An innovative exploration of ways of thinking and doing politics that challenge liberal assumptions.

‘Politics on the edges of liberalism’ refers to a grey zone where phenomena such as difference, populism, revolution and agitation turn the distinction between the inside and the outside of liberalism into a matter of dispute.

Each chapter takes on one of these ideas, discussing the intellectual background animating the politics of the culture wars and its celebration of particularism over the universalism of classical liberal thought. Populism becomes a spectral recurrence rather than an outside of democracy. Agitation reappears in emancipatory politics, and the idea of revolution is thought through outside the Jacobin view of insurrection, overthrow and total re-foundation.

This is truly interdisciplinary inquiry at the cutting edge of contemporary debates in politics, critical theory, philosophy and sociology. The author draws from an impressive range of thinkers such as Kant, Benjamin, Derrida, Freud, Schmitt, Rancière, Gramsci, Canovan, Oakeshott, Foucault, Vattimo, Laclau and Žižek.

Despite the complexity of his reasoning, he writes with the reader in mind, presenting his ideas clearly and persuasively and drawing on examples from recent political history to illuminate his arguments.
Politics on the Edges of Liberalism
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Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation

Benjamin Arditi

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Foreword

Whether in libraries or in front of a computer screen, intellectual labour tends to be a solitary enterprise accompanied by bouts of creative anxiety. Yet it also has a collective dimension, as we sometimes outline our preliminary ideas and intuitions in classes, circulate our drafts amongst friends and colleagues to hear their reactions, or submit them to the criticism of our peers at workshops and conferences. I have been fortunate enough to have had readers like Marta Lamas and the group of friends that met monthly in her house in Mexico City to discuss our work for over five years – Roger Bartra, Roberto Castro, Bolivar Echeverría, Fernando Escalante, Benjamin Mayer, Nora Rabotnikof and Ilán Semo. I also benefited from other readers, more scattered around the world, like Willem Assies, Margaret Canovan, Juan Martin and the anonymous referees of the journals that published earlier versions of these chapters. I thank them all for their generosity, although Nora deserves a special acknowledgement, as she was patient enough to read the drafts of several chapters, sometimes more than once, and to point out in her ever so subtle way some of the weaknesses in my arguments.

José Carlos Rodríguez, my friend, colleague and fellow traveller in Paraguayan political activism in the 1980s, is in many ways my intellectual alter ego. He revised virtually all the chapters, and while
at times we had major disagreements, especially with regard to the interpretation of populism, his critical gaze helped me identify and work out many half-baked arguments and inconsistencies that otherwise would have made this book weaker than what it is.

Chance also plays an important part in writing. Francisco Panizza of the London School of Economics invited me to collaborate in a volume on populism he was preparing for Verso. At first, I declined the offer because I was not fully convinced that I had anything to say on the subject, but he was persistent – and persuasive – enough to coax me into doing the research that led to the two chapters on populism included here. Something similar happened in the case of the chapters on revolution and agitation. I wrote the first version of the one on revolution after Kurt Hirtler, at the time an editor of *Parallax*, contacted me to contribute to a special issue they were preparing on ‘mourning revolution’, and the chapter on agitprop when Alistair Rider, who had become one of the editors, invited me to contribute to the issue on agitation. Chance reappeared with Rossana Reguillo of ITESO in Guadalajara, Mexico. We met at a conference in the USA and she had the generosity to put me in contact with a publishing house in Buenos Aires. I was offered a contract for a volume based on my published work, but as often happens, chance played a role once more when the project fell through for practical reasons, but it gave me an excuse to prepare a new version of the manuscript that found its home in Edinburgh University Press.

So, one should not downplay the importance of chance. What is not fortuitous at all is the enthusiastic and unconditional support I have always had from Anja Eller, my life partner. Her joyful presence has been a permanent encouragement. That is why my appreciation for Anja can only be joyful, enthusiastic and unconditional. She is also the source of the title of Chapter 5, and the one who suggested I look at Gordon Allport’s book on intergroup prejudice that I ended up using as one of the key examples in Chapter 4.

February 2006
Introduction: the Edges as an Internal Periphery

What does it mean to speak of politics on the *edges* of liberalism, and why should this matter for political thought? Let me begin to answer this by saying something about what these essays are *not*. Their aim is not to identify and criticize the underside of liberalism, if by this one understands the negative side effects it has had on, say, equality or solidarity. There is plenty of literature on this already. Nor are they another entry in the list of interventions that take issue with the claim that we live in a post-historical world where liberalism rules. There is a lot on this too, and keeping a scorecard on the ins and outs of the polemic about the end of history has become otiose. What these essays try to do instead is to look at a grey zone of phenomena where one is tempted to suspend the qualifier ‘liberal’ when describing politics, or at least where it is difficult to assert unambiguously that what happens within it is governed by a liberal code alone. It is also a zone where experimentation with political innovation questions the liberal consensus. The ‘edges’ of the title thus refer to phenomena that either push the envelope of liberalism or seek to go against and beyond it.

Do these edges authorize us to infer by implication that there is something like a normal region of liberal politics? The quick and incomplete answer is that there is one, but mainly at the level of the liberal imaginary. Its regulative idea is that political performances entail
sovereign individuals casting their votes, political parties representing the people and competing for the right to shape the will of the state, and elected representatives deliberating on their behalf in legislative bodies in between elections. The state is neutral with regard to the competing conceptions of the good, governments and elected officials are generally attentive to public opinion, relevant players abide by the rule of law, and external actors do not intervene in domestic politics. This is the horizon of liberal politics. In practice, things are less tidy. The historical record is quite clear about this. Workers and women acted politically by disputing their exclusion as citizens long before obtaining suffrage rights, the relevant political actors are groups rather than individuals, the collective action of social movements and special interest groups bypasses electoral politics, and territorial representation coexists with functional, transitory and other forms of political representation. The cross-border activism of internationalists – from the International Working Men's Association or First International of the nineteenth century to contemporary global warriors advocating human rights, gender equality, environmental protection or an alternative to neoliberal globalism – put to the test the belief that politics is a purely domestic affair amongst nationals. The sanctity of the rule of law – like any holy occurrence in a worldly setting – is less heavenly than liberal ideologues would care to admit, and the concern for security often overrides the efforts of public opinion to hold elected representatives accountable for their actions. The individualist credo and the relative disregard of liberalism for structural inequalities coexist with collective entitlements to education, health and housing as part of what T. H. Marshall called social citizenship, although these are nowhere near what they were in the heyday of the welfare state. We could add more examples but these should suffice to make the case that the purity of what passes for liberal politics has always been bogus. The same applies to communism, anarchism, populism and other labels we use for classifying politics. Hybridity rules wherever one looks, from the liberal socialism advocated by Norberto Bobbio to the capitalist economy jump-started and celebrated as the way forward by the Communist Party in China.

But to say that hybridity trumps purity is the facile way of addressing the question of whether we can speak of a standard region of liberal politics. There is a more complex response too, one that is also more interesting for the purposes of this inquiry. I said that the
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Evidence points towards liberal politics as a melange without purity, but one does not need purity to speak of mainstream liberal politics as opposed to a politics on the edges. If the liberal mainstream is immersed in a strategic relation with its ‘others’, and if phenomena that unfold in the periphery define or help to define that mainstream, then there is no reason why this contact will not be reciprocal and affect the periphery too. This is still a comfortably correct conclusion. It is also useless, partly because it consists of the banal claim that contamination rules and partly because the melange created by generalized hybridity would take away the punch packed by a politics on the edges of liberalism. We still need a criterion to understand the nature of the periphery or grey zone of politics on the edges of liberalism and to distinguish it from the mainstream.

The analogical model for the distinction – and relation – between mainstream and periphery cannot be the spatial metaphor of near and far, as this would commit us to a simple topography where space eventually morphs into place and distance becomes the sole basis for the distinction. It does not depend on a model of intensity either, one where the mainstream increases in intensity as we move away from the periphery, and decreases as we move in the opposite direction. Intensity is simply a variation of the spatial metaphor; both have the problem of quantifying distance or intensity and suggest a binary opposition between inside and outside. I propose instead that we invoke Freud’s characterization of the symptom as the return of the repressed developed in Chapter 3. This will help us introduce the notion of internal periphery. Freud uses the oxymoron of the ‘foreign internal territory’ to describe the relation between the repressed and the ego. The repressed refers to traumatic experiences that are foreign to the ego because the psychic apparatus presents them through substitute-formations designed to mask the trauma and therefore protect us from danger. Yet if the agency that represses is the ego itself and, furthermore, if the repressed returns in different and often unexpected ways, then one must conclude that the repressed is not simply exterior to the ego but also internal to it. Freud’s oxymoron allows us to visualise the symptom as the site for a play between the foreign and the internal. I use it to develop the notion of internal periphery, one that is designed to capture the peculiar status of an outside that belongs, but not properly so. This is because it is a region where the distinction between inside and outside is a matter of dispute and cannot be thought outside a polemic. To speak of
politics on the edges of liberalism is to speak of the internal periphery of liberalism.

The most visible sense of this polemic revolves around the non-recognition of interiority. For example, when mainstream politics refuses to contemplate, say, populism as part of the democratic setting or – to use Rancière’s characterization of politics – when there is a part that does not count as such, when a subject of enunciation is not considered to be visible or audible within the existing order. There is a continual tug-of-war about who counts and who belongs. There are other, less obvious, ways of thinking about the dispute over the interiority of phenomena unfolding in the internal periphery. They refer not to belonging but to departing. Deleuze and Guattari call this ‘becoming minoritarian’, which is not to crave irrelevance but to invent alternative modes of being vis-à-vis the norm. Becoming minoritarian describes processes of disidentification or subjectivization that aim to break away from the existing codes even when the departing parties go nowhere. In the work of Deleuze and Guattari, ‘going nowhere’ is, of course, the paradox of nomad life, as for them to nomadize does not mean to escape or move to faraway lands but to avoid being over-coded by the existing order of things. Those who become minoritarian, or nomadize, are leaving the existing order without going anywhere. That is why we can simply say that the internal periphery refers to phenomena on the edges whose permanence within the territory of liberal politics is undecidable outside a disagreement, or which cannot be addressed unless they submit to polemicization.

As for why this periphery is a relevant object of inquiry, the response has been weaved into the explanation of what I mean by a politics on the edges of liberalism. The phenomena in this internal periphery confront liberalism with its ‘unthought’, defy the commonsense belief that our politics is unquestionably liberal, or spearhead political interventions that move into less liberal or even post-liberal scenarios. One of the essays looks at the intellectual background that animated the politics of the culture wars and the celebration of particularism that accompanied it, and inquires how the classical liberal vindication of equal rights for equal individuals squares up with the demand for special rights for special groups. This is not simply a reference to citizen rights, like in Marshall’s third generation social rights and their concomitant assumption of universal access (to education, health or housing), for the entitlements demanded by particular groups depart
from both the sovereign individual and the universality of rights. Another refers to the rule of law and procedural democracy in the face of a populist challenge that presents itself less as a simple exterior than as an undecidable spectre of liberal democracy. Then there is the issue of what it means to speak of emancipation, which raises the question of how the view of politics as the art of the possible sets important limits to the range of possibilities of transformative action. A final theme consists of an inquiry into revolutionary phenomena, at a way of constructing a concept of revolution that includes the classical view of insurrection and overthrow: revolutionizing is not tied to this occurrence, yet nonetheless disputes the limits of liberal democratic consensus.

Let me outline what is involved in each case. Chapter 1 discusses some problems associated with identity politics, a politics conceived from the standpoint of one's belonging to or identification with a particular group. Unlike liberal universalism, which emphasizes the sovereignty of the individual and proclaims equal rights for equal individuals, identity politics asserts the collective nature of contemporary politics and vindicates special rights for special groups. This is interesting in that it points towards a politics that escapes the coordinates of classical liberalism – but radical particularity also poses some problems worth examining. One defining trait of contemporary progressive thought is its support for the right to be different and its opposition to racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and class bias. The affirmation of otherness is often linked with a more tolerant society, and the proliferation of differences is seen as an opening towards emancipation. However, political reasoning should also be sensitive to the possible underside of radical particularity. The advocacy of difference can foster a more cosmopolitan world, but also greater disorientation that may offset diversity by reinforcing demands for simpler and more rigid models of identity. Similarly, the political affirmation of cultural identities may enhance toleration and political articulations between groups, but also harden the boundaries between them and hamper the formation of wider political coalitions.

My aim in raising these issues is not to question the legitimacy of difference or to minimize the progressive efforts to affirm it. What I do instead is explore a series of less auspicious consequences – what I describe here as the underside of difference – that arise alongside our defence and celebration of particularity. I also show the ambivalence of the critique of liberalism found in identity politics. It tries to break with
liberal politics through the critique of individualism and individual rights, but it maintains a curious complicity with the liberal project – perhaps an unavoidable one – because of its conception of the citizen as a bearer of rights rather than as someone that participates in collective undertakings, as Wolin would say. Or rather, what we have here is a displacement of the subject of rights, as the bearer of rights is no longer the sovereign individual but the sovereign group or collective identity. This leads to a fragmentation of political space through the privileging of the oré or exclusive ‘us’ at the expense of the ñandé or inclusive modality of the ‘we’. The chapter begins by outlining the more optimistic reading of the postmodern condition, particularly that of Vattimo, and then proceeds to discuss its possible underside. It concludes with a reflection on citizenship and the return of universals as ‘impure’ categories rather than as transcendental referents. The chapter draws on the work of Derrida, Hall, Laclau, Rorty, and a host of writers both in favour of and against identity politics and political correctness. I conclude with a reflection on citizenship and the return of universals as ‘impure’ categories rather than transcendental referents.

The tension with liberalism reappears more explicitly in the case of populism, although this does not mean that the latter is necessarily incompatible or antithetical with the former. The two chapters exploring this topic are not case studies even though they are interspersed with many examples drawn from history and contemporary politics to illustrate my claims. They engage instead with the main thinkers in the field in order to develop a novel interpretation that departs from the traditional view of a relation of exteriority between populism and representative democracy. On the one hand, I argue that populism can be seen as a spectre of liberal democracy, one that can accompany it as a fellow traveller and also come back to haunt it. On the other, and unlike other authors, I show that one cannot see the populist phenomenon as a single, total form but as requiring (at least) three iterations.

A first glimpse of this link between populism and democracy is developed in Chapter 2 through a friendly polemic with Canovan’s recent take on populism. The traditional literature on populism depicts the phenomenon as an alternative to the standard path from traditional to modern society, as a way to enfranchise the underclass, as a politics centred on the role played by charismatic leaders that act as undisputed brokers, or as an anomaly vis-à-vis class politics and liberal
introductions. More recently, the debate has shifted somewhat into terra incognita due to the growing interest in the connection between populism and democratic politics. One of the more intriguing contributions to this debate is an article by Canovan, if only because it makes this unknown territory less confusing. Her argument draws from Oakeshott's claim that political modernity is characterised by the interplay of two distinct styles, the politics of faith and of scepticism. She renames them the redemptive and pragmatic faces of democracy, and suggests that populism arises in the gap between them. This establishes a relation of interiority between populism and democracy. The former will follow democracy like a shadow. I accept this relation of interiority between populism and democracy, but I take on her arguments in a double way. First, I question the theoretical status of the gap and claim that it seems more appropriate for thinking politics – particularly radical politics – in general, and second, I question the validity of the metaphor of the shadow and argue that one has to specify the political valence of the shadow further. Drawing from Derrida’s notion of spectrality in Specters of Marx, I speak of populism as a spectre of democracy, a move that enables one to accept the undecidability between the democratic aspect of the phenomenon and its possible ominous tones.

This discussion prepares the ground for the argument in Chapter 3, where I develop the understanding of the spectrality of populism vis-à-vis democracy. It reformulates the perception of populism as an aberration of political democracy and as an antithesis of liberalism and proposes instead to conceive populism as an internal periphery of democratic politics. I then proceed to develop this idea by identifying three possible modes of the populist phenomenon. The first one looks at populism as a mode of representation virtually indistinguishable from contemporary, media-enhanced modes of representation. The second possibility, populism as a symptom of democratic politics, ups the ante by looking at the tensions that push populism to the edges of democracy without necessarily stepping out of that setting. The third line of inquiry looks at the populist mobilization as a possible underside or nemesis of democracy. I illustrate these three iterations of populism by referring to the election of Vicente Fox as President of Mexico in 2000 as well as that of Arnold Schwarzenegger as Governor of California in 2004 and the implications of the President’s ‘signing statements’ for the separation of powers in the USA. The arguments in this chapter draw from
a series of sources. These include Pitkin and Manin’s work on political representation, Freud and Žižek’s take on the notion of ‘symptom’ in psychoanalysis, Rancière’s thesis that freedom is an empty property of a *demos* that institutes its litigiousness into democracy, and finally, I turn to Lefort’s work in order to develop the argument concerning populism as an underside of democracy.

Chapter 4 explores the persistence of agitation – the stirring and shaking mentioned in the title – in emancipatory politics. It deconstructs the familiar notion that politics is the ‘art of the possible’, an observation made by Bismarck in the nineteenth century and taken as a rallying cry by political realists everywhere. The purpose of this is to destabilize the frontiers between the possible and the impossible, and between revolutionary and non-revolutionary politics. This will allow me to argue that to stir and to shake the given is not a hangover from the hot politics of times past but lives on as part of an internal periphery of institutional politics. Agitation functions as a symptom that prevents the closure of politics in a purely gentrified format or, alternatively, agitation in tandem with emancipatory politics brings out the ‘eventness’ of events and reveals the working of the impossible, something that is easily lost in the more banal realist coding of politics as ‘the art of the possible’. Here I draw primarily from Benjamin’s comments on the angel of history in the wake of the catastrophe of his time, the victory of fascism and its consequences for us, and on Rancière’s take on politics as an interruption of the given.

The final and longest chapter is an extension of the preceding one. It aims to both vindicate the use of revolution for contemporary thought, even in pluralist settings, which presupposes that news about its demise have been greatly exaggerated, and to argue that the activity of revolutionizing today means primarily but not exclusively to challenge the existing liberal-democratic consensus. More substantially, it deconstructs the concept of revolution to claim that there is still space for radical politics from the standpoint of what I have called ‘the activity of revolutionizing’. One should read it as a critique of liberal complacency that has become pervasive after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the crisis of socialism. Indeed, one often hears that revolution is dead as a relevant political concept in the West. If this were true, then it would not make much sense to speak about it except to pay a nostalgic homage to its past or to treat it simply as an object of historical or intellectual interest. But this is a hasty conclusion. There is something alive and productive
in the concept outside its conventional meaning as an indicator of insurrection, overthrow and re-foundation of the order of things.

I propose three premises to examine this remnant. First, that whatever one says about revolution, its meaning always points towards a will to disrupt/interrupt the order of things, to restructure the cosmos, which is why it remains today – as throughout most of modernity – a way of thinking of what radical politics is about. Second, that one can begin to perceive the performative force at work in revolution beyond or before the shimmer of insurrection by looking at revolution less as a noun than as an activity of revolutionizing. Finally, that the *mise-en-forme* of this activity takes place in the continual play between enthusiasm for a promise of something to come and the finite representations that offer us normative figures of this to come.

Drawing from this I claim that revolutionizing does not exclude pluralism and what usually passes for political democracy, but it aims to take the latter beyond the restrictive and often conservative perception of politics as the art of the possible. I use two images to support this claim. One is the iconic phrase, ‘be realistic, ask for the impossible’, which provides us with a telegraphic depiction of the enthusiasm generated by the promise. This, I will argue, allows us to link what Kant described as the enthusiasm for revolution and Derrida’s notion of the promise of something to come in order to highlight the role played by the impossible as a mobilizing element. The other is a verse by Nicanor Parra, ‘the poet’s job is/to improve on the blank page/I don’t think that’s possible’. The aporia of writing outlined in this verse provides us with an analogical model to think of revolution as an effort to negotiate passageways between pure possibility and finitude: as an opening to something to come and, at the same time, as a necessary limitation of its infinite possibilities through figures or representations of revolution. My argumentative sequence in this chapter will navigate through Benjamin’s ‘weak Messianic force’ to introduce the link between promise and revolution, Kant’s reflection on revolution through the idea of enthusiasm, and Gramsci’s reference to the ‘becoming-state’ of a political force rather than a simple seizure of power. It will invoke Rancière’s conception of the disagreement or polemic as a way to assess the radicalism of a radical break, Žižek’s use of Leninism to think about the disruption of consensus, and Derrida’s account of the promise and the event as a core component of the peculiar realism of demanding the impossible.
Chapter 1

The Underside of Difference and the Limits of Particularism

The first theme in our discussion of modes of politics that push liberalism to its edges is the debate on difference and identity. The frame for this debate was the culture wars of the 1980s and early 1990s around issues such as abortion, sexual preferences, race relations, curriculum content or the place of religion in public life. It was stronger in the USA than in other Western countries, but it nonetheless had an impact in all of them. An optimistic appraisal of this impact would point out that it made us more sensitive to cultural, gender and racial difference as well as non-economic forms of subordination. A more cautious assessment would counter that the culture wars displaced politics into morality and made progressive thought less concerned with economic exploitation and class inequalities. It ultimately blunted its radical edge, given that advocates of difference were critical of liberal democratic politics but felt quite comfortable advancing their agenda within that setting.

Semiotics and Some Programmatic Consequences of the Culture Wars

While both accounts of the consequences of the culture wars are correct, in order to ascertain this we must first position the debate on difference and identity. I want to introduce it by looking at an intellectual
footnote that is now largely forgotten but had a surprising influence on this whole affair, namely, the inspiration that semiotics provided in the early stages of the war on words. It made us aware that the system of differences we call language is not value-neutral; power relations are embedded in it, if only because many everyday linguistic expressions reflect and reproduce inequalities. The idea that language could thus become a field of struggle opened up the possibility of something like a politics of the signifier. Feminists in the English-speaking world were amongst the first to perceive this. They reminded us that expressions such as ‘the rights of man’ reflected a male-dominated public sphere that subsumed the particularity of women under the supposed universality of men. They were right in exposing this as a metonymic fallacy of the part for the whole, as it took men to be the representatives of humanity. The political task ensuing from this was to denounce and remove gender-biased expressions that instituted, reinforced and reproduced gender inequality and the subordination of women. Gay activists, disabled people, black militants, immigrants and many others soon followed suit.

The initial impetus for this programme of ‘linguistic cleansing’ – which of course extended into non-linguistic practices too – came from US academic circles and was soon known as ‘political correctness’ or simply ‘PC’. The etymology of this expression, as Stuart Hall rightly reminds us (Hall 1994: 164–5), derives from an in-joke in leftist circles in the 1970s: someone would imitate the severe voice of a Commissar and admonish a friend for making a dicey remark with possible sexist undertones. It was also used to refer to more mundane matters. You were politically incorrect if you bought designer brands or watched commercial cinema instead of socially engaged films. By the 1980s, it meant adopting a language and a behaviour that was non-discriminatory towards women, blacks and cultural and ethnic groups. A new PC lexicon started to emerge as chairman became chairperson, blacks in the USA African-Americans, disabled people differently able, and so on. As some expressions came into use, others fell into disrepute. Those like chick, bird, nigger, spics or hymie were chastised as un-PC because they were or could be understood to be sexist, racist or ethnic slurs. Disconcerting expressions like ‘vertically challenged’ to refer to short people appeared too, mostly to mock the PC trend, although many could not tell for sure if it was used in jest or if some people actually used it for addressing a perceived wrong.
In tandem with PC, the general vindication of particularism brought along a growing distrust of universals and an open hostility towards the grand political narratives of modernity, including nationalism and Marxist socialism. Whether or not this misrepresented Lyotard, many turned his claim about the end of grand narratives in *The Postmodern Condition* of 1979 into a rallying cry of postmodern thought and politics. If the macro characterized the Enlightenment project of Western modernity, particularism would rule the postmodern 1980s. The macro level of grand narratives was criticized as an indication of the ‘essentialism of the totality’, the belief that one could derive the intelligibility of the whole from a particular domain or level of the totality like the economic mode of production. The argument was that macro perspectives inspired projects that repressed or misrecognized the specificity of particular identities and struggles, either through the homogeneity of an ethnos or the equally homogenous conception of general or human emancipation modelled around the category of class.

The polemic counterpoint to this consisted of the refusal to subsume ethnic, sexual, racial and other identities, together with their demands, under sweeping categories such as the nation or class exploitation. Even territorial representation – the mainstay of liberal politics – was open to criticism for erasing all difference under the homogenizing category of citizenship. There was a plausible reason for this. The political agenda of elected officials is skewed towards the general simply because they represent the population within a territorial jurisdiction, not occupational categories or cultural groups. The distrust of the macro, together with a defensive affirmation of identity in response to the realities of racism, sexism or homophobia gradually led to the development of a mode of collective action known as ‘identity politics’. Its advocates were convinced that radical and territorial politics alike would become amenable to address differential demands only when confronted with equally differentiated political pressure groups.

Identity-based groups and demands received a boost with the mainstreaming of difference in the public sphere. There was a gradual – if often grudging – acknowledgement of the right to be different as part of the acceptable code of the status quo. This translated into various measures of affirmative action or positive discrimination – mostly through quotas – that improved the bargaining position of vulnerable groups, minorities and subaltern identities generally. It also contributed to undermine the attachment of progressive thought to a party-centred
paradigm of politics and to the Marxist paradigm of socialism. There was an outspoken criticism of the centrality of class struggle and class subjects and a growing sympathy for the ascendancy of civil society organizations – social movements and organized interest groups – in a political landscape dominated by parties and elections.

Yet it also had an unexpected political underside. We can describe it with the help of the metaphor of the walking stick. In his *Soutenance d’Amiens*, his doctoral thesis of 1975, Althusser maintains that Lenin once said that to straighten a walking stick you have to bend the handle in the opposite direction. This exposes the action to the twin possibilities of an insufficiency or an excess, the risk of not bending it enough or of bending it too much. We witness the latter in the politics of difference. The radicalization of the critique of grand narratives and the relentless vindication of particularism served to part ways with, say, the class reductionism of Marxism, but it also turned the question of difference into something akin to the essentialism of the elements that was as illegitimate as the essentialism of the totality it criticized.

In the case of politically correct language, this started to happen when sexism – or racism, or homophobia, or whatever – was spotted in the use of taboo words regardless of the context of enunciation or the position of enunciation of the subject. Irony was probably the first casualty of the culture wars; it became suspicious as a rigid moral code started to colonize political reasoning through the censorship of expressions and behaviour. Whoever said ‘chick’ or ‘nigger’ – especially if the person that did so was neither woman nor black – automatically qualified as un-PC, which really means that they were perceived and treated as sexist or racist. PC also inspired things such as the caricatured code of sexual conduct introduced in Antioch College in 1991. Its ostensive purpose was to combat the ugly reality of date rape by demanding that men obtain verbal consent from their potential partner at every stage in a sexual encounter, from kissing to fondling to penetration. Not only did this not stop date rape, but it also placed men in the uncomfortable position of being considered as rapist time-bombs and therefore guilty until proven otherwise. The politics of the signifier ended up bending the walking stick of offensive language and behaviour beyond recognition, sanitizing it to the extent that the initial political argument turned into moral prudishness.

Identity politics suffered a similar fate. It was born as a response to a very palpable experience of exclusion and from a desire for equal
treatment but it soon found itself enclosed in a self-referential reasoning and almost anything could be seen as offensive to the members of an aggrieved group. What characterizes this reasoning is the exaltation of a limited modality of the pronoun ‘we’, one in which the pronoun ‘us’ is enounced within the horizon of a particular group and seen to be at odds with superordinate forms of the ‘we’. The language of the Tupí Guarani people of Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil has two different pronouns to designate these modalities of the ‘we’. One is the oré or exclusive mode, as in ‘us women’ or ‘we immigrants’, and the other the ſandé or inclusive mode, as in the case of ‘us citizens’ or ‘we the people’. The play between the oré and ſandé is not a question of numbers or size, or of a relation between particular and universal. It designates instead the fluctuating domains of exclusive and inclusive modalities of the ‘we’. This of course is a fixture of all politics, but identity politics privileges the oré at the expense of the ſandé. The radicalization of such a privilege has a centrifugal effect that transforms the field of collective action into a universe of multiple oré. The particularity of a group rather than a more inclusive category like ‘citizen’ becomes the distinctive pole of identity, solidarity and collective action.

One can see how the underside of difference starts to appear through the desire to purify language from discriminatory connotations or through the tendency towards a self-referential description of the oré. In practice, the semiotic thesis of a relational character of discursive terms eventually vanishes and in its place the essentialism of differences fixes the value of terms outside discursive constellations. Furthermore, the perception of all criticism as a threat and an unacceptable offence to the group buries the differential nature of all identity oré under a litany of complaints about victimization, and replaces it with a self-referential definition of what it means to be woman, gay, Jewish, Muslim, black, Latino, and so on. This is when groups begin to think of themselves as endowed with the classical Westphalian entitlement of sovereign entities to forbid the intervention of other states in their ‘internal affairs’ – at least on paper, as no state in the Westphalian system ever managed to do so. The endogamous undertones of this celebration of identity opens up a scenario of action and a way of conceiving political intervention that make it more difficult to forge horizontal links between particular groups. A new apartheid becomes more palatable as the call for a separate development of the various oré becomes the rallying cry and salient feature of its politics. As we
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will see shortly, Gitlin put it very well when he says that despite the critique of essentialism and determinism, for some oré biology once again becomes a destiny.

Can we say anything else about PC and identity politics or are the well-documented excesses enough to close the book on this question? The political side is well-covered by the vast literature on the subject, but it is surprising to find how little has been done to link the intellectual background – philosophical arguments stemming mostly from Continental thought and the debate on postmodernism – with the politics of the culture wars. Many conservative and progressive critics looked at the relation mainly to ridicule post-structuralism, deconstruction and post-foundationalism. The usual accusation was that they championed cultural relativism and the erasure of the distinction between high and low culture and good and bad academic work. Morris Dickstein is a case in point. He lamented their pernicious influence and claimed that the main fault-line was between open-ended liberalism and anti-foundationalist theories of people like Stanley Fish who had abandoned the universal values of the enlightenment and of liberalism (Dickstein 1994: 43). This, of course, is a hasty judgement, if only because instead of demonstrating the connection between their thought and the excesses of the culture wars it relies on circumstantial evidence – advocates of PC happened to read authors associated with post-foundationalism.

I do not mean to say that if they had engaged with the thought of Fish and others thoroughly enough they would have been able to show a causal connection between a set of theories – or perhaps something looser like an ‘intellectual imaginary’ – and a politics. Neither do I want to suggest that by criticizing the politics one also invalidates the theory. This would be simplistic, as it gives too much credit to philosophers as instigators of action and presupposes that a theory is tailor-made for a certain politics. The nouveau philosophes tried their hand with Marxism in the 1970s, suggesting that there was a direct link between Marxism and the horror of the Gulag. Yet one can say the same about any body of thought and claim, for example, that there is an unbroken thread connecting Christianity to the Inquisition or nationalism to ethnic cleansing. The reasoning is spurious because it depends on our willingness to accept that the coexistence of a cognitive framework and a type of action suffices to demonstrate a relation of cause and effect between them. However, the absence of a causal link between ideas
and political movements does not mean that one cannot establish a connection at all between them. I myself mentioned a possible link by looking at what I described as an ‘intellectual footnote’ in the debate on difference – the inspiration provided by semiotics – and then following what happened with the politics of the signifier once the proposals to flesh it out appeared.

I want to take this further by discussing some of the work on postmodernism that gave conceptual support for the debate. It did so not by specifying a programme of action but by providing philosophical arguments to validate the belief in the emancipatory potential of difference resulting from its irruption into the public sphere. I will focus on the reasoning behind this expectation to see how the latter played out politically in the programmatic outcomes of the culture wars. This involves examining the type of diagnostic proposed by postmodern theorists – particularly Vattimo – as well as the prognosis they made about the possibility of another, better world. My argument will thus deal with the prescriptive and the normative aspects of the theory. I will also refer to the ambivalence towards liberalism. Advocates of difference challenged the individualism and universalism of the liberal account of rights but also adopted the figure of the citizen as a subject of rights. They did so by modifying one important assumption, namely, that the bearer of those rights was not only the sovereign individual of liberal discourse but also particular groups – the oré of women, gays, immigrants, and so on. I will argue that a displacement from the one to the many does not challenge liberalism; at best, it introduces noise into the liberal imaginary.

A Post-Modern Society? Vattimo’s Wager

An enthusiastic theorist of difference like Gianni Vattimo – amongst others – claims that we are living in a new type of society, a ‘postmodern society’ (Vattimo 1992). His contribution to this debate highlights the significance of the mass media in a way that runs counter to the received opinions of critical social thought. For him the media did not produce the general homogenization of society expected by Adorno or the totalitarian nightmare depicted by Orwell. ‘Instead’, he says, ‘what actually happened, in spite of the effects of the monopolies and major centres of capital, was that radio, television and newspapers became elements in a general explosion and proliferation of Weltanschauungen, of world views.’ A growing number of what he
calls ‘dialects’ – non-dominant groups – have a say, maybe not in the domains of power but at least in terms of self-expression, as local rationalities like ethnic, sexual or cultural minorities start to speak up for themselves. Generalized communication makes society more complex and chaotic, and the circulation of multiple images of the world shatters the belief in a single reality or a transparent society. These images of the world, says Vattimo, are not simply interpretations of an independent ‘reality’ that is given, but rather are constitutive of the very objectivity of the world. As Nietzsche suspected, there are no facts, only interpretations, and the true world becomes a fable. What we call the ‘reality of the world’ is the ‘context’ for the multiplicity of fables, in which case we are confronted with the absence of a unifying foundation. ‘Reality’, Vattimo adds, ‘is rather the result of the intersection and “contamination” (in the Latin sense) of a multiplicity of images, interpretations and reconstructions circulated by the media in competition with one another and without any “central” co-ordination’ (1992: 7).

This reveals the liberating dimension of contemporary experience, or rather the experience of developed societies that are the object of his reflection – at least potentially, for unlike Hegel or Marx, Vattimo does not think of the idea of emancipation in terms of liberation from ideology or an attainment of absolute knowledge of the ‘necessary structure of reality’. Our hopes for emancipation lie instead in the relative ‘chaos’ of a multiple world. His reasoning is as follows. The liberation of differences coincides with the rise of hitherto peripheral identities such as ethnic, sexual, religious or cultural ‘dialects’ that start to speak by themselves and about themselves. As these identities speak up, they also put into circulation their own images of the world. This process of identification, he adds, is accompanied by a sense of disorientation resulting from the proliferation of images of the world: life in a multiple world is disorienting because the circulation of images and information weakens the principle of reality – of a single reality. Yet at the same time, he believes that a multiple world might also create a favourable disposition towards toleration because it makes us conscious of the historical, contingent and limited nature of all systems of values and beliefs, including our own (Vattimo 1992: 7, 8–9). For him freedom might enter through this gap. ‘To live in this pluralistic world’, he says, ‘means to experience freedom as a continual oscillation between belonging and disorientation’ (p. 10).
Thus, Vattimo conceives the link between the liberation of differences and the chances for emancipation through the experience of oscillation – more specifically, through the individual’s continual oscillation between belonging and disorientation. How do people live in this ‘chaotic’ world of oscillation that acknowledges the absence of a unifying ground for existence? Vattimo addresses the issue through a line in The Gay Science, where Nietzsche contends that we must continue to dream knowing we are dreaming: there is no stable reality but we must act ‘as if’ the world had a certain meaning or coherence. This, he adds, is the essence of Nietzsche’s idea of the ‘overman’. While he is aware that it is not easy to recognize oscillation as a liberating experience, Vattimo blames it on nostalgia for a reassuring closure, a solid, stable and ‘authoritative’ reality.

 Such freedom is problematic. As an effect of the media, it cannot be guaranteed and remains a possibility still to be recognized and taken up (the media can always and everywhere be the voice of ‘Big Brother’, or of stereotypical banality, void of being . . . ). Moreover, we ourselves still do not have a clear idea of its physiognomy and so have difficulty in seeing oscillation as freedom. Individually and collectively, we still have a deep-seated nostalgia for the reassuring, yet menacing, closure of horizons. Nihilistic philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger (but also pragmatists like Dewey or Wittgenstein), in demonstrating that being does not necessarily coincide with what is stable, fixed and permanent, but has instead to do with the event, with consensus, dialogue and interpretation, are trying to show us how to make the experience of oscillation in the postmodern world as an opportunity of a way of being (finally, perhaps) human. (Vattimo 1992: 10–11)

From a more socio-political perspective, Vattimo’s references to multiplicity and contamination suggest that if reality had a mirror it would not reflect a unitary image or a mere collection of isolated fragments. Instead, it would have to account for the shifting patchwork or collage of the multiple cultural worlds in which contemporary existence is immersed. The mirror would also have to acknowledge that the pieces that make up this mosaic could not be self-contained, self-referential entities. Contamination, unlike apartheid, presupposes the permeability of frontiers, that there are exchanges between the different cultural worlds, and therefore, that each one is tainted with the traces of others. Immigrants to the UK become cricket fans and the British absorb kebabs and curry dishes as part of their diet. Latin American intellectuals discuss the work of Nietzsche or Deleuze while the Japanese
read Borges and Garcia Marquez. Thus, when Vattimo invokes ‘contamination’ to conceive the coexistence of different cultural worlds, he seems to use it in the sense of mestizo or mixture. The musician David Byrne of Talking Heads expresses this idea of contamination as hybridization as follows:

Tell the Rolling Stones not to play the blues because they weren’t raised in Mississippi, or Africans not to play electric guitars. For it works both ways, which people forget, every which way in fact. Purity is a bogus notion. There is no point zero, everything’s a mixture, and when cultures mix against one another, that’s where the heat and the energy come from. (Byrne 1992)²

The multiplication of dialects and, in Vattimo’s view, the enhanced communication between them, also suggests that the individual of this postmodern society can no longer be easily confined in a single space. Men and women become nomads who shift from one environment to another, although not in the sense of reflecting an unrestricted social mobility of sorts, for the more intelligent advocates of a postmodern society are aware that the effects of class, race, gender, ethnic, national or religious markers have not withered away. For them the idea of nomadism refers to the oscillation of belonging and the erosion of stable, long-term identities that characterized a more parochial world where the pace of change was slower. In a way, this parochialism had already begun to change with the advent of industrial society. Marx and Engels refer to it in a well-known passage of the Communist Manifesto. They say:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.

This account certainly applies to contemporary society too, only more so. Perhaps the difference, at least for those who endorse the thesis of a postmodern society, is that modernity also developed technologies to mould subjects within disciplinary enclosures. These enclosures did not conceal nomadism but attempted to domesticate it through strategies whose homogenizing categories – such as class, citizen, consumer or producer – aimed to create firm, stable and lasting identities. The
ascendancy of nomadism is linked to the decline of the disciplinary ethos and of a strong logic of identity, at least in the more secular parts of the world. Maffesoli put it nicely: ‘Modernity’, he says, ‘used to assign individuals a stable dwelling in an ideology, a class, or a profession, whereas in contemporary society one belongs to a specific place, but not forever. The individual wanders through different spaces and is thus characterized by a “dynamic rooting”’ (Maffesoli 1990: 82–3).

These nomads also differ from the type of individual produced by modernity in another sense: they seem to be less concerned with guilt. Lipovetsky claims that moral views have undergone rapid change since the 1950s, when society entered the era of mass consumption and communications (1992). The Enlightenment initiated a process of secularization whereby people began to realize that morality was possible without God. Yet this secular morality was accompanied by the restructuring of society along the lines of a cult of duty ‘ruled by a sacrificial culture that glorifies abnegation and the idea that men must be concerned about things other than themselves.’ By contrast, contemporary society inaugurates a new stage of secular morality that undermines the sacrificial ethos of modernity. It introduces what he calls ethics without pain and morality without sacrifice, which in turn announces the twilight of duty. For Lipovetsky, the ‘hard’ ethics of modernity softens up as people vindicate the right to enjoy life and to live according to their desires, although this is more of a wish than an available option for those that are too poor, old, scared or repressed to be able to think in terms of lifestyle choices.

The twilight of duty inserts the subject in a ‘process of individuation’ that produces a more flexible, expressive and narcissistic type of individual. Lipovetsky believes that the cultural syncretism and eclecticism of contemporary individuals lead to a greater concern for personal autonomy and to a ‘radicalization of the right to be different’ (Lipovetsky 1986: 49ff.). Habermas (1992: 456) says something similar when he refers to the removal of barriers between spheres. For him, this process ‘goes hand in hand with a multiplication of roles becoming specified in the process, with a pluralization of forms of life, and with an individualization of life plans.’ Whether one takes him, Vattimo or Lipovetsky, the diagnostic they offer undermines the idea of homogeneous, one-dimensional men and women.
A More Cautious Optimism

A potential offshoot of this oscillation might be the ‘multiplication of commitments’. This is consistent with the idea of ‘dynamic rooting’ of contemporary individuals. As I will argue later, oscillation from one environment to another can lead to a relaxation of commitments, but it also has the potential to diversify people’s interests, to expand associationism and multiply networks of belonging. For the last three decades or so people have been exploring different forms of protest and organization that are minimalist, spontaneous and loosely coordinated. They are, as Foucault argues (1982), struggles against an immediate, not a principal enemy, against the subjection of subjectivity and thus about who we are. Many join them for the pleasure of direct action that is not mediated by organizations or semi-professional cadres. The participants usually act in their own name without pretending to represent society as a whole: and they often do not tend to claim the high moral ground. They set up minimal modes of articulation, loosely knit networks to communicate and to coordinate protest actions.

The acknowledgement of the oscillatory character of identities might also lead us to a more explicit recognition of the ebb and flow of participation in public issues. I call it ‘intermittent intervention’. People differ from Rousseau’s conception of the virtuous citizen. There is no ‘civil religion’ – at any rate, none as absorbing or enduring as Rousseau envisioned it – to commit them to a continual passion and interest for public affairs. Trotsky’s maxim – ‘my party, right or wrong’ – is a more recent incarnation of the ‘civil religion’, but commitment based on strong and stable ideological bonds is clearly in decline. The case of those who ‘don’t give a damn’ one way or the other, which I will introduce later, illustrates the more extreme form of this decline. However, we cannot say that people withdraw to pure indifference either. The examples mentioned before indicate that they do not shun involvement in public affairs; they show concern for the most diverse causes and become involved in a myriad of collective projects. The acute separation between antagonistic groups of ‘us’ and ‘them’ – fundamental traits of the political, at least in Carl Schmitt’s account – does not disappear with the advent of oscillation and the decline of duty. Many still want to change the world. They just do not want to do it all the time and tend to participate intermittently. Intermittent intervention is another face of oscillation in the field of action, political or otherwise.
These observations about the multiplication of commitments and intermittent interventions portray the more positive consequences of life in a multiple world. However, there are problems worth mentioning. Some are factual, and refer to the countertendencies that operate alongside differentiation and individuation. One cannot forget the simultaneous drive towards uniformity, whether through patterns of consumption (fashion, fast-food chains, musical tastes) or because a significant number of people see the world through the eyes of television and the tabloid press. We should also be cautious about the extent of oscillation, since not everybody is equally empowered to choose his or her lifestyle. Capitalist market society excludes a vast and varied mass of people from the benefits of individuation, whether those made unemployed because of technological change or their age, or immigrants who escape poverty and end up in the periphery of big cities with dead-end jobs and the stigma of racial prejudice and intolerance in their host countries.

But there are other problems, too. Maybe Vattimo is right and our best chance for emancipation lies in the experience of oscillation. He acknowledges that it might be a problematic freedom, but he is wrong in reducing the problem to nostalgia for a reassuring ground. It can also be a question of the underside of oscillation itself, for the perspective of the Nietzschean overman is a possible rather than an actual state of affairs. Philosophical discourse can announce that the world lacks a foundation, that things do not necessarily collapse if there is no ‘authoritative reality’ – the metaphysical yearning for a transcendental signified – to operate as the referent for existence, and that life can be structured around the Nietzschean idea of dreaming, knowing it is a dream. This is a legitimate yet somewhat ambiguous cognitive horizon – why do we need the self-deception of dreaming if we know it is a dream? But the important point is that the connection between the awareness of the death of God and the birth of the overman is contingent, not necessary, and therefore the actuality of the overman cannot be taken for granted.

Here is where an unqualified embrace of difference as a theoretical position overlooks a potential underside that cannot be dismissed as mere nostalgia. I borrow the idea of the underside from Claude Lefort. In his study of democracy in North America, says Lefort, Tocqueville feared that the positive side of equality of conditions for all would have a reverse or darker side. He mentions some examples: ‘the new
assertion of singularity fades in the face of the rule of anonymity; the assertion of difference (of belief, opinion, or morals) fades in the face of uniformity... The recognition that human beings are made in one another’s likeness is destroyed by the rise of society as an abstract entity, and so on’ (Lefort 1988: 15). Lefort calls it the underside of democracy, which stems less from philosophical accounts of democracy than from the undecidable nature of its socio-political implications. For him, democracy is characterized by the dissolution of the markers of certainty, and therefore, by an explicit recognition that the foundations of the political order and the social order vanish. This means that democracy can lead to totalitarian options as the difficulty to solve conflicts and demands of security can undermine democracy and encourage what he calls the fantasy of the People-as-One, the fantasy of a state free of divisions (1988: 19–20). Mutatis mutandis, the question of the underside can be posed to those who, having accepted the post-foundational critique of grand narratives, are quick to link the proliferation of differences with emancipation without taking into account the ambiguity of such a link.

I am thinking of two sets of problems related to this undecidability. One refers to the consequences of disorientation on identity. For Vattimo, as we have seen, individuals are characterized by a continual oscillation between belonging and estrangement, and his idea of emancipation is linked to what he calls ‘the relative chaos’ of the multiple world where oscillation occurs. I take oscillation to be an accurate description of the general conditions in which many contemporary identities are constructed, but it is not clear why one should expect emancipation to follow from it. Emancipation can follow, but the multiplication of choices and decisions, together with the dissolution of long-term identities can also create a demand for certainty that can be satisfied by authoritarian or intolerant world views. Nationalism as well as reactionary and pre-modern forms of religiosity are obvious examples. They undermine the emancipatory potential of difference expected by Vattimo or, rather, they make emancipation – whatever it may be – less an effect of oscillation than a contingent outcome of collective action in public arenas.

The other set of problems touches upon the effects of the proliferation of dialects on collective action. Contamination between dialects and the possibility of nomadism are neither as clear nor as extended as some seem to believe. The recognition of otherness does not always
imply a willingness to engage with that otherness; it can be formalized by citing the lack of institutional restrictions of the rights of ethnic and racial groups, but this does not suspend cultural or other forms of prejudice. It also holds true in the case I will explore, namely, the relations between ethnic, racial, sexual or cultural dialects. A mere affirmation of particularity may lead to the hardening of frontiers between dialects, and this can in turn undercut possible transcultural political articulations between them.

The Underside of Disorientation

Let us consider first the case of oscillation, at least with regard to the nexus between disorientation and emancipation. There are two sides to the notion of oscillation. We have discussed one already. It refers to the oscillation between groups, values, beliefs and spaces – the ‘dynamic rooting’ mentioned by Maffesoli – that reveals the quest for autonomy and diversity stressed by Lipovetsky. It is the more liberating side: people assign a positive value to a multiple world where options – and the oscillation between options – are possible.

The other side of oscillation refers to the opening up of options in a multiple world, at least for those who have them. It also refers to the link between options and enhanced freedom. An option only truly becomes one when it moves from the possible to the actual when experienced by the subject through a decision. Option and decision are constitutive of the classical Greek usage of the notion of crisis as *krinein*, which entails a two-fold process of sorting out available options and deciding amongst them (Rusconi 1979). In a similar vein, Derrida (1992: 54) refers to critique as *krinein*, as ‘an attitude that permits us to choose (*krinein*), and so to decide and to cut decisively in history and on the subject of history.’ To sort is to identify, organize and evaluate the various alternatives in a given situation. It refers to the process of deliberation that takes place before a decision. To decide, however, is to put an end to deliberation: once you choose a particular option, you take a stand and suspend other options. Decisive junctures – the critical moments that make sorting and deciding unavoidable – become turning points for those involved. The significance of each juncture varies, but the direction of the turn – whether it will be for the better or not – can only be known after the choice has been made (decided). People rarely have a stable and well-defined structure of options from which to discern the best choice. There is no script for decisions,
nor guarantee of their outcome. In the lonely moment of the decision, people face the risk inherent in every calculation – is it the right choice, will things work out well? – and must accept the contingency of their decisions and the uncertainty of their outcomes. Therefore, life in a multiple world widens our options, but also expands the scope and the frequency of decisions. For those who prefer a more structured existence, less exposed to the uncertainty of decisions, options become less a reward than a burden of freedom.

There is another reason why freedom can be a risky experience. Vattimo does not pose belonging and disorientation as mutually exclusive options. On the contrary, he talks of a continual oscillation between them. This means that at times one can gain the upper hand at the expense of the other and, more often than not, there is an unstable mixture of both. In this case, the uncertainty of oscillation no longer refers to decisions, but to belonging and disorientation. Vattimo develops his argument from some reflections by Heidegger and Benjamin about the aesthetic experience (Vattimo 1992: 45–61). Neither of them conceives the work of art as the site of perfection and harmony. Heidegger describes it through the concept of Stoss, while Benjamin defines it as shock. Both concepts, says Vattimo, consider aesthetic experience as one of disorientation, for the work of art suspends the familiarity of the world and therefore unsettles the certainties and perceptual habits of the spectator. Art has no inner meaning, something like a use value under its exchange value, or a ‘high’ cultural value behind its exhibition value. The meaning of art comes forth through its varying modes of reception and interpretation in culture and society. Aesthetic experience thus forces the subject to engage in a continual task of rearrangement and readjustment of perception. This task never reaches a final, full reconciliation; the suspension of familiarity, and hence the state of disorientation, are constitutive and not provisional. That is why disorientation exposes the individual to what Vattimo calls, following Heidegger, ‘an exercise in mortality’. For Vattimo, this ‘mortality’ is a positive aspect of disorientation insofar as it reveals the incompleteness of the subject.

It is unclear whether the positive assessment of uprooting and disorientation can be generalized beyond the aesthetic experience. Yet, even assuming that it could, it also has a potential downside. It is quite reasonable to think that it can enhance apathy or lead to a retreat to the private sphere. Lipovetsky talks of the twilight of ideals in a
meaningless world of pure indifference. ‘God is dead’, he says, ‘but nobody gives a damn’ (1986: 36). As mentioned earlier, pure apathy is a limit case. Short of such a scenario, we could say that the oscillation between disorientation and belonging at least tends to undermine strong, stable and long-term participation in institutions.

This might have several consequences. One is that the weakening of belonging can lead to a certain relaxation of commitments to organizations. Let us leave aside relatively exceptional moments such as wars, civil or international, the foundation of independent states in post-colonial contexts or the transitions from authoritarian to democratic regimes, when both the involvement in organizations and the passion and interest for the fate of the community tend to be at its highest. Under ‘normal’ political circumstances, people rarely respond willingly and massively when called to attend a demonstration, a branch meeting, or an assembly. Moreover, in the last half century or so many Western countries have experienced a sustained erosion of the centrality of political parties, unions and other organizations that used to function as means for a lasting structuring of people’s lives. In the United Kingdom the membership in the main political parties is less than one third of what it was in the 1950s, and a mere 5 per cent of them are under 26 (Mulgan 1994: 16). Perhaps the revival of nationalist tendencies may still infuse some life into the English maxim, ‘my country, right or wrong’, but few would now endorse Trotsky’s hyper-militant formulation, ‘my party, right or wrong’. Something similar happens with trade unions. Oscillation from one environment to another creates a situation by which the interests of wage earners are no longer exhausted – were they ever? – within the sphere of trade union activity. Unions become one of many spheres in the life of workers. The same applies to other organizations. Many of them have found it difficult to attune their strategies, proposals and appeal to the current modes of fluctuating subjectivity.

Another consequence of oscillation goes to the heart of what I see as the underside of disorientation. As mentioned, a multiple world expands the range of choices and the frequency of decisions, which makes choice both the reward and the risk of freedom. Yet what happens with those who value this freedom, but not enough to face the consequences of recurrent situations of undecidability? How is belonging negotiated in situations of uprooting and disorientation? While some may not give a damn about the death of God, the loss of a transcendental imaginary
can unsettle the identity of others. Confused by the fluidity of identities and the precariousness of certainties, many can take refuge in all sorts of groups that offer simpler and more structured images of identity. Laclau and Zac claim that it is perfectly possible that in situations of social disorganization, ‘whatever political order exists would be legitimate not as a result of the value of its own contents, but due to its ability to incarnate the abstract principle of social order as such’ (Laclau and Zac 1994: 21; also Laclau 1991: 94, 1995a). The problem is that the ‘abstract principle’ is often incarnate in less than desirable models of order. The authors mention the success of fascism in Italy during the 1920s as an illustration.

More generally, situations of disorientation can facilitate the appeal of charismatic leaders who present themselves as self-styled saviours, or lead people to seek the sense of belonging offered by aggressive forms of nationalism, uncompromising religious sects, or violent urban tribes. Maier (1994) talks of a retreat to territorial identities and of the ascendancy of ‘territorial populism’ as one possible outcome of political disorientation at times of historical dislocations. Debray sees the rise of fundamentalism, whether nationalist or religious, as a defensive response to the loss of a sense of belonging. He argues that the process of globalization has dislocated cultural identities; people feel lost, and when that happens, the list of ‘believers’ usually grows. This might account for the obsessive defence of territorial sovereignty; it might also make us aware that, in some cases, ‘religion turns out after all not to be the opium of the people, but the vitamin of the weak’ (Debray 1994: 15). In short, the experience of disorientation and of incompleteness can open the subject to the world and also turn disorientation into a more disturbing experience.

Theoretically, this does not reflect a yearning for the familiar certainties of an authoritative, stable and unitary reality. It is not a question of claiming that post-foundationalism was a passing fashion and we are back on track to reassume the supposed truth of a strong ontological ground. It is clear that there is nothing out there to function as an objective \textit{ultima ratio} to judge the goodness and truth of our interpretations of the world. Yet precisely because there is no such referent, emancipation can be no more than one possible outcome of oscillation. We can share the desire for this outcome, not the faith in emancipation as the destiny of the ‘exercise in mortality’. For once we accept that the subject is incomplete by definition, and that the multiplicity of images
of the world erodes the idea of a single reality, we must conclude that
emancipation, sheer despair, and indifference are left on an equal foot-
ing. This underside of the ‘exercise in mortality’ should not be taken
lightly, particularly when the state of disorientation is transposed from
the aesthetic experience to other fields. If emancipation is a possibility
rather than a destiny, then it is necessary to transform it into active
hope. This requires something more than a description of the oscillat-
tory condition of contemporary individuals. It requires a mobilizing
myth or an image of the future, a Nietzschean ‘dream’ of emancipa-
tion as a reward that waits at the end of the rainbow. Laclau put it
well when he said that one can demonstrate the impossibility of an ul-
timate closure or presence, but it is illegitimate to assert that an ethical
commitment to open oneself to the heterogeneity of the other, or to
support a democratic society, will necessarily follow from the critique
of closure. This commitment is a goal certainly worth fighting for, but
if you must fight for it, there can be no logical connection between the
critique of presence and the ethical injunction (Laclau 1995b).

Indeed, it is important to recognize that we live in a plural world
that lacks a foundation yet we should act ‘as if’ there was a stable
reality, that is, act with the knowledge that such stability is only a
dream. What we cannot do is confuse the normative ‘ought’ with an
imperative ‘will’. It is also unreasonable to expect that it will always be
the ‘will’ that we willed. Collective action requires the promise of – and
the belief in – a remedy for disorientation, no matter how ‘imaginary’
and circumstantial it may be. Rorty says:

Modern, literate, secular societies depend on the existence of reason-
ably concrete, optimistic, and plausible political scenarios, as opposed
to scenarios about redemption beyond the grave. To retain social
hope, members of such a society need to be able to tell themselves a
story about how things might get better, and to see no insuperable
obstacles to this story’s coming true. (Rorty 1989: 86)

This is a good point, although I would not dismiss the veiled reference
to religion as a mere offer of ‘redemption beyond the grave’. It can also
be a possible – although not always desirable – ‘story about how things
might get better’, what Debray calls ‘the vitamin of the weak’. At any
rate, the more critical issue around how to negotiate the gap between
the story and actual action appears once you introduce politics, which
involves a sustained effort over time. Nothing guarantees that a call for
action will be heeded, no matter how forceful and persuasive it may
be. Lyotard provides a rather bleak example: ‘the officer cries *Avanti!* and leaps up out of the trench; moved, the soldiers cry *Bravo!* but don’t budge’ (1988: 30).

Let us assume that an action will follow a call for such. This still poses an uncertainty regarding the type of action. First, because proposals arising through the medium of democratic politics can fill the gap and provide the remedy – what Rorty calls ‘a story about how things might get better’ – but so can non-democratic political movements, religion, and other narratives far removed from the emancipation expected from oscillation. And second, uncertainty remains because even if it is a democratic option and a democratic action, political events do not necessarily follow a clean-cut sequence that invariably culminates in the desired emancipatory goal. Morin argues the point well, saying that the unexpected occurs because political action is governed by the principle of uncertainty (Morin 1993). The long-term effects of an initiative are unpredictable because political action is not one-directional and does not happen in a social vacuum. One person can act in a certain way, but others act upon that action too. This triggers reactive chains that enhance the conditions and constraints of any political initiative. ‘Politics does not govern us’, Morin says, ‘it is not like a sovereign that rules us, that organizes reality’ (1993: 12). Political action eludes the wilful design of agents: good intentions do not always produce good actions, let alone yield the expected results. Columbus, he adds with a trace of irony, set sail thinking he was going to the East Indies, but on the way, he bumped into a huge obstacle: America. The same applies to the link between difference and emancipation: it is a possibility, not a necessity. Both the stubborn vindication of difference and the unqualified celebration of its expressive capacity overlook this underside. They simply bracket out the uncertainty of the outcome, which is precisely what should not be done in theoretical formulation and sociological description, let alone when these move into the scenario of politics.

The Underside of Multiplicity

There is a second area of problems, this time related to life in a multiple world rather than to disorientation. In the past few decades, the vindication of difference has had a strategic importance in the critique of more restrictive conceptions of politics and the subject. It has helped to legitimize social movements against the long-standing reduction of political agency to the domain of political parties. Within the Left, it
has helped legitimize the specificity of gender, racial and ethnic identities in the face of Marxist reduction of identity to class identity. But it seems to me that two things happened in this critical enterprise once the legitimacy of these differences as instruments of political action and identity was secured to some degree. On the one hand, the academic Left, especially in developed countries, sidestepped practical questions of strategy – what was to be done thereafter – and opted instead for an enthusiastic pursuit of a greater conceptual refinement of the critical apparatus. On the other, more practical oriented people deferred a sober political assessment of what was actually accomplished and engaged in a continual reiteration of the original grievances. This resulted in a belated recognition of two political questions: the limits to acceptable differences and the increasingly hardened frontiers between dialects or images of the world. This is the underside of multiplicity.

The problem can be formulated as follows. Initially, the politics of difference consisted of the vindication of equality for subordinate and/or marginalized groups, whereas today the right to be different (Lipovetsky), and consequently the proliferation of world views (Vattimo), is considered a sign of the times. Yet this does not mean that every difference is deemed equally valid. One that undermines the principle of difference as such cannot be tolerated. Democratic regimes exclude political parties that advocate the destruction of democratic political competition. Short of this relatively clear-cut case, where do you draw the line? It is tempting to respond with a well-intentioned but flawed argument and say that we should exclude ‘bad’ differences, like racist gangs, and support good ones like ethnic or cultural minorities that strive to redress discrimination and subordination. This view is untenable, for it presupposes that there is an indisputable criterion to distinguish the good from the bad. In the absence of such a referent, any judgement concerning acceptable differences is open to contestation. And everyone knows how difficult it is to predict the fortunes of claims concerning rights once the dice of a ‘war of interpretations’ start to roll in the judiciary system or the common-sense discourse of public opinion. Things might go our way, but also against our expectations.

Another option might be to insist on a tactical defence of difference. Right-wing groups explicitly advocate racial hatred, but we must defend their right to speak and assemble not only because one cannot penalize intentions until these are transformed into actions, but
because the universality of rights helps to deter possible cases of partiality against progressive groups. This is a case of principled yet grudging tolerance: the universality of rights – and the sacrifice of any limits to that universality – is invoked to forestall future damage to ‘good’ differences. One ends up deferring the question of limits due to the risks posed by the contingency of political outcomes. Deferral, of course, is a non-solution. At best, it illustrates the incapacity to make a decision – which is, at the same time, a decision to defer. At worst, it opens the door to conceive the right to be different as an absolute value. Žižek illustrates the problem by referring to the use of clitorectomy as a mark of a woman’s sexual maturity: while many in the West would oppose this, considering it to be an act of mutilation and male domination, one can also invoke Eurocentrism to denounce that opposition in the name of a universalist ‘right to difference’ (Žižek 1994: 216). This leads to an untenable position that suspends judgement in the name of respect for difference. If I may borrow freely from Laclau and Mouffe, this amounts to replacing the essentialism of society with the essentialism of the dialects (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 103; see also Laclau 1995a: 3).

The idea of a prima facie goodness of all difference can lead to bizarre consequences. On the one hand, if every difference is (potentially) valid then there is (potentially) nothing to forbid or exclude. This either presupposes a world that has cancelled out all power relations or that any attempt to limit the range of valid differences is inherently repressive. The cancellation of power is simply wishful thinking, for any order must draw limits to assert itself against those who threaten it, while the negation of limits is dangerous, since it equates all exercise of authority with authoritarianism and thus blurs the distinction between democratic and authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, if ‘dialects’ – identities based on gender, race, ethnicity or culture – are conceived as absolute values, then it is reasonable to think that some of them can conceive the permeability of their frontiers as an existential threat. The disputable underlying assumption here is that dialects have some kind of internal consensus, and that disruption and subjection can only come from the outside. In Wolin’s words, here ‘the quest for boundaries has been closely linked with a myth of homogeneity that seeks to establish cultural perimeters within which oppression disappears’ (Wolin 1996: 32). A dialect addressing issues of another could then be accused by the aggrieved party of meddling in its internal
affairs. Steel put it very aptly: ‘The trick is exclusivity. If you can make the issue exclusively yours – within your territory of final authority – then all who do not capitulate are aggrieving you’ (Steele 1992: 51). At the limit, this logic amounts to a celebration of autarchic relativism. Thus, to paraphrase Hitchens (1993: 560), only Jews would be entitled to tell Jewish jokes, only blacks could criticize blacks, and only gays could dismiss the views of other gays.

If the various groups are reticent to intersect or contaminate one another – because the quest for purity leads to the erection of what Visker (1993) calls ‘cultural condoms’ around them – one is left with the logic of separate development characteristic of apartheid. Dialects then turn into what Leca calls ‘a mosaic of compartmentalized solidarities . . . [through which] society appears to take the form of many societies, each with its own political community’ (Leca 1992: 24–5). The mirror of the multiple, cosmopolitan world envisioned by advocates of difference then ends up reflecting a mosaic of self-referential fragments. At the limit, the world of multiple Weltanschauungen becomes a world of pure particularity where the judgment of others becomes illegitimate and cross-cultural political articulations improbable. This is what I described earlier as an effect of privileging the oré or exclusive mode of the ‘us’ over any ŋandé or inclusive form of the ‘we’ in identity politics.

Gitlin fears that the more extreme forms of identity politics could lead to this kind of scenario. While he recognizes that this politics can function as a remedy for anonymity in an impersonal world – to which we should add its role in the combat against sexism, racism or homophobia – he also observes two less appealing trends. One is that the original talk of constructed identities often relapses into forms of essentialism that shrink the self-definition of each group, and ‘after a genuflection to historical specificity, anatomy once again becomes destiny’ (Gitlin 1993: 172). The other refers to the segmentation of groups, in the sense that ‘what began as an assertion of dignity, a recovery from exclusion and denigration, and a demand for representation, has also developed a hardening of its boundaries.’ Essentialism and the ‘hardening of the boundaries’ between dialects hinder permeability and mutual contamination, and facilitate separatism by creating self-enclosed worlds. In the end, it suggests that differential groups perceive permeability as a threat.

Steel draws from his experience as an activist in the civil rights movement and takes this critique a step further. He describes the trend
towards a self-enclosure of dialects as ‘the New Sovereignty’, a situ-
ation in which the power to act autonomously is bestowed upon any
group that is able to construct itself around a perceived grievance (Steel
1992; also Gitlin 1993 and Hitchens 1993). He links it to the exten-
sion of the concept of entitlement from individuals to collectives such as
racial, ethnic and other groups. Originally, this was devised as a means
to redress a long history of injustice and discrimination towards these
groups, but it soon led to an ethics of self-imposed separatism. Steel
mentions the case of:

America’s university campuses, where, in the name of their grievances,
blacks, women, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, gays, and
lesbians had hardened into sovereign constituencies that vied for
the entitlements of sovereignty – separate ‘studies’ departments
for each group, ‘ethnic’ theme dorms, preferential admissions and
financial-aid policies, a proportionate number of faculty of their
own group, separate student lounges and campus centres, and so on.
(Steel 1992: 49)

This hardening of dialects into exclusive fiefdoms subverted the nature
of solidarity as a means of rallying diverse peoples against oppression.
‘As early as the mid-Sixties’, he says, ‘whites were made unwelcome
in the civil rights movement, just as, by the mid-Seventies, men were
no longer welcome in the women’s movement. Eventually, collective
entitlement always requires separatism’ (p. 53).

I would not go as far as to claim an inextricable link between
group entitlements and separatism, or between identity politics and
separatism. All that one has to do is recognize that the hardening of
frontiers, separatism and intolerance amongst groups are unexpected
by-products of progressive efforts to defend the rights of dialects and
to assert the desirability of a cosmopolitan society. A progressive po-
litical outlook should not dodge the question because of some real or
imagined fear of being accused of endorsing an ethnocentric, phano-
gocentric, or plainly conservative agenda. Hitchens put it very well:
‘The pressing matter is the defence of free thinking from its false
friends, not its traditional enemies. This is a case where what remains
of the Left has yet to find what remains of its voice’ (Hitchens 1993:
562). Even more so since this weakens the nomadism expected from
the ‘dynamic rooting’ of identity. Nomadism becomes a cultural buz-
word rather than a mode of experiencing diversity in postmodern
society.
Politics on the Edges of Liberalism

Perhaps contrary to their intentions, the writings of Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 351–423) seem to have fuelled their readers’ fascination with the figure of the nomad as a romantic transgressor, as a lonely, heroic rebel that refuses to surrender to a well-ordered, domesticated world. In a different vein, the nomad as a cultural wanderer is a fitting image of what Vattimo seems to consider as the outcome of oscillation, the prototype of a more liberated existence in a multiple world. Yet, as Roger Denson puts it, the actuality of nomadism might be much less exciting than this. For him, despite the exaltation of the figure of the nomad in intellectual discourse, most people end up recognizing diversity and a pluralistic existence without actually engaging these pluralities beyond expressing a taste for tourism or exotic cuisine (Denson 1994: 156). Instead of the spatial – or cultural – wandering expected from Maffesoli’s ‘dynamic rooting’ of identity, we can end up with a media-enhanced simulacrum of nomadism – with the nomad as a cultural voyeur. Denson also perceives this possibility. He says that ‘a kind of conceptual and cultural nomadism has been mediated for centralized and static populations through journalism, network and cable television, cinema, the computer Internet, and virtual reality’ to such an extent that it tends to become a mental exercise which, in the end, ‘proceeds to make the couch potato or armchair traveller a potentially formidable player of nomadism’ (Denson 1994: 155).

Universals, the Discourse of Rights and Liberalism

It is clear that these arguments do not entail nostalgia for a single reality or a rejection of difference and identity politics. Raising the issue of the underside does not imply a retreat into a purely pessimistic outlook. Neither does it endorse the contrary view that opposes unity to difference, homogeneity to plurality, or stability to movement. It is not an either/or situation. It is simply that the legitimate defence and celebration of difference, of the awakening of hitherto silenced and subordinated peripheral identities should not be blind to the question of the underside. The affirmation of local dialects, as Vattimo calls these identities, does not translate automatically into a pure experience of freedom. Neither does it appear to secure by itself more solidarity or democratic participation. The potential underside of oscillation is that the loss of the sense of belonging can foster the proliferation of sectarian forms of identity. Debray describes this danger when he warns us that religion or nationalism can become less the opium of the people than
the vitamin of the weak. There is also an underside of multiplicity, what Steel calls ‘a hardening of frontiers’ between particular groups. Visker’s references to self-imposed ‘cultural condoms’, or Denson’s claim that the nomadic ‘game’ can be played by couch potatoes and that the recognition of diversity may be restricted to a taste for tourism or exotic cuisine, are reminders of the less enticing possibilities of multiplicity. A more cosmopolitan society with greater communication between differences is just as possible as a cacophony of particular groups in a re-feudalized social space.

Having said this, it would be unfair and misleading to restrict the diagnostic of the underside to excesses incurred in the assertion of cultural difference. A first reason is that while critics question identity politics for its tendency to promote the self-enclosure of particular groups, they also admit that the bargaining position of women, blacks, gays and cultural minorities has improved since they began to speak up in defence of their interests (see Gitlin, Hitchens and Steel; also Rorty 1990, 1992). Moreover, I have already mentioned the innovative aspects of the ethos of difference, such as intermittent intervention and the multiplication of commitments, as well as the expansion of networks of belonging. A second reason is that there is also the danger of overplaying the excesses of identity politics in order to advance a conservative political agenda. Hall mentions the New Right that emerged in the Reagan-Bush and Thatcher era. He claims that its effective drive to remake public and civic life involved more than its command of government and its effectiveness in winning elections. The ascendancy of the New Right also required a mastery of the ideological terrain, including, amongst other things, playing on people’s fears about the excesses of the political correctness advocated by radical voices in the cultural Left (Hall 1994: 170–4).

Maier refers to another type of right, the ‘retro-right’, that emerged in a scenario he describes as one of a ‘moral crisis’ or ‘civic discontent’ with democracy. He mentions a series of indicators of this crisis: a sense of historical dislocation due to the decline of familiar principles and alignments created by the end of the Cold War; irresolution encouraged by the multiplication of less clear-cut issues; a widening distrust for party politics that springs from tribal rather than associational concerns; more cynicism about the role of political representatives and disbelief in their claims and in the results they promise; and a sense of collective disillusion that can generate xenophobia and despair over ethnic
or ideological pluralism (Maier 1994: 54–9). The loss of familiar certainties and the greater complexity of political scenarios enhance both disorientation and a yearning for more predictable relationships. The remedy is often defined in terms of a defence of identity, as a demand ‘to realign a meaningful territory and political voice’ (1994: 61). This is where the authoritarian rhetoric of right-wing territorial populists can find a fertile ground for support. Right-wing populists play nationalist and xenophobic prejudices against complexity and cosmopolitanism. They strive to reaffirm the validity of a bounded political domain as a means to overcome social fragmentation.

This brings to mind a remark by Laclau and Zac mentioned earlier. When referring to the Italian situation of the 1920s, they observed that a scenario of disintegration could open the door to a principle of order whose concrete contents are far from desirable. While we might not be facing such radical disintegration, their argument still applies to the right-wing revival described by Maier. Unlike the case we examined, that of the proliferation of dialects, here the question is no longer to curb the excesses incurred in the name of multiplicity, but rather, to secure the survival of a type of order that could accommodate and uphold multiplicity – whatever form it may take. A similar argument can be used in the cases of religious or political intolerance, where multiplicity is dismissed either as contrary to the core values that constitute and regulate a given society or feared for its potential to undermine the hold on power of existing elites.

There is no generic answer to the problem of the underside, or magical formulas to exorcize its risks. From a pragmatic standpoint one could speak of political ‘remedies’, in the sense of strategic initiatives to institute and maintain a shared space for dialects and, in that way, to counteract the retreat to self-enclosed particularity and the hardening of frontiers between groups. Maier suggests that this ‘means reaffirming commitments to civic inclusiveness, not just ethnicity; avoiding retreats into protectionism; encouraging common international projects and loyalties beyond ethnic or even cultural kinship’ (1994: 63). One could – in fact must – recuperate the idea of citizenship as a counterpoint of identities based on dialects or particular groups. As the current debates on multiculturalism and ethnic pluralism reveal, one cannot reduce citizenship to a periodical exercise of suffrage rights or to an overarching category bent on homogenizing differences (Turner 1992: 59).
Citizenship is a form of entitlement, and a condition that implicitly recognizes both the diversity of those who exercise it and the variety of modes and domains where that exercise takes place. Indeed, citizenship transformed the modern history of subjection by conceiving the subject as a site of resistance to subjection. As Balibar notes, citizenship is the paradigmatic form of modern subjectivity in that the citizen ceases to designate simply the one who is called before the law; the citizen also becomes, at least virtually, the one who makes the law or declares it to be valid (Balibar 1994: 11). Seen in this light, citizenship contemplates the differentiation and nomadism of contemporary identities and, at the same time, provides us with a format to think about resistance to subjection. Significantly, this resistance does not exclude wider articulations, by which I mean a certain ‘us’ that includes but also transcends the limits of an identity of resistance based on the ‘us’ of the particular group or dialect. In other words, it does not exclude the ñandé.

However, whether as a progressive celebration of difference in a context of multiplicity or as a right-wing revival of xenophobic nationalism, the underlying problem is the same: the emphasis on particularity forgets universality, or rather, it leads to an ambiguous understanding of the ‘goodness’ of difference and the universality of universals. But it is a deceptive forgetfulness, for the very idea of pure or self-referential particularity is inconsistent, if only because the dispute about the status of dialects is enounced through the language of rights. Claiming a right involves a claimant, but also a relationship with something external to the claimant and, consequently, a playing field wider than the one covered by pure particularity. There is a reason for the forgetfulness of universals or even for their ill repute amongst advocates of difference. They usually associate the idea of universality either with a final ground or foundation on which to settle disputes – which presupposes an impartial third party to judge the validity of a claim – or with the grand narratives of the European Enlightenment that tended to reduce peripheral traditions to mere particularity.

This need not be the case. There is little chance of thinking through the notion of toleration of otherness without some notion of the intolerable, without some conception of the limits of toleration, and therefore, bringing into play questions of power, decision and exclusion. And this of course means that the debate on difference must also focus on the interplay between particularity and universality. More
specifically, it must focus on universality as an impure category instead of a ground. Elsewhere I have discussed at length that reference to universals is inescapable if one is concerned about the status of the terrain for exchanges or polemics that shift the boundaries between oré and űndé and pose the question of community (Arditi and Valentine 1999: 106–41). Polemic presupposes a dispute that divides the interlocutors into antagonistic camps and that the dispute does not prevent reaching an agreement about their corresponding claims. For Rancière (1998), a dispute, or a disagreement, has less to do with interlocutors as ‘parts’ of a community than with the fact that every community is internally divided by the disagreement concerning the count of those ‘parts’. This constitutive division reveals both the absence of community as a self-identical fullness and, at the same time, the fact that whatever community exists, it is organized around a disagreement. The irreducibility of division rules out the pretension of reconciliation, yet every negotiation brings to life a space of commonality that is actually built in the course of polemic engagement. In other words, disagreement and negotiation introduce something that transcends the pure particularity of participants. The meaning and the scope of the rules of engagement are not external to them. This indicates that universality does not entail a transcendental referent or stable ground to settle disputes, but refers instead to an ‘impure’ category in the sense that the dispute in question configures – at least partly – its condition as a referent. Consequently, whether it is the case of identity politics or of a retro right, a particular claim always appeals (and inscribes itself) in the terrain of the impure or disputed universal.

The demand for rights invalidates a solipsistic conception of particularism and reintroduces universals as disputed or polemic categories, yet it also tells us something about the ambivalent relation between identity politics and liberal discourse. We can see this in the pursuit of rights as collective entitlements. Initially, the struggle for the recognition of equal rights was in line with the universalist ethos of liberalism and the Enlightenment. In the 1960s, it was the cornerstone of the civil rights movement pursuing voting rights for blacks and of feminists demanding equal pay for equal work, amongst other things. Identity politics modifies this. It criticizes liberalism for its dependence on homogenizing categories like legal and electoral citizenship – and politics as territorial representation – and conceives rights as part of a
compensatory mechanism. This compensation is either to make up for inequalities suffered in the past, which introduces a moral discourse of guilt and victimization, or to offset the initial difficulties of attaining equality simply by enjoying the same rights as others. The reference to the insufficiency of equal rights is intriguing, for even when the declared objective is to equalize, this equalization is not understood in the usual sense of ‘being as others’ but as a process requiring first a demarcation from others because equality here means the equality of ‘being as particulars’. That is why instead of endorsing the usual claim that universal rights apply to all or they are not universal, identity politics demands special rights for special groups, surplus rights beyond those enjoyed by individuals. Surplus rights through positive or reverse discrimination is a means to foster the development of social and political capital amongst the oré. We have seen earlier that the materiality of these rights is invariably quotas – a reserved allotment of positions to boost the presence of women in political parties, a pre-assigned number of places, jobs and government contracts to encourage the participation of underrepresented ethnic, national or cultural minorities in universities or the public sector, and so on.

This quota system contributed to strengthen the political force and bargaining position of subaltern groups while undermining some of the tenets of liberalism and the Enlightenment. Surplus rights question the belief in equal rights for equal individuals and modify the type of universality proclaimed by the Enlightenment. They also undercut the liberal view of rights as legal and political tools designed to defend society and the individual from the arbitrary power of public authorities, for special rights are mostly means to empower subaltern groups in relation to the hegemonic cultural and social forces. Furthermore, contrary to the liberal zest for individualism, the subject of rights is not the possessive, lonely and sovereign decision-making person but the various oré or identity-based groups.

Yet despite these apparent challenges, the rhetoric of identity politics vis-à-vis the Enlightenment and liberalism was far more radical than its practice. The disturbances it generated did not actually open up options beyond the liberal-democratic setting and despite the anti-capitalist rhetoric of many groups market society was not challenged. Special rights were quickly reprocessed as an ad hoc supplement of the liberal scheme of universal rights, the displacement from the one to
the many left the idea of the citizen as a subject of rights intact, and the state remained the primary addressee of the demand for rights and quotas – and the chief guarantor that these would be respected. Wolin does not speak directly of identity politics but he is probably thinking about it when he writes about the liberal view of the citizen as a bearer of rights rather than as a participant in collective undertakings (Wolin 1992: 243). He argues that this leads to the pettiness of interest politics where the citizen is primarily ‘a business executive, a teamster, a feminist, office worker, farmer or homosexual’ and accustoms society ‘to the dangerous notion that rights, like crop subsidies or taxes, are part of the normal give-and-take of politics’ (pp. 244–5). For him this is now the politics derived from the liberal-legal conception of citizenship as an ability to claim rights rather than to generate power and invent new forms through action in common (p. 250). Here Wolin is re-enacting the distinction between the rights-demanding identity oré and the more inclusive ſandé. Perhaps he is being too harsh, especially since initiatives generated under the heading of identity politics also managed to modify the status quo between subaltern and dominant groups, often symbolically, instilling a sense of dignity to subaltern groups, but at times also materially by opening up new opportunities for them. But he is right when he says that the liberal-legal idea of the citizen as a subject of rights is embedded in identity politics. More than challenging the liberal-democratic setting of politics, it was rather comfortable with it and used it as its framework for advancing the agenda of collective entitlements. The identity oré participated in the normal give-and-take of interest politics and transformed its initial defiance into a strategic drive to enhance pluralism and toleration in the existing liberal-democratic scenario.

Notes

1. A theoretical account of the play between oré and ſandé is developed in Arditi and Valentine (1999: 134–9), where it is used to account for the paradox of an absent community that comes into being through a polemic about whether community is possible.

2. The origin of the word mestizo – the hybrid resulting from interracial breeding – is the Spanish conquest of what came to be known as America, but here I use it in the sense of intercultural permeability. Calderón et al. (1996) use it to account for hybrid cultural identities in Latin America. However, apartheid remains a real possibility, whether because cultural domination and imperialism undermine overoptimistic expectations concerning egalitarian cultural exchanges or because difference can exist well as a multiplicity with very little contamination. I will return to this briefly later.
3. Compare this with Luhmann’s contrast between stratified and modern societies: ‘In stratified societies, the human individual was regularly placed in only one subsystem. Social status (condition, qualité, état) was the most stable characteristic of an individual’s personality. This is no longer possible for a society differentiated with respect to functions such as politics, economy, intimate relations, religion, sciences, and education. Nobody can live in only one of these systems’ (1986: 318).
Chapter 2

Populism as a Spectre of Democracy

Populism and Democracy
To the best of my understanding, Peter Worsley (1969) provides us with one of the first intelligent proposals of how to link populism and democracy. He takes his cue from the double heading of populism suggested by Edward Shils, the supremacy of the will of the people and the direct relationship between the people and the government (p. 244). Worsley makes two claims based on this. One is that these notions apply to a wide variety of situations, which is why he argues that we should regard populism as an emphasis, ‘a dimension of political culture in general, not simply as a particular kind of overall ideological system or type of organization’ (p. 245). This is Worsley’s way of saying that populism cannot claim any conceptual purity for itself, or that the ‘as such’ of populism is not such as it is always already contaminated and cannot be determined outside a context. The other claim is that one can plot the contact between the people and the leadership on a continuum that goes from the total non-involvement of the masses at one end of the spectrum to the anarchist ideal self-regulating commune at the other (p. 245). He uses this scale to distinguish Right from Left, although it seems more apt as a criterion to differentiate elitist and participatory politics. Having said this, Worsley also identifies the limits of an
argument that rests solely on the directness of the link between leaders and masses, for in complex societies this must necessarily be a symbolic or a mystifying directness. That is why he adds an important modifier: populism refers not only to this link but also to forms of ‘direct’ participation in general, be it genuine or spurious, in the sense of the involvement of people in governing their own lives, however ineffective this may turn out to be (p. 246).

The reference to participation is crucial for Worsley’s argument. He disputes Lipset’s conception of the good society as one where citizens can chose amongst contenders for political office, for he argues, quite correctly, that this reduces democracy to the institutionalization of opposition and to the periodic change of government. In saying this, he is questioning the commonplace argument that encloses democracy with its latter-day liberal format of territorial representation and electoral citizenship. By focusing on participation, Worsley broadens the field of what we normally understand by it: if it is a way of putting into practice the supremacy of the will of the people, then democracy ‘has always involved a great deal more than the ins-and-outs of parliamentarianism’ (p. 246). He draws a two-fold conclusion from this. On the one hand, populism is neither democratic nor anti-democratic in itself, for Fascists, as well as egalitarian and reform movements, can claim to represent the people and appeal to direct forms of participation too. Yet on the other hand, he adds that ‘insofar as populism plumps for the rights of majorities to make sure – by “intervening” – that they are not ignored (as they commonly are) populism is profoundly compatible with democracy’ (p. 247).

This compatibility is what interests me. The recent literature on populism replicates this link with democratic politics. Jack Hayward sees populism as a response to the perceived shortcomings of democratic elitism. Critics say that in the case of the European Union, elites no longer act in the public interest and corruption at the highest levels discredits them (Hayward 1996: 10). The continuing decline of mass parties and the ability of elite-oriented organizations to mobilize the public open up a space for the new politics of social movements and challenger parties (pp. 21–2). This failure of the mediating role of impersonal elites, he says, is an open invitation for populist and other groups to step in to counteract the democratic deficit in the EU. Even more so, given that their methods of political action include the use
of direct action, which broadens the participatory horizon of citizens beyond that of infrequent voters choosing amongst contending parties (p. 23). Hayward concludes that no matter how unsavoury populism may be for some, representative democracy must coexist with the countervailing forces of elitism and populism (p. 27).

Margaret Canovan develops a similar view, although instead of speaking of elitism and populism she refers to the pragmatic and redemptive faces of democracy. As do other authors, she understands populism ‘as an appeal to “the people” against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society’ (Canovan 1999: 3). Canovan specifies what she means by this. Firstly, like new social movements, the anti-system mobilization of populism often runs against parties, but unlike the former, populists direct their challenge to both the political and economic establishments and elite values of the type held by opinion-formers in academia and the media. Secondly, a recognized authority grants legitimacy to this revolt against the power structures, for populists claim to speak for the people; the style of this speech is characterized by the use of a direct language and by the proposal of equally simple and direct political solutions to the problems of ordinary people. Finally, there is a certain populist mood that involves the ‘revivalist flavour of a movement powered by enthusiasm’ and a tendency to focus emotions on a charismatic leader (pp. 3–6).

After fleshing-out the basic coordinates of the populist ‘reaction against politics-as-usual’, Canovan leaves aside the discussion of the ideology or the policy content and proceeds, like Hayward, to examine populism in its relation to democracy. Her basic claim derives from Michael Oakeshott’s distinction between two styles that have characterized European politics throughout modernity. One is the politics of faith, the belief in the possibility of achieving perfection through human effort, or salvation without the intervention of divine providence (Oakeshott 1996: 22–3). It is a style characterized by ‘an absence of scruple, a suspicion that formality in government and the insistence on the letter of the law will hinder the enterprise’ (p. 56). Jacobinism would exemplify this. The other style is the politics of scepticism, which reckons that governments can do little more than keep the peace and improve ‘the system of rights and duties and the concomitant system of means of redress, which together compose the superficial order’ (p. 34). For Oakeshott, neither style can exist in its purity, or
alone, for they are poles of a single activity and not mere alternative opposites (p. 91). Whenever they do appear on their own, they become their own nemesis, self-destructive (p. 92, 127). The tension between them explains the deep ambiguity of our political vocabulary (p. 18, 118), whose terms are continually being claimed by the opposing styles, and it also accounts for the contingency of all political arrangements, as these are the outcome of the shifting fortunes of each style.

Building on this distinction, but renaming its constitutive poles ‘redemptive’ and ‘pragmatic’, Canovan says that we can ‘understand modern democracy (idea and phenomenon) as a point of intersection between redemptive and pragmatic sides of politics’, and that between these two faces ‘lies a gap in which populism is liable to appear’ (1999: 9). She mentions three specific tensions that reveal this gap. First, pragmatists see democracy as a way of handling conflicts without appealing to repression or degenerating into civil war; the set of electoral institutions and practices of representative democracy provide the key mechanisms for this (p. 11). However, democracy also has a more glorious face related to secular redemption, ‘the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people’ (p. 12). For her, ‘when too great a gap opens up between haloed democracy and the grubby business of politics, populists tend to move on to the vacant territory, promising in place of the dirty world of party manoeuvring the shining ideal of democracy renewed’ (p. 12). I take this emphasis on ‘renewal’ to mean either a reform or a reinstitution of the existing order, be it in terms of its social, political, cultural or economic dimensions. Second, another source of tension that functions as a breeding ground for populist demands is the gap between the promise of power to the people – understood as a capacity to exercise some control over major issues that affect our lives – and the actual performance of existing democracies on issues like participation and the responsiveness of elected representatives (p. 12). Finally, populism exploits the tension between ‘democratic institutions and the alienation to which they inevitably give rise’, that is, between the romanticism of a spontaneous expression of the will of the people on the one hand and, on the other, the institutions and professional expertise that are required to mediate that will (p. 13). Populist movements react against this by empowering charismatic leaders who promise to break with the routine of bureaucratic institutions and to turn politics into a more personal experience (p. 14). In all these cases,
the populist intervention invokes the redemptive face of democracy as a corrective of the excesses brought by pragmatism.

The Gap between Faith and Scepticism and the Elusiveness of Populism

The theoretical core of Canovan’s contribution is the claim that the gap wherein populism emerges revolves around a certain non-coincidence of the two faces of democracy. Populism is a response to an asymmetry brought on by an excess (of pragmatism) and a deficit (of redemption). How are we to assess the conceptual status of this gap or in-between, that is to say, what is the theoretical import of the spacing between the two faces of democratic politics?

This question presents us with at least two options. One is to conceive the gap as an outcome of a poor balance between pragmatism and redemption, and therefore claim that it is possible – and perhaps even necessary – to arrive at some sort of correct combination, either through patient pursuit or by feat of institutional engineering. This would be something of an Aristotelian solution: just as the good constitution consists of the right mixture of monarchic, aristocratic, and constitutional or democratic components, the good modern polity is one that manages to balance pragmatism and redemption in a way that cancels out the tension between them. The problem is that then one has to dismiss populism, for there would be no gap left for it to appear in. It would turn out to be an accident or a disturbance exorcized away by fiat of the right mix.

At first sight, Canovan would seem to endorse this when she says that populists thrive when the gap between the two faces of democracy widens, for this suggests, by implication, that if the gap were sufficiently narrow, the space for the populist appeal would shrink accordingly. Similarly, there would be an Aristotelian vein in Oakeshott too, at least according to the Editor’s introduction to his book, which highlights the pursuit of a correct balance between the opposite tendencies of faith and scepticism (Oakeshott 1996: x). In my view both authors explicitly avoid such a solution. Oakeshott does propose the principle of the mean point between the two poles of modern politics, but he compares his idea of the right balance to a shifting equilibrium of the type sought by the ‘trimmer’, ‘one who disposes his weight so as to keep the ship upon an even keel’ (p. 123). That is why he describes this mean point as a middle region of movement and not as a central
point of repose (p. 121). This means that political settings have nothing to do with the static beauty of geometric forms and refer instead to contingent arrangements resulting from variable mixes between the two political styles of modernity. He also speaks of a surprising partnership between the politics of faith and the politics of scepticism. These styles of government form a unity in their mutual attraction and repulsion. Oakeshott describes this relationship as a *concordia discors* or harmony in discord (p. 90, 118), an oxymoron reminiscent of Kant’s celebrated allusion to the ‘unsocial sociability’ characteristic of humankind. All this weakens the charge of Aristotelian reasoning. The same happens in the case of Canovan. Both pragmatism and redemption are *necessary* for the working of democracy and, if anything, each acts as an endless corrective for the other; they are, she says, ‘a pair of squabbling Siamese twins, inescapably linked, so that it is an illusion to suppose that we can have one without the other’ (Canovan 1999: 10).

Having established that the gap is not the result of a poor mix, and therefore cannot be assimilated as a void that could and should be filled, we can move on to the second option: one that conceives it as a matter of structural bad timing. The meeting of pragmatism and redemption will always come too early or too late, and therefore the tension generated by the excess or deficit of one or the other – and by the corrective role of one over the other – will be played out indefinitely. In this interpretation, the question is no longer how or if the two faces might come together; it is about the actual spacing between them, one that confirms that their non-coincidence is a constitutive and not an accidental feature of modern politics. For Canovan, as for Oakeshott, democratic politics *requires* this in-between if both complacency and romanticism are to be held in check. The problem is that if the gap is a structural feature there is no reason to think that it will father only populist offspring. Other movements could appear there too, so instead of being the condition of possibility of populism it turns out to be the space of appearance of the impulse of political reform in general. Canovan raises this point towards the end of her essay when she says that ‘populism is not the only kind of radicalism that flourishes in this gap’; the other kind she is referring to is the theory and the practice of participatory democracy that came along with the new social movements of the 1960s (1999: 14–15).

This is not a minor afterthought, for it poses a dilemma that touches on the specificity of the subject we are examining. On the one
hand, Canovan re-elaborates Oakeshott’s distinction between the two faces of modern politics in order to account for the populist experience in contemporary democracies. The virtue of her argument resides in the creative way in which she grafts these two styles into a different setting and proposes the gap between them as a space for the emergence of populism. On the other hand, this argument goes beyond populism as it addresses the broader issue of radical democratic politics – or of radical politics in general, democratic or otherwise, for Oakeshott reminds us time and again that these styles were born with modern politics and have shaped its fortunes for the past five hundred years. As mentioned, this means that the gap that ensues from the constitutive spacing between pragmatism and redemption – and, in particular, the gap resulting from the excess of the former over the latter – accounts for the emergence of the populist appeal, but also for the appearance of any movement or coalition seeking to enhance the redemptive side of politics. That is why this remarkable theoretical insight of Canovan tells us a lot about how to proceed with the study of the actual practice of politics, which can never be reduced to a disenchanted pragmatism stripped of all messianic or redemptive elements. However, it also limits the analytic import of the gap as a means to assess the populist phenomenon in its ‘as such’.

One could try to specify this by other means. Ernesto Laclau does so by fiat of conceptual permutation, for he maintains that populism and politics are interchangeable terms. He is quite clear about this. ‘If populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice at the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative’ (Laclau 2005a: 47). I can see the appeal of this argument, as it interpellates those like myself who share the intuition that all politics, democratic or not, has a populist streak. Yet it is also disconcerting, for it seeks to specify the conceptual valence of populism by endowing it with the attributes of the political. I am reticent to endorse this conceptual inflation, the use of two concepts to designate a radical interruption of communitarian space, or to go along with the confusion resulting from populism and politics morphing into one another. This does not mean that one should aim for Cartesian clarity. Any reference to a strict ‘as such’ of concepts is tricky, especially if one accepts Oakeshott’s argument about the deep ambiguity of our political lexicon. Language is the site of a tug-of-war
between faith and scepticism, with each style staking its own claims on the various terms of our vocabulary. There will always be an inevitable degree of linguistic slippage and outright polemic about the meaning of the terms of political discourse, including that of ‘political’ itself. Like any other concept, populism is caught in the tension between these two styles and is therefore inevitably contaminated by its relation to other terms in our political vocabulary. The very possibility of any ‘as such’ is thus compromised from the outset.

Spectral Recurrences
Can we disambiguate populism further while maintaining the reference to the squabbling Siamese twins of pragmatism and redemption? A closer look at the second theme in Canovan’s argument, populism as the shadow of democracy, is helpful in this respect. What does the metaphor tell us about the relation between populism and democracy? Is the populist shadow a fault, an accident, a recurrence, or a fixture of modern democracy? The impact of the metaphor rests mostly on what it evokes in the reader. At first, she speaks of populism as the shadow cast by democracy (Canovan 1999: 3). The emphasis falls on the ‘by’, as in ‘cast by democracy’, which of course raises the questions of what this shadow is cast onto, and what it consists of. One possibility is to understand the shadow as an indicator of a democratic glitch. Liberals are not particularly happy with the populist offhanded interpretation of democratic rules and institutional arrangements, so maybe we would have to speak of a shadow cast on the liberal component of modern democracies. Canovan, however, warns us against the simplistic view of an illiberal populism that nonetheless incarnates the democratic side of liberal democracy (p. 8), for that would make populism something of an über-democratic experience. This is a reasonable caveat, yet she does mention the populist distrust of institutional mediations like established political parties or the intricacies of a legislative process, both of which require experts and professional politicians instead of the ‘common man’ of the populist interpellation. If one focuses on these typically liberal aspects of democracy, populism would appear to be a glitch or a shadow cast by democracy. That is, cast by the actual functioning of democratic politics, either by an excess of pragmatism that invites its redemptive Siamese twin to step in as a corrective, or by a systemic overload caused by participation left unchecked and running amok.
However, a shadow is not an accident that can occur or not. Leaving aside the special occasions of night and high noon when shadows disappear, and the presumed although unconfirmed possibility of the living dead who are said to have none, a shadow is, by definition, that which will accompany a body. If populism is a shadow of democracy, it will follow it always as a possibility – and probably as something more than a possibility, since no one can choose to have a shadow or not. This seems to be the point Hayward makes: in the European polity, populism coexists with representative democracy. Perhaps that is why later on, Canovan speaks not of a shadow cast by democracy but of a ‘populist mobilization that follows democracy like a shadow’ (1999: 7, emphasis added). Here, the metaphor undergoes a subtle connotative shift. It confirms that one cannot assimilate populism to a malfunction and that while it is not equivalent to democracy, as a shadow that persists, populism must be conceived as a possibility embedded in the very practice of democracy.

The question is to determine how embedded this possibility is, and what it entails, for once we have allowed for a relation of interiority between populism and democracy, the semantic field of these concepts begin to overlap. The purity of frontiers is a bogus notion, but it seems to me that the acceptance of conceptual contamination – Oakeshott’s thesis about the ambiguity of our political language – should stop short of Laclau’s claim that populism and politics are interchangeable. On the one hand, the spacing created by the squabbling Siamese twins of redemption and pragmatism is a distinctive trait of modern politics and a condition of possibility for the emergence of reform movements in general, and on the other, the reference to the shadow as something that follows democracy turns populism into an internal possibility of democracy. Either way, the difficulty I mentioned earlier reappears, for the reflection on the populist experience overlaps with an argument that seems more appropriate to describe the vicissitudes of modern politics.

Perhaps, and I must underline the exploratory nature of this ‘perhaps’, we can disambiguate the intuition concerning the interface between the gap and the shadow by modifying the status of the latter and grafting on to it additional features. This will allow us to fine-tune the conceptual valence of the populist phenomenon. Following Derrida (1994c), who popularized the discussion of spectres and of spectral logic in his reading of Marx, we can refer to populism as a spectre.
rather than a shadow of democracy. I am not just fidgeting with language. A spectre suggests both a visitation, as in the return of Hamlet’s father, and something that can haunt us, as in the spectre of communism famously depicted by Marx and Engels in the opening lines of the Manifesto. This double meaning is implicit in Canovan’s argument concerning the shadow, but the reference to spectrality takes on the interplay between the two options explicitly, and more importantly, it addresses the undecidability that is inbuilt into populism, for it can be something that both accompanies democracy and haunts it.

We can see this spectrality at work in three modes of appearance of populism, all of them connected with democratic politics. As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, each moves the phenomenon a notch further in the interval separating a visitation from a more threatening haunting. I introduce these three modalities very briefly. The first one refers to a relation of interiority with political representation. By this I mean that populism may be seen as a particular mode of representation that is compatible with, but not identical to, the liberal-democratic understanding of representative government in today’s media-enhanced political performances. Manin (1997) speaks of the metamorphoses of representation and claims that the older party democracy is being replaced by what he calls ‘audience democracy’. Two major developments characterize the latter. One is that political marketing and the spread of the mass media has undermined the importance of party activists and bureaucrats. Today, he says, political leaders can use radio and television to bypass party machineries and establish a direct relation with the electorate (p. 220). This provides them with personal legitimacy that is relatively independent from that cast by political institutions, and opens up a space for both mavericks and career politicians to thrive in the public stage. The very possibility of securing a virtual immediacy between voters and candidates seems attuned to the populist claim to a direct appeal to the people and its fascination with leaders who enjoy supra-partisan legitimacy. The other development is that in a world of growing complexity, no elected official is expected to fulfil all his or her electoral promises. Instead, given the speed and intensity of economic, technical and cultural change, what counts is their capacity to adjust themselves swiftly to unforeseen circumstances. That is why Manin claims that perhaps audience democracy calls for a reassessment of what Locke called ‘prerogative’ power, the capacity of making decisions in the absence of a standing rule or norm (p. 221).
Personal trust becomes an important criterion for electoral options; people today are more inclined to vote for those they can trust to make decisions in a changing world (pp. 221, 226). Once again, I see here a fertile ground for the populist tradition of strong leaders, only that these no longer appear as exceptions in the institutional framework of representative government but instead become a functional component of audience democracy. In this scenario, populism becomes a spectral companion of liberal-democratic politics.

A second modality of populism refers to a mode of participation that departs from the etiquette of political salons without apologizing for its brashness. The archetypical image of populists is that of football fans who respond to the victories and defeats of their teams without paying much attention to the ritualized table manners of public life. As in all challenges mounted on the redemptive side of democratic politics, their objectives are more important than a strict observance of institutional procedures. One can see this, for example, in their instrumental use of popular mobilization and street violence to bypass institutional constraints or warp the functioning of legal rules and political procedures. Whether as a reaction against politics as usual or as a response to the failures of elitist democracy, this mode of populist intervention has the potential to both disturb and renew the political process without always or necessarily stepping outside the institutional settings of democracy. Its politics unfolds in the rougher edges of the liberal democratic establishment. Here the spectre has moved a step further from being a media-friendly fellow traveller of liberal democracy and starts to resemble a haunting presence, one that generates some degree of discomfort within mainstream politics.

A third and final manifestation of populism reveals the more ominous potential of the metaphor of the shadow. In this case, the spectre no longer refers to a visitation but to a phenomenon that comes to haunt political democracy and to endanger the very framework in which it can function. For example, the distrust for institutional procedures and the intricacies of the legislative process – which Oakeshott identifies as one of the traits of the politics of faith – might give way to a discretionary adherence to the rule of law that slips all too easily into authoritarian practices. When in office, this multiplies conflicts with the judiciary and other state powers; when in opposition, it blurs the line separating the multitude in action from mob rule. The non-democratic behaviour of many populists undermines the rule of law.
without necessarily eroding their own legitimacy or popular support. With their penchant for demagogic claims, they often invoke the trope of corrupt or self-serving elites that have lost touch with the people, or prey on people’s fears by claiming that stricter policing and immigration controls will solve economic and social problems. This, of course, requires a strong and decisive leadership or government, depending on whether they are in opposition or in office, but this is often an alibi for authoritarian practices. As a rule, populists can get away with undemocratic behaviour, at least in the short run, as long as their actions are perceived to represent the will of the people. This evokes a quasi-Hobbesian theory of political obligation. The classical exchange of obedience for protection is replaced by a passionate allegiance to a leader and a political grouping in exchange for jobs and security, or at least the promise to provide them. Moreover, the centrality of the leaders and their direct rapport with the ‘common man’ transform them into something akin to infallible sovereigns in that their decisions are unquestionable because they are theirs. The populist mode of representation and its peculiarly brash style of political participation then cease to be internal moments of the democratic process and turn into its menacing underside.

In brief, the emphasis I have placed on the spectral relation between populism and democracy helps to supplement Canovan’s take on populism. The undecidability between the visitation and the haunting allows several modes of appearance of the phenomenon, including the three I have mentioned here. As an internal periphery of democratic politics, populism can be a dimension of representation, a mode of participation lodged in the rougher edges of democracy, but also something more disturbing given that it can thrive in political democracies while it morphs into something that can become its nemesis.
Chapter 3

Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics

The Verbal Smoke Surrounding Populism

Neopopulism and neocorporatism are regular entries in our political lexicon, yet the meaning assigned to the prefix ‘neo’ is not as clear in the former as it is in the latter. The rather unambiguous meaning of neocorporatism derives from the conceptual stability of its classical referent in the mainstream literature of political science. In the case of neopopulism, the prefix has not fared so well, partly due to the contested status of populism as such.

There has been a cluster of meanings associated with the term populism. The account offered by the sociology of modernization prevailed throughout the 1960s, at least in the developing world. A classical exponent of this approach is Germani (1969), who sees populist mobilization as a deviation in the standard path from traditional to modern society. Di Tella proposes a modified yet equally functionalist interpretation. He conceives populism as the result of the convergence of two anti-status-quo forces, the dispossessed masses available for mobilization and an educated yet impoverished elite that resents its status incongruence – the gap between rising expectations and job satisfaction – and broods on ways of changing the current state of things (Di Tella 1965: 49–50). Other theoretical interpretations move away from this view of
populism as an alternative road to modernize class-divided, traditional societies. Lasch (1995) sees it as a response to the crisis of modernity. In his initial neo-Gramscian approach, Laclau (1977) conceives populism as a dimension of the popular-democratic imaginary and argues that its class-nature varies in accordance with contending discursive articulations of the concept. He later sees it as a radical alternative equivalent to politics (2005a) or as the construction of ‘the people’ as a political force (2005b). Cammack (2000) opts for the revival of a Marxist standpoint that associates the phenomenon with resistance to neo-liberal capitalism, although he adds a functionalist touch by linking the changing status of neopopulism to the requirements of capitalist reproduction.

Worsley maintains that the term is wide enough to encompass right- and left-wing variants, to appear in advanced countries and in developing ones, in towns and in the countryside, and amongst workers and the middle classes as well as peasants (1969: 242–3). It includes political phenomena ranging from the Russian narodnichestvo of the nineteenth century to William Jennings Bryan and small farmer movements in the USA during the 1930s and Latin American populism of the 1940s and 1950s. The latter, exemplified by Argentina under Domingo Perón and Brazil under Getulio Vargas, had trademark characteristics usually seen as something of a general matrix of classical urban and industrial populism. It was characterized by strong nationalism; by the perception of the state as both a political bounty and the prime mover of economic activity; by economic programmes based on subsidies and price controls, import substitution and the protection of local industry; by a cavalier allocation of government resources to reward followers and punish opponents; and by the use of public spending to build networks of patronage disregarding criteria of fiscal or monetary responsibility. On the more political side, typical features were the enfranchisement of the urban underclass of descamisados (shirtless) or cabecitas negras (dark heads) and their mobilization against the oligarchy; the creation of mass political parties; the growth of trade union militancy shadowed by governmental control of organized labour and its use as a reserve army for mass demonstrations in support of the party or the leader; the cult of personality, that aggrandizes the stature of the leader and turns him or her into a quasi-messianic figure; and the role of leaders as political brokers that bypass formal mechanisms of representation whenever it suits them.
On the political side of the disagreement around populism, those who have focused on the more worrisome traits, like the messianic nature of its leaders or the submission of trade unions to the government, see it as a purely negative phenomenon. Others find it hard to reject many of its avowed goals when taken at face value, as they read like a wish list for a socialist and radical-democratic agenda: the emphasis on welfare policies and employment, the continual appeal to the people, the claim to empower the ‘common man’ and the capacity to motivate largely un-political individuals to participate. There is also the professed aim of restoring some dignity to politics, which instead of representing the aspirations of society, often functions as a ‘pork barrel’ business run by corrupt and cynical political impresarios. This, together with the anti-liberal bias that I will discuss below, helps us to understand why in the 1960s and 1970s parts of the Third World intelligentsia – amongst them, socialist intellectuals who championed nationalist and anti-imperialist demands – saw populism under a very favourable light. For them, the fact that it jump-started the empowerment of the underclass through distributive policies and though its irruption into the political scene, together with its continual challenge of the power of the rich and powerful that constituted the traditional ruling bloc meant that populism contained important egalitarian and participatory components.

Things have changed quite radically in recent years without dispelling the polemic around the meaning of the term populism. Populism today seems to bear very little in common with its classical referent, except, perhaps, for the self-perception of the leader as a saviour of the nation and the standard, and often demagogic, observance of the premise that ‘virtue resides in the simple people, who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions’ (Wiles 1969: 166). This claim begs the inevitable questions of who ‘the people’ are and how the meaning of the term varies from one case to another (Kazin 1995: 13; Knight 1999: 266; Marquand 1999: 9; Tarchi 2003: 16–17). Nationalism and economic protectionism are virtually gone, and popular mobilization tends to be minimized; in its wake, we are left with what some describe as a marriage of convenience between neoliberal economics and neopopulist politics (Weyland 1996; Knight 1999: 246–7; Mayorga 2002: 307ff). To talk of a marriage does not settle the question either. This is not only because there are tensions between the economics and the politics of neopoliticians. Despite the general advocacy of market
liberalization, the differences in the policies they follow once in office remain far too large to allow us to identify this as a common denominator that could function as the genus of the more recent incarnations of the populist experience.

To complicate matters further, the populist drive seems to be virtually indistinguishable from Oakeshott’s ‘politics of faith’ discussed in the previous chapter that has characterized a wide range of reform movements throughout modernity. The will to renew politics, the exaltation of ‘the people’, and the presumed immediacy of their link with the leader or the party are present in political movements not usually branded ‘populist’. Besides, one cannot fail to notice that the terms we have been using – populism, modern politics, democracy, and reform – do not cease to contaminate one another. The result of this is that the conceptual frontiers between them become unstable. This puts a limit to any pretension to disambiguate fully the ‘as such’ of populism vis-à-vis politics. The conceptual contours of the term remain fuzzy, and its theoretically contested status unabated.

This does not mean that the phenomenon is intractable. One way of approaching it is to describe populism as an ‘anexact’ object. I take this paradoxical expression from Deleuze and Guattari, who in turn borrow it from Husserl’s writings on protogeometry or science that studies vagabond or nomadic morphological essences. They say,

Protogeometry is neither inexact like sensible things nor exact like ideal essences, but anexact yet rigorous (‘essentially and not accidentally inexact’). The circle is an organic, ideal, fixed essence, but roundness is a vague and fluent essence, distinct both from the circle and things that are round (a vase, a wheel, the sun)...At the limit, all that counts is the constantly shifting borderline. (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 367)

The interesting thing about this notion is that it falls outside the binary opposition between exact and inexact, for the vagueness of the contours of anexact objects is a requisite condition and cannot be formalized as a clear truth-value. Considering the range of interpretations and positions, populism could well be an anexact object and therefore any precise description faces a real and perhaps insurmountable limit.

Assimilating populism to an anexact object of thought tells us something about the status of the concept but not much about the range and type of political occurrences covered by its semantic field. We expect to find something there without being very sure of what
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It is. Worsley puts it quite fittingly when he says that ‘since the word has been used, the existence of verbal smoke might well indicate a fire somewhere’ (1969: 219). The question is whether this fire is sufficiently distinct as to beget an acceptable descriptive concept. I think it is, despite legitimate reservations about how precise one can get. There is a growing awareness that populism is not a stand-alone phenomenon and that its intelligibility is intertwined with contemporary democratic politics, be it because it is a fellow traveller, an unpleasant by-product or a threat to democracy. Hayward sees it as a response to the failures of elitist democracy in the European polity, whereas for Canovan it emerges in the ever-present gap between the pragmatic and the redemptive faces of democracy (Hayward 1996; Canovan 1999). Mudde speaks of a populist ‘Zeitgeist’ emerging in the 1990s in Western Europe, arguing that populism is not a pathology of democracy given that its discourse on the good people versus the corrupt elite has become so extended that it has now become mainstream. Yet he also indicates that populism today is demanding more responsiveness of politicians and governments and not necessarily more participation (Mudde 2004: 558). Similarly, Blokker looks at populist nationalism in Eastern Europe and concludes that it is not simply a response to the upheavals of the transition to a market economy or an atavistic anomaly. One cannot reduce it to chauvinistic ethnic homogeneity either, even when there is also an element of this in populist nationalism. Instead, the vindication of national autonomy and self-determination is internal to modernity and democratic politics. As he put it, the populist critique of existing institutions is at least in part ‘about the mobilization of the people around the idea of national emancipation and collective autonomy’ and an open call for the participation of the people in politics – albeit often under the banner of direct rule or rapprochement between rulers and ruled (Blokker 2005: 384). Laclau has taken the link between populism and politics further, suggesting that we should regard all politics as populist to some extent. ‘If populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice at the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative’ (Laclau 2005a: 47). There is some truth to this view, but one needs to expand on it in order to avoid a simple and direct conceptual overlap between politics and populism, as well as to account for non-radical instances of the populist appeal.
I want to explore the pertinence of situating the phenomenon in relation to both modern politics and democracy. The evidence for this link is mixed. In the more intuitive use of the term, populism, old and new, is a label applied to crowd-pleasing politicians hard to distinguish from demagogues who will make any kind of promise, no matter how unattainable, as long as it advances their cause, and who will tweak legal procedures and institutional arrangements shamelessly to adjust them to their needs. Bernard Crick suggests something along these lines when he argues that there is a contradiction between populism and politics because its inability to compromise shows the populist contempt for politics (2005: 626, 631–2; also Tarchi 2003: 26). This, of course, applies to other political movements too. The common-sense use of the term also describes an ambiguous observance of democratic practices and a general dislike of liberal institutional settings. Whether they are in government or in opposition, the populist impatience with formalized decision-making processes leads them to invoke their trademark distrust of elites as a sweeping device to override institutional constraints on their actions. One could attribute this to inexperience with the intricacies of the legislative and judicial process, for populists see themselves, legitimately or not, as political outsiders. Whatever the reason, their general disdain for the procedural channels and for the checks and balances of the democratic process reflects a strong anti-establishment ethos that might explain why liberals are not particularly keen on populism. They see populism, especially the urban-industrial type, as a variant of old Caesarism with a democratic dressing. Yet, even when populists warp the operational mechanisms of a liberal-democratic framework of politics – representation, partisan competition, accountability, and due process of law – they invest considerable energy in defending their democratic credentials and reassuring critics of their observance of that framework. Either as mere posturing or as an actual practice, the democratic vindication is part of the populist imaginary, even though the persistence of authoritarian variants is a reminder that one must keep a level head and remember that the relation between populism and democracy is complex and often tense.

My proposal to disambiguate the concept further consists of accepting that populism is a recurrent feature of modern politics, one that appears both in democratic and undemocratic variants, and that this recurrence refers to key themes of the populist discourse, the high-minded
as well as the more unsavoury ones. By this I mean the invocation of the people, the critique of elites and corruption, the participatory imaginary, the role of strong political leaders, and the impatience with the formalities of the political process. I will discuss this by examining three possible modalities of populism. I mentioned them briefly in the previous chapter. If one looks at populism from the standpoint of the political subsystem, it can be a fellow traveller of contemporary, media-enhanced modes of representation at work in both emerging and well-established democracies. This mode would be fully compatible with the institutional regime form of liberal-democratic politics. A second possibility shifts the focus to the more turbulent ways of expressing demands, articulating collective wills or performing political exchanges behind the procedural normality of democratic politics. This does not turn populist mobilization into an anomaly of democracy. On the contrary, it makes it a symptom, a paradoxical element capable of both disturbing and renewing the operation of democratic politics. Populism thus functions as a mirror in which democracy can look at the rougher, less palatable edges that remain veiled by the gentrifying veneer of its liberal format. Both these modalities of populism can thrive in a democratic setting, but the third one puts it in danger: it also emerges from within democratic politics, but as a ‘misfire’ that mutates all too easily into authoritarianism. Taken together, these three possibilities of populism – as a mode of representation, as a politics on the more turbulent edges of democracy and as a threatening underside – will enable us to recast the populist experience as an internal periphery of liberal-democratic politics.

Populism as a Mode of Representation

From the standpoint of the political regime, especially in the case of elections, we can regard populism as a mode of representation that has become part of mainstream democratic politics. The reciprocal applies too. Macpherson’s work on liberalism and democracy illustrates this very well. He says that the expansion of suffrage rights in the second half of the nineteenth century led to the democratization of liberal states, but the concomitant acceptance of market society and representative government as fixtures of modern democracy contributed to liberalize the very idea of democracy (Macpherson 1965: 11, also 1977). Hence the familiar syntagm of ‘liberal democracy’ was born. Similarly, when we say that populism is a mode of representation
compatible with liberal-democratic politics we must specify that it is not simply a question of coexistence or a relation of pure exteriority between them. Neither is left untouched by the encounter. This is the case when populists see representative government as something more than either empty formalism or a poor substitute of direct democracy, and when traits of the populist mode of representation become regular components of liberal democratic politics.

Style and Persuasion
How do we describe a populist ‘mode of representation’ – warts and all – as part of the territory of democratic politics? An initial response is to draw from authors who speak of populism as a style or mode of persuasion. Knight conceives it as a set of features – the rapport with the people, a confrontational mentality, personalism, and mobilization – and claims that ‘style’ is the basis for a looser model of populism that actually fits better with the phenomenon (1999: 223–48, 240). ‘Fit’ might not be the most felicitous term, for despite the avowed instrumentalism and nominalism of his definition of the populist style (p. 225), it evokes, at least implicitly, the problems associated with a correspondence theory of truth. However, if one leaves this issue aside, the emphasis on a more flexible view based on the idea of ‘style’ opens up a productive line of inquiry. It tacitly accepts the impossibility of establishing a Cartesian-like definition of the populist phenomenon and endorses Oakeshott’s well-known claim that the political vocabulary of modernity cannot extricate itself from some degree of ambiguity (1996: 28, 118).

Canovan (1999: 5) speaks of style too. She describes it as the ability to communicate in tabloid-like language, offer political analyses that are as simple and direct as the solutions they propose and, in general, appear to be the embodiment of transparency. In his study of populism in the USA Kazin refers to it as a political rhetoric or a mode of persuasion, one in which speakers use everyday ‘expressions, tropes, themes, and images to convince large numbers of Americans to join their side or to endorse their views on particular issues’ (1995: 3). In the USA, he says, this language has undergone many transformations. The nineteenth-century heritage of Americanism and its virtues – the producer ethic at the core of the idea of ‘the people’ and an elite that opposes and exploits it – has drifted into a more conservative territory in the late twentieth century. This is a result of the appearance
of the moral majority, the criticism of ‘Big Government’, the scorn for the cultural elite, and so on (pp. 12–17, 251 ff.).

I am sympathetic towards this way of thinking about populism and the constitution of the people by reference to style and political rhetoric, if only because it introduces, albeit indirectly, my claim concerning the mainstreaming of populism as a mode of representation. A populist persuasion built on the strength of a simple and direct language, which entails a reduction of the complexity of the issues presented to the electorate, has become characteristic of contemporary politics generally. I have more difficulties in the reference to an appeal to the people or the interpellation of the common people against the status quo, as this is also a distinctive trait of democracy, particularly amongst those engaged in emancipatory politics. Perhaps the distinction is a matter of degree, in the sense that populism radicalizes the appeal to the people, but then there is the problem of measuring the intensity of the appeal. Schmitt faces a similar problem when he invokes the criterion of intensity to define a political opposition. He wants to differentiate the friend-enemy opposition – according to him, the political opposition par excellence – from all others according to the criterion of intensity: political oppositions are the most intense because they are the only ones that can lead to the extreme or decisive case of war (Schmitt 1996). Yet as Derrida has shown, this presupposes a telos of intensity. If an opposition becomes more political because it has the possibility of reaching the extreme case of war then, contrary to what Schmitt claimed, war would become not the limit case but the quintessence of the political (Derrida 1997: 131–2, 139). A similar problem would plague a distinction between populism and democracy based on the appeal to the people or the use of a certain rhetoric or mode of persuasion.

I suggest instead that we focus on representation, for this has the double advantage of maintaining a family resemblance with both style and rhetoric and of linking populism with mainstream politics. The usual way of dealing with this link is to say that populism is the result of a crisis of representation, as a response to either the incapacity or the refusal of elites to respond to people’s concerns. There is some evidence to support this view. The populist right often exploits xenophobia to swell its ranks and disqualify (other) professional politicians. Typically, they would blame establishment figures for the increase in unemployment figures amongst domestic labourers because they are lax on immigration controls and thus entice the influx of foreign workers.
A key assumption of Panizza’s work on Brazil (2000: 180–3) is that populism revolves around a crisis of representation. Collor de Mello, he says, exploited the disenchantment generated by this crisis in his bid for the presidency in 1989. He successfully played the card of the political outsider and mounted a moral crusade against the corrupt economic and political establishment in the name of the excluded masses. As in any redemptive script, his avowed goal was to renew politics and the economy. A crisis of representation would thus constitute a fertile terrain for the emergence of populism. However, the reference to ‘crisis’ also narrows down the scope of the populist experience to moments when politics fails to address participatory, distributive or other demands. One could draw from Panizza’s advice to distinguish ‘populism in the streets’ from ‘populism in power’ (2000: 190) and argue that the emphasis on the exception does not allow us to differentiate populist politics in opposition from populism in government. In the former, the motif of the breakdown of representation is more likely to be salient, whereas in the discourse of the latter the possibility of such a crisis tends to diminish but a populist mode of representation might remain in place all the same.

**A Crossover between Acting for Others, Authorization and the Imaginary/Symbolic**

Instead of the moments of crisis, then, we could look at representation itself and see how populism takes it on. Representation means rendering present, bringing into presence through a substitute, ‘the making present of something that is nevertheless absent’ or, more in tone with the specifically political sense of ‘acting for others’, representation ‘means acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them’ (Pitkin 1967: 237, 209, 12; also Derrida 1982: 307–9). This acting for others does not mean that the ‘others’ are left completely at the mercy of their representatives, for they also act upon them, if only because of their participation in public debates and their capacity to punish or reward elected officials by exercising their suffrage rights. There are three elementary yet important presuppositions at work here. First, representation makes no sense unless one accepts a two-tier playing field, one of the represented and one of those who act for them as their representatives. Second, there is a gap between these tiers, which prevents the collapse of one into the other; this distinguishes representation from self-government. Third, the ‘re-’ of representation involves
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a repetition whereby ‘the people’ return through a substitute (Derrida 1982: 308), but that which returns is not an unaltered sameness, a mere expression of pre-constituted identities and interests. Like any return, which is governed by what Derrida (1988) calls the law of iterability or the paradox of a repetition whose sameness incorporates something other, the task of ‘rendering-present’ introduces a differential element that modifies the absent presence of ‘the people’. Otherwise, instead of representation we would have the simultaneous presence of the people and their delegates. The main point here is that the presence of ‘the people’ is at once indirect and constitutively impure. It is at least in part an effect of representation insofar as the latter involves a drive to configure the identity and interests of the represented by addressing the classical political questions of ‘who we are’ and ‘what do we want’.

Populists are notoriously ambiguous about these aspects of representation, particularly about the implications of the activity of ‘rendering-present’. On the one hand, they claim to speak in the name of the people and to use their language, to be the voice of those who have no voice and the agency that summons their presence to the political stage. This is often more the expression of a desire than a reality. De Ipola reminds us that there is no guarantee that interpellations to the people will succeed, if only because of the gap between the conditions of production and the conditions of reception of interpellations (1982: 113). Many claim to speak in the name of the people but this does not mean that the addressees will pay any attention to them. On the other hand, populism is also hazy about whom the people are, conceiving them variously as the dispossessed, the hard-working middle classes, the burdened taxpayers, the ‘common man’, the moral majority, and so on. One might say that this is not a relevant point, as the people are not a pre-existing sociological category, a given group. For Rancière the people, as we will see shortly, are the demos, the excluded part, the part that designates those who have no part. (Laclau’s recent work on populism (2005b: 247) draws from Rancière’s argument when he refuses to define the people by means of pre-constituted categories and by describing populism as a mode of constitution of the people as a political force). Indeed, a populist – or any other – rendering-present of the people is still committed to distinguish between a certain ‘us’ and ‘them’ characteristic of political oppositions. It must make an effort to configure an identity and to specify the disagreement that pitches
the people against named adversaries – the elites, the oligarchy, the Government, and so on. Yet the populist ‘us’ remains conveniently vague even then. It is a deliberate vagueness, for it enables it to blur the contours of ‘the people’ sufficiently as to encompass anyone with a grievance structured around a perceived exclusion from a public domain of interaction and decision hegemonized by economic, political, or cultural elites.

A similar ambiguity surrounds the gap between the absent presence of the people and the action of representing them. The gap is bridged by a ‘presentation’ that forgets the iterability at work in the ‘re-’ of ‘re-presentation’. One way of doing this is through the presumed immediacy of the relation between the people and the leader or his movement. This abolishes the absent presence of the represented and renders the ‘re’ of representation irrelevant: instead of a ‘rendering-present’ through a populist leader or movement, there would be a joint presence of the people and their representatives, and therefore no need for representation. Another way in which populism dissolves the gap between the represented and their representatives is by claiming that the leader is a vehicle for the expression of the popular will. The problem with this is that then the absent presence of the people turns out to be an absolute presence, and all that remains is the presence of the leader by fiat of tacit authorization. Taken together, what we have here is an alleged double and simultaneous full presence, of the people and of those who act for them.

A representation that pretends not to be one reflects a clear bias for presence. Like Rousseau, populists distrust representation as a corruption of the general will and see themselves less as representatives than as simple placeholders or spokespersons for the ‘common man’, but unlike Rousseau, they also distrust autonomous initiatives that empower citizens and encourage them to act by themselves. This ambivalent oscillation between the glorification of the independent action of the people (the movement is merely their placeholders) and the instrumental appropriation of that action (the movement incarnates the people and speaks in their name) furnishes populist representation with a convenient permanent alibi. Barthes once observed that myth always appears to have an ‘elsewhere’ at its disposal that allows it to elude admitting its condition as a second-order semiological system (1973: 123). Populism seems to have one too, which it uses to put the spin on its position vis-à-vis representation, participation and mobilization.
This ambivalence explains why some can believe that populism releases the unadulterated energies of the people, whilst others claim that it is little more than a shackle that condemns people to a position of subservience to a movement or its leader. The point in common in both readings is that the leader appears to be a symbolic device. As the presumed incarnation of the popular will or as a trustee of the people, his (or her) role is to simplify the issues and to disambiguate the identity of the populist camp.

What does this tell us about the populist mode of representation? We have flagged that it revolves around a series of themes: the promise of inclusion and intervention in the public sphere, an ambivalence concerning the ‘immediacy’ of the relationship of representation, and the role of the leader as a symbolic condensation of the movement. Why is this different from the conventional take on political representation? In order to respond to this question we have to both borrow from Pitkin and go against her argument. When she discusses political representation, she discards Hobbesian authorization because it entails a complete disappearance of the represented: the authorization granted to representatives is so exhaustive that all the actions and judgments of the latter are valid and binding (Pitkin 1967: 30–31). She also discards the ‘standing for’ that defines symbolic representation – when a symbol takes the place of an absent object, as in the case of a flag that stands for the unity of the nation – because this tells us nothing about the action of representation proper and also because it is based on irrational belief (1967: 91ff., 110–11). Instead, she settles for ‘acting for others’, for she believes that this formulation deals with the substance of the activity of political representation itself instead of the formal arrangements surrounding the action. Populist representation breaks with this view. This is not because it cancels Pitkin’s ‘acting for others’, but because it is a mode of representation arising from a crossover between three modes of representation. One is the standard ‘acting for others’ she singles out as the defining trait of political representation in liberal democracies. Another is the re-entry of a Hobbesian authorization of sorts into politics under the guise of the personalization of political options and the trust for the leader. The third combines an imaginary identification with a strong symbolic dimension. It is imaginary because the people and their representatives claim to be mirror images of one another and because they confuse their relation of virtual immediacy with an actual suspension of the distance between them. It
is symbolic in the sense that Pitkin assigns to the term: the belief in, say, the virtues of the leader or in him being the incarnation of the people’s will without requiring rational proof to legitimize that belief. My contention is that today the crossover that characterizes populist representation is prevalent within liberal democracy itself.

**Populist Representation and Media-Enhanced Democratic Politics**

The work of Manin can provide us with some clues to construe this relationship between populism and contemporary forms of representative democracy. Despite the widespread belief in a crisis of representation, he says what we are experiencing today is a metamorphosis of representation (Manin 1997: 196–7). He identifies three consecutive forms of political representation in the West. These are: classic English *parliamentarianism*, from 1832 to the introduction of male universal suffrage in 1867; *party democracy*, an effect of the entry of the underclass into the political system and the emergence of mass political parties, which has prevailed in Europe and elsewhere since then and throughout most of the twentieth century; and *audience democracy*, that started to emerge in the 1970s with the decline of mass parties, with the impact of the mass media on electoral campaigns, and the formation of a veritable ‘stage’ for politics. They all share the same principles – the election of representatives, the autonomy of the representatives, the role of public opinion and trial by discussion – although these appear differently in each of these forms of representative government. We are familiar with the second form, Kelsen’s *Parteienstaat* or party government (1981), whose demise many continue to mourn as a loss of the gravitas of politics. The old hegemony of fiery leaders and disciplined party apparatuses is eclipsed in the wake of audience democracy and its media-enhanced candidates basking in the cool glow of technopolitical expertise. The democracy of ‘audience’, says Manin, is akin to a supply-side politics that aims to identify the relevant cleavages within the electorate in order to differentiate the candidate from its adversaries. Media experts replace party bureaucrat and activists, or at least put an end to their earlier prominence, and electoral discipline weakens due to the volatility of party loyalties from one election to the next (Manin 1997: 218–26).

For its critics, audience democracy transforms politics into a spectacle run by media and marketing professionals. Former US president
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Gerald Ford refers to this type of politics in a caustic remark about the dangers of pointless manipulation when he speaks of ‘candidates without ideas hiring consultants without convictions to run campaigns without content’ (quoted in Carlson 1999). There is some truth to this claim, but it might also be a somewhat unfair rendering of audience democracy. Opinion polls and electoral marketing might replace the serious pondering of party manifestos and electoral promises, says Manin, but they also help voters by reducing the complexity of the issues and lowering the cost of access to information on those issues (1997: 227–8). Besides, it is doubtful whether voters ever took the trouble to ponder the various electoral options before making up their minds. Emotions and ideological alignments were at least as important in determining electoral preferences. More importantly, at least for the purpose of our inquiry, in audience democracy there is a personalization of the link between candidates and voters. In Manin’s view, people today tend to vote for a person instead of an electoral platform or a party, and while parties do not lose their central role as electoral machines, they tend to become instruments in the service of the leader. He gives two reasons for this, which I will now outline, both of which support our claim that populist representation has gone mainstream.

The first reason Manin gives to account for the personalization of political options is that the channels of political communication, mainly radio and television, affect the nature of the representative relationship: candidates can now communicate directly with their constituents without the mediation of party networks (1997: 220). In a way, he says, this entails a return to the face-to-face character of representation in the parliamentarianism of the nineteenth century. This is generally true, but also imprecise. There is no simple return to a past of real-time, face-to-face encounters between representatives and their electorate except in a very limited way. Mediations remain in place, denser than ever and ubiquitous as the mass media take over from the party press and propaganda sections. The media provide a semblance or simulacrum of immediacy that gives momentum to a mode of representation characterized by the ‘as if’ of virtual immediacy. This ‘as if’ sublimates the representative link by veiling the gap between the people and those who act for them. Virtual immediacy coincides with the imaginary identification characteristic of populist representation – the presumption of enjoying a direct relation with the people and the imaginary identification of the latter with the leader. The second reason Manin gives is that the scope of governmental activity has expanded
substantially and elected officials must make decisions on a wide variety of issues that a party platform can neither foresee nor specify in advance. In fact, he says, governmentality requires something analogous to what Locke called ‘prerogative’ power, a certain discretionary margin that allows elected leaders to ‘take decisions in the absence of pre-existing laws’, which is why personal trust in the candidate has become such an important criterion of selection (p. 221). Manin concludes that ‘representatives are thus no longer spokesmen; the personalization of electoral choice has, to some extent, made them trustees’ (p. 226).

These two points are important for our inquiry. Media-enhanced closeness or virtual immediacy as an instance of imaginary identification, together with prerogative power based on trust as a stand-in for authorization, reinforce the claim that audience democracy intertwines with populist representation conceived as a crossover between acting for others, authorization, and the strong role of imaginary identifications and symbolic imagery. The election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as governor of California in 2003 is a good illustration of ‘trust’ and of belief that can do without independent criteria of verification and falsification. Exit polls conducted during election day ‘suggest that for those who voted for Schwarzenegger, his personal qualities mattered far more than the position he had on the issues’ (Tumulty 2003: 38).

We can also see this at work in Mexico. In 2000, Vicente Fox, the victorious presidential challenger who put an end to 72 years of hegemony of the ruling Partido de la Revolución Institucional (PRI), obtained the nomination of his centre-right Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) not by lobbying the party hierarchy or mobilizing the faithful inside the party apparatus. He obtained it thanks to an ad-hoc organization, Amigos de Fox (‘Friends of Fox’), which mounted an impressive media campaign to present him as a no-nonsense candidate in touch with the feelings of ordinary people. The popularity of Fox rested on his communication skills and the work of the team of advisers that designed his campaign. His success hinged on the way he connected this popularity with the claim for political renewal. People trusted Fox and felt they had a direct rapport with him. This allowed him to acquire supra- and extra-partisan legitimacy that the leadership of his own party did not like but could not stop either, so in the end it had little choice but to follow the lead of public opinion and anoint Fox as its candidate. The PAN and its allies benefited from the pro-Fox electoral tide; they gained more elected positions than they would have had otherwise, although they obtained fewer votes than Fox himself.
Opinion polls and electoral studies conducted in the aftermath of the general elections of 2 July 2000 agree that those who voted for Fox did so less for what he said than for what he symbolized. If one had to judge him for what he said, he had very little chance of succeeding. Much of his discourse consisted of a haphazard blend of unrealizable goals and the classical populist tendency to propose simplistic solutions for complex problems. The more salient ones were his campaign promises to solve the stalemate with the indigenous rebellion spearheaded by the EZLN, or Zapatistas, in the State of Chiapas in fifteen minutes, to outperform previous administrations by maintaining an 8 per cent growth rate of GDP throughout his presidency, and to expand social expenditure and allocate 3 per cent of GDP to education without raising taxes. He delivered none of them, despite the windfall earnings on oil exports triggered by the unprecedented demand for energy to fuel the Chinese economic expansion in combination with the Iraq crisis and the subsequent US-led invasion of that country. Yet what counted was what kind of hopes people attached to the person of Fox. They saw him as the most credible option for ousting the PRI, says Julia Flores, to the extent that the majority of those who voted for him and his electoral coalition were betting on the idea of change regardless of the specific content of that change (Flores quoted in Rivera and Cuéllar 2000).

In Manin’s terminology, the advisers of Fox perceived that the central cleavage within Mexican society was between continuity and change – and not, as the centre-left PRD had calculated, between the sovereign nation and the forces of neoliberalism. If we look at it from the standpoint of discourse theory, or at least of one of its variants (Laclau 1994), the virtue of Fox’s campaign handlers was that they correctly identified ‘change’ as the empty signifier needed to suture the Mexican political field in 2000. They succeeded in presenting their candidate rather than his party as the agent capable of effecting a symbolic appropriation of that signifier. Either way, this shows that Fox built his electoral strategy around a typically populist mode of representation – one that welded ‘acting for others’ and the symbolic ‘standing for’ with authorization based on trust – that has become intertwined with contemporary politics. He developed a virtual or media-based face-to-face relation with the electorate, presented himself as the representative of the will of the people, was graced by the trust that people invested in him regardless of the actual platform
on which he campaigned, and became the torchbearer of the idea of change.

**Prerogative Power Heightens the Proximity between Populism and the Mainstream**

A final observation concerning the mainstreaming of populist representation has to do with another possibility present in this link between prerogative power, the personalization of political options and authorization. Manin is very clear about how he sees the role of Locke’s prerogative power today. He says that under present conditions governments must make a vast number of decisions based on unforeseen developments, and that this requires something analogous to Locke’s prerogative power. It is a matter of analogy rather than equivalence. This is because Manin wants to underline the need for a discretionary margin of manoeuvre for decision-makers, as Locke did, but the margin he has in mind is wider than the one resulting from the absence of pre-existing laws. How wide? It is difficult to tell. Locke says that in their infancy, governments were almost all prerogative and later this was gradually limited by laws (Locke 1963: 162), but he nonetheless accepts that prerogative is a discretionary power to do things where the law is silent, and even to go against the law but always for the public good (pp. 160, 164). He also concedes that there is a problem concerning who can judge if it is properly used. In his time, given the primacy of the executive and the limited role of public opinion, the judge could not be the legislative, as it depended on the executive power for convening, and it could not be the people either, as they could not counteract such a power and thus had no remedy ‘but to appeal to Heaven’ (p. 168).

While we might want to think that this appeal to Heaven can be waived now that we have more political resources available to us, the question concerning the scope of prerogative remains to be addressed. We might follow a simple rule of thumb and say that in the contemporary political scene, prerogative power stands not for a blank cheque but for an enduring yet revocable vote of confidence for the actions of those who govern. This is a legitimate reformulation of Locke’s argument in order to account for the role of trust and the personalization of electoral choices. Voters choose someone they trust because they know that elected leaders will have to confront many unexpected events and come up with answers quickly in the name of the public good under the assumption that they cannot simply do as they please, or at least
not all the time. The question is, can this practical and theoretical vindication of prerogative power open the door for political leaders to demand too great a margin for discretionary acts of government and therefore slide all too quickly towards a proto-Hobbesian authorization? This is a common complaint about populist politicians, as critics object to their selective observance of the rule of law – often through contested interpretations of the letter of the law – and their abuse of presidential decrees to bypass the legislative. Yet we have already made provisions for prerogative power as a rightful tool for leaders in audience democracy. This means that the mere possibility that a cavalier attitude towards legal norms and institutional checks and balances will become a generalized phenomenon is already included as a structural possibility of representative politics. If this is the case, then there is no reason to restrict the charge of abusing the interpretation of either the norms or institutional procedures to populists alone.

Consider the increase in discretionary powers demanded by governments to face perceived threats to national security. This either blurs any clear distinction between populist and other leaders or validates the claim that a populist mode of representation has become commonplace in media-enhanced democracies. The abuse of ‘signing statements’ during the presidency of George W. Bush is illustrative. A ‘signing statement’ is an optional text that the President can add to a bill when signing it to make it a law. Presidents can issue a signing statement to indicate how they intend to interpret the law made by Congress, to explain why they are vetoing it or to state why they will not enforce a given provision included in the law. While signing statements do not have force of law, they seek to influence judicial interpretation of the law and to expand executive powers at the expense of the legislative. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito contributed to overhaul this constitutional instrument in a memorandum written while he was a lawyer in the Justice Department. He had no doubt about what the purpose of such statements should be. Under the assumption that ‘the President’s understanding of the bill should be as important as that of Congress’, he argued that presidential signing statements are meant to ‘increase the power of the executive to shape the law’ (Alito 1986: 1, 2).

This possible contamination between making and enforcing the law – or between founding and conserving it – might be worrisome because it assigns proto-legislative competence to the executive branch, but is not new. Derrida himself discusses it at length. He points out that
the police do it continually at a lower level when they issue ordinances (they invent norms instead of simply enforcing them) when there is no clear legal situation to guarantee security (Derrida 1992: 42–3). Neither does it necessarily qualify as tampering with a republican division of powers that many see as typical of the behaviour of charismatic populist leaders. What is interesting, however, is that signing statements show us that the distance between the actions of populist and other politicians begins to close when one pairs this contamination between making and applying laws with other things. Alito himself provided the rationale for this proximity between populist and other politicians, if only because he speaks of the shaping of the laws by those charged with applying them. First, let us bear in mind that the justification for signing statements is to put the legislative and executive interpretation on an equal footing – if the President signs a bill, then his ‘understanding of the bill should be just as important as that of Congress’ (Alito 1986: 1). This may or may not be a valid legal means to undermine the separation of powers, but the suspicion that it does increases when the sheer volume of these statements subverts the legislative process by granting a virtual legislative power to the executive branch. President Bush issued over 500 such statements in his first five years in office alone, in contrast with the seventy-one and 105 signed by his predecessors Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, correspondingly (Sullivan 2006: 52). Moreover, these statements elevate the leader and his entourage above the law or, more precisely, they are devices to legitimize a self-serving interpretation of laws. Bush signed a bill banning all ‘cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment’ of US detainees in its ‘war on terror’, but also added a signing statement that left open the possibility to make it legal – in the eyes of the government – to authorize torture when the President sees it necessary for national security (Sullivan 2006: 52).

Under circumstances such as the ones just outlined, prerogative power moves much closer to what we have described as a (tacit) Hobbesian authorization than what Manin and others would have imagined possible and reasonable within a liberal-democratic form of representative government. A proto-Hobbesian authorization entitling leaders to do whatever it takes to curb the threats to security – broadly defined to cover terrorism, drugs and immigration – becomes more acceptable as the government can claim that its observance of the laws can be waived and their meaning modified virtually at will in the name of security. We witness here a significant shift in the perception of politics,
one that welcomes strong and decisive leaders as well as the increased power of the executive branch of government. The literature associates this with authoritarian populism, but if it becomes a regular fixture of politics, it is harder to differentiate the practice of populists from that of politicians who claim to stand outside the populist camp. Agamben does not speak of populism or prerogative power but highlights the rise of discretionary powers and the encroachment on legislative functions by the executive. His basic point is that one of the characteristics of the state of exception – the temporary abolition of the distinction of executive, legislative and judicial powers – is gradually becoming a normal practice of government in Western democracies dominated by the paradigm of security (Agamben 2005: 7, 14, 18). Perhaps he exaggerates, but if he does not, and we have already seen that there is some evidence to support his claim, what we are witnessing is another angle of the mainstreaming of populist representation into well-established liberal democracies.

Populism as a Symptom of Democratic Politics
If the mode of representation defines populism virtually as a phenomenon that coexists with, and transforms, mainstream politics, the second modality moves into a different territory that positions it together with other radical movements in the rougher edges of democratic politics. Here the argument concerning the link between populism and democracy begins to shift from the institutional site of the political regime to the democratic imaginary of modern politics. To put it in a schematic manner, and drawing from psychoanalysis, we can depict this mode of populism as the return of the repressed, as a symptom of democracy – as an internal element of the democratic system that also reveals the limits of the system and prevents its closure in the presumed normality of institutional procedures.

Freud occasionally thinks of the symptom in the usual medical sense of a sign of illness, but this is not what he wants to highlight in his study of the psychic apparatus. He conceives it mainly as a substitutive-formation that stands in for a frustrated satisfaction or for something amiss in our lives. The symptom shields us from danger by masking a traumatic experience. He mentions the case of a patient with obsessive neurosis. The patient, who was living apart from her husband, was prone to running from one room to another and then calling the servant, but upon her arrival, she would forget why she
had summoned her or instruct her to do something trivial. The patient eventually came to realize that her obsessive behaviour both imitated and disguised her husband’s behaviour during the wedding night. Affected by impotence, he would go back and forth from his room to his wife’s chambers trying – unsuccessfully – to consummate the matrimony and worrying that the servants would put him to shame if they discovered his failure. The symptom-formation – the compulsive act of going from one room to the other and summoning the servant – was the means used by the patient’s ego to try to dispel the frustration caused by the husband’s sexual failure. It aimed to remove her from a situation of danger. This turns the symptom into something akin to a formation of a compromise between repressed representations and repressing representations. The phenomena of symptom-formation are, then, an expression of the repressed or, to be more precise, they indicate the return of the repressed through more or less tortuous paths (Freud 1959: 144–5; 1963: 257–302, 358–77; 1964b: 124–6).

Freud offers us an additional characterization of the repressed through the metaphor of the ‘internal foreign territory’. He says:

Symptoms are derived from the repressed, they are, as it were, its representatives before the ego; but the repressed is foreign territory to the ego – internal foreign territory – just as reality (if you will forgive the unusual expression) is external foreign territory. (Freud 1964a: 57)

This sui generis status of the symptom as ‘internal foreign territory’ of the ego destabilizes a clear frontier between inside and outside. It opens up a play between properly internal phenomena and phenomena that are internal yet somewhat improperly so because they are part of a repressed internal foreign territory. This play – and the grey area it opens between inside and outside, proper and improper – is the key to the second modality of populism. I call it an internal foreign territory or internal periphery of democratic politics. Like the Freudian symptom, which designates something internal whose repression makes it appear as foreign to the ego even when it returns once and again, populism as an internal periphery designates political phenomena that develop on the edges or more turbulent regions of democratic politics. They are frowned upon as improper behaviour for good procedural democrats, yet they reappear continually enough to be seen as part of democratic politics.
I want to develop this point through Žižek’s reading of the symptom. This is not because he offers us a better interpretation than Freud but because he gives a socio-political slant to the play between the proper and the improper. For him the symptom is ‘a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus’ (Žižek 1989: 21). Marxist critique itself is symptomatic, for the working of ideology, he says, does not require false consciousness amongst those who participate in a given social reality but rather that they ‘do not know what they are doing’. We might recall that this was the condition of the woman with obsessive neurosis mentioned by Freud: she did not know what she was doing when she wandered compulsively from room to room. The symptom could then be defined as “a formation whose very consistency implies a certain non-knowledge on the part of the subject”: the subject can “enjoy his symptom” only insofar as its logic escapes him’ (Žižek 1989: 21). Ignorance is bliss in the sense that there can be no enjoyment without us failing to realize that something is being repressed by the symptom. But the repressed always returns through unexpected pathways, so we must develop the story of the symptom further.

Žižek illustrates the mechanics of enjoyment and repression at work in the symptom with an example borrowed from Marx’s theory of commodity exchange, or at least from Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s reading of it. The universality of the commodity form presupposes that every exchange is always an exchange amongst equivalents. This universality, however, is an empty or counterfeit one. It is an ideological universal because the labour force is a special commodity whose use – the actual expenditure of labour – generates surplus value over and above the market value of the labour force itself (Žižek 1989: 22). That is why the system produces equivalent exchange, but also ‘a particular paradoxical exchange – that of the labour force for its wages – which, precisely as an equivalent, functions as the very form of exploitation’ (p. 22). Labour power, he says, is a special commodity, one ‘representing the internal negation of the universal principle of equivalent exchange of commodities’. This negation of universal equivalence is internal to equivalent exchange and not merely its violation. Žižek caps this by saying that utopia consists of ‘a belief in the possibility of a universal without a symptom, without the point of exception functioning as its internal negation’ (p. 23). Another way of putting this is to say that the symptom is not an accident, or that it is such a recurrent
accident that it becomes a distinctive trait of any non-utopian system. The misrecognition of this fact is a requisite condition for maintaining a semblance of equal exchange and, therefore, enabling the effectiveness of commodity exchange. Politically, this means that any effort to unveil the special status of labour power as the site where equivalence breaks down introduces a measure of disruption into the system, although it does not necessarily entail its implosion. This is what revolutionary working class organizations and socialist movements have been trying to do since the nineteenth century.

Let us connect this with the discussion about the relationship of interiority between populism and democracy. What is the status of this interiority? Earlier we described populism as a mode of representation that has become mainstream in contemporary media-enhanced politics, but the symptom offers us a different angle. As a symptom of democracy, populism functions as a paradoxical element that belongs to democracy – they both endorse the public debate of political issues, electoral participation, informal forms of expression of the popular will, and so on – and at the same time interrupts its closure as a gentrified or domesticated political order.

I borrow the reference to gentrification from Žižek, who in turn uses it to recast Lefort’s distinction between politics and the political. In Žižek’s reading of Lefort, politics is the site where the contingency and negativity of the political are gentrified in a political ‘normality’, forgotten in an order that has the status of one sub-system amongst others (1991: 194–5). Gentrification does not erase negativity; it simply takes the edge off the political by domesticating it within a normalized setting. This is not altogether different from what Foucault had in mind when he described politics as a continuation of war by other means. In this reading, the institutions, normative codes, practices, procedures and rituals that are part of our political normality are the end-result upholding the disequilibria of forces generated by war (Foucault 2003). They ratify and crystallize the asymmetries resulting from war in a gentrified political setting that privileges institutional mediations over charisma, the presence of checks and balances to limit the discretionary powers of political leaders, the widespread practice of reaching agreements through negotiations amongst political elites, and so on. Negativity persists, but enmeshed in a political normality that downplays the violence and occasional blood shedding that were the prolegomena of our standing codes and established institutions. One
may say that citizens in liberal democracies enjoy their symptom by subsuming the moment of negativity of the political under the veneer of a gentrified setting of politics. As in the presumed universality of commodity exchange that sidesteps the special case of labour power, democracy creates a semblance of impersonal institutional virtue that exorcises – but not necessarily condones – the shadier deals concocted regularly by the political and economic elites in the name of systemic stability.

Populist and other challenges to the status quo disturb this soothing image. This seems to be what Laclau has in mind when he says – in a passage quoted earlier – that ‘populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space’. One can agree with him without endorsing his conclusion that this makes populism synonymous with politics. Instead it is a symptom of democratic politics; it grants visibility to the founding negativity of the political by summoning the disruptive ‘noise’ of the people. To illustrate this we can think of the discomfort caused by a guest who has had a drink too many. He can disrupt table manners and the tacit rules of sociability by speaking loudly, interrupting the conversations of others, and perhaps flirting with them beyond what passes for acceptable cheekiness. It is not always easy to get rid of the awkward guest even if the hosts are not particularly happy with him, so they will do their best to downplay his antics and make the rest feel as comfortable as possible. Populism plays the role of the awkward guest. It is a paradoxical element that functions both as an internal moment of liberal democracy and as a disruption of the gentrified domain of political performances. Whether it is by disregarding the ‘table manners’ of democratic politics or by observing them in a discretionary way, the ‘disruptive noise’ of populism stands in for the return of the repressed in the sense of the negativity of the political.

One could also read the example of the awkward guest without invoking ontology, that is, without positing negativity as an invariable element, and without constructing the relationship between democratic politics and the populist noise in terms of a compromise between repressing and repressed representations. This does not entail abandoning the reference to symptoms but it invites us to focus on Freud’s metaphoric depiction of symptoms as ‘internal foreign territory’ of the ego. The populist ‘noise’ would describe a practice of disidentification whereby the people refuse to accept the place – often of the excluded
underdog – assigned to them. The vehicle for this disidentification is the enactment of a disagreement or polemicization to handle a perceived wrong. Rancière speaks of disagreement as shorthand for politics; gentrification corresponds to what he calls the order of police or the partition of the sensible. This partition conceives the city as a distribution of parts without remainder, as a hierarchy of parts and their functions that aims to cancel out the polemic nature of politics (Rancière 1998: 13–15; 2001). Politics disrupts gentrification by summoning the demos, what he calls ‘the party of the poor’. But the demos, he says, can only be an improper part, for the poor – or in the preferred language of populism, the common people – represent those who have no real part in the polis except for the empty property of their freedom. For him, the impropriety of the demos, which is the scandal of democracy, is the constitutive torsion or disagreement of politics. Populism challenges the partition of the sensible through the mobilization of the demos to address a wrong typically defined as the unacceptable privileges of the elites and the subordination/exclusion of the people. This prevents any reconciliation of the community, and therefore interrupts the closure of liberal democracy as pure elitism or as detached pragmatism. Populism thus undermines the fullness of any democratic expression of the will of the people, including its own.

We can look at this in more detail by saying that populism mounts its challenge on the participatory supplement of institutional procedures. I have mentioned its usual criticism of back-door deals between the government and economic elites and the attacks on professional politicians for having lost touch with the mood, feeling and demands of the people. Participation, however, is the populist watchword. They invest considerable energy in electoral processes but these are few and too far apart as a show of strength, which is why non-electoral mobilizations play such an important role as a means to advance their agenda of political and economic demands. This is perfectly democratic, but the recurrent use of mobilization exerts pressures on the discourse and institutional settings of representative government and therefore puts to the test the obviousness of what passes for a democratic political order. Of course, populism can also go beyond mere pressure and warp the working of that order by mobilizing supporters to threaten adversaries into submission, to force tailor-made interpretations of existing norms or to bypass institutional constraints it sees merely as formal dressings of democracy. This is their peculiar way of
enacting the promise of redemption at the expense of stricter interpretations of what passes for the rule of law. Predictably, critics emphasize this discreional adherence to standing procedures whereas others highlight the participatory and reform-oriented challenge it brings about, but both the unsavoury and redemptive aspects are present in populist practice at one time or another.

The surprising thing is that even if one focuses on these annoying aspects of populist politics or says that despite all the rhetoric about the people the alternative it offers is self-serving, it would still be difficult to disqualify it as an aberration of democratic practice. For one thing, standing norms and even practice are exposed to the possibility of reinterpretation as well as to outright distortion, so the democratic standing of populism is undecidable outside a disagreement that puts it to the test. This is not a generous concession to populists as the same applies to politicians outside the populist camp: their practices are not above suspicion and are therefore exposed to this undecidability too. It is not always clear when the quid pro quo of cross-party voting on budget allocations is a sign of concern for one’s constituency and when it is corrupt pork-barrel politics. Gerrymandering distorts the popular will but has been practiced ever since the democratization of classical parliamentarianism by just about every political party in office. There is a thin line separating creative accounting to bolster party finances from tactics to circumvent legal limits on electoral funding. It is difficult to dissociate personal favours amongst government officials, elected representatives and business people from an illicit trading of influence. The government can make particularly skewed interpretations of laws in the name of national security, becoming a de facto legislator and judge of the legality of its own actions, yet officials in charge frequently pay a relatively low political cost – if any – despite public outrage. The list of examples is long, tedious and familiar, and brings the practice of political and economic elites much closer to populism than they would care to admit. Populism calls the bluff on claims that gentrified politics is democratic politics ‘as such’. It also shows that the ‘table manners’ of democratic politics are often little more than props to bestow an aura of public virtue on elected officials that have none.

Drawing from this discussion, we can say that populism functions as a symptom of democratic politics in two senses. First, as a promise of redemption and as an index of what Canovan calls the reaction against politics as usual, populism disrupts the gentrified democratic
order and expands – or at least claims to expand – the scope of citizen involvement in public affairs. One could then speak of populism as a response to ‘formal’ democracy, as long as we agree that the adjective is not understood in the pejorative sense of a mere travesty of a ‘real’ or substantive democracy. Following a distinction suggested by Badiou, populism as a symptom recovers the idea of mass democracy, which he labels ‘romantic’ and associates with ‘collective general assembling, crowded gatherings, riots, and so on’, in contrast to the perception of democracy as designating the configuration of the state, which he calls ‘formal’ (Badiou 2002). Second, as the awkward guest or element that ‘falls out’ of the gentrified system, populism also positions itself in the rougher edges of democratic politics, in a grey area where it is not always easy to distinguish populist mobilization from mob rule. In this interpretation, populism might not necessarily break loose from a democratic setting, but it becomes an unstable and potentially destabilizing phenomenon. In the terms suggested earlier, and corroborated by the metaphor of the symptom as an ‘internal foreign territory’, it becomes part of what we could describe as an internal periphery of the democratic order along with other radical movements.

Populism as an Underside of Democracy

This is not the end of the story, for the very fact that populism has a capacity to disrupt democratic politics compels us to inquire about the darker possibilities that can come along with the phenomenon. As a political practice that takes place at its rougher edges, populism can be conceived both as a mirror in which democracy can scrutinize its more unsavoury traits, and as an experience that can cease to be an awkward ‘noise’ and transform itself into its potential underside.

Here we can turn again to Canovian’s depiction of populism as a shadow of democracy. The argument was developed in detail in the preceding chapter. Following Oakeshott, who distinguishes between faith and scepticism as the two styles whose interplay characterizes modern politics, Canovan speaks of the two faces of democracy – redemption and pragmatism – that require one another and cohabit as two squabbling Siamese twins (1999: 9–10). She claims that the populist mobilization arises in the gap between these two, primarily as a way to counteract the pragmatic excesses of established democracies. By locating populism in this gap, Canovan manages to develop a conception of populism that retains a relation of interiority with democratic
politics. Populism is not the ‘other’ of democracy, but rather a shadow that follows it continually.

Canovan’s reference to populism as a shadow of democracy is quite compelling. It can be even more forceful if we graft a supplementary meaning onto the metaphor, one capable of conveying the sense of undecidability that is present in the image of the shadow. Without it one risks losing populism in the vastness of democratic politics. For this is the issue: to establish a connection between populism and democracy without overlooking the gap that separates them. Canovan uses the shadow to designate something that follows a body. What is missing in the metaphor of the shadow is its more extended meaning, as a sign of danger. From horror films to mystery novels, the literary device of the shadow is a topos of something ominous; it functions as a signpost to announce the perils that may lurk ahead. It is no different in this case. Critics have warned against the allure of populism by citing the dangers it poses for democracy. For example, the cult of personality can transform leaders into quasi-messianic figures for whom accountability is not a relevant issue, and the populist disregard for institutional checks and balances can encourage rule by decree and all sorts of authoritarian behaviour while maintaining a democratic façade. The Manichean distinction between good common people and corrupt elites can become an alibi for using strong-arm tactics against political adversaries, and the continual invocation of the unity of the people can be used as means to dispel pluralism and toleration. And so on and so forth. The point is that it is difficult to say in advance if things will go towards the underside or not, if the shadow will designate a benign following or an ominous sign. That is why, in Chapter 2, I referred to populism as a ‘spectre’ of democracy, an expression that conveys more clearly the double sense of the shadow as an accompaniment and as a possible threat.

Yet, democracy is always exposed to the threat of an underside, populist or otherwise. As Lefort describes it, democracy is ‘instituted and sustained by the dissolution of the markers of certainty’, by a process of questioning implicit in social practice, and by a representation of unity dependent upon political discourse bound up with ideological debate (1988: 19–20). If this is so, then in limit situations the very functioning of democracy may provide the conditions of possibility for the underside. This danger, he says, appears when the exacerbation of conflicts cannot be resolved symbolically in the political sphere and a sense of social fragmentation pervades society. When this happens, there is a
real possibility of ‘the development of the fantasy of the People-as-One, the beginnings of a quest for a substantial identity, for a social body that is welded to its head, for an embodying power, for a state free from division’ (p. 20). Lefort associates this with the emergence of totalitarian phenomena, but the fantasy of a unity without fissures is equally present in the populist temptation to confuse the government with the state, which amounts to a perversion of representation (Lefort 1991: 230). This confusion refers to the case of populism in government; it opens the door for a perception of the exercise of political power as a possession rather than as occupancy, which in turn is conducive to a patrimonial use of state resources.

The temptation of a substantial identity would also appear when the internal paradox of the populist mode of representation mentioned earlier is resolved on behalf of the leader, that is, when the leader no longer acts for others because he or she presumes to incarnate those others and therefore believes to be authorized a priori. Oakeshott refers to this as the messianic twist of the politics of faith (1996: 28–9). The effect of messianism is that the gap that differentiates representatives from the represented – and that sets limits to representation as ‘acting for others’ – starts to operate haphazardly. This is when instead of the aforementioned crossover between acting for others, ‘standing for’ and authorization, populist representation gradually slips into the symbolic ‘standing for’ and ultimately into a Hobbesian authorization by means of which the gap is de facto dissolved in favour of the representative. This is when the shadow begins to show its other, more ominous face, and the danger of an authoritarian streak enters the scene.

The paradox is that this move towards the underside might not entail a loss of legitimacy or support amongst populists as long as the government delivers the goods. Philip puts this nicely in his comments on the recent populist experiences in Argentina, Peru and Venezuela. Like Canovan, he maintains that democracy involves the will of the people, a claim that bears the imprint of the politics of redemption, and also due process and freedom under the law, which reminds us of the pragmatic face of democratic politics. He adds that these two notions might come into conflict. Whilst some tend to interpret democracy in terms of the pragmatic aspects of checks, balances and procedures, when these do not work, occasionally a strong presidentialism – with a centralizing streak which entails a vast increase in the decision-making powers of the leader and the use of decree powers to bypass
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Congress – might be a genuine reflection of the popular will (Philip 1998: 95, 83). Such an inclination for strong presidentialism is not rare, even though the expression is often a euphemism to describe authoritarian practices that have mustered popular approval. Crabtree mentions the popular mood that prevailed during a controversy between former President Alberto Fujimori and the Peruvian Congress in 1997. The opinion polls conducted at the time, he says, ‘suggest a predilection for authoritarian government – so long as its performance was positive with regard to issues like employment and public security’ (Crabtree 2000: 173; see also Barr 2003 and Weyland 2003). Fujimori secured electoral legitimacy, yet he relied on such predilection throughout his administration. The bottom line is that a democratically elected leader can get away with undemocratic behaviour as long as his or her actions are perceived to represent the will of the people.

Lefort also refers to the populist invocation of social justice (1992: 141–2), a key element of urban-industrial populism that has sustained its appeal amongst the dispossessed as well as amongst progressive intellectuals. He examines this when he says that populist movements often build their relation with the masses through the mediation of welfare policies, and that this relation might have a negative effect on the health of democratic practice and on the prospects for empowering individuals. While this might sound like a conservative argument against social justice, Lefort is not trying to question equality but to criticize the vertical relation with the people. His argument is as follows. Social justice and the redistributive policies through which it comes about certainly improve the life of people by satisfying basic needs. Yet, populists see this mostly as a top-down process, as a vertical link connecting political leaders and governmental decision-making bodies with grateful masses. The expectation of gratitude from the beneficiaries of social policies turns easily into a demand to submit to the dictates of the party, the government or the leader. In Lefort’s words:

[It] instigates what de la Boëtie called ‘a voluntary servitude’. Being drawn to populism and to the leader, or putting the destiny of all in the hands of the leader, merely highlights this form of servitude… What is the point of social justice if all the measures are decided by a government that seeks the obedience of its citizens as repayment for the rewards it offers, and if such a justice does not awaken in the people awareness of their rights, of their sense of endeavour, or of their freedom of association? (1992: 141–2)
Servitude, voluntary or otherwise, turns citizenship into an empty shell and distributive justice into an instrument of domination. This disempowerment of citizenship – despite verbal reassurances to the contrary – is a reminder that populism can also project a darker shadow on democracy. Just as Canovan could claim that democracy – or at least, and more precisely, modern politics generally – has two faces, one redemptive and the other pragmatic, we may contend that the populist shadow does too, for it follows democratic politics as a promise and as an underside. As a promise, it can contribute to political renewal by harnessing the participatory energy issuing from the redemptive drive of modern politics, but as an underside, populism can turn out to be dangerous. Reiterating Canovan’s analogy, the promise and the underside resemble a pair of squabbling Siamese twins. The problem is that while the promise might merely disturb the more gentrified functioning of the democratic process, as in the case of populism as a politics in the rougher edges of democracy, when the underside gets the upper hand, the dangers for democracy can increase to the point at which it may be ready to leave the political stage.

However, there are important nuances present even when the metaphor of the shadow seems to move towards its more unsavoury meaning for democracy. If one looks at Venezuela, for example, one finds a leftist variant of populism – at least with regards to its social base and egalitarian discourse – spearheaded by Hugo Chavez, a progressive yet often troubling leader imbued with an overriding sense of purpose, who was first elected president in 1998 and again in 2000 (Hawkins 2003; Weyland 2003). In ‘chavismo’ one finds a strong charismatic leader, a continual invocation of the common people against the elites, the actual mobilization of subaltern groups in the pursuit of a redistributive agenda, a strong sense of political renewal and a defence of national autonomy coupled with a frontal attack on neoliberal policies and the Washington consensus of the 1990s. His detractors see Chavez as an authoritarian populist and a nemesis of Venezuelan democracy, but his followers describe chavismo as a democratic and egalitarian movement. The fieldwork of Hawkins and Hanson (2006) on the Círculos Bolivarianos (CB), the grass-root organizations set up to support the changes spearheaded by Chavez and his government, shows the ambivalence and contradictions of this populism by highlighting the democratic ethos that inspires the CB. These eleven-member CB are organized components of chavismo set
up in 2001 with 20,000–30,000 people, but their numbers grew to nearly two million by 2004 (Hawkins and Hanson 2006: 103). They have strong participatory democratic values – often stronger than the rest of the Venezuelan population – and are engaged in significant social work, requesting and administering programmes granting services and goods in poor neighbourhoods (pp. 118–19). Yet their contribution to democracy is ambiguous because the formation of the CB followed a call from Chavez and they developed under his tutelage (p. 110); this undermined their capacity to become institutionalized (p. 124) or to challenge the leader without being marginalized (p. 126). Furthermore, they often make sure that neighbourhoods that support Chavez get goods before others, which undermines the norms of citizenship required by democracy (p. 119). This is what Lefort feared when he said that the lack of independence from the government eventually leads to a submissive citizenship, and that a top-down distribution of resources encourages the formation of grateful masses rather than autonomous citizens. Hawkins and Hanson reach a similar conclusion, saying that chavismo might have permanently enhanced the capacity of mobilization of the poorest segments of society at the cost of the autonomy that democracy requires (pp. 126–7). In this respect, for all its progressiveness, chavismo reflects the ambivalent status of the metaphor of the shadow, at times being a companion of democracy and at times its possible underside.

This takes us to the end of the inquiry on populism. We took traditional markers such as the invocation of the people, the split between people and elites, the demand for participation, the centrality of strong leaders or the cavalier attitude towards institutional procedures, and saw how they appeared in three possible modes of populism. What can we say about these three scenarios of populism?

To begin with, we can say that the contours of populism emerge as a double bind that does not describe the democratic nature of the phenomenon – for we have seen that this cannot be decided by decree, as there can be undemocratic populism too – but the ambiguous and often tense relation of interiority it maintains with the practice of democracy. Populism can flourish as a fellow traveller of democratic reform movements and put democracy in jeopardy. This double bind suggests that Canovan, Worsley, Hayward and others are right in proposing that any enquiry about populism is, at the same time, an
inquiry about democratic politics. It also shows that this connection with democratic politics works as a conceptual strategy only if followed by the proviso that populism can also refer to its more turbulent aspects, to a reflection of politics played at the rougher edges of democracy, and that it can also become something much more daunting. This seems to be what people like Crick have in mind when they express their concerns that populism can be contradictory to politics. For him, populism eschews the compromises characteristic of politics; for us it is unconstrained by the ‘table manners’ of democratic politics and can move beyond being a mere uncomfortable guest when the politics on the edges becomes rough enough for populism to endanger democratic politics. One is therefore obliged to speak not of populism in general but of three modalities of populism with regards to modern democratic politics – as a mode of representation, as a symptom and as an underside of democracy. The actual valence it adopts is undecidable as it can go in any of these three directions. Determining when the mode of representation and the disruptive edge cross the line and become an underside of democracy is a matter of political judgment and cannot be settled by conceptual fiat.

Perhaps one could stick to the metaphor of the spectre, as I propose in the previous chapter, or generalize the second iteration of the term – populism as a symptom – and refer to the phenomenon simply as an internal periphery of democracy and modern politics generally. Both portray the paradoxical and contested status of the relationship between populism and democratic politics. The undecidability between a friendly visitation and a haunting presence is built into the spectrality of populism. The same happens in the case of the internal periphery. A periphery, internal or not, is a hazy territory that indicates the outermost limit of an inside and the beginning of the outside of a system, a grey area where the distinction between inside and outside is an effect of polemic. Populism can remain within the bounds of democracy, but also reach the point where they enter into conflict and go their own separate ways.
Chapter 4

Stirred and Shaken. From ‘the Art of the Possible’ to Emancipatory Politics

‘Agitprop’ used to be the bread-and-butter of radical movements aiming to change the order of things. It meant stirring the masses into action, mostly to follow a partisan roadmap pointing to socialism or to mobilize their latent energies for various anarchist initiatives, although later fascist and populist movements adopted it as standard practice too. Activists engaged in agitprop in a variety of ways, whether by extolling the virtues of the party line amongst trade unionists, selling partisan press in the streets, publishing pamphlets attacking the government as well as the rich and the powerful, or denouncing class-divided society as the source of the wretched condition of the people. This was its pedagogic role, educating the masses for action. They also confronted their adversaries, organized strikes and demonstrations, and occasionally embarked on ‘armed propaganda’ consisting of exemplary direct actions, like robbing banks to finance the organization’s activities or setting bombs (often in government buildings) to frighten their enemies and elicit enthusiasm amongst their followers. This was the ideological and political role of agitation. Both the pedagogic and the ideological-political aspects were meant to justify the group’s fitness to lead and to show that another world was both desirable and possible. This made agitprop an integral part of emancipatory politics.
Today the term ‘agitprop’ has lost its political lustre and groups outside the ideological fringe have all but abandoned it. It survives as a hip term amongst ‘hacktivists’ and culture bloggers and in the narratives of historians and erstwhile sympathizers of socialism and trade unionism. Talk about emancipation, central to radical politics from 1789 to 1968, has come to be seen as an anachronism in the context of liberal-democratic consensus. Radical and class-based politics have given way to catch-all parties aiming to occupy the middle ground. Agitation has been replaced by motivational speeches and propaganda has morphed into electoral marketing with the helping hand of professional campaign managers. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, former US President Gerald Ford offers an unflattering view of the resulting political scene by characterizing it as one dominated by ‘candidates without ideas hiring consultants without convictions to run campaigns without content’ (quoted in Carlson 1999). Ford exaggerates – or we would like to think he does – but he nonetheless identifies a political trend that now includes organizations of the centre-left that have made their peace with a market-driven economy and are comfortable pursuing an agenda of capitalism with a more humane face.

There are other reasons for the apparent demise of agitation, at least amongst the Left. One of them is that the political compass of socialism is no longer as clear as it used to be. The disenchantment with so-called ‘really-existing socialism’ in Eastern Europe and China in the 1970s and 1980s, and the absence of a project capable of generating lasting enthusiasm after the collapse of many of those regimes, depleted much of the theoretical and empirical capital of socialism. It is now difficult to identify what qualifies as emancipatory politics in a landscape dominated by politics-as-usual and sprinkled with outbursts of principled indignation about the state of the world. Those who do speak up are moved by the expectation that another world is possible but have difficulties articulating what that world would look like or what has to be done to make it come about. Another reason is that a good deal of what passed for political radicalism has now migrated from mass movements to academia, where it has found a comfortable niche thanks to the respectability acquired by Marxist and post-Marxist studies in the English-speaking world. This has created a semblance of political engagement by fiat of intellectually sophisticated discussions. Finally, during the ten or so years when the debate on difference became the watchword of progressive politics, radicalism came
uncomfortably close to the moral righteousness of political correctness and identity politics that emerged as a programmatic side effect of the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. We touched on this in Chapter 1.

The surprising thing is that this does not mean that agitation has ceased to be of relevance for emancipatory drives or that cynical reason and disillusionment rule unchallenged. It hasn’t and they don’t. What has happened is that agitation no longer coincides with a function within an organization (an agitprop section or secretariat) and is not pegged to a style of insurrectional politics, so any retrieval of the term will involve a certain break with the general meaning it had in its original context. There is room for agitation, or for the stirring and shaking mentioned in the title in allusion to the strict manner of preparation of James Bond’s beverage of choice. But instead of Bond’s ‘shaken, not stirred’, I use the doubling connective to underline the enduring force and actuality of agitation in emancipatory politics.

The Realist Coding of the Possible

We can begin to explore this endurance by interrogating Bismarck’s remark that ‘politics is the art of the possible’, meaning that one should follow the course of action that endeavours to achieve what is doable in a given situation or under circumstances that we did not choose. It is difficult to disagree with this view except for the fact that what people really mean to say when they speak of ‘the art of the possible’ is that politics is a code that only a realist language can crack. This is because in politics interests trump principles. For realists the world is ruled by the logic of consequences and whoever plays the political game must base his or her reasoning on facts and not ideology, put national or partisan interests before the good, and back those interests by using or threatening to use force. This is why they believe that the pursuit of a normative ‘ought’, or proposing goals incommensurate to one’s resources, is well-meaning but naive and generally non-effective. In politics, to do the right thing is to do the possible, which also means embracing realism.

Realism hijacks Bismarck’s remark because Bismarck himself believed that the art of the possible was an art best performed by realists. Yet realists are not a homogenous lot. Prince Salina, the character in Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s novel The Leopard, represents the archetypical conservative-cynical variant of realism when he claims that ‘things must change so they can stay the same’. This is gatopardismo, the
pursuit of whatever one can achieve through compromise within the status quo, or the art of tweaking the balance in such a way that changes will not really affect an order where the rich and powerful have the upper hand. It leaves no room for emancipatory politics and agitation has a purely instrumental function in the power struggles amongst interest groups. Realism is also compatible with a less parsimonious politics. If the possible refers to what is feasible, then radical change – seeking to overturn the status quo if the circumstances are propitious – must be part of the very structure of the art of the possible. In the high politics of inter-state relations, overturning the order of things could mean instituting something like the Westphalian treaty, that set the stage for the state system of the following three-hundred years, or simply changing the relative position of the various state players through wars and alliances within that system. The first is revolutionary, although not necessarily emancipatory, whereas the second is banal, as it glorifies entropic disturbance by replicating the code that governs a political game consisting of ever-changing geometries of power amongst states. Agitation, if it occurred at all, took place within the bounds of a conservative radicalism that kept the code intact. The Bolsheviks, in contrast, illustrate a radical variant of the possible, allegedly from the standpoint of emancipation. This is chiefly because, in the conjuncture of 1917, they realized that a revolution was doable and acted accordingly. Agitation was a means to provoke the coming together of people in the multiple and often discontinuous events we lump together under the label of the ‘Russian Revolution’.

No matter what ‘flavour’ of realism one chooses, there is a lingering suspicion about the cogency of its take on the art of the possible, if only because its criteria for identifying the doable seem to be so simple. You get rid of normative views and so-called ‘ideological’ expectations and are ready to go. But is it really that simple? I can think of several reservations about this supposedly a-normative and a- (rather than ‘anti-’) moral take on politics, the least of them being that a principled avoidance of either comes suspiciously close to being the unspoken underlying normative criterion of realism.

First, the problem of transparency: it is notoriously difficult to grasp the possible in the midst of the actual conjuncture as one often only realizes what is or was doable in retrospect. The possible is never a sure thing, which is why there is disagreement amongst those who must decide if something is doable or not. Second, decisions concerning what
is doable are supposed to be based on interests rather than principles, but it is questionable whether there is such a thing as normative-free decisions. If interests alone define this politics, the art of the possible would amount to little more than the pursuit of the doable for the sake of it. This is a very restrictive view of politics. It condemns realist politics to entropy, as in the case of power politics amongst states described above, or transforms the doable into another name for a game ruled by cynical reason. Third, realists are not always consistent in their rejection of normative claims or ‘ideological’ political views. They made a laughing stock of former US President Woodrow Wilson for pretending to make the world safe for democracy, for this overturned a basic axiom of realpolitik – countries have principles as well as interests, and sometimes they must sacrifice the former in the name of the latter. Yet the heirs of realists like Carl Schmitt and Hans Morgenthau see no contradiction in claiming to base policy decisions on the criterion of national interests and then invading a country to overthrow a dictator in the name of freedom and democracy, two ideological goals driven by ideas of the good. Fourth, the realist take on politics leaves little or no room for emancipatory politics because emancipation has an ethical dimension irreducible to interests. This dimension consists of representations of alternative ways of being that motivate people in support of a group or a project. Ethics provides us with an interface between the representations of what one is fighting for and the claims that justify why it is worth doing so. Cooke calls this ‘utopian thinking’. This is not because they entail dreamy images of the future but because they involve ‘the ability to conjure up vivid ethical pictures of a “good society” that would be possible only if certain currently hostile conditions were transformed’, adding that without such images an ‘emancipatory perspective would suffer from a justificatory and motivational deficit’ (Cooke 2004: 419).

Even if we were to dismiss these reservations, there is a remaining objection, that a politics of the possible brushes-off the impossible all too quickly by implying that the possibility of the doable excludes the impossible. I find this unconvincing. Its Manichean vision takes for granted that the frontiers between the possible and the impossible are stable, and thus forgets that the doable is indebted to the impossible. By the ‘impossible’ I am not referring to that which can never happen and will never occur, but to the present effect of something that is not strictly speaking possible in a given field of experience but nonetheless
impels people to act as if it was. The arguments concerning the role of the impossible are developed at length in the next chapter, where I argue, with some caveats, that we can compare the role of the impossible to that of enthusiasm in Kant, weak messianic force in Benjamin and the à-venir in Derrida. They all refer to something that transcends the algorithmic reasoning of the merely calculable – whether feasibility analysis or cost-benefit calculation – and poses the promise of something other to come. Without this opening to the ‘eventness of the event’, as Derrida would call it, without an effort to disturb or interrupt the given, the art of the possible cannot account for emancipatory politics and its claim that another world is possible, or can only do so haphazardly and retroactively. One can discuss for days on end whether the Bolsheviks made a reasonable calculation about the ripeness of the revolution or just got lucky, but what is certain is that the Russian people did not go into the fray risking their lives simply because their leaders told them that the revolution was doable. They did so because they thought that they would be better off by precipitating the collapse of the Tsarist regime and building a different society. That is why the possible did not work alone. – Both as enthusiasm for or anticipation of something to come and as images that gave consistency and ethical appeal to that enthusiasm, the mobilizing force of the impossible was already at work shaping whatever the revolutionaries of 1917 believed was doable and the people saw as desirable.

The Impossible as Supplement

We can look at the play between the possible and the impossible in more detail by examining two cases. The first is the trial for rebellion of Auguste Blanqui, the nineteenth-century French revolutionary. Rancière cites a passage of his interrogation by the prosecutor:

> Asked by the magistrate to give his profession, Blanqui simply replies: ‘proletarian’. The magistrate immediately objects to this response: ‘That is not a profession’, thereby setting himself up for coping the accused’s immediate response: ‘It is the profession of thirty million Frenchmen who live off their labor and who are deprived of political rights.’ The judge then agrees to have the court clerk list proletarian as a new ‘profession’. (Rancière 1998: 37)

Rancière uses this exchange to illustrate what he means by a process of subjectivization, which is not only or simply the assertion of an identity but also the denial of an identity given by another. It is a
process of disidentification or declassification: when Blanqui identified himself as ‘proletarian’, he was rejecting the name assigned to him by the authorities and adopting the name of an outcast, ‘the name of those who are denied an identity in a given order of policy’ (Rancière 1995: 66). The proletarians with whom Blanqui identified himself did not count politically in French society in the 1830s, so he claimed to belong to the part that was wronged by being denied a stake in that society. The proletarians were the part without part in France – they were homeless Frenchmen, as it were. Rancière also mentions another name for the outcasts: ‘we are all German Jews’ (p. 67), inscribed on the walls of Paris in May 1968 after the government deported Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a French-German student leader at the Sorbonne. The French nationals who chanted it were expressing solidarity with a comrade and overturning the place/identity given to them by the status quo. They were declassifying themselves from the ‘Frenchness’ defined by the authorities by claiming to be as homeless in France as the foreigner Cohn-Bendit was; they were engaging in a process of subjectivization by declaring themselves to be the subject of a wrong and putting into question the existing field of experience.

These examples bring into play Rancière’s distinction between police and politics. By ‘police’ he does not mean the uniformed enforcers of the law but what he calls the ‘partition of the sensible’ that establishes the distinction between the visible and the invisible, and what can be heard from the inaudible. For the police, ‘society consists of groups dedicated to specific modes of action, in places where these occupations are exercised, in modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places’ (Rancière 2001). Society has no void – everyone has an assigned place and there is no remainder. In Blanqui’s case, the prosecutor could not recognize ‘proletarian’ as a profession because he could not separate the idea of profession from a recognized job, and ‘proletarian’ obviously did not coincide with one. A century and a half later, the authorities could not understand why the French protesters claimed to be German Jews when they were predominantly French Catholics. Politics, in contrast, disturbs this arrangement by supplementing it with the ‘part of those who have no part’, the part that does not count. It introduces the ‘noise’ of the outcasts within the order of police. Proletarian and German Jews, the ‘wrong names’ assumed by Blanqui and French students, challenge the existing partition of the sensible. They name the part that has no proper place in the
police order and show that another world where they will find their place is possible or, in Rancière’s own terms, their dissensus shows the presence of two worlds lodged in one.

The second case also involves an interrogation. Allport mentions it in his classic work on inter-group prejudice, as follows. ‘A negro woman was a plaintiff in a case involving a restrictive covenant. The lawyer for the defense questioned her, “What is your race?” “The human race”, she replied. “And what is your skin color?” “Natural color”, she answered’ (Allport 1979: 135). Allport says that the lawyer’s strategy bears the imprint of what he calls a mechanism of condensation, the tendency to conflate the symbol and the thing it stands for – in this case, the visible signs of being black and the inferred quality of having lower status. There is no causal connection between colour and status except through this mechanism of condensation whereby people end up ‘confusing the cue with the thing it signifies’ (p. 136). Prejudice appears when someone makes this type of connection. The lawyer’s classification of the woman along racial lines – and the fact of taking her skin colour as a relevant issue in a court of law – aims to particularize her within a mode of being that is in accordance with a racial partition of the sensible. The response of the woman overturns this logic. She refuses to identify herself in racial terms and instead invokes an equality denied to her: like her interrogators, she is part of the human race and her colour, like theirs, is natural. Her rhetorical strategy aims to disrupt the naturalness of a hierarchical racial code accepted as either fact or fate. It is analogous to Blanqui’s in that it consists of a simultaneous declassification and subjectivization: she adopts wrong names (she is human and natural) not because these names have no place in the existing order but because the racial partition of the sensible wrongs her by dissociating equality from race. Once again, there is an effort to create another world from within the police order, this time based on the verification of racial equality.

Both cases overturn the realist coding of the art of the possible by articulating the latter with the impossible. Hypothetically, Blanqui could have chosen to answer the questions of his interrogators in terms that were familiar to them. Instead, he used his trial to remind those in the courthouse that he was part of the vast majority of people who had no part in French society, and that a world where proletarians were not outcasts was developing within that society. The plaintiff in Allport’s example could have played by the rules with the expectation of
winning the case, but in describing her blackness as irrelevant because it was natural, and her race as human and thus universal, she aimed to disrupt a racial status quo where blacks were not considered equal to whites. People like this can win or lose, but this is not the decisive point. What matters is that granting visibility to proletarians in a space of appearance that excludes them, or positing racial equality in an order where blacks do not count, is acting politically, albeit in a very specific way: not by doing what is possible but by redefining what is doable. Blanqui and the black woman showed that the realist and commonsensical take on politics as the art of the possible fails to see that, in collective action – particularly in the case of emancipatory politics – the impossible is already at work in the very thought of the doable. Every action that aims to achieve something other than an accommodation within the given – that actually seeks to transform the conditions of the given – sets itself goals that might seem impossible. Those who partake in such actions are moved by a promise of something other to come.

Agitation as Unveiling/Translation

We can use the two cases introduced in the previous section to argue that Blanqui and the plaintiff also engage in ‘agitation’ in the etymological sense of setting things in motion. They stir the status quo. This is not enough to transform the partition of the sensible, as great transformations occur not through individual actions but by setting in motion human collectives. The value of their gesture, however, resides in its exemplarity. The exemplar is extra-ordinary; it resembles the exception in the Schmittian sense of a moment when ‘the power of real life’, as he calls it, shakes the pattern of mechanical repetition characteristic of normal times (Schmitt 1985: 15). The exemplar also shows us the unstable relation between singular and collective action. What they did as individuals reverberated beyond the singularity of the personal case by becoming an inspiration for emancipatory drives amongst their contemporaries. Their actions contributed to keep open the promise of something different and possibly better to come.

Let me say more about this play between the singular and the collective, particularly on how it intervenes in the disturbance of the given. Unlike other incarnations of agitation, the institutional aspect is relatively absent because Blanqui and the black woman are not acting in the name of a political group or advancing its strategic goals. But,
like agitprop, their actions of dissent have the pedagogical-political value of unveiling. They shake the order of things to give visibility to the exclusion of proletarians and blacks because either this is not immediately obvious or because those who live with it confuse the present condition of inequality with the way the world is meant to be. Their individual gesture of unveiling present inequality and depicting it as unjust and unnecessary educates us in the promise of a seemingly impossible equality to come. It opens the way for emancipation.

It would be a mistake to say that unveiling, and its investment in something to come, involves a teleo-eschatology or promise of final redemption, as in the familiar promise of a fully egalitarian Communist society. This is the classical way of conceiving emancipation: you show the true cause and nature of oppression and then aim to eradicate it completely. It is problematic because it replicates a theology of salvation in a secular register by imagining a reconciled, post-historical society that has moved from formal to substantial equality by putting an end to relations of exploitation and subordination. Whatever is to come becomes another name for presence – in this case, it is simply a delayed presence. A more interesting take on unveiling cuts the link between a promise of something to come and the belief in universal redemption by dropping the telos and the eschatology. In this way, the emancipatory pedagogy does not depend on a theological frame and unveiling becomes a political operation in the sense that Rancière gives to this word – politics as ‘the manifestation of dissensus, as the presence of two worlds in one’ (2001). The entire process is marked by undecidability, as the operators of dissensus might be proposing things that are worse than what we already have, by advocating a world of fascism and dictatorship, for example.

This is why someone like Walter Benjamin would accept the notion of something to come but construe it from the standpoint of his idiosyncratic mirror. For him, the stirring and shaking of unveiling plays on the value of the negative: it tugs the emergency brakes of the train of history hoping to stop things from getting worse or, to put it more dramatically, with the hope of interrupting our voyage to the abyss. His locomotive metaphor repositions emancipation in a more gloomy register. Instead of harping on about how things will be different (and better), it tells us that the worst is not inevitable as long as we are prepared to do something to stop it. For Löwy this is Benjamin’s way of speaking of a fragile utopian dimension, of showing
us the virtues of the *negative force* of utopia (Löwy 2005: 111, 113–14). The fragile or negative force reconfigures utopia less as the quest for a promised land than as a call for action to stop, or at least slow down, our descent into hell. It is a way of saying that something similar to the Nietzschean ‘death of God’ settles in once you dump the expectation of a sweet hereafter promised by a telos of progress. In the aftermath of God’s demise, or, if one prefers to withhold judgement about this occurrence, in the event of God having taken a severe beating from the moderns and their successors, there is no soothing roadmap to guarantee a specific outcome. Whether things might get better (emancipation) or worse (fascism) is undecidable, so act up or be damned.

This pedagogical and political unveiling stands for translatability in the absence of a transparent world. Unveiling is necessary because the conditions of exploitation and oppression are not immediately evident or, to circumvent the patronizing language of vanguards, unveiling comes into play because people are not blind to their circumstances but perceive these to be the outcome of forces beyond their grasp. One translates a given interpretation of the world into another language of perception in order to pose the possibility of another, less oppressive and exploitative world, and to entice people to pursue this possibility. Unveiling as translation is a response – for better or worse – to the lack of transparency of our conditions, an exercise meant to encourage emancipatory drives or to prevent a catastrophe. It is thus a way of speaking of ideological struggle without being burdened by the connotative baggage that accompanies the term ‘ideology’.

There will always be the suspicion that all translation is also a betrayal (the Italians have an expression for this: *traduttore, traditore*), especially if one heeds warnings like the one Lyotard issues in *The Differend* when he speaks of the incommensurability of the regimes of phrases dealing with a wrong. The risk of betrayal is undeniable, and so is the possibility of misreading the situation or presenting an openly misleading rendering of the world. However, it cannot function as an alibi for inaction or for embracing a risk-free contemplative life; we must live with this risk because otherwise nothing can ever really happen. As for Lyotard’s incommensurability, Rancière rightly claims that we might not be able to redress a wrong, but at least we can address it through disagreement, which means that the unveiling or translation performed by agitation is never outside dissensus. Let us also acknowledge that by shedding light on a wretched circumstance
one should not expect to achieve awareness of a true self that is ready to be released from subjection. Post-Marxist, post-foundational and other postie ways of thinking of agitation and emancipation look at transcendental signifieds like true self, final emancipation or absolute transparency with suspicion. Instead, in abandoning claims about human essence and by disengaging emancipation from the hold of narratives based on a telos of progress, we discover two things: that unveiling can no longer mean exposing the ultimate foundation of being and that emancipation turns out to be a task of Sisyphus (it has no end and we will be called repeatedly to perform it). One could then join the throngs that have taken aim at Fukuyama’s cocktail-party thesis and state that this way of conceiving unveiling teaches us that history goes on quite happily after any presumed ending. I prefer to stick to the conceptual syntax used above and say that it reveals that the demand for translation never ends. This is precisely why agitation is a supplement and not simply a sporadic occurrence of emancipatory politics. The shorthand formula to depict this structural link would be something like \textit{no emancipation without agitation!} However, if emancipation is rarely the order of the day, as many claim, does this mean that agitation is rare too?

We can count Benjamin amongst those who believe in the episodic nature of rebellion. He formulates his views with great lucidity and more than a touch of gloom in ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, a short text written in 1940 under the shadow projected by the triumph of fascism, the defeat of the workers’ movement, and the beginning of World War Two. The mind-numbing brutality of Auschwitz, like Hiroshima, apartheid, Pinochet, Rwanda, Srebrenica, and a long etcetera, are part of the tempest of progress that propels the angel of history of ‘Thesis IX’ into the future; they partake of the single catastrophe ‘which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet’ (Benjamin 1969: 257). The horror is always atavistic because the catastrophe has never ceased to pass; it is ongoing. Yet despite the apocalyptic language he uses, there is no pessimism here, as Benjamin also speaks of the possibility of redemption, of ‘a revolutionary \textit{chance} in the fight for the oppressed past’ (p. 263, Thesis XVII; my emphasis). His ‘chance’ stands in for contingency. It tells us that redemption, if it occurs at all, is dependent on actual struggles and therefore antithetical to the belief in natural laws of history guaranteeing that the future is ours. Löwy is adamant that, in Benjamin’s view, we can only interrupt
the catastrophe by acting collectively, by daring to challenge our oppressors through revolutionary actions (Löwy 2005: 33). He contends that emancipatory interruptions are brief episodes that puncture the ‘normality’ of domination, and thus that for Benjamin the tradition of the oppressed consists of a discontinuous series of rare moments when the chains of domination were broken (p. 106).

It is easy to see why Benjamin’s take on resistance and revolution helps to counteract the deterministic interpretations of history popular amongst progressive thinkers of the time, but there is something missing in the way he pegs the thought on emancipation to a revolutionary redemption of the past. He probably realizes that the gathering of the oppressed is not spontaneous, or is rarely so, for if it were, the normality of domination would probably be far less normal. People must make an effort to convince themselves to act up, and their effort has to be sustained over time if they expect it to yield results. Yet he is silent about the mechanics of this process because his idea of the messianic focuses primarily on exceptional situations, like the one he recalls to illustrate the revolutionary Jetztzeit or ‘now time’. He tells us that during the French Revolution people fired at the clocks of the towers of Paris to signal that their objective was ‘to make the continuum of history explode’ (Benjamin 1969: 261, Thesis XV). Poetic as this image of interruption may be, it sidesteps the discussion of a more pedestrian politics of emancipation – with its agitprop, logistics, temporality, and warm bodies coming together to discuss, plan, decide, test and modify an agreed course of action in the face of defeat or if it fails to work out as expected. In contrasting the Olympian heights of emancipation with its more pedestrian politics, what I am saying is that one does not need to be in the midst of cataclysmic moments that invite us to dare to become a collective, secular Messiah, for emancipatory politics to happen.

Emancipation, Revolutionizing and the Interstitial Region of Politics

Let me outline what I mean by emancipation. We can speak of emancipation when there is a dispute about whether present conditions – or if one prefers, existing social relations – encourage or harm equality and freedom, and about whether another world can come into being. Emancipatory politics is the practice of disturbing the given – and therefore of redefining the possible – in the pursuit of another, less unequal
and oppressive world, whether at a macro level or in the local regions of a microphysics of power.

This minimal definition has two advantages. One is that it describes emancipation without concerning itself with the way in which different politics of emancipation characterize the present and imagine the better alternative to be. The other is that it does not define equality and freedom by reference to a specific content, be it ‘abstract’, as in the statement ‘all men are born free and equal’, or ‘concrete’, as in the promise of radical equality following the abolition of private property in a future classless society. Instead, it understands them as an effect of polemicization. Equality and freedom have no relevant political existence outside efforts to singularize them in specific cases where one makes claims concerning (1) what it means to speak of either of them, (2) what it means to say that present conditions harm or further their cause, and (3) whether or not the possibility of a different world is at stake. Outside this kind of polemic there is politics as usual, which is nothing to frown about, but it is not emancipatory politics.

To say that conditions that expand freedom and equality are better than those that restrict them is to acknowledge that emancipatory politics has a normative dimension. To call for an involvement in disputes about the status of those conditions means that there is an ethics there too, a mode of subjectivization whereby we refuse to accept the obviousness of the given to demand a different world. To claim that we can only verify the normative and ethical orientations of emancipatory politics in a polemic, introduces an existential dimension to both. Carl Schmitt is helpful here. He gives us a working definition of this existential aspect when he claims that the political nature of a group depends on its capacity to distinguish their friends from their enemies as well as on its disposition to confront those enemies in combat. The existential dimension lies in this ‘as well as’. It means that whoever invokes a politics of emancipation must be willing to identify those who damage equality or freedom, but also, and most importantly, that they must be prepared to take sides and engage them in some kind of contest. In the absence of engagement, or of the willingness to engage, what we have is nice folks expressing a morally decent view – it is bad to harm freedom and equality – but not people taking a stand and accepting the risks that may follow from doing so. Yet Schmitt’s existential account of friend-enemy oppositions is conservative; there is no reference to emancipation as it is unconcerned with questions of freedom and
equality. In fact, he is content with affirming a state-centred status quo. That is why we must go against the grain of his general conservatism. We can do so by returning to something mentioned above, namely, that emancipatory politics is different from politics as usual in that it also, and necessarily, aims to disturb the status quo by demonstrating that another world can come to life.

Agitation is a supplement of this demonstration, sometimes rhetorical in nature and sometimes logistic or strategic. It participates in the exercise of disturbance of the given through the unveiling that offers a *mise-en-discours* of present conditions seen to harm equality and freedom. This unveiling is fraught with difficulties. It can be effective or fizzle out in grandstanding, expressive gestures, and it can even turn out to be plainly annoying in its effort to introduce dissonance into an otherwise gentrified domain of political exchange. Moreover, the stirring and shaking of agitation aims to get things going without always succeeding (this is never guaranteed) and, of course, without always becoming revolutionary in the classical sense of insurrection, overthrow and reinstitution (more on this shortly). All this is part of any politics of emancipation that unfolds over time and therefore undercuts the exceptionality of emancipatory drives.

I want to add two supplementary arguments to back this claim. One of them has to do with an understanding of radicalism that does not reduce revolution to its Jacobin view of overthrow and re-foundation, and that simultaneously destabilizes the frontiers between revolutionary and non-revolutionary politics. It is not that frontiers are irrelevant but rather that they are undecidable – their status cannot be settled outside cases that singularize them in a polemic. Does piercing the continuum of history – as opposed to making it explode, as Benjamin would put it – count as something other than lame reformism? How loud must the explosion be before it can count as a genuine (revolutionary) disruption of continuity? It is difficult to tell. The conceptualization of revolution is also plagued by the metonymy of the part for the whole. We confuse it with salient events that stand in for the phenomenon – the storming of the Winter Palace, for example – perhaps because of the ritual celebration of those events to reminisce the occurrence of revolution. Consider ‘the French Revolution’. What does this noun mean? We associate it with the assault of la Bastille, a synecdoche that takes a critical episode – little more than a historical sound bite – as indicative of an entire mass-movement. One might
question whether the events of 14 July 1789 actually put an end to absolutism and mark the birth of a republican system. Why not set the date differently and make it coincide with, say, the promulgation of the Constitution in 1792 or the forced return of Louis XVI from Versailles and his subsequent beheading in 1793? Others would argue that the Revolution only finds its closure, if there is such a thing as a final closure, with the end of the Terror and the beheading of Saint Just and Robespierre in 1794. Episodes like these are iconic moments that have the power of both conveying the epoch-changing character of an event and of mystifying revolutions by suggesting that they consist of an all-encompassing rupture that takes place in a single glorious moment.

There is also the confusion between the fleeting and the enduring, between acts of insurgency/rebellion that flicker and then disappear and the permanence of a new state or regime. This dissolves the question of revolution in the banal scheme of success versus failure, the overthrow of the ruling bloc and the establishment of a new regime or the fiasco of exile – or, more tragically, the execution of its visible leaders – if unsuccessful. One might then ask what happens when some vindicate a ‘failure’ of sorts by deliberately refusing to seize power or to institute a new state. On the academic side of this refusal we find Virno and others who propose ‘exodus’, ‘exit’ or defection from the state as the politics of the multitude (Virno 2004: 69–70), or Holloway when he speaks of changing the world without taking power (2002). Hakim Bey also speaks of dropping out, going ‘native’ and opting for chaos – returning to a state of nature in the sense of a state where there is no State – in his Deleuze-inspired rhizomatic ‘temporary autonomous zone’ or TAZ. He understands the TAZ as a ‘tactic of disappearance’, in the sense that it consists of an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it’ (Bey 1991). The TAZ resembles what Deleuze and Guattari call ‘becoming-minoritarian’, which refers to a refusal to submit to the dominant codes and an effort to invent alternative ways of being. Autonomy is the watchword of a becoming-minoritarian; one becomes revolutionary by conjugating a number of minority elements, because by doing so ‘one invents a specific, unforeseen, autonomous becoming’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 106; also Patton 2005: 406–8). On the more practical or operational side one encounters
the Zapatista insurgency and its refusal to centre its demands on the seizure of state power, despite its insistence on constructing another state. What we have here is the paradox of an activity of revolutionizing that explicitly refuses to become a new state, a way of understanding revolution outside the Jacobin matrix and the binary opposition between success and failure that we will discuss in detail in the following chapter.

We can avoid the problem of metonymy by adopting an image of thought of revolution that mirrors Foucault’s depiction of systemic coherence as ‘regularity in dispersion’ (Foucault 1972): the revolutionary singularity would be a multiplicity of discontinuous sites of enunciation of challenges to the status quo. A revolution will never have finished because it will always have started to happen as we position ourselves in such sites of enunciation. (Foucault might not have had Spinoza in mind, but his regularity in dispersion provides some consistency to the notion of ‘multitude’ – a plurality that persists as such without converging into a One – popularized by the likes of Hardt, Negri and Virno.) The confusion about duration disappears as soon as one realizes that revolution is not simply a distant time-shattering event that will lay the foundations for a future state but primarily a performative designating the activity of revolutionizing through which a revolution has already begun to happen as we work for it here and now. Gramsci himself suggested this when he rejected putschism by claiming that a class does not seize the state but becomes one (Gramsci 1971: 57), even if his thought remained within the paradigm of revolution as re-foundation – the institution of a new state. Bey’s TAZ provides a counterpoint to Gramsci’s state-centred reading in the sense that temporary autonomous zones are part of an always-ongoing revolution of everyday life that does not stop at the gates of the state. As he put it, ‘the struggle cannot cease even with the last failure of the political or social revolution because nothing except the end of the world can bring an end to everyday life, nor to our aspirations for the good things, for the Marvellous’ (Bey 1991). These differences notwithstanding, the type of reasoning developed by Gramsci and by people who propose the tactic of bypassing the state undermines the purity of the distinction between revolutionary and non-revolutionary actions (for example, between exploding and piercing the continuum of history) and transfers the handling of the distinction to the terrain of polemic. It also places the stirring and shaking of agitation – its disturbance of gentrified politics, its unveiling
of presently adverse conditions for freedom and equality – within the general heading of a politics of emancipation verified in the everyday activity of revolutionizing.

The other argument to validate everyday disturbances of the given is in a way a corollary of the preceding one. It has to do with the political relevance of the gap or structural non-coincidence of the inscription and the inscribed, or the institution and the instituted. This gap reveals an interstitial region that is neither pure domination nor absolute freedom, but rather a grey zone where challenges and transformations are possible and commonplace occurrences. We can look at it from the standpoint of Rancière’s distinction between police and politics. We saw something of this in the discussion of Blanqui’s trial. The police or partition of the sensible assigns a name and a place to every group – which means that society only has identifiable parts – whereas politics is the institution of dissensus, a dis-identification with the assigned name and an adoption of the wrong name of the part that has no part in the existing partition. Politics is ‘improper’ because it has no place of its own and can only ‘take place’ in the territory of police, where, according to Rancière, it attempts to demonstrate that there are two worlds lodged in one. This, of course, suggests the failure of the police, or its impurity, for the police might wish to deliver us a single world in which the inscription is identical to the inscribed, but the polemic introduced by politics opens up a gap within the partition of the sensible. The gap constitutes a blind spot in the field of vision of the police. It stands in for the non-coincidence between the inscription and the inscribed, and therefore functions as a condition of possibility for a second world lodged in the first one. This is not a pre-constituted site for the manifestation of emancipatory drives because the site itself is being carved by polemics about equality and freedom. One might say that if politics is the practice of dissensus, then the blind spot is an effect of dis-identification, and therefore of liberation, that makes its appearance as we strive for equality and freedom long before we have rid from society the last scoundrels that hinder them.

Foucault offers us another angle when he says that ‘there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight’ (1982: 225). There is a perpetual encounter between power relations – an action upon the actions of others that seeks ‘to structure the possible field of action of others’ – and strategies of struggle or insubordination where each ‘constitutes for the other a kind of permanent limit, a
The conjunction of revolutionizing with the interstitial region overturns the belief that emancipation is always and necessarily tied to exceptional moments of disruption of the given and it reminds us of the impossibility of a dominant order without residues. Both undercut the realist take on the art of the possible by imagining something to come—a different world that improves on existing freedom and equality—and by acting to make it happen. They reinforce the argument about the practice of emancipation and agitation as an everyday occurrence.

Notes

1. There is also the classical criticism of realism: that its claim to epistemological superiority rings hollow because it takes for granted that its language tells it as it is. Barthes challenges this in S/Z through an ingenious reading of a realist text—Balzac’s short novel Sarrazine—that shows that intertextuality undermines the realist pretension of offering us a purely denotative transcription of the world. As he famously put it, ‘denotation is not the first meaning but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of connotations . . . the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature’ (Barthes 1970: 9).

2. Deleuze and Guattari’s topos of the nomad (1988) and de Certeau’s distinction between strategy and tactics (1984) provide us with some of the most intriguing figurations of this interstitial region. Bey’s TAZ is a figure of such a region.
Chapter 5

Talkin’ ’bout a Revolution: the End of Mourning

The Mourning After

What is it that we mourn when we mourn revolution, especially since the term has fallen into disrepute in the age of liberal-democratic consensus? At first sight, we mourn very little. Ever since the fall of Communism and, perhaps just as significantly, starting with the polemic around the ‘end of history’ predicated as a consequence of that fall, its use in political discourse seems irremediably anachronistic, an enunciation closer to the language of historians than to the doings of serious activists and progressive thinkers.

So, who mourns? Certainly not the advocates of the free market, for they have every reason to celebrate. Those who once believed in revolution have now moved on. Having made their peace with the loss, they accept the closure of the idea of radical change and conceive politics along the path of pragmatism. If they still invoke revolution, or its manifold ghosts, they do so ironically in order not to sound risible or pathetic. Others, however, continue to mourn. They do so as one mourns a dead lover or a departed friend, with grief, at times with nostalgia, but always with the feeling of loss. This is a loss of direction ensuing from the collapse of a project or horizon for action, in this case the horizon of a more just society with a greater sense of solidarity,
also called socialism for the sake of brevity. My sympathies go to this group of mourners, although theirs is often a troubling mourning. It presupposes that what is lost is irretrievable, which is quite true, but also that it escapes the law of iterability. This is what makes it so tragic, for then no work of political mourning could ever be adequate to its object, or it would have to be endless in its effort to match, no matter how poorly, the unending grief caused by the loss. However, this is not so much mourning as it is melancholia, the failure to let go of the lost object. Melancholia or endless mourning for the demise of a revolutionary project that once guided the socialist tradition places the advocates of such a project in a terrible predicament. Like Jaroslav, the character in Milan Kundera’s *The Joke*, they are condemned to live lives marked by the awareness that destiny is often completed before death.

However, as in any work of mourning, one has to accept that at some point bereavement for the loss of revolution has to end, unless, of course, mourning turns into melancholia. Kurt Hirtler (2002) makes a strong case against confusing these notions. Freud does too. He speaks of both as painful experiences – mourning involves the loss of an object and melancholia points to a pathological loss concerning the ego (Freud 1957: 247). Melancholia is pathological because it never lets go. In contrast, Freud says that mourning can and does finish. The end of mourning is a matter of time; it is aided by reality testing, which in showing that the loved object no longer exists, proceeds to withdraw the libido from it (p. 244). When the work of mourning is completed, he says, ‘the ego becomes free and uninhibited again’ (p. 245). Kuebler-Ross is perhaps the best-known writer on mourning. She describes its end as the fifth and final stage of mourning, the acceptance of the loss and the discovery of the fresh hope that comes along with it (1970: 122–6). The end of mourning for revolution – assuming there could ever be such a thing as an ending without a remainder – would thus signal a turning point comparable to Nietzsche’s depiction of the nihilist experience. Nihilism is a transitional moment that follows the death of God and the transvaluation of all values that comes with the emergence of higher men that prefigure the birth of the overman. For Nietzsche, according to Blanchot, nihilism calls for its own overcoming, so it is actually the principle of a new beginning (Blanchot 1985: 121). The end of mourning is thus more of an opening than a last page, a chance for reopening the case for revolution.
The question this raises is why we need to reclaim it at all. The term comes with a heavy baggage of violence, betrayals and uncertainty that most would find ill fitted to thinking about political mobilization in pluralistic societies. One only needs to look at its etymology, which oddly enough relates to astronomy in more than one way. Until the mid-eighteenth century, revolution refers to the movement of celestial bodies, usually in an orbit, which presupposes a return to the point of departure. Koselleck points out that the political sphere replicates the naturalistic undertones of this view by conceiving political temporality as a cyclical sequence of finite constitutional forms – monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. These succeed and replace one another as they slide into tyranny, oligarchy and ochlocracy, their corresponding corruptions, until the end of the sequence is reached and the repetitive cycle of change and restoration can begin anew (Koselleck 1985: 41–2; also Arendt 1963: 42–3). Seen from this perspective, ‘revolution’ designates the ensemble of polemics and struggles aiming to put an end to, say, an aristocratic regime that has become oligarchic and to replace it with its democratic corrective that will remain in place until it degenerates into ochlocracy and the revolutionary cycle recommences.

Revolution also relates to astronomy through a connotative link with ‘disaster’, a term whose original meaning (dis- + aster/astrum or star) designates the unfavourable aspect of a planet or a star. This in turn suggests by implication the idea of disarrangement in or of the cosmos, the idea of a cosmos in disarray. The negative implication of the idea of disarray, paired with the more constructive side of re-foundation, became dominant in the second half of the eighteenth century, particularly after 1789. The reference to cycles was lost and political discourse began using it to designate times of radical change or projects aiming to disarrange and rearrange existing political settings in a fundamental way. The term came to indicate the overthrow of the existing government or, better still, the change of a political regime through the mobilization of those subjected to it (Paramio 1990). We can narrow this further and say that a call to arms and the shedding of blood usually accompany it, although this is not always the case. The ‘Velvet Revolution’ of 1989 provides us with a counter-example of putting an end to communist rule in the old Czechoslovakia without resorting to armed violence. The ‘Orange Revolution’ of 2004 in Ukraine is another, as the peaceful yet massive and sustained gathering of the people in Kiev’s Independence Square enabled the annulment of
fraudulent elections and the replacement of an authoritarian government. Of course, one could also be less specific and see revolution as an indicator of novelty and change – a revolutionary invention, an industrial revolution, even cultural or scientific ones. This notwithstanding, the prevalent use of the term designates exceptionally intense moments of change; its meaning is caught up in the loop of insurrection, overthrow and re-foundation.

If this is all there is to it, its utility is limited to foundational moments when the fate of the whole is at stake. The end of mourning would then merely replicate the conventional use of the term instead of providing us with an opening to retrieve it for politics more generally. One way of thinking that the history of the term has not reached its end is that its itinerary has been complex and eventful: in less than a century, the perception of revolution shifted from a cyclical view of political change to the early modern sense of overthrow and reinstitution. This historicity suggests that there is no such thing as a paradigmatic closure for revolution. Gramsci was well aware of this when he provided an alternative to the Jacobin and Leninist schemes. He conceived revolution as the becoming-state of a class and not simply as its successful ‘takeover’ of state power. The point, though, is not to exclude the classical meaning but to supplement it with other possibilities that can be generated by the concept.

Polemicizing the Limit: how Radical does a Radical Change have to Be?

A starting point for moving in this direction is to acknowledge that an inquiry about the conceptual status of revolution is tied to a reflection on the political. One can see the latter as the encounter of two heterogeneous logics, that of the order of ‘police’ and that of ‘politics’: the former describes a partition of the sensible or hierarchical distribution of names and functions of a whole, whereas the latter consists of a disruption of a given relation between parts (Rancière 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004). We could also conceive the political as the mode of institution of society, as a mode through which society is ordered and unified despite and across its divisions (Lefort 1988: 11, 218–19) or as the moment of antagonism that reactivates the sedimented forms of objectivity of the social (Laclau 1990: 34–5). One could even depict it simply as the capacity to distinguish friends from enemies and the disposition to take
sides in their confrontations (Schmitt 1996). Regardless of how one conceives it, revolution remains one of the structural possibilities of the political – a limit case of disruption, reactivation, or friend-enemy groupings.

Common-sense discourse tends to conceive this limit case as a signpost for the reinstitution of the whole, but ‘limits’ can also designate changes that aim to extricate people from subjection, or to transform in a substantive way prevailing relations of power, or legal codes, customs and rituals. This second sense of limits does not necessarily involve an absolute re-foundation of the type associated with the Jacobin imaginary. Yet it is still revolutionary, in which case one would have to disengage revolution from a strong notion of totality and place it under the general heading of emancipation. This is the possibility that interests me because then one could enquire about the political valence of a will to revolution without stopping at the gates of insurrection and begin to describe experiences such as sexual or democratic revolutions as part of the field of possibilities of the idea of revolution. The will to revolution would then refer not only to overthrow or to re-foundation but to a wider activity of revolutionizing, equally intent on restructuring the cosmos in a radical way.

This seemingly commonsensical proposition introduces a difficulty given that ‘restructuring the cosmos in a radical way’ is not a self-evident utterance. What do we mean when we use the adjective ‘radical’? All we can say is that roots are at stake whenever we use it and that one must thus excavate to see how deep to go, what to disrupt and how to re-institute it. Jacobins had a clear view that roots meant making tabula rasa of the past in order to rebuild society from scratch. They provided political thought with the classical-modern interpretation of revolution as insurrection, overthrow and reinstitution and condemned political projects that fell short of this benchmark to the lamer realm of ‘reformism’. It is as if without the Jacobin interpretation of radicalism and revolution it is not possible to distinguish the activity of revolutionizing from politics as usual. How radical is a radicalism that eschews the re-foundation of the whole? How encompassing does the proposal of transforming the cosmos have to be before you can call it ‘revolutionary’? One might find solace in remembering that revolution is one of the structural possibilities of the political and that some degree of overlap between these concepts is to be expected. Yet saying that conceptual frontiers are unstable does not solve the difficulty of
distinguishing between everyday politics and a non-Jacobin approach to revolution as revolutionizing.

The interesting thing is that the Jacobin coding of radical change does not solve it either. Philosophically, the pursuit of a clean break with the past – the belief that one can produce a present that is uncontaminated by that past – is suspect because it entails a change without remainder and therefore places the idea of revolution as absolute re-foundation in the field of the metaphysics of presence. On a more practical register, revolutions do not live up to their supposed referent: no revolutionary project has ever managed to transform society so radically as to make *tabula rasa* of the past. Jacobins failed in their attempt to do so despite the rhetoric of a total rupture with the *ancien régime*. Religion and pre- and anti-republican thought survived in the revolutionary aftermath. The new calendar – with its now all but forgotten months of Brumaire, Messidor, Thermidor or Fructidor – designed to compute time from the day after the proclamation of the Republic in 1792, was abandoned in 1805. Quasi-millenarist movements like the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the Taliban in Afghanistan were equally incapable of eradicating (again the ghost of roots, as eradication suggests a ‘rooting out’) the spectres of the past despite the terror and the implacable logic of re-foundation that followed their seizure of power. Žižek once observed that the moment Hegel calls the ‘loss of the loss’ is the moment of discovery that ‘we never had what we were supposed to have lost’ (Žižek 1990: 252). *Mutatis mutandis*, we never had the kind of revolution we were supposed to repeat. The purity of an absolute change ends up being a bogus notion, which in turn puts into question the absolute radicalism of a radical change. This does not cancel out the usage of revolution to designate phenomena of insurrection and overthrow, but it short-circuits its presumed equivalence with re-foundation. In short, the problem of how to think of radicalism and distinguish revolution from politics as usual remains unresolved even amongst Jacobins and their heirs.

Yet we do have to say something about it, which is why I propose we use two methodological criteria to assess the radicalism of a radical restructuring of the cosmos. Given that revolutionizing involves challenging commonsense, an opening to experimentation in the realm of ideas as well as in the practical affairs of everyday life, the first criterion will consist of an index of interruption or non-quantitative measure of disruption of the given. There is no revolutionizing without
such interruption. However, ‘interruption’ is an ambiguous term. In Chapter 4 we discussed this in relation to Benjamin: does ‘puncturing’ the continuum of history count as a veritable revolutionary rupture or does it constitute a mere reformist action? This is why we need a second criterion to think about the radicalism of a radical rupture. It is as follows: one cannot determine the radicalism of a revolutionary intervention outside a polemic.

**Revolutionizing as an Interruption of the Given**

I will first discuss the criterion of interruption. There are many ways of addressing it. Derrida speaks of the coming of an event: revolution appears as ‘an interruption, a radical caesura in the ordinary course of History’, one that ‘seeks to do the impossible, to interrupt the order of things on the basis of non-programmable events’ (Derrida and Roudinesco 2004: 83). Revolution amounts to thinking and acting beyond the horizon of the merely possible that characterizes codes. It would therefore refer to non-algorithmic interventions. We will discuss this in more detail later in the chapter. Žižek proposes something along these lines when he discusses Lenin’s distinction between formal and actual freedom. The former ‘is the freedom of choice within the coordinates of the existing power relations, while actual freedom designates the site of an intervention that undermines these very coordinates’ (Žižek 2002a: 544). This ‘stepping out’ of existing coordinates is not simply a transgression, like when we break the law or disobey standing authorities; it has to be one that brings into question the obviousness of the existing consensus. Virno calls this ‘civil disobedience’, which for him is the basic form of political action of the multitude. It is a form of disobedience that goes beyond the liberal formulation of the concept by putting into question the very faculty of command of the state; radical disobedience does not simply violate a given law, it questions the validity of its foundations (Virno 2004: 69). The supplement of this disobedience, says Virno, is ‘exodus’ or defection, an idea inspired by Hirschman’s notion of exit. By this he means that confronting a problem is not simply choosing one of the foreseen alternatives but instead is an effort to change the very setting in which the problem appears, an ‘unrestrained invention which alters the rules of the game and throws the adversary completely off balance’ (p. 70).

Žižek believes that today in the West the paradigmatic case of interrupting or disrupting the given is questioning the predominant
liberal-democratic consensus, in the sense that this questioning can function as an opening for posing alternative configuration of that consensus. (Rancière, of course, would designate this act of undermining consensus as ‘politics’, which, as seen in previous chapters, he defines as an activity of disrupting and refiguring the partition of the sensible, and therefore, at least implicitly, as the opening up of sites of enunciation that did not exist or were not visible in a given field of experience.) Žižek illustrates what he means by the disruption of consensus by referring to a popular French TV programme of 2000, *C’est mon choix*, where the guests had to describe a choice that had changed their lifestyles. They were allowed to speak of a wide variety of topics, including detailed accounts of non-conventional sexual practices, as long as what they said did not disturb the audience. Žižek ridicules this as a lame view of transgression. A truly radical choice, he says, would have been to ‘to invite people like dedicated racists whose choice – whose difference – *does* make a difference’ (*2002a*: 542–3). This would have been provocative indeed, but it begs the questions of why racism is more radical than sexuality and why this would matter. Voicing a racist option can disrupt liberal-democratic consensus but its occurrence does not tell us much about whether it is desirable or not. If the disruption of the given is the absent norm of revolutionizing we are left with an account that reduces the desirability of the norm to the simple enjoyment of disruption for its own sake.

**The Radicalism of an Interruption is Established through Polemic or Disagreement**

A reference to emancipation could undermine the formalism of this account of disruption, as it would be consistent with seeing revolutionizing under the general heading of emancipatory politics, but I want to keep the argument at the formal level. That is why I propose a second, supplementary criterion to the one outlined above. It is the following: one cannot establish whether an interruption of the status quo is radical or not outside of a polemic or a disagreement. Oakeshott (1996) provides us with a first image of polemic by saying that modern politics in the last four centuries has been characterized by the tension between two distinct styles. These are the politics of faith, which claims that politics can effect deep and durable changes in its quest for worldly salvation, and the politics of scepticism, which maintains that politics can only aim to secure a minimal order for human interaction.
The tension between these styles is also played out in language, says Oakeshott, in the sense that faith and scepticism have embarked on a continual dispute to define the terms of our political vocabulary. This explains the ambiguity of the terms of political discourse, in this case, of the very idea of radicalism.

Another way of looking at it is to focus on the conceptual meaning of disagreements. We usually think of them as oratorical matches of the type that take place in debating societies, where speakers present conflicting views on a given subject and the best argument prevails. Rancière gives it a different slant. He says that disagreement is:

a determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying. Disagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness. (Rancière 1998: x; also Arditi and Valentine 1999: 121, 138–9)

It refers not to words alone but ‘generally bears on the very situation in which speaking parties find themselves’ (Rancière 1998: xi). Moreover, he claims that it is not only an object of theorization; disagreement is also a method of inquiry, in the sense that ‘addressing an author or a concept first means to me setting the stage for a disagreement, testing an operator of difference’ (Rancière 2003).

Since the first question to elucidate is what one is talking about (what do you mean by ‘whiteness’, ‘revolution’, ‘emancipation’ or ‘radical’?), a disagreement is less a confrontation between two established positions – as in the case of a debating society – than an engagement between ‘parties’ that do not antedate their confrontation. A disagreement constructs the object of argumentation and the field of argumentation itself. Any talk of the radicalism associated with the activity of revolutionizing is also a discussion about radicalism, a polemic or disagreement about what it means to talk of revolutionizing. Let us call this polemicization, which is not a convenient alibi to surrender conceptual precision but a procedure to construct political concepts that resists the temptation to endow them with a strong ontological consistency. Polemicization does so by rendering their ‘as such’ – their proper name – constitutively improper. I will now outline some examples of this.
My first example refers to Carl Schmitt’s claims that political oppositions are the most intense of all oppositions. The political refers to the capacity to distinguish friends from enemies, and the disposition to confront the latter in a combat that can reach the extreme case of war. However, he does not specify the contours, scope and intensity of political oppositions. Do they include rival gangs fighting to the death for the control of a neighbourhood, or the opposition between empiricist and idealist philosophers as long as they are willing to go to war for their beliefs? Moreover, as Derrida points out, one could argue that if the ‘intensity’ of political oppositions is measured by their possibility of leading to the limit case of war, then his argument bears the mark of a telos of intensity. The closer one gets to war, the more political an opposition becomes, in which case war ceases to be a presupposition and an extreme case of politics and turns into its essence and destiny (Derrida 1997: 131–2, 139). These questions do not invalidate Schmitt’s concept of the political, but indicate that they cannot be settled outside a polemic or a disagreement, at least as long as one agrees that ‘settlement’ does not signal the closure of the issue but refers instead to what Foucault (1982: 225–6) describes as a strategic situation or strategic relation. The resolution of a disagreement is therefore a contingent outcome of polemic.

The itinerary of ‘class’ in the Marxist tradition provides us with another example. The relative certainty enjoyed by this concept during the nineteenth century was partly due to the belief in an immediate overlap between ‘wage earners’ and ‘proletarians’, as neither possessed means of production. The link between them has become more ambiguous as ‘wage earners’ now includes not only the proletarians but also professionals, service employees and managers who lack stock in their companies. This differentiation posed a serious problem for those who wished to identify the subject of socialism with the proletarians, and these with wage earners. Poulantzas (1974) tried to set things straight by identifying the genuine proletarians of late capitalism through a distinction between productive and non-productive labour: only those who produced surplus value would be part of the proletariat. His solution caused more difficulties than those it aimed to solve, if only because it lacked a criterion to measure the notion of ‘productive’ in the case of domestic workers, state employees or university lecturers whose productivity is difficult to quantify in terms of surplus value. This ended up reducing the ‘workers’ – as well as the socialist subject – to a minority amongst wage earners. One of the most interesting contributions
at the time was put forward by Przeworski (1977). He argued that one should not identify ‘proletarian’ and ‘class’ automatically, or the structural position of wage earners and class, and suggested a political criterion to do so: the class struggle is primarily a struggle about class – about the ideological, theoretical, organizational and institutional process of class formation – and not simply a struggle between classes. A ‘struggle about class’ is, of course, a way of admitting that the never-ending story about ‘class’ is configured through polemicization. This might shed light on the empirical and contingent identification of social classes, although not on the motive of why a socialist project required a transcendental subject of history.

A third and final example finds that a similar disagreement surrounds an issue such as the decriminalization of abortion. Some might see it as a radical change that puts into question the partition of the sensible in the field of reproductive health, whereas others will perceive it simply as a limited change that does not affect the conservative vision of gender relations in any fundamental way. The practical and theoretical status of decriminalization as an index of reform or revolution is played out in a disagreement and cannot be settled by fiat of conceptual engineering.

In brief, if we want to stick to the claim that revolution is a limit case of the political we must also inquire about the status of that limit. This means addressing an inevitable question: how radical must the radical restructuring of the cosmos be in order to call it revolutionary? My response to this is that the Jacobin solution is very clear but also unsatisfactory. Its call for total re-foundation puts revolution in the realm of metaphysics, which is why I propose that we follow two methodological criteria to think about the idea of radicalism associated with limits. I called the first one an index of change: revolutionizing is an interruption or disruption of the given, a transgression that questions the existing consensus. As the scope of this interruption is unclear – how transgressive is a transgression? – I introduce a second criterion, disagreement or polemicization. This serves as a means to construe the radicalism of that disruption, as well – and more importantly – as a device to generate concepts whose ontological status is that of a strategic relation and an improper name. These two criteria function as opening salvos to position the activity of revolutionizing beyond the standard meaning of revolution. Now we have to move the argument further by looking at the relation between the promise of something to come and the finite representations of that promise at the heart of
the structurality of the concept of revolutionizing. I will introduce it by looking at some lines of flight from the Jacobin imaginary, provided by the likes of Gramsci, Kant and Benjamin, and then develop it through the interlocking Derridian notions of the à-venir, the impossible and the event.

The Play between the Promise and the Figure
Gramsci was amongst the first of the leaders of the Third International to perceive the possibility of thinking revolution outside the Jacobin and later Leninist box. In an early article published in _Avanti!_ and _Il Grido del Popolo_, he describes the Russian revolution of 1917 as a revolution against Capital – against the expected normal course of events outlined in Marx’s study of capitalist development and his views about the conditions for a socialist revolution (Gramsci 1977: 68). More interestingly for our inquiry, his own approach to the politics of revolution departs from the lingering putschism of Bolshevism.

This departure is not because he believed that Lenin and his followers were wrong, but because Gramsci realized that a simple replication of the revolutionary politics that worked for the Russian communists did not guarantee its success elsewhere. Conditions in the West forecasted it.

In Russia the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses. (Gramsci 1971: 238)

What he is saying here is that there are differences between East and West and these affect the way we conduct political struggle. This commonplace observation in Gramsci’s studies becomes more interesting when one realizes that the passage also insinuates that revolution differs from the images of an insurrectional epic that populate our collective unconscious – iconic moments like the assault of La Bastille, the storming of the Tsar’s Winter Palace, or the toppling of the gigantic statue of Lenin in Kiev in 1991. We have seen something of this in the previous chapter. Powerful as they are, these illustrations of turning points in the history of a people often betray an involuntary metonymy of the part for the whole that lead us to confuse the images – glorified historical sound bites – with the dynamics of revolutionary processes. They are
misleading because they link the idea of revolution to a takeover of state power and to a project that seeks to modify society in a single, decisive rupture.

Gramsci famously disagreed with the idea of revolution as something resembling a ‘Big Bang’, partly because this overlooks the day-to-day political, cultural and organizational efforts to assemble collectives of men and women and put them into action. He developed an alternative by drawing from his well-known distinction between two forms of supremacy, domination (force and submission) and leadership (intellectual and moral). He says:

A social group can, indeed must, already exercise ‘leadership’ before winning governmental power (this is indeed one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to ‘lead’ as well. (Gramsci 1971: 57)

This ex-ante leadership explains why for him – as Laclau and Mouffe maintain – a class does not ‘seize’ the state but becomes state (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 69). It becomes state as it engages in wars of position within civil society and gradually puts together a new collective will or hegemony. If hegemony is the becoming-state of a political force, then, for Gramsci, challenging the *nomos* of the cosmos – the activity of disarrangement and rearrangement characteristic of the political, and of its revolutionary possibility – is not reducible to a single point in time because it has been occurring since long before the last savant is dismissed. The effects this challenge produces here and now are already signalling the occurrence of revolution.²

This moves the concept of revolution further away from the Jacobin vision. It offers us an angle from which to consider the performative dimension at work in the concept beyond the gleam of insurrection. Revolution takes place without always arriving as one expects the arrival of a person or a parcel, because those who speak, act, imagine or are simply sympathetic to the coming of a radical change *at the same time* bring forth a change as they speak, act, imagine and go along with it. Yet, what is it that entices people to involve themselves in this revolutionizing, and what does it mean to ‘get involved’ here? Kant discusses this in his inquiry about a priori or ‘prophetic history’ of the human species as a whole. ‘We can obtain a prophetic historical narrative of things to come’, he says, ‘by depicting those events whose
a priori possibility suggests that they will in fact happen’ (Kant [1798] 1991: 177). A history of the future might sound odd, but he believes ‘that it is possible if the prophet himself occasions and produces the events he predicts’. The purpose of such a history is to address the question of whether humanity is in constant progress, and in order to do so he proceeds to isolate an event that has the value of a sign capable of functioning as a cause of that progress (p. 181). This event, he says, must be at once rememorative, demonstrative and prognostic ‘of a tendency within the human race as a whole’. It is important to underline, as Zupančič does (2005: 32), that we are not speaking of empirical causality pointing directly to the event, given that Kant understands the event itself as an interruption of the normal course of things.

Kant’s essay was written some years after 1789 so it comes as no surprise that the event he has in mind is revolution. However, it seems to be a strange choice to account for a moral disposition of humanity, especially since Kant admits that revolution may be ‘so filled with misery and atrocities that no right-thinking man would ever decide to make the same experiment again at such a price’ (p. 182). Yet its significance as a sign does not rest on the fact of the revolutionary upheaval as such, for the success or failure of the actual process of disarrangement of the cosmos is not the decisive issue. What matters for him is ‘the attitude of the onlookers as it reveals itself in public while the drama of great political changes is taking place’. What does this public attitude consist of? That people ‘openly express universal yet disinterested sympathy for one set of protagonists against their adversaries, even at the risk that their partiality could be of great disadvantage to themselves’ (p. 182). Two things stand out here. One is that Kant does not put the emphasis on the revolutionary leaders but on the spectators, on those who take sides by expressing interest without directly participating in the revolutionary events as such. The other is that spectators are not free riders, as he warns us that taking sides ‘could be of great disadvantage’; whoever shows sympathy for a political contender in public must be prepared to accept the consequences that may follow from taking a stand.

Foucault captures the significance of Kant’s formulation when he says that he is less concerned with the drama of the revolutionary process – its battles, leaders and combatants – than with what happens in the heads of those who have not participated directly but have
nonetheless been swept along by the revolution. What matters for Kant is the *enthusiasm* it elicits amongst the onlookers (Foucault 1983: 15–17). Enthusiasm for revolution or will to revolution is a sign of progress in that it reveals the specific moral disposition at work in humanity, namely, a recurrent effort of people to decide freely on their own civil or political constitution and to avoid offensive war. This is Kant’s compass for moral progress. Revolution is the sign of a disposition to govern ourselves freely – which we can link to the idea of emancipation more generally – and to pursue peace, even though ‘the precise time at which it will occur must remain indefinite and dependent upon chance’ (Kant [1798] 1991: 185). While the time of arrival of revolution ‘must remain indefinite’, the possibility of deferral does not undermine the moral disposition to progress it brings forth. This is because the latter relates to a certain anticipation of something to come, an opening to the future that is already at work despite the absence of any guarantee of its fulfilment.

Kant’s reference to enthusiasm and anticipation provides us with the initial criterion for thinking of the future present of revolution as a promise or an opening to something to come that elicits enthusiasm and entices people to reach for what might seem impossible. The promise, however, is not lodged in a simple and distant future because it is already happening here and now. This is because in Kant’s prophetic history ‘the prophet himself occasions and *produces* the events he predicts’. The doing of prophets does not consist of predicting what will occur or waiting for something to happen but refers instead to an activity, the activity of *precipitating* the events the prophet describes.

It is interesting to notice that here prophetic history dovetails with Benjamin’s reference to the Messiah, at least to the extent that they both call for a collective effort to *provoke* an arrival rather than simply await it. The Kantian theme of enthusiasm reappears indirectly in Benjamin through the promise of something to come. Enthusiasm brings into play the messianic power of the promise in the sense that the ‘now time’ of revolution (Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*) is a mystical present ‘which is shot through with chips of Messianic time’ (1969: 263, Thesis XVIII a), a present being acted upon in anticipation of an event. This event is consistent with the Jewish belief that ‘every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter’ (p. 264, Thesis XVIII b). The arrival of the Messiah – an event that in Benjamin’s writings can be replaced by emancipation – exposes us to two types of
attitudes or experiences. Appealing to an economy of language, I will call one of them ethical: we do not know when the Messiah will come, so we must always be prepared for that arrival, ready to respond for the way we have lived our lives. The other, according to the criterion of linguistic economy, designates a political experience, which consists of provoking the arrival of the Messiah, of precipitating his arrival through collective action. The former refers to our responsibility for the rectitude of our conduct whereas the latter focuses on actions in concert to make something happen, yet neither preparation nor precipitation entails mere waiting or contemplation; they both require a decision – and an action derived from it – from the people of Israel.

Löwy puts the onus on the second attitude. He reminds us that Benjamin belongs to the tradition of the dohakei haketz, of those who ‘hasten the end of time’ (Löwy 2005: 122), which is something that requires an action of precipitation. Quoting Yerushalmi, he describes this precipitation as “messianic activism... lead[ing] to direct action on the historical plane” in order to “hasten the end” of time’ (p. 135, footnote 170). Indeed, if we bracket out possible reservations about messiahs and suspend judgement about the onto-theological connotations of a ‘weak messianic power’, then we could say a thing or two about the type of anticipation that is at work in revolution. It is not an anticipation that prefigures the future (and therefore not simply a delayed presence or a ‘not yet’), but an anticipation structuring the ‘now time’ as the time of our becoming-other. Deleuze has a clever way of referring to this. He calls it diagnostic, which ‘is not to predict but to be attentive to the unknown which knocks at the door’ (Deleuze 1992: 165). This attentiveness to the unknown, as a chance of our ‘becoming-other’, designates an opening to something to come that is already starting to happen.

People like Rancière are suspicious about the messianic promise and about what he calls the ‘ethisization of the political’: when one invokes a messianic promise, there is something of a presence of the absent that ends up granting otherness ‘a power of ethical injunction’ (Rancière 2003). Political subjectivization, he says, can make sense without invoking the ‘existence of the inexistent’. He is not talking about Benjamin’s take on the messianic but of Derrida’s references to spectres and messianicity without messiahs in his reading of Marx. The critique applies to our use of the promise too. For Rancière it makes more sense to adopt an ‘aesthetics of politics’ that highlights political
invention because ‘the framing of a future happens in the wake of political invention rather than being its condition of possibility. Revolutionaries invented a “people” before inventing its future’ (2003). He is right in saying that one cannot read politics through an ethical lens and that invention happens in the very process of revolutionizing. We will see shortly that Derrida would agree with him with regards to the invention of the future, as he maintains that any clear-cut framing of it would close-off the opening to the promise.

In response to this kind of objection I would say that what is at stake here is not putting the cart in front of the oxen, as if were, but addressing the motivation for involvement in a revolutionary enterprise: who can experience enthusiasm for a promise that comes without at least a rough outline of what it looks like? A collective that partakes in a revolutionary process or that publicly expresses its enthusiasm as onlookers usually entertains some ideas about the promise. One writer put it very well when she invokes utopian images to link critical theory and transformative action: if we lack representations of what a better society might look like, then the ‘emancipatory perspective would suffer from a justificatory and motivational deficit’ (Cooke 2004: 419).

Benjamin himself refers approvingly to Michelet, who said that every epoch dreams of the next. It dreams its own becoming-other, which involves a certain play between a promise and a representation – or series of representations – of that promise. In Kant, the promise is the moral progress of humanity visualized through ‘a prophetic historical narrative of things to come’. A prophesy already names those things, if only in a sketchy way. The revolutionary experience of 1789 certainly had it: its image of thought was the desire to avoid offensive war and to choose freely our own constitution. For socialists it is the promise of a free, egalitarian and fraternal society, which is coupled with representations of justice and equality ranging from the classless society of communism and the various forms of self-governing communities of equals championed by anarchists to the regulated market with better distribution of income advocated by social democracy.

What I am saying is that the acknowledgement that the promise is always already contaminated by figures of the promise means that we have to introduce a supplement to the promise, namely, the normative dimension of the representations – who we are and what we are fighting for – that function as finite figures of a revolutionary promise. There is no performative contradiction in speaking of figures of possibility,
for these do not stand for an ineluctable destiny or a full-fledged presence that closes off the opening made possible by the revolutionary promise. The future is still produced as an effect of political invention because these figures are provisional images of thought – part of a ‘weak’ or punctured horizon for action – of that which comes knocking at our door, and not a presence to come that would prefigure the event and therefore devalue its ‘eventness’. The promise and the figure require, and do not cease to contaminate, one another. The revolutionary becoming-other – and a politics of emancipation more generally – occurs in the spacing or play between the promise that entices us to demand the impossible and the continually deconstructible figures of possibility aiming to flesh out the promise.

Revolutionary Realism as Enthusiasm for the Impossible

This, of course, entails a twofold task of discussing the promise and outlining what could constitute a figure of that promise. Let us look first at the promise. We can do so through Derrida’s reflection about law and justice and the aporetic nature of justice in ‘Force of law’ (1992). Justice will not come about by merely following or applying a law, for then the singularity of the individual case would be subsumed under the generality of the law. Yet if one disregards the law altogether, instead of justice we risk slipping into pure arbitrariness, which is of course the danger stalking Carl Schmitt’s decisionism. Derrida speaks of the radical heterogeneity between law and justice and refuses to think of their relation in terms of opposition. Their unity is perceived when he introduces the decision, or rather, the aporia of undecidability, which he links with the promise or opening to something to come (the `a-venir) in order to outline something like an ethics of the à venir.

His reasoning is as follows. A responsible decision must exceed the law (droite) or the order of the calculable. ‘The only possible decision’, he says, ‘is the impossible decision, the decision that is stronger than me, higher than me and coming from the Other’, for if it were simply possible, and therefore purely calculable, it would be no decision but a mere algorithm whereby the code decides for us (Derrida 2001; 1992: 14). For a decision to be a truly responsible one, it must face the aporia of undecidability that is defined as the moment when the decision between just and unjust cannot be guaranteed by a rule and yet cannot disregard the rule either (1992: 16; also 2003a: 41). Ethics arises when we confront this aporia – which is the experience of the
impossible – instead of using it as an alibi to surrender responsibility. ‘Responsibility’ here means to accept the challenge of finding a road where there is none at hand, of deciding in the absence of a navigational map. Without such challenge there would be little or no room for the event, for something other to come. ‘The event only happens under the aegis of the impossible. When an event, efficiency or anything is deemed possible, it means that we have already mastered, anticipated, pre-understood and reduced the eventhood of the event’ (1993: 227). As events, justice, democracy, hospitality, or even revolution itself, will always be justice, democracy, hospitality and revolution to come, although not in the sense of a pure ideal waiting for its realization but as an opening to the possibility of the impossible. ‘Without this experience of the impossible’, Derrida says, ‘one might as well give up on both justice and the event’ (1994c: 65).

To continue with the argument, in-between law and justice lies an irreducible space for negotiation to improve the law or at least to have the least bad law, for Derrida believes in a non-teleological notion of progress – he is indeed a ‘progressist’ (2001; 1994b: 37). In English, the term would come close to ‘progressive’ without always coinciding with ‘Leftist’. One can be a ‘progressist’ without necessarily resorting to a telos of progress, for the latter can be conceived in terms of a project instead of as eschatology. He refers to this as a way of thinking about another historicity,

another opening of event-ness as historicity that permitted one not to renounce, but on the contrary to open up access to an affirmative thinking of the messianic and emancipatory promise as promise: as promise and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological programme or design. (Derrida 1994c: 75)

This way of conceptualizing the promise seems tailor-made for thinking about the imagery of events inventoried under the heading of ‘May 1968’, particularly the iconic inscription ‘be realistic, ask for the impossible’. This appears to be just another surreal injunction, very much in synch with the irreverent spirit of the times, or at least with one of the spirits that roamed that age. One could also argue that asking for the impossible subverts the accepted wisdom that politics is the art of the possible. A good deal of what passes for politics certainly does fall under the heading of the possible, but the very idea that ‘the art of the possible’ could somehow exhaust the field of politics is
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self-defeating, as this would place it within a hair’s breadth of morphing into opportunistum, cynical reason or administration (see the previous chapter). Therefore, instead of positioning the ’68ers outside politics, or compelling them to adopt an anti-political label they themselves rejected, we might say that asking for the impossible is intended both as a provocation and as an accurate description of the activity of revolutionizing as a politics of emancipation discussed in the previous chapter. That is, by engaging in the activity of revolutionizing one has already taken sides in a polemic by affirming that present social relations are not conducive to greater freedom and equality and that another world is possible. The phrase also functions as a cipher to convey the mobilizing potential of a messianic promise. We are not speaking here of salvation but of the promise as ‘structural messianism, a messianism without religion’ or messiahs, as the messianic without messianism (Derrida 1994c: 59, 73). The promise of the impossible infuses people with the realism of attempting something beyond the ordinary and invites them to be part of a future that has already begun because it is already being acted upon here and now. It is the ‘structural messianism’ of a revolutionary political engagement.

The reason for this – if there can be a motive or reason to account for messianicity – is that the demand for the impossible puts into perspective the peculiar realism at work in the promise, where the impossible stands for an actual opening up of possibilities. It refers to the mobilizing potential of enthusiasm – faint echoes of Kant – for the impossible. Varikas looks at the impossible by joining Benjamin’s ‘now-time’ (Jetztzeit) with the promise of something to come in order to claim that 1968 can be described as a seizing of the occasion and as an opening up of possibilities characteristic of utopia (Varikas 2002: 102–3, 104; also Passerini 2002: 11–30). The injunction of asking for the impossible, she says, reveals the stratagems of utopia as a promise, as well as the critical distance separating what is from what should be and what could be. Notice the play between ‘is’, ‘should’ and ‘could’, which combines a present state of affairs with a desired one as a normative claim – ‘what should be’ – paired with the contingency brought in by the more humble ‘could’. But what is the status of this promise and how does it affect the present? Here we can refer to the promise as ‘enacted utopia’, an expression that is reminiscent of Benjamin’s messianic time – acting as if every moment was the one when the Messiah
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might arrive – as well as of the performative dimension of the activity of revolutionizing whereby revolution is already happening as we pursue it. The expression ‘enacted utopia’ comes from Žižek, and we must differentiate it from his earlier critique of the classical notion of utopia as a universal without a symptom. The enacted variant of utopia refers to a unique suspension of temporality whereby future happiness and freedom already cast their shadow on us. ‘In a proper revolutionary breakthrough’, he says, ‘the utopian future is neither simply fully realized, present, nor simply evoked as a distant promise that justifies present violence’. Instead, the promise as enacted utopia means that ‘in the short circuit between the present and the future, we are – as if by Grace – for a brief period of time allowed to act as if the utopian future were (not yet fully here, but) already at hand, just there to be grabbed’. The shadow of the future is already at work here and now in the sense that ‘we already are free fighting for freedom, we are already happy while fighting for happiness, no matter how difficult the circumstances (Žižek 2002a: 559).’ The corollary of this ‘as if’ is that, from the standpoint of the realism of asking for the impossible, one begins to be free and happy en route, as it were, while we fight for freedom and happiness; something of the future has already started to happen as we strive for its realization.

This is certainly an unorthodox rendering of utopia. It departs from its conventional portrayal as a non-place, or as the ideal form of a pure presence waiting to arrive, or as what Žižek would call a universal without a symptom. It also prefigures the discussion of the interplay between the promise and the figures of possibility, in the sense that it sees utopia both as a demand for the impossible and as contemplating the pulling power of representations to motivate us in pursuit of a desired state of affairs. I will come back to the discussion of the figures of possibility shortly. In the meantime, we must acknowledge that Derrida, like others, is uncomfortable with the use of the term ‘utopia’, and even more with paring the impossible with a representation, because this displaces the question of the eventness of the event under the aegis of the merely possible. Yet one aspect of this – the formulation of utopia as a demand for the impossible – is attuned to his depiction of the à-venir or opening to a future to come. It is a future conceived more as a ‘punctured horizon’ for action than a Kantian regulative idea (Derrida 1994a: 50; 1994c: 65). This is not because he is against the expression
'regulative idea' but because he has some reservations about it. Amongst them, is that a regulative idea ‘remains in the order of the possible, an ideal possible, to be sure, one that is infinitely deferred, but one that participates in what at the end of an infinite history would still fall into the realm of the possible’. The impossible, in contrast, cannot be deferred because it ‘seizes me here and now’ in the form of an injunction ‘that never leaves me in peace and will not let me put it off until later. Such an urgency cannot be idealized’ (Derrida 2003b: 134; also 2005: 83–5). His provisional way of surmounting these reservations is by using the expression ‘punctured horizon’ instead of referring to the horizon of the regulative ideal. Utopia as an ‘ideal possible’ falls out of the à-venir but the openness to the impossible becomes its fellow traveller.

Enacted utopia is also important for another reason. It partakes in the process whereby a ‘we’ of those who already experience freedom and happiness comes into being. The actions of this ‘we’ insinuate a certain community, evanescent or not, like the revolutionary ‘nous’ that gathers its voice in the interviews conducted by Cohn-Bendit in Nous l’avons tant aimée la révolution (1986). Blanchot perceives the illocutionary force of this nous quite clearly. The point of May 1968, he says, was not so much to seize power but ‘to let a possibility manifest itself, the possibility – beyond any utilitarian gain – of being-together’ (Blanchot 1988: 30). We can read this being-together as partaking in the imaginary community of those who want – and in a way have already begun – to change the world, a community that exceeds the cost-benefit calculations of purely pragmatic reasoning. Asking for the impossible is asking for a non-existent ‘us’ or community to come (to life). It is an opening to a community to come. In a way, Sorel is a precursor of this idea, especially when he invokes the General Strike as a ‘mobilising myth’ capable of imprinting a unity to the historical subject – a certain ‘us’ – as an effect of struggles and not of a telos or an underlying principle of necessity. His use of myth has some similarities with the promise or the enthusiasm for the impossible, although according to Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 40–2), in Sorel the horizon of the promise is somewhat closed-off when he proposes the class unity of the subject or community to come. It is of course perfectly valid to endorse a class-based project, but where Sorel wants to dissolve the distance between the myth as promise and the myth as figure, in an instrumental use of myth in relation to the figure, I want to keep the space between promise and figure open to think about the activity of revolutionizing.
Before discussing this spacing, we should say something more about the unusual realism of the '68ers, and particularly about how it connects with the Kantian argument about enthusiasm for revolution as an indication of our moral disposition for progress. I want to do so by referring to transitions from authoritarian rule. Many associate the struggle for democracy in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s with images of heroic resistance to oppression, and in many cases it was, but this heroism was not always that of the masses in the streets, as relatively small groups of people participated in protests and mobilizations. Something similar happened in the opposition to one-party regimes in Eastern Europe, or in the defence of the Russian parliament during the attempted coup of 1991. In all these cases, most people simply stayed at home for reasons ranging from their opposition to change, their appeasement by the advantages derived from acquiescing with the status quo, or simply because they were fearful of expressing their enthusiasm for democratic demands in public. This probably disheartened but failed to deter the noisy minority that actually took to the streets to demand radical changes like the right to unionize, freedom of expression, human rights, the establishment of a democratic political regime, or more generally, the enactment of what Kant calls the moral disposition to govern ourselves freely.

From the purely pragmatic perspective of those accustomed to balance gains and losses, these were exorbitant demands, far beyond what the rulers seemed willing to concede and the opposition could realistically impose. Yet, for the protesters, the realism of pursuing a seemingly impossible goal was the only possible realism available. It prompted ordinary folk to do extraordinary things. People like this might succeed or fail in their attempt to change a given state of affairs, but this is not the decisive point, for the task of the promise is to elicit enthusiasm, not to guarantee the success of the enterprise. Their very presence on the public stage has a significance that transcends the outcome of their actions. As one author observed, in authoritarian or dictatorial regimes, the opposition fulfils a key role by offering active hope through the advancement of one or more alternatives projects of a possible society (Garretón 1987: 39). One could say something similar in the case of the Zapatista uprising, for even though they lack the military capacity to defeat the army of the Mexican state, their very public presence has contributed to generate an active hope for equality and dignity amongst indigenous people who do not always participate in their
actions. ‘Active hope’, however, is not a call for a generalized carpe
diem. It is a message for Kant’s onlookers, for those who do not play
direct role in the drama unfolding in the streets but are nonetheless
touched by it. The promise of something to come aims to elicit enth-
siasm for democratic change, for the vindication of rights for native
people, or whatever; it seeks to generate sympathy for those demands
amongst the spectators and therefore to involve them in the imaginary
community of those who want to change the world.

This unusual realism associated with the promise is not restricted
to exceptional moments. The allure of the promise also works in the
‘normal’ contexts of, say, advanced capitalist countries with established
democratic regimes. There, as Bowman put it, ‘demanding the im-
possible today is demanding democracy, accountability, transparency,
justice, prosperity, or emancipation’ in the face of the commonsensi-
cal/idealogical truth that holds that they already exist and therefore
need not be demanded. The impossible, as he sees it, stands for chal-
lenging the blinkers of common sense (Bowman 2003: 40). This is what
ˇZiˇzek describes as exercising actual freedom, which involves disturbing
and stepping out of the existing liberal-democratic consensus. But the
impossible is not restricted to modern, secular societies either, and its
path can be at odds with the emancipatory politics we associate with
a progressive standpoint. The possibility of an underside is included
in the very structure of the promise, as can be seen in projects that
are antithetical to the enhancement of pluralism, democracy, equality
and toleration, or to the inclination to govern ourselves freely raised
by Kant. Debray perceived this danger when he observed the appeal of
fundamentalism as a response to globalization, particularly when the
latter is seen as a threat to traditional identities. I mentioned Debray’s
position in Chapter 1. In some cases, he says, the experience of dislo-
cation shows that

religion turns out after all not to be the opium of the people, but
the vitamin of the weak. How is it possible to divert the poorest of
the poor from taking recourse to this vitamin if democratic states
have no mystique other than material improvement?…Today, the
greatest ally of obscurantism is the spiritually empty economism of
our prosperous liberal societies. (Debray 1994: 15)

This suggests that religion functions as the active hope or enthusiasm
for something to come, as a promise that entices people to aim for exor-
bitant goals. There is no doubt that it does, particularly when one sees
the type of demands and actions of those who have embraced religious orthodoxy. Fundamentalism would then seem to coincide with a revolutionary promise in its very aim to reinstate a pre-modern, theocratic order that has little or no tolerance for dissidence. However, like any fundamentalism, theological or otherwise, it is a promise caught up in the possibility of a presence to come, either in the sense of the kingdom of God, a reconciled society, or a universal without a symptom. Derrida describes something similar when he speaks of a revolutionary revolution, one that entails ‘a return to the past of a purer origin’ (Derrida 1992: 47). Reactionary revolutions would describe the confluence of the pre-modern usage of revolution – or its current astronomical use – and a mythical belief in a return to the arcadia of an uncontaminated origin. This deployment of teleo-eschatology suspends the opening offered by the promise and turns it into an indicator of closure and not of an opening for emancipation.

A preliminary conclusion that follows from the discussion about the promise is that if we can learn anything from the injunction to be realistic by asking for the impossible, it is that nothing can ever really happen without the expectation generated by the promise of the impossible. This sounds like an excessive gesture, one that in leaving aside the possible presents us with an image of politics as an activity that always takes place at the limit. This is not what I have tried to suggest here, for then everyday politics – what we usually describe as the art of the possible – would have to be discarded in the name of an endless revolutionary politics. The reference to the impossible in relation to the activity of revolutionizing refers only to radical politics and aims to highlight that if our horizon is that of the possible alone, there might be little to expect apart from more of the same. This is already something, but perhaps not enough, to elicit the enthusiasm for change or the moral inclination to progress mentioned by Kant. One may even ask if ethics or responsibility is possible if one takes into account, only and exclusively, the actual distribution of forces in a conjuncture or the political jurisprudence resulting from an inventory of accumulated experiences. An ethical response presupposes the encounter with the unexpected, with the willingness to come up with what Derrida calls a fresh judgement or responsible decision in a situation not contemplated by the codes of conduct or navigational maps at hand. Can there be any surprise if cost-benefit calculation is the sole trigger of our actions and the Rubicon that judges their validity? Can there be any
innovation if one is not willing to run the risks involved in the pursuit of the seemingly impossible? In other words, can one exorcise the ghost of revolution at the altar of pragmatism and still expect to interrupt what Rancière calls the order of ‘police’ or, in brief, to ‘make history’?

This is the remarkable thing about revolution. It elicits enthusiasm even amongst those who do not participate directly in the revolutionary drama. It also functions as the engine of a politics of emancipation that includes yet transcends both insurrection and the reinstitution of the whole. The civil rights movement in the USA is an archetypical example. One only needs to browse through the pages of _I Have a Dream_, the speech delivered in 1963 by Martin Luther King at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC. The rhetorical structure of his speech mobilizes the promise as a performative, condensing the demand for racial equality and civil and political rights for blacks with a call to action that captured the imagination of a generation. The exorbitant demand for equality made racial emancipation the order of the day and aimed to disrupt and rearrange the prevailing racial _nomos_ in the United States. It was a realistic bet despite (or maybe because of) its exorbitance. As the promise echoed in the ghettos and the campuses as much as in the Mississippi delta, it became a rememorative, demonstrative and prognostic sign of a tendency to embrace racial emancipation. To put it in Derridian language, revolution stands for a promise that, in demanding the impossible, becomes the very opening of possibility as such. This enthusiasm for the promise of a future to come is at stake every time we invoke the idea of revolution. The capacity to generate enthusiasm marks the actuality of revolution; it is what is worth repeating despite and against the political complacency of liberal democratic consensus and its third way variants.

**Figures of the Promise and the Iterability of Revolution**

Now we must move on to the second axis of the concept, the figures of revolution. These are the normative supplement of an ethics of the _à-venir_. The generative force of revolution – and of radical political innovation broadly – appears in the spacing between the pure possibility of a promise and the actual figures of that promise. One can see it in King’s speech, which unfolds in the gap between one and the other by posing the dream as a promise and as a figure of racial equality. Nicanor Parra portrays this gap and the play between promise and figure particularly well in his poem _Letters from a poet who sleeps in_
a chair. The object of his musings is the aporia of writing, but if we scrutinize it we will see that it captures the play between the promise and the figure in the deceptively simple language of one of the verses. The verse in question reads as follows:

The poet’s job is
To improve on the blank page
I don’t think that’s possible.

Let us leave aside the case where the blank page becomes a threat and not a challenge, for Parra is flagging something more interesting than the anxiety familiar to anyone who has experienced writer’s block. He is saying that improving on the blank page is an impossible task. And he is absolutely right. The blank page is an empty surface overflowing with a richness of forms, the space of inscription of every imaginable poem, story, novel, essay, article or pamphlet. It functions as a metaphor to describe the opening of possibility as such. Yet the job of the poet is not simply to do something about this emptiness but also to improve on it, which can only mean that Parra is burdening the poet with the exorbitant demand of surpassing the infinite horizon of pure possibility. Such an ‘improvement’ is clearly impossible, as nothing can surpass infinity, but it is nonetheless necessary, for without the attempt to improve on the empty page, there will have been no literary creation.

Parra has laid in front of us the curious predicament of writing, the double aporia traversing writing. First aporia: writing is an act of power because writing destroys what could have been. The inscription of a text inevitably puts limits to the infinitude of the blank page, but whilst the etching of the first trace of the very first word immediately cancels out the infinite possibilities offered by the emptiness of the page, if one is not prepared to risk placing that first trace, there will be no literature. Second aporia: writing is ultimately condemned to failure and repetition. This is because the inscription signals the moment of victory of the creator, but it can only be a pyrrhic victory given that it will become undone by the infinitude that opens up again with the following page. Writing will repeat itself endlessly as each successive page sets into motion the challenge of surpassing the unlimited possibilities offered by the unmarked page. Writing thus becomes an endless effort to negotiate the interval that opens up between the infinitude of pure possibility offered by the blank page and the finitude of any inscribed text. This condition of failure and repetition does not turn writing into
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a pathetic enterprise, nor does it punish it by condemning it to the unchanging repetition as endured by Sisyphus. Instead, it draws writing closer to what Derrida describes as the ghost of undecidability when he speaks of the aporia of justice. If the negotiation of a passage between the observance and the suspension a norm will ‘resolve’ the aporia by delivering a just decision, but also leave a ghost that prevents the decision from being fully just, then literature, like justice, will never arrive at a final resting place. This is why writing and justice turn out to be names for the working of $\text{diff\text{é}rance}$.

Revolution replicates this predicament of writing in that the act of naming the becoming-other immediately limits the openness of the future by investing it with a specific figure, but without this finitude, no transformational action will ever take place. That is why, punctured or not, all horizon is a figure that announces and simultaneously places limits to pure possibility. As in the case of writing, political action must continually negotiate passages between the un-deconstructible promise and its deconstructible figures or normative representations. The promise of revolution functions as a structure of possibility that repeats itself endlessly through finite figures of revolution.

We can examine these instantiations or figures of the promise in political practice, which is to engage in their deconstruction, an exercise that relates to the question of whether there is any room left for radical politics, posed at the beginning of this chapter. I believe there is, but not as we knew it, and certainly not without reconstructing it. Žižek, with his usual penchant for provocation, has hinted something along these lines in his comments about the actuality of Leninism. He praises Lenin’s ‘ruthless will to discard all prejudices’ because it might be ‘a useful antidote to all the aseptic, frustrating, politically correct pacifism’ that has become dominant in some left-wing circles (Žižek 2002b: 50). Many of us share his exasperation with the moralizing PC tone of identity politics, as I made quite clear in Chapter 1. It often reduces the scope of progressive politics to culture wars or confuses the opposition to a given war with the embrace of pacifism tout court. The unqualified call for a ruthless will is more disturbing, perhaps a rhetorical excess or a calculated provocation. This is not because one must discard violence beforehand or be coy about its use as it remains lodged in any action, if only because the absence of a zero-degree of culture in the public sphere introduces important asymmetries amongst formally equal political interlocutors. Those
with a discursive disadvantage are bound to experience the uneven distribution of these skills as a form of violence. Force, or at least power, is also present in every decision: to decide is to put an end to deliberation by selecting a particular option – by taking a stand – that will inevitably exclude other options that were available at a given time. The use of physical violence is a possibility inscribed in all political acts too, revolutionary or otherwise, ranging from street demonstrations to insurrections, from a concerted e-mail attack seeking to overload the servers of an enemy organization to the takeover of campus buildings or the destruction of property during a strike. The problem, then, is not violence per se, but the danger that an unqualified ‘ruthless will to discard all prejudice’ can function as an alibi for an instrumental view of the activity of revolutionizing, and of politics more generally. We have no use for this Lenin.

However, Žižek’s Leninism means something more than this. He reminds us that after the deadlock of 1914, when World War I began and the Second International collapsed in an outbreak of patriotism, ‘Lenin had to think how to reinvent a radical, revolutionary politics’ (Žižek 2002b: 50). Today we are in a similar situation and, as he aptly put it, the actuality of Lenin would not amount to a return to Lenin but to a repetition of his gesture. ‘To repeat Lenin is to accept that Lenin is dead, that his particular solution failed, even failed monstrously, but that there was an utopian spark in it worth saving’ by exploring the field of possibilities he opened up (2002a: 566). One can hardly disagree with him on this. Any reopening of the case for revolution requires the acceptance that the lost object, a revolutionary project of socialism – and a radical emancipatory politics more generally – that once had the capacity to inspire people to engage in revolutionizing, must be reinvented and not simply resurrected.

This last distinction is important because it places revolution under the heading of repetition. Heraclitus provides us with an allegory to introduce repetition when he says that one cannot step into the same river twice. The usual reading of his remark is that the world is in constant flux. Yet, if one shifts the emphasis to the actual spacing between the first and the subsequent occasions of stepping into a river, what Heraclitus is suggesting is something more interesting, namely, that the repetition of an act will invariably incorporate something new, a difference that turns the repetition into some form of re-institution. The prefix ‘re-’ that qualifies the act also indicates that the new is not
simply new, for a shadow from the past is lodged in its heart. It is always the same river, which becomes different every time we step into it. With this allegory, Heraclitus offers us clues for thinking of iterability or repetition, even in Marx.

At first sight, nothing seems further from Marx than repetition or the ghosts it brings with it. He seems to be fond of spectres, but only to chase them away. ‘He does not want to believe in them. But he thinks of nothing else’ (Derrida 1994c: 46–7). When he invokes the spectre of communism, he ‘announces and calls for a presence to come’ (Derrida 1999: 218), possibly because he has hopes for a presence of communism without spectres, without residues of the past. In general, presence is Marx’s game. The succession of modes of production is dominated by the belief in the feasibility of a change without remainder, for each step in the historical sequence between one mode of production and another appears to be a rupture that inaugurates a tabula rasa. A similar belief is expressed in The Eighteenth Brumaire. We are told that ‘the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past’, which he couples with the celebrated injunction that we ‘let the dead bury their dead’ (Marx 1968: 98). Past and present do not contaminate one another. In this point, the passage from a class-divided society to the full realization of the revolutionary promise of a communist society is governed by something resembling an Althusserian ‘epistemological rupture’: old ideas, concepts and themes that have been discarded have no bearing on our current mode of reasoning. Yet a call for a clear rupture and an absolute beginning is imbued with the spirit of the Jacobins, or at least of the revolutionary model provided by the French Revolution. This is disconcerting, as for someone writing in the nineteenth century Jacobinism and the French Revolution had already become part of the past and therefore should not inform the type of revolution Marx has in mind. The fact that a ghost from 1789 is lodged in his way of thinking about revolution means that he is not always consistent when he demands that the dead bury their dead. The past lives on in the present, although not always in the same way that it once occurred. This is why repetition is not altogether absent from Marx’s writings.

We can see it in the opening lines of The Eighteenth Brumaire, where he ridicules Louis Bonaparte for being little more than a caricature of his illustrious uncle. He says that
Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Montagne of 1848 to 1851 for the Montagne of 1793 to 1795, the Nephew for the Uncle. (Marx 1968: 96)

While nobody has been able to find the textual reference in Hegel (Carver 2002: 120; Geoghegan 2002: 15), the remark serves to establish an explicit hierarchy between the two Bonapartes, at least if one is willing to accept that tragedy is preferable to farce, which might not always be the case. It also tells us something about temporality and sameness, and hence about repetition. Marx does not speak of the re-presentation of a simple presence that every so often replicates itself, but of a somewhat paradoxical return of the ‘same’ that cannot be reduced to pure sameness. The ‘as such’ is never such. Like in the case of Heraclitus’ river, repetition entails some form of reinstitution. The original in question (the tragic time of Napoleon Bonaparte) has incorporated difference in the very process of its reappearance as the farcical times of Louis Bonaparte. The claim that history repeats itself therefore suggests that the original is always already exposed to an occurrence that will alter its initial sense as it redeployes itself. From drama to farce, the temporality of repetition resembles the impossible return to origins that Escher portrays in his etchings of coils or Möbius strips, endless cycles that never close back onto themselves.

This perception of repetition or iterability as an impure identity that subsists in its alteration is a bridge that brings Marx into contact with contemporary philosophers of repetition like Deleuze and Derrida. As mentioned, repetition involves a certain recovery that does not leave the original unchanged. To recover is to reclaim something that is lost, gone, stolen, or dead, but as one can never know the condition in which the returning object will be, the possibility of alteration is inscribed in every act of recovery. Historians even modify the past – they re-institute it – as they discover new documental evidence or re-interpret existing sources they thought to have understood beyond reasonable doubt. One may then say that the past was not what it used to be. Every historical repetition, from 1789 to 1917, or from Old to New Left, modifies that which it repeats. If there is no alteration, instead of repetition there is only the monotony of a self-replicating
code. Every repetition alters that which it recovers in order to remain faithful to the irreplaceable singularity of whatever one aims to reclaim. To be faithful is to be inventive, for repetition is the production of a new singularity, or if one prefers, is an opening for the coming of an event. Therefore, if the end of mourning involves the repetition/retrieval of revolution, then this ending is actually an opening for re-instituting the will to revolutionize once again. Another way of formulating this idea is to say that the law of iterability at work in revolution presupposes that the original context of appearance does not exhaust or fully contain the appearance (Derrida 1988: 9–10). Like history, ‘revolution’ repeats itself in different contexts, and in doing so, differs from itself continually.

Inevitably, this makes revolution an equivocal term. Its meaning is by no means a settled question, ever, as it comes in many guises. There is the revolution as an entelechy of militants and intellectuals; the revolution of revolutionaries as a messianic call for radical change with plenty of messiahs to lead the way; the revolution as the cultural paradigm of a generation; or the revolution as a turning point that can and often will revert into a betrayal of those who fought for it. The repetition of revolution is therefore inseparable from a disagreement or polemic about its meaning. We already saw that disagreement or polemicization consists of the erection of a stage for putting to the test an operator of difference. This excludes an absolute referent or a transcendental signified of revolution as well as the possibility of establishing a priori what it means to inherit the name of revolution or to stake a claim on that inheritance. In an article by Derrida, ‘Marx & Sons’ (1999), the title itself plays on the issue of establishing a proper lineage or placing a legitimate claim on an intellectual inheritance. To assume an inheritance means to reaffirm and to transform it, for it is ‘never given, it is always a task’ (Derrida 1994c: 54; 1994b: 39; 1999: 219). This is another way of stating the earlier claim that one can only remain faithful to the singularity of revolution by transforming it as it is retrieved. So, the law of iterability at work in revolution – that which subsists while altered, or persists as it is re-instituted – is inseparable from polemic and invites us to take a stand in an inquiry into what it is that is being repeated by the term and how we expect to reclaim it politically today. This is what Žižek meant when he called for a renewed Leninism in the sense of an imperative to be inventive to recast a progressist and socialist imaginary.
Postcards of a Socialist Imaginary

Taking for granted that every retrieval (or rejection) is polemical by nature, we can begin by saying that a contemporary repetition of the figures of revolution has to discard the Jacobin belief in a one-off foundational event that clears the slate so completely as to inaugurate an absolute beginning. It also excludes thinking of emancipation as a final push to rid humanity of all forms of oppression, like when Marx vindicates human emancipation – the end of alienation – in *The Jewish Question* and opposes it to merely political or bourgeois modes of emancipation. Marx replicates the Jacobin model of a change without remainder and the possibility of a reconciled society. The elimination of private property – and with it, the conditions of possibility of splitting up society into antagonistic classes – reveals an eschatological view of communism as the end of history and, in fact, the end of politics (Althusser 1993: 224; Badiou 2002). Our iteration should leave aside other options too: for example, the Leninist-inspired view of revolution. This poses, on the one hand, the centrality of the working class on the assumption that its demands represent the universal demands of humanity and, on the other, a class dictatorship incarnated in a political party that monopolizes society’s collective decision-making power. This discards a democratic perspective and, as many have claimed in the past decades, it ends up subsuming gender, sexual and racial demands under the mantle of a class-centred emancipation. Pluralism, desire and difference are rooted in the socialist imaginary and no repetition of revolution could do without them.

The next step would be to discuss the programmatic outline of actual political projects, but this step takes the theoretical reflection into the field of practical politics and will therefore have to remain as a pending assignment. Short of an actual project, one can still mention a thing or two on this subject. I will end by etching four postcards of an image of thought for a progressist imaginary that iterates revolution as the promise of something to come and as a becoming other of the figures of the promise. They are sketches of what today has become part of a progressist ethos.

*First Postcard: Equality and Solidarity in the New Internationalism*

The concern for the weakest links of the legacy of the French Revolution – equality and solidarity – remains the distinctive trait of a socialist
imaginary and a progressive politics. This differentiates it from liberalism, which has always been more preoccupied with the defence of individual freedom than with the fate of those who suffer the inequalities of the market and of capitalist accumulation. The concern for social justice always nurtured the socialist tradition, initially through a critique of industrial capitalism like the one outlined by Marx in *Capital* and the advocacy of solidarity without borders through the formation of the International Working Men’s Association or First International in the nineteenth century. The economic failures of ‘really existing socialism’ and the growing hegemony of neo-liberalism relegated these socialist themes to a secondary position in the political and intellectual agenda. The grudging acceptance of the market logic within the Left only enhanced this demotion. We are still lacking a satisfactory way of thinking through the link between socialism and the market, as well as a critique of contemporary, disorganized capitalism, although the recent discussions on post-Fordism (Virno 2004; Hardt and Negri 2000) are moving in this direction.

What is noteworthy is that the vindication of equality and the exercise of solidarity have reappeared in the political agenda, although without always following a Marxist political script. The orientation of anti-capitalist national groupings, as well as that of cross-border coalitions and protest movements, is not coded in terms of working-class resistance. Their logic of collective action is not framed solely in terms of class warfare either, and their condemnation of – and responses to – the unequal exchange between North and South aims to regulate rather than suppress free-trade or private enterprise. The spectre of socialism, or of the imaginary fostered by the socialist tradition, is re-entering the public scene both domestically and abroad in the shape of a new, loosely assembled internationalism that seeks to counteract the weight of its conservative counterpart in order to address questions of equality and solidarity on a global scale.

The new internationalists are putting on stage the themes of equality and justice, fair trade relations between North and South, the statute of frontiers in relation to immigrants coming from the periphery of advanced capitalism, child labour, AIDS, sexual mutilation, and so on. Derrida speaks of a New International as

an untimely link, without status, without title, and without name, barely public even if it is not clandestine, without contract, ‘out of
joint’, without coordination, without party, without country, without national community (International before, across, and beyond any national determination), without co-citizenship, without common belonging to a class. (1994c: 85–6)

It is an International ‘to come’, a political project in the making, one that involves all those who suffer and those who are not insensitive to the impact of these urgent problems, yet has no boss or central coordination (Derrida 2000). The lack of central coordination amongst those who are part of this imaginary community might be an obstacle for generating the sweeping consensus that seems necessary for carrying out major global transformations. In other words, it can function as a disincentive for the Gramscian or post-Gramscian conception of politics – for the hegemonic form of politics. This is true, but only to a certain extent, for the network and viral logic of this internationalism does not forestall the formation of ad-hoc networks around specific themes, and it is particularly appropriate to deal with the viral forms of contemporary capitalism. They are experimenting with forms of politics that move away from the Jacobin imaginary engaging in emancipatory politics when they affirm that a new world with greater equality and solidarity, and also freer, is indeed possible. The new internationalists are opening up the political phase of what Zincone and Agnew (2000) describe as the ‘second great transformation’ by taking – or aiming to take – globalization beyond mere globalism. That is, beyond what Beck describes as ‘the ideology of rule by the world market, the ideology of neo-liberalism’ (2000: 9), which reduces globalization to a question of markets, trade and financial flows.

Second Postcard: the Noise of the Demos

The drive emerging from 1789 still generates enthusiasm. Its legacy is the idea of citizenship, which we can observe from two directions. One is the familiar liberal trope of the citizen as a subject of rights. It presupposes membership to a political community, or inclusion, and a set of entitlements, positive rights – the civil, political and sometimes social rights outlined in T. H. Marshall’s classical scheme – enforced by the state even though these are often exercised despite, rather than thanks to, the state. Outside the state, either there are no rights or those that exist depend on the goodwill of states to enforce them. That is why Arendt proposes the ‘right to have rights’ (1973: 296). This demand became salient with the emergence of millions of displaced people who
had become stateless, and therefore inhabited a legal limbo in terms of belonging and rights, as a result of the policies of the Nazi and other regimes in the interwar period. Unlike all other rights, which are grounded either in divine law, natural law, or, to limit ourselves to modernity, that are validated by the sovereign state, the right to have rights is independent of membership to any one political community as it would be guaranteed by agreements beyond the state level. It requires a supranational community or supra-state framework to come, as it were, so one can look at it in the light of a realism that aims for the impossible. This is a complex issue due to the difficulties involved in getting states to renounce sovereignty and its right to refuse entry to a political community (Cotter 2005: 98-101, 111).

Interestingly, a right to have rights reinforces the liberal conception of citizenship and undermines its conception of politics. On the one hand, regardless of whether it is within or without the state framework, Arendt's way of looking at the question of citizenship is still couched in the discourse of rights of the liberal tradition. Wolin is quite critical of this tradition. He says that by focusing primarily on rights, it ends up sidelining the idea of citizenship as a power to create new political forms: the ideal of rights ends up usurping the place of civic activity (Wolin 1992: 242). Yet on the other hand, a post-state right, such as the one Arendt proposes, makes it possible to act collectively in the public sphere regardless of statehood, and therefore opens up a hole in the conventional liberal view of politics as a purely domestic endeavour amongst nationals inside the physical territory of the sovereign state. I will say more on this shortly.

The second approach to citizenship is from the vantage point of those who consider it as a category that brings into play subjection and subjectivization. ‘Citizenship’ for Balibar designates a subject who resists its own subjection; it poses the humanity of ‘man’ not as a given but as a practice and a task of self-emancipation from every domination and subjection (Balibar 1994: 11-12). This take on citizenship shifts the emphasis from the discourse of rights to the activity of ‘becoming free’; it keeps the play between authority and resistance open and thus deprives emancipation of any telos. Whether as a subject of rights or as a ‘cosmopolitical’ entity, to use Balibar’s neologism, this ‘cosmopolitical’ take on citizenship has exhibited an enduring capacity to conjure emancipatory movements and to shape the political imaginary of the last two hundred years. A progressive politics tends to ride
on the cosmopolitical figure by stressing the collective resistance to subjection or the idea of a subject that performs its own emancipation. If formal freedom, as seen earlier, designates a choice made within the pre-given set of coordinates of existing power relations, then taking on the challenge of actual freedom opens up emancipatory possibilities by resisting the given and posing questions that fall outside of the merely ‘possible’. Citizenship plays in both fields, but when it brings back the ‘noise’ of the demos in pursuit of real freedom it embarks on the activity of revolutionizing.

This joining of ‘noise’ and ‘demos’ condenses, in the idea of citizenship, a drive to interrogate the certainties of the existing consensus and a recognition that this interrogation is done collectively. Thus conceived, the citizen is not a substantive entity or simply the depository of attributes such as equality before the law, freedom to choose and suffrage rights. Liberal-democratic discourse is right in emphasizing these hard-earned, politically charged, and always vulnerable entitlements, but if one remains at the level of entitlements, it is difficult to understand what makes citizenship a practice. Citizenship is the practice or the process of citizen subjectivization. It is an operator that tests the veracity of freedom, equality, or solidarity; it designates a place of enunciation that does not quite manage to acquire a firm ontological consistency given that it is immersed in an interminable becoming-other through polemization. By conceiving citizenship as an indicator of the noise brought in by the people, ‘citizen’ turns out to be not so much a subject position than an agency that is being produced in a process of subjectivization. More precisely, it is a mode of subjectivity consistent with what Rancière describes as the ‘in between’. This consists of a process of declassification by which one rejects or resists the assigned name, place and identity given by another, and a simultaneous assertion of an identity. But the in-transit state of the in-between also indicates that one has not yet acquired a proper name – the name of a group – because the process of subjectivization happens in a crossing between names and identities (Rancière 1995: 61–2). The process of subjectivization thus has a family resemblance with Blanchot’s reference to May 1968 as a possibility of ‘being-together’. This refers to the emergence of a certain ‘us’ that is not yet a ‘we’ but a community to come: in this case, the community of those who want to address a wrong and change a state of affairs perceived to be oppressive, unjust or non-equalitarian. Citizenship then becomes the designator of processes
of citizen subjectivization that stage the most diverse emancipatory utterances.

**Third Postcard: Politics Beyond Territorial Representation**

Participation exceeds the electoral format, but this does not entail its replacement by self-government of the type envisioned by Rousseau. One reason for this is the commonplace observation that the impact of non- or extra-class processes of subjectivization has modified the political landscape. The irruption of gender, racial, ethnic or sexual demands weakens the discursive equivalence between the notions of ‘progressive’ and ‘socialism’, or rather, disengages the equivalence of the former with the nineteenth-century idea of socialism based on class issues alone. The emergence of movements around such a varied array of demands also undermines an important aspect of the liberal-democratic code, namely, its effort to establish a conceptual equivalence between democratic politics and electoral representation. Bobbio once remarked that the question of ‘who votes’ captured the spirit of democratization from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, whereas today, democratic aspirations are reflected in the phrase ‘on what issues one can vote’ (1989: 155–6).

While voting seems to be the independent variable in this shift from ‘who’ to ‘what’, the critical point Bobbio is making is that now the utterance ‘democracy’ designates an idea of participation that is no longer focused exclusively on the election of representatives. That is why the shift towards the ‘where’ is not a topographical displacement but a topological one, a way of referring to the question of what is open to debate in the public sphere: it subjects classifications to a process of polemicization that redefines the frontiers between the public and the private, and between the political and the non-political.

This emphasis on the idea of participation is useful to assess the various migrations of politics: towards civil society, which has began to function as a second tier of politics or field of social citizenship, and also beyond the territorial borders of the nation state, which opens the doors for thinking about a veritable supranational citizenship and political field. Those who intervene in global arenas want to have a say in political decisions, scrutinize the policies of major global players (like multilateral organizations or business conglomerates), and hold them accountable for their decisions, more often by instituting mechanisms to control and regulate their field of action than by subjecting them
to electoral scrutiny. Moreover, as mentioned, the question of what is open to debate implies that their action redefines the public and political by destabilizing the liberal perceptions of what is public and political, whether in civil society or the supranational field. That is why we can describe participation in these arenas as democratic and post-liberal.

*Fourth Postcard: Asynchronous Emancipatory Politics in the Archipelago*

A post-liberal archipelago displaces territorial representation as a guiding image of thought for politics, and contradicts the thesis of a liberal end of history. The assumption behind this claim is that modern politics has moved along a migratory arc that manifests itself though a continual colonization of new territories (Arditi 2003). Its itinerary or genealogy goes from the sovereign state of the absolutist era to the liberal sphere of partisan politics, and from there to civil society and supranational domains. These last, ongoing migrations do not cancel the political status of the state or announce the decline of partisan institutions; they simply expand politics beyond electoral citizenship, territorial representation and the territorial borders of the nation-state by carving out *supplementary spaces* of political exchange. Social movements, advocacy groups and NGOs are opening up a second tier of politics in civil society, and the new internationalists are building its supranational tier. Yet this expansion is not a mere arithmetic sum, for it also modifies what Rancière calls the partition of the sensible and therefore transforms the way the political field is coded; it creates a new partition of the sensible. Both the second tier and the supranational spaces coexist alongside the more classical, primary circuit of electoral politics we inherited from the liberal democratic tradition. Together, these three domains for collective action announce a Copernican de-centring of the political field, the formation of an eccentric scenario we can describe as a post-liberal archipelago of political arenas.

This representation of politics as an archipelago provides us with an image of thought – a cartography, if you will – of the post-liberal scenario of politics. As with all maps, this one comes without a user manual of how to navigate through the circuits of the archipelago or of how to set the course of political initiatives within them. But it has an immediate advantage for collective action: it depicts power, institutions, actors and relations in a poly-centred diagram that departs
from the Jacobin representation of political change – the seizure of a centre whose control can and will modify the whole – as well as from state-centred conceptions of politics. The archipelago decentres familiar representations of politics, and the dissemination of sites of power and resistance strengthens the viability of political options outside the mainstream. These options include post-hegemonic forms of politics such as viral actions and networked initiatives: these do not eschew articulations but they do not require the type of articulation of the chains of equivalences of hegemonic politics. The new internationalists are an example. Local and asynchronous politics of emancipation – in the topical rather than topographical sense of ‘locality’ – that do not entail projects of total re-foundation turn out to be quite common and legitimate ways of revolutionizing.

Does this way of conceiving the radical politics of revolutionizing mean that there is a time for revolution? Possibly, there is no such thing as a time for revolution given that revolution is an untimely event that seeks to interrupt the ‘normal’ course of things. Another response would be to claim that one is never outside this time, at least if we understand ‘the time of revolution’ as in the sense of a permanently available possibility of engaging in emancipatory politics or, from the standpoint of Benjamin’s negative utopia, of doing whatever it takes to prevent things from getting worse. The continually available ‘time for revolution’ suggested by this second response breaks with the idea of revolution as a cyclical change; it also moves away from the strictures of the classical view of revolution as an event of rupture that delivers a *tabula rasa* through the trinity of insurrection, overthrow and re-institution. The activity of revolutionizing developed here is not even pegged to the actual events of a revolution, as this would limit the import of the Kantian slant I have given to revolution as enthusiasm and restrict the performative force of revolutionizing as an action that is already generating disruptive effects here and now. If we place the notion under the aegis of the promise of something other to come, with its messianicity or messianic structure, then revolutionizing is always an enduring possibility as long as we agree that its actuality has to be *provoked*, as we have seen here and in the discussion of a politics of emancipation in Chapter 4. Emancipatory politics is always already embarked on the activity of revolutionizing because it speaks of changing present conditions seen to be detrimental to freedom and equality and of affirming
that another world is possible. This activity is forever caught in the spacing between the promise of something to come and the finite figures or representations that enable us to dream of the shape of things to come.

Notes

1. Jacobins were actually a political version of a philosophical project. To make tabula rasa of the past, says Touraine, is the rallying call of the rationalist project outlined by Descartes in the early seventeenth century. It reappears with the Jacobins and is later vindicated by the revolutionary workers’ movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. Touraine reminds us that the original French lyrics of The Internationale proclaim ‘du passé faisons table rase’ (Touraine 1990: 122). The translation into English as ‘Never more traditions’ chains shall bind us’ misses the strong connotations of turning the past into an erased tablet in order to start from zero.

2. Of course, Gramsci also pegs the very possibility of hegemony to one of the ‘fundamental classes’ of a mode of production, a claim that bears the imprint of historical materialism and bows to the principle of necessity advocated by it. This reappears in his belief that each political party is only the expression of a single social group – a class nomenclature, as he calls it (Gramsci 1971: 125). There is also a strong notion of totality at work in Gramsci’s analysis, for he does not manage to extricate himself from the classical belief in revolution as a complete reinstitution of the existing order and this ultimately reveals that the metaphysical view of revolution, as a change without remainder, lingers in his thought. Intellectuals of the now defunct Italian Communist Party started a debate on the limits of the Gramscian legacy in the 1970s. One of the more lucid interventions was by de Giovanni (1979), who presents us with a convincing critique of Gramsci’s class reductionism and his conception of politics – and therefore political transformations – as a total form.

3. This is the same type of reasoning informing Žižek’s (2001) account of freedom and choice discussed earlier. Žižek invokes, at least implicitly, the themes of undecidability, responsibility and the demand for the impossible. The free subject is one who experiences himself as ultimately responsible for his fate’. In contrast, the postmodern subject is one who ‘grounds the authority of his speech on his status of a victim of circumstances beyond his control’, who universalizes the logic of victimization whereby every encounter with another human being is experienced as a potential threat. This, he says, is the exact opposite of freedom, for portraying oneself as an irresponsible victim of circumstances amounts to the renunciation of responsibility. At best, every choice made by this subject is a choice that takes place within the framework of the possible. Here is where the Derridian themes appear in his argument about choice. For Žižek, ‘the truly free choice is a choice in which I do not merely choose between two or more options WITHIN a pre-given set of coordinates, but I choose to change this set of coordinates itself’. And again: ‘the “actual freedom” as the act of consciously changing this set occurs only when, in the situation of a forced choice, one ACTS AS IF THE CHOICE IS NOT FORCED and “chooses the impossible”’ [capitalized in the original, B.A.].

4. Contrary to Žižek’s own warning about dissociating the utopian future from a full presence, the not yet suggests, by implication, that the fullness of the future might actually arrive and therefore that utopia simply designates a deferred presence. To say that it is not yet fully here complicates things further. For the argument to work one must drop the qualification of the future as ‘not yet fully there’.
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