Here the vocation coincides with the very movement of the hos me; it is “the movement of the calling toward itself” that introduces the binding factor. Two things are instructive here: first, if communism cannot locate what is common between singular beings in an artificial ideological unity introduced from without, yet it

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182 It is worth noting that in the interviews surrounding The Time that Remains (cf. BM 121-123), Taubes disappears, replaced only by the formulations concerning the ‘zone of communal life’ and the considerations of ‘a subject that is its own desubjectification’ drawn from Foucault that we have seen so far. This attests to the fact that, in spite of the way Agamben presents the triptych (“many interpretations are possible, none of which may be correct”), the Taubes-Benjamin route is not simply a third option among others, but serves in The Time that Remains as a proxy for Agamben’s own position.
is equally unwilling to premise its process on the “free association” of the “union of egoists” (thereby re-entrenching their separateness), the only alternative is to displace the centrality of the subject altogether. It is not the individual’s egoic desires, nor their ideological agreements that form the basis of a common plane of perception, but the world to which this perception is oriented. The relation to the shared perception of the world is not one of an ideal form of political organization or society that we then attempt to realize in practice, but assumes the character of a response to the experience of potentiality harbored by our encounter with our situation. At the center of the communist project lies a shared perception of the world that outstrips individuals, yet exists only in the crossing and recrossing of their mutual encounter with each other, in situ. What is sometimes referred to these days as a “commune” is not a factual institution or a ‘collective’ oikos, but a process through which diverse individuals come together and make a decision to face the world together, come what may. The world is therefore not a datum but gathers together convergent processes of desertion and allows them to coexist in a form of co-belonging that Agamben will characterize as that of “exile” (HS4.2 234-239).

Messianism is not a profession of faith, but a belief in a shared world the intensity of which nullifies ‘functional’ separations and professional vocations. What matters is less the specific content of belief—this emerges only later—than a mode of relating to the world that refuses to dissociate itself from the common potential of its encounter with it. It is not an identity or ‘class’ composition, but a mode of political involuntarism wherein the subject deduces its ‘self’ from the evidence of the common potentiality in which he or she participates. How can this boundedness to a common world find an expression? What gesture, what use of language responds to it? We will explore the answer to this question by focusing on a peculiar
phenomenon that has marked contemporary struggles in the past decade, namely, the practice of the *pledge*.

**The Destituent Pledge**

With the exception of the Zapatista-held territory in Chiapas, Mexico, La ZAD is probably the largest populated police-free zone in the West. It is located on 2000 hectares of wooded farmland in the commune of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, 30 minutes north of Nantes, in Western France. As early as 1965, French politicians and lobbyists began proposing the construction of a new international airport to function as a “gateway to Europe,” in particular for North American freight. In 1974 the state declared a *Zone d’aménagement différé* [ZAD], a Deferred Development Zone, and began attempting to legally wrestle land away from local farmers. The project encountered firm resistance among the local peasantry, many of whom had been radicalized during the 1968 uprising, and was eventually shelved for three decades. In 2008, a €580 million airport project was formally approved, and the state began driving residents out by legal and extralegal means. A little over a year later, the remaining inhabitants circulated a call for people to occupy the zone and resist the new mega-project. Hundreds of farmers, environmentalists, anarchists, moved to the zone, built semi-permanent structures, and dug in, rebranding the space “Zone à défend” (ZAD), or the ‘zone to defend.’ Demonstrations and actions against the airport multiplied, and support committees sprung up across France and other parts of Western Europe. In October of 2012, militarized French police forces began entering the zone in large numbers and conducting operations to clear the zone of its inhabitants. After a bitter winter of *guérilla bocage*, or ‘treeline warfare’ between occupants and state forces, the police finally evacuated in spring of 2013, and have rarely returned since.
Three years later, after winning 55% support for the airport in a widely-contested state referendum, the French government promised an eviction of the ZAD in “October, or autumn.” On the weekend of October 7-8, 2016—at the same time as thousands of Native and non-Native water defenders were blocking access roads, cutting fences, sabotaging equipment and locking-down to trucks and heavy machinery from Standing Rock, ND, to the Mississippi Stand pipeline resistance camp at the Iowa-Illinois border—a massive mobilization took place on the ZAD in Notre-dame-des-landes. While many such manifestales (demonstration-festivals) have taken place on the Zone since the police withdrew their occupation, this one included a phenomenon we regard as distinctive, perhaps even ‘paradigmatic’ (in the specific sense Agamben lends this term) of the vision of destituent communism.

The callout for the weekend encouraged supporters not only to travel to the Zone, but to each bring with them with a wooden staff or baton with which to make a visible and collective sign of their determination to defend it. The demonstration-performance was entitled the “Song of the Batons”, or simply “Baton Song”. Upon arrival, more than 40,000 people planted their batons in the ground, and took an oath that if the territory should come under attack, they would return, collect their baton, and wield it against the ZAD’s enemies. Here is one version:

Pledge: On this, the 8th of October, we take hold of our batons, the symbol of our determination and the instrument for the defense of this ZAD that we love. By planting them here today, we seal into the soil of Notre-dame-des-landes our collective pledge to return to the ZAD, if necessary, to defend it. We won’t submit either to the law of profit, nor to the law of the strongest: we are here, we will be here!

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183 While we will not address it here, the phenomenon of the pledge has deeply marked indigenous struggles against infrastructure in the US as well. For one example, see “Lakota vow: ‘dead or in prison before we allow the KXL pipeline’”, http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/lakota-vow-dead-prison-allow-kxl-pipeline/ (accessed 04.07.2018).
184 A paradigm is defined as a “singular object that, standing equally for all others of the same class, defines the intelligibility of the group of which it is a part and which, at the same time, it constitutes” (ST 17).
As Agamben (drawing on Benveniste) shows, the term *horkos* (to take an oath) can be traced back to the most archaic forms of law and belongs to a “pre-juridical sphere in which magic, religion, and law are absolutely indiscernible from one another” (TR 114; HS2.3 *passim*). What defines the Pauline use of the term *pistis* (faith) is the effort not to “set a new and luminous element against the ‘antiquity of the nomos,’” but to “play one element of pre-law against the other” (ibid). The messianic oath binds the community to itself through a gesture that aims to disentangle the experience of a collective *attachment* (loyalty, reciprocity, trust, credence, a shared experience of power and possibility, as well as mutual defense and protection) from its juridical entanglements in the *arcanum imperii* of sovereignty (TR 115-117). In doing so, Paul plays the element of the promise [*epaggelia*] or the ‘pact’ [*diathēkē*] against that of the commandment [*nomos tôn entolôn*] sanctioned by it. The act of *institution* is hereby turned back against the very law it elsewhere is mobilized to legitimate. In a decisive passage, Agamben writes,
The caesura between constitutive and constituted power, a divide that becomes so apparent in our times, finds its theological origins in the Pauline split between the level of faith and that of nomos, between personal loyalty and the positive obligation that derives from it. In this light, messianism appears as a struggle, within the law, whereby the element of the pact and constituent power leans toward setting itself against and emancipating itself from the element of the entolē, the norm in the strict sense. The messianic is therefore the historical process whereby the archaic link between law and religion (which finds its magical paradigm in horkos, oath) reaches a crises and the element of pистis, of faith in the pact, tends paradoxically to emancipate itself from any obligatory conduct and from positive law (from works fulfilled in carrying out the pact) (TR 118-119).

The messianic community comes into being through a pact that premises itself on the decision to place a shared world at the center of our attention. It is a conjuratio that deposes the hold that positive law exerts over our perception of the interesting and the uninteresting, the tolerable and the intolerable, the alluring and the repugnant, orienting itself instead around its refusal to dissociate itself from a fragment of power in which it embeds itself. 185 The meaning of “grace” in Paul is “not a letter written in ink on tables of stone; rather, it is written with the breath of God on the hearts of the flesh;” in other words, Agamben writes, “it is not a text, but the very life of the messianic community; not a writing, but a form of life (TR 122). Communism is the grace that can only be experienced at the moment we return the nothingness of ‘the World’ to nothing, and instead restore form to a collective power of experience oriented around a shared pledge to each other and to the world between us.

The oath not only gives a name to this peculiar mode of being in the world, one of shared attachment, but exhibits a distinctive use of language premised upon it. As Agamben argues in The Sacrament of Language, to take an oath is to suspend the denotative or signifying use of speech, allowing a pure act of self-reference to appear in its place. In this, it shares something with the state of exception, to the extent that the latter’s efficacy likewise depends on an act of suspension: “Just as, in the state of exception, the law suspends its own application only to

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185 The term conjuratio (in the sense ‘oblige by oath’) has its origins in the Old French conjurer, ‘to plot or exorcise,’ and the Latin conjurare ‘band together by an oath, conspire.’
found, in this way, its being in force, so in the performative [oath], language suspends its denotation precisely and solely to found its existential connection with things” (HS2.3 56). By suspending signification, the oath gives rise to an expression. But what occurs in this suspension of signification? In what sense does the oath implicate and envelop the existence of the one who engages it? What is meant here by “existential”?

The key idea is that to the extent that the oath is not a signification, it is neither portable nor indifferent to its speaker. It cannot be detached from its site of enunciation, for it is itself an act of attachment. It is, therefore, an irreducibly situated use of discourse. If the pledge establishes an “existential connection with things”, this is because it configures an “experience of the event of language” in which the existence of the world is able to be expressed, the same existence that sovereign governance works to strip from bodies. That it envelops a world, however, means that it is not indexed strictly to an individual either, but to practice of collective inhabitation or occupation without which the enunciation would lose its content: it is, we might say, territorial.

Destituent politics have a two-fold frame: they must make a partisan use of human inoperativity—‘exhibiting the void’ at the heart of governance—while ‘immediately
inaugurating a new reality. In other words, it must generate consistency without constituency. How can we think a reorganization of factual experience around a ‘caesura’ capable, on the one hand, of nullifying the governmental bond, while at the same time allowing a new type of ‘contact’ to emerge within the space thereby opened up?

This is where the ‘territorial’ component becomes decisive. Since we always exhibit this void from somewhere determinate, from a substantial world, it is not just ‘any void’ that is exhibited; there is something like a distance-drawn between us and the law which clears the space for the law’s exhaustion to become a shared evidence. We always destitute governance from somewhere. By standing in the event of speech from which we speak (the ‘event of anthropogenesis’), by pledging on the basis of a collective attachment, the gesture of the oath expresses an affirmation, not of a ‘common claim to legitimacy,’ which would remain within the regime of the law, but of a common plane of perception. The pledge is a perceptual machine that destitutes the machine of sovereignty here and now, for as long as the attention it affords is renewed and rejuvenated through a form-of-life premised upon it.

For all these reasons, we wish to suggest that in the 40,000-strong Baton Song pledge at the ZAD there is more at stake than a familiar leftist protest march. Everything appears as if, by severing the two elements of the classical theory of the social contract, Zadists and their supporters performed a “pact of association” against subjection, rather than for it. In its refusal to countenance the state referendum’s electoral majority, what is at issue is an irreducibly partisan pledge. Such a gesture is best understood not as a splitting of a totality into competing parts or factions each defined via mutually contested claims over the management of the whole, but rather as the intensification of asymmetrical differences that were already there within the way we live, which the ‘savage peace’ of the State only ever manages at best to attenuate, but can
never settle or extinguish. That its struggle is premised on a partisan idea of how we want to live is audible in very the slogan of the ZAD, “against the airport and its world,” which consciously distances itself from the politics of reasoned dissent or citizenly disagreement. ‘War’ is not the same thing for the inhabitants of La ZAD and for those seeking to erase it. After all, if one struggles by means of living differently on the ZAD, it is by means of the entirety of the world one builds thereby that one is waging war. In such a situation, what does one oppose, except another world?

To pledge oneself to the ZAD is not to lay the grounds for the constitution of a new totality, which some extrapolated “ZADist revolution” could some day fulfill or actualize, but to commit one’s resources to the gathering of a force in which construction and desertion coincide. In a video interview from that Saturday, a man assembling a cabin to house the ZAD’s defenders explained that what distinguishes them from the state is not primarily their negative threat of self-defense, but above all their use of construction as a means of making war. Nor is the ZAD a ‘micro-utopia,’ as Naomi Klein and others have referred to it, for it does not ‘pre-figure’ a better world to come; to believe so would be to once again assume a relation of spectatorship to one’s own experience, freezing one’s lived form into a model or schema (a time-image). It does not index a future to come, but intensely inhabits the potentiality of the present, and in its fringe of desubjectivation it digs a trench, one just stable enough to open up an experimental and perpetually-revised consistency.

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186 As Naomi Klein recently remarked on Twitter, “Such gratuitous violence and vandalism from the Macron government, attacking a utopian community that has been a beacon for many. Sending love to my friends at the ZAD.” April 9, 2018. https://twitter.com/NaomiAKlein/status/983431449285222400 (accessed 4.17.2018). The tweet was well-intentioned, even if it reiterates a common misperception about the rudimentary premises of life in the Zone, as we understand them.
This only begins to make sense if one recalls that to live in such a space is already to live experimentally, since the day-to-day absence there of police, of State administration, of prisons, and of a monetary economy within the territory of the ZAD is a sort of complex problem to which life must respond by a perpetual invention of lived forms.\(^{187}\) Is every invention functional, or adequate to the challenges confronting its inhabitants? Not at all. It simply means that life and politics are in reciprocal immanence—a single question, a single process, with no separation between oikos and polis carving up needs into specialized roles and functions. Destituent communism takes its point of departure in this immanence of politics and life, from the point at which it has become impossible to separate-off a supposedly ‘generic’ human form in whose name one may dominate others.\(^{188}\)

If, in our building of a force, we manage to consciously avoid relating to our enemies (and above all to ourselves) in terms of a claim we suppose ourselves to possess to a deeper universality or ‘constituent legitimacy’, if we measure our strength by the vitality of our positive

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\(^{187}\) In a fine text collectively authored by some of its residents, we catch a glimpse of the complex problems such a politics demands: “In [this] power vacancy, a rare opportunity is offered up, where we have to grapple directly with the things that condition our everyday life both materially and affectively. Faced with the challenge of sharing our lives together on the zone, we step into another battle, this time against and within ourselves. It’s no longer about confronting power in its most obvious form, but to struggle against that which is embedded deep within us. There is always, in all of us, a bit of those separated individuals, stuck in their social, cultural and political identities. The defeat of a police operation will never be enough to destroy what remains of the grip of consumerism within us, the devastating addictions, the prejudices, the everyday sexism... How do we free ourselves from the cowardly habit of wanting to delegate everything, which sits so well next to the deadly desire to control everything?” Mauvaise Troupe, “Defending La ZAD.” Available here: [https://constellations.boum.org/IMG/pdf/zad-en-a5.pdf](https://constellations.boum.org/IMG/pdf/zad-en-a5.pdf) (accessed 4.07.2018).

\(^{188}\) As we write this, a debate has flared up between inhabitants of the Zone concerning a proposal made by some to create a sort of quasi-official apparatus by which to engage in collective negotiation with the state over the use of land, now that the airport project was officially canceled by the French state on Jan 17th, 2018. The proposal’s defenders have argued that the organization has nothing to do with a concession to state legitimacy, but is rather a strategic wager intended precisely to counteract the power of state law to divide and conquer residents by enforcing a division between legitimate and illegitimate tenants. Its more ideologically purist ‘anarchist’ detractors, however, have attacked the proposal as a surreptitious power-grab both from without and within, seeing in it a cynical backtracking on the commitment to autonomy and self-determination. See (Collective), “The ZAD Will Survive,” [https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3682-the-zad-will-survive](https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3682-the-zad-will-survive) (accessed 4.17.2018). See also (Anonymous) “The Revenge against the Commons,” April 24, 2018. Online here: [https://zadforever.blog/2018/04/24/the-revenge-against-the-commons/](https://zadforever.blog/2018/04/24/the-revenge-against-the-commons/) (accessed 4.24.2018).
asymmetry with the world of governance rather seeing ourselves as a People awaking to a “betrayal” by its representatives, then our idea of politics changes. Once we subtract innocence and abstract legitimacy from our idea of power, the pledge of association no longer exists to bring into being a proto-legal subject, but a new attachment to the world. It is on the soil of this attachment signaled in the pact that (in a secondary moment) we become capable of discerning who are our friends and who our enemies. It is this processural priority of the lived world, the sensitivity to, and unwillingness to be disembedded from, the immediate asymmetry or multiplicity of forms-of-life, that ensures that a juridical and quantitative referendum on our legitimacy will be unable to dent our confidence in our own power.

In the opening chapters of *Leviathan*, Hobbes described the aims of scientific speech by means of a metaphor:

> Seeing then that truth consisteth in the right ordering of names in our affirmations, a man that seeketh precise truth had need to remember what every name he uses stands for; and to place it accordingly; or else he will find himselfe entangled in words, as a bird in lime-twiggs; the more he struggles, the more belimed.  

We may say that the partisan pledge uses language in a diametrically inverse manner as that of Hobbes: if the imperial use of language aims above all to dis-embed us, to break the link between our speech, our bodies, and substantive worlds in which we exist and to which our bodies are attached, the pledge functions like a bird-song of desire: it elaborates a “territory,” a desire that draws us into the world in such a way that the world wraps us, making it impossible for us to be disembedded—“belimed.” If we are asked what we ‘stand for,’ what we want, why we refuse consensus, constituent appeals, and democracy, we can only utter our bird-song: these limes, this

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tree, this land, these hills, this valley, these fields, these rivers, these friends, _this world—or nothing._
CONCLUSION

TOWARD A POLITICS OF EXILE

In the dark I smile at life, as if I knew some sort of magical secret that gives the lie to everything evil and sad and changes it into pure light and happiness. And all the while I’m searching within myself for some reason for this joy, I find nothing and must smile to myself again—and laugh at myself. I believe the secret is nothing other than life itself...

ROSA LUXEMBURG

We have attempted to link the communist wager in the 21st century to the creation of zones of communal life defined by an essential non-coincidence with themselves, abiding in the “no-man’s-land” between identity and non-identity, and drawing their power not from the radiation of a ‘formal’ program or a utopian ideal or ideology, but from the distinctively ‘territorial’ experience of a life oriented around a shared investment in its situated collective potentiality. As we have sought to show, the logical underpinnings of this vision are found in a renovated relation between time, subjectivity, and violence: through the inner ‘fragmentation’ of totalizing historical time-images, operative time provides the genetic condition for the desertion of our ascriptive identities or ‘vocations’ and the reconstitution of places, the sum total of which serves to explicate our definition of destituent violence as the ‘restoration of participation in the creation of a world.’

We will close with some preliminary considerations concerning the internal logical form of communal life and the ‘sharing’ that defines it. What does it mean to share not objects, identities, or ideologies, but a world? How does destituent communism overcome the opposition between singular and collective, individual and society, without relying on a form of ‘group

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closure’ or supplementary unity? How can this process ward off the danger of groupuscular microfascism or neo-economism? These questions are highly complex, and we make no pretense of offering an exhaustive reply. However, we do contend that our way of posing these problems can only begin to be placed ‘right side up’ provided we make two preliminary conceptual distinctions. First, to the closed and negative ‘interiority’ of constituent group identification, it is necessary to counterpose a destituent understanding of community as the internalization of an Outside, or the affirmation of exteriority; second, in place of the institutional tendency to parcel-out human life into a discreet collection of preset ‘functions,’ what stands at the center of communist practice is the concept of form-of-life, understood as a plastic principle that generates the relational ‘place,’ site, or ‘plan(e)’ of community only in and through the interaction of its elements, the latter being paradoxically understood as occurring ‘without relation.’ These two distinctions find their unity in an experience of sharing that Agamben will describe in the final part of The Use of Bodies as ‘exile,’ a concept that alters the logical coordinates of the problem of communist life and the ‘sharing’ at issue in it.

Economization and Negligence

The question of communism today must depart from the recognition that we stand at the end of a four-centuries-long systematic campaign of unworlding human experience. Capitalism could not have come into being without the ruthless enforcement of a vast nominalist reduction, a substitution of all places with names, a replacement of all lived forms by the managerial division and functionalization of an administered survival. Before human life could be crammed into the narrow identification of the ‘worker’ (or its minor premise, the ‘slave’), it was first necessary to eviscerate every situated attunement to what is evident, every sectarian truth on the
basis of which collectives once gave the event of living here (and not there) a participable form and sense, to suppress all the various collective techniques, rituals, and dramatizations by which we inhabit the entry into presence together. No one whose idea of life is bound up in the collective inhabitation of a territory (as we have defined it) can slip easily into that rootless nowhere in terms of which modernity imagines our bodies as a pure productive availability or ‘labor power,’ and other such “abstract juridical-social identities (voter, employee, journalist, student…[etc.])” (HS4.2 209). The preliminary condition for the economic management of ‘society’ was therefore to produce its correlate: an ‘autonomous individual,’ stripped of all worldly attachments, dis-embedded from all vital magic, from every lived attachment. Since then, an intimate perfidy has come to serve as the modus vivendi of the contemporary subject. We are trained from a young age to sidestep our own forms of life, the singular difference of our contact with the world. This deracination is a distinctively Western institutional tutelage, designed to instill in us the prudential wisdom of our dependency on the state and civil society; we learn to regard our life ‘as if’ it were barren of forms, as if form entered our experience of the world only by the grace of an artificial supplement or a ‘mortal God’ without whom we would descend into the Maelstrom. If economic logic is the continuation of civil war by other means, this is first of all because the condition of the marketized ‘World’ is a perpetual war—waged on the terrain of sensibility—against every irreducibly situated world. Before one can speak of a ‘social science of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services,’ economic epistemology refers first of all to the arsenal of techniques that shore up the ‘economization’ of experience, the anthropological dressage that trains us to suspend rather than assume the internal pulsation of messianic time within historical time, to pay no mind to the evaluative differences we brush up against in our encounters with other beings. Economics is the Western science of
dispersing worlds, whose task is to ensure that the force of sensibility is lived *ut tanquam dissoluta*. The ‘real’ economic crisis consists in our inability to even feel the disaster of our lives, to have become well-adjusted to the ceaseless self-treason to which the course of this world commits us—a crisis of presence. As Arendt was right to observe, it is precisely to the extent that “we suffer under desert conditions [that] we are still human and still intact; the danger lies in becoming true inhabitants of the desert and feeling at home in it.”191 Communism cannot refer to an ‘alternative’ economic logic; it names the real movement that destitutes economic governance, ushering in secessionist territories of experimental collective life—or else it forms one more obstacle to this process.192

It is the great shortcoming of so many modern conceptions of emancipation to have taken over an image of subjectivity modeled on the anti-mundaneity of economic rationality, thereby tacitly making peace with our dispossession. When we reproduce the same age-old negligence toward our immediate conditions of cohabitation, modeling the promise of politics on the supposition of a subject with ‘universal’ aspirations—but with/in no particular place—our

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191 Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, op cit., 201 (our emphasis).
Attempts to flee our misery only “carry the sand of the desert into the oases.” The more purportedly ‘universal’ our image of happiness becomes, the more negligent we tend to become of our forms of life, denying the partisan significance of our care and attention to concrete factual beings, postponing the decisive moment in which we directly confront all the large and small forces within us that militate to reduce the secessionist potentials our affective attachments harbor, the myriad ways our encounters invite us to desert our vocations and pledge something irreversible on the germinal worlds whose sparks glimmer through them. The more ideological and abstract our convictions become, the more incapable we become of determining who are our friends, who our enemies—questions that can only in fact be answered from within a substantive world, on the basis of the lines of force within a situation. Thus do we find ourselves embroiled in thinly-veiled theological debates over the ‘ultimate ground’ of revolutionary politics: ‘what are we primarily against?…is it capitalism? patriarchy? racism?’ That such debates are today ‘resolved’ only by recourse to a newfangled trinitarianism (race-class-patriarchy, ‘one and three, at the same time’) should serve as a cautionary reminder of the katechonic impotence to which a politics seeking to re-entrench our captive identities consigns us.

To destitute politics is to drag them back down to earth, to situate the stakes of the confrontation at a level that can be seized upon and decided. The introduction of messianic or operative time into the communist problematic restores to experience its decisional milieu

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(kairos is nothing other than ‘seized’ chronos). In this, it places the essential substance of political and communal life within our grasp: the point of entry (the ‘side door’) lies in the very consistency of our experience.\textsuperscript{195} At the same time, it allows us to dispel certain lingering hangovers of economic rationality that continue to distort the communist problem today.

Messianic community has nothing to do with a new understanding of a ‘commons’ to be administered or managed ‘in the name of’ a recognized social constituency by a new form of benevolent and eco-friendly bureaucracy. Nor does it entail an appeal to concepts of ‘natural right’ or ‘customary law’ originating in archaic juridical and theological schemas of ownership.\textsuperscript{196} Communism is neither a new mode of ‘self-governance’ to replace the old institutional apparatuses, nor does it hang on a divine donation conferring an originary metaphysical guarantee of subsistence. If every effort to ground communist practice in an archê is destined to lead us back to another juridical-metaphysical apparatus, this is because it can never avoid subsuming the experience of community within a representational historical ‘totality,’ fetishistically effacing the fragmentary genetic operations that constructed it (the destituent ‘exhibition’ of which always reveals their partisan meaning). As Agamben shows, it was the great failure of the Franciscan strategy to have become so obsessed with indemnifying themselves, with proving their ‘innocence’ on an abstract juridical plane, that they never

\textsuperscript{195} If this comes across as a surprising or obscure thought, that does not make it incoherent, but is perhaps a symptom of the fact that we live in a world of compulsory individualization that employs every means at its disposal to mutilate and attenuate the possibility of community, of facing the world together.

\textsuperscript{196} See Elinor Ostrom, Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Peter Linebaugh, The Magna Carta Manifesto. Liberties and Commons for All (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). For a critique of the ideology of ‘governing the commons,’ see TOF 206-216. For his part, Agamben emphasizes not the commonality of goods, but the binding force of the pledge (pistis) that allows us to act in concert, gratuitously: “autarkeia does not signify a sufficient disposition of goods…but the sovereign capacity to gratuitously carry out good works independently of the law” (TR 121). As he reminds us toward the end of The Use of Bodies, “in the autoconstitution of a form of life, what is in question is its freedom” (HS4.2 243, our emphasis). In the final account, the anarchist inclination of Agamben’s thought always prevails over its Marxist tendencies.
formulated a positive conception of the *usus facti* that gave a consistency to their form of life (HS4.1 144-145).\(^{197}\) Communism cannot stake itself either on a benevolent law or on a voluntarist ‘negation’ of law. It is only by beginning from the impetus of operative time, the time of consistency-in-construction, that we can give an affirmative meaning to what is ‘shared’ between us.

**Internalizing the Outside: Subjectivity as a Problem of Use**

Let us return to our question: what does it mean to share not objects, identities, or ideologies, but an attachment to a world? If we ask why perception and attention presuppose heterogeneity and divergence, the answer is that real experience necessarily envelops an instance of *contact* with the world. For sensibility to have a ‘sense,’ a communication or encounter must take place between at least two heterogeneous terms. As Chapter 3 sought to show, the meaning or ‘sense’ of what is given to our perception is therefore never itself simply given or originary, it does not array itself clearly or immediately—there is a time, a time that we *are*, in which it must have been *constructed*. We have characterized the relation between this instance of construction and the givenness of its results as one of envelopment-development: perception *develops* an act of evaluation that is *enveloped* within it. Perception and sensibility are results or emergences, which develop or explicate what is folded, rolled-up, enveloped by the encounter with something that does not depend upon us, which we ‘internalize’ without ever being capable of appropriating or arrogating it to our ‘selves’ through an attributive logical schema. What we now wish to

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\(^{197}\) The Franciscan conflict with the curia concerned the possibility of separating use from ownership. It failed, on Agamben’s reading, because its strategy became “preoccupied solely with assuring the lawfulness of the refusal of every ownership” (HS4.2 80). By “enclosing themselves in a solely juridical polemic”, the Fransciscans prevented themselves from thinking use otherwise than negatively, as a “right, not to have any rights” (Hugh of Digne). By contrast, what is decisive for Agamben is to arrive at “a conception of use that [is] not founded on an act of renunciation—that is, in the last analysis, on the will of a subject—but, so to speak, on the very nature of things” (ibid).
understand is why, according to Agamben, what is sharable between us falls entirely within what he calls an intimate “zone of non-knowledge”? Why is it that what can truly be shared can only be ‘used,’ while remaining fundamentally “Inappropriable” (HS4.2 238)? To clarify the importance of the inner relation between destituent perception and what Agamben calls “use,” we will take a brief detour through the theory of self-constitution in Part I of The Use of Bodies.

What the Stoics referred to as our proton oikeion refers to a sensation of our own makeup, a sense of self-familiarity that each living being develops, its ‘con-sentiment’ of self. For Agamben, the interest of the concept lies in the Stoics’ refusal to consider this familiarity as a straightforward recognition of an essence or substantial form; rather, it merges with the practice of self. Animals ‘pick up on’ the functions of their own constitution through the use of their bodies. As Seneca observes, “no animal is at a loss how to use itself,” and not simply out of fear of pain, but out of a desire to ‘inhabit its natural condition:’ “winged animals see that they have wings, and thus use their wings to fly; when we want to see, we point our eyes and not our ears at something; animals with teeth, tusks, and venom use them in combat” (HS4.2 52, 50). At issue in such perception is therefore a simultaneity of two movements: at once a con-sentiment and a constitution of self. What Agamben calls ‘use’ refers to the coexistence in a single time of these two processes, which points us in the direction of a “relational and non-substantial” concept of selfhood: self-sensation as use-of-oneself, a self that “coincides each time with the relation itself, and not with a predetermined telos” (HS4.2 54). If use is a self-constitution through the relation with something else, then oikeois is a use-of-oneself that coincides entirely with the “mode of being” of the living:

The living being uses-itself, in the sense that in its life and in its entering into relationship with what is other than the self, it has to do each time with its very self, [it] feels the self and familiarizes itself with itself. The self is nothing other than use-of-oneself (HS4.2 54).
In other words, we do not know in advance what our constitution can do; we must first ‘use’ our bodies, our minds, in order to arrive at a familiarity with ourselves. It is precisely because we do not know who we are in advance that Agamben is able to assert that “the self becomes aware of itself by means of the articulation of a zone of non-awareness” (HS4.2 54-55). This zone is nothing other than the absence of any a priori affinity between the user and the used, the mind and that which ‘remains to be thought,’ the body and its encounter with something else, by which we engender a familiarity with ourselves. ‘Use’ may be defined as the coming-into-consistency of a familiarity with oneself through the internalization of an exteriority, of our contact with a being that does not depend upon us—use of self is always, therefore, a use of the world. To borrow an insight from the late François Zourabichvili, we may characterize its logical structure as that of an ‘internalization without interiority:’

In a milieu of exteriority, two heterogeneities encounter one another: the communication or resonance of one with the other presupposes an internalization; but this internalization is not a closure, it creates no milieu of interiority. The encounter between heterogeneities presupposes an internalization without homogenization: the paradox of a relation internalizing an outside. […] The logic difference [exhibits] the paradoxical virtues of joining without mediation and an internality without the interiorization of one term within the other. A relation of affirmation and of exteriority, rather than a constitutive relation to the other (negativity). The relation to an outside, to the other as non-constituent of me, destitutes the negative as principle of relation. 

198 The concept of ‘use’ must not be assimilated to Marx’s idea of ‘use-value.’ Whereas the latter emphasizes ‘utilization,’ Agamben insists on the ‘surplus’ or ‘alterity’ of use with respect to utilization (HS4.2 41-42). By the same token, Agamben claims that the Marxist concept of a ‘mode of production’ is incomplete without a separate genealogy of ‘inoperativity’ (we have preferred the synonymous terms ‘deposition’ or ‘destitution’ throughout): “One-sidedly focused on the analysis of forms of production, Marx neglected the analysis of the forms of inoperativity, and this lack is certainly at the bottom of some of the aporias of his thought, in particular as concerns the definition of human activity in the classless society. From this perspective, a phenomenology of forms of life and of inoperativity that proceeded in step with an analysis of the corresponding forms of production would be essential. In inoperativity, the classless society is already present in capitalist society, just as, according to Benjamin, shards of messianic time are present in history in possibly infamous and risible forms” (HS4.2 94).
199 The quote is from an unpublished fragment contained in François Zourabichvili’s archives at IMEC (Folio 2RB, Document 4.1). Although it is undated, it appears to have been composed between 1995-1996. Our translation.
The self is born only through the ‘internalization’ of an intimate exteriority, or what Agamben (following Giorgio Colli) calls ‘contact,’ an “interstice” between two entities with no representational relation to one another (HS4.2 237). Use allows us to think the experience of our contact with the world as the generative affirmation of an ‘Outside’ (i.e. my contact with a being with whom I have no a priori affinity), without the result of this encounter being contained within, nor derivable from, the initial nature of the terms. The ‘contact’ at issue in use is never explained by, nor does it operate on the basis of, a necessarily higher dimension in which the two terms participate.

Since it remains unsupervised by any transcendental ego, the theory of ‘use’ allows us to break with the voluntarist conception of the ‘autonomous’ subject, or the “apparatus that allows one to attribute the ownership of actions and techniques to a subject” (HS4.2 54-55). In place of the linear relation of ‘realization’ that presents action as the actualization of a pre-existing and ‘upright’ faculty of free thinking (or ‘will’), Agamben—betraying a noticeably Deleuzian inspiration—situates the experience of the act within a problematic of reciprocal co-constitution across a “void of representation”:

Chresthai expresses the relation that one has with oneself, the affection that one receives insofar as one is in relation with a determinate being... Somatos chresthai, “to use the body,” will then mean the affection that one receives insofar as one is in relation with one or more bodies. Ethical—and political—is the subject who is constituted in this use, the subject who testifies of the affection that he receives insofar as he is in relation with a body (HS4.2 237, 28-29).

The key idea here is that if the ‘being’ of the actor is itself modulated and ‘affected’ through the action itself, then it is not possible to understand action as merely the ‘realization’ of a pre-existing will or decision. Moreover, the passage into actuality does not constitute the terminus of

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200 On the destitution of the Western juridical apparatus of ‘responsibility,’ see Agamben’s Karman, op cit., passim.
an act, but is merely a relay through which we are once again turned back onto our potentiality, which is to say, onto the affection this encounter produces in us, and to the operative evaluation this solicits in us. Since the operative time of evaluation is ‘in-construction,’ it offers a point of view on actuality that exhibits its sense, without being subsumed by it. In this way, it releases the potentiality of the act from its subordination to a logic of ‘realization,’ which here finds itself ‘deactivated:’ “what deactivates operativity is certainly an experience of potential, but of a potential that, insofar as it holds its own impotential or potential-not-to firm, exposes itself in its non-relation to the act” (HS4.2 276).

What is decisive is the immanence of “self-experience” and our constitution of self through a use-of-the-world. Every use is a use of the self. To use something, my very being must be at stake—I must be affected. To use something is to “constitute myself as one who makes use of it. Human being and world are, in use, in a relationship of absolute and reciprocal immanence” (HS4.2 30)

Still, if use is the process through which we arrive at a con-sentiment or familiarity with ourselves, why is it not a form of ‘appropriation’ of self, but a relation to the ‘inappropriable’? Every act dramatizes a capacity both to generate effects while itself being affected at the level of its own being. It therefore tethers being irreducibly to acting and to living, in a way that challenges any attributive schema that would allow us to represent our capacities as ‘possessed attributes’ that we have before acting. For example, Glenn Gould does not ‘possess’ the habit of playing the piano; this potentiality is not a title or attribute that is then—in a second moment—redeemed through a willful act or decision. Rather, the pianist "does nothing but make-use-of-himself,” he constitutes-himself as a habitual use “independently of his playing or not playing in actuality…[Habit is] not the knowledge or faculty of a subject” (HS4.2 61). Put otherwise, the
self that ‘use’ familiarizes us with is not a substance, but a “subject of actions, behavior, relationships, attitudes” (HS4.2 32). Not a substance, but a process. It is not possible to decompose the process into a (prior) ‘constituent’ and a (posterior) ‘constituted’ self, for there is no subject prior to the relation with itself, to the use of itself: “the subject is that relationship and not one of its terms” (HS4.2 101, our emphasis). The ethical dimension of ‘care-of-oneself’ has no autonomous substance, for it has “no other place and no other consistency than the relation of use between the human being and the world” (HS4.2 33, our emphasis).

The lesson here is that it is not necessary to pre-suppose the meaning of community in advance of entering into it—indeed, it is not even possible. Wherever revolutionaries busy themselves with securing an a priori title to their supposedly ‘historical’ vocation, “appropriating being to [themselves] in order to subjectivate [it] in a separate substance,” they have already lost contact with the very substance of their power (HS4.2 55). Revolution is not a process through which we ‘expropriate the expropriators;’ instead of reclaiming ownership over it, the destitution of the present order coincides entirely with the deposition of our factical vocations, through the creation of a new use of the world: “use does not belong to any subject, it is situated beyond both being and having” (HS4.2 61).

The theory of use in The Use of Bodies therefore expands and enriches the concept of the hos me elaborated in The Time that Remains. As we saw in Chapter 3, the messianic calling does not ground our relation in a new substantial identity, but consists first of all in the capacity to ‘use’ the factical situations in which we find ourselves. As Agamben reaffirms a decade later, “to

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201 “True constituent power is not that which produces a constituted power separated from itself, which refers back to constituent power as its unreachable foundation, which, however, has no other legitimacy than that which derives from having produced a constituted power. Constituent is, in truth, only that power—that subject—that is capable of constituting itself as constituent. The practice of the self is that operation in which the subject adequates itself to its own constitutive relation and remains immanent to it” (HS4.2 104, our emphasis).
dwell in the call in the form of the ‘as not’ signifies never making of the world an object of ownership but only of use” (HS4.2 56, 57). The concepts of use-of-self / use-of-the-world may be understood as practical schemas by which to understand the logic of ‘self-constitution’ at the level of operative time, i.e., prior to its separation-and-articulation at the level of representational time-images (forms divorced from the lived time of their construction). In other words, the subject of use is, we might say, ‘constitutively destituent.’ It is in this sense that Agamben has hopes that the logic of use contributes to a rethinking of the collective subjectivization of revolutionary violence. If every user is likewise used, it becomes possible to say that in collective action we pass into each other, or at least, that we enter into a zone of mutual indetermination, active in our own passivity, and vice versa. It is Agamben’s combative wager that this kononia tes zoes, the “community of life” between two ‘users,’ has always threatened the social order, which sought to neutralize it through its capture in a juridical order founded on its exclusive inclusion. Whether or not Agamben is right that the “originary form of property” (i.e. property ownership of other persons, slavery) should be understood as the capture and ‘parodic realization’ within the juridical order of a communal use of bodies otherwise inadmissible in the law, what matters today is how such a kononia affords us the opportunity to flee the abstract nothingness of our contemporary factual vocations, to desert our own social posts and reinvent new forms of life, here and now.  

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202 The link between operative time and use as form-of-life is made clear at numerous points in Part III of The Use of Bodies; for example: “what we call a form-of-life is a life in which the event of anthropogenesis—the becoming-human of the human being—is still happening” (HS4.2 208, our emphasis).

203 In The Use of Bodies, both Ancient slavery and the modern experience of technological machines are understood as the “capture and parodic realization within social institutions of…a ‘use of the body’” (HS4.2 78). As a result, the archaeology of technology must also be an archaeology of slavery, in order to free the “archaic nucleus that has remained imprisoned in them” (ibid). The slave signifies a double threshold: animal life passes over into the human, and the living (the human) passes into the inorganic (the instrument). Whereas the capture of use in the figure of the slave trapped it within productive systems, “its abolition in modernity freed up the possibility of technology, that is, the living instrument” (HS4.2 79). We are not inclined to follow Agamben in his reading of slavery and its supposed
It would not surprise Agamben one bit to learn that the regular assembly-form in which many residents of the ZAD meet to evaluate both daily matters of co-habitation, as well as the extrinsic threats confronting the Zone, is called the “Assembly of Uses” [or: *usages assemblés*]. At issue in this practice is nothing less than the slow and patient construction of a collective intelligence, a sensibility or perception, and a related way of speaking that places the *world* between us at its center. It is precisely a theory of use that explains how a practice that is conventionally ‘economized’ at the level of individual behavior can have its economic significance destituted when it becomes the object of collective use. As some residents explain,

Many things are free here; you can use tractors, tools or books without ever reaching for your wallet. This doesn’t mean that there isn’t a circulation of money here, as anywhere else. It’s the use made of it that differs, and its symbolism: we would like that payment not be an easy reimbursement for a lack of involvement in the common, a way of exempting oneself. If there is a little money, then there is a fierce and daily struggle against the economic logic that would seek to see the merit of every gesture calculated. Instead, we’re trying to replace it with our bonds, our attachments, our confidence in each other, and a certain sense of commitment. Scrupulous reciprocity is not required because *exchanges are not thought of exclusively at an individual scale, but at the level of the whole territory*. If the baker gives a loaf of bread to someone who’s part of the ZAD’s social rap project, he doesn’t calculate how many verses his flour is worth. No accounting for services rendered has ever been written down. Obviously, nothing guarantees that everyone is playing the game; it’s both a gamble and a question of balance. The care we bring to the quality of our relations, *our insistence on maintaining common perspectives, this is what wards off the economy*, not banishing every last euro.

The relation that a form of territorial community has to its own products is not that of a producer to its products, but one in which the relation to the ‘work’ is pointed back on the potentiality of the self who ‘contemplates’ a common world *through* it: “life, which contemplates in the work its (own) potential of acting or making, is rendered inoperative in all its works and lives only in

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“abolition,” which passes over in silence the entire continuum of anti-Blackness from slavery to modern-day carceral institutions. While we will reserve an extended polemic on this matter for another occasion, we would add that the sensitivity to the question of anti-Blackness found in Moten and Harney’s concept of the ‘undercommons’ offers a useful corrective to Agamben’s understanding of slavery.

204 Mauvaise Troupe, “Defending La ZAD” *op cit.*

205 Mauvaise Troupe, “Defending the ZAD,” *op cit.* Our emphasis.
use-of-itself, lives only (its) livability” (HS4.2 63). If we build a house, or plant a garden, or defend a barricade, what is at issue is not simply the accomplishment of an end or the ‘reclamation’ of what was originally ‘ours,’ but an experience of the becoming of the collective subject itself: an *apprenticeship*, understood as the discovery of, and ‘familiarization’ with, our collective power—*oikeiosis*. Who do we become, of what do we become capable of thinking, of experiencing, of perceiving in ourselves and in the world, if we do this? Through the refraction of potentiality back onto the operative perception of the one who experiences it, action exhibits and destitutes the ‘ownness’ of the subject who undergoes it. Communism is nothing other than the habit or ethical disposition we contract through living in a collective use-of-ourselves. It names an experience of the world between us as absolutely ‘inappropriable,’ as the relation of intimate *exteriority* that connects us to each other: “intimacy can preserve its political meaning only on condition that it remains inappropriable.” (HS4.2 93) Communist use, or ‘communization,’ is the inhabitation of a ‘field of polar forces’ internally riven between having and not-having, belonging and exile; to enter into a relation of use is to lose oneself in the relation, to become the subject *of* a relation, which to this extent becomes precisely inappropriable: to inhabit oneself, is to inhabit with-one-self, “to oscillate unceasingly between a homeland and an exile: to inhabit” (HS4.2 87).

**Use of Self and Form-of-Life**

It is through the theory of use that we may arrive most clearly at an understanding of what Agamben means by the term ‘form-of-life.’ What the use-of-self-and-world teaches us is that “singular modes, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all potential” (HS4.2 207). If a form-of-life names a
“life that can never be separated from its form,” it is the theory of use that allows us to understand the ‘operative’ conditions under which such a mode of being is lived. As the example just cited from the ZAD makes clear, the practice of collective use without ownership invites us to ‘seize’ upon and inhabit the time of our bonds with the world by recursively centering our perception on the evaluation of life it envelops, i.e., to act in such a way that we ‘exhibit’ the singular perspective on living, the ‘idea of happiness’ to which that this or that habit or way of acting responds. To carry the theory of destitution or ‘fragmentation’ into the phenomenon of ‘self-constitution’ entails that we inhabit and experience action not as the ‘materialization of an identity,’ not as expressions of the idea we have of our (pre-existing) selves, but the idea we have of life, our evaluation of the livable (HS4.2 207; TOF 204). It is in this latter sense that all action ‘affirms’ a form of life in the form of “habitual use” to which it attests.

The precise difference between the terms ‘form of life’ and ‘form-of-life’ has long been a matter of debate among Agamben’s readers. Our interpretation is as follows: what is at issue in every ‘form of life’ [unhyphenated] is an evaluation of happiness, understood as a differential distribution of the livable and the unlivable, the tolerable and the intolerable, the alluring and the

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206 In our view, the most insightful take on this difference is found in Jason E. Smith’s “Form-of-Life: From Politics to Aesthetics (and Back),” The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics, No. 44–45 (2012–2013), 50–67. Smith isolates a play between three distinct terms: (i) ‘bare life’ (a product of sovereign power); (ii) multiple forms of ‘social life’, which economic governance ‘recodes’ into ‘juridical-political identities’; (iii) their congealing into a form-of-life. Smith presents this triad as follows: “Starting from multiple forms of life, we witness the confrontation between the separation of a life from its form on the part of sovereign power; and on the other hand we are told of a coming ‘anti-state’ politics that will be constituted through a practice that traverses without canceling the multiplicity of forms of social life—transforming this multiplicity of forms into a single form-of-life that is nevertheless traversed by a certain ‘multitudo.’”. He then indexes these three terms to three distinct types of situation: “the ‘normal situations’ in which naked life remains ‘tied’ to forms of life in their social articulation; states of exception in which naked life is extracted from, or separated from, any ‘form’ or mode of being by state or sovereign power; and finally, what we could call a revolutionary situation, in which a certain traversal of the multiplicity of forms of life occurs, a negation that is in no way symmetrical to that performed by sovereign power” (55). However, the fact that what is meant by a ‘revolutionary situation’ is never clearly defined in Smith’s treatment leaves us once again in an ambivalence, since the very term (form-of-life) that was supposed to define a revolutionary situation for Agamben now finds itself defined by it.
repugnant, the interesting and the uninteresting (HS4.2 208).\(^{207}\) A use of self only ever congeals within the space opened up by a form of life, as a pre-individual evaluation of the livable at the level of operative time. To be a self is always to express (and, when this is messianically affirmed and assumed, to inhabit) a form of life in and through our use of the world. There is no ‘bare,’ ‘barren,’ or generic human life, and there never has been.

When we ethically and politically prioritize our forms of life, when we refuse to be separated from the affirmations of what we see and feel, we ‘give form’ to the evaluative potentialities of our perception of and attention to the world. It is this refusal that allows these forms of life to “cohere into a form-of-life” (HS4.2 209). The phenomenon of the destituent ‘pledge’ described in Chapter 3 should be understood in precisely this way: a becoming-coherent of forms of life into a collective form-of-life through convergent perceptions of, and attachments to, a common world (the ZAD cum existential territory), which remains ‘Inappropriate’—a world that is ours, but only ‘for use as not-ours.’ Form-of-life may therefore be defined by an existential mode of being in the world in which we refuse to be separated or cut-off from the territorial world(s) to which we are attached, in which we destitute or ‘deactivate’ all apparatuses that attempt to de-situate us. In this, it corresponds to a life lived through the “ceaseless deposition of the social conditions in which it finds itself,” not by “negating them, but simply by using them” (HS4.2 274).

Like the Deleuzian concept of the plane of immanence, the concept of form-of-life responds to the requirement of what may be thought of as a ‘non-subsuming unity.’ As Zourabichvili observes, “immanence means that the plan(e) does not precede relations like a

\(^{207}\) Incidentally, this insight also affords us one of the more interesting definitions of the distinctiveness of human life: “The human being is the only being in whose living happiness is always at stake, whose life is irredeemably and painfully consigned to happiness. But this constitutes form-of-life immediately as political life” (HS 208).
ground on which they would take place; rather, relations are themselves productive and creative of their place. The plan(e) is what traces relations, and is at the same time their condition.²⁰⁸ If it is to avoid being fetishistically substantialized, the concept of form-of-life must be interpreted as a ‘plastic principle’ of precisely this sort, a condition no larger than the conditioned. Instead of incorporating us into a new social totality or constituent body, form-of-life refers to the continual reprisal or differentiating repetition of ‘events or acts of communization’ by means of which a communist consistency emerges and rejuvenates itself, and which ensures that our relations are only ever “neighboring connections or liaisons” (ibid).²⁰⁹

**Toward a Politics of Exile**

Agamben’s theory of “exile” gathers the two threads we have been studying here, linking the theory of use as the internalization of the Outside (affirmation of exteriority) to the experience of collective potentiality at issue in form-of-life. In this way, it allows us to destitute the false opposition between individual to the collective, replacing this couple with the reciprocal determination of the singular/common.

To *situate* politics is always to ‘exile’ ourselves from the deracination demanded of us by classical politics. For Agamben, such exile is not a renunciation of political life, but serves as the point of departure for a new image of politics: “exile from politics cedes its place to a politics of exile” (HS4.2 326). Messianic destitution is the process through which we depose our historical vocations and assume our forms of life, thereby becoming “inseparable from ourselves” (HS4.2

²⁰⁸ François Zourabichvili, Unpublished manuscript 2RB 4.1 *op cit*. Our emphasis.
²⁰⁹ On the importance of understanding revolutionary becoming as a ‘continual reprisal or repetition,’ see François Zourabichvili, “Deleuze and the Possible. On Involuntarism in Politics,” *op cit.*: “every revolution is stillborn, but not in the way this is normally understood: the precarious continuance of the vanishing depends on its incessant reprisal, so that revolutions die from the inability to repeat, or the suffocation of repetition (under the forces of subservience that denounce it as ‘treason’)” (169, fn 18).
236). Following a neo-Platonic turn of phrase, Agamben will interpret this process as the “exile of one alone to one alone” [phygè monou pros monon]. If we cannot be separated from the operative time that we are, from the evaluation of the livable and the tolerable that envelops and develops itself in our contact with the world, there is precisely no sense in which we can speak of a “relation” between our form of life and ourselves—‘our’ life is inseparable from our form of life. It is for this reason that exile must be characterized as an “intimacy without relation” (HS4.2 236). The difficulty concerns understanding how this ‘inseparability’ of the self from its evaluative presence to the world can form the basis of a cohesion with others. Here Agamben will engage in a delicate conceptual maneuver, on the one hand decomposing the notion of form-of-life into ‘singular’ points of entry (or ‘side doors’), yet immediately (i.e. without any mediating representation) linking them to one another through ‘contact:’

…It is in a contact—that is, in a void of representation—and not in a relation that forms-of-life communicate. The ‘alone by oneself’ that defines the structure of every singular form-of-life also defines its community with the others. And it is this thigein, this contact that the juridical order and politics seek by all means to capture and represent in a relation. Western politics is, in this sense, constitutively ‘representative,’ because it always already has to reformulate contact into the form of a relation. It will therefore be necessary to think politics as an intimacy unmediated by any articulation or representation: human beings, forms-of-life are in contact, but this is unrepresentable because it consists precisely in a representative void, that is, in the deactivation and inoperativity of every representation. To the ontology of non-relation and use there must correspond a non-representative politics.

‘Alone by oneself’ is an expression of intimacy. We are together and very close, but between us there is not an articulation or a relation that unites us. We are united to one another in the form of our being alone (HS4.2 237).

It is precisely from the moment that we refuse to be separated from our singular form of life, that we pass through the side door that allows us to compose into a form-of-life with others. What we share always departs from what is most singular in us, and never from the encompassing unity of a homogeneous condition. It is precisely what is singular in us that most calls to be shared, since this is never what belongs to me ‘peculiarly,’ but what “attaches me to the world, and which is
therefore not reserved for me, [having] nothing to do with a private property nor with what is supposed to define an identity.” 210 At the limit, ‘what there is to be shared’ isn’t a ‘what’ at all, since it is not an ‘X’ detached from us, but our way of entering into contact with the world. It is only by assuming the singular ‘how’ of our existence, that we can experience a shared power through the encounter with other beings, allowing a compositional matrix to unfold between us, to give rise to a place of relation through the repetition of an Outside that traverses our contact with each other and the world. Just as, in calculus, there are singularities only in relation to the ordinary, the regular, the banal, there is communism only by means of the composition between singular points of view made possible by the Inappropriable around which they converge.

Communism—messianic community—departs not from an ideal form of social organization, but from the conviction that our happiness can never be a private matter, that the ties that bind us to the world and to one another, in each case expressive of evaluations, or forms of life, constitute the very terrain and substance of the political and ethical problem, which can only be worked out through situated and endlessly revisable uses. If there is a ‘struggle’ at the heart of communism, it proceeds from the affirmation of a form of life that ties us to the world, pursues its elaboration and linkage with others through a compositional matrix of places, and allows them to cohere into a form-of-life by pledging enough upon these bonds to become willing and able to attack and sabotage everything that prevents and blocks their expansive play. 211 Today, the communist placement of politics must be constructed anew. Even where its premises are drawn from a past, new premises are nonetheless needed if we are to succeed in giving these languages and vernaculars a renewed vitality today. If everything remains to be

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invented, it is nonetheless only as remnants—as fragments, shards, partial processes—that such a construction can be undertaken. There is no ‘integral’ communist life, nor was there ever: communism is the free play of forms-of-life, from the point at which the latter manage to take on a local and experimental *consistency* without constituency. Communism is not a new social order, but the side door by which we flee the disaster of the present course of the world. It is only by finding each other, by assembling an ungovernable life together, that an *exit* from the present catastrophe appears. This result will not be “chronologically more originary unity, nor a new and superior unity, but something like a *way out*…if one reaches it and holds oneself there in it, the machine can no longer function” (HS4.2 239).

*Alea iacta est*


——— (with members of Vacarne), “‘I am sure you are more pessimistic than I am…’: An Interview with Giorgio Agamben”, Trans. Jason Smith, Rethinking Marxism, 16.2 (April 2004).


——— “The State of Emergency”. English translation (unattributed) of a lecture given at the


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