

## **Im/potential politics**

### **Political ontologies in Negri, Agamben and Deleuze**

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#### I. De-heroising politics

‘Beyond the big and the tragic’ is the theoretical slogan at the basis of these meditations, which revisit a figure we tend to assume we already know all-too-well: Bartleby, the scrivener. The slogan suggests that the de-heroisation of politics—keeping at bay the sad passions of left-wing militants, dismissing the idea of a privileged historical subject registered in the instances of class and party, not existentialising politics in the form of the choice of the choice, the decisiveness of being, or the fidelity to the cause and its incorporation—is a precious part of what we inherit from the post-structuralist thinking of politics known as molecular revolution.

At the margins of his teleological conceptualisation of politics, oscillating unstably between an economic and a political perspective, Marx introduces, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, a first but incomplete de-heroisation of politics. His diagnosis is that the process of revolution will evade the fall from tragedy to farce by bringing into action the self-reflexivity of proletarian practices, which ‘criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh’,<sup>1</sup> until the self-identity of the historical moment of transformation is produced, ‘and the conditions themselves cry out: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*’.<sup>2</sup> Marx distinguishes the de-heroised proletarian politics that actualises itself in the critical process of its complex becoming from two modes of heroic spectrality which will be buried by it: a good one exemplified by the Revolution of 1789, whose militants draped themselves in the costumes of the Roman Empire so as to conjure up the past to find, once more the ‘spirit of revolution’<sup>3</sup>; and a bad one exemplified by the bourgeois revolutions, which awoke the dead to conceal from themselves the limitation of their struggles.

Evidently, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx retains a heroism of self-reflexivity imagined to enable the historical subjects to confront ‘the indefinite prodigiousness of their own goals’.<sup>4</sup> Marx obsessively purifies the idea of revolution by opposing its spirit to its ghost,<sup>5</sup> and by embedding into it a rational eschatology of self-reflexivity that enables the

proletariat to incorporate the present content of the revolution instead of calling its erstwhile spirit: 'There the words went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the words'.<sup>6</sup> Concurrently, though, and with unrivaled clarity, Marx comes to the realisation that politics is a strategic process in need of a program, a course, a composition, as well as of constant reflection on its multiple effects. He dismisses the idea of revolution as an imminent pure and momentary act, in which the proletariat dissolves the old society and itself in the process of unfolding its universal productive force. He deconstructs the ontological kernel that characterised the notion of the declassifying class he developed in *On the Jewish Question* and in the introduction to *The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. In 1843-1844, Marx negated politics by presenting it as an anthro-ontological dialectical automatism wherein radical disappropriation is converted into complete appropriation, the nothing of the worker converted into the everything of wealth, negativity converted into revolution: politics is a figure which presents, 'the *complete loss* of man and hence can win itself only through the *complete re-winning of man*'.<sup>7</sup> In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, written in the wake of the failed 1848 revolution and Louis Bonaparte's 1851 coup, Marx succeeds in thinking politics as a *process*, not in the sense of a negativity through which a latently given human force articulates its effectivity, but of struggles that traverse and, hence, retroactively constitute class. Thus, Marx starts 'to think the revolution within the class struggle (and not the class struggle within the imminence of revolution)'.<sup>8</sup> The discourse of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, in other words, provisionally substitutes an analytical materialism of politics for an ontological materialism of praxis.

With minoritarian politics, however, there was a second wave of de-heroisation of politics, which cancelled out both the teleological and economist determinations in Marx's unstable notion of politics. Instead of projecting the idea of the work of the negative onto proletarian practices, which would end in its self-reflexive self-completion, politics is conceived as a conjunction of heterogenous impersonal forces in which even the transvaluation of tragic thought into heroic affirmation Deleuze puts into play in his 1962 book on Nietzsche is abandoned. Minoritarian politics eludes that Nietzschean figure, the yes-saying hero descended 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'.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, it dismisses the heroisation of the militant one finds in Lenin, when he speaks about the mutual reinforcement of cadres and masses linking a strategic 'science of the conjuncture'<sup>10</sup> with the existentialist call to commitment in the spirit of *Narodnaia volia*.<sup>11</sup> While, even in their restraint, Badiou's recent remarks on the rare fidelity that distinguishes the few experienced revolutionaries,

and on truth politics' four determinations—will, equality confidence, and terror—resound with heroism and cover the authoritarian implications of political organisation,<sup>12</sup> Deleuze and Guattari progressively urged their thought to keep heroism at bay by insisting that failures and destructive turns are not external but immanent to radical politics.<sup>13</sup>

Articulating the thought of molecular revolution, however, entailed reading Marx with Nietzsche and Spinoza, and this brought about a different ontologisation of politics than Marx's idea of the pure proletarian act: short-circuiting an ethics of non-heroic affirmation with an ontology of potentiality, molecular politics oscillates between the idea that the process of becoming expresses, without any mediation, the unfolding of radical and anomalous resistances and the demand that the transversal connections produced in this process of unfolding be organized and steadied, thus raising the paradoxical question: how can a process of becoming be stabilized? Guattari, who always insisted on the irreducible paradoxality of minoritarian politics,<sup>14</sup> poses this question in terms of organisation and depoliticisation. He rejects the criticism, originating from Maoist quarters, that he and Deleuze abandon the question of organisation<sup>15</sup> by claiming that their problem is how to conceptualise 'another type of unity',<sup>16</sup> one that allows for an increasing coordination of struggles without instituting a central organ of leadership: '[An organisation] must have as many centres of decisions as centres of struggle'.<sup>17</sup> But Guattari also asked how to prevent the singularisation of struggles from collapsing into particularism and essentialism, or from leading to a diffusion that makes the movement fall apart and depoliticize its elements, as happened when 'all the different components of the *Autonomia* movement in Italy broke down'.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, Guattari assumes that it is possible to solve the paradox of molecular politics by virtue of the ontological instance of desire, conceptualised as a multiple force operating in divergent directions—singularising without particularising and unifying without totalising.<sup>19</sup>

## II. Unsuturing politics from ontology

To call into question the ontological solution to this paradox, I would like to present a short etude on the notion of potentiality in the thinking of radical politics in order to discuss the relationship of politics and ontology and to confront, in the instance of theory, the paradoxes immanent to politics without offering a solving principle.

Since the late 1970s, linked to a severe crisis of Marxism and a closure of several militant sequences, the notion of potentiality has been introduced to divergent theories of politics in workerism, post-structuralism, post-Althusserianism and left-Heideggerianism.

These different conceptualisations of the politics of potentiality illustrate how, in the 1970s, a new wave of heretical readings of Marx came into being that centred around non-Marxist and non-economico-theoretical concepts that bring into play a sort of Marx without Marxism. Five concepts, in particular, have been key this operation: Spinoza's notions of *conatus* and *potentia*, Nietzsche's notion of becoming, Sorel's notion of class separation, Bataille's notion of unemployed negativity, and Heidegger's idea of the abandonment of Being as relation that proceeds from the disjunction of its terms. These readings responded to the catastrophic experience of communism's self-destruction, the striking lacuna of the notion of politics in Marx, and the antinomies of proletarian politics by ontologising or existentialising politics in the form of privileged philosophemes.

In this article, I will focus on the different ways in which Negri, Deleuze and Agamben have sutured the ontological problem of potentiality to the compositional problem of politics. I will look at how they deduce—through different readings of Spinoza and Aristotle—a thought of politics from an ontological axiom, and, thus, conceive politics as the practice of a philosophical principle and philosophy as the completion of politics. The thesis I want to defend is that by subsuming politics under a central philosophical principle—think for example of Badiou's existentialist principle of the choice of choice, through which the impossible of a situation revealed by an event is affirmed. Many post-Marxist approaches fail to grasp the paradoxes immanent to politics, which require the thought of politics to be composed out of several theoretical elements, none of which is privileged to ground the act of politics, even when foundation is understood to be empty or paradoxical, that is, even when politics is grounded in the impossibility of grounding and on the *Ab-grund*.<sup>20</sup> In brief, I attempt at sketching a thought of politics that dismisses onto-theology and metaphysics, even in the Heideggerian form of *Verwindung*,<sup>21</sup> of a non-metaphysical metaphysics and of a post-foundationalist foundationalism that inaugurate suspended principles.

While debating the aporias the different concepts of political potentiality lead to—automatisation of politics in Negri, mysticism of politics in Agamben, involuntarism of politics in Deleuze—I try to unsuture the thought of politics from ontology, in order to eliminate the possibility of a philosophical purification that imagines the political act as expressive of a transhistorical truth or as incorporating one primary principle. Only by dissociating politics and (post)foundationalist philosophy, does it become possible to reflect on the use of ontological, existentialist or ethical supplements of politics—the excess of joy in Negri, the autonomy of impotentiality in Agamben or the singularisation of being in Deleuze—without absolutising them, without elevating them to being the prince and principle

of radical politics. That is, the challenge for me is not simply to turn, with Derrida (and a certain Heidegger), ontology into a *hauntology* that relentlessly reminds us that ontology seeks to redeem the imaginary ‘full presence of the present-being, where that present-being, in accordance with what is not merely a lack or flaw, but also an opportunity, appears to be lacking’,<sup>22</sup> but to sketch out some preliminary remarks on a thought of radical politics by confronting its intractable difficulties and paradoxes by concatenating multiple theoremes which dismiss the erection of unconditioned and transhistorical principles.

Ultimately, I attempt to sharpen this operation by exposing the divergent ways, in which the three authors link the concept of potentiality to the concept of class struggle or proletariat referring to Melville’s figure of Bartleby, a man without qualities and an anonymous proletarian, who, for Deleuze, has been the chosen messenger of non-heroic politics beyond the big and the tragic.

### III. Self-affecting politics: love

In one of the short essayistic passages of *Empire*, Negri and Hardt present Bartleby as a figure whose indefinite but absolute refusal solicits ontological interpretations: ‘The mystery of Herman Melville’s classic story is the absoluteness of the refusal’.<sup>23</sup> Equating Bartleby with what they think Agamben would define as the mere passivity of naked life—‘wither[ing] away, evaporat[ing] in the bowels of the infamous Manhattan prison, the Tombs’<sup>24</sup>—they turn to the no less absolute figure of mere creation, of ‘a *homohomo*, humanity squared, enriched by the collective intelligence and love of the community’,<sup>25</sup> insisting that politics has to proceed from Bartleby’s spontaneous refusal to a productive process of cooperative constitution.

Negri’s corresponding politics of potentiality is dedicated to a ‘Leninism of biopolitics’,<sup>26</sup> that is, to the question how the multitude, due to its potentiality, is able to generate the party or the organs that are immanent to its body.<sup>27</sup> Potentiality is not understood by Negri in the Aristotelian sense of a passage from the possible to the actual, but in the Spinozian sense of a variable potentiality to act, one ultimately capable of arriving at complete beatitude and divine love. Thus, all potentiality in Spinoza is act, active and actual. In *The Savage Anomaly*, the book he wrote about Spinoza while in prison in 1979 and 1980, Negri reinterprets, for the first time, the concept of potentiality by grafting the Spinozian notion of *conatus* established in the third and fourth parts of the *Ethics* onto Marx’s idea of living labour as ‘form-giving fire’,<sup>28</sup> as the potentiality to form the objects and the world that

Marx develops most thoroughly in the *Grundrisse*. The *conatus* in Spinoza is the striving, immanent to each existing thing or mode, to ‘persevere in its being’.<sup>29</sup> It is a sort of springboard for existence, a force that unites different dimensions of existence: a mechanic (to preserve, to maintain), a dynamic and organisational (to increase, to proliferate), and an antagonistic (to oppose that which opposes) dimension.<sup>30</sup> The *conatus* is conceived as a self-organising, self-accumulating force that enables existing things to proceed from joyful passions to an increased potentiality to act. It articulates the effort to imagine and find the reasons for that which causes joy or that which causes sadness (knowledge of the second kind), thereby ultimately making it possible to arrive at active affects and to intellectually take possession of the singular degree of what it is potential of (knowledge of the third kind). In *Commonwealth*, Negri and Hardt sum up: ‘For Spinoza, in other words, love is a production of the common that constantly aims upward, seeking to create more with ever more power, up to the point of engaging in the love of God, that is, the love of nature as a whole, the common in its most expansive figure’.<sup>31</sup>

Reading Spinoza allows Negri to think the project of communism as an infinite creative production triggered by a force that is immanent to life, and that always starts from the bottom and is propelled forward by local affections and joyful passions: it is the joy springing from a positive coincidental encounter that pushes the self-accumulating movement of the *conatus* from preservation to promotion. Joy makes it possible to build an adequate idea of why elements mutually agree, because adequate ideas (common notions or knowledge of the second kind in Spinoza) result from the experience of bodies to have something in common. That is a dramatic turn in the conceptualisation of affection and knowledge in the *Ethics*: Spinoza states that joy—produced through bodies having something in common—triggers the intellect to understand the reasons and not only the effects of social compositions. Along with those first common notions catalysed by joy, bodies become capable of organising their movements instead of being exposed to constantly changing chance encounters, permanently vacillating between compositions and decompositions of their elements, which express increasing or decreasing potentialities. Decisive, for Negri, is the proposition that the *conatus* that springs from joy is stronger than the one that springs from sadness.<sup>32</sup> From here onwards, he sees the process of the creative self-expansion of being infinitely proceeding on the open path ‘*conatus-potentia-mens*’ (striving-potentiality-intellect).<sup>33</sup> Thus, he presents the *conatus* as the transindividual subject of an imminent communism, in which elements or modes of being unite in order to agree on an increasing scale and to become their own immanent cause, a self-affecting God on earth: ‘Infinitely

extended toward infinite perfection. A continuous transition toward always greater perfection. Being produces itself'.<sup>34</sup>

The escalation and force of Negri's heretical reading of the great heretic Spinoza is prompted by its high stakes: by anchoring the thought of communism to an ontology of constitutive potentiality, Negri writes in 'The "Return to Spinoza" and the Return of Communism', 'the will to revolution survive[s] the crisis of Marxism and quite rightly break[s] away from it'.<sup>35</sup> Hence, in order for the grafting operation of the notion of conatus onto the notion of living labor to succeed, Negri emphasises two themes in Spinoza's thought<sup>36</sup>: firstly, Spinoza's anti-juridism, which places him in a tradition stretching from Machiavelli to Marx, and which becomes manifest in Spinoza's assumption of a spontaneous development of bodies and ideas that do not require any mediation to express the relations corresponding to them: 'They are elements of socialisation in themselves'<sup>37</sup>; secondly, Spinoza's two successive theoretical foundations of the *Ethics*, which drive his metaphysics from pantheist utopianism (first foundation) to revolutionary materialism (second foundation). According to Negri, the succession of two theoretical foundations in the *Ethics* can be tracked by way of two major adaptations Spinoza undertakes in his philosophical system: first, the fact that he stops thinking the relation between substance and modes through the intermediary of the attributes, which reduced it to an emanating process in which substance exhausts itself in its effects; second, the fact that he goes beyond the concept of asceticism, which he arrives in the fifth part of the *Ethics*, where he shows what 'the power of reason [...] can do against the affects'.<sup>38</sup> As Balibar underlines in *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, the possibility to 'free oneself from the passions, 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',<sup>39</sup> is not attributed to the masses by Spinoza. That is why his thought is characterised by a strong tension between the axiom 'Man thinks'<sup>40</sup> and the idea that, as a rule, people are not guided by reason. Spinoza thus partly tends to bring into play the idea of an ascetic community capable of knowledge of the third kind and withdrawn from society's influence. Self-mastery and spiritual exercise, however, contradict 'the Spinozian analysis of the concatenation of natural causes and the development of the power of bodies'.<sup>41</sup>

In 'Negri's Spinoza', Macherey remarks that the dramatic textual performativity Negri sees at work in Spinoza's thought, its being driven by the negativity of its own blockages, in order to arrive at a revolutionary materialism structured by the concepts of *conatus* and *potentia*, ironically tends to restore to the *Ethics* a dialectical movement that Negri so

desperately wants to erase.<sup>42</sup> By presenting the *Ethics* as a text that provides itself with the means of escaping its contradictions, Negri is able to push out all ambivalent elements from it, be it the asceticism of the knowledge of the third kind that Balibar highlights in *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, be it its mysticism that Deleuze traces through the hypothesis of the complete beatitude given in the third kind of knowledge, when being is affected only by itself, when it is enclosed in self-contemplation, i.e., when it perceives its own perceptions.<sup>43</sup>

Negri combines this immanentist and communist reinterpretation of Spinoza's notion of *conatus* with a reinterpretation of Marx's notion of labour-power. He bypasses the value-theoretical definition of abstract labour and extracts from the *Grundrisse* an ontological idea of labour-power understood, as naked potentiality and negative universality, that is capable of reverting into the all-sided development of positivity, a radical de-individualisation that bears in itself a radical individualisation. Seen negatively and historically, Marx states in the *Grundrisse*, labour-power is radically expropriated: 'not-raw-material, not-instrument of labour, not-raw-product: labour separated from all means and objects of labour'.<sup>44</sup> Seen positively and ontologically, however, labour's 'absolute poverty as object' embodies, for Marx, 'the general possibility of wealth as subject and as activity'.<sup>45</sup>

Just as Negri inscribes an immanent telos into being—'infinitely extended toward infinite perfection'—so too he detects a teleological development in the capitalist mode of production, in which mere human potentiality—to speak, to improvise, to cooperate, to invent—has become the central productive force of postfordist accumulation. Thus, labour-power is no longer variable capital, and as such subsumed under the mechanisms of discipline and valorisation. Since the beginning of the 'third period of the capitalist mode of production, after manufacture and large-scale industry', labour-power has become', according to Negri, its own condition and immanent cause through incorporating the means of production into its own body: 'Historically, capital provided the worker with the instrument of labour; as soon as the human brain re-appropriates this instrument of labour, capital loses the ability to articulate the command by means of the instrument'.<sup>46</sup> That is, Negri opposes a derealised capital reduced to a mere robbery machine to the autonomised potentiality of living labour. In so doing, Negri sees the extremity of the *eschaton* approaching. The time for time to arrive at the threshold of eternity has come: we are moving toward the extraordinary moment, in which ontogenesis, anthropogenesis and capitalist development converge. Communism will spring from it in the form of a self-affecting and self-promoting community in which separation, conflict, disagreement and death are absent. Obviously, the related concept of class is modelled after the pure proletarian act that Marx expounds in the introduction to the *Critique*

of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Negri's multitude returns to the ideal form of a declassifying class, 'a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society',<sup>47</sup> able to produce the world while simultaneously dissolving the existing order, and itself, in the process of unfolding its immanent forces. The problematics of political organisation and ontological becoming are blended into one another and the divergent lines of Leninist and molecular politics are supposed to lead to one single question: how can the party immanent to the masses be generated by them? 'It is with Lenin', Negri emphasises, 'that we decide to make the body of the general intellect the subject of the organisation of a new way of life'.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, Negri's communism of poverty, which he supplements by a militancy of love, reintroduces to materialism the essentialist, anthro-ontological, and linear periods arguments that Althusserian Marxism had already deconstructed in the 1960s.

#### IV. Deactivating politics: impotentiality

In *The Absolute Immanence*, a text dedicated to the late Deleuze, Agamben questions the use of Spinoza's concept of *conatus* to think being as a constitutive force that produces itself and the world, and that expresses the absolute immanence of a creative life. Agamben especially highlights the ambivalence of the idea of life's own inner immanentism: existence determined by the *conatus*, he states, strives to contain only itself as its own cause; it desires its own desire to constitute itself as desiring. What interests Agamben here is that in desire's self-affection, the mechanisms of preserving, nourishing and maintaining are inseparable from the potentiality to arrive at complete beatitude. Provisionally, Agamben affirms this coincidence of biological and political life, because it repeats the originary inseparability of *zoē* and *bios*. He affirms this perspective, not in the Negrian sense of creative proliferation, of existence's exalting plenty, but as its deactivated rest in itself understood in terms of a potentiality that does not act or a force that is but does not effect.<sup>49</sup> Finally, however, Agamben retreats from the option to think life as *conatus*, because 'this concept [does not] truly suffice [...] to master the ambivalence of today's biopolitical conflict, in which the freedom and happiness of beings is played out on the very terrain—bare life—that marks their subjection to power'.<sup>50</sup> In other words, the Spinozian perspective of the absolute immanentism of life does not provide, for Agamben, sufficient conceptual means to confront what he understands to be the central aporia of biopolitics: administration of happiness, sovereignty executed in defence of life, its survival and its wellbeing on the terrain of biology. Consequently, he conceptualises the notion and politics of potentiality by reading Aristotle instead of Spinoza, by bringing into

play a dialectics of *désouvement* that culminates in a different figure of self-relation: not self-affecting love, but self-letting being *such as it is*, the taking place of a ‘whatever’<sup>51</sup> existence.

In a number of texts written in the 1980s, Agamben develops, out of a heretical reading of Aristotle, the thesis of an autonomous effectiveness of the potential.<sup>52</sup> Potentiality is not understood as logical possibility, but as disposing of a mode of existence that can be traced back to impotentiality. ‘The potentiality that exists’, Agamben writes in *Homo Sacer*, ‘is precisely the potentiality that cannot pass over into actuality’.<sup>53</sup> The fact that the potential can appear, but also *not* 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*. 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 its self-giving gift.<sup>54</sup> Impotentiality is sublated and thus preserved for a coming deactivation.<sup>55</sup> It is not abolished when the corresponding potentiality is actualised, but completed by giving itself as gift.<sup>56</sup> In his book on Saint Paul, Agamben shows that, as a result of impotentiality’s self-sublation, the messianic moment allows a reversal of the relation between act and potentiality. The impotentiality that survived actualisation in sublation is now given back to reality and makes all that is inoperative. Attributing this formula of deactivation to politics, Agamben too returns to the notion of class in the young Marx that, for him, corresponds to the messianic inversion of potentiality and reality. At the beginning of *The Time That Remains*, Agamben describes the formula of the ‘as not’ used by the Apostle Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians to express the suspension of all juridical-factual conditions—those weeping as not weeping—both as the formula of class struggle and as the ‘most rigorous definition of messianic life’.<sup>57</sup> The class which is no class, of which Agamben speaks quoting Marx’s introduction to the *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, will deactivate all classes and complete itself by rendering itself inoperative.

In *Homo Sacer*, a striking inversion of this negative ontology of impotentiality is marked by the limits Agamben attributes to the figure of Bartleby. Though introduced as the ‘strongest objection against the principle of sovereignty’, one whose formula ‘resists every possibility of deciding between potentiality and the potentiality not to’,<sup>58</sup> Bartleby is no longer completely free from the logic of sovereign power, as he was said to be in ‘Bartleby, or On Contingency’. Referencing the same passages in Aristotle, impotentiality now becomes the hallmark of sovereign being and of a law that allows for its own exception and the execution of extralegal measures: ‘In thus describing the most authentic nature of potentiality, Aristotle actually bequeathed the paradigm of sovereignty to Western philosophy. For the

sovereign ban, which applies to the exception in no longer applying, corresponds to the structure of potentiality which maintains itself in relation to actuality precisely through its ability not to be'.<sup>59</sup> Referring to Nancy's concept of the ban, Agamben defines the state of exception as the mechanism by which the law is able to retreat into its impotentiality, to suspend itself and to transfer its force to its exception.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, a bare life, one that is allowed to be killed, is produced by a law that can be applied by not being applying, but one that, nevertheless, in its non-application, relates to the actuality of the law. Hence, in the state of exception, life is simultaneously abandoned by law and fictively connected to it: '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'.<sup>61</sup> 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<sup>62</sup>—can be separated again.

The striking proximity of disaster and redemption which characterises Agamben's thought 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 law's potentiality to convert into its own exception is reversed to the law's potentiality to be made ineffective. On the other hand, Agamben demands, due to the experience of the state of exception, that we think ontology and politics outside of all figures of relation, which implies thinking them outside the extreme relational forms of the sovereign ban and messianic gift,<sup>63</sup> a demand that he explains by referring to Heidegger's definition of the abandonment of Being as non-relation: 'The being together of the being and Being does not have the form of a relation'.<sup>64</sup>

The equation between the abandonment of life by the law and the abandonment of beings by Being sheds light on the structure of Agamben's thought. He analogises two great battles in politics and metaphysics: onto-theology includes pure Being in the logos, the sovereign exception includes anomic violence, or life, in the law. In short, Agamben formulates the problem of politics as an enigma in which the relationship of exception in onto-theology mirrors the relationship of exception in political sovereignty and vice versa. He works with one single transhistorical figure of exceptional power, the ban, and accordingly reduces politics to a single counter-figure: a violence that is able to interrupt the relation between law and exceptionalism. Hence, he absolutises incision and rupture as such: 'Ultimately, at stake is only the absolutisation of discontinuity itself'.<sup>65</sup> His ethico-political perspective is restricted to the transfiguring of existence into perfect inactivity by distinguishing a whatever being that is lovable, not because of its properties, but because of

its being *such as it is*. That is Agamben's Spinozism, or his figure of absolute singularisation: 'the movement that transports the object not toward another thing or another place, but toward its own taking place'.<sup>66</sup> Even if Agamben's hypothesis that being *such as it is* is the principal enemy of the state entirely avoids thinking the modes in which this enmity might articulate itself, the fact of insisting on one's pure belonging without ever having achieved anything or obeyed a communitarian demand, is to distance oneself as far as possible from capitalist biopolitics, in which doing-nothing is considered either a detour to doing, or failure and punishment.<sup>67</sup>

## V. Exhausting politics: absolute singularisation

The late Deleuze shares with Agamben the interest in the weak force of deactivated being, which he, too, traces back to Spinoza. While Negri claims that by anchoring Marxist thought to an ontology of potentiality, 'the will to revolution survives the crisis of Marxism', Deleuze, especially in his later writings, asks which form the will to revolution will assume, and proposes that it to be an involuntary one beyond telos and preference.<sup>68</sup> Spinoza, Deleuze reminds us, dismissed the category of will as one of three anthro-theological illusions—illusion of free will, illusion of finality, illusion of God as the world's creator and lawgiver.<sup>69</sup> Spinoza defines will as *conatus* related to the intellect.<sup>70</sup> It is nothing else than the corporeal and intellectual striving towards that which agrees with us and allows for the passage to absolute singularisation and knowledge of the third kind. While Negri understands this passage in maximal terms, thus translating Spinoza's knowledge of the third kind into a militancy of love —'from poverty through love to being'<sup>71</sup>—Deleuze understands it in anamol terms, thus translating Spinoza's knowledge of the third kind into a politics of exhaustion in which the stakes are to exhaust 'that which, in the possible, is not realized'.<sup>72</sup> What Deleuze emphasises is not so much the proliferation of being, but what one could call its immanation, a transgression that is at rest in itself, a singularisation that exhausts itself by moving to the limits of what it is potential of. In so doing, Deleuze converts what Negri understands by living on the edges of one's potentiality. While for Negri this means to arrive at the exalting abundance of existence infinitely multiplying its elements, composing them as ever stronger social complexes, Deleuze focusses on the subtractive and exhaustive character of singular existence. With anti-Aristotelian rigour, he stresses that the possible, as something that is to be actualised, is subtracted in the process of singularisation: every variation of options, every change of intentions, is finished. If actualising means to vary the possible, to

substitute this for that, because ‘one even creates the possible to the extent that one realizes it’, to singularise means ‘to exhaust the possible’, to have done with it, as Deleuze puts it in his last text on Beckett: ‘There is no longer any possible: a relentless Spinozism’.<sup>73</sup> While the realisation of the possible, for Deleuze, executes an exclusive disjunction, that is, an infinite substitution of alternatives—first this, then that, and then that—singularisation, conversely, has to be thought as inclusive disjunction, as exhausting all variations of a situation in the process of actualising one particular degree of potentiality, ‘on the condition that one renounces any order of preference, any organisation in relation to a goal, any signification’.<sup>74</sup> From this singularisation stems what Agamben calls a potentiality that does not act; or, in Deleuze’s words: ‘One remains active, but for nothing’.<sup>75</sup>

In ‘Bartleby, or: The Formula’, Deleuze translates inclusive disjunction into a proletarian politics of exhaustion by voiding politics of all compositional, organisational and strategic functions, until it arrives at an absolutely non-Leninist and non-Machiavellian threshold. All begins, for Deleuze, with Bartleby mounting a revolt against the mechanisms of self-governance and philanthropic humanism, against responsibility, foresight, execution—mechanisms that Deleuze subsumes under the concept of the ‘paternal function’.<sup>76</sup> 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 radical 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’.<sup>77</sup> Thus, Bartleby’s politics of non-politics is characterised by the special relation between negativity and positivity expressed in the formula, ‘I would prefer not to’, the formula that causes 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’,<sup>78</sup> a positively becoming-negative which he describes, with a barb against Heidegger’s anti-inorganic thesis of the worldlessness of the stone,<sup>79</sup> as a becoming-stone. Initially, politics appears here, in a left-Heideggerian perspective, as its own retreat, as the trace of its absence: Bartleby embodies an archi-passivity in which negation, as Blanchot says 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’; however, Blanchot’s motif of ‘a life so passive [...] that it does not have death for an ultimate escape’<sup>80</sup> is overwritten by Deleuze with the motif of the weak activity immanent to involuntary politics.

The thesis Deleuze and Guattari advance in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, that the Marxist idea and the communist practice of class struggle normalised proletarian

struggles, is supplemented by the idea that Bartleby's politics of non-politics interrupts the responsible and patronizing forms of leftwing militancy. Deleuze presents Bartleby as America's proletarian, who fights for whatever existence beyond any qualifying commitment and gives to politics the ontological supplement of becoming-stone by deactivating the experienced revolutionaries who guard and clean the organisation, as Badiou puts it at the end of *Logics of Worlds*.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, we find a fragile line of argumentation in which Deleuze and Guattari loosen the short-circuit between their ontology of potentiality and their thought of politics. In 'Spinoza and the Three "Ethics"', Deleuze distinguishes the knowledge of the second and third kind, i.e., common notions and singular essences, in the following way: 'Relative speed is the speed of the affections and the affects: the speed of an action of one body upon another in space, the speed of the passage from one state to another in duration. What the notions grasp are the relations between relative speeds. But absolute speed is the manner in which an essence surveys its affects and affections in eternity (speed of power)'.<sup>81</sup> In the ninth chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, on micropolitics, Deleuze and Guattari accordingly argue that politics takes place on the relative, not the absolute, plane of being. Thus, they dismiss the equation of absolute singularisation and politics that is so predominant in Negri. With molecularity, they introduce a concept that does not express a mode of pure singularisation but of a relative conjunction of elements which is always carried out under historical conditions and never encloses itself in an inclusive disjunction or complete coincidence of the elements that are immanent to a social situation. Comparable to the difference between the knowledge of the second and the third kind, molecular politics is distinguished from singular becoming by confronting the question of how to produce a differential relation between elements without an essential bond. At stake is a heterogenesis that is exposed to the paradox of allowing for both becoming-minor and stabilising its becoming, by which it will be interrupted. The zone between absolute singularisation (becoming-imperceptible) and molar fixation (disciplined organisation) is then the originary zone of politics. Against Negri and Hardt's perspective of producing the common, Deleuze and Guattari set the equally ontological perspective of producing the heterogeneous, one that, however, is punctuated and interrupted by several political and analytic theoremes. Three determinations of molecularity are key here. First, the movements of molecular escape are not emancipatory as such, because modern power constantly instigates movements of molecularisation: 'The more molar the aggregates become, the more molecular become their elements and the relations between their elements'.<sup>82</sup> Second, molecular acts have to intervene

in social institutions, in mechanisms of separation and exploitation, because, if they don't, they are politically inexistent: 'Molecular [...] movements would be nothing if they did not return to the molar organizations to reshuffle their segments, their binary distributions of sexes, classes, and parties'.<sup>83</sup> Third, due to their excessivity, molecular acts are in danger of instigating a reactionary becoming that could reach self-destruction, as well as an acceleration which could vanish in absolute singularisation. Hence, Deleuze and Guattari, at the margins of their ontology of potentiality, touch on the problematic of politics that cannot be solved in advance by a principle, because its paradoxes require the development of divergent theorems and practices to confront the tension between becoming and organisation, whatever being and discipline, event and preparation, expansion and escalation.

## VI Traversing the paradoxes of politics

In a position that combines Marxist and Foucauldian perspectives, I assume that politics is made under conditions that have to be historically specified as to the modes in which valorisation, individualising discipline, socialising governmentality, and law mutually displace each other in their effects. Politics, understood as the multiplicity of struggles directed against these conditions, is simultaneously marked and contaminated by them. If one stops at this point, as Foucault did, one ends up thinking politics as the mutual interplay of powers and resistances conditioned by the idea of a certain plasticity of life, in which powers and resistances alike anchor their practices. The thought of politics is then restricted to an open series of contingent acts that only allows for ad-hoc diagnoses and tactical pointers.<sup>84</sup> At this point, I propose to introduce a different distinction between politics and the political than the one Lefort or Nancy introduced in their response to the crisis of Marxism. I understand by the political the multiplicity of dissident or insurrectionist practises in which another time and expression is already—beyond symbolic and representative articulation—crystallised. One could say, referring to Deleuze and Guattari's use of Duns Scotus' medieval concepts of *hecceity*: a politics of thisness, always on the move to absolute singularisation and imperceptibility. On the other hand, if political acts were to be absolutely singular, in the sense of Bartleby's involuntarism, they wouldn't construct any conjunctions beyond themselves. That is why I understand by politics the process of organising these acts in order to produce, through concatenation, the strength necessary for generating a radical rupture that abolishes capitalist valorisation and coexisting modes of domination, without thereby ending history and conflict. At the same time, politics has to invent procedures that allow it to

establish a distance from the authoritarian, disciplinary or identitarian effects of organisation. The political without politics is in danger of being entirely singular and dissipating. Politics without distance to itself, without inventing mechanisms to withdraw from mobilisation, will destroy itself in the autonomisation of discipline, decision, violence, or representation.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *MECW* 11 (New York: International Publishers, 1976) 106.

<sup>2</sup> Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 107.

<sup>3</sup> Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 105.

<sup>4</sup> Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 107.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuff (London: Routledge, 1994) 108-118.

<sup>6</sup> Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 106.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*, in *MECW* 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1976) 187.

<sup>8</sup> Étienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy before and after Marx*, trans. James Swenson (London: Routledge, 1994) 102.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, quoted by Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 37.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes*, No. 9/10 (Paris: SER, 1966). The unsigned texts in this issue are widely attributed to Althusser.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Lars Lih, 'Lenin and the Great Awakening', in *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, eds. Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, Slavoj Žižek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007) 283-296.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London and New York: Continuum, 2009) 20-27; 500-503.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 1984) 208-231.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Félix Guattari, *Mikropolitik des Wunsches*, trans. Hans-Joachim Metzger (Berlin: Merve, 1977) 72. (This and subsequent translation of this text are by the author.)

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Alain Badiou, 'The Flux and the Party', in *Polygram* 15-16 (2004) : 75-92.

<sup>16</sup> Guattari, *Mikropolitik des Wunsches*, 69.

<sup>17</sup> Guattari, *Mikropolitik des Wunsches*, 69.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Félix Guattari & Suely Rolnik, *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, trans. Karel Clapshow and Brian Holmes (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008) 124.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Guattari, *Mikropolitik des Wunsches*, 69: 'There is a multiplicity immanent to desire, a molecular character of desire that prevents revolutionary activity from being unified from above, centralised by bureaucratic apparatuses of interest, and yet ensuring another type of unity to the concrete goals by exceeding their particularisms and deviating from their initial territories. There is only desire in order to make us deterritorialise, overcome particularisms and resist arbitrary totalisations'.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, 'The Principle of Identity', in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002) 23-41.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, 'Overcoming Metaphysics', in *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003) 84-110.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Marx & Sons', in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 1999) 261.

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- <sup>23</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000) 203.
- <sup>24</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 203.
- <sup>25</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 204.
- <sup>26</sup> Antonio Negri, 'What to Do Today with *What Is to be Done?*', in *Lenin Reloaded*, 303.
- <sup>27</sup> Negri, 'What to do Today', 302.
- <sup>28</sup> Karl Marx: *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993) 361.
- <sup>29</sup> Cf. Baruch de Spinoza, *The Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* vol. 1, trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) [III, P6] 498: 'Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being.'
- <sup>30</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1988) 102.
- <sup>31</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) 181.
- <sup>32</sup> Cf. Spinoza, *The Ethics*, [IV, P18] 555: 'A Desire that arises from Joy is stronger, other things equal, than one that arises from Sadness'.
- <sup>33</sup> Antonio Negri, *Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 176. (All further references to this text will occur parenthetically as SA in the body of this essay.)
- <sup>34</sup> Negri, *Savage Anomaly*, 228.
- <sup>35</sup> Antonio Negri, *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)Contemporary Variations*, trans. Timothy S. Murphy et al. (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2006) 96.
- <sup>36</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze, 'Preface to *The Savage Anomaly*', in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews, 1975-1995*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006) 190-91.
- <sup>37</sup> Deleuze, 'Preface to *The Savage Anomaly*', 191.
- <sup>38</sup> Spinoza, *The Ethics*, [V], 594.
- <sup>39</sup> Balibar, *Masses, Classes*, 7.
- <sup>40</sup> Spinoza: *The Ethics*, [II, A2], 448.
- <sup>41</sup> Balibar, *Masses, Classes*, 7.
- <sup>42</sup> Cf. Pierre Macherey, 'Negri's Spinoza', in *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri: Revolution in Theory*, Vol. 2, eds. Timothy S. Murphy and Abdul-Karim Mustapha (London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007) 9-11
- <sup>43</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Lecture Transcripts on Spinoza's Concept of Affect*, Cours Vincennes, 20/1/1981 (<http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/sommaire.html>): 'It's here that there is something irreducibly mystical in Spinoza's third kind of knowledge: at the same time the essences are distinct, only they distinguish themselves on the inside from one another. So much so that the rays by which the sun affects me are the rays by which I affect myself, and the rays by which I affect myself are the rays of the sun that affect me. It's solar auto-affection.'
- <sup>44</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 296.
- <sup>45</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 295 and 296, respectively.
- <sup>46</sup> Antonio Negri, 'Zur gesellschaftlichen Ontologie', in *Empire und die biopolitische Wende*, eds. Thomas Atzert, Serhat Karakayalı, Marianne Pieper, Vassilis Tsianos (Frankfurt/M. and New York: Campus, 2007) 21 (translation by the author).
- <sup>47</sup> Marx, *Critique of Hegel's*, 186.
- <sup>48</sup> Negri, 'What to Do Today', 303.
- <sup>49</sup> Cf. Giorgio Agamben, 'Absolute Immanence', in *Potentialities*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 1999) 233-4.
- <sup>50</sup> Agamben, 'Absolute Immanence', 232.

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<sup>51</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 1-2.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. P 177-271; see also Aristotle, *De anima*, 417b, 2-16 and *Metaphysics*, 1046a, 32; 1050b, 10.

<sup>53</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1986) 45.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 417b, 2-16.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Giorgio Agamben: *The Time That Remains*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005) 100.

<sup>56</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'On Potentiality', in *Potentialities*, 183.

<sup>57</sup> TR 23. 1 Cor. 7:29-32 : 'But this I say, brethren, time contracted itself, the rest is, that even those having wives may be as not having, and those weeping as not weeping, and those rejoicing as not rejoicing, and those buying as not possessing, and those using the world as not using it up. For passing away is the figure of this world. But I wish you to be without care'.

<sup>58</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 48.

<sup>59</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 46.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 58-59; see also Jean-Luc Nancy, *Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993) 36-47.

<sup>61</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 88.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Agamben, *State of Exception*, 52-64.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 58-62.

<sup>64</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 60.

<sup>65</sup> Vivian Liska, *Giorgo Agamben's leerer Messianismus* (Wien: Schleebrügge Editor, 2008) 42 (translation by the author.)

<sup>66</sup> Agamben, *Coming Community*, 2.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Agamben, *Coming Community*, 86.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. François Zourabichvili, 'Deleuze et le possible (de l'involontarisme en politique)', in *Gilles Deleuze. Une vie philosophique*, ed. Eric Alliez (Le Plessis-Robinson: Institut Synthélabo, 1998) 335.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 20.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Spinoza, *The Ethics* [III, P9, Schol.], 500: 'When this striving [conatus] is related only to the Mind, it is called Will; but when it is related to the Mind and Body together, it is called Appetite. This Appetite, therefore, is nothing but the very essence of man, from whose nature there necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation. And so man is determined to do those things. [...] From all this, then, it is clear that we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it'.

<sup>71</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 100.

<sup>72</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 152.

<sup>73</sup> Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', 152 (for all passages).

<sup>74</sup> Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', 153.

<sup>75</sup> Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', 153.

<sup>76</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'Bartleby, or: The Formula', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 77.

<sup>77</sup> Deleuze, 'Bartleby', 73.

<sup>78</sup> Deleuze, 'Bartleby', 71.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995) 176-178.

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<sup>80</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) 145.

<sup>81</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'Spinoza and the Three "Ethics"', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 148-149.

<sup>82</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 228.

<sup>83</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 171-72.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory and Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977 – 1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: St. Martin's Press, 2007) 3.