

Beyond the big and the tragic

The thought of politics in Negri, Agamben and Deleuze

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Beyond the big and the tragic is the theoretical slogan the following considerations depart from by returning to a figure of whom we tend to think we would already know it all-too-well: Bartleby, the scrivener. This slogan indicates that the dis-heroisation of politics undertaken by keeping the sad passions of left militants at distance, by avoiding existentialising politics in form of the choice of the choice, the decisiveness of being, the fidelity to the cause, and the identification with it, is a precious part of that what we inherit from the post-structuralist thought of politics known as molecular revolution.

In the *Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx had introduced a first dis-heroisation of politics: He diagnosed that the process of revolution will evade a decline from tragedy to farce by bringing into action the pure self-reflexivity of proletarian practises that "constantly criticize themselves, constantly interrupt themselves in their own course, return to the apparently accomplished, in order to begin anew"¹ until the self-identity of the historical moment of transformation is produced, "and the conditions themselves call out: 'hic rodus, hic salta'²". Marx distinguished this non-heroic proletarian politics beyond tragedy and its decline that repeats itself to become what it is from two modes of political spectrality that will be buried by it: a good one exemplified by the Revolution of 1789 whose militants draped itself in the guise of the Roman Empire conjuring up the past to find "once more the spirit of revolution"³ and a bad one exemplified by the bourgeois revolutions that awoke the dead to conceal from themselves the limitation of their struggles. With molecular politics, however, a second dis-heroisation of politics had been introduced to the thought of politics: Instead of projecting the idea of the work of the negative on practise ending in a rationalized idea of politics' self-reflexive self-completion, politics had been conceived

¹ Karl Marx: *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx/Engels Internet Archive

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

as a conjuncture of heterogenous impersonal forces whereby even the transvaluation of tragic thought into heroic affirmation that Deleuze had put into play with Nietzsche had been abandoned. Molecular politics eluded Nietzsche's figure of a yes-saying hero descending from the "full virile maturity" of the noble, from "the fire of this burning joy which is that of the adult and the victorious age"⁴. By short-circuiting an ontology of becoming with an ethics of non-heroic affirmation, the model of molecular revolution oscillated between the idea that the process of becoming, without any mediation, expresses a desubjectified mode of unfolding radical resistances and the urgent demand to politicize this process, whereby the paradoxical question had been posed of how a process of becoming can be organized and stabilized.⁵

Taking leave from this paradox, I will show the antinomies to which one of the most important theoretisations of molecular revolution – politics of potentiality – has led to by converting an ontology of potentiality into a thought of politics. I will do so in three steps, firstly by returning to *Bartleby*, a man without qualities and anonymous proletarian, who is a chosen messenger of non-heroic politics beyond the big and the tragic, secondly by distinguishing the concepts of potentiality in Negri, Agamben and Deleuze, and thirdly by proposing to think the paradoxical state of politics instead of deducing the thought of politics from ontological axioms.

Bartleby, the pale scrivener in Melville's curious novella dealing with the anomalous effects resulting from the non-execution of things, has been lent three political voices. These voices articulate three irreconcilable forms of a politics of potentiality that can be traced to a more than thirty-year-old debate on the concept of potentiality in poststructuralism, post-workerism and left-Heideggerianism. They articulate three different modes of ontologising politics, and lead to three different antinomies: automatisations of politics in Deleuze, negation of politics in Negri, mysticism of politics in Agamben.

For Negri – as formulated with Hardt in *Empire* – *Bartleby* expresses a basic act of

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche: *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, quoted by Gilles Deleuze: *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 37

⁵ Remember Negri's question to Deleuze: "How can minority becoming be powerful? How can resistance become insurrection? [...] Is there then, some way for the resistance of the oppressed to become effective, and for what's intolerable to be definitively removed? Is there some way for the mass of singularities and atoms that we all are to come forward as a constitutive power [...]" [Deleuze: "Control and Becoming", 173]

politics – refusal – that has to be supplemented with a positive and creative act of constitution to avoid reducing politics to negativity.⁶ His ontological axiom is the primordial politicacy and excessivity of creative being in its subjective form, being infinitely auto-affirmative, infinitely cumulative. For Agamben, in contrast, Bartleby's case testifies to potentiality's autonomous mode of existence, which lies in impotentiality – the potential to not do this or that, to remain in the abyss of inactivity, the weak effectivity of which liberates being from the primacy of reason, will and presence, and thought from the dichotomy of nothingness and being. This activity of inactivity consists in opening time to the gift of inactivity, which one day will be able to deactivate all juridical-factual conditions. Everything that is, will be rendered inoperative, and existence will be allowed to arrive at perfect inactivity.⁷

For Deleuze, however, Bartleby conducts a revolt against the mechanisms of self-governance and philanthropic morality, against responsibility, foresight, execution – mechanisms that Deleuze subsumes under the concept of the “paternal function”.⁸ As a matter of consistency, this insurrection is also directed against the logic of insurrection itself. Which means: Bartleby eludes the subjectification of the militant and suspends the classical forms of expression of left politics, particularly critique and project. “If Bartleby had refused”, Deleuze says, “he could still be seen as a rebel or insurrectionary, and as such would still have a social role.”⁹ Thus, Bartleby's politics of non-politics is characterised by a special relation between negativity and positivity. It oscillates between a weakly positive negativity and a weakly negative positivity, which Deleuze introduces as a pragmatics of the passive that generates its own activity. This special relation between positivity and negativity is expressed in Bartleby's formula “I prefer not to”, causing a zone of indiscernibility to emerge between a preference that relates to nothing and a refusal that appears as preference. What remains is what Deleuze calls “the growth of a nothingness of the will”,¹⁰ a positive-negative becoming, which he describes, with a barb against Heidegger's anti-inorganic thesis of the worldlessness of the stone¹¹, as a becoming-stone. Initially, politics appears here in Blanchotian and left-Heideggerian perspective as its own retreat, as the trace of its absence. Bartleby embodies an archi-passivity in which

⁶ Hardt/ Negri: *Empire*, 203-204

⁷ Agamben: “Bartleby, or On Contingency”, 243-271

⁸ Deleuze: “Bartleby; or the Formula”, 77

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 71

¹¹ Cf. Heidegger: *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics. World - Finitude – Solitude*, 176-178

negation, as Blanchot writes in *The Writing of Disaster*, “effaces preference and is effaced therein: the neutrality of that which is not among the things there are to do – the restraint”.¹² Blanchot’s motif of “a life so passive [...] that it does not have death for an ultimate escape”¹³ is taken up again by Deleuze who, in the last instance, combines it with an active motif of a becoming that carries the passive along with it and gives Bartleby’s politics of non-politics a positive inflection toward pragmatic constructivism. Bartleby thus gives his name to a new man who is without qualities and appears as neither the owner of his actions nor of his mind, but as the anorexic and exhausted variant of a subject that opens itself to desubjectification. Deleuze’s Bartleby permits and proliferates combinations of forces that pass through him, through subjects and objects, the thinking of which requires us to overcome the transcendental and dialectic subject-object schema. Ultimately, Deleuze no longer allows Bartleby to express primarily archi-passivity and restraint, but the force of an arbitrary, impersonal and formless life this side of subjectification.

I would like to compare this idea of a politics of potentiality on the threshold to non-politics with Agamben and Negri’s idea of a politics of potentiality in order to problematise their respective concepts, particularly the idea of an infinitely auto-perfecting and auto-affirmative proto-communist being in Negri and in extreme opposition to that the idea of a redemption in inactivity and being rendered inoperative in Agamben.

Let’s begin with a short reflection on Negri’s concept of potentiality. This concept was developed in his book on Spinoza, *The Savage Anomaly*, written in prison in 1979 and 1980. It arose from a heretical linking of two concepts of activity: Marx’s concept of labour-power and Spinoza’s concept of potentiality. In this way, Negri initiates his own post-Hegelian and postdialectic transformation of Marxism that allows him to link production, being and politics in the instance of potentiality.¹⁴ My thesis is that Negri’s onto-politics of potentiality, which has the concept of poverty at its centre, leads to three problems: the re-articulation of the idea of a pure proletarian act, the reinterpretation of the value-theoretical notion of abstract labour as proto-

¹² Blanchot: *The Writing of Disaster*, 145

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ In the last chapter of *The Savage Anomaly*, he articulates this identification, this extreme short circuit between ontology and politics with the following words: “Productive force is therefore immediately constitution, and constitution is the form in which productive force reveals Being” [Negri: *The Savage Anomaly*, 223-224]

communist general labour-power, and the presupposition of a concept of self-perfecting being in a subjective form, “infinitely extended toward infinite perfection”¹⁵, developed from a reading of Spinoza.

In the foreword to the French edition of Negri’s Spinoza book, Deleuze underlines two of Negri’s thematic threads without mentioning their contradictoriness: firstly, Spinoza’s anti-juridism, which places him in a tradition stretching from Machiavelli to Marx. This anti-juridism becomes manifest in Spinoza’s assumption of a spontaneous development of forces that do not require any mediation to express the relations corresponding to these forces: “They are elements of socialisation in themselves.”¹⁶

Secondly, Deleuze shows how Negri detects a tendency in Spinoza’s thought toward a development from utopianism to revolutionary materialism by pinpointing two insights that Spinoza develops in the course of the *Ethics* and the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*: firstly, Spinoza traces the potentiality of the substance back to the modes, the substance is nothing other than infinite modal transformations, infinite modal affections; secondly, with the categories of imagination and the common notions, Spinoza gives this modal transformations a political perspective: The composition of forces constituting a mode is not purely spontaneous; their organisation is part of the potentiality of the modes. Let's briefly summarize what Spinoza means by modal transformation: Each mode is a body composed of a certain number of elements paralleled by a certain idea of it. Each mode has a potentiality to affect and be affected; it is defined by its encounters and collisions with other modes. The ability to be affected from outside, to become charged with affects produced by other modes can strengthen or weaken a mode’s degree of potentiality. This process of composition or decomposition of the modes, the increasing or decreasing of their potentiality, Negri identifies as an immediate political process. In this regard, the significance of Spinoza’s common notions lies in the fact that the imagination, in alliance with reason, is able to organise both the physical composition of the body as well as the political constitution of the human community insofar as it is able to understand not only the effects but the causes of the multiple connections of the modes. Spinoza calls this capacity the knowledge of the second kind. Therewith one is

¹⁵ Ibid., 226: “Infinitely extended toward infinite perfection. A continuous transition toward always greater perfection. Being produces itself.”

¹⁶ Deleuze: “Preface to *The Savage Anomaly*”, 191

capable of understanding why the elements in a mode agree or not, why they cause joy or sadness. Spinoza takes this further by considering the potential of a community not only to feel joyful passions – which is still passive, which is still carried out in the area of the becoming-affected – but to cause reason to actively create an adequate idea of its compositional possibility and its singular degree of potentiality. That is to say, a community is capable of actively creating an idea of its degree of perfection. This very perspective of the knowledge of the third kind, which Spinoza pursues at the end of the *Ethics* when he asks about “mental freedom or blessedness” and investigates “what power reason has over the emotions [affects]”,¹⁷ Negri translates into the perspective of a communism of the infinite composition of productive forces, in which being, production and politics become one. Politics becomes nothing other than the cumulative process of the articulation of being, which is played out simultaneously on a physical, political and ethical plane. For Negri, this process – and this is his second translation of Spinoza in the framework of a workerist Marxism – is a subjective one. It leads to a political subjectivity that is in a position to practice “the-always-more-complex affirmation of subjective power”.¹⁸ The absolute opposition between *imperium* and *multitudo* that we find in the book *Empire*, the absolute depotentialisation of capital together with the simultaneous potentialisation and substantialisation of political subjectivity can be traced back to these considerations developed by Negri around 1980. In the course of these considerations, Negri overlooks a striking ambivalence in Spinoza’s thought that Balibar addresses in *Masses, Classes, Ideas*. The political project that Spinoza associates with “the power of reason over the affects” runs the risk of becoming a project of elite effort. The possibility to “free oneself from the passions”, writes Balibar, “that is to combat sad passions not only by reinforcing joyous passions but by developing active affections, which would immediately result from an adequate knowledge of causes”,¹⁹ is always only realized by the few. Spinoza’s idea of an association of free people who are united in “the intellectual love of God” and in reason is not a mass idea. In this sense, Balibar notes, that Spinoza, whose thought is characterised by a strong tension between the axiom “Man thinks”²⁰ and the idea, that, as a rule, people are not guided by reason, runs the risk, with this association of the free, of bringing into play the idea of a monastic community that withdraws from

¹⁷ Spinoza: *Ethics*, 194

¹⁸ Negri: *The Savage Anomaly*, 226

¹⁹ Balibar: “Spinoza, the Anti-Orwell”, 7

²⁰ Spinoza: *Ethics*, 39

society's influence by means of asceticism. Self-mastery and spiritual exercise, however, contradict "the Spinozian analysis of the concatenation of natural causes and the development of the power of bodies".²¹

Negri associates his political reading of Spinoza's concept of potentiality with a re-interpretation of Marx's concept of labour-power. By bypassing the value-theoretical definition of abstract labour, Negri extracts from the *Grundrisse* an identification of labour-power as a general human potentiality, a negative universal that contains the latency of an all-unfolded omnipotence. Seen negatively and historically, labour-power is radically expropriated, in the *Grundrisse* Marx counts on: "not-raw-material, not-instrument of labour, not-raw-product: labour separated from all means and objects of labour".²² Seen positively and ontologically, however, labour's "absolute poverty as object"²³, Marx says, embodies "the general possibility of wealth as subject and as activity".²⁴ The main point of Negri is that this potentiality of living labour reaches its historical apex in today's post-Fordist regime of accumulation. According to Negri, this is due to the fact that labour-power has internalised the decisive means of labour of the post-Fordist mode of production: language, knowledge, capacity for improvisation and coordination. What are the consequences of this thought? Our current situation is assumed to be distinguished by an extremity of the eschaton of the last. Politics is assumed to be founded in the anthropological potentiality of doing that steps forth in the course of the history of being. That is, the auto-cumulative and auto-affective potentiality of being is supposed to coincide with the historical development of the capitalist mode of production. Thus, we are coming closer to the extraordinary moment in which ontogenesis, anthropogenesis and capitalist development meet in a kind of last great antagonism. Necessary presupposition is the hyposthesis that the class of living labour owns the ontological privilege of transcending the limits of the capitalist mode of production. Ultimately, communism receives the fictive form of a community of creative producers without division and relation, an auto-affective and auto-subsistent community of the active, in which conflict, exteriority and death are absent. This concept of class takes up again the idea of a pure proletarian act of the young Marx. The *multitudo* becomes "a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the

²¹ Balibar: "Spinoza, the Anti-Orwell", *ibid.*

²² Marx: *Grundrisse*, 296

²³ *Ibid.*, 295

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 296

dissolution of all estates”²⁵ of which the young Marx spoke in the introduction of the *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*. It is a part of society that is poor but potential; representing nothing, but being capable of everything, an anthropological bearer of revolution that harbours the general and the real – the human potentiality to act – as much as the negative force of the immediate dissolution of the bourgeois form of state and law. Consequently, essentialist, teleological and anthropological determinations of Marxism that structural Marxism had already deconstructed are reintroduced to materialist thought.

In Agamben’s thought, however, the politics of potentiality takes on a radically different form. In contrast to Negri’s cumulative potentiality of the articulation of being, Agamben formulates a potentiality of deactivation and of rendering inoperative. This is shown clearly at the beginning of *The Time That Remains*, in which Agamben describes the formula of the “as not” (those weeping as not weeping, etc.),²⁶ used by the Apostle Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians to express the suspension of all juridical-factual conditions, as the “most rigorous definition of messianic life”.²⁷ Agamben compares this formula of the “as not” with Marx’s idea of “a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society”. The class which is no class, Agamben states, will deactivate all classes to bring about an arbitrary whatever being. It will perfect itself by rendering itself ineffective. How does Agamben arrive at this interpretation?

In a number of texts written in the 1980s, Agamben developed from a heretical reading of Aristotle the thesis of an autonomous efficacy of the possible. Potentiality is not a purely logical possibility, but disposes of a mode of existence that can be traced back to “the potentiality not to (not to do or be)”,²⁸ and hence, to impotentiality: “The potentiality that exists is precisely the potentiality that cannot pass over into actuality”²⁹, Agamben writes in *Homo sacer*. The fact that the possible implies that it also cannot appear, since otherwise it would have always already proceeded to the act, presents for Agamben the great secret of Aristotle’s theory of dynamis and energeia. Decisive for Agamben here is the question of what happens to

²⁵ Marx: “Introduction to *A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*”, 186

²⁶ Agamben: *The Time that Remains*, 23

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Agamben: *Homo Sacer*, 45

²⁹ Ibid.

impotentiality in the passage to the act. What happens to the potentiality of a kithara player not to play when she or he plays? Inspired by a single phrase in Aristotle's *De Anima* that impotentiality gives itself in the passage to actuality, Agamben develops the mystical figure of impotentiality's salvation in the act, which consists in a self-giving gift: the impotentiality is not destroyed in the actualisation of the corresponding potentiality, but fulfilled. It has given itself to this passage. It is not exhausted by entering into the actual mode, but is maintained there, deactivated.³⁰ This survival or deconstructed sublation of the impotentiality in actuality opens up for Agamben the force of the messianic. In his book on St Paul, he shows that, in the messianic moment, a reversal of the relation between act and power occurs. Just as impotentiality gives itself to actuality, actuality, conversely, is now made inoperative and gives itself to potentiality in the form of inactivity.

The self-suspension of potentiality in the act and, conversely, the gift of the act to potentiality mark an extreme turning point in Agamben's thought, one that leads to two different spaces: to the negative space of sovereign exception and to the positive space of the community of whatever being that leads to a messianic exception, to the redemption of activity and efficacy.

To understand this turning point, we have to look at how, in *Homo Sacer*, Agamben carries the question of the relation between potentiality and actuality over to the question of the state of exception. An astonishing inversion of his thought is carried out. With reference to the same passages in Aristotle, the potentiality of impotentiality now becomes the hallmark of sovereign being and of a law that allows for its own exception and the execution of extralegal measures. With reference to Nancy's concept of the ban,³¹ Agamben defines the state of exception as the mechanism in which the law is able to retreat in its impotentiality, suspends itself and transfers its force to its exception. That is, a bare life, which is allowed to be killed, is produced by a law that is able to apply by not applying and still, in its non-application, to maintain a relation to the actuality of the law.

³⁰ "Contrary to the traditional idea of potentiality that is annulled in actuality, here we are confronted with a potentiality that conserves itself and saves itself in actuality. Here potentiality, so to speak, survives actuality and, in this way, gives itself to itself." [Agamben: *Potentialities*, 184]

³¹ Cf. Agamben: *Homo Sacer*, 58-59; cf. Nancy: *Birth to Presence*, 36-47

A striking proximity of disaster and redemption characterises Agamben's thought that makes his politics of potentiality extremely disparate. On the one hand, he reduces the difference between sovereignty and redemption to a minimum: in the messianic moment, the potentiality of law to convert into its own exception is reversed to the potentiality of law to be made ineffective. On the other hand, and in contrast to this, Agamben demands, from the experience of the state of exception and the retreat of law into its impotentiality, to think ontology and politics outside of all figures of relation.³² Here, we encounter one of the most instable points in Agamben's thought, where it oscillates between the idea of an inversion of the relation between potentiality and act in the messianic moment on one hand and the idea of the non-relationality of potentiality and act on the other hand. But why should politics take on the form of non-relation? And how could the non-relational form of a politics of potentiality can be thought?

Agamben sets out from the diagnosis that in the state of exception, life and law are fictively connected and thereby given their form: "Life and law", Agamben writes, "result from the fracture of something to which we have no other access than through the fiction of their articulation."³³ Thus, for Agamben, the decisive question of politics is how law and violence or law and life (in his writings on Benjamin, Agamben equates life with anomic violence) can be separated again. In this question, an extraordinary thematic transformation takes place, which is characteristic of Italian and French left-Heideggerianism: the question of politics is reformulated as enigmatic question of ontology. Politics is presented by Agamben as an enigma of a *prima philosophia*, in which only one problem is posed – the problem of how ontology and politics can be thought outside of the form of relation. Agamben formulates this demand in the framework of a political ontology of potentiality. Potentiality and act must be thought without relation to one another, that is, without the extreme forms of ban and self-suspension or of gift and redemption.³⁴ Agamben explains this demand by referring to Heidegger's determination of the abandonment of being: "Then this is shown:", Agamben quotes from Heidegger's *From Enowning*, "Being [Sein] abandons the being [das Seiende], means: Being dissimulates itself [verbirgt sich] in the being-manifest [Offenbarkeit] of the being. And Being itself

³² Cf. Agamben: *Homo Sacer*, 58-62

³³ Agamben: *State of Exception*, 88

³⁴ Cf. Agamben: *Homo Sacer*, 58-62

becomes essentially determined as this withdrawing self-dissimulation [sichentziehende Verbergen].” Agamben derives his demand of a politics of non-relationality from Heidegger's determination that an abandonment is no relation: “the being-together of Being and beings does not have the form of a relation.”³⁵

The comparison and eventual distinction between life's abandonment by law and being's abandonment by Being casts a spotlight on the structure of Agamben's thought. He recognises two great battles in politics and metaphysics taking place on a single battlefield: onto-theology includes pure Being in the logos; the sovereign exception includes violence in the law. In short, Agamben formulates the problem of politics as an enigma in which a relation of exception in onto-theology mirrors a relation of exception in political sovereignty and vice versa; ontology and politics are identified with one another in the structure of exception that connects what has to be separated. Thereby, Agamben works with a single transhistorical figure of exceptional power, the ban; he depicts the history of the fictive connection of law and violence in the form of decay and expansion; he reduces political action to a single counter-figure: a violence that is able to interrupt the exceptional relation between law and violence; his political perspective is reduced to the transfiguration of existence into the mode of perfect inactivity.

Ultimately, I would like to propose the thesis that, concerning ontologies of potentiality, Deleuze and Guattari have provided the most interesting answer to the question of the relation between potentiality and actuality with the concepts of virtuality and the plane of immanence.

Virtuality is not a mode of the possible in the sense of a lack of actuality like in Aristotle. The entire Aristotelian theory of *dynamis* and *energeia* that Agamben attempts to subvert is suspended. In relation to actuality, virtuality presents a field of forming forces that are themselves unformed, which Deleuze (with Nietzsche) describes as forces of an impersonal life. The theoretical problem that motivates Deleuze and Guattari consists of conceptualising an ontology that allows a way of thinking infinite differentiability, transformation and multiplicity beyond transcendence, teleology and subject-object relation, that is, outside of a transcendental or dialectical synthesis of the world by the *cogito* or the work of the negative.

³⁵ Agamben: *Homo Sacer*, 59

Deleuze departs from Spinoza's concept of the substance as the One-All, an immanent cause, that is expressed by infinite attributes (we only know two, thought and extension), which again are themselves modified by the modes that are to be understood as affections of the substance³⁶. At stake is not a One above or beyond difference and multiplicity but a One-All that is to be defined by the multiplicity of its expressions, a notion which – following Spinoza and Leibniz – is triadic for Deleuze: "We must distinguish what expresses itself, the expression itself and what is expressed. The paradox is that 'what is expressed' has no existence outside its expression yet bears no resemblance to it, but relates essentially to what expresses itself as distinct from the expression itself. [...] [This] constant triadic character means that the concept of expression cannot be referred either to causality within being or to representation in ideas, but goes beyond both [...]. Beyond real causality, beyond ideal representation, what is expressed is discovered as third term that makes distinctions infinitely more real and identity infinitely better thought."³⁷

In the course of the intense rereading of Spinoza in Germany in the 1790s initiated by Jacobis's "Über die Lehre des Spinoza, dargestellt in Briefen an Herrn Moses Mendelssohn" (1785) Hegel adopts this idea of a genetic self-differentiation of the substance while at the same time he criticizes Spinoza of having conceptualized a substance that is non-dynamic, lifeless and abstract. He rejects the idea of an infinite inner positive differentiation of an immanent cause, the effects of which never leave the cause, but modify its intellectual and material being. Instead Hegel thinks an explication of the logicity of being through negation, determination, and self-reflexivity. To be is to be something for Hegel. The dynamic genesis, he conceives, is moved by the negativity of difference, realizing the telos of the explication of the absolute. For Deleuze, this idea of genesis moved by the work of the negative destroys the thought of difference for three reasons. Firstly, the primacy of negativity in thinking expression reduces difference to contradiction. Secondly, the teleological explication of the logicity of being destroys the thought of the event and eventual transformation in time. Thirdly, the centrality of consciousness destroys the possibility to think a consciousness without self, not-attributable to a subject. In opposition to Hegel's logicity of being, the plane of immanence is defined by Deleuze

³⁶ Cf. Spinoza, *Ethics*, 3: "By substance (substantia) I understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself", Spinoza writes in the first part of the *Ethics*. "By Attribute (attributum), I understand that which the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence. By Mode (modus) I understand the modifications (affectiones) of a substance; or, that which is in something else through which it is also conceived."

³⁷ Deleuze: *Expressionism in philosophy: Spinoza*, 333-335

and Guattari in *What is philosophy?* as "the non-thought within thought"³⁸. Immanence is what cannot be thought, but has to be thought, a "vertigo"³⁹, constituted by the simultaneity of the outside and inside of thought, of the "not-external outside" with the "not-internal inside of thought"⁴⁰. For Deleuze and Guattari, on the plane of immanence the empirical – the object, the subject – remains indeterminate while the singular occurs fully determinate. This indetermination of the person and the simultaneous determination of the singular is expressed in Deleuze's text "Immanence: a life ..." by Dickens' figure of Riderhood who, dying, oscillating between life and death, opens himself to an impersonal singularisation of a life: becoming nothing but a gesture, a smile, a grimace.

Besides this ontological considerations, in Deleuze's and Guattari's concept of immanence, we find the kernel of an attempt to think a materialist theory of radical transformation beyond subject-object-relation and the primacy of contradiction and negativity. Deleuze and Guattari point out that the infinite differentiation happening on the plane of immanence is not continuous. Its infinite movement is selective. It allows for a passage, and it constitutes transformation. Right here, when Deleuze and Guattari explain that the plane of immanence (as a fold of the potentiality of being and the potentiality of thought) is transformative, they pose the very question of politics, of how transformation, how the passage from one plane of immanence to another is to be thought. In his letter to Foucault Deleuze explains this specification of the virtual:

"I would say for my own part: a society, a social field does not contradict itself, but what is primary is that it flees, it flees first from all sides, the lines of flight are primary (even if 'primary' isn't chronological). Far from being outside of the social field or leaving it, the lines of flight constitute its rhizome or cartography. The lines of flight are more or less the same thing as the movements of deterritorialisation: they imply no return to nature, they are the points of deterritorialisation in the desiring-assemblages. What is primary in feudalism are the lines of flight that it presupposes; as also for the 10th-12th centuries; as also for the formation of capitalism. Lines of flight are not necessarily 'revolutionary', but they are what the systems of power will plug and bind. Around the 11th century, all the lines of deterritorialisation which

³⁸ Deleuze/ Guattari: *What is philosophy?*, 59

³⁹ Ibid., 48

⁴⁰ Ibid., 60

accelerate: the last invasions, the pillaging hordes, the deterritorialisation of the Church, the peasant emigrations, the transformation of knighthood, the transformation of the cities which abandon territorial models more and more, the transformation of currency which injects itself into new circuits, the change in the condition of women with the themes of courtly love which even deterritorialises knightly love, etc. The strategy could only be second in relation to lines of flight, to their conjugations, orientations, convergences or divergences."⁴¹

Here a difficult problematic in Deleuze's impersonal and aleatory materialism occurs: the secondariness of politics. How do political strategies act on and within the convergences and divergences of impersonal forces that are primary? Formulated in Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, how does the molecular political plane effects the virtual ontological plane? In the "Micropolitics"-chapter in "A thousand plateaus" Deleuze and Guattari negotiate this question by stating that the political occurs inbetween the virtual and the molar, in the micro-texture of social relations, in which both, power and resistance embed and anchor their procedures. Decisive for our discussion of a politics of potentiality in its Deleuzian variant is this provisional, almost fragile tendency in "A thousand plateaus" to distinguish the ontological from the political perspective, from which Deleuze and Guattari repeatedly succumb to the temptation to identify the virtual with the political, and thereby install an automatism of politics. Deleuze does this in a paradigmatic way in his book on Foucault when he analogises the concepts of life, the outside and the virtual with that of resistance. As soon as this occurs, politics receives a fictive ontological privilege and being becomes proto-communist. If, however, politics coincides with a potentiality of being that what characterises politics, its paradoxical status, becomes unthinkable.

The paradoxical topology of politics can be roughly outlined by five theses.

Firstly, politics is exposed to contingency. It wants to produce a radical change of change and in this way a process that can be neither planned nor guaranteed through a substance, a subject or a decision but is always the outcome of an eventual conjunction of heterogenous practises.

⁴¹ Deleuze, "Desire and pleasure", 127-128

Secondly, understood as conjunction of heterogeneous practices formulated from disparate places and problems, politics makes universality become a secondary demand. In other words: Politics consists of the association of the heterogeneous that wants to be arbitrary and singular and is exposed to the paradox that the struggle for this possibility of becoming a whatever being demands a mobilisation that is opposed to this becoming.

In this sense, politics, thirdly, constantly oscillates between a too much and a too little. On the one hand, political acts are not simply a particular placeholder for the universality of a coming community of the free and equal. This freedom is already articulated in them. Beyond symbolic articulation, they are crystallisations of another time, a micrological intensity. On the other hand, political acts are not absolutely singular. As pure singularities they wouldn't construct any conjunctions, they wouldn't point beyond, but only to themselves and go out like tracers in the night. They could not contribute to the possibility that the improbable occurs, that, through the conjunction of heterogeneous acts, a militant field of forces is produced through which the social situation could be interrupted and changed in a radical way.

That is to say, fourthly, in a materialist perspective, one has to acknowledge that politics acts under conditions. It is not autonomous. It acts under the conditions of capitalism and domination; it acts under the conditions of a multiplicity of struggles that are directed against the conditions of domination while simultaneously being marked by them. If one does not want to reduce the thought of politics to a genealogy of an open and indefinite series of contingent resistances that only allows for ad-hoc diagnoses and tactical pointers, one has to set a supplementary condition that leads to a politics of second order: Politics is the name given to the hypothesis that a radical rupture is rare but possible. Its paradoxical condition lies in the fact that the process of producing a radical rupture implies violent and authoritarian effects that have to be politicised again and fought by the introduction of procedures that interrupt or distance from these effects.

In short, another distinction between politics and the political has to be introduced than the ones established, in very different ways, by Lefort, Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe or Badiou with which these authors dismissed the economic and metaphysical line in

Marx by focussing both on thinking politics as disruption of the social bond and on the destruction of politics as pure object of political philosophy, as philosophem.

In contrast to them, I propose to dismiss any essentialising or existentialising mode of thinking politics, even in postessential or negative ways by grounding politics on its own absence of ground, on the non-essence of the event, the emptiness of the universal, the *Abgrund*, etc. That is to say, politics are not to be founded on post-foundationalist principles, which purify politics by giving to it an operational truth, be it the fidelity to the event determining the retro-active subjective form of the militant, be it the singular universal determining the proto-political instance, be it the retreat of the political determining the disappearing appearing of the political in a time of philosophy completing.

Hence, the political can be conceived as multiplicity of dissident or insurrectionist practises, as multiplicity of more or less singular acts. Politics can be conceived as process of organising these acts in order to construct a certain strength directed to the possibility of achieving a radical break with the conditions of capitalism and coexisting modes of domination. This idea of political difference (difference between the political and politics) does not only require to analyse how different modes of valorisation, biopower and law historically coexist while constantly being displaced and renewed as a consequence of their own effects. It does not only require to analyse the strategies of the struggles attacking these conditions. Concomitantly, politics would have to be able to invent procedures of organisation and of distancing alike. When the political without politics runs risk being entirely contingent and dissipating, politics without distance to itself and without politicising its own effects, is doomed to repeat its own destruction in the autonomisation of discipline, decision or violence; it is doomed to destroy itself due to its own self-identified strength. To this thought of politics of second order neither a telos nor an existential or ontological principle is immanent that would explain and guarantee its process.

Hence, it fifthly equates politics with this paradox, which it does not dissolve, but it is able to stand: To initiate a radical break with the dominant situation requires a militant organisation that is opposed to the potentiality of a life not to have to choose between activity and inactivity, expenditure and sleep. Thus, one effect of politics can consist of subordinating revolt and dream to the economic primacy of effective doing.

The “organisation which we are able to give to ourselves”⁴² is therefore there to both coordinate and keep a distance to the process of politics. For this it would have to reject the romantic tradition, by not equating politics with life and a common to be produced. Politics would precisely to be thought against the backdrop of its possibility to become reactionary or normalising and to destroy itself and the improbable possibilities of the situation in which it acts.

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⁴² Cf. Hölderlin, “Hyperion Fragment”, 33

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