

## Chapter 02

### The World or Nothing at All

*Was ist ist  
was nicht ist ist möglich  
nur was nicht ist ist möglich.*  
—Einstürzende Neubauten<sup>1</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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1. “What is, is / What is not, is possible / Only that which is not is possible.”
  2. Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill Press, 1983). [Translator’s note.]
  3. Colectivo Situaciones, *19 & 20: Notes for a New Social Protagonism*, trans. Nate Holdren and Sebastián Touza (Brooklyn, NY: Common Notions and Minor Compositions, [2002] 2011); Mario Tronti and Adriano Vinale, “Potere destituente: Una conversazione con Mario Tronti,” in *Potere destituente: Le rivolte metropolitane* (Milan: Memesis, 2008), 23–44; The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (South Pasadena, Semiotext(e), 2015); Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016). The same question had been raised by Agamben the previous year, at the opening of a seminar series in the French countryside which saw the participation of five hundred people from across the globe. The transcription of the conference (in French) can be found at <https://lundi.am/vers-une-theorie-de-la-puissance-destituante-Par-Giorgio-Agamben>.
  4. Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).
  5. On constituent power, see: Carl Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, trans. Jeffrey Seitzer (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999).
  6. The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*. [Translator’s note.]
  7. David Lapoujade, *Deleuze: Les mouvements aberrants* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2014), 250.
  8. Editorial board, “A nos amis ... o dell’entusiasmo!” *Infoaut*, October 24, 2015, <https://www.infoaut.org/notes/a-nos-amis-o-dellentusiasmo>.
  9. Gigi Roggero, “Che cosa sono i nostri amici?,” *Commonware*, October 25, 2015, [www.commonware.org/index.php/gallery/623-che-cosa-sono-i-nostri-amici](http://www.commonware.org/index.php/gallery/623-che-cosa-sono-i-nostri-amici). Both this and the previous citation are reviews of The Invisible Committee’s *To Our Friends*. [Translator’s note.]
  10. The difficulty in distinguishing constituent power from sovereign power is precisely the critique Agamben undertook in the first volume of *Homo Sacer*. See

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

11. Roberto Esposito, “Perché le primavere non cambiano il mondo,” *La Repubblica*, July 23, 2013, [https://www.repubblica.it/la-repubblica-delle-idee/mondo/2013/07/22/news/perch\\_le\\_primavere\\_non\\_cambiano\\_il\\_mondo-63453074/](https://www.repubblica.it/la-repubblica-delle-idee/mondo/2013/07/22/news/perch_le_primavere_non_cambiano_il_mondo-63453074/). [Translator’s note.]

12. Sandro Mezzadra, “Per una politica costituente europea,” *EuroNomade*, August 20, 2013, [www.euronomade.info/?p=168](http://www.euronomade.info/?p=168).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 14

### An Enchanting Horror

*SO THAT SOMETHING CAN COME, SOMETHING MUST GO. THE FIRST SHAPE OF HOPE IS FEAR. THE FIRST MANIFESTATION OF THE NEW IS TERROR.*

—Heiner Müller, *Mauser*<sup>1</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rome, 27 October 2016.

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1. Heiner Müller, *Mauser* [1970], in *Theatremachine*, ed. and trans. Marc von Henning (London: Faber & Faber, 1999). [Translator's note.]
  2. See Irving Wohlfarth, "Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part 2," *Radical Philosophy* 153 (2009): 12–25.
  3. Walter Benjamin, "Schönes Entsetzen," in *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 4*, ed. Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 434–435. English translation by Irving Wohlfarth, "Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part 1," *Radical Philosophy* 152 (2008): 7.
  4. Furio Jesi, *Materiali mitologici: Mito e antropologia nella cultura mitteleuropea* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), 94–95.
  5. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 6*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 116 [fragment 82].
  6. Andrea Cavalletti, *Class*, trans. Elisa Fiaccadori (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2019), 38.
  7. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" [1935], in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 2008), 32–33.
  8. Gabriele d'Annunzio, the Italian poet and soldier (1863-1938), was well known for his energetic, highly emotional lyricism and, later, for his Fascist propaganda. [Translator's note.]
  9. On the poetic experience as a subversive one, see Furio Jesi, *Spartakus: The Symbolology of Revolt*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2014), 26.
  10. Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 105.
  11. Jesi, *Spartakus*, 67 onward.
  12. Jesi, *Spartakus*, 141.