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Capitalism and the New Political Unconscious

A Philosophy of Immanence

Edited by Riccardo Panattoni and Fabio Vighi

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Instituting Power

Riccardo Panattoni

Falling into the Political

Every time philosophy is questioned about its effective capacity to influence political action a point of crisis becomes visible. A sort of constitutive obstacle seems to materialize, as if searching for an immediate translatability of the political sphere entailed a loss of the status within which philosophical discourse is established. Clearly philosophy is able to discuss the political, but as soon as it subsumes it under its own criteria, it forces it to become the object of its own theoretical assumptions. For this reason, it is necessary to understand how thought can be developed between the instituting and the constituent criterion of power [*potenza*].¹ Indeed philosophy must always remain alert to the possibility of its political precipitate.

It is in the context of this unavoidable tension that philosophy is repeatedly called upon to express itself – from within the irreconcilable contrast between its tendency to include the political in its own narrative, and the need to place the political outside the philosophical field in order to be able to access it directly. The issue is, after all, always the same: philosophy is inherently established through speech, public speech. This speech, however, is peculiar, in that no one is necessarily obliged to listen to it. The risk and fascination of philosophy lie precisely in this undecidable contrast: its words are always destined to appear as words spoken in vain. This is why the political sphere, its public dimension, resonates as the fundamental phantasy underlying all philosophical thinking and summons it to measure itself against its own crisis point, its own unavoidable tendency to dissolution.

Indeed, at the structural juncture in which philosophical speech is upheld to invoke direct adherence to political acts (i.e., when it is required to perform by adhering perfectly to the criteria of the latter), it is as if its articulation were

somewhat distorted, not least because it is not possible to say that the politicization of philosophical discourse necessarily implies an intensification of the political reflection. On the contrary, the more philosophical language is made to serve such a function, the more it loses its antagonistic drive. It becomes oriented towards a pure force of acceleration, in an attempt to fully adhere to its precipitate in history, engaged by the need to provide an answer to the immediate future. Here, however, lies the reason for referring to what we might call, following Deleuze,² the disjunctive synthesis between the *destituent* force of thought,³ and the instituting power of the political, in order to retain the necessary inoperativity that philosophical reflection is called upon to instill with respect to any pure actualization of history.

It is possible to read the preface of Hannah Arendt's *Between Past and Future* in this sense.⁴ Arendt highlights how René Char joined the Resistance – during the Second World War – as if he were sucked into politics with the force of a vacuum. The totally unexpected defeat of France emptied the political scene of the country, and the poet, who had never been directly involved in political events or in the country's public sphere, found himself implicated without any forewarning. According to Arendt this was against his conscious inclination: the void was such that the poet was left speechless, and his resolution could be translated only into pure action. A completely different situation from the one Heidegger found himself in when, in 1933, reading a speech when elected to Rector of the University of Freiburg, he joined the National Socialist Movement. The German philosopher structured his inaugural speech believing he could interpret historical events – i.e., the novelty represented by the advent of National Socialism – through his own philosophical categories. This led him to openly shift towards what, quoting Carl Schmitt, we may call Political Romanticism.⁵ He was convinced, in other words, that if the National Socialist Movement had followed his philosophical arguments it would have acquired its proper political form; that is, it would have become able to respond adequately to its historical destiny: to bring the German people to the metaphysical heights from where it would be possible to hear the voice of being. In this case we are not dealing with the experience of a historical void, but with something so full it overflowed, pouring over the edges. This story has nothing to do with the event described by René Char. No one is left speechless; on the contrary, it is clear that the philosopher believed he would be able to voice the event of being, so the destiny of appropriation could unfold in all its articulations.

We may say that Heidegger's political ontology is the exact opposite of the aphorism with which René Char described his experience of the historical

moment (mentioned by Arendt in her Preface): 'Our inheritance was left to us by no testament.' On the contrary, Heidegger intends to directly link the inheritance of the German people to the testament left by Greek philosophy, to inscribe the destiny of Nazi Germany in the mark left by the ancient Hellenic tradition, creating a bridge able to connect the two metaphysical peoples *par excellence*, one looking to the past, the other to the future. For this reason, Heidegger not only made the dramatic political error of joining the National Socialist Movement, but he also failed to address the connection between his own philosophical assumptions and the attempt to view them as useful in giving shape to the political possibility emerging in that particular historical juncture: precisely what Paul Celan asked of the German philosopher and was denied. This responsibility becomes radical when Heidegger starts to believe that the lasting connection with the legacy of Greek philosophy, with its tradition, could become one with the future represented by the novelty of the National Socialist Movement. Also for this reason, it is not particularly important to criticize the impolitic turn of his philosophy following this failure. What is more important is to consider the very impolitic nature of his philosophical position, the intrinsic possibility of such a sudden outcome in the context of this historical event. His is a transcendent position with respect to historical reality: Heidegger seems to observe everything from a perspective that is external to the same reality his discourse articulates – once again attributing a decisive role to the symbolic and performative nature of language.

Also, Deleuze's participation in the movement of 1968 (leaving aside the indisputable and incomparable differences in the historical and political context with respect to Heidegger's participation in the National Socialist Movement) represents the moment a precipitate is formed in the actuality of a historical present. In this case too we may speak of the acceleration of the expressive force of a voice that tends to propagate and disperse in the multitude of its own becoming. Here there is no vacuum, no suspension of speech: rather, once again, a fullness, an intensification that goes beyond any specific and contingent particularity. This horizon is in many ways exclusively affirmative, it is an activation captured inside a pure plane of immanence, where each singular life seems to be engaged in the dissolving act of a continuous generative process. Even though the effectiveness of this continuous constituent power is actually always (that is, every time in an exact manner, and thanks to the very singularity of that life) disjoined in the synthesis of a counter-effectualization, determined by the destituent power that such an impersonal and generative act imposes in itself.

For this reason, it is useful to highlight the continuous tension between the destituent and constituent force of power, in order to allow an instituting articulation to emerge with respect to the very concept of power. Which means understanding the latter as the disjunctive synthesis between the destituent and the constituent that remain active within its very meaning. In such a way that whoever speaks is always called upon to speak also in the name of his/her own singularity, and not to intervene in the name of rights alone, including when the rights of humans are at stake, but always in the name of life, of a particular life articulated in its own singularity. State and Law respond to the *molar* structure of what we may identify as a macrophysics of power, and in order to approach the exercise of power, its real and immanent dimension, it is necessary to recognize oneself within a *molecular* structure that is destituent in the process by which it constitutes itself within its own becoming. A philosophical act should therefore not orient the exercise of its own knowledge so as to formulate a general theory of state sovereignty, nor should it strive to define the form that the Law should acquire, or participate in the recognition of the global unity that claims to impose its domination. Rather, it should dwell essentially on the local and molecular exercise with which power articulates itself, and abstain from addressing statistical determinations. State sovereignty, the form of the Law or the global unity of domination, on the other hand, are exclusively oriented towards defining the ultimate forms of a transcendent principle of power. This does not mean there should be no State; nor does it mean the existence of Law is completely unnecessary. Rather, it means that the reflexive exercise of power, its force, is first and foremost a molecular movement that precedes all instances of statistical organization.⁶

The disjunctive synthesis of power, or of the plane of immanence

In *Marcel Proust et les signes*,⁷ Deleuze highlights an essential difference between art and life that can be found in *À la recherche du temps perdu*.⁸ In fact, art is referred to as that which does not rest on the becoming event of involuntary memory, but is rather grounded in the faculty of thinking exclusively aimed at grasping that which is essential. Essence, however, should not be understood in the Platonic sense, but as virtuality, as that which is real despite not being actual, as dematerialized entity that does not belong to the sensitive domain. It is a position, in other words, that views art as the only reflective mode capable of a

real sublimation of the temporal experience that structures life, as opposed to the intrinsic limits that scientific knowledge, as well as philosophical knowledge, present with regard to this capacity. In this reading of Proust's work what emerges is a capacity of not putting forward a contrastive force with respect to the continuous tension exerted by the particle *not*, in such a way as to highlight how negation can act with respect to the tendency to concertation that characterizes philosophy: thought is, in other words, directed exclusively towards the determinations that force it to exercise itself. Thought is pushed to the edge of a coercive force that leads it towards an inevitable clash of forces. Time regained in lost time therefore exercises its own underlying motive thanks to the impressions that compel us to look, the encounters that compel us to interpret, and the expression that compel us to think.

It is not possible here to carry out an in-depth analysis of the extremely complex relationship between art and life. Although Deleuze highlights and carefully exposes the implications of the superiority that Proust attributes to art, we must nevertheless note that the book on Proust still presents the fundamental need for a counter-effectualization of this superiority through an immanent articulation of a life that is always embodied in its minority, in what is left out and is not subsumable. And so, despite the fact it is certainly not individuals who constitute worlds, but essences that determine individuals for the world they are, what still remains to be understood is the complex mechanism of reminiscence. That is, the mechanism by which what at first sight seems to respond to a direct associative pattern, does not in fact present a simple similarity between a present sensation and a past one, but rather an identical quality present in both. In going from an involuntary act to reminiscence, in fact, what is highlighted is how the present sensation is retrieved not so much in its original form, in continuity with the past sensation, but with a sense of splendour and authenticity that does not characterize experience itself, neither present nor past. Herein lies the fundamental importance of the concept of virtual in Deleuze. This concept is the outcome of a sort of shift: it is accentuated with respect to what we find in the work of Bergson, from whom it was borrowed (as can be seen clearly in the two fundamental books that Deleuze dedicated to cinema, *L'image-mouvement: cinéma 1*,⁹ and *L'image-temps: cinéma 2*,¹⁰ where his conception of film images is articulated together with an almost literal commentary on *Matière et mémoire*).¹¹

Obviously, the concept of virtual would require a vast and detailed analysis too. The most important aspect is, however, that the virtual does not respond to the sole criteria of possibility, which means it cannot be equated with something purely imaginary that is articulated in all its determinations: if anything, it

maintains the indetermination of the point in which this imaginary arises. It does not even coincide with the real, or rather, it constitutes its internal fault line. In such a way that the concept of virtual never posits the correspondence of something that is fully real, but rather the experience of something that is *not* experienced, which is not, however, to be understood as the imaginative force of what could have been and was not. Rather, this not-experienced is determined as the irruption of an inevitable destituent power, of a permanent action of revocation with respect to what being-in-progress does not in itself cease to constitute. This is a folding of being in action to be grasped in strictly temporal, not spatial, terms. Only in this way does virtual experience cease to respond to a mere identification of being with difference, preventing the articulation of being from being mere process of continuous differentiation. In this sense it is necessary to highlight the necessary shift with respect to Bergson's conceptualization, in which the virtual is viewed above all as a perpetually differential form, where the act of perception is continually subjected to a disintegration that forces, in a virtual way, to an always different actualization. The shift from this conception means that experience of the virtual no longer entails the belief that without the symbolic, without the tear that the negative exerts on experience, we would be crushed by the pressure of the real – which, moreover, is inevitably translated into the projection of something purely imaginary.

In this sense, it may be helpful to view the virtual through Lacan's three registers of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. It is not a question of adding a fourth register to the first three, but rather of thinking of these three registers plus one. As far as the structure of the three registers is concerned, the real is presented as unbearable, as an event that cannot be experienced and whose irruption determines an inevitable traumatic response. Hence only *après-coup* is it possible to re-signify the event by retracing it with the symbolic, so that the impact is not projected onto the implications of the purely imaginary. With respect to this structure, we should think of the insertion of the virtual as a differential recording of the event. The virtual, in fact, does not coincide with the real, but corresponds to it only by temporally dilating its effects: we could say that the virtual is a differential experience in the time determined by the effects of the real.

A space opens up in the temporal experience of the event such that the real is no longer what leaves a hole. Only the symbolic is able to weave a possible pattern on the edges of this void. Therefore, the virtual reveals itself as a contrasting force with respect to the resignifying action of the symbolic, with

respect to the unconditional trust placed in language; it allows to introduce a different spectrum through which to relate to the fundamental structure of the imaginary. What emerges, in other words, is the need for a paradigm shift, in part still to be explored in its implications, in which images play an essential role. Indeed, Roland Barthes himself (who was in many ways much more Proustian than Deleuze), when questioning the ontological nature of photography, and comparing it to the visual experience of Japanese haiku – to what characterizes its point of emergence, its instituting trait – dedicated his last university course to demonstrating how the brevity of the visual dimension contrasts the narrative proliferation of the symbolic.¹² Without investigating this point further, we can however say that his proposal for an iconological neo-structuralism represented a paradigm shift, whereby its field of reference required to radically rethink the very structure of the imaginary. The latter must be grasped in the point of incidence with virtual experience, which is disjointed from the determination of the real.

Hamlet, Bartleby or misconstruction

We might say that the stuntman of philosophical action in the political domain is Hamlet. Lacan clearly demonstrates that the Shakespearean hero is not at all incapable of acting¹³ – when it comes to killing Polonius, Hamlet performs the deed swiftly, without the slightest sign of hesitation. Hamlet embodies the immanent experience of time, which is out of joint, and is the perfect expression of the need expressed by René Char, to be able to inherit without a testament. Hamlet is the product of a present in which time is no longer measured against movement, because movement is subordinate to time, it is articulated by what its condition dictates. Deleuze tells us that Hamlet is the first hero who actually needs time to act,¹⁴ who senses the central void constituting the temporal structure and who draws the optics for his visionary ability precisely from this blind spot. His action, therefore, does not derive at all from the consequence of an original movement or from the implications of an aberrant action; he does not follow the testament that Greek tragedy artfully constructed to shed light on human life. Rather, he is aware that although things happen at different times, they are at the same time also simultaneous and do not cease to persist in any one time. The figure of Hamlet allows us to focus precisely on this ‘any one’: if time is out of joint, succession and simultaneity are nothing but ways of permanence of time. This is why Hamlet’s character seemingly reflects a passive existence: like

the actor or the sleeper, he no longer embodies skepticism or doubt, but orients himself exclusively toward the action of criticism. Hamlet is the subject who is barred at the origin. He has always been cut through by the form of time, in such a way that his permanence in that 'any one' is the formal event by which he is affected by himself. It is a form of interiority that never ceases to tear him, divide him, double him: it is a split that is however never complete. This event is shaped like vertigo, like the oscillation of a destituent power through which the process of its subjectification never ceases to institute itself.

If on the one hand Proust is the great creator of the symbolic capacity to sublimate life in art, on the other hand Hamlet is the virtual counter-realization of what has not been experienced that structures life itself. This non-lived experience is anything but what it could have been and was not, in that it is the experience of non-appropriability with respect to the action that the symbolic exerts between the imaginary and the real: a minor language being uninterruptedly carved into a major language. The language of mothers, of life, that we commonly call mother tongue, but that actually responds to the testamentary inheritance of the language of the father. This minority that belongs to a visionary language does not aim to the destitution of the symbolic force of language, but rather to its deposition, understood both in a theological sense, with reference to the immanent transcendence of the moment when the body of Christ yields to itself in all its weight, and in a juridical sense, as the counterpart of what Kafka described as the impossibility of testifying in the context of the constituent function of the Law. This minor language inside the major one is exemplified by *Bartleby*, Melville's scrivener.¹⁵ 'I would prefer not to' is in fact a formula with a double temporality that never ceases to regenerate itself, to institute itself in the suspension determined by its fullness: it is the virtual emergence of an imaginary that evades utterance in a denotative form, as if the expression incorporated its punctuation, the colon, announcing the void of content that follows. This is why every time the lawyer, *Bartleby's* employer, hears the formula resonate in his office, he has the dizzying impression that everything must start again from scratch.

After all, the formula does not refer to something that still has to be said, which supposedly completes the sense of the statement. In fact, there is nothing more to be said or to be added. Here form is one with its own procedure, it overcomes the appearance of particularity without at the same time yielding to a universal. It discards the criterion of an alternative, creating a zone of indeterminacy in the very words composing it, a void in linguistic expression, which all the same remains active. It is *Bartleby's* own life that becomes waste

(*déchet*), what Lacan calls *petit objet a*, in the sense that it does away with its function; he refuses to copy but this is expressed only as a preference, he never slips into the role of the rebel or the insurgent: he introduces a logic of preference within a logic of presuppositions. The dull timbre of his voice signals a disconnection between words and actions, so much so that Bartleby presents himself as the man without a reference, as he who is bound to always remain in his own position, in the a-grammatical correctness of his utterance.

Instituting power

Let us try, at this point, to reverse the terms of the discussion and follow the implications that arise when a radicalization of political theory prevails with respect to a position strictly anchored to philosophical reflection. A radicalization such as the one carried out by Claude Lefort with respect to the theoretical approach of his teacher, Merleau-Ponty.¹⁶ In his work there is an effective reversal of roles: without rushing towards action, that is, remaining focused on an exquisitely theoretical position, political philosophers reveal the political inadequacy of an argumentation that is itself fundamentally philosophical. In fact, even though Merleau-Ponty's reflection opens to an a-subjective space, to a meta-political articulation of thought, his main focus remains the phenomenological project. According to Lefort, however, it is necessary to understand the whole of politics as an institution of the social, so that if the institution is, in itself, unequivocally political, on the other hand the sphere of the political cannot but manifest an inevitable instituting quality.¹⁷ We witness a shift in the structure of the ontological argumentation that goes from the noun *institution* to the verb *institute*. The institution of the social should not be understood as a political institution located within society, but as the fact that society itself, as a whole, can only be instituted in its own form by the political.

This essential intensification of *institute* over *institution* cannot, however, leave out an essential reference to the force of what is maintained in action. In fact, in order to let its instituting nature emerge, the verbal form cannot but present a destituent articulation of its own normative quality. And it is precisely within this disjunctive synthesis between institution and destitution that we can think of democracy as the only political regime able to recognize the absence of a foundation as a constitutive part of its structure, in such a way that from a formal point of view power should be exercised through an intrinsic non-appropriability of divergent interests, the same way the process of socialization

should always manifest itself as unoccupiable space. This means that the tendency inherent in the instituting process, while positing the need of a symbolic re-composition with regard to the void of the signifier, is at the same time counter-effectualized by the virtual medium of the image, by the iconological structure of its folds, whereby precisely in this contrast between vision and expression the temporal structure of its immediacy is revealed. It is a temporal dilation that is not so much achieved through the negative character of the law, but rather by means of a constant splitting operated by the diaphragm of imagination. In such a way that the instituting process, in its very essence, reveals itself as a living point of insurgence, as an immanence fault that destituent power determines in thought with respect to every precipitate that constituent power demands.

If thinking is first of all a relation between seeing and speaking, it is necessary to add that in this relation between these two simultaneous acts an essential disjunction arises. It is in this disjunction that the singular process of subjectification is established. In such a way that thinking does not take place only thanks to the relation between seeing and speaking, because its force always originates between the two: in the tear, in the fold that is between them; in the exact point in which seeing reaches the limit of its visibility (that is, it reaches what can only be enunciated). At this point of the disjunctive synthesis, seeing and speaking both reach the common border that connects them at the exact moment in which they are inevitably disjoined. It is therefore between seeing and speaking that thought sees and speaks, although it is also here that, at the same time, its potential virtuality arises: that is, it accesses the operative quality of a real imaginary. Here imaginary means the scenario of a power relation that is homogeneous both to seeing and to speaking, despite these two forms are different, that is, they are not homogeneous. This allows us to grasp the fact that the virtual is by no means that which is opposed to the real; rather, the virtual is the potential and immediate destitution of the real. The virtual is therefore inactual, but always real: what is indeed opposed to the real is not the virtual, but rather the possible. Only the eventual realization of the possible can, in fact, be deduced, following the criteria established by the relationship between seeing and enunciating. The virtual, on the contrary, can never be understood in terms of possibility because it is not implied by the logic of an eventual realization – in the instantaneous act of counter-effectualization the virtual is already a modality of the real. Virtuality never lacks reality, it lacks actuality: it is what rebounds on actuality ignoring its exclusive factuality, immediately counter-effectualizing every finality criterion, thus articulating the necessary incidence of the effects of singularity. This is why every actualization is in itself differentiation, a relationship

of forces between surfaces and multiple singularities. The virtual, understood in this sense, reveals itself as too rich to be retraced back to unity, because it is articulated in division, without, however, this disjunction ever reaching a perfect dual form: it is the being in act of an instituting power whose political articulation presents itself in all its immanence.

Notes

- 1 Roberto Esposito, *Instituting Thought: Three Paradigms of Political Ontology* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2020).
- 2 Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: PUF, 1968); Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1969).
- 3 Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).
- 4 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961).
- 5 Carl Schmitt, *Politische Romantik* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1919).
- 6 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
- 7 Gilles Deleuze, *Marcel Proust et les signes* (Paris: PUF, 1964).
- 8 Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).
- 9 Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-mouvement: cinéma 1* (Paris: Minuit, 1983).
- 10 Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-temps: cinéma 2* (Paris: Minuit, 1985).
- 11 Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire. Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012).
- 12 Roland Barthes, *La préparation du roman. Cours au Collège de France 1978-79 et 1979-80* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).
- 13 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre VII. L'éthique de la psychanalyse (1959-1960)* (Paris: Seuil, 1986).
- 14 Gilles Deleuze, *Sur quatre formules poétiques qui pourraient résumer la philosophie kantienne*, in Id., *Critique et Clinique* (Paris: Minuit, 1993).
- 15 Herman Melville, *Bartleby and The lightning-rod man* (London: Penguin, 1995).
- 16 Claude Lefort, *Le travail de l'œuvre Machiavel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).
- 17 Roberto Esposito, *Instituting Thought*.

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