

A Critique of Post Emancipatory Reason:

Philosophical Visibility, Political Possibility and the

Question of Novelty

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*In Loving memory,
Thora Rose Douglas.*

Abstract

This thesis explores the possibility of recasting the idea of emancipation in an age in which some have tarred it with the ‘incredulity’ brush. The prevailing trend is one of a scepticism about the utility of the idea, either because one believes the demands associated with it have been met (e.g. political rights, such as the right to vote as a universal right, an opportunity to stand for public office, etc.) or, in its more radical form (e.g. revolutionary discourses such as Marxism and ‘Radical’ Feminism), because one believes the demands pursued to be unworkable, inevitably leading to the exercising of terroristic violence and the perpetuation of further injustice. Harnessing certain elements from Kant’s critical method and distilling particular ideas from contemporary French philosophy (in particular from the philosophies of Alain Badiou, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Rancière), this thesis shall seek to find an answer to the sceptic, and shall hope to do so through the tentative presentation of an alternative understanding. However, to do so it must first extricate any recasting of the idea from established interpretations. Both the arguments of the sceptic and the dogmatist are predicated on questionable suppositions, which lead to a set of antinomies and other illicit dialectical inferences.

'I have conquered the lining of heaven, have torn it down, and making a bag, put in colours and tied it with a knot. Sail forth! White—free of the chasm—infinity is before us.'

Kazimir Malevich.

'Human reason, impelled by its own need rather than moved by the mere vanity of gaining a lot of knowledge, proceeds irresistibly to such questions as cannot be answered by any experiential use of reason and any principles taken from such use. And thus all human beings, once their reason has expanded to speculate, actually have always had in them, and always will have in them, some metaphysics.'

Immanuel Kant.

'[F]or everything which is exposed to the thinkable there is an idea, and to link this idea to thought it suffices to decide upon the appropriate axioms.'

Alain Badiou.

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D.P.

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Prologue:

Three Emancipators and a Sceptic

Imagine that a conversation takes place between three proponents of the principle of emancipation and a detractor of their cause. A Marxist, feminist, a subaltern, and a sceptic gather around to converse about the possibilities of emancipatory politics. The discussion first begins with agreement that what is actual is not just, that society as it functions presently is injurious toward the many. Talk soon gravitates around the issue of the terrains on which the struggle for emancipation is to be waged and who should take up that struggle.

‘It is without doubt’, the Marxist begins, ‘that oppression takes many forms: Women exploited as woman, the continued discrimination of people of colour. Questions about patriarchal oppression and racial subordination are of course paramount in thinking a solution to the problems we face today. The question is whether there is a general system that can be identified as generative of the ills and felonies of our times, a structured totality within which the meaning of these injustices are given their full intelligibility. I am wondering: what functions, in the last instance, as the *explanans* and the *explanandum* of our collective predicament. Capitalism, I think, functions as that which explains the severity of our position. It is on this basis that class solidarity is *determinant* in bringing about the fundamental transformation in social relations we all seek.’

The feminist replies: ‘if what you say is true, that with the defeat of capitalism a truly definitive emancipatory society will have been augured, then consider gender discrimination, acts of sexual violence exacted on women by men. These do not speak the language of class. These are experiences that traverse class relations. The proletarian is no more enlightened than the factory-owning capitalist in this regard. I think therefore it is quite remiss of you to equate ‘capitalism’ with ‘patriarchy’, of which the latter has a historicity and historical trajectory that cannot be said to coincide entirely with that of capitalism. After all, living under the yoke of patriarchy is a condition of sufferance that antedates both the wage relation and surplus value, and, if we are honest,

cannot be said to have been resolved by any putative revolutionary discourse aiming to upend the forces of capital. I know the Russian Revolution of 1917 was certainly exercised by the question of woman's rights, and in its infancy, there was progressive policy here—though, it cannot be forgotten how these were soon rescinded and rolled back under the dictates of economic progress and political suppression. Likewise the piecemeal gains made in liberal-capitalist countries (extended over a longer period of struggle, no doubt) would be as significant as those gained under a putatively socialist regime, which, as it were, happened over night, and yet did not stand the test of time. So this does not mean that it is necessarily a question of different 'relations of production', upon which the liberation of women depends. You may consider class struggle to be the principle of historical development, the 'motor of history', as you like to refer to it, but if anything the insistence on this trope only goes to aid and abet a more obdurate and persistent problem, perpetuating the drawn out silence of women in the annals of history. Class struggle might be the transcendental schema you see fit to conform history and its process to. But class struggle and the figure of the 'worker' you champion, the hypostatisation of 'labour' and 'work' that subtends your analyses (the distinction drawn between 'productive' and 'unproductive' labour and the way in which activities are distributed between these categories), tends toward a 'world-view', a His-tory told from the perspective of Man, that repeats many of the felonies with which I would more generally charge against one half of this species only.'

'For, as women, the position we occupy in your narrative is ambiguous. Some of us are, as you attest, oppressed, subjugated by capitalism. Others are not, that's for sure. Not that you should understand by this that such women are not wronged in different ways. There are other relations of oppression that are not reducible to class exploitation. Your own discourse runs the risk of belittling the site of the oppression of women and the ways in which women come to articulate their own struggles: the 'personal' as the unit of analysis around which women struggle and become conscious of their plight, which from your viewpoint is regarded with some disparagement, being not a class consciousness, and hampered therefore by an atomistic standpoint, lending itself not so easily to collective mobilisation and organisation along class lines. But what for you is the strength of the workers movement for me comes at the weakness of the concomitant displacement of the women's movement. Here, the predicament of us women is redoubled in your discourse. For the demand for women's emancipation (as well as all other emancipatory demands) is to be fought on the site of social production (which

women are marginalised from). In the defeat waged on the bourgeoisie by the proletariat, the lives of all will be positively impacted upon, women included. Yet, in your discourse, this will not necessarily require direct women involvement. The emancipation of all is the consequence of the emancipation of the proletariat. Gender difference effaced through the economic relation that binds equally every proletarian to their factory-owning capitalist. Along with it, however, goes the effacement of other forms of oppression (some more insidious than others) that are predicated on such difference, and which I would say are the very modes about which a position such as yours remains silent. You think that the dissolution of the bonds of servility to capital will represent the end of all injustice, engendering the advent of the just organisation of society? I believe this to be rather an optimistic and quite short sighted conclusion to reach, which derives ultimately from the false attribution that you ascribe to patriarchy and capitalism as conditioned and unconditional causes, respectively. The question of women's toil and the paucity of our lot is not reducible to the topographical instance of the economic, but extends to all regions of social being—to the instances of law, politics, to the private domain of conjugal relations and sexual violence, all the way down to the organisation of a political movement that seek to overturn the extant order—yes, the chauvinism of party officials is a continual blight! Only a radical transformation in gender relations, liberating both man and woman from their assigned positions, will suffice.'

At this point a third contributes to the discussion.

'I would never wish to deny the importance of either of your particular struggles for social progress, but the categories you mobilise are too broad and undifferentiated to afford a rigorously meticulous assessment of the actual possibilities for emancipatory change. I can only speak from my position, which is some place removed from the metropolises of the occident from which the two of you speak. However it is my suspicion that both of your impassioned defences are trapped within a set of assumptions about, first, the *apodicticity* of the categories you employ and, second, a *monism* about the composition of structures of domination, reducing all relations of oppression to the effects of a unitary structural cause. Is not the issue both the uneven and combined nature of structures of oppression? And if this is so does this not directly impinge upon the consistency of the nominations you extol as the agents of emancipatory change, whose potency and efficacy is unevenly distributed within the world? 'What is Woman?', 'Who is the working-class?'—these questions that take aim at the 'quid', the essential content of these referents, do little to shed light on the 'reality' of their appearing. They might be

‘ideal types’, but their *nominal homogeneity* do more to blight your visibility about the complexity of social existence. You mobilise these syntagms with such conviction and purpose *as if* these categories were ‘in themselves’ sufficiently perspicuous, when in fact each harbours an inherent opacity. Their importance is not in doubt, though what needs due consideration is the differentiated and heterogeneous character of these collective names with which you identify. Is not the history of Marxism at once blighted by this reverence which it pays to the working-class, but which at every moment of its history, has bordered on a loss of faith about its revolutionary capacity? I speak, on the one hand, of the *embourgeoisification* of the western working-class, already highlighted by Marx and Engels in their derisory remarks about the English working class, and Lenin’s disquietude over the possibility of revolution in western Europe—concerns and ambivalences later the source of many a sociological treatise. Equally, is not the history of feminism complexified by the expansive distribution of women within social networks, with a divergent set of experiences? This is not a question of consciousness (whether contradictory or plain false), but a matter of structural position, a problem about the complexity of a system—internally differentiated and dislocated—and the cause of internal discordance and displacement. The question I raise, therefore, is a different one: the categories you espouse in the course of your diatribes are in need of further specification and variation in content. What happens therefore when we compare the fates of peoples between ‘worlds’, so to speak—between the ‘first’ and ‘third’ worlds—between those who operate within the mechanisms of power and a subterranean class, which functions at the peripheral vision of your own visibility? But not only this; what about the fates of people between worlds *within* worlds, between, for example, the peasant on the banks of the Yellow River and an orphan girl roaming the streets of Shanghai? An infinite variation of lived experiences that cannot be easily spoken about with the deployment of generalities.’

The three attendants continue to argue with each other, until the sceptic intervenes to pass judgement on what he has heard:

‘Is it possible to guarantee the delivery of the idea of emancipation? I think not. The successive waves of discourse, each attempting to accord to the cause it represents a centrality and an imperious authority, already demonstrates the futility of this aim. There are two capital problems I believe to be at play in the discussions I have heard and have come to know. I present to you all both a logical and an empirical observation.’

The sceptic continues: 'First, at stake for all of you is the accomplishment of the task of emancipation. Is this not right? But the subject to whom this accomplishment is tied is variable, so is the cause from which emancipation is sought. For the Marxist, capitalism is the cause of injustice and the proletariat the appointed subject to defeat it; for the feminist, patriarchy the chief cause and Woman the elected subject to bring about qualitative change. In both these cases, you say: the Idea of emancipation is not reducible to a particular interest. The emancipation of the working-class is not restricted to that particular cohort of people, neither is the emancipation of women, and so on. It is rather an Idea that concerns the whole of Humankind; everyone will advantage from the traversal of such and such, it is said.'

'However, this I believe is where the problems begin. I can understand the reason for equating how far a certain system of domination extends with the potency of its claim to universal emancipation. Indeed, the appeal to universality, to 'human emancipation', would very much rest on the supposition that an actual equality exists between all possible sites of domination and relations of oppression. It is clear that for the ideal of universal emancipation to obtain, *all* such sites and relations must be eliminated together, without exception. Differences between the *ways* in which injustice is experienced, both in kind and degree, are subordinate to the rule of identity: a plurality of injustices are identified with the effects of a 'root' or underlying cause. Whether this 'Cause' is presented in the form of 'class relation' or the 'sexual relation', the consequence is the same, namely a first cause functioning as the organising principle around which all instances of injustice gain their ultimate intelligibility. However, as the third speaker amongst you has already expounded, this logic is flimsily constructed, the conclusion hastily arrived at. Whomsoever puts their support behind the Idea of universal emancipation supposes that whichever system of oppression proves to be the most broad in its effects constitutes the general horizon for emancipatory change, which is then to guarantee the deliverance of the ultimate meaning of emancipation. 'Marxism', according to Jean-Paul Sartre, 'was the unsurpassable horizon of our times.' Indeed, Marx confidently declared Communism to be the riddle of History solved. But is it so that the overturning of capitalism could ever mean the traversal of all 'actual', as well all 'possible', forms of domination? Personally, lacking this confidence (history has after all (has it not?) proved to be a far more densely packed conundrum than Marx envisaged) I am entirely sceptical of any doctrine that claims to unlock the door of universal emancipation, that installs itself as the 'horizon' for its thinking. Whatever is deemed to

have a generality unsurpassed runs roughshod over the *specificity* of instances of injustice, not totalisable under the rubric of a given theoretical design. The feminist amongst us draws our attention, does she not, to the associated risks of this position, which in remaining resolute in its objectives, is myopic in its visibility of other possible emancipatory struggles and the specificity of these struggles. She claims the *specificity* of women's oppression is not given sufficient consideration in the standard Marxist account of proletarian exploitation and organised class insubordination. Rather, if subsumed under the analytic of capitalism—such that the phenomenological character of women's oppression becomes reduced to the structural effect of capitalist oppression—the risk is that the repression of the specificity of such wrongs may return in any post-revolutionary situation. It would present thereby the lie that blocks the felicity of its promise of *universal* emancipation.'

'But surely', the Marxist interjects, 'the same argument can be put the other way around?'

'Precisely', responds the sceptic. 'Do you notice what is occurring here? There is an equivocation about the extension of the claims you raise about both the system of injustice to be overturned, and the universality of the political demands that are issued against it. Each of you issues proof and counter-proof, undermining the pretensions that the other has to the Idea of human emancipation. What, *prima facie*, is a question that seemingly addresses the *extensionality* of a system soon turns around a problem about the insufficiency of any such thinking to attend to the *specific* and *local* character of each of your demands. And yet it is not the emancipation of a particular cohort of people at stake but human emancipation, which is—well at least in principle—of a higher order of extension. You would ultimately be sanctioning the substitutability of one struggle by any other, insofar that a certain system reaching out to all regions of existence, subsuming all relations in the world, entails that struggles against this global imposition of injustice participate *equally* in raising challenges to this order, contributing equally to the furtherance of emancipatory progress. But by denying both the premise and the consequence, you are as good as undermining your own belief in the possible achievement of an emancipatory end which has been our topic for conversation today. If there remains something unaccounted by any one of the narratives within which you develop the status of your emancipatory claims then it leaves an end only partially achieved. This implies, does it not, that an idea of emancipation has to be expressed

relatively and not *absolutely*? But what an absurdity this would be—to be partially emancipated!’

‘And yet even if you are all moved to acknowledge the importance of each other’s struggle and the interdependence of your struggles, rather than this solving the issue, it raises further questions. After you have made this concession, on what bases now can you appeal with any certainty to the fact that, between you, a definitive account has been reached? Who is to say the entire issue can come to any *real* conclusion within the confines of our discussion here? Would it not be more consistent if, on account of the concessions you have already made only in the presence of a few, you concede further that there is sufficient doubt that there may be more relations of domination that escape your narrative and choose to leave the list open-ended—who knows, you might have to feign a definitive and exhaustive account with use of the ‘etcetera’. If this is the case, however, then it is true that you undermine the very claim with which you began, namely to give a foundation to the demand for universal emancipation, to find the ultimate form of its expression. The halting point you were haggling for is immediately put in question. This leaves you all with the following dilemma. Either you remain open to the possibility of other relations of injustice heterogeneous to the system you have been quick to hypostatise, in which case the position you originally sought to occupy must be rejected. Or, you remain forthright in your conviction of the centrality of your own perspective, turning thereby a blind eye to the sheer complexity of the problems we face collectively. If, on further reflection, you choose the latter, and thus decide that the power of whatever theoretical position you hold overrides the validity of casual conversation then this is your prerogative. However, if the question of universal emancipation is dependent upon making truth-claims about the real cause of injustice in the belief that by assailing the source of this injustice it will clear the world and humanity as a whole of its ills and social pathologies for all time, then this concerns me. It is its pretensions to objectivity and exhaustivity which is dangerous. Removing both colour and tonality from the picture of social relations, rendering nigh imperceptible all areas of grey, all zones of indiscernibility, such world views are a mix of realism with the gloss of an idealist reverence. Recent history, the history of political experience (for, after all, is this not the only knowledge we can have?) would show the staining of this monochromatic setting with the blood of the innocent, the anonym caught within the machine of an emancipatory process promising unconditional justice, equally waging unconditional force to mete out such justice.’

‘No longer can it solely be announced for the ‘Good’, raised to soothe the soul. Rather, in the name of ‘the good life’, its mobilisation has been to exact the most pernicious source of violence.’

The four participants remain silent.

Introduction

‘What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of Broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.’

T.S Eliot.¹

The object of this investigation concerns a demand, once a staple resource for political struggle, waged from the factory floors and lecture halls. An idea, with the weight of bodies behind it—bodies pressed against the steel cladding of the barricades, thrown under the hooves of horses, pounded by batons and truncheons. Yet, an idea with a sense of lightness, an opacity, amenable to the brush of the artist, the pen of the poet, the timbres of the pianist, labouring over a texture, a nuance, a discord.²

A word both a portent for a more just, free and egalitarian order to-come, existing in the rarefied and dreamlike state of the minds of utopic visionaries and a watchword for the hard reality-principle of struggle and party discipline. Emancipation: an idea which has inspired the most elaborately detailed plan for a future society, with the geometrical precision and meticulous management of an architect, whilst elsewhere, shrouded under the density of the poetic imagination, elliptical and fragmented images of a redeemed future.³

¹ T.S. Eliot. ‘The Wasteland’, *Selected Poems*, (London: Faber and Faber) In 19-25.

² Sometimes, at critical junctures, the two sides of an idea come together. A pertinent example, very much condensed in its demonstration, is the remarks of the jazz legend, Duke Ellington. Providing a commentary to one of his own recordings being played on a record player, he remarked to an interviewer: “[Listen!] Hear that chord[...] that’s us [the Negro’s life][...]We are something apart, yet an integral part.” (quote lifted from Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, London: Harper Perennial, 2007) p168. With a meticulous economy, Ellington unites the dissonant chord, which breaks with conventional harmonic scales, with a subset of American society, which at that time suffered the indignity of being discounted as equal citizens.

³ Theodor Adorno writes of the constitutive failure to think the content of emancipation with the broken and fragmented resources of the modern world, when he mockingly writes in *Minima Moralia*: ‘He who asks what is the goal of an emancipated society is given answers such as the fulfilment of

Emancipation. A sentiment transmitted through the rich lyricism of the folk tradition, or through a form liberated from the conventions of public taste. An ideal which not only once commanded the attention of composers, painters, poets, writers, but which drew out a litany of debates about the role of art in the processes of collective emancipation: whether as an explicit vehicle for the pursuit of concrete political ends, as a form of ‘agitprop’, or as the sublimated politics of an aesthetic revolution (Schoenberg as the ‘emancipator of dissonance’, Matisse the ‘liberator of colour’).

The thesis laid forth in the following pages takes as its concern, therefore, an ‘Idea’ that cannot be assigned to any particular *topos*, site, to any specific practice. But, rather a hope, a desire, innermost in the ‘modern imaginary’. An Idea very much incubated in the scientific claims to ‘reason’ and ‘progress’, in the artistic maxim of ‘experimentation’ and in the political demand for ‘equality’.

Today, however, the first question that must be considered is whether the prospect of a monograph on the question of emancipation provokes thought or whether in these times awashed with incredulity and scepticism, as an idea emancipation can be said to have sunken without trace? What if today, in our present constellation, emancipation is an object hollowed out of all position taking and counter-positioning? What if, not the setting of any intra-philosophical discord, emancipation functions as something of an absent ground that allows for a consensus to be reached between pragmatists, liberals, one-time communists, post-metaphysicians alike, all of whom agree (though doubtless armed with different reasons) that, at best, emancipation is a conceptual curioso, a relic of bygone times, laboured by metaphysical assumptions and ill equipped to shed light on the complexity of a global system that is not the monolithic and repressive order generations of militants thought it to be, but an open, more responsive system, which, if anything, is autogenerative, continually transforming itself in accordance with the demands waged against it.

human possibilities or the richness of life. Just as the inevitable question is illegitimate, so the repellent assurance of the answer is inevitable, calling to mind the social democratic ideal of the personality expounded by heavily-bearded naturalists of the ‘nineties, who were out to have a good time.’ Adorno will take solace only in the most fragile of images: that of ‘lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, being nothing else without any further definition and fulfilment.’ *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 2000) pp155-57.

Post-Emancipatory Blues.

It is important not to ignore that emancipation is caught up in a crisis of legitimacy, implicated in vicious circularities and dialectical reversals. The old guarantees under which the idea operated have been thrown into doubt; placed under suspicion and put on trial. The idea has been adjudged to have had its time. The ‘collective names’ (the ‘Proletariat’, ‘Women’, ‘Black Power’), once the bearers of the promise of universal emancipation, have been vanquished; the collective body, which gave substance to the name signifying emancipatory hope, fragmented. Second the political apparatuses (such as the ‘party’) supposed to guide the ‘agents of emancipatory change’, to navigate safe passage into the liberated community of equals, have since been exposed as institutions of repression and brutality. Third the intellectual avant-garde responsible for decrypting the ciphers of ideology, digging deep beneath the appearance of society, in order to excavate the repressed truth of that society have given up the ghost, because, and most troubling of all, for some, the ‘real’, in the name of which both ‘science’ and ‘reason’ bespoke, has lost the anchorage it once was thought to possess.⁴ Once it was the last of these, the ‘real’, which could be guaranteed to stem the tide of any infinite regress—‘the passion for the real’, as the French philosopher Alain Badiou has understood the great emancipatory adventures of the modern era.⁵ Badiou describes this ‘passion for the real’ as a violent tearing down of social artifices, an attempt to get behind the masks and facades veiling the Truth of being, of identifying the *real contradiction* beneath appearances, to reveal an impasse in the order of appearances.⁶ The ‘real’: the halting-point divining both the ideological and the relative from the True, the absolute, the unconditioned.

Is it the case, then, that emancipation is a term out of kilter with the complexity of ‘our times’?

Evidently, some would believe so. Our present condition has been baptised by a few as ‘post-emancipatory’.⁷ What would it mean, specifically, to inhabit ‘post-

⁴ See: Jean Baudrillard, ‘Simulacra and Simulations’, *Selected Writings*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992; pp166-184), François Lyotard, *The Differend*, (London: Minnesota, 1986).

⁵ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 2004). pp48-57

⁶ Ibid. Badiou writes: ‘the passion of the century is the real, but the real is antagonism. That is why the passion of the century—whether it be a question of empires, revolutions, the arts, the sciences, or private life—is nothing than war. ‘What is the century?’ the century asks itself. And it replies: ‘The final struggle.’ p38.

⁷ This can either be announced forthrightly, as is the case with say Judith Butler, in her *Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: SUP, 1998), or Richard Rorty, in his essay entitled ‘Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation’, in *Objectivity, relativism, and truth: Philosophical papers, Volume I*. (Cambridge:

emancipatory' times? The social theorist Judith Butler has enumerated some possibilities. In a review article that surveys contemporary political thought, Butler notes that the 'post-emancipatory' condition might cover at least any of the four following meanings: '(a) the degradation of the ideal; (b) the proliferation of other ideals [at the expense of emancipation]; (c) the closing of the gap between the ideal and what is realisable and (d) permanent disappointment, disillusionment, rancour.'⁸

Each of these dimensions is a way of supporting the label with which for some the present has come to be associated. None are mutually exclusive. Indeed much could be written on the interrelationship between the four possible responses and the complexity of their relation. But there are here broadly two types of appeal of particular interest.

As an idea(l), some will say that emancipation has lost its potency. But, this loss of potency can have one of two meanings. One, it can be said that emancipation lacks the political force it once had, incapable of stirring the imagination of those who once committed themselves to its promise. It would be to draw the lessons from the annals of history, according to which the idea reads like an unbroken chain of broken promises and unfulfilled dreams, of elevated principles compromised under the rule of the state and reneged upon by those who were meant to be the carriers of hope. Many have grown tired and cynical about the prospects of a qualitatively new way of organising society. The image of 'emancipated man' accompanying the advent of a profound transformation in

Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp211-21), or Jean François Lyotard, 'Missive on Universal History', *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-85* (University of Minnesota Press: 1996, pp23-38) and *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 1986). It can also be an implicative thesis, which is not pronounced as such, but nevertheless is presupposed as being the case. This is so of Giorgio Agamben, for whom the idea of emancipation would be caught up in the logic of bare life. Please see Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: SUP, 1998) or in the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Please see: *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* (Stanford: SUP, 1998) and in Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992). In a rather more complicated way, one would need to mention Michel Foucault in this company. Michel Foucault cuts a rather ambiguous figure. Although it is true that on occasions his discourse comes close to an explicit announcement of the end of the idea of emancipation. The textual evidence for this is taken from a late interview from 1984, entitled 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom', printed in the journal *Philosophy Social Criticism* July 1987, Volume 12:2. Here Foucault argues as follows: 'I've always been a little distrustful of the general theme of liberation, to the extent, that, if one does not treat it with a certain number of safeguards and within certain limits, there is the danger that it will refer back to the idea that there does exist a nature or a human foundation which, as a result of a certain number of historical, social or economic processes, found itself concealed, alienated or imprisoned in and by some repressive mechanism [...] [More besides, an] act of liberation is not sufficient to establish the practices of liberty that will later on be necessary for this people, this society and these individuals to decide upon receivable and acceptable forms of their existence or political society.' pp113-14.

⁸Judith Butler, 'Poststructuralism and Postmarxism', *Diacritics* (Winter, 1993) p7.

social relations, has, in reality, wrought but a repetition of violence and catastrophe. Whence the dispiriting feelings of rancour and disillusionment of which Butler speaks in (d).

On the other hand, however, the loss of potency can be attributed to the completion of emancipation as a project. On this second account to live in 'post-emancipatory' times is to have attained all the demands and goals associated with the idea. The political objectives, which once only the most ardent advocates and committed campaigners dared thought possible, are now accomplished facts, constituting the general backdrop against which today individuals play out their roles and practices as citizens—'citizen' to be taken in its broadest sense. These objectives and achievements could be enumerated as follows: the 'right to vote'; 'the right to trade union organisation'; the 'right for all people, of all colour, to associate in public'; the conjugal rights for lesbian and gay people; as well as government legislation on reproductive rights, maternity and paternity rights, equal opportunity bills. Such instances could be cited as progress, as 'signs' that the gap between the ideal and what is realisable under that ideal has greatly attenuated. With the closing of the divide between what is possible and what is actual, it might be claimed there is therefore the categorial weakening of the potency of emancipation as an idea with which to wrought further change.⁹ Such an account is not without philosophical expression. Jean-François Lyotard, in a late quasi-retrospective on his days as a Marxist, wonders whether 'emancipation' is not the 'anti-systemic' demand it once functioned as, but rather that it can today be situated on the side of the system itself.¹⁰

Slavoj Žižek's *In Defense of Lost Causes* strikes a similarly cautious note.¹¹ Žižek defines the logic of emancipation as traditionally operating by way of an element that serves to constitute the limit-point of a political regime, a point upon which the organisation of that regime is both founded and founders. Such an element shores up the inconsistency of that regime, affording thereby a glimpse of a 'beyond'—an affordance that can be as minimal as the realisation that 'things can be otherwise' (such as the slave celebrating Saturnalia) or as maximal as the actual construction of a new and transformed political system (for example the October Revolution of 1917).

⁹ For an interesting critical engagement on this issue, from a feminist perspective, please see: Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2008)

¹⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables* (London: Minnesota, 1997) p67.

¹¹ See: Slavoj Žižek *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008)

Importantly, writes Žižek, this emancipatory logic functions by showing how the element is both an integral part of that system and yet is disavowed by the system. In the Marxist narrative, for example, the workers under capitalism, generative of both labour power and value, are nonetheless regarded by the bourgeoisie with mild antipathy—automatons for whom the reproduction of the system may rely, but not its esteemed ‘spiritual’ side, for which the workers count for very little. The emancipation of the working classes is not simply the emancipation of a class from the particularity of its own condition of subservience and drudgery, but its own liberation represents a singular break that will expose an entire system based on class division and human alienation and provide an opening for the establishment of a world community that will banish the arbitrary divisions that Capitalism as a social system formalises and rules by. With a condensed economy, the Young Marx writes:

In the formation of a class with radical chains, a class of civil society [is created] which is not a class of civil society, [but] a class [*Stand*] which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere which has a universal character because of its universal suffering and which lays claim to no particular right because the wrong it suffers is not a particular wrong but wrong in general; a sphere of society which can no longer lay claim to a historical title, but merely to a human one, which does not stand in one-sided opposition to the consequences but in all-sided opposition to the premises of the German political system; and finally a sphere which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from - and thereby emancipating - all the other spheres of society, which is, in a word, the total loss of humanity and which can therefore redeem itself only through the total redemption of humanity. This dissolution of society as a particular class is the proletariat.¹²

Similarly, in Feminism, women, under the yoke of Man and patriarchy, might be responsible for the reproduction of the species, but nevertheless have in all other respects been discarded as unequal in public life. Charles Fourier said that the emancipation of women was not solely the emancipation of women *qua* woman, but the emancipation of women as the fulfilment of the promise of *generic* humanity.¹³ The potential of mankind would be realised only when woman—its unredeemed other

¹² Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*’, in *Early Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1992) p256.

¹³ Charles Fourier, ‘Degradation of Women in Civilization’, *Théorie des Quatre Mouvements et des Destinées Générales*, (*The Theory of the Four Movements and of the General Destinies*), 3d ed, and reprinted in *Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents, Volume One, 1750-1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983). Fourier writes: ‘As a general thesis: Social progress and historic changes occur by virtue of the progress of women toward liberty, and decadence of the social order occurs as the result of a decrease in the liberty of women.’ pp 40-1.

(underwritten in the annals of History, marginalised from the publicity of political spaces)—has transcended her position as the ‘second sex’ and finally accedes to the status of man's equal. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir: ‘When we abolish the slavery of half of humanity, together with the whole system of hypocrisy that it implies, then the ‘division’ of humanity will reveal its genuine significance and the human couple will find its true form [...] To gain the supreme victory, it is necessary that [...] men and women unequivocally affirm their brotherhood.’¹⁴

These are two obvious, well-trammelled examples. In both the demand for emancipation gains its power by way of the contradiction that encircles a particular collective figure, in terms of its relation and non-relation, its inclusion and exclusion, vis-à-vis a given social formation.

The critical question subtending this, Žižek raises in the following way: ‘what happens when the system no longer excludes the excess, but directly posits it as its driving force?’¹⁵ Žižek’s concern is with capitalism, a system said to be without limit, an open-system (if not anti-system), which, as one thinker has recently put it, is ‘astonishingly supple and adaptive, [one] singularised by its fluidity, its metamorphic plasticity [...] continually redefining its own structural boundaries, perpetually living off its own impossible limit.’¹⁶ Žižek’s critical point reveals itself in the analogy he draws between the logic of capital and the logic of emancipation, surmising that the idea of emancipation is inefficacious in the struggle against capital, for which the limit of the system is not the *impasse* of *that* system in the way, say, the category of women is the limit of patriarchy or the indigenous slave the limit of colonialism. The historical struggles for emancipation have taken shape around those collective figures that have shown up the limits of a given regime or social formation. But capitalism sustains itself only through an indefatigable transgression of its own limits. If capitalism sustains itself at its limit then the limit of capitalism is the source of its greatest power and not its weakness—according to which it is on the limit, precisely, that capitalism has, through continual metonymic displacement, the uncanny knack of discovering a niche or a gap to further aid its expansion, by way of its ceaseless drive to construct a new market to satisfy a new desire.¹⁷ Jacques Rancière’s quip that were there an effective programme for

¹⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 1997) p741.

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008) p396.

¹⁶ Ray Brassier, ‘Nihil Unbound: Remarks on Subtractive Ontology and Thinking Capitalism’, *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2004) p53.

¹⁷ The metonymy of desire is the subject of an interesting article by the Lacanian psychoanalyst Yannis

emancipatory change ‘capitalists would buy it and exploit it as they saw fit’ would have salience here too.¹⁸ That it is not in the ‘interest’ of capitalism to fix the identities of its consumers, in a stable system of representation, but rather to carry out its own immanent deconstruction of representational orders—thus allowing for an indefinite play of differences—would show then an unnerving similitude between the logic of capital and emancipation. The greater the infinitesimal variation in ‘choice’ and ‘desire’ afforded (that is, the more ‘open’ a system capitalism becomes) the more insidious capitalism’s power.¹⁹

Žižek’s fear shows another side to a perceived impotency regarding the idea of emancipation. This is echoed by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in their sociological treatise, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. A trawl through management discourse leads them to the same conclusion: capitalism has proved to be persistent and adept at surviving systemic crises on account of both its absorption and assimilation of emancipatory critique. Even when such critiques have sought to articulate an alternative vision at variance with capitalism, many of the elements from which this vision is drawn are domesticated by the very system it opposes. Consider the following passage:

People’s aspirations to mobility, to multiply their activities, to greater opportunities for being and doing, emerge as a virtually boundless reservoir of ideas conceiving new products and services to bring to the market [...] One has to take seriously, therefore, capitalism’s vocation to commodify desire—especially the desire for liberation, [both in its recuperation and supervision]²⁰

Meant as no apologia of the market, Boltanski and Chiapello (rather like Žižek and Lyotard) are more than aware of the injustices and forms of oppression doled out by capitalism. Yet what such observations are said to signal is the constitutive ambiguity that emancipation as an Idea exhibits: its duplicity, a sinuous Idea pulled and

Stavrakakis, who makes the following insight of Lacan’s from the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis Seminar* central in thinking the logic of affective investment in late capitalism: ‘The morality of power, of the service of goods is as follows: “As far as desires are concerned come back later. Make them wait”’. Please see: Yannis Stavrakakis, ‘The Consumerist Politics of *Jouissance* and the Fantasy of Advertising’ in *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) p245.

¹⁸ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, p83.

¹⁹ See: Slavoj Žižek *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008) p404.

²⁰ Boltanski and Chiapello *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007) pp437-8.

contorted in all manner of political directions, a claim over which the 'Left' has no exclusive propriety; a 'promiscuous' Idea, as some may adjudge it to be? ²¹

Certainly, it is no easy thing to know exactly what is meant by the 'Left' or what is deemed 'progressive.' Today, politicians of all persuasions claim to have transcended the old frontiers of 'left' and 'right', of being in tune with the rhythms of global markets, of having a pragmatic bent, in which flexibility and adaptability are deemed the necessary behavioural attributes for economic survival. The frontier drawn between progressives and the forces of reaction is internally dislocated, throwing up some strange oppositions. In the present situation the dividing line separates those who face up to the 'realities' of the global age and those immovable objects of 'reaction' who cleave to an outmoded and inordinate set of principles, obstructing and slowing down the rate of change. The discursive strategy of officials and global political leaders in response to protests and demonstrations taking place during world summits has often been to represent the protestors as 'luddites'; 'anti-globalisation' protestors wishing to 'reverse time', to 'reel in' the forces of change, and seeking to implement policies and initiatives out-of-step with the rhythms of the global economy. A hankering for old certainties (protectionism and social welfarism), such people are said to live in denial of the facts.

Could not one of the problems with the Idea of emancipation lay in its negative designation? The prefix *e-mancipation* (the latin grammatical particle *e-*, which mirrors the *ex-*) designates a 'release from' a particular set of relations. In itself, it specifies not in what emancipated man consists or what conditions of existence (social and political) must obtain for emancipation to be realised absolutely. Abstracted from any referent (the act of emancipation of collectivity *x*, from conditions *y*), unmoored from its signified, this signifier merely floats; nothing forecloses any kind of political discourse from making hay with such an Idea. This *indetermination* is sufficient to place reason in a tailspin, to such a degree that the lack of assignable determinate content makes the

²¹ Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1993). Here broad reference is being made to Bonnie Honig's general remarks about the promiscuity of the political as such, though there is no reason for thinking that Honig would not choose to refrain from surmising that emancipation is caught up in the same web of dalliances and indiscriminate posturings that for her defines politics, broadly speaking. Perhaps we could ask whether, instead of ascribing to the political the attribute of promiscuity, there is not something instead promiscuous about the Idea, in its essence? This thesis follows Kant in thinking that an Idea is a mode of presentation that corresponds to no determinate object of experience. On this basis, the problematic of promiscuity becomes a live one, and will demand from us some consideration later, principally because, once this ostensibly 'critical' turn is taken, an Idea devoid of any specifiable content moves us uncomfortably proximal to the centripetal force of scepticism, which carries with it the abjuring of the potency of the Idea.

category too thin and unintelligible to have any general utility. Whence another reason to speak of emancipation's categorial impotency.

Critique, Or How to Make a Difference in Indifference

It is not for ornamentation that this thesis operates under the title: *A Critique of Post-Emancipatory Reason*. The task of *critique* has a central place in its operation. The title is at once to bring to the attention of the reader two concomitant judgements. First, a judgement about the mood of our present, which, it is hoped, the foregoing account affords the requisite insight. 'Post-emancipation' would be a prevailing sensibility dismissive of emancipation as a meaningful topic for inquiry. Second, the title makes plain a value judgement. By way of the presentation of a 'critique', the intentions of the author will be quite clear. The thesis could easily have traded under an alternative title, 'A Critique of *Pure* Emancipatory Reason', which would certainly have set down its philosophical marker all the more purposefully, as regard the deliberate citation to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* on which the thesis plays. Philosophical allusion aside, dominant today is the sceptical dismissal of 'emancipatory' reason.

What might be termed 'pure emancipatory'—or a *dogmatic* metaphysical defence of emancipatory—reason is in retreat, but by no means has it disappeared from view completely. The 'metaphysical defence' of emancipation can be identified in the same way that Kant was to account for the principle of 'pure reason', namely any thinking that attempts to accord *direct* proof to an Idea, the real existence of which is not possible to corroborate through experience or any other conditioned form of presentation.²² Described in this way, 'pure emancipatory reason' is analogous to *dogmatic* metaphysics, inasmuch that what governs both 'pure reason' and its political corollary is the desire to lay claim *by knowing* the absolute of its object. In its straightforwardly 'philosophical' determination, the absolute is the unconditional cause of beings, the answer to the question, 'what is the Being of beings?' A question, then, that thought hopes to banish through its complete and definitive presentation.²³ Its political

²² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Palgrave) A328/B385.

²³ This question, aiming at what Heidegger referred to as the ontological difference between 'Being' and 'beings', and to which western metaphysics is interminably tied, marks the long sojourn of the history of philosophical thought into the forgetting of Being. If time and space permitted, we would need to consider in this connection everything that Martin Heidegger had to say under the syntagm of the 'onto-theological', and interrogate thereby the formal affinities that exist between a species of both

analogue searches out what it takes to be definitive about the being of emancipation, or in what the *ultimum*, the *eschaton*, of emancipation consists. A process entailing the identification of a collective subject, bestowed with the task of fulfilling humanity's historico-ontological destiny. The attempt to ground the Idea on a secure and indubitable basis, to accord the idea an objectivity for which its empirical testimony otherwise lacks. In its metaphysical determination, emancipation reads as a *transcendent idea* that commits *transcendental illusion*, to phrase this in the Kantian idiom.²⁴ It can be considered a transcendent idea on the basis that its conceptuality is to be kept apart from its phenomenal appearance, impervious to the impurities and vicissitudes of the empirical realm and the subjective play of the imagination. It unavoidably commits a transcendental *illusion* on the same basis, however, because in so searching for a way of guaranteeing the content it attaches to the Idea beyond the contingency of its deployment, the *meaning* it alone attributes to emancipation is conflated with the *being* of this idea, in which the stand taken (*histemi, stare, stet*) on the Idea is read as the destination (*histemi, stare, stet*) as the *terminus cognitus* of that Idea. Such an appropriation (what Kant would have named its *constituent* use, in which the idea is mistaken for the concept of a real

philosophical and political reason, ensnared as each is within the problematic of thinking the first (*archē*) and the highest (*eschaton*) of principles. Tying the two together is a certain flight by which thought undertakes, namely an ascent from the conditionality of 'beings' to the unconditioned, 'Being': 'the essential constitution of metaphysics is based on the unity of beings as such in the *universal* and that which is *highest*'. (p61) Heidegger later writes: 'Because Being appears as ground, beings are what is grounded; the highest being, however, is what accounts in the sense of giving the first cause. When metaphysics thinks of beings with respect to the ground that is common to all beings as such then it is as onto-logic. When metaphysics thinks of beings as such as a whole, that is, with respect to the highest being which accounts for everything, then it is logic as theo-logic. *Because the thinking of metaphysics remain involved in the difference which as such is unthought, metaphysics is both ontology and theology in a unified way, by virtue of the unifying unity of perdurance.*' (emphases added) Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). For the later Heidegger, Being can only be thought as that which appears only to withdraw, as that which shows itself only for its essence to be veiled once more: 'Being essentially comes to be as a self-revealing that at the same time lasts as self-concealing', as Heidegger writes in his lectures on *The Principle of Reason* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996) p75. As such Being is without any exhaustive and definitive presentation; there is instead Being as what *comes to presence*, as itself the *presencing* of what is—what Heidegger will refer to as both the *geschick* (sending) of Being and Being as *geschick* (Being as itself a sending). Being is exposed to the contingency of the *ab-grund* through the manner of its appearing, but Being is itself the *ab-grund* of contingency *as such*. This turns the issue of Being from an answer into a question (as Heidegger remarks on p62 of *The Principle of Reason*). Being is inherently problematical, and therefore the metaphysical task of issuing an answer to the question 'what is the Being of beings?' is exposed to the historicity of its own questioning. pp70-1.

²⁴ Ibid

existent²⁵), places a restriction on the plural ways in which emancipation can be presented within the immanent and conditioned bounds of political struggle.

In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant warned of the errors of what he called ‘raving with reason’²⁶, ‘of wanting to SEE something beyond all bounds of sensibility, of dreaming according to principles.’²⁷ The philosopher can all too easily lapse into transcendental illusion. The Idea of emancipation might just be taken as a paragon of philosophy’s narcolepsy. In advancing this, one would need to understand emancipation as an Idea of Reason, and like all such Ideas is without an object of experience, akin thereby to the cosmological Ideas (the ‘soul’, ‘God’, the ‘world’) that Kant treats extensively in the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’ of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Treated in this way, emancipation is to be looked upon as an idea that can be *thought*, but about which no positive *knowledge* is obtainable.²⁸ With what kind of empirical measure could we use to verify the extent of a people’s or an individual’s emancipation? Are we to look at the gaining of the vote, ‘quality of life’ indexes? The grounds on which an appeal is made to ‘universal emancipation’ as an already realised outcome might themselves be illusory.²⁹ Reasoning about emancipation shows the limits of philosophical

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A568/B596.

²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, (Cambridge: Hackett, 1987) p135.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ As Kant writes, in the ‘Second Edition’ to *Critique of Pure Reason*: ‘Thinking an object and cognizing an object are not the same.’ He continues: ‘[when] no intuition corresponding to the concept could be given at all, then in terms of its form the concept would indeed be a thought; but it would be a thought without any object, and no cognition at all of any thing whatsoever would be possible by means of it.’ *Critique of Pure Reason*, B146.

²⁹ Caution is required about how precisely one is to understand ‘illusion’. It must be immediately divorced from any pejorative deployment, such as with the term, delusion, and its cognates, the delusory, the delusional and the delusionist. No risk is to be taken in trivialising or belittling the importance of any concrete struggle for emancipation, along with the claim that each stakes on the universal. By drawing an analogy between the use of transcendental illusion in the defence of both ideas of reason (as Kant was to understand them in the First and Third Critiques) and the illusions that beset ideas of emancipatory reason (the object under discussion here), is not in any way to suggest that such struggles (and the wrongs against which they struggle) are false or erroneous, ill- or misconceived. The question instead is whether there is a possible exit from committing such illusions, whether, that is, the role of illusion, rather than being eliminative, is constitutive of a particular species of political thought. Suffice it to say, Kant regarded metaphysical illusion to be inextricably bound up with the demands of speculative thought as such (a species of thought that Kant was not prepared to vanquish!). It is for this reason that Kant couched such illusion in *transcendental* and not *empirical* terms. Thus we read that transcendental illusion is ‘an illusion which can no more be prevented than we can prevent the sea from appearing higher at the horizon than at the shore; [...] or to cite a still better example, than the astronomer can prevent the moon from appearing larger at its arising, although he is not deceived by this illusion.’ *Critique of Pure Reason* A297/354. On this basis, the question is transformed. It ceases to be a matter of extricating thought from the vitiating and maddening effects of metaphysical illusions, but a question of how thought can best comport itself despite of the invariable claims it makes about Ideas that cannot be corroborated through experience.

demonstration: thought overstepping its boundaries, over exercising its cognitive muscles to demonstrate the indemonstrable. Too many counterfactuals exist that get in the way of isolating emancipation in its phenomenality. The Idea of human emancipation inclines one to think the unconditional cause of social prejudice and political injustice, of tracing out the fundamental fracture line in social relations, which as the source of all other manifestations of injustice, would thereby stem the tide of any infinite regression. This would be one of the messages the prologue, with which this thesis begins, seeks to relay.

The hypothetical dialogue is in part an attempt to dramatise the compulsion for thought to engage, at one and the same time, in a logical *regression* to identify the unconditional ground (i.e. a ground that is itself ungrounded, a condition that is not a conditioned cause) for all forms of injustice and to undertake a logical *progression*, transporting thought thereby to what is highest, to the release into the sublime and unconditional ends of a ‘Just’ and ‘Liberated’ order.³⁰ In this way, the dialogue serves as a propaedeutic, a way of staking out—in general and doubtless reductive terms—a basic grammar for understanding the lines of dispute drawn between the *dogmatism* and the *scepticism* of a *pure-* and *post-*emancipatory reason respectively. The basic contours of this disagreement function as the background against which this thesis—committed as it is to rethinking the Idea of emancipation—gains both intelligibility and resoluteness. The question is whether it is possible to develop a way of thinking emancipation that takes its leave from both established positions? And, if so what would such a possibility entail? How is this to be done without producing a sigh from those who—and for good reason—anticipate a repetition of the old well-trammelled pathways, and by implication are already bating the inevitable traps.

The predicament is succinctly articulated by Jelica Sumic-Riha, who wonders whether:

a ‘fidelity’ to emancipation in an era characterised by its amnesia does not represent a regression to the classical doctrine of emancipation, collapsed because it has proved to be constitutively unable to develop a relation with specific socio-historical circumstances? [Whether] therefore the promotion of emancipation to the centre stage implies that an

For a comprehensive account of the role of transcendental illusion in Kant’s critical philosophy, please see: Michelle Grier’s *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011).

³⁰ Here, the logical demonstrations deployed in the conflicts of Reason over the cosmological ideas (the ‘World’, the ‘Soul’, God)—both the *regressus* and *progressus* lines of reasoning that seek to think the first and last terms of a series—have absolute salience here. Please see: Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* A463-64/B491-92

unyielding *dogmatic* fidelity as such is subversive, and thereby emancipatory?³¹

This is the burden of expectation that has somehow to be lifted before it is possible to proceed effectively: the expectation that to take up the issue in times that are 'post emancipatory' will somehow be party to dogmatism without it necessarily being known as such. Sumic-Riha, herself fully aware of the danger, knows that to take-up a defence of emancipation dogmatically is 'inadmissible'.³² Such comportment towards the question of emancipation is captured under the figure of the 'revolutionary conservative' who 'perseveres in a politics of emancipation, which he then [...] tries pathetically to present as a politics of "principle", but is in reality a "principled" politics both rigid and inflexible, "powerlessness" in the face of the vicissitudes of political events.'³³ The 'revolutionary conservative' is marked by nostalgia for the old avatars of politics. He dreams for their return, without ever opening his eyes to what is actual, which he regards with general disdain and antipathy. Here, we might also sense a particular resonance with Hegel's description of the 'beautiful soul': the figure of philosophical despair, who 'lives in dread of besmirching the splendour of its inner being by action and an existence; and, in order to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with the actual world, and persists in its self-willed impotence to renounce its self which is reduced to the extreme of ultimate abstraction';³⁴ 'lacking an actual existence' the beautiful soul, writes Hegel, is driven to 'the point of madness, wast[ing] itself in yearning and pin[ing] away in consumption.'³⁵

The point broached by Sumic-Riha is clear. How, without lapsing into either dogmatism or some form of mutism, is emancipation to be thought? Similarly this must be our question. The sceptic believes it to be an impossibility; the *Idea* of emancipation is itself dogmatic. The general and fundamental impediment obstructing the fulfilment of the *Idea* of a common and indivisible Humanity is that the hope invested in a particular collective-subject to bring about the *ultimate* conditions of existence for an 'equal', 'free' and 'just' community, has its genesis in a *finite* collectivity, and from a site which is itself *local*—conditioned by a myriad of contextual factors. Considered either from the point of

³¹ Jelica Sumic-Riha, 'Anachronism of Emancipation or fidelity to politics', *Laclau: A Critical Reader*. (New York: Routledge, 2004) pp182-92.

³² *Ibid* p183.

³³ *Ibid*.

³⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) p400.

³⁵ *Ibid* p407.

view of the structure or the subject, nothing guarantees the universality of the demands being raised by a collective-subject, merely the availability of a partial visibility on a complexly articulated whole that transcends it.

If the sceptical and dogmatic poles are indeed exhaustive of the entire debate, then the space for manoeuvre is negligible. Such a barely discernible difference between warring tribes is enough to bring on a bout of *indifference*. This indifference is the effect of lethargy in the face of a struggle that can carry no sign of a definitive victor. Out of exhaustion and through a loss of volition, the discussion and the stakes carried along with it begin to wane. Indifference in the face of the question of emancipation (its possibility, its potency, etc.) can be taken as indicative of its long drawn out end; the final sign that on this issue at least pens are best put down in truce. But in any kind of ‘recommencement’—which here requires that we enjoin with Sumic-Riha in inquiring into the possibility of a non-dogmatic defence of the Idea of emancipation—indifference (as a general attitude of mind) is a condition that must first be overcome.³⁶ The precondition for a re-treating of emancipation, in a way that extricates itself from the dominant ways in which emancipation has been understood—where what is ascribed to have dominance are the set of suppositions regulating the presentation of the idea to which both defendant and prosecutor unreflexively subscribe—is to break loose from the general attitude of indifference. The *critical* imperative can be said to lay in productively making a difference, which means, first of all, recasting the way in which emancipation, as an Idea, is to be seized in thought.

The philosophy of Immanuel Kant—who provides the requisite critical *method*—furnishes us with a set of apparatuses, modes of presentation, argumentational and logical devices that will prove invaluable in our pursuit of a re-thinking of emancipation.

In the first Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant begins by laying down the requirement of critique as commencing with those matters of discourse which ‘provoke weariness and complete indifferentism’, to revivify therefore what appears atrophied, to recommence what is otherwise deemed ‘unserviceable.’³⁷ Uncompromising,

³⁶ This is the starting point for Kant explicitly, but one could say it is the starting point for any thinking worthy of being described as such: an act of thought which takes a ‘wonder’ in—and not an indifference or apathy towards—the world. For the thinking-being a-pathy is therefore a condition of existence to overcome. On the question of Kant and the theme of indifference please see: Ian McKenzie, *The Idea of Pure Critique*, (London: Continuum, 2004) pp1-14 in particular.

³⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, *op.cit* px.

Kant warns of the idleness of feigning indifference, of shirking the responsibilities of thought, either by failing to think at all or by borrowing ready-made argumentational devices to show the futility of thinking a particular idea—never going out of metaphysics to demonstrate such foolhardiness.³⁸ Indifference means the elimination of any difference between would-be disputants; there is but the formal resemblance of two positions. In a recent book, Ian Mackenzie has underlined the importance of this indifference as a precipitate for Kant’s critical philosophy. Indifference, claims Mackenzie (enjoining with Kant), is the terrain on which critique is exercised.³⁹ Individual doctrines, schools of thought, are not the subject of *critique*. This standard activity which takes doctrines and schools as its datum is mere *criticism*, and does nothing to extricate itself from either dogmatism as a mode of thought or from a state of indifference as a general setting that thinking (*stricto sensu*) seeks to move beyond.⁴⁰ Criticism only aids and abets the ‘tit-for-tat movement’, the alternating to-ing and fro-ing cadence of claim and counter claim. Such activity serves as the harbinger of apathy, but also as the wheel by which the burgeoning Marketplace of books and other commodified textual paraphernalia turns. Instead the entire terrain of indifferentism—which, here, encroaches on the idea of emancipation (and the impasse between dogmatic defence and sceptical refutation the idea is today saddled by)—is the principal means of orientating critique. Nothing less than a critical engagement, which takes aim at the presuppositions regulating the way in which the object of disagreement appears, will suffice. By drawing a line around the established distribution of positions, the line that had divided the yeses and the naysayers, loses its significance in limiting the possible ways by which the Idea of emancipation might be committed to thought.

But this is all too formal and general. What, specifically, is to be accomplished, and in what way will it be achieved? A distillation of the main steps to be carried out in this thesis is at this point required.

Everything stated so far has been for the sake of situating the thesis and the central theme under which the investigation gains its purposefulness. A way of orientating

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ian McKenzie, *The Idea of Pure Critique*, (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁴⁰ Kant writes in the ‘Introduction’ to the Second Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: ‘the critique of pure reason leads necessarily to science; the dogmatic use of pure reason without critique, on the other hand, to baseless assertions that can always be opposed by others that seem equally plausible, and hence to scepticism.’ B22-3.

ourselves in the present is a necessary first step, to be sure. Nonetheless, it has afforded no specific questions, expressing instead a feeling of dissatisfaction with the sceptical impasses of our own contemporaneity. Little of any rigour has ever been developed out of feelings alone! Permit this to be this thesis' only rationalist prejudice.

What of the central question, then, which this thesis seeks to explore? The guiding question is to be put in the following way: what might the idea of emancipation be able to tell us about politics? How may it help us to think the *novelties* and the *re-possibilisations* that, once in a while, quite unexpectedly, happen politically? There are two responses that are often given to this question, both of which will be contested during the course of this thesis:

The first understands emancipation as a certain passage *into* political life—a necessary but insufficient pre-condition for an individual or group to become a fully-fledged part of a political community. Let us call this 'political emancipation'. Emancipation would be exhaustive of this passage *into* an already existing political space: politics as the determinate negation of emancipation, the latter appearing so as only to disappear once more.

The second is to claim that emancipation is a certain route *out of* political life—a necessary and ultimate end that will expose the space of politics as a limited and ultimately disposable practice. Let us call this a 'politics *of* emancipation', where the genitive used here is to indicate emancipation as an end towards which a politics must tend, and in finally having tended towards—which is to say, equally, after having attended to the tasks to reach—this final stage, a point in time is arrived at that relieves the attendant practice of its duties, marking out thereby the self-abrogation of the political process that had constituted the principal means of securing this highest end: the realisation of emancipation as a lived reality would concomitantly entail the determinate negation of politics.

Simply stated, it is the view of this thesis that neither of these ways into the matter discloses anything of the primacy of politics and of emancipatory Ideas in thinking the novelties and re-possibilisations by which a certain regime of being-together is effected.⁴¹ We need to recast the problem of politics *ontologically*, and not

⁴¹ The first of these ways says *too little* about politics. In addressing *the* political it merely speaks of *a* politics, and therefore already supposes a given set of institutions and governmental arrangements, of formal practices, etc.; it imposes a set of rules regulating the ways in which politics is said to appear as politics. On this interpretation of a 'politics of emancipation', politics is bent towards a determinate understanding, i.e. liberal parliamentarian. In bending back politics in this way, it takes what is merely

topographically, which reduces it to a question of arrangement, to a certain *politeia* (i.e. a particular political order, whether this be ‘liberal’, ‘republican’, ‘technocratic’, etc.)—and to a set of formally sanctioned places and sites within which political activity is exercised. At the same time, we must resist any temptation of casting the matter of politics *historically*, as a *transitive* intensification of a specific constellation of social relations which, once the Historical task is accomplished, leads to the putting down of all political tools so as to bask in the glory of the new dawn that has been shepherded in: the World Revolution that would break History into a pre-Historical period of antagonisms and alienation, and the reverie of a redeemed post-revolutionary time.⁴² The avoidance of these traps in accounting for politics, demands that equal vigilance be paid to the approach taken with respect to the question of emancipation, rethought in such a way that the act of thinking this Idea gravitates not around the ascription of a determinate set of demands, of goals, or conditions of existence that must be met for emancipation to be

a historical and determinate appearing (a given political arrangement) for the Being of politics, that is, in its essential determination. What is said about the Being of politics undergoes a radical restriction thereby. Concomitantly, the second of these ways of ascribing meaning to a ‘politics of emancipation’ says *too little* of emancipation, even if it does so under the aegis of wishing to present the ‘all’ of emancipation, in terms of staking out the real conditions by which universal or human emancipation is to be attained. It says too little, because, rather similar to its counterpart, what is taken as the being or essence of emancipation is merely only the elevation and hypostatisation of a particular way in which such a demand is giventhetic form and historical direction. How then to free both politics and emancipation from the acts of subreption that hitherto interpretations have committed? Subreptic reasoning here means *the illicit move from the way in which X appears to the fastening of the being of X to a certain appearing of it*.

⁴² Alain Badiou describes this tendency of emancipatory reason in ‘Meditation Twenty’ of *Being and Event* as a ‘speculative leftism’. There we read the following: ‘Speculative leftism is fascinated by the eventual ultra-one and it believes that in the latter’s name it can reject any immanence to the structured regime of the count-as-one. Given that the structure of the ultra-one is the Two, the imaginary of a radical beginning leads ineluctably, in all orders of thought, to a Manichean hypostasis. The violence of this false thought is anchored in its representation of an imaginary Two whose temporal manifestation is signed, via the excess of one, by the ultra-one of the event, Revolution or Apocalypse.’ (p210). It should also be noted that earlier in the same meditation, Badiou accounts for the other tendency of emancipatory reason, namely political emancipation, via the example of ‘universal suffrage’, which, in contradistinction to speculative leftism, attenuates the figure of the Two to such a degree that it hypostatizes the One, and merely circulates interior to what is already represented within the situation. Under these conditions, the event as the hazardous passage into the new is annulled. (see: p206). This dialectics of number—of the One and the Two—illuminates the difficulties into which a recasting of the Idea of emancipation is thrown. Emancipatory reason can run aground because of a unilateralism shown toward either the figure of the One, which makes the emancipatory demand entirely homogenous to the extant order, and the Two, which makes of the same demand something radically heterogeneous, and inexplicable from the point of view of the existing state of things. This meditation is one of the principal thoughts organizing Badiou’s philosophical assessment of the artistic experimentations, political novelties and scientific inventions that helped comprise the historical period of the ‘twentieth century’. Please see: *The Century* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2004)

confirmed as a lived reality for all. This means thinking emancipation in the form of the *Idea*— not reducing it to an *object* of experience that can be known, to an *experience* that can be felt and intuited, nor to a *law* of History awaiting proof of its realisation. Any of these possibilities suppose emancipation to be something eminently knowable. Implied also is an image of an *Idea* marked by its own transitivity; once the demands for emancipation have been met, one outgrows thereby the questions that, as a task *still* to be fulfilled, emancipation otherwise provokes in thought. The philosophical task to be undertaken here is to open up the possibility of affirming both the plural and novel ways in which emancipatory *Ideas* appear in a given world, actualised by multiple political sequences.⁴³ How is this double operation (that interrogates both the meaning of the political and the *Idea* of emancipation) to be countenanced?

A further, and equally central, contention of this thesis is that rather than think emancipation and politics as two terms that appear so as only to disappear (as is the case with, on the one hand, positing emancipation as an introduction *into* politics and, on the other, postulating emancipation as an exiting *from* politics), what happens when we think politics and emancipation through their co-appearing? What changes in our thinking of both emancipation and politics once we think their relation in this form? First, we would be presented with an idea of emancipation, the meaning of which develops out of singular political procedures; and second, a thinking of politics, the transformations of which (in terms of the ‘what’ and the ‘who’ that counts as political) are effected through the operation of emancipation. The two terms are best understood as functioning as co-operators.⁴⁴ If emancipatory politics account for many of the novelties that have taken

⁴³ How is the *Idea* to be thought? But, perhaps, more importantly, what does it mean to think with the *Idea*? Is there a way of thinking emancipation that permits a difference in the operation of the *Idea*, so as to pay respect to a difference that exists between two modes of thinking, namely between philosophical and political thought? Could it be that the difference Kant solicits between two species of *Idea*—Rational *Ideas* and Aesthetic *Ideas*—serves as an adequate way of rendering two ways in which philosophical and political thought, respectively, puts to work the *Idea*? Such a question must await adequate circumscription at a later date, however.

⁴⁴ One must here readily acknowledge that in deploying the suffix ‘co-’, one moves in already chartered waters, and which have recently been sequestered as perilous. Quentin Meillassoux writes of the problematic of the correlationist circle in his *After Finitude* (London: Continuum, 2008), in which what is real is only given impurely by way of its contamination through human receptivity of some kind or another (whether thought, experience, history, language, and so on). More specific to our investigation, he writes: ‘the ‘co-‘ (of co-giveness, of co-relation, of the co-originary, of co-presence, etc.) is the grammatical particle that dominates modern philosophy, its veritable ‘chemical formula’ [...] Prior to the advent of transcendentalism, one of the questions that divided rival philosophers most decisively was “Who grasps the true nature of substance? He who thinks the *Idea*, the individual, the atom, God? Which God?” But ever since Kant, to discover what divides rival philosophers is no longer to ask who has grasped the true nature of substantiality, but rather who has grasped the more

place in history, this is because such sequences have invented new forms of political engagement, giving rise to new subjectivations, providing visibility to objects and places that were otherwise taken as being beneath the dignity of political propriety. Instances of emancipatory politics, to use a phrase from Jacques Rancière, *re-partition the sensible* as regards what can be seen, shared, said and declared in any given situation.⁴⁵

But to speak of emancipation in this way is not to reduce it to the play of an empirical optics. It cannot be a simple case of seeing better, such that the limits of our sight are incrementally corrected to finally account for *what* should have been seen as a political issue, *who* should have been recognised as a citizen, bestowed with the full complement of formal rights and communitarian duties. The play between the visible and the invisible, between what is apparent and inapparent, transports us considerably further, to the very problem of existence. To take up the task of thinking politics in light of the Idea of emancipation, and emancipation in the light of politics, affords the possibility of recasting the very question of political existence. Rather than the question of what it means *to exist politically* be reducible to the givenness of a political order (such that to *exist politically* is to perform the roles and duties of the citizen by casting one's vote, by offering one's ascent or (when the moment arises) one's moderate dissent to a certain governmental reform, in lobbying for a new piece of legislation, and so on), the task of a particular mode of political thought (that is, an emancipatory politics) is tied to the matter of *transforming* the actual conditions by which what is said to have *existence* politically is evaluated. Only through a *transvaluation* of the schema used to set-apart the non-political from what *is* political, does what is *barely* deemed to exist, if at all, take up the valence of a political appearance.⁴⁶

originary correlation'? (pp5-6). Evidently, the tenor of the thesis presented here exists within the very trajectory that Meillassoux will identify for censure (and, certainly, Meillassoux does so for legitimate reasons). Whether the scientific problematic of re-routing philosophy into a realism once more is transposable onto a political problematic—in which the priority of process over substrate has, at least, to some extent, continued traction—this author shall leave for the discerning reader to decide. For a rather truncated account of the political implications of Quentin Meillassoux's project, please see the concluding remarks of this thesis.

⁴⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2007)

⁴⁶ The question of existence has become central in Alain Badiou's later philosophy in specifying the category of the event. Whereas Badiou's earlier work, *Being and Event*, played on the primitive difference between Being *qua* being and the event as that which is not being *qua* being, Badiou has now supplemented this relation with a theory of *being-there*, of existence as the point of localisation of that which appears within a world. For Badiou, the category of the world is instrumental in thinking the way in which a certain set of practices, objects, and things are regulated and ordered so as to form a structured and relatively consistent whole. The regulatory mechanisms providing a world with a certain consistency are understood by Badiou as 'transcendentals'. Please see: Alain Badiou, *Logics of*

Chapter Breakdown

This thesis, ‘A Critique of Post-Emancipatory Reason’, is to be considered a work of critical philosophy. As already sketched, critique is to be understood in its strict Kantian sense, and is not meant as simple ‘criticism’. Neither does its critical operation circulate within the dialectical traditions of Hegelianism and Marxism (with their own variants of critique), nor, thirdly, does this thesis have any relation to the ‘critical theorists’ of the Frankfurt School. It does not understand itself as presenting something that springs from an inherent knowledge-constitutive interest predisposing one to contribute to emancipatory progress through an immanent critique of ideological distortions and inhibitive power relations, as is the case with, for example, Jürgen Habermas and his acolytes.⁴⁷ One of the suppositions that philosophy and the social sciences might well think about breaking with is the conviction that to provide a critique of *this* or *that* phenomena is the central way in which a philosophy or theory shows its emancipatory credentials.⁴⁸ Phrased in the genitive a ‘philosophy’ or ‘theory’ of emancipation has always carried with it the ambiguity between thinking ‘emancipation’ as both a problem and Idea to be investigated into (emancipation as an *object* of philosophical or theoretical inquiry) and its often hubristic self-regard as itself being an ‘*emancipatory theory*’ (a theory or philosophy as the *subject* for the transmission of emancipatory

Worlds (London: Continuum, 2009) and his *Second Manifesto for Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011) pp43-63 and pp73-82. In his *Second Manifesto* Alain Badiou seeks to think the relation between one, Being *qua* being, two, what *exists* within a world, and three the *event* as an immanent modification of a world, with the rhapsodic refrain from the *Internationale*: ‘We are nothing let us be all!’ Badiou goes on to explain: ‘What does ‘we are nothing’ mean? Those proclaiming ‘we are nothing’ are not in the process of affirming their nothingness. They are simply affirming that they are nothing in the world as it is, as far as appearing politically is involved. From the point of view of their political appearing, they are nothing. Becoming ‘all’ presupposes a change of world, which is to say, a change of transcendental. The transcendental has to change in order for the assignation to existence and, thus, the inexistent as a multiplicity’s point of non-appearing in a world, to change in its turn.’ pp61-2. Evidently, this example resonates with the two examples presented earlier in this introduction (see here foregoing pages 16-17 of this manuscript) about the precarity of the proletarian worker and woman as political existents.

⁴⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Oxford: Polity, 1994).

⁴⁸ This point has been made by Jacques Rancière in his article ‘The Misadventures of Critical Thought’ in *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009) pp25-51. It has also been the topic of a recent essay of mine, entitled ‘Critique Disarmed, Ideas Unharmed: A Laclauian Approach to Emancipatory Ideas’, in *Tracking Discourses* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2011).

effects).⁴⁹

With this in mind the first section of the thesis (Chapters One and Two) will be of a general theoretical and methodological order, and will present the specific way in which it understands the stakes of a critical contribution to the question of emancipation and the means and operations by which this contribution is effected. The first of these chapters (Chapter One) will develop a four-fold problematic into which the idea of emancipation is to be inserted. It functions as a way to systematise a certain conceptual relation between all the terms entitled in the thesis: ‘novelty’; ‘visibility’; ‘possibility’ as well as ‘emancipation’, ‘politics’ and the ‘event’. Can these terms be said to relate, and if so in what way? The thinking here is that only on the bases of constructing a new problematic space into which the idea of emancipation is to be situated might a renewed understanding be possible.

Chapter Two shall present the Kantian method in greater detail, paying particular attention to the antinomial form by which Kant presented his critical examination of both dogmatic metaphysics and scepticism in the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’. It provides some considerations about the meaning and significance of the antinomies—how they relate to any putative critical philosophy, generally, and Kant’s mode of critique in particular.

The central question of this thesis (which was adumbrated schematically above, and which touches on the relation between the idea of emancipation and politics) is to be explored extensively in what will be the thesis’ second section (Chapters Three to Six, inclusive). These four chapters will include a general account of what we may wish to call the antinomy of political and emancipatory reason (Chapter Three). Subsequent to

⁴⁹ For this reason, what passes for a theoretical operation is but the making operative (a ‘putting into practice’, so to speak) of a putative ‘theory’ in the interest of emancipation. There is, therefore, the convertible instance of a theory of emancipation with a prospective emancipatory theory. A reversibility that, as virtuous its intentions, is no less controvertible. It is a transmutability that only causes one to walk on blindly. We can track this tendency (with all the ambiguities it entails) in a certain passage from Max Horkheimer’s ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ essay: ‘That, unless there is continued theoretical effort, in the interest of a rationally organized future society, to shed critical light on present day society and to interpret it in the light of traditional theories elaborated in the special sciences, the ground is taken from under the hope of radically improving human existence... the issue, however, is not simply the theory of emancipation; it is the practice of it as well.’ Max Horkheimer, ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, (London: Continuum Press, 1995) pp242-3.

If an emancipatory theory substitutes an investigative procedure taking place at the very level of constitution of the concept for the presence of a sign, ready-to-hand—whose potency is restricted to but the warmth of a spring-time serenade, harmonizing the effects of a ‘theory’ and ‘practice’—then it operates not as theoretical inquisition at all, but as something other, as a point in the circulation of emancipation’s ontic realisation.

this a close readings of thinkers who operate within the logical structure set out above will be presented. First we shall address the attempts by Karl Marx to think the task of emancipation in the form of the genesis of Communism (Chapter Four). This will be followed by a reading of Hannah Arendt, which will tease out the implications of her travails to think the political in its specificity (Chapter Five). In chapter Six, the thought of Jean-François Lyotard will be considered. Lyotard's point of departure is to think the idea of emancipation neither in terms of 'political emancipation' nor a 'politics of emancipation'; instead it culminates with the flight from the political altogether, in an attempt to recover an *ethical* itinerary for emancipation. The three readings will be of a critical disposition, seeking to trace out the impasses and limits of their respective thought. A full justification as to why these three thinkers have been chosen is, in the case of Marx and Arendt, set out in the second part of Chapter Three and, in the case of Lyotard, is provided at the beginning of Chapter Six.

Finally, the conclusion will at least begin to raise the question whether there is anything in philosophy's armoury that will allow it to remain consequent in thinking the new relation augmented between emancipation and politics. In exploring the tripartite relation between Philosophy, Ideas and Politics, it will be argued that philosophy's particular way of affirming emancipation is, indeed, by way of the Idea—and not in the form of a 'concept' or 'principle', a 'law' or 'model', a 'demand' or 'Ideal'. However, this conclusion (with only the tentative steps it advances) will serve only as a caesura, marking but the need for a new beginning, namely a future thoroughgoing inquiry into the relation between philosophy and the Idea.

The thesis submitted here must readily concede that it is behind the curve. It is certainly the case that 'the owl of Minerva has already spread its wings.'⁵⁰ Were it not for a number of contemporary thinkers (mainly French philosophers, with one notable exception⁵¹), very little developed in this thesis would have been possible. However, this

⁵⁰ Hegel, *Elements of a Philosophy of Right*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p23.

⁵¹ Only on the condition that we root meaning within a specifiable and theoretical context is the full force of that way of thinking emancipation developed here given its power to both unite and separate. A unity, therefore, between individual thinkers that runs deeper than the presence of the word alone. Must we remind ourselves of Nietzsche's observation that 'to use the same words is not a sufficient guarantee for understanding [...] one must use the same words for the same genus of inward experience; ultimately one must have one's experiences in common'? It is only right that this thesis has its root within a specifiable tradition, with a set of political experiences in common, and a constellation of axioms and problematics shared. Without any better collective noun at one's disposal, this tradition is broadly 'post-Althusserian'. Such a nomination would have at least three

will not be an exegesis or close reading of those thinkers (Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière) who have, in their own different ways, done much not only to affirm the centrality of emancipation in thinking politics but have been absolutely consequent in the manner of their re-casting. This thesis will rather distil a set of axioms and insights that are locatable within their bodies of work. Whenever appropriate more sustained engagements with parts of their thought will take place. Generally, however, the nature of this inquiry is more constructive and exploratory, rather than interpretative and exegetical.

determinations. First, the name would mark out something of a concentrated geographical location (a filiation of thinkers working at the Ecole Normal Supérieur in Paris, during the sixties); second it would represent a temporal dislocation, a particular period in France's history, which marked something of a 'revolutionary situation' (this to be understood in the widest sense possible), a condensation of novel and experimental practices on a multiple set of fronts (Philosophical, political, artistic). Lastly, Post-Althusserianism would mark an interior break within Contemporary French Thought, a break with the Hegelianism that had marked post-war French philosophy (courtesy of Kojève and Hyppolite), and the Hegelian Marxism, Sartrean existentialism and French phenomenology that this inspired.

This thesis is indelibly marked by the writings of Louis Althusser, Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar, Jacques Derrida (whose position, admittedly, within this filiation is rather more undecidable and therefore contestable), and Jacques Rancière (as well as Ernesto Laclau). It is greatly inspired by what is best described as a fortitude in their work, a tireless labouring over the implications of what was engendered during a concentrated period of fervent possibilities and ultimately of unseized opportunities. Philosophically, one could say that there is an unwavering fidelity to the happening of politics and a common standard to be equal in thought to the events that politics might engender.

Chapter One

Problems, Provisos and a Proposal: Emancipation and the Happening that Politics *Is*.

‘Either too much is said, or not enough: too much, because the search for a ground forms the essential step of a ‘critique’ which should inspire in us new ways of thinking; not enough, because so long as the ground remains larger than the grounded, this critique serves only to justify traditional ways of thinking.’

—Gilles Deleuze.⁵²

‘[The error] is to introduce as a solution a concept which itself poses a theoretical problem, for as it is adopted and understood it is an uncriticised concept, a concept which, like all ‘obvious concepts’, threatens to have for theoretical content no more than the function that the existing or dominant ideology defines for it.’

—Louis Althusser.⁵³

Ideas as Problems

Sometimes new ways of thinking emerge, but which, veiled as answers, are not fully understood, on account of their being inserted into the wrong type of questions, situated within outmoded problems.⁵⁴ This is one of the obstacles that a retreating of emancipation invites.

⁵² Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) pp153-4.

⁵³ Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, (London: NLB, 1970) p93.

⁵⁴ So as to make this a little more plain, please consider what Louis Althusser was to write in his Introduction to *Reading Capital*: ‘[Sometimes] eyes are still fixed on an old question, and [thought] relates a new answer to [this] old question; because it is still concentrating on the old horizon within which the new problem is not visible [...] What is at stake in the production of a new problem contained *unwittingly* in the new answer is not a particular new object which has emerged among other, already identified objects, like an unexpected guest at a family reunion; on the contrary, what

Consider Jacques Derrida's claim that 'nothing appears less outdated than the classical emancipatory ideal.'⁵⁵ At the time of its pronouncement, it packed a sizeable punch amongst many of his own interlocutors, who were still coming to terms with what had been written decades previously, and were far from spent in drawing the implications from the erasure and suspension placed over the classical philosophemes of 'Experience', 'Subject', 'Community', 'History', 'Man', 'Reason' —all such concepts that might have served as a ground for its philosophical proclamation. Derrida appeared out of step with his own 'marching order'. But, at the same time, there was something quite typical in this countermovement. Beyond the surprise of this speech-act, on closer inspection there was seemingly little more than the rhetorical play with litotes (the '*nothing less outdated*'), a meiotic refrain. Nothing, in any case, that would press home the precise character of how it might be seized in an idiom removed from any foundationalist demonstration. This led one prominent exegete to preside over the ambiguity of traditions that Derrida was seemingly laying claim to. What was Derrida invoking in the name of the 'emancipatory ideal'? Was it the liberal cosmopolitan idea of a 'global citizenry' or the socialist vision of international fraternity and economic self-ownership? No answer to this was forthcoming. It was typical therefore of a cautious evasiveness, of offering the minimal gesture that would transmit just enough to guarantee its intelligibility, but all the same an utterance shot through with undecidability.

Sometime later, under the pressure of some convivial prodding, Derrida extemporised a little, offering a more unequivocal attestation to its importance: 'There is no ethico-political decision or gesture without what I would call a 'Yes' to emancipation'⁵⁶, he was to propose. This was to underline thereby the seriousness of his original locution, that the first was no slip of the pen. But if the 'yes' clarified the felicity of this gesture, again it did little to illuminate the precise direction in which it was to be taken. It was explicable only by what Derrida did not mean: 'I would not wish to inscribe

has happened involves a *transformation* of the *entire* terrain and its *entire* horizon, which are the background against which the new problem is produced. The emergence of this new critical problem is merely a particular index of a possible critical transformation and of a possible mutation which affect the reality of this terrain throughout its extent, including the extreme limits of its horizon.' p25.

Reading Capital. (London: NLB, 1970). What happens is 'an entire transformation of the entire terrain and its entire horizon'—the background, as Althusser asserts, against which the new problem is produced. Thinking does not invent new objects, but novel thinking is indexed by the extent to which the conditions under which a given object appears are reconfigured.

⁵⁵Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by Drucilla Cornell (London: Routledge, 1992) p28.

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism' *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996) p82.

this discourse of emancipation into a ‘utopia’, a ‘teleology’, a ‘metaphysics’, an ‘eschatology’, or any classical messianism’,⁵⁷ he was quickly to add. Thus it was a resounding ‘yes’, followed by a concatenation of denials and negations. The Derridean exegete, Simon Critchley, who raised the question as to which ‘political tradition’ Derrida was paying lip service—the ‘liberal tradition’ of the accession of rights or ‘a more radical version one could find in the socialist tradition’⁵⁸—frames the terms of the debate in such a way that does little to liberate things beyond the political trappings that have contributed in restricting the novelty of its thinking. Here we have an example of how the possibility of re-thinking the idea of emancipation might be held in check by the problems, questions, and choices into which it is drawn.

There is then a risk, the real possibility that one may be found to be presenting the emperor with new clothes—doubtless, though, a fitting metaphor for a *philosophical* investigation.⁵⁹

What therefore is required is not simply an affirmation in the form of a resounding ‘Yes’ to emancipation. This, an answer, needs to provide for itself a set of correctly constructed problems; unless, that is, it is to be subject to misunderstandings and drawn into a crib of assumptions, themselves the object of critical scrutiny. Kant said of ideas that they are inherently problematical.⁶⁰ Emancipation, this thesis will argue, is, at the level of philosophy at least, best understood as an Idea that has *no* direct presentation

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Simon Critchley, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996) p35.

⁵⁹ Awareness must be shown to the act of convertibility that philosophy often engages in when addressing particular phenomena. Such an act of convertibility consists in the conversion of a marginal or particular phenomena, only to elevate what is marginal and particular to the status of a transcendental category or to accord to it ontological primacy. Philosophical reasoning is amphibologous thinking. Such is the case, for example, when a democratic politics is not merely considered a certain mode of political engagement or a specific regime of being-in-common, but rather, in the hands of the philosopher, the idea of Democracy is given a transcendental gloss, such that it transports thought to the essence of what it is to engage politically; similarly, painting functions not as a particular form of artistic presentation, but rather *the* mode of presentation providing access into a thicket of transcendental questions about artistic creativity as such, *ad infinitum*. A conditioned, historical, example of wider phenomena becomes the transcendental ground for thinking the being of that phenomena, or the conditions under which that phenomena appears as such. Circumspection has to be shown toward this incurable gesture of philosophy’s, even if there is ultimately no way out of this interminable cycle, unless, that is, one is to renounce philosophy. For some interesting meta-philosophical observations about the philosophical act, and what has been referred to as the principle of sufficient philosophy, please refer to Francois Laruelle’s *Principes of Non-Philosophe* and *Philosophies of Difference*. In the latter text, Laruelle writes: ‘the circle of philosophical decision always accomplishes itself as tautological thought’ (p26), that is, between the givenness of X and what philosophy gives to X in return.

⁶⁰ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A328/B384.

in experience.⁶¹ This means, first and foremost, that one can think the Idea without ever securing for it knowledge about its real existence. But furthermore that it is the problem that shapes and moulds the contours by which the thinking of a particular idea is possible, not its givenness as a determinate object in the world. A new problematic, then, needs to be properly and extensively worked through, one in which certain established ways of thinking emancipatory ideas are *dislocated* with, so that new possibilities for seizing, both philosophically and theoretically, such ideas may become actualisable. This will not only be the immediate aim of this chapter but an aim that is carried over into the next two chapters on the antinomies also.

If the title of the thesis announces quite plain its main intention, namely to offer a critique of post-emancipatory reason (but equally pure emancipatory reason too), it does so not *solely* because it thinks the Idea of emancipation worth saving (whatever, axiologically speaking, this value or sense of worth is to consist in), but because through a critical exploration of this Idea, it seeks to address a set of issues that, announced in its subtitle, have a more general import. There we find a concatenation of related themes. ‘Political possibility’, ‘Philosophical visibility’ and the question of the ‘new’. We are therefore not only adding a further three nouns (‘possibility’, ‘visibility’, and ‘novelty’) to our inquiry into emancipation. We must also add the ‘philosophical’ and the ‘political’ to the list too. What is the relation between this sextet of terms? Fully appreciating that the way in which they relate to one another will be a mystery to all but the author, time must now be spent articulating their specific points of connection. It is with this task that our attention in this chapter shall now turn.

Provisional Questions.

There are four clusters of introductory questions that require delineating, and when

⁶¹ Ibid. To give one extended quotation of a thought continuously repeated throughout all three *Critiques*, Kant writes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: ‘[...] there are certain cognitions that even leave the realm of possible experiences. These cognitions, by means of concepts to which *no corresponding object can be given in experience at all, appear to expand the range of judgments beyond all bounds of experience*. And precisely in these latter cognitions, which go beyond the world of sense, where experience cannot provide us with any guide or correction, reside our reason’s inquiries. We regard these inquiries as far superior importance, and their final aim as much more sublime, than anything that our understanding can learn in the realm of appearances. Indeed, we would sooner dare anything, even at the risk of error, than give up such treasured inquiries, whether on the ground that they are precarious somehow, or from disdain and *indifference*.’ A3/B7. For other, similar, thoughts expressed on the Idea, see also: Bxx; B22; A320/B377; A329/B386; A479/B507; A644/B672; A646; B674. And from the *Critique of Judgement*: p250, p275, pp313-20 and pp342-44.

taken together shall establish the terms by which this inquiry sets about its tasks. Each of these assemblages, presented below, has as its concern a particular theme: *politics*; *emancipation*; *philosophy* and the *Idea*. From out of these thematically oriented problematics, a set of situated questions and reflections will emerge also. These will in turn contribute to both an exploration of the depths of questions that arise out of each these themes (*in isolation*), as well as (*in relation*) to establish the breadth between thematic concerns. In the case of the latter, one must first account for any assumed points of disconnection between themes, so that the task of building bridges can then begin in earnest; the intended outcome here is that *one* coherent problematic will present itself from these four fields of questioning.

1. First, what demands does politics place on thought, and, by the same token, what demands does thinking itself place on politics? It is to ask, less cryptically: how are we *to think* politics? What is it *to be* political? Is the last of these a question for which an exhaustive answer can be provided, or are we already to suppose that politics is something we take a stand on? Alain Badiou writes that there is nothing called ‘*the political*’, in which the definite article would purport to guarantee the most generic and all inclusive meaning of what politics is.⁶² Every philosophy, Badiou contends, has its own point of derivation in a real politics.⁶³ If this is so then in what way does this prior investment in *a* politics alter the way in which the ‘as such’ of politics is thinkable, and how might one effectively index the differences between philosophies and theories that take a certain empirical politics as exemplary?

2. Second, the theme of emancipation itself: what to say about this syntagm, what import does it have in *thinking* politics? How might we frame this term in a way that remains irreducible to the two dominant ways in which, historically, it has been presented, namely in terms of either an accession into, or a departure from, politics—either, that is, in terms of the political emancipation of the citizen or the real liberation of humanity? This question doubtlessly touches upon the actuality and/or inactuality of emancipation in our present circumstance. However the branch of problems subtending the question about how emancipation might contribute to a thinking of politics need not be thought solely in this manner. It is not therefore simply a question of asking whether,

⁶² Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, (London: Verso, 2005) p18.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

today, emancipation still has meaning for ‘us’ , whether the demands that have often been ascribed to it are still to be met or have been met; though, some remarks about this particular phrasing of the question will be necessary. It might, for example, be fair to assume that the complete actualisation of emancipation renders redundant its raising as an issue for contemporary political thought. Since it would be a non-issue for a people whose ‘emancipation’ (in whatever form, from whichever situation) has already been achieved, the question would be anachronistic, and in this sense would lack actuality.⁶⁴ Something

⁶⁴ One empirical problem tied to the Idea of emancipation has often been generational; it is to advance the thesis that the emancipation of a collectivity only happens *once*. The women of the suffrage movement raised their demands not solely for themselves, for living women, but for the dead—who toiled in hardship and in needless submission—as well as for future generations of women, who might share the spoils of political rights and public visibility. Only in the lifetime of a particular cohort of people is emancipation a lived reality, even though the effects of these struggles for the emancipation of *that* cohort (both in terms of its past and its future generations) have a ‘universal’ significance. The actuality of emancipation, as a lived experience, is soon eclipsed, remaining in the consciousness of descendents as a virtual memory, as part of a history—a story to pass on—which while carries a meaning, a significance, to be, certainly, commemorated, celebrated, it is nonetheless an act, a passage, of which future generations can have *no direct experience*. How can the stark contrast between the lived conditions of social oppression and the momentous joy of welcoming a new dawn be transmitted, inculcated, sensed, by those who were not merely spectating from some other place (and as such nonetheless co-present with regards to time), but who, more estranged still, share no spatial or temporal commonality, who observe it from a time and place removed from its original appearing? What does it mean to be a ‘woman’, a ‘soviet worker’ existing after the struggle has been won, who have no direct experience of the actual phrase of emancipatory fulfilment, but who, nonetheless, are captured under the collective name that served as a historical operator for ‘emancipation’? Based upon the abovementioned premises, the solution would be the following: the post-emancipatory condition puts to one side the process by which its forebears unburdened themselves of the weight of suffering and injustice. As one does when one outgrows an item of clothing, one value is replaced—stored away (perhaps) as a memento, as a memory to be preserved—with another. Politically, the desire of emancipation is substituted by the consolidation of the free life, as both Hannah Arendt (See: *On Revolution* (Penguin: London, 1990)) and Albert Camus (See: *The Rebel* (Penguin: London, 2000)) believed to be the case. Thus the question becomes: what is one to do with the freedom gained from the acts of emancipation effected by others? How to best consecrate these actions in a present where the historical conditions for political engagement have altered? What might it mean to exercise this ‘freedom’ gained in a manner that is consonant with the initial events that gave rise to its achievement? To this set of questions, a certain answer is often given. Future generations have an obligation (cultural and historical, moral and political) to make use of the possibilities opened up by those who struggled for the emancipation of their community, their collective identity: the duty to vote in parliamentary elections, to exercise civic responsibility as a fully assimilated member of a political community, etc. Is this, though, sufficient? Everything hangs on whether the premises upon which this set of reflections is based are to be upheld. The principal supposition, then, is that, for a particular sector of society, emancipation is a demand to be satisfied fully only once. The inactuality of emancipation rests on this, the first of three reductive assumptions. The second assumption is the investment made in a particular mode of politics, which it takes as the only intelligible form of what it is to be political. The space for politics is thought as fixed topoi—furnished with a set of determinate objects, institutional fixtures and subjects. Based on such a topography, emancipation marks the passage of a collectivity from a place outside of the political towards its inclusion in that space. With the achievement of this movement, thereafter one actively participates as a political equal, integrated as part of the whole of the wider political community, with

inactual must therefore need to remain for emancipation to provoke both thought and action, for, that is, the Idea to issue politics today with a certain “marching order”. This, though, is not the central problem that must be considered. If the question raised is about the import that emancipation might have in *thinking* politics, it is with a view to address the centrality that the Idea has in thinking the appearance of political novelties, to account for the happening and the event of politics—not therefore simply probing its present ethico-political currency on the ever-fluctuating market of Value.⁶⁵ Consequently, the

the associated rights and duties this entails. The third and final supposition impresses on the question of the ‘name’ and its connection to a ‘collective body’. For it to be true that emancipation occurs only once for a particular group, individual, nation, then this supposes that a name rigidly designates a concrete collective body of subjects. If the generational problem as an empirical blockage in thinking the Idea of emancipation is to be dissolved then all three of the suppositions outlined above will need, in turn, to be broken with.

⁶⁵ What is the present stock of political ideas, about which politicians, political activists and philosophers speculate? Arguably—more than the ‘Good’, ‘Equality’, ‘Justice’—it is ‘Freedom’ that is taken as premium in our present conjuncture, even if there is a certain modulation in the uses that it is put to, in the practices it justifies and in the specific contents ascribed to it. The sense of ‘equality’, of what is ‘just’, what satisfies the collective ‘good’ have their meanings brought into alignment with the value of freedom. Parliamentarians (whether nominally on the ‘left’ or on the ‘right’) speak in terms of ‘freedom of choice’, meant as a way of ‘empowering’ its subjects, of ‘de-centralising’ power from the locus of anonymous bureaucrats and ‘quangos’. In reality, however, it is a less-than veiled attempt to justify the deepening and widening of the market and the concomitant stripping bare of public welfare provision. ‘Freedom of choice’ is routinely conflated with the ‘Freedom of the Market’; the logic of the market that, according to its adherents, is supposed to inculcate a certain spirit of freedom, with the profusion of commodities available to satisfy innumerable desires of the most idiosyncratic type.

Certainly, ‘freedom’ does not today circulate as solely the justificatory norm for free-market capitalism and the social injustices and inequalities it is responsible for unleashing. Other ideas of freedom beyond the narrow confines of hegemonic neo-liberal ideology suffuse the contemporary scene. The globalisation of ‘human rights’ would admittedly occupy an undecidable position in this regard. Certainly crafted in such a way so as to consecrate man’s autonomy, and his inalienable freedoms, the circulation of discourses on Human Rights have served as a palimpsest on which the specific demands and claims of political movements have been overwritten. But the form by which human rights discourses are couched *qua* rights—and this would constitute their residual trace—places a particular weight on the ‘individual’ claimant as the beneficiary of those rights, as the sovereign subject in possession of a quantifiable and objectifiable set of right-claims. It is in this way that human rights can be domesticatable within, rather than being a direct challenge to, the prevailing understanding of freedom; the negative right of non-interference as the requisite for individual autonomy, and the lynchpin of Human Rights treatise, is the very axiom that undergirds the market economy. The state’s function is to secure for its citizens individual autonomy (negative freedoms), while the citizen capitalises on his autonomy through the drive to accumulation and possession in the market place.

Recent events in both Tunisia and Egypt, it is true, have been couched in terms of ‘freedom’ (*hurriya*). In February 2011, millions of Egyptians could be heard demanding *hurriya*, *hurriya*, *‘adalah iġtimayyia* (“freedom, freedom, social justice”)—an understanding of freedom which, absolutely, need not be essentially re-inscribed within the dominant narrative of liberal democracy and market capitalism, although given the contemporaneity of such events, it remains difficult to know either way whether these political upsurges will lead to something qualitatively new or just simply a return to the fold.

Furthermore, a large swathe of academic literature has dedicated itself to the task of

question raises the *possibility* or the perennial *impossibility* (depending on how we are to situate ourselves in relation to question (1) above) of drawing out a set of implications that emancipatory struggles invite to reflect upon politics *as such*.

This takes us toward another cluster of questions, addressing thereby:

3. The *way* of approaching the theme of emancipation. The discursive situation we are to occupy for this thesis will be philosophical. But, and here arise the questions: what is philosophy's way of soliciting answers to a set of associated questions that subtend the thematisation of emancipation as a way of thinking politics? In what, specifically, does a mode of thinking we might name 'philosophical' consist? If some misgivings about philosophy and its comportment towards the task of thinking emancipation are voiced—due to a number of incurable antinomies that a philosophical accounting of emancipation has, historically, given rise to—then this may produce scepticism about the salience of approaching the theme philosophically. Philosophy is thus itself the locus of a set of problems, bringing with it the question of how we might desist a certain philosophical engagement from politics and yet remain strongly bound to it—not only on point of fact that philosophical discourses serve in this study as the datum by which the argument is to unfold (suggesting this inquiry remains tied to philosophy

thinking freedom, which remains explicitly critical of its prevailing utility, placed in the hands of free-marketeters and technocrats. Much of this re-description of what freedom might mean today takes its inspiration from Hannah Arendt, though not exclusively so. To name a few notable monographs: Svetlana Boym, in his recently published *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea* (London: Chicago University Press, 2010) speaks of freedom as 'an existential imperative.' p9. See also: Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002); Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (London: Anchor, 1999) and Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004). All this is noted in order to give a sense to the reader of the central value that is placed on the idea of 'freedom' today, in a way that if not displacing other Ideas then most certainly 'quilts' their understanding so that their meaning is overdetermined by freedom. Is it any wonder then that Nikolas Rose has asked whether it is at all possible to 'adopt an untimely attitude towards freedom?' *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* p62.

Lastly, 'freedom' and 'emancipation' need to be kept as two discrete ideas, not as synonyms. The latter remains heterogeneous to the former, a difference that is to be upheld. Arendt writes about this difference. We shall consider it in Chapter Six. Although, Arendt makes the distinction in order to place the value on freedom. Also, Simone de Beauvoir's comments on the difference in chapter 3 of part 2 of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948) are worth noting, particularly because she reverses the Arendtian priority of freedom over emancipation.

solely by association) but because this approach considers itself as an instance of philosophising.

It is with this third field of problems considered, that, in light of the first and second assemblages also, a further and final set of questions must be posed, namely:

4. Philosophy's *mode* of presenting the issue of emancipation. The species of presentation by which philosophy is to think both emancipation and politics is through the *Idea*. An Idea, that is, in contradistinction to the 'demand', the 'concept', the 'moral postulate', to 'a law', 'Ideal'. This is, admittedly, a claim more than a question, which at this stage functions solely as an assertion, and demands that the requisite demonstrations be provided. By Idea we are to understand, following Kant, a mode of presentation which, unlike 'concepts' and 'intuitions', have no direct correspondence to any object that might be corroborated through experience. Ideas are, in this sense, *transcendent*—which is not to say they have no immanent application. Rather, in contradistinction to the immanent bounds by which both knowledge and understanding operate, rational Ideas do not conform to the strictures of time-space bound cognition. We are not dealing with representations of a 'table', a 'pen', a blade of 'grass', but presentations that are solely the product of reason, such as the 'Good', 'Justice', 'Freedom', etc. Ideas function as portals by which access is sought to a beyond of our conditioned existences. Their nature is such that there is neither the possibility of issuing proof of their real existence nor, equally, can their employment be subject to any categorical refutation on the basis of a naïveté from those who, fixating upon abstract Ideas, concomitantly turn a blind eye to the realist factum of the sully of the purity of the Idea by the mixed and imperfect tableaux of the vicissitudes of material existence. As Kant writes in relation to man's continual striving for the virtuous life, 'the fact that no human being will ever act in a manner adequate to what is contained in the pure idea of virtue in no way proves that there is in this thought anything chimerical. For it is still only by means of this idea that any judgment about moral value or lack of value is possible.'⁶⁶ Judgments may have their root in experience. But, in our practical dealings with the world, many judgments suppose an Idea which lay beyond the grasp of possible experience. Ideas flout the otherwise stringent conditions cognition otherwise places on any existent that appears in the world. They exist within the

⁶⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A315/B372.

disjunction that is otherwise posited between, on the one hand, the immanent and conditioned bounds within which our understanding operates (the table of categories, the transcendental conditions of both space and time) and, on the other, the transcendent and unconditional heights to which speculative thought ascends, producing presentations that give both a sense of direction and impetus to bounded and conditional practices.

Supposing for a moment that philosophy's way of thinking politics is through the Idea, then, from such a basis, a final question arises: does 'emancipation' lend itself to such appropriation? This is an important question. We have to show awareness that when one raises the meaning of emancipation, the questions 'from what?', 'of whom?', 'by whom?', seem so preponderant in shaping the contours of what is to be understood by emancipation that were one to subtract this idea from the specificity of these questions there may be the risk of vacuity. The word e-mancipation, which has its etymological root in the Latin *e-mancipare*, already alerts us to its derivative status, and to its direct dependence upon an already established reality. The prefix 'e-' functions as a negation, a negation, specifically, of the hand (*manus*) that grasps, that captures, that seizes (*capere*). Firstly, in Latin, the reference is to the way by which slaves were exchanged before the monetary form came into circulation. The practice of *manceps* referred to the physical taking in hand of a slave by a freeman. At this stage (and without wishing to complexify its etymology unduly at this stage⁶⁷) it is sufficient to note that emancipation would designate this act of freeing, of releasing, from the hand that possesses—an act of *dis*-possession, of *ex*-propriation. It would seem, therefore, that the meaning of emancipation is negative and, by implication, derivative.⁶⁸ On these grounds,

⁶⁷ We must not forget, on the grounds of historical accuracy, that Roman Law distinguishes the liberation of the slaves (*manumittio*) from the emancipation of those under the tutelage of the domestic organon of *paterna potestas* (the 'power of the father'). Would this suggest a substantive difference in effects, with regards to the act of emancipating the child and manumitting the slave? Philologically, a notable difference does reveal itself. *Manumittio* is a compound verb formed from the particles *manus* (the hand, which metonymically also signified the power of the master) and *mittere* ('to let go', 'to release'). It is derivative, in that the act of manumission denotes a release from the power of the master, but it is not a straightforward negation, as is the case with emancipation, composed as it is from the noun *manus* (the hand) and the verb *capere* (to seize), and the pre-fix *e-*, which attaches itself as the negation of this act of seizing. Interestingly, *manceps* or *mancipium* was a form of exchange, undertaken in the act of possessing ('laying claim to') the chattles as *res* (objects) of freemen, before it was the assignation of a juridical condition of domestic governance. But the act of gaining propriety over slaves (*mancipium*) does not, nevertheless, have as it correlate term the direct negation of this economic arrangement, even if this remains one of the sources by which social incarceration was achieved, and for which, technically, the term emancipation would still apply, suggesting as it does the deliverance out of this arrangement.

⁶⁸ On the matter of all negations being derivations, Kant is instructive. He writes: 'Now no one can think a negation determinately, save by basing it upon the opposed affirmation. Those born blind

is it appropriate to think in terms of an Idea (as we have defined it) when it seems to be a concrete act that seemingly resists abstract speculation? Is not its meaning contextually determinant, resting on both a determinate and specified object, from which an equally historically given and structurally identifiable subject demands release?

These would be to circumscribe four general problematics. With each of these sets of problems there is, through a set of abnegations, the possibility that the central aims of this thesis might be subject to sceptical refutation. In the first place one may find dubious the salience of an inquiry into emancipation, and recommend that the investigation be aborted at the very point of its inception. This categorical dismissal has already been broached in the foregoing ‘Introduction’.

But, in truth, a certain modulation may exist in both the extent and intensity of the resistance shown towards the prospects of this study. One can affirm a notion of emancipation and not view its philosophical approach suitable, first because setting out with a philosophical itinerary risks steeping such a discussion in unnecessary abstraction and metaphysical contortion. The Italian thinker and subscriber to ‘weak thought’ (*Il pensiero debole*), Gianni Vattimo, would doubtless advocate such a parting of ways. Weakening philosophical pretensions would be a principal precondition for a re-routing of emancipatory claims away from the thick transcendental scansions with which philosophers have used to prop up such claims. What remains of the task of emancipation, writes Vattimo, is the realisation of ‘everyone’s entitlement to a meaningful existence, or, [...] their right to happiness [...] implying solidarity rather than competition and the reduction of all forms of violence rather than the affirmation of metaphysical principles or the endorsements of scientific models of society.’⁶⁹ When philosophical thought is disarmed, thinking is put in the service of a politics that ‘listens to what others have to say’ and seeks to build consensus between differences of opinion; an ethics of intersubjectivity substitutes the objective designs of the philosopher, in the pursuit of emancipatory ends. The case of Gianni Vattimo presents us with one possible way of

cannot have the least notion of darkness, since they have none of light. The savage knows nothing of poverty, since he has no acquaintance with wealth. The ignorant have no concept of ignorance, because they have none of knowledge, etc. All concepts of negations are thus derivative; it is the realities which contain the data, and so to speak, the material or the transcendental content, for the complete determination of all things.’ *Critique of Pure Reason* A575/B603.

⁶⁹ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) p36.

addressing emancipation, but which does so by withdrawing from the scene of philosophy.⁷⁰

Things can as easily be thought the other way around, such that the theme of emancipation lacks either the interest from or the engagement of the philosopher. Unlike other political Ideas ('Equality', 'Freedom', 'Justice', the 'Good'), one might venture that emancipation is perhaps too prosaic to offer any access into a wider set of metaphysical or ontological questions. This is, we know, the formative role that both 'the Good' and 'the Just' had in Greek philosophy. 'The Good', for Plato, as the highest of forms—the greatest to be known, but the last to be seen—which 'controls and provides both truth and understanding'.⁷¹ Freedom may have been a central idea in antiquity too, inextricably bound to both the Athenian *polis* and the *agora*, as well as to experiences of the public realm during the Roman republic. But its entry into the philosophical nomenclature as an integral and fully explicated part of its own project is of more recent date.⁷² German Idealism elevates freedom to a position of pre-eminence, where, as the inaugural notes for

⁷⁰ Ibid. p86. This is not the route this thesis will proceed along, though, for sure, certain suppositions are shared, inasmuch that what must first be put into question is a set of dogmatic investments in the way of reasoning for human emancipation, namely the attempt to provide an objective ground that would seek to guarantee the delivery into a liberated order, to accord necessity (whether structural, anthropological, historical or ontological) to the movement of emancipation, to identify a certain appearance of injustice as laying at the essence of social misanthropy *as such*. All of these questionings, by which Vattimo's brazen antifoundational thought is exercised, return us to the positing of contingency as the formative horizon for thinking Being. How this comes to affect the relation between the orders of the philosophical and the political is a principal issue here. How, therefore, is one to shuttle across the frontier that marks out the philosophical demonstration of the principle of contingency and the expounding of a certain set of political practices? To be consequent in drawing out the implications from the contingency of what is given requires that there be no relaxation of philosophical rigor, which would otherwise allow the ushering in of a set of political short-hands that themselves fall short of the very criteria used to undermine the metaphysical pretensions of philosophy. Vattimo succumbs to a set of political temptations that need not directly follow from what he takes as the 'radicality' of his own starting-points, and perhaps see him reaching for conclusions that serve only to sequester the otherwise radical suppositions his thinking begins from. References to the importance of 'consensus building', of an ethics of intersubjectivity based on the free and open exchange of opinions and views, bring Vattimo in close proximity to positions Habermas would otherwise hold, whose premises (as Vattimo tirelessly points out) serve as a counterpoint to his own. In this connection, one might wish to echo Reiner Schürmann's terse judgement of Vattimo that 'weakness of thought comes close to abdication' Reiner Schürmann 'Deconstruction is not Enough: On Gianni Vattimo's Call for "Weak Thinking"' in *Weakening Philosophy* ed. Santiago Zabala (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007) pp117-31.

⁷¹ Plato, *The Republic*, 517c.

⁷² Hannah Arendt writes in her essay, 'What is Freedom?': '[...] it may be pointed out that historically the problem of freedom has been the last of the time honoured great metaphysical questions—such as being, nothingness, the soul, nature, time, eternity, etc.—to become a topic of philosophic inquiry at all. There is no preoccupation with freedom in the whole history of great philosophy from the pre-Socratics up to Plotinus, the last ancient philosopher.' *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin, 2006) p144.

a system of German Idealism—written by its great architects (Hegel, Höderlin and Schelling)—announce, only what is ‘an object of freedom is called an *Idea*’: ‘Absolute freedom of all spirits, who carry the intelligible world in themselves and may seek neither god nor immortality *outside of themselves*’ is the unquestioned supposition with which the act of thinking must commence in its dislocation from the heteronomous orders of both religious superstition and the machinery of the state.⁷³ The groundwork for such a system had already been laid by Kant, who—according to Martin Heidegger—‘brings the problem of freedom for the first time explicitly into a radical connection with the fundamental problems of metaphysics.’⁷⁴

And Emancipation? *Prima facie*, the Idea has no systematic *thematization* in philosophy, even if motifs (such as in Kant’s opening remarks to his essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’⁷⁵) can be located and specific references isolated in the course of its history. It might be true that it is with Marx that the destiny of philosophy is thematically wedded to the idea of emancipation—Marx will write that ‘the emancipation of Germany will be an emancipation of man. Philosophy is the head of this emancipation and the proletariat its heart.’⁷⁶ But for one notable caveat: the advent of the Idea of emancipation marks the end of philosophy.⁷⁷

Much of the work of Marx and Marxism can be termed anti-philosophical, inasmuch that the aim is to do away with the mode of presentation by which philosophy thinks: the Idea. We can recall the opening passage of *The German Ideology*, where Marx

⁷³ Höderlin *et al*, ‘Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism’, *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p186.

⁷⁴ Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Human Freedom* (London: Continuum, 2005) p15. Gilles Deleuze, in his reading of Kant, also turns the problem of speculative metaphysics into the problem of freedom. Deleuze writes: ‘[...] the concept of freedom, as Idea of reason, enjoys an eminent privilege over all the other Ideas: because it can be practically determined it is the only concept (the only Idea of reason) which gives to things in themselves the sense or the guarantee of a ‘fact’ and which enables us really to penetrate the intelligible world. It seems, therefore, that practical reason, in giving the concept of freedom an objective reality, legislates in fact over the object of this concept. Practical reason legislates over the thing in itself, over the free being as thing in itself, over the noumenal and intelligible causality of such a being, over the supersensible world formed by such beings.’ Gilles Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, (London: Continuum Press, 2008) p26.

⁷⁵ Immanuel Kant, ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’, *Political Writings* p54. ‘Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. The immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding!’

⁷⁶ Karl Marx, ‘Contribution to the Critique of *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*: Introduction’, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (London: Norton Press) p65.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*.

rebels against the revolt waged at Ideas and concepts, all the fashion among the Young Hegelians.⁷⁸ This was not Marx performing his own counter-revolution in order to restore the Idea to its rightful place, but rather the last gesture to effectuate the final revolutionary task to extricate thought once and for all from the illusions (the ideo-logy) wrought by ideas. Marx begins:

Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. They have arranged their relationships according to their ideas of God, of normal man, etc. The phantoms of their brains have got out of their hands. They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations. Let us liberate them from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away. Let us revolt against the rule of thoughts. Let us teach men, says one, to exchange these imaginations for thoughts which correspond to the essence of man; says the second, to take up a critical attitude to them; says the third, to knock them out of their heads; and –existing reality will collapse.

These innocent and childlike fancies are the kernel of the modern Young-Hegelian philosophy, which not only is received by the German public with horror and awe, but is announced by our philosophic heroes with the solemn consciousness of its cataclysmic dangerousness and criminal ruthlessness. The first volume of the present publication has the aim of uncloaking these sheep, who take themselves and are taken for wolves; of showing how their bleating merely imitates in a philosophic form the conceptions of the German middle class; how the boasting of these philosophic commentators only mirrors the wretchedness of the real conditions in Germany. It is its aim to debunk and discredit the philosophic struggle with the shadows of reality, which appeals to the dreamy and muddled German nation.⁷⁹

One might surmise from this that emancipation occupies an uncertain place within philosophy's *taxis* of Ideas, not knowing the extent to which it lends itself to any philosophical treatment. And yet, at the same time as its meaning seems bound to a set of historical determinations, 'emancipation'—as it has been defended, put to use, argued for—shows itself in anything but a straightforwardly prosaic and concrete manner. There is a density of metaphysical ideas and a knotting of philosophical problems at work in the ways in which struggles for emancipation are waged. We shall need to consider these at length at a later stage, this is true. But, already, we have seen an entwining of metaphysical claims and political hope in the prologue to this thesis. The wager of

⁷⁸ Karl Marx, *German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998) p29.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

universal emancipation rests upon the possibility of seizing what is ‘unconditional’, ‘absolute’, of bringing an end to all relations of oppression and ideological mystification. At the same time as being drawn into speculation about the advent of the absolute, universal emancipation opens up a line of regression that tries to locate the determinant cause, i.e. the cause of the cause of injustice, so that, once successfully identified and destroyed all other forms of injustice, *epiphenomenal* to the first, are overcome.

Admittedly, there are some who have been alive to this strange marriage between concrete political struggles and abstract metaphysics, and have dismissed the use of emancipation on such basis.⁸⁰ The metaphysical subtext has been sufficient to convict the desire for emancipation as an idea not in keeping with both the rhythm and the pulse of the times, skipping the ‘post-metaphysical’ beat upon which many thinkers carry out their merry dance. Further, if emancipatory struggle is pulled into the orbit of ideas of the ‘absolute’, of the ‘supersensible’, or as ‘the totality of all conditions’—the ‘unconditional’ or ‘unconditioned’—then it is equally the case that philosophy finds itself drawn into the vicinity of a certain emancipatory logic, even if its effects by way of philosophy’s achievements are undecidable. While not thematically explicated, emancipation is nonetheless presupposed by philosophy. In axiomatising that ‘Man thinks’⁸¹, as Spinoza (for one) declares, philosophy sets the stage for its own aporetic display of emancipatory awakening. *Sui generis* man exhibits rationality and thought, the capacities of which man is in possession far surpass other beings—and the presence of which afford man the possibility of freedom. At the same time, man is a slave to a set of impulses, drives, desires—enchained to feelings, enraptured by cathectic states that push him to act in ways not in keeping with his rational capacities. How might humanity become the possible being that resides within each and every man? *Paideia* functioned as the Greek solution to this problem, a *paedeutics* or logic of instruction that would guide humanity out of the habitual and the commonplace toward the light of the Good.⁸² Whichever way philosophy

⁸⁰ For example: Judith Butler, in her *Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: SUP, 1998), or Richard Rorty, in his essay entitled ‘Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation’, in *Objectivity, relativism, and truth: Philosophical papers, Volume I.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991,) pp211-21, or Jean-Francois Lyotard, ‘Missive on Universal History’, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-85* (University of Minnesota Press: 1996) pp23-38 and *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 1986), Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: SUP, 1998).

⁸¹ Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics* (London: Penguin, 2004) See the second axiom of the section entitled ‘Of the Mind’ in which Spinoza writes simply: ‘Man thinks (or, to put it differently we know that we think.)’ p32.

⁸² Plato will famously allegorise this movement in Book VII of the *Republic* in the form of the cave

has chosen to undertake this task, supposed is a ‘middle passage’ through which man moves from a position of servility to the legislator of reason. A process of emancipation (however contestable this process may be) is installed therefore at the heart of philosophy.⁸³

This thesis positions itself equally against the possibility of considering emancipation without passing through philosophy in order to do so, as well as the possibility of proceeding philosophically without recognising emancipation as a legitimate concern for its own undertakings. Instead, here, the link between philosophical thinking and a thematic concern for emancipation is to be maintained. In this way, we are to follow Alain Badiou, who already prepares the way, when he writes that ‘placing *philosophy* under the condition of *emancipatory* politics [...] requires us to begin from the beginning, from the recognition that politics itself is, in its being, in its doing, a *thought*.’⁸⁴ This entails *strengthening* the resolve of philosophy, and the unique axiom with which it commences its investigations (‘man thinks’).⁸⁵

As the unthought of thought, it has often been deemed necessary to give (in the field of politics) *primacy* to action. This primacy is supposedly issued as a way of redressing the imbalance in philosophy’s priorities, of shifting from the cold detachment and relative isolation of the contemplative life to the *vita activa* of political deeds and the

that sees mankind playing in the shadows only for one to ascend into the light, making the returning descent into the ambit of the incarcerated to impart the knowledge of the truth and immutability of the Idea. Plato writes: ‘Education takes for granted that sight is there (i.e. that Man thinks) but that it isn’t turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately.’ 518d. The act of emancipation would be this instructing of Man to comport himself properly, so that he might see what needs to be seen.

⁸³ Please see: Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: SUP, 1991). Rancière provides a thought provoking account of the paradoxes of emancipation, delineating two strategies of intellectual emancipation: an explicative strategy, of which the Platonic method would be exemplary, but which maintains a relation of inequality between learner and learned—between ‘knower’, the ‘ignorant’ and the ‘object to be known’—and a more *aleatory* and emancipatory logic (properly speaking) that seeks to undermine the conventional pedagogical relation in order to bring into play the logic of equality which begins when there is no determinate knowledge to exchange or transmit between master and student. As Rancière writes of Socrates and the explicative method carried out by Socrates when equipping Meno’s slave with mathematical truths: ‘This may be the path to learning, but it is no way a path to emancipation. Socrates must take the slave by his hand so the latter can find what is inside himself, unless it is to illustrate the master’s lesson. In this case, Socrates interrogates a slave who is destined to remain one.’ p29.

⁸⁴ Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, (London: Verso, 2005) p24.

⁸⁵ Kant himself acknowledges the importance of this when he writes of man’s natural predisposition towards metaphysics: ‘all human beings [...] actually *have always had* in them, and *always will have* in them, some metaphysics.’ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* B21. (emphases added)

sensus communis of being- and acting- together.⁸⁶ But, perhaps nothing would do more disservice to politics than if it were understood as a weakening of thought's ambitions. Such a gesture more than implies that politics participates in thinking in an impoverished sense, and this *inadequation* be raised as if this were the source of the inner strength of politics. But what is issued as a compliment serves only to reinforce the very prejudicial attitude provoked with respect to the internal ordering of thinking and action, and for which an overturning is deemed necessary. But with what legitimate justification is such a claim to be defended, and in what way might such a gesture be rescued from plumbing the depths of absurdity it would otherwise descend? Politics understood as a practical task—which would mean what, exactly? That political subjects (the 'masses', 'political classes', figures of 'the oppressed') are there to act and not to think? And philosophers, theorists, whose self-appointed vocation is to think—are we to surmise that this thinking is not to be indexed as an activity, a practice? In its more egalitarian form, thought and action would find in the other a way of addressing the specific impotency each experiences: theory blunt without the real and embodied figure of the masses and a politics directionless without the guidance of a theoretical schema, to remind them from where it is they have departed, to whereabouts they are heading, and marking out the obstacles and dangers existing in-between. Each would supposedly come to the salvation of the other: the unity of theory and practice. But would there be in this division of tasks a truly equal distribution of competencies? The 'equal distribution' of roles can instead be the rhetorical overture of theory that otherwise goes about its business with a different tune. Those who act politically find themselves the subordinates to those who look onwards as spectators and, from a point of relative detachment, seek to point out the misdeeds and miscalculations made by those in a position of spontaneous immediacy with respect to political struggle.⁸⁷

Things then have to proceed differently. This means, precisely, affirming that political action is itself an act of thought, even if its rhythm, its cadence, that is to

⁸⁶ See: Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (London: CUP, 1998), which is exemplary of this reversal.

⁸⁷ Max Horkheimer remains exemplary of a certain affliction that overcomes the otherwise 'harmonious' relation between the appendages and head of the revolutionary body. The extent of the real asymmetrical relation between thought and action reveals itself in the following passage from 'Critical and Traditional Theory': 'The theoretician whose business it is to hasten developments which will lead to society without injustice can find himself in opposition to views prevailing even among the proletariat [...] If such a conflict were not possible, there would be no need of a theory.' *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (London: Continuum, 1995) p221.

say, the specific modality of this thinking is something else besides the form by which philosophical thought reveals itself as a thinking. To see the power of thought as constitutive of all modes of engagement with the world; such is the conviction, beautifully captured by the Post-Kantian Solomon Maimon, who begins his *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy* by issuing the following reminder to his readers: that ‘even those who despise thinking must admit this truth, if they would only pay careful attention to themselves. *All human activities are, as such, simply more or less thinking.*’⁸⁸ The strengthening of thought consists in being consequent in the *universalisation* of this message, and of raising the question as to how precisely philosophy is best to consecrate the little piece of good tidings it proffers.

For, the strengthening of thought cannot come at the exclusive benefit of philosophical thought, so as once more to wheel out the old prejudices of philosophy’s propriety over thinking. Not that everyone can be philosophers (*as if* to think was to philosophise), but that thinking can take place at anytime, in anyplace, under different forms and practices. The emboldening of thought must be ventured at the same time of *pluralising* the sites by which thinking comes to have material existence in the world: ‘Man thinks, *because* he exists’, to play as Rancière does on an inverted Cartesianism.⁸⁹ And in existing, man is placed in an array of situations, engaged in a plurality of activities, which nonetheless place different demands on, and generate different effects about, what it is to think (political, aesthetic, scientific, etc.). It is for these reasons therefore that a philosophical route into the Idea of emancipation is not raised as a way of admonishing the significance of the political task of raising the question of emancipation, but as a way of commencing an inquiry that addresses, from the outset, the importance of disseminating the universal message of thinking and its differentiating potency within a plurality of situated settings. This, therefore, is the purpose of a philosophical undertaking into the Idea of emancipation.

The Provocation of Politics: Thinking the Event, the Event of Thought

So far time has been taken to develop four sets of questions: questions relating to politics and its relationship to emancipation and philosophy; questions arising out of the

⁸⁸ Solomon Maimon, *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy* (London: Continuum;2010) p5. (emphases added)

⁸⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: SUP, 1991) p62.

relationship between philosophy, emancipation, thinking and the Idea. But what of ‘politics’? Of what benefit might it be if we think politics in light of emancipation and the idea of emancipation in light of politics?

Politics has given rise to its own branch of philosophy dedicated to thinking the specificity of the ‘political’, a veritable fleet of theoretical and scientific apparatuses are constructed to engage with ‘political’ phenomena. But what are the stakes associated with the tasks of ‘political philosophy’, ‘political theory’—or for that matter any thinking that takes as its datum for any systematic reflection something one may wish to call ‘politics’? The ends towards which a thinking of politics may tend—whether it is to adjudicate, criticise, to explain, predict or prescribe, to understand, and so on—are plural. Nonetheless, irrespective of the different ends a thinking on politics can be put, can we look upon these tributaries of thought as having a common source? What is it about ‘politics’ that moves thought to think? How to account for what puts these modes of thought on their way as an act of ‘thinking’? And—perhaps more pressing, today—how to remain faithful to the very quality that puts thinking on its way?

Gilles Deleuze writes that thinking does not entail the freedom to choose what to think, one is rather *forced* to think.⁹⁰ Alain Badiou gives his own assent to this insight: ‘thinking is never a matter of voluntary decision or natural inclination [...] thought pushes us, as it were, from behind, [...] a violence done unto us.’⁹¹ If politics serves as such a provocation for thought, if it is a cause for its movement, inasmuch that politics places a demand on thought *to think* ‘it’, then to enquire into this provocation is to initiate an inquiry into a set of attributions attached to politics that give rise to this provocation. ‘What is it about politics that causes thought to think it? This may not be the right way to raise the question. Or, if, perhaps, as the only way, we must readily acknowledge that such a question entails its own paradox.

The aim of focusing on the ‘whatness’ of politics is to accord to politics a definition that captures its essential determinants. We can write: to decide on the ‘what’ of politics is to advance knowledge-claims about the political. It would be to know, precisely, in what politics consists. This means giving politics both discernibility and a decidability as regards its being, and thus a consistency in the manner of its appearing. The question is whether to be in a position to know is to eliminate the very movement that thought undergoes in an attempt to think it? If there is something provocative about

⁹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p185.

⁹¹ Alain Badiou *Second Manifesto for Philosophy* (London: Polity, 2011) p110.

politics, then to what extent is this either a transitory characteristic or an invariant property of politics as such? If the former then the relation between thought and the provocation that politics produces interior to thought is an epistemological question: this feeling of provocation would be a symptom of an epistemic obstacle that knowledge alone can address. This means that if something about politics provokes us to think it, then this sense of provocation is nothing touching the essence of politics, at least not in any special way other than in terms of the most general sense, namely in the passage that all objects (and let us temporarily consider ‘politics’ as an object for thought) must at one point or another pass through, that is, from a state of being unknown—which triggers in thought the desire to think *it*—to that which is known. Brought finally under the control and security of the concept, the object in question is re-cognisable, its problematicity erased through its cognisance as a determinate object in the world. In deciding upon the meaning of politics, there comes a point when a certain thinking of politics ceases to stir or move with respect to the object it thinks; subsequent to the point from which a decision has been taken on its meaning, what is taken as an instance of politics will conform to the definition that that particular thinking had reason to confer upon it. Here, a given thinking on the political performs a perfect circularity.

One could enumerate all manner of predicable characteristics ascribed to politics that would serve to distil the quid, the ‘what-ness’ of politics: ‘Politics is the government *of* a people’, ‘Politics is government *by* the people’, or ‘politics is the governing *of* the people *by* the people’; ‘Politics is class struggle’, ‘The personal is political’, ‘Politics is war by other means’, ‘War is the continuation of politics by other means’, (the list is inexhaustive!). The question is whether the epistemological reduction (that is, the question of what incites, provokes, moves thought ‘to think’ politics as one being reducible to a question of knowledge), and the circularity subtending this reduction (namely, that whatever is posited as politics becomes co-extensive with its ‘real existence’), conceals something of the irrepressible movement that politics effectuates in thought, which, even once the question of its being has been said to be decided, issues examples that break loose from the conceptual bond tying politics to a certain representation of it? What if, therefore, the being of politics is not of the order of a set of stable properties and characteristics—secured for all time—but that a certain quality of politics rather discloses itself in the perforations and breaks it makes with respect to any

schema, model, any definition presented. It is to ask: can we consider the being of politics in terms of its happening?⁹²

⁹² To speak of the ‘happening’ that politics *is* shall be treated synonymously with the idea of politics as an event. Politics as ‘event’, politics as a ‘happening’: the reader will need to note that, throughout this thesis, there will be a seamless sliding between these two attributions. This conceptual sliding is not entirely unproblematic, for there is undoubtedly a certain difference in both intensity and extension between what circumscribes a ‘happening’ and what constitutes an ‘event’. Extensionally, the former appears to have a far broader reach in terms of its semantic possibilities than the latter. For example, one might say *it happens that* a cat jumps onto a branch of a tree (as cats are prone to do). But, this need not constitute an ‘event’. In order for it to qualify as an ‘event’, we would not solely be thinking of either a ‘movement’ or an ‘occurrence’, but something that marks out what commonly occurs when a cat encounters a low lying branch of a tree from that which takes an unexpected turn, such that the branch on which the cat lands breaks and the cat cushions its possible fall by landing on the head of some unsuspecting old lady who is taking shelter under the tree to protect herself from the glare of the midday sun. And even if, in the hospital, the nurse might enquire as to what *occurred* for the old lady to be bleeding so profusely from her head, this enquiry would reference the same series of actions that would be otherwise termed as an event, without in this instance the name attributed in order to describe this series (either an occurrence or an event) altering its meaning. *While, up to a point, every event is itself an occurrence or happening, we cannot so easily claim that every happening, occurrence or movement is an event.* We could not say of any jumping cat, for example, that it is in and of itself an event. The speech-act, ‘it was an event that the cat jumped’ supposes instead something more than the jumping cat i.e. that the cat had hitherto shown for whatever reason an inability to jump or, in what follows the act of the cat jumping, something transpires that was, from that point in time, unforeseeable. This admittedly is a trivial example, but it is an example that all the while conveys, at the level of everyday language, a subtle shift in semantic inflection between ‘happening’ and ‘event’, an extensionality that does not apply equally to each of the two terms. As far as the being of politics is—at times, expressed in terms of a ‘happening’—the reason for doing so is that it verbalises the movement that thought itself undergoes in the encounter with politics, i.e. something happens that serves as a happening both to and for thought. One cannot use the category of event for the same purpose, even if ‘event’ is the nominal marker by which one captures something of the break or rupture effectuated with what is known. Certainly, we can think about thought as being affected by an event, but the event itself does not allow us to verbalise the movement that thought undergoes in thinking it. We cannot for example say that something eventalises thought, without this causing one to place too much weight on the thought itself as an event (which doubtlessly is *entailed* by the relation between event and thought). While we can say that something can be an event for thought, this elides the minimal point of exteriority from which *philosophical* thought is touched by something outside of itself. In order to speak of the movement by which thought is effectuated we must, at the level of philosophy, couch the description of politics in terms of a ‘happening’.

If event and happening are both used as predications of politics, it is not at the cost of eliding their difference but to maintain a minimal difference between them. In a sense they speak to two different requirements. First, to appropriately phrase the way in which both philosophy and theory open themselves to the order of politics (in the form of politics as a happening) and second, to understand the event as that which, *politically*, is not that which only occurs, but as an *intensification* through a *modification* of an occurrence.

It is with this established that when raising the question above about whether we can think the being of politics with respect to its happening, we could have expressed the same thought in a slightly different way, which would have nonetheless retained the fundamental insight. We should consider, in light of these reflections, an article entitled ‘What is a Political Event?’ by Ian MacKenzie (Ian MacKenzie, ‘What is a Political Event’, *Theory & Event* 11:3, 2008). Mackenzie claims that while the relation between politics and the category of the event is, both in political philosophy and political theory, today often presupposed, the implications deriving from this articulation are yet to be fully drawn out. Mackenzie raises the question ‘What is a Political Event?’ so that, in his words, ‘analytical

We shall try and demonstrate the claim that a politics should first be understood in terms of its happening, by proposing that any philosophical or theoretical thinking about politics can be said to assume three things: 1) That, in matters regarding politics there is still something to think; what it has to think is not already adequately accounted for in political thought; 2) That, events secure for thought the fact that there is something still to think in politics 3) That what a thinking presents about politics is on account of the specific event it thinks as well being a thinking that transcends that singular event, which is to say, thinking politics (either theoretically or philosophically) is not reducible to a commentary on events. Each of these shall be taken in turn, expanding on both their meaning and their implications:

1) First, a thinking of politics will often claim that what has been presented hitherto is lacking, that prior interpretations are deficient in a certain way, insufficient in capturing the range of possible cases that might be gathered under the general concept of the ‘political’. *To think* politics requires that there is something *still* to think—a set of problems left undecided, an array of political phenomena left unaccounted for, a case that does not fit the general pattern of what is already known about a particular phenomenon etc. Were this not so, were the ‘all’ of politics already decided, the subject well and truly saturated—and one can be excused for often believing this to be so, given the sheer profusion of discourse dedicated to it—then one could feign indifference.

Sometimes, a feeling of indifference is difficult to avoid, particularly at conferences, in departments and institutions that build their reputation on politics. A mere repetition of the same, where the differences between particular viewpoints are sometimes so infinitesimally small that, ploughing through a thicket of exegetical detail, one becomes both beleaguered and blind to the political themes and problems that are supposed to animate the inquiry in the first place. It is important, as Rudolphe Gasché

light is shone, initially at least, on the ‘event-ness’ of political events rather than on the epiphenomenal meanings that such events acquire by virtue of being interpreted.’ Here MacKenzie posits an important distinction between, on the one hand, the meaning and signification attributed to *this* or *that* event—as and when the appearance of a particular event comes to be marked and indexed by a subject as the bearer of a certain theoretical position, of a particular political inclination, etc.—and, on the other hand, the brute irruption of an event anterior to the particular ways it may be indexed, marked, fixed, signified, etc. This latter, almost privative ‘event’, takes us to the ‘*eventness* of the event’, that is, the being of the event, and raises the question: what can be said about the ‘eventness of the event’, which is irreducible to the way in which a particular event appears in the world? Evidently, the projects of thinking the *event as event* and to think the happening of politics *as happening* coalesce around the same overarching problematic.

declares, to ‘save the honour of thinking’⁹³ (a motif he borrows directly from Jean-Francois Lyotard⁹⁴) from the mere calculation of the psephologist, from the recital of facts, quotes and dates of the historian, from the reception of another person’s ideas and the polemical exchange of invectives and cheap-shots that are meant to pass off as ‘critique’.⁹⁵ Not that there is either a time or a place for any of these activities. Rather, that a certain mode of thinking, which takes as one of its concerns the political, might leave to one side the hubristic inclination toward the certainty of its own position, and, at least, at some point, open itself toward what occurs beyond itself, the outside of thought, as the very cause for thinking.⁹⁶

‘The honour of thinking’ depends, however counter-intuitive this may at first appear, on a certain ‘disarmature’ of thought. Honour and disarmature are the antonyms by which Jean-François Lyotard employs in order to think the real stakes of thinking, so as to develop, in his words, again, a more ‘timorous rationality’,⁹⁷ a thinking sensitive to the nuance and the differentiating character of the nature of things.⁹⁸ An evaluation of his endeavours is not something to be explored now.⁹⁹ Important here is that Lyotard was, among many other thinkers of his generation, to give serious and sustained attention to the task of thinking that opens itself up to the order of the *event*, to the chance and aleatory happening that, at one and the same time, disturbs thought and yet compels to be thought. ‘The event indicates’, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘what has to be thought at the very heart of becoming, pointing to it as something more deeply withdrawn and more decisive than the “passage-into” to which it is ordinarily reduced.’¹⁰⁰

The order of the event (*das Ereignis* in German, in French *l’évenement*), with respect to the task of thinking, finds a certain perspicuity in politics.¹⁰¹ Hannah

⁹³ Rudolphe Gasché, *The Honour of Thinking*, (Stanford: SUP 2007) p9.

⁹⁴ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minnesota: Minnesota Press, 1988) pxii.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Martin Heidegger’s lectures on the task of thinking remain a source of much fecundity. Thought’s calling, i.e. what calls to be thought, demands that one be mindful of the outside of thought; the unthought of thought is the way into thinking. Thinking is not, therefore, a self-originating act. This would distinguish willing from thinking. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* (London: Harper and Row, 2004)

⁹⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) p11.

⁹⁸ Ibid

⁹⁹ This shall be undertaken in chapter 6.

¹⁰⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being, Singular, Plural* (Stanford: SUP, 2001) p163.

¹⁰¹ Though by no means is politics exhaustive of what is evental. For example, Alain Badiou offers an account of the event which has four basic denominations, and which he calls ‘Truth Procedures’: ‘Science’, ‘Love’, ‘Art’ and ‘Politics’. The event, for Badiou, is not just the indexing of a movement in

Arendt understood well enough that ‘the event constitutes the very texture of reality within the realm of human affairs’,¹⁰² where politics, as a particular site for human activity and of being-together, discloses the immanent possibility that, at any given moment, the miraculous in the form of the unforeseen, the incalculable may appear in the world. A high price, according to Arendt, is paid by the philosopher who makes a home for himself in the solitude of his own ideas, and, in this ‘fabricated’ abode, closes his door to the outside, remaining unaffected by the vicissitudes of concrete existence.¹⁰³ Entailed in this description is a question about how a philosophical thought might allow itself to be touched from without, how, therefore, it comports itself in relation to the event as a happening, an occurrence? If therefore the first presumption is that there is *still* something to be thought in politics, then the event itself constitutes the second presumption in any thinking of politics: namely, *there are events*.

2. What guarantees that politics remains to be thought is the possibility of the event. This can be considered very concretely, and in a way that intimately ties it to the first presumption. Assuming that hitherto accounts of the political are deficient (the first presupposition), it is through an appeal to the order of the event that one demonstrates such inadequation. One makes therefore an empirical wager by citing a case taken to be anomalous, an exception that disproves the many rules with which theories and philosophies of politics follow in thinking it. An example will be necessary here. Within the history of Marxism, the figures of Lenin, Gramsci and Althusser all seized upon the Russian Revolution of 1917 as an event that could not be adequately explained within the existing form of Marxist theory. Antonio Gramsci’s essay, ‘Revolution Against *Capital*’ was meant not only as confirmation of the founding axiom of Marxist Revolutionary thought (i.e. the necessity of a revolution to overcome the contradictions of capitalism), but it placed its stress on Marx’s *Capital* as the very target for revolutionary zeal;¹⁰⁴ the success of the revolution in Russia was a falsification of the ‘iron laws of economic

thought i.e. a happening. It is the irruption of something new in the world, an intensification of existence which modifies a particular world or situation. For three sustained engagements with the *transbeing* of the event across all four procedures, please see: *Being and Event*. (London: Continuum, 2005); *Conditions* (London: Continuum, 2008) and *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event, 2*. (London: Continuum, 2009)

¹⁰² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (London: Chicago University Press, 1998) p300.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Antonio Gramsci, ‘Revolution Against *Capital*’, *Pre-Prison Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp39-43.

necessity', which Marxism had, for a period after Marx's death, proselytised. On the 24th December 1917, Gramsci writes of the temporary suspension of the normal course of things, of the caesura in the natural *metabolē* of historical time: 'Events have overtaken ideology [...] events, which have exploded the critical *schemas* whereby Russian history was meant to develop according to the canons of historical materialism.'¹⁰⁵

What Gramsci had rather polemically waged as an event of political will to disprove the scientific excesses of the 'Second International', Louis Althusser uses as the means to rewrite—rather than to dispose of—the scientific accreditation of Marxist thought. Developing out of a reading of the October revolution Althusser contributed to a renewal of a Marxist analytic of political events—buttressed by the categories of 'overdetermination' and 'underdetermination'.¹⁰⁶

What simple message are we seeking to convey here? That—and let us not think it to be anything but a generally accepted point—events serve as cases with which to probe, and sometimes expand the limits of, a given philosophical or theoretical *dispositif* on the political. They serve as direct challenges to received ways of thinking politics, holding particular ways to account with the use of a critical example; they can throw into doubt a 'world-view' or theoretical perspective, by rendering certain axioms both uncertain and indiscernible—the points around which the line circumscribing the being of politics is drawn. We have therefore a 'political' event that calls for a concomitant event in the thinking of politics, and which demands that one think politics anew through the renewal of the very thinking of politics.

What prevents this thinking from being but the most flagrant empiricism, a mere commentary on 'events' as they happen, which, it must be recognised, need not impel one to think at all? Media networks seemingly exist on the 'eventalisation' of anything and everything. Rolling news coverage dictates that one form an instant opinion about whatever is topical—a snap-judgment often too receptive to the sentience of the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid p39. (emphases added).

¹⁰⁶ Louis Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', *For Marx* (London: Verso, 1996) pp87-129. The theoretical construction that Antonio Gramsci was later, against the odds of self-censorship and both political and theoretical incarceration, to bequeath to us should not itself be forgotten. See: Antonio Gramsci's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998). Gramsci offered a set of sustained reflections on the nature of political antagonism and the structuration of social and political relations, and have been of central importance in recent social and political theory. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 2000) still remains an important exploration and radicalisation of Gramsci's original theoretical insights.

times to have any analytical or explanatory value. We must advance therefore a third presumption:

3. That the consequences of a thinking of politics will have posterity. What it at least promises is the longevity, the endurance of its own contribution to the field of knowledge. Therefore a thinking of politics will not only take as its point of departure a set of examples that disclose the inadequacy of extant theories, and which, through due emphasis being placed on their differential character vis-à-vis already circulating knowledges, provides an opening once more to think the question of politics. Rather, it will take this opportunity as an opening to construct a set of ‘propositions’, ‘statements’, ‘concepts’, of its own, which will enable it to make articulations, draw comparisons between cases, between fields of objects and Ideas, and to carve out lines of demarcation and frontiers between itself and other theoretical positions.

Above, we have set out an extended reflection on how politics is first to be thought, in its being, as a happening or event, and that all thought (whether theoretical, philosophical, interpretative, empirico-scientific), nonetheless presupposes this fact, even if it is something that gets covered over once more. This dialectic between supposing and veiling this originary insight is, to a certain degree, inevitable. The first and the third assumptions, adumbrated above, would bring such inevitability to a head: there is the possibility that the very thought—which at first is receptive to the happening of the event of politics—becomes, in a certain way, recalcitrant to it. The event, registered as a disturbance to thought, demands to be thought; an inevitable reversal in the ordering between the event that serves as an opening for thought and a thinking that would aim towards interpretative closure of the event that has taken place. The relationship between thinking and the event, then, would exist within this torsion.¹⁰⁷

The Aporia of an Emancipatory Theory

Does there, then, exist the possibility of affirming the happening, the event of politics, which does not seek to anticipate its arrival in any determined form? To what

¹⁰⁷ This has been the topic of a non-philosophical investigation by Francois Laruelle. Please see: ‘From the Philosophy of the Event to the Philosophy-Event or World’, *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 9, 2000.

extent can a thinking think politics as an event in such a way that enquires into—to follow here Lyotard, as well as Nancy once more—not ‘what’ happens (a secondary question), but ‘that it happens’ (a more originary interrogation);¹⁰⁸ to what extent, moreover, can the event of politics move thought to interrogate the ascription of politics as eventual? Which is to ask, how much might be said about the *being* of the happening of politics, without the plural ways in which a politics *appears* in a world undergo any *needless a priori* restriction? How minimal might the transcendental conditions be, so that one can address the formal conditions that account for the happening or event of politics, without being drawn to silence? It is a question directly correlated to the following: how to welcome *the new* in thought? This is a problem about which Alain Badiou is acutely aware, and which is immaculately synthesised in the following passage from *Being and Event*:

How is it that an event can be that which breaks with the decidability of the situation, that which, *par definition*, is undecidable—unpresentable—that which is not-being in the being-there of the situation—and yet at the same time appear and have its appearing confirmed, decided, without that which defines the event qua event being annulled?¹⁰⁹

Admittedly, these issues are of a particular density, such that if the requisite amount of care is not taken we will either be led into a thicket of digressions and detours or, contrarily, we will offer only the most superficial of treatments, doubtlessly short-changing the reader. Summarily, things can be put in the following form: thinking the event of politics entails a certain paradox. To think politics is to open itself to the order of the event as that which happens. To paraphrase Alain Badiou: so that the process of thinking may begin, ‘something *must* happen.’¹¹⁰ Were nothing to happen, then, following Badiou further (*via* one of his many allusions to Marllamé), we would be faced with the inevitability that ‘nothing takes place, but the place’,¹¹¹ a complete hypo-stasis of the structure, which, in its interiority, would only function as the interminable repetition of the same, as the finite circulation of what already exists within it. With respect to the decidable, the discernible, the knowable—and concomitantly the determinately unknowable—thought stirs not under these conditions. Rather, the ‘event’, which, for Badiou, carries associations with the ‘hazardous’, the ‘unforeseeable’, the

¹⁰⁸ J-F Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 1996) p93.

¹⁰⁹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, (London: Continuum, 2005) p193.

¹¹⁰ Alain Badiou, ‘On Subtraction’, *Theoretical Writings*, (London: Continuum, 2005) p110.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

‘disconcerting’—that which ‘irrupts’, ‘surges forth’—serves as the supplementary instance of what is already given, issuing thought with the wager of declaring the existence of what is otherwise not decided upon, and as such is said—from the point of view of what Badiou terms the ‘situation’—to *inexist*.¹¹² The paradox for thought then is that, if its genesis lay in something that disturbs it, its task is subsequently to work over the implications of the particular happening(s) by which it is provoked. In affirming the specific happening that braces it, the task of thinking lay in registering, in its *singularity*, that which emerges, of providing an account of it that does not seek to house it within a pre-fabricated conceptual framework, as if it were knowable in accordance with an order of already fixed categories or established logical deductions. If the happening of politics breaks with the knowable (and the eventual attribution ascribed to politics rests on this assumption), then it cannot find its place within a general theoretical architectonic built on the basis for some other purpose, or in response to a set of other cases, but it must be treated singularly, that is, as a unique and unrepeatable instance. Is, then, the event reducible to its historical appearing—which would bring us back to a form of inductive or empiricist reasoning—or, if not, what can be said that addresses the event of politics as such, directing itself to the being of the event, once one has subtracted it from any of its multiple appearings in the world?¹¹³ How, from a philosophical point of view, to extricate the form of the happening from the specific content of what happens? But, at the same time, how to give a historical affirmation as to what concretely happens—indexing what ‘appears’—all the while not equating the concrete appearing of the event with the being of the event as such? This is a problem of immense difficulty. Lyotard writes:

There is a tradition and an institution of philosophy, of painting, of politics, of literature. These ‘disciplines’ also have a future in the forms of schools, of programmes, projects and ‘trends’. Thought works over what is received, it seeks to reflect on it and overcome it. It seeks to determine what has already been thought, written, painted or socialised in order to determine what has not been. We know this process well, it is our daily bread. It is the bread of war, soldier’s biscuit. But this agitation, in the most noble sense of the word (agitation is the word Kant gives to the activity of the mind that has judgement and exercises it), this agitation is only possible if something remains to be determined, something that has not yet been determined. One can strive to determine

¹¹² Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, (London: Continuum, 2005). See in particular Meditations: 19, 20 and 31.

¹¹³ A central task of Alain Badiou’s thinking is principally to identify the being of the event (what, on occasions he names the trans-being of the event), transporting us beyond ‘the empirical manifestness of their existence.’ *Logics of Worlds*, (London: Continuum, 2009) p6.

this something by setting up a system, a theory, a programme, or a project—and indeed one has to, all the while anticipating this something.¹¹⁴

The subtitle of this thesis is such that much hangs on thinking through this problematic, which is not divorced from the set of issues arising from the Idea of emancipation, but follows as a logical extension of them. Thinking an emancipatory politics in such a way that one might affirm what is emancipatory about politics and what is political about emancipation depends that we think its irruption in the form of an event, a happening. A little assertoric perhaps, we must nonetheless advance the proposition that emancipatory political sequences are themselves novelties; it is through due consideration of struggles for emancipation that affords access into the ontological postulation that politics is itself evental. Why might this be the case? An emancipatory politics—as a particular way in which the political appears *as such*—has as its point of departure not the confirmation of any definitional content which, at a given point in time and space, is said to be ascribable to politics. It rather confounds any attempted answer to the question ‘what is politics?’ (and the associated question about the ‘who’ that has the capacity as well as the authority to speak and act on behalf of the all of a political community), by placing under temporary suspension the content ascribed to the ‘what’ and the ‘who, which counts as political in a given regime or situation.¹¹⁵ If this questioning of the ‘what’ of politics is *primary* in instances of emancipatory struggle, then it is on such a basis that we can regard such struggles as attendants of the new. Obviously, we are acknowledging two things at once about the precise manner in which the Idea of emancipation relates to politics: the first demands that we think the *differentia specifica* of *emancipatory* politics. We are therefore not thinking politics and the totality of its cases, but an idea of politics that gains ascriptive qualification through the term emancipation, and thus a mode to be set apart from others. At the same time, the second demands that we affirm in this particular mode of political engagement (an emancipatory *politics*) what is *generic* in

¹¹⁴ Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, pp90-91.

¹¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, for one, has tirelessly demonstrated this. A beautifully rendered passage, synthesising the general points being made here in this thesis, describes an emancipatory politics as: ‘scenes of dissensus, capable of surfacing in any place, at any time. What “dissensus” means is an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness on all. It means that every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification. To reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought is to alter the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities.’ *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009) p49.

politics, namely something of the evental form by which politics *qua* politics makes its appearance.

Yet, the prevailing ways in which these two demands have played themselves out in the history of thinking empirical emancipatory politics point to their unsatisfactory calibration. Here we have to consider the fact that theories of emancipation have arisen out of concrete instances of such emancipatory political sequences, more or less co-appearing with them. They become bound to a specific *empirical* appearing of a novel occurrence that is then elevated to *transcendental* status. Such is the case with Marxism and the worker's movement, Feminism and the striving for gender equality, Post-colonialism with respect to anti-colonial struggle. Each indexes a particular mutation, a change or transformation in the specific themes, the meanings, the objects, subjects and the places that come to be ascribed as 'political'; each has marked along the register of either theory or philosophy a certain event or a cluster of events that have themselves actively contributed to a re-visioning of politics in the name of emancipatory possibilities, actively demonstrating thereby that another politics is possible other than what is already given or received to be the case. A politics, for example, augured through the antagonism between the factory-owning capitalist and the wage-earning worker, which allowed one to replace the preponderant concern with political order and the rule of law with the antagonistic relation of class struggle. We can consider also a thinking of politics that teased out the implications of feminism's concrete problematisation of the topographical distribution of public spaces and private places, which made thereby it possible to think domesticity as itself political and not solely the cloistered setting of conjugality and family affairs. But also any thinking of politics that has affirmed the capacities of those who were otherwise deemed to be without political capacity, as actively demonstrating their immanent potency to effectuate change in the ordering of a given society. The risk, however, is that the opening afforded by any specific and historically emergent emancipatory politics is, through *an act of subreption*, philosophically or theoretically seized by elevating the singularity of *an* event to the status of *the* event, so that the trajectory of what counts as *evental* is fixed determinately in the image of what, empirically, serves as *a happening for that* thinking. What results is a certain indiscernibility between the real material cause that the 'event' *qua* 'event' has upon thought (as that which interrupts thought from without, so to speak) and the ideal conditions on which thought places on the 'event' (so that what is identifiable as an event is forced to conform to certain set of predicates; for example, that the event, for it to be

re-cognised as an event must contain the proletariat as its principal subject, that it must take place at the site of the factory, and must have as its demand the consummate overthrow of capitalism as a mode of production, etc.).

This is something that we need to pay attention to, and this is why also—along with the question of the novel in politics and the manner in which philosophical and theoretical thinking might serve as ways of registering the new—we must consider the question of ‘visibility’, and direct the question of the visible toward the philosophical or the theoretical—or for that matter, any thinking that is not itself an instance of politics but which takes as one of its concerns ‘the political’.

Conditions of Possibility as Conditions of Visibility

In the course of undertaking a critique of post-emancipatory reason, we shall open up towards a thinking of the new, of the event, in relation to politics. But, at a certain level of engagement—such as when one proceeds *intra*-philosophically (as this thesis does)—the ‘event *qua* event’ recedes beyond the page of the philosopher’s book; the question of the ‘in-itself’ of both the new and the event undergo a certain displacement.

In this thesis, the whole debate surrounding ‘politics’, ‘the possible’, ‘novelty’ is channelled through a certain discursive film, philosophy. Philosophical thought in relation to the happening of politics places a strain on any direct access to the ‘real’. Philosophies are encumbered discourses (like all discourses, this is true), which means that invariably any gesturing towards affirming the new is relative to the theoretical or philosophical site from which a particular thinking occupies. What a given thinking can affirm that is ‘new’, the possibilities it registers, are related to the conditions that a given theoretical discourse posits, functioning as the conditions of visibility for that thinking. What does its articulation of categories and concepts, its postulation of a set of transcendental conditions said to make a certain politics possible, allow it to affirm with respect to the political—what constitutes its blindspots, its limits in thinking the event of politics?

Philosophies may put into operation similar categories and concepts. We should not for one moment though see the broad distribution of a term among a range of thinkers from a variety of traditions as a signal to draw out any identity in its usage. Much

depends not only on the meaning ascribed to such categories, but on the articulations and relations drawn between concepts. There is, firstly, the way in which the event is understood by different theories and by various philosophers. The event has now made its arrival onto the scene of philosophy. Five notable examples have already been cited: Arendt, Badiou, Deleuze, Lyotard and Nancy. Others could be named, which by no means would exhaust the list either. The meaning accorded to the category undergoes a certain amount of variance. There is, on occasions, an empiricist-bent to the way in which the event is deployed. On the other hand, there is a metaphysical rendering of the event, an intensive treatment and an extensive use; understandings of the event that make it something exceptional, a rarity, such that the event is defined as that which makes an incisive cut with the order of Being, but equally philosophies of the event that think it as something *supermundane*, as a category interwoven with the movement of Being.¹¹⁶ Of equal importance, there is a difference in the mode by which certain philosophers and theorists comport themselves with respect to the category. This invariably subtends the particular valence that, in each case, the event is said to exhibit. Almost certainly, here the complexity of these issues is further ratcheted. The event is a cause for thought, and yet it appears also as a thought-effect. What is meant as a *real* predicate for thinking politics is none other than something that thought works over, shaping it into a particular form that will alter the way in which, interior to their respective philosophies, the event appears as such. We had already reason to mention—but it bears repeating—that there is therefore an indiscernibility between the event as a material cause thought receives and the event as an ideal condition posited by thought, which it then donates to politics. This thesis will have reason to think the difference in how the event appears as an element interior to three distinct itineraries. Principally the readings of Hannah Arendt, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Karl Marx—presented as part of the investigation into the Idea of emancipation, politics and the manner of their (non)relation—will index the shifts in the tone and accent that the event as a category for thought undergoes. The implications

¹¹⁶Alain Badiou has drawn out the central dispute arising out of the thinking of the event, counterposing his own thought against Deleuze's as the two principal protagonists of *eventality*. The reader is directed to pp381-87 of *Logics of Worlds* tr. Alberto Toscano (London: Verso, 2009) for a condensed summary of the differences illuminating their thinking of the event. In a more general accounting of the difference between different appropriations of the event, please consider the following quote from Badiou, taken from a short essay entitled 'The Event as Trans-Being': 'Philosophy will always be divided between, on the one hand, the recognition of the event as a supernumerary advent of the One, and on the other, the thought of the being of the event as a simple extension of the multiple. Is truth what comes to being or what unfolds being? We remain divided.' *Theoretical Writings* (London: Verso, 2004) p102.

subtending their respective ways of thinking the event will need to be registered in the course of our inquiry.

How might one evaluate these modulations and variations in the very way in which these basic categories are understood and put into operation by particular philosophers and theoretical systems? Firstly, we have to resist appealing to the criterion of *adequation*, as if the question were which philosophical discourse or which theoretical programme provided definitions of these central categories that were in strict accord with their real existence. If it is true, as Alain Badiou writes, that every philosophy entails a politics—even when it wishes to think *the* political in more general terms¹¹⁷—then, rather than the attempt at jumping out of one’s shadow, in order to free oneself of the image that one casts upon the real, we need to fix our eyes on the implications subtending the silhouette which is projected and thereby circumscribe the possibilities that that thinking makes available in receiving the happening that politics enacts. The implications are here far-reaching.

Operating interior to philosophy means that we are condemned to walk along the same logical circularity that all philosophical thought proceeds along. The real receives as much as it gives to philosophical discourse. Philosophical visibility, therefore, is not a matter of judging which philosophy has the most accurate, or more correct, picture of the world, or failing that, is more proximal to it. What it can *only* be a matter of, at least on this occasion, is thinking in terms of a philosophy that maximises the ways of indexing the new in politics. This demands that a philosophical thinking wrests itself from a particular content as to what constitutes an event—resulting in the elevation of a particular event to the *status perennis* of the Event (held up as the model against which all events are measured and must conform to, or otherwise be discarded)—and seeks instead to multiply the ways in which the event of politics appears qua event.

In one sense, the category of the ‘new’ is the axle around which the thesis turns. And this in spite of the thematic priority this investigation places on the idea of emancipation. This is because affirming the idea of emancipation by criticising certain discourses for renouncing it and applauding those for retaining it could turn out to be a quite scholastic and empty affair were this not connected up with a set of other related ideas (politics, the event, the new, possibility), which might undergo certain alteration in accordance with whether a certain thinking of politics makes available or leaves

¹¹⁷ Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, (London: Verso, 2005) p16.

unavailable the idea of emancipation. We need to know what precisely rests on the presence and absence of this idea, and to what extent it can be said that a set of effects are carried along with the retention of the idea that transfigure the very way in which, with respect to the new, politics can be seized in thought.

To be direct in the framing of the question: to what extent does an emancipatory politics imply a politics of novelty? Or phrased in a way so that the question operates on a register interior to philosophy: what does a philosophy, which keeps in play an idea of emancipation, contribute to a thinking of politics; in which respects is such a philosophy consequent in unfurling the implications subtending the happening of politics? It is with this question that the thematic focus on the idea of emancipation is delivered over to the question of the new. But delivering the idea of emancipation over to the new as the measure for thinking through the question of philosophical visibility encounters the obvious problem of knowing how to think the new *qua* new? Are we not here caught within a double-bind? Is it not the case that what is adjudged to be novel is itself relative to each and every philosophical discourse? Can we possibly think the new in and of itself, and if not does this not mean that there is a problem in appealing to the new as a way of arbitrating over different philosophies, as if it operated as some neutral term?¹¹⁸ We need to find ourselves in a position that permits, on

¹¹⁸ It is certainly possible to think the in and of-itself of the ‘new’ that would not relativise it by claiming that what determines the ‘new’ is how it appears to consciousness or how it shows itself against the backdrop of a particular matrix of thetic decisions and contextual factors. The challenge is one of the utmost magnitude. We can imagine a number of scenarios in which the question of the new is ineliminably perspectival, so that the new is only new from a certain point of view: the fragrance from an exotic flower experienced for the first time; the opening trills of a new Philip Glass opera (which does not depart significantly from any of his prior compositions), etc. In neither of these cases is it so that the new as new is thinkable, but that it is the subject, on the basis of his or her past experiences, who finds a sense and a sensibility in the new. It would seem therefore that one can only think the new in the dative case, such that the new is new for someone, that only in it being received by someone does it come to be seen as new. This would be the abiding judgement of Hannah Arendt, who writes in *The Life of the Mind* that ‘Seeming—the “it-seems-to-me”, *dokei moi*—is the mode, perhaps the only possible one, in which an appearing world is acknowledged and perceived. To appear always means to seem to others, and this seeming varies according to the standpoint and the perspective of the spectators.’ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, (London: Harcourt, 1978) p21. This, however, places ‘the new’ under the extreme pressures of relativisation, sufficient to expiate it of its metaphysical potency; through the convention of a dialectical reversal, it could be said: if everything can, under particular conditions, be experienced as new then nothing is. This would be the corollary of tracing the new back to consciousness, judgement, understanding or any other subjectively derivable faculty.

The work of Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze would offer proof of effective investigations into the real conditions of existence for the new. In this way they offer two of the most compelling—though greatly contrasting—accounts. For the purpose of this thesis (and in keeping with, at least, the spirit of the Kantian critical method and its concomitant ontological neutrality)

the one hand, us waging that the new, both in and of itself, can be thought, even though, on the other hand, given that this thesis proceeds interior to philosophy, any immediate possibility of encountering it is foreclosed to us. The immediate enquiry is into the ways in which certain philosophical discourses seize the new; therefore, here it is only a question of what is indexed as new *for* a certain thinking about politics.

There is here a relation between conditions of possibility and conditions of visibility. From the position of philosophy, philosophical visibility becomes the varifocal lens through which the event of politics, and the emergence of the new thereby, passes. It is this principle that our encounter with the event and the new will invariably be bound by.

Novelty and Possibility. A Complication

From what has been introduced so far, there is the further requirement to correlate ‘possibility’, ‘visibility’ and ‘novelty’ in a way that bespeaks, at a philosophical level at least, a co-dependency between this tripartition of terms. To what extent, though, do ‘possibility’ and ‘novelty’ chart two different courses in thinking politics?

Seemingly, if politics is to be ascribed as *evental*, then this would predispose politics to one of these categories alone. Regarding the ‘possible’, warnings abound. Gilles Deleuze offers a salient word of caution: ‘To the extent’, Deleuze writes in *Difference and Repetition*, ‘that the possible is open to “realisation”, it is understood as an image of the real, while the real is supposed to resemble the possible.’¹¹⁹ The cautionary tale Deleuze delivers is that the possible tends towards circularity: the possible, indexed by what is already the case, comes to have a quasi-reality, grounded in what is real without *really* being such; the possible functions thereby only as a certain realisation of that which is already posited by the real. It is on this basis that the possible debars access to the new, because as possible it has its point of derivation in what is already ‘there’, what already has place in the world. The possible is the coming to be of something that is

agnosticism has to be shown with regard to the being of the new. This means, specifically, that this thesis will not be laying forth an argument that has its basis in any ontological position delineated by a given thinker, and does not mean, as might be otherwise thought, having no interest in ontological questions *stricto sensu*. What this, therefore, does not mean is that ontological claims are completely bracketed. This ‘weak’ sense of what is understood by the ontological (as Stephen K. White would have it see: *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*, (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000) is unavoidable.

¹¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, (London: Athlone, 1990) p212.

already in circulation. Henri Bergson will write, in 'Le possible et le réel', that the common notional content attached to possibility is that it be treated as the correlate of the actual; in its generally accepted understanding, according to Bergson, 'the possibility of things precedes their existence', such that the realisation of possible things be therefore the possible made real. What is possible is already given prior to its concrete instantiation. It is a state of affairs about which one can first hypothesise, so as then to realise it. The possible is thought as a knowable and deducible element, the genesis of which can be accounted from the point of view of what is extant, from what is already given. Can the new be understood on such bases? Were it so then the new would be akin to a hidden treasure, locked away in storage some place, awaiting some consciousness or scientific apparatus to discover it. Such an image profoundly misunderstands the quality of *newness*, however. This Bergson explains by way of the following anecdote:

One day I was approached and asked how I saw the future. Somewhat confused, I declared that I did not see it at all. "Don't you see at least" was the reply, "a few possible directions? We admit that we cannot foresee the details; but you at least, you the philosopher, have an idea of the set of possibilities. How do you imagine, for example, the great dramatic work of tomorrow?" I will always recall my interviewer's surprise when I answered him: 'If I knew what the great dramatic work of tomorrow would be, I would create it myself.' I saw clearly enough that he thought the future work locked away, since then, in who-knows-what cupboard of possible works; in consideration of my age-old relationship with philosophy, I was supposed to have obtained the key to that cupboard.

"But," I say to him, "the work of which you speak is not yet possible."

"But it simply has to be possible, so that it will come to pass."

"No, it is not. That said, I will grant you that it will have been."¹²⁰

Bergson takes issue with the assumptions that serve the basis for the interviewer's enquiry, namely the prospects of knowing prior to its instantiation any future event of literary creativity. How could one begin even to entertain such a line of enquiry, without the novelty and creativity of that work being fatally compromised? The preponderance of the 'possible' becomes a way thereby of extinguishing the necessary sensitivity to the unexpected and unforeseen required to think and index the new.

¹²⁰Henri Bergson, 'Le possible et le réel', *La pensée et le mouvant: essais et conférences*. (Paris: Libraire Félix Alcan, 1934.)

Therefore, to think ‘genuine creation’—which for both Bergson and Deleuze require the same stringency as the thinking of the new—would seemingly demand that the distinction between the possible, on the one hand, and the real, on the other be broken with.¹²¹

And yet, in this thesis, the title introduces politics not with respect to ‘political novelty’ but ‘political possibility’. The category of the new instead functions as a third term that operates transversally across the issues of ‘political possibility’ and ‘philosophical visibility’. How, then, do things stand in relation to the category of the possible? Caution must first be shown with regards the specific meaning we are to ascribe to this category, if we are to think possibility in relation to both politics and novelty in a manner that is consequent and does not invite bafflement. To begin, we must be aware of the difference between what is ‘logically possible’ and the category of ‘real possibility’. In the case of the former, we shall take Aristotle as a guide. In the *Metaphysica*, Aristotle writes that any proposition not entailing contradiction is possible. Aristotle proceeds by taking the example of two entities, *A* and *B*, that are said to exist only through their relation to each other. On this basis, for either *A* or *B* to be possible, their possibility must apply to both equally. If, on the other hand, only one of either *A* or *B* are posited as possible then, given that the premise established is the co-relation of both *A* and *B*, both *A* and *B* must be impossible.¹²² Logically, therefore, it is the principle of non-contradiction that circumscribes the possibility of a given statement. The ‘squared circle’ would be an example that violates such a principle: given a definition of a square (a geometrical object with four equal sides) and of a circle (an object with a curvature of 360 degrees), the idea of a ‘squared circle’ is an impossible figure. Its impossibility conforms to the logical dictates of the ‘broken middle’: *either* it is a square *or* a circle. In being *both* it is *neither*. As a formal operation, the question surrounding the possibility of a given proposition need not directly encroach upon the content of *that* proposition. This means, at least from a logical point of view, the proposition that ‘nymphs live at the bottom of the garden’ is, on point of fact of coherence and non-contradiction, a possible statement.

Empirically, things look somewhat different. When the question of possibility is latched onto a specifiable world, the formal coherence and internal consistency of a proposition cease to be the sole criteria by which the possible is

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, The Basic works of Aristotle. (New York: The Modern Library, 2001) 1047b.

deducible. This point is succinctly made by Kant, in the First *Critique*, where the question of ‘impossibility arises not from the concept in itself, but in connection with its construction in space [and time], that is, from [both] the conditions of space [and time] and of [their] determination.’¹²³ To this Kant adds a fundamental modification to the modal form of possibility, namely ‘real possibility’. For something to be regarded as possible it is insufficient to uphold the law of non-contradiction; a possibility is such only if it conforms to the formal *a priori* presentations of space and time, which operate as the requisite conditions of our experience of the world. For while, logically speaking, ‘I can present various things, which are so constituted that the state of the one carries with it some consequence in the state of the other, and this reciprocally’, Kant warns that ‘I can never determine from these concepts, which contain a merely arbitrary synthesis, whether a relation of this kind can belong to any [possible] things.’¹²⁴ The possible has a more determined position with respect to the actual, which is not the case with ‘logical possibility’. This determination of the possible comes to have a double significance:

1. First at the level of *formal conditions* of possibility—of the categories and the *a prioricity* of both time and space, which escort our every representation of an object of experience, securing for us the conditions by which an object appears to consciousness and on the basis of which this object comes to have actuality. Possibility is, in this sense, that which allows things to appear in a world, *that which makes possible the experiencing of objects*.
2. Second, at the level of matter, such that whatever is possible is first received as a datum for cognition, and is then made intelligible for a subject through the superimposition of the formal categories and presentational fields of time and space. Possibility is that which bears upon what has appearance as a *possible object* of experience.

On account of this dual determination (at the level of both form and matter), Kant surmises that the possible only has sense when it ‘bears on the *knowledge* of things

¹²³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A221/B268.

¹²⁴ Ibid A221/B269.

as *actual*.¹²⁵ Restricted by the *material* conditions of experience that comprise the actual, and that therefore serve as the datum by which cognition operates—under the *formal* conditions of space and time—the possible is divined from what is known in actuality. Real possibility alters the scene somewhat from logical possibility. The measure of the ‘possible’ is forced to pass through not the empty sense of logical propositions but the sense determined by the experience of the object, which itself is subject to the spatio-temporal determinations that themselves make possible the experience as such. With the distinction between the logically possible and real possibility, we drift from what is purely *thinkable* to what is *knowable*. For this reason, it is Kant’s notion of ‘real possibility’ that we must begin with, if only to quickly depart from it again. Why must we prepare for a hasty departure from the Kantian recasting of the possible? Some further steps need to be taken if the category of ‘possibility’ is to remain consequent in thinking what strikes thought as eventual. The philosopheme of the event necessarily breaks with possibility as known possibility, and with therefore the Kantian articulation between the possible and the knowable. Here, an array of philosophical statements and metaphors might be gathered together in order to stage such a dislocation: such that the truth of the event reveals itself in the hole it *punctures* in knowledge (Badiou);¹²⁶ that the event issues its own demand of unlearning what it is to *re-cognise* so as to learn once more the art of seeing’, of fostering a heightened sensibility about what constitutes ‘the vast peripheral fringe of curved space’ (Lyotard);¹²⁷ that, from the view-point of what is most quotidian, the event is understood as incalculable, miraculous, unforeseeable (Arendt);¹²⁸ that it is the stage for an aporetic display of the impossible-possible (Derrida), the event as that which therefore takes its flight from the inviolable law of non-contradiction.¹²⁹ Real possibility as knowable possibility, precisely, would place the orders of the possible and the event on opposite sides of a dividing line. Does this mean therefore that the possible is the alibi for what is *already given and presents itself* to experience, and is

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, tr. Oliver Feltham (London: Verso, 2004) pp327-43.

¹²⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, tr. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (London: Minnesota, 2011) p154.

¹²⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p169.

¹²⁹ Jacques Derrida writes: ‘[...] a possible that would only be possible (non-impossible), a possible surely and certainly possible, accessible, in advance, would be a poor possible, a futureless possible, a possible already set aside, so to speak, life-assured. This would be a programme or a causality, a development, a process *without an event*. The possibilisation of the impossible possible must remain at one and the same time as undecidable—and therefore as decisive—as the future itself.’ Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, tr. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997) p29. Emphases added.

therefore insufficiently calibrated to the specific demands of thinking that which breaks with what is received in the present as that which circumscribes the bounds of what may come to pass?

Even though what is possible is, theoretically at least, greater than that which is, at any point in space and time, actual, Kant adduces that while this excess of the possible over the actual can be logically demonstrated and therefore posited, it remains nonetheless unknowable. For what can be known is based on the actual. The claim to know that the actual is inexhaustive of the possible involves, on the other hand, an illicit dialectical inference of pure reason, propelling thought to go beyond the self-imposed limits of critical reason.¹³⁰

The relation between politics and the possible would find its problematicity within what Kant defines as the knowable space of ‘real possibility’, and therefore not within that which is ‘thinkable’ as ‘logical possibility’. By speaking of the ‘possible’—of ‘political possibility’, for that matter—we are putting into operation a term that invites inferences about a set of likely political outcomes from a set of established material conditions. Such is the case when we claim that “*under existing conditions*, ‘time-travel is impossible’” or that, again, under present economic circumstances, “the total eradication of global poverty is an impossibility.” Even though such eventualities are thinkable, they lack the actuality of a set of historical conditions that would account for their real possibility. In these examples, the possible is not the antonym of the actual, but rather is its correlative term. Possibility is circumscribed by the actual, it is that which can be anticipated or indexed from the point of view of a given present. This rooting of what may come to pass in what is knowable places politics within a network of causes and conditions. Politics would be limited to working within the restricted circuitry of a *given* set of possibilities. And yet to speak of politics as eventual demands that things are conceived a little differently, as Deleuze—and others we have noted here also—recognise. Whether it requires a complete abandonment of the category of the possible is another issue that we must make further enquiries into.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* Ibid A232/B284

¹³¹ Certainly, a further possibility should be entertained here. An analytical contrast has been made between the possible and the novel, with the problematic set up in such a way that the burden of transformation lay with the possible, namely that the category of possibility has to be reworked for it to be compatible with the new in the form of a political event. But, what if the problem lay instead with politics as recalcitrant to both the new and the event? This would go against everything that has been argued thus far, in that this thesis has proceeded by supposing politics to be eventual. We move immediately from the unquestioned claim that politics is to be thought as generative of the new, of

Politics finds itself caught between the realisation of a knowable possibility and an eventual irruption that breaks with the known. On the one hand, the actual as that which we are granted access into, and about which positive knowledge can be produced; on the other, the irruption of the event, which strikes at the very heart of the known and, *mutatis mutandis*, from the viewpoint of the actual, is prohibited, for what cannot be recalled through cognition, that is, re-cognised, is senseless; its actuality is, at best, negligible if not unapparent or inactual. Only what is calculable or predicable, what can be predicted or inferred from extant knowledge—from systems of meaning and models of existence presently at one’s disposal—is said to have actuality. If, though, the event is that which is unknown, and which cannot be inferred from the present, if is untraceable from what is extant then it is not, and therefore cannot be. The principal effect of the event, therefore, is its disturbance of thought, not its confirmation through *re*-cognisance. The event, as that which ‘happens’, happens as much to thought as it does to what could be considered a ‘world’. It impels thought to think anew, to place under suspension a set of judgements, a schema, a criterion, or for that matter any principle or model, the purpose of which is to determine the happening of the event in advance of its hazardous irruption. This means what exactly? That, to talk of politics in terms of the possible cannot be *solely* in terms of the ‘art of the possible’, of what to do with the finite possibilities that a given situation makes available. But if not this, what other understanding of the possible may be considered which would bring the new into alignment with politics and possibility? The happening of a politics, which would augment its eventual attribution, could be thought as the very ‘possibilisation of the possible’ (as Sartre was to express it¹³²), that is, as the reconfiguration of what is possible

novelty, so as then to inquire what this does to the category of the possible. Here, the thought of Jean-François Lyotard will need to be considered, who, as one of the principal thinkers of the ‘event’, harbours a set of reservations about the extent to which the order of the political can ever be faithful to the event, whether, that is, politics is not caught up with its forgetting, its suppression. This scepticism towards politics can be traced in statements of Lyotard’s, such as, for example, in the claim that ‘politics will never be anything but the art of the possible.’ *Postmodern Fables* (London: Minnesota Press, 1993) p193. It is clear, then, that it might still be a question of needing to further think the relation between politics and the categories of the new, of the event, of that which happens, as much as it has been required of us to re-think the relation between the possible and the novel (the eventual). For a sustained examination of this position (which this thesis will not itself uphold) please see chapter six of this thesis.

¹³² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, (London: Routledge, 1996) pp128-9. While the syntagm, the ‘possibilisation of the possible’, is Sartre’s, it is the case that Sartre follows Martin Heidegger’s existential analytic of the possible, as developed in §31 of *Being and Time* tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: Blackwell, 1980), according to which possibility is dislodged both from that which is merely logically possible as well as known possibility, and instead becomes ontologically

as possible that does not, therefore, simply operate as the actualisation of a determinate possibility already sanctioned by the actual. The event of politics must, in some way or other, break from the actual as both a material and objective measure by which the possible is indexable. But to do this, we cannot only have at our disposal a redescription of what is meant by possibility, but of the actual too.

The ‘actual’ is understood as *what is the case*, with the possible as *what might come to be* in relation to what is. What though of the copula, the ‘is’, which invariably brings to bear with it a certain authority about what can possibly be? Considered an objective stratum—given as both real and material—the actual is commonly thought as the “possibilisation of the possible.” In its givenness, the actual is the progenitor of possibility; the actual is that which possibilises a determinate set of possibles. For there to be possibility at all, something must be. And, while we might think the possible with respect to no-thing in particular, and be committed to pure, unlimited possibility, the test for any given possibility is that it be realisable. The realisability of a possibility brings with it two corollaries. First, for it to be realisable, it must not exist within the vacuum of the void, but must come into the real; and second because the possibility in question is understood as either a possibility realised or the realisation of a possibility, then what it already supposes is the real into which its entry is made. The actual would house all that is possible under the dual formal determinations of space and time, it is therefore that which possibilises a certain determinate set of possibles. But, as Kant demonstrates at least to be logically the case: ‘Everything actual is possible; from this proposition there naturally follows, in accordance with the logical rules of conversion, the merely particular proposition, that some possible is actual; and this would seem to mean that much is possible which is not actual.’¹³³ Even if Kant undertakes this logical deduction, so as to jettison it once more—on the grounds that it has no validity beyond the restricted parameters of logical reasoning—a logical fault-line nonetheless opens up between the actual and the possible, paving the way for a complexification of their relation. On the one hand, the actual is a “possibilisation of possibles”, in that it

tied to the being of *dasein*. Possibility is thus deemed an *existentiale* (p183): ‘Dasein always has understood itself and always will understand itself in terms of possibilities’ (p185), Heidegger writes. Thus possibility becomes, at one and the same time, the determinate set of possibilities that *dasein receives*, constituting the horizon for *dasein*—that is, as the backdrop against which *dasein* is thrown into the world—and the possibility that *dasein is*—which is itself ‘constantly more than it factually is’ (Ibid)—namely, a being disclosive of possibilities that cannot be read off from what is knowable as actual (what Heidegger will term ‘present-at-hand’).

¹³³ Immanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* Ibid A231/B284.

brings into play a determinate set of possibilities; on the other hand, however, the actual is itself only a certain possibilised outcome not exhaustive of the ways in which the actual may have itself come to be. Between the actual and the possible we have two equally contingent orders: a set of possibles that are contingent upon a given actual, but an actual that is the result of a contingent occurrence, an actual that is only one among a multiple set of worlds.

This, then, would be another way to understand the question of possibility in relation to politics, which fortifies rather than weakens the relationship between emancipation, politics, event and novelty. The new is to be understood as this very re-possibilisation of the possible, the character of which necessitates a transformation or reconfiguration of the actual that would otherwise prescribe what is possible. Historically, certain political demands are deemed from within a given situation impracticable, bordering on the impossible. And yet retroactively, after the event of its ‘impossible’ occurrence, they become universally accepted truths.¹³⁴ the equality between the sexes, the self-organisation of the working class, the recent conflagration of revolutionary uprisings in the Middle East showing the power of mass coordinated action and the fragility of political regimes would also attest to this logic. The new to be considered as the re-possibilisation of the possible would seek thereby to capture the immanent and situated transformation of a given political order.¹³⁵

Things are invariably more complicated than this, however. Firstly, it is important that politics as such is phrased in such a way that extricates it from the restricted sense with which it is often associated, that is, ‘as the art of the possible’, as what is most exigent or peremptory in relation to the present. What is commonly referred to as our ‘post-political’ or ‘post-democratic’ condition gains much of its force from the

¹³⁴ To make reference once more to our earlier consideration of the quote from Bergson from ‘le real et le possible’, this ‘retroactivity’ is present precisely when Bergson comments that the possible is not what comes to pass but what *will have been*.

¹³⁵ The work of Alain Badiou—particularly, his most recent book, *Logics of Worlds* op.cit—allows one to think the complexity of the emergence of the new within a world. An entire typology of modalities of change and differentiation are proposed (ranging from a weak modification to a world—according to which change occurs without questioning the transcendental of a given world which orders the ways in which things appear within it—to a change of the utmost magnitude i.e. an event, which calls for the abandonment, destruction, and complete recasting of the rules by which things are said to appear (see p363-80)). We can find similar projects at stake in the work of Ernesto Laclau, whose ‘political theory’ is an attempt to provide a set of analytical tools to be used in order to think, via dislocations of a given order, the opening towards new and otherwise unrecognized possibilities, possibilities which become the basis on which the restructuring of a political order is carried out. Please see, in particular, the first essay comprising *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (London: Verso, 1990).

sanitisation and non-appearing of politics. A situation that is cogently described by Jacques Rancière in the following passage from his *Disagreement*:

The state today legitimizes itself by declaring that politics is impossible. And this demonstration of impossibility works through a demonstration of its own impotence. To evacuate the demos, postdemocracy has to evacuate politics, using the pincers of economic necessity and juridical rule, even if it means bringing both of these together in the definition of a new citizenry in which the power and powerlessness of each and every one has come to even out.¹³⁶

In drawing this contrast between a post-political constellation of non-happenings and desertions and the possibility of an emancipatory politics as providing access to the happening that is *proper* to politics, this thesis duly follows a logic constitutive of much of contemporary discussions on the necessity to affirm the evental character of politics and doing so by *seemingly* affirming the idea of a politics of emancipation as its immanent and exclusive operator.¹³⁷ The oppositions between ‘the politics of the situation’ and ‘the politics of the event’ in Badiou,¹³⁸ between the order of the ‘police’ and the interruptive ‘politics’ of the part-that-has no-part in Rancière,¹³⁹ would be two notable example of this tendency—where the happening of politics falls exclusively on the side of a certain normatively overdetermined understanding of politics. This would, of course, be the obvious implication of following Badiou’s assertion that every thinking of politics is already an investment in *a* politics. This position though raises a critical question: to at least imply that an emancipatory politics is bound up with the being of politics as a happening—taking us thereby to what is proper to politics—are not the rules of our engagement rigged in advance? Do we too quickly wash our hands of the messy business of the general way in which politics takes place—in its established, institutional settings—by claiming that the ‘standard ways’ can be put to one side with the

¹³⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) pp110-11.

¹³⁷ For an extended critique of a certain affirmationism in contemporary French philosophy, in particular, but a tendency that stretches further in the humanities and social sciences, more generally, please see Benjamin Noys’ polemically entitled *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2010). The author duly accepts the charge that, on the premises Noys establishes, this thesis would itself be convicted of affirmationism, of displacing the ‘negative’ in an attempt to seize the new in political praxis; this, in spite of all the care taken to operate under the sign of ‘critique’. But this thesis’ drift into affirmation would not be a lapses, and nor should it be taken as the ‘slackening’ of thought (as Noys would wish to suggest). It must be recognised as a constitutive element of the critical task as such.

¹³⁸ See in particular Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2005) and *Metapolitics* (specifically Chapter 10) and *Conditions* (London: Verso, 2009).

¹³⁹ As laid out in Jacques Rancière’s *Disagreement* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

use of the negations, the *non*-political, *post*-political, *anti*-political? Oliver Marchart has concluded that this is a problem with much of contemporary thought. It exhibits a ‘tendency towards an emancipatory apriorism.’¹⁴⁰ Levelled at these thinkers (and by implication this thesis too) is the reproach that politics as a process is only understood in the light of its emancipatory content. The ‘truth’ of politics, the ‘proper’ of politics to be found in emancipatory political struggles has as its corollary that all other modes of engagement are dismissed as non-political, anti-political, or as other-than political.

By politics, then, we shall not seek to cover the entire field of political possibilities. It is not a question of neglecting the indetermination of the multiple ways in which the event of politics may appear. As the saying goes, ‘not everything that moves is red’. Or, less figuratively, as Badiou writes: in order to waylay any ‘obfuscations’ it must be conceded that ‘Nazism itself is both a politics and a thought.’¹⁴¹ Ernesto Laclau’s assessment that we ‘go beyond the horizon drawn by [...] [a] feintheartedness, in its praises and condemnations’¹⁴² must be heeded. With these considerations in mind, it

¹⁴⁰ Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) p158.

Worthy of note here is the work of Ernesto Laclau, upon which many of Marchart’s claims are based. Laclau sets about drawing a particular line between his more general intellectual project and those of his contemporaries. In his critical assessments of both Badiou (please see: ‘Ethics of Militant Engagement’ in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2004) pp120-38; and Rancière (See *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005) pp244-9, the same oversight is in question: the logic each employs is incomplete, it is not carried through to its end. It stops short of embracing the full radicality of the very ontological insights they themselves have contributed in opening a way towards. Badiou and Rancière, in a highly sophisticated way, rig the game in advance. They place politics *proper* in the custody of the just, of ‘progressive’ ends and ‘egalitarian’ causes, on the side of change for the ‘good’ and for ‘all.’ Repeatedly, Laclau advances that no *a priori* principle exists to guarantee the attribution of *emancipatoriness* that both Badiou’s notion of the ‘event’ and Rancière’s idea of dissensus would allegedly be exclusively concerned. Too closely identifying politics, in its generality, with a particular mode, an emancipatory politics, is at risk of a romanticisation of political action, of allowing one’s particular predilection for a certain appearing of the political relation to overextend its specificity and encroach on the very being of politics. Change can be wrought however in a panoply of ways that are not equally ethically palatable. Oliver Marchart’s comments must be read in light of these remarks of Laclau’s, for they are at peace with them. Perhaps it is because Marchart’s reservations are distilled from the work of Laclau that the issue of emancipation, which equally plays a significant (if not a determinant role, as it is alleged to be the case in some of his contemporaries) part in his own work, can be passed over as the limit point of a certain tendency in contemporary philosophical discourse on the political. This is, though, the problem with the non-sequitur that Marchart levels at Badiou and Rancière. Not that Marchart levels a critical remark at the order of an illicit *a priori*, but that Marchart levels this at a certain set of thinkers without being attentive to the radical transformation first effected by these thinkers when thinking the very question of emancipation, all of whom undertake this task in a way that erases all forms of teleology, messianism, eschatology, substance—metaphysical trappings that have dogged the way in which emancipation has been effectively inquired into as an issue of politics.

¹⁴¹ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) p4.

¹⁴² Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, (London: Verso, 2005) p250.

cannot be so straightforward as wishing to accord to politics *as such* a ‘normative’ direction, which resonates with a predilection that the author has for *a* politics. The happening of politics that incites and provokes need not necessarily be, if one can phrase it in this way, for the ‘Good’, neither need the affects it generates at the level of thought be feelings of positive arousal; suffice it to acknowledge that a happening can also affect in thought feelings of dread, awe, shock and terror.¹⁴³

Nonetheless, it is not with politics in all its clearly differentiating variations, which is the primary concern for this thesis. It is with emancipation: an Idea that undergoes a set of important modifications once it is thought in light of politics understood as that which happens, as that which irrupts in a world as an event; an irruption or a happening which, furthermore, calls for thought to be equal to the happening that politics *is*. The main purpose of this chapter was, as introduced at the very beginning, to provide the ‘Yes’ of a philosophical affirmation to emancipation with the requisite construction of a problematical space within which the ‘yes’ might show itself in a new form, rather than proceed along the already established routes and bridleways. This, it is hoped—after an extended discussion of the ‘event’, the ‘new’, the ‘possible’, thought’s relation to politics—has been provided. Emancipation must be thought not in terms of a social order to come, nor must it be considered as a process into the established settings of political institutions and practices. It must instead be affirmed on account of a politics that puts in question the ‘what’, the ‘quid’, of what is recognised as the limits and real possibilities that constitute a given situation, political community or polity. In order to show in what way this recasting of the problem proposed here dislocates with the ways in which the Idea of emancipation have often been thought, we shall now dedicate some time to a treatment of the themes that the thinking of emancipation has often found itself compelled to address, but in addressing them has led itself into a limitless set of conflicts and apparent contradictions. The next part of the thesis will embark upon a critical interrogation of some of these problems by way of a presentation of some antinomies of emancipatory reason. We shall begin, however, by enquiring into the power of Kant’s critical method, and the positive contribution that his presentation of the antinomial method had in the development of his philosophy.

¹⁴³ Such would be the lesson of Jean-Francois Lyotard, whose interest in the sublime and the contradictory range of affects it arouses becomes the analytical prism through which to think the indetermination of that which happens. Please see: *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* tr. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) and *The Inhuman*.

Chapter Two

Antinomies of Emancipatory Reason: Kant and the Presentation of Critique

‘Suppose such an incarnate will to contradiction and antinaturalness is induced to philosophise: upon what will it vent its innermost contrariness?’

Friedrich Nietzsche.¹⁴⁴

‘There are grounds for regarding the problem of the antinomies as the cradle of critical philosophy.’

John Sallis.¹⁴⁵

Thought, when left unguarded, can be led into all manner of blind-alleys and cul-de-sacs, no end of confusions and needless intra-philosophical disputes. This would be the first lesson that critical philosophy seeks to impart to those who would care to lend their ear. Yet when thinking is led astray or leads itself astray by way of Ideas, which have no source other than in thought alone (which, on point of fact of having no experiential or real object with which it can accord, issues no indubitable proof or any direct presentation¹⁴⁶), it is often done so not with the careless whim of someone who knows nothing else, or because of a general sense of indignance with the world, but out of an inclination, a tendency in thought to propel itself beyond the realm of conditioned appearances. A principled ignorance or foolish nobility? Speculative thought—metaphysics would be one of its names—would be saddled with this inner diremption, a vocation that shows how far it can ascend to the giddy heights of what is not given in

¹⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. p118.

¹⁴⁵ John Sallis, *The Gathering of Reason* (New York: SUNY, 1990) p97.

¹⁴⁶ We shall follow Kant’s definition of the Idea, as provided in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The Idea is the mode of representation with which the faculty of Reason thinks. At the close of the section entitled ‘Ideas in General’, Kant goes to great lengths to offer a complex taxonomy of the modes by which thought presents objects (whether phenomenal or other). Kant proceeds ascendantly, from the most basic and prosaic to the most elevated and abstract forms: ‘Subordinate to it (representation in general) stands representation with consciousness. A perception which relates solely to the subject as the modification of its state is sensation, an objective perception is knowledge. This is either intuition or concept. The former relates immediately to the object and is single, the latter refers to it mediately by means of a feature which several things have in common. The concept is either an empirical or a pure concept. The pure concept, in so far as it has its origin in the understanding alone (not in the pure image of sensibility), is called a notion. A concept formed from notions and transcending the possibility of experience is an *idea* or concept of reason.’ (A320/B376-7)

experience but just as quickly makes its descent into the more base setting of the *Kampfplatz* of parochial scholastic squabbles and mock philosophical fights.

Critical thought, which gathers together its case-material on this subject in order to play both plaintiff and judge, cannot but avoid a certain ambivalence in what it uncovers. For sure, in its more merciless moments, critique convicts such philosophising on the grounds of improper conduct: wielding principles that, at once, are used as portents for exalted states of transcendence and yet come to be marshalled as weapons with which to upend competing doctrines. The critical philosopher reprimands this irresponsible behaviour, incarcerating the Ideas speculative thought would cleave so tight and dear to, on the dual grounds of philosophical order and public safety. One will immediately recall the Wittgenstein of the *Logico-Philosophical Tractatus*: ‘whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.’¹⁴⁷ We should recall the foregoing remark also, in which Wittgenstein writes:

The right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method.¹⁴⁸

Philosophy is best to conduct its affairs in a more secure and robust environment, respectful of the limits of what is knowable and demonstrable, and leaving the rest to other non-philosophical enterprises. For its part, critical philosophy finds its role in the circumscription of boundaries, a way of ‘policing the enunciated’, of ensuring that the strict limits of rational endeavour are adhered to, so that thought can contribute with both a quiet efficiency and meticulous rigour on providing solutions to clearly defined and unambiguous problems. At the same time, however, critique cannot help to have a more sympathetic disposition with respect to what it will otherwise rule as the culpability of the excesses of idle and mischievous speculation. A sense of adventure, of pushing the boundaries beyond the bounded realms of natural causation, such a thinking emboldens the very entitlement that critique often carries out its duties in order to defend: freedom. If philosophical speculation presents itself as somewhat of a mixed tableau of

¹⁴⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, (6.53)

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid* (6.52)

imprudence and courage, of free-spiritedness and dogged determination, then these contradictory sensibilities come to equally affect the critical receptors of a philosophy that would otherwise be on its guard against such thought. Such a philosophy, then, cannot help but to transmit rather mixed messages.

Immanuel Kant, the principal architect of critical philosophy, would certainly embody this ambivalence. On the one hand, Kant rebukes a certain kind of unguarded thinking for its ‘injurious influence’,¹⁴⁹ of leading the young and unguided from the surety and certainty of the path of science, leaving them instead ‘to grope at random’¹⁵⁰ so that they ‘come to indulge in easy speculation about things of which they understand nothing.’¹⁵¹ Thinking based on the indeterminacy of Ideas alone is idle work—‘we can no more extend our stock of theoretical insight by mere ideas’, writes Kant, ‘than a merchant can better his position by adding a few noughts to his cash account.’¹⁵² On the other hand, there is something altogether laudable in the ‘proud pretensions of reason’,¹⁵³ and something resplendent in the very ideas signalling ‘what the highest degree may be at which mankind may come to stand’,¹⁵⁴ which motivate its vocation, and which must be defended, against all supercilious forms of scepticism and sophistry. Speculative thought ‘exalts itself to modes of knowledge’ that serve as the means through which to gain indirect access into the supersensible and the unconditional.¹⁵⁵

The task is how to proceed not in spite of, but emboldened by, this ambivalence about the role of Ideas in philosophy and to develop a thinking equal to such Ideas as legitimate modes of philosophising? How then to do this in a way that, with dexterity, maintains its critical faculties in enquiring into some of the less productive disputes and logical impasses that, over some period, have become tied to the thinking of a particular Idea—to preen, therefore, some of the more excessive gestures and illicit claims made in its defence—and doing all this without not merely relinquishing ideas, but contributing to a renewal in their understanding and their practical and philosophical deployment. Kant will offer a mode of presentation which will bring such Ideas, along with the conflicts, oppositions and impasses with which they become entangled, into a

¹⁴⁹ Immanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* Bxxxix

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid. A602/B630

¹⁵³ Ibid. A462/B490

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. A317/B374

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

constellation of dialectical set-pieces, presenting them in a way that, with both an air of formality and scrupulous attention to detail, interrogates the very suppositions on which hitherto their thinking has been based. This mode of critical presentation can be found in the Antinomies that comprise a large part of the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’ in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. It is a sizeable section, spanning over some one hundred pages, in which Kant casts his eye over the great metaphysical disputes surrounding the Ideas of the ‘World’, the ‘Soul’, ‘Freedom’, and ‘God’. Each respective Idea sets the stage for a dispute appertaining to knowledge about these Ideas: whether, that is, the world has a beginning in space and time, or whether it is infinite; whether composites are made from simple parts or whether they are not reducible to what is simple but infinitely divisible; whether everything is fully determined by a preceding cause or whether something can break from natural causality; whether there is a *summum ens* that is entirely self-sufficient and absolutely unconditioned or whether all things are themselves conditioned and relative.

Analogously, what Kant carries out and achieves through these four presentations of the antinomic conflicts at the level of Pure Reason—so as to critically examine the limits and possibilities of successfully deploying these Ideas—we are to undertake at the level of political thought in relation to the Idea of emancipation, circumscribing the antinomies that beset this Idea. The precise function and the force of the ‘Idea’, both in Kant and beyond him, in relation to emancipation—which, we shall argue, at the level of philosophy is to be regarded as part of the philosophical canon of Ideas¹⁵⁶—can only begin to be ventured at this thesis’ end. But, we shall only be in a position to even think about undertaking any such reconstruction of the *Idea* of emancipation once the critical task has been carried through. This means *mentioning* the disputes that in one form or another have come to a head in broaching this Idea. These are: whether politics is bounded in space or whether everything is political; whether, secondly, what is just is irreducible and therefore injustice eliminative or whether every justice is decomposable into other injustices; whether emancipation is an act of self-overcoming or whether it is effected by a source other than the self and, fourthly, whether an unconditioned whole (we shall name this ‘society’) exists with a finite set of parts and elements or whether the whole is conditioned by an open system of elements and parts that constitute it. These are four antinomies, which while by no means are exhaustive,

¹⁵⁶ The full demonstration of this is developed in depth in the final chapter.

nonetheless have the benefit of spanning four important dimensions of emancipatory politics: *action* (the antinomy regarding politics), *Ideas* (on the question of Justice), the *subject* (with regards to the act of emancipation as self-initiating or not) and fourthly the *structure* (on the issue of society, and the associated relation between the one and the multiple it implies).

But, further to these four conflicts, there is a fifth antinomy, which over the course of the thesis taken as a whole will take a certain precedence, serving as an extended backdrop against which other thinkers will play their part. This antinomy will stage the confrontation between emancipation as an Idea and politics as a certain regime of being- and acting-together. While particular, it shall be demonstrated that this antinomy opens up onto the most general of problematics concerning the question of emancipation and its relation to politics. Schematically, this particular conflict can be staged in the following way: on the one side, emancipatory politics is a politics conditioned by an ideal of ‘emancipation’ externally sourced, namely sourced through an appeal to a state of affairs to-come, and buttressed by a first principle, with which politics then is responsible to force as an actuality, to *real-ise*. Such a politics would be the *means* to satisfy the higher rational end of emancipated Man. But politics would, in principle, be operative only insofar as this end is yet to be realised. The attainment of this transcendent end would render politics—as the *means* by which such an end is delivered—inoperative. Such a politics *of* emancipation would, more appropriately, be emancipation *from* politics. On the other side, an emancipatory politics can be understood in a way in which the transitoriness moves in the opposite direction. Thought in this way an emancipatory politics would signify the passage into political community. This notion of emancipation would not be understood as an end in itself, but the means by which one enters into public life. Again it would be inappropriate to understand this as an emancipatory politics, properly speaking, but rather a definition of emancipation in which the entry *into* the place of politics is made possible. Addressing this particular confrontation will be of a pressing concern, because (and it will need again to be properly argued) that through foregrounding the antinomy arising from this specific relation of terms, one will gain an access into the themes of the new and the event, which are themselves important in the development of this study. A full account of the character of this fifth antinomy (along with some more extended meditations on its centrality) will however be developed in the next chapter.

While all of these issues await their proper explication, there are some issues that must detain us in the meantime. First, we need to address the issue of the meaning and the operation of the antinomy, accounting for the possible modes of engagement that, apart from the Kantian approach we have already introduced, make themselves available to us. Second, time needs to be set aside to account for Kant's specific deployment of the antinomic form in the development of his critical philosophy, before a set of reflections are developed that will seek to make good on the analogy here being drawn between Kant's critical examination of metaphysical ideas as set out in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the inquiry into political ideas being conducted in this thesis, under the name of a critique of Post-Emancipatory Reason.

Methods of Engagement: Antinomies and Problems of Misrecognition.

To speak of an antinomy, in its strictest sense, is to be presented with two opposing statements, both of which can *equally* be demonstrated to be true. Logically at least, there exists no definitive way of adjudicating which one of them should prevail. *Discretely* we encounter two logically acceptable claims; *together* we face an insoluble contradiction. In order not to incur the penalties for breaking the inviolable 'law of non-contradiction' thought is disposed to come down on the side of either statement at the expense of the other. *Stricto sensu*, we are in the bounds of what Aristotle would have called the 'broken middle': two positions presented that are *alone* exhaustive of all possibilities, nothing else existing in-between.¹⁵⁷

How thought relates to this situation, to the scene of contradictory propositions, undergoes variation, and such variability is something to which, in this introductory section, we must attend. The first question to be settled, before all else, is what the stakes of a certain problematic are when its problematicity is framed in terms of an antinomy, and what possible ways of handling this problem present themselves? Only in settling these related questions will it be possible to circumscribe the precise way in which the investigation, herein presented, is to proceed and the reasons for doing so secured. If ultimately it will be the Kantian treatment of the antinomic method—Kant, who, on a *formal* level, shapes the way in which the thesis more generally operates (which can be glossed already from the title and which it is hoped has been made clear

¹⁵⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, The Basic works of Aristotle. (New York: The Modern Library, 2001) 1004a-1005a.

from the introduction, but, if not, will be further adumbrated both here and in the introductory chapter of the second part of the thesis)—then this is because it is through Kant’s way of deploying such a method and the particular motivations underwriting this deployment, that the full implications of our own critical investigation come to the fore. Before we introduce Kant, so that we can clear the way for a presentation of the set of antinomies associated with the question of emancipation—themselves used in order to get a better sense of the ends of emancipatory reason as well as the impasses into which such reasoning is drawn—a brief survey of the possible ways in which the form of an antinomy come into view are necessary.

At a basic level of understanding, we have already said in what the meaning of an antinomy consists, namely a situation in which two statements about a given object come to be accorded two opposing orders of predication. In what ways might this be approached, and what follows from these approaches? We must first consider a possibility which is arguably not an approach at all, but constitutes instead the problem to be approached. This is to say, we must account for the possibility of thought not being cognisant that the scene upon which it intervenes is antinomically structured. This is because the place from which it operates is an interior instance of that which only appears in its antinomic form from a position of exteriority.

We have said that for an antinomy to come into view two conditions must hold: One, that for a certain Idea two opposing theses are positable; and two, that between opposing theses, a strict equality must subsist, so that there is no way of logically arbitrating over which proposition to accept. This strict equality gives rise therefore to a logical undecidability; there can exist no possible proof to corroborate the affirmation of either proposition. But both the predications of ‘equality’ and ‘undecidability’ apply only from a position exterior to the positions constituting the opposition. Obviously, this is not the case from either of the thetic instances that lay a claim to the truth of a certain proposition, both of which remain immanent to the opposition. In a contradictory proposition, we know that the contradiction is constituted unequally. When faced with two statements, p and $non-p$, it can either be argued ‘if p then not $non-p$ ’ or ‘if $non-p$ then not p ’. From a place interior to an opposition, thought decides on what, from a place outside, is taken as undecidable. Whatever is asserted from one position is meant as a direct refutation of the other; the other thesis cannot, with equal rigour, be defended. It *misrecognises* itself as offering the solution to a given problem—thinking that it provides *apagogically* proof of its own thesis by way of disclaiming the other—and not as playing

its role *within* a problematic that, on the basis of no empirical or experiential measure, admits no solution.¹⁵⁸ This position, duplicated on the other side of the conflict, leads to a situation in which the exchange of assertions continues interminably (dogmatic claim meets with dogmatic claim), with neither side obliged to cede territory to the other.

We can say the lines of an antinomy are here presented negatively. It is in the very act of *misrecognition* committed by both parties *engaged in a dispute* that the antinomic structure shows itself, not necessarily in its cognisance. The parties responsible for proselytising certain propositions turn a blind eye to the effects that are generated therein.¹⁵⁹ This means while the antinomy comes to *exist* as a problem on account of two parties blindly pursuing their own ends, the problem is *recognised* only once one has *subtracted* oneself from the immanent scene of the two of this dispute.

In taking leave of a position immanent to the scene of opposing theses, thought takes as its problem the two positions conjointly. Here thought no longer predisposes itself to decide on any one particular proposition. It takes up instead a position transversal or exterior to both, regarding both to be equally demonstrable as well as refutable, and surmising the question, animating the answers to which it gives rise, to be *undecidable*.

This extrication from the immanent scene of opposing theses is however insufficient to fix thought upon a set path. We must consider how there is variability in responding to any antinomic distribution of positions, arising from the act of deciding between two equally demonstrable theses. It is nonetheless true that there is a general starting point from which any *critical* thought begins (a position transversal to the constituent propositions) and a general question that has to be worked through, namely

¹⁵⁸ Immanuel Kant considers the apagogic presentation as the dogmatic method. He writes: ‘The apagogic method of proof is the real deluding influence by which those who reason dogmatically have always held their admirers. It may be compared to a champion who seeks to uphold the honour and incontestable rights of his adopted party by offering battle to all who would question them. Such boasting proves nothing, however, in regard to the merits of the issue but only in the respective strength of the combatants, and this indeed only in respect of those who take the offensive. The spectators, observing that each party is alternately conqueror and conquered, are often led to have sceptical doubts in regard to the object of the dispute. They are not, however, justified in adopting such an attitude; it is sufficient to declare to the combatants: *non defensorius istis tempus eget.*’ *Critique of Pure Reason* A793-94/B821-22.

¹⁵⁹ This is to be understood in the sense both Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser used the term, *mesreconnaissance*, meaning a constitutive ignorance on the part of the thinking subject, who mistakes what is an illusory structural-effect for the truth and necessity of their situation. In the context of the argument being developed here those party to the dispute truly believe that the problematic they have entered into as disputants is decidable and resolvable. See in particular: Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus’, in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001)

what is the precise status of the misrecognition that is involved in the take up of the propositions giving rise to an antinomy? Is the misrecognition involved one of necessity or is it an accident, an error of thought that can be eliminated? Is there something either transitive or intransitive about the way in which certain problems are caught up within an antinomic form? These are formative questions, insofar that the responses provided determine the course by which thought takes on the thinking of the antinomy. To begin, we can formalise these responses in one of three ways:

1. One could say that the *misrecognition* is an error that can be corrected. What remains incontestable is that the two constituent parts appear contradictory, which is to say, they constitute both exhaustive and mutually exclusive logical positions. Where each side errs however is to maintain the logic of non-contradiction, and think thereby that the solution lies in the negation of the other. This derives from the principle of *non datur tertium*, that there exists no third position. A solution is however possible, but it requires the suspension of the very axiom that would proscribe the *non datur tertium*: the law of non-contradiction. What does the law of non-contradiction proscribe? It claims that we cannot attribute to a given thing that it be both α and not α . A black square cannot be, at the same time, not black. Either one or the other of these propositions must be true, and thus the other must be rejected. Contradiction is the insignia of errancy, of unreason, against which Reason must forever be on its guard. And yet, far from contradiction being the laceration of Reason—the obstacle derailing the rigours of logical thought—a speciously rigorous logic, *dialectical* logic, would supply contradiction itself with reason—overcoming the effects of contradiction by carrying within itself (*aufheben*) the difference that makes up the conflict. It is from this perspective, then, that the logic of the ‘broken middle’, maintained as a principal effect of the act of misrecognition, can be corrected: the fusion of the two sides, ‘the unity of opposites’, brings together their truth. This is a *dialectical* operation, at least in the way in which the dialectic has come to be understood since Hegel. This operation of unity unfolds by way of ‘the negation of the negation’. While interior to a certain opposition, the general tendency is to affirm one proposition by *negating* the other (*either x or non-x*), then resolution is possible only on condition that this form of negational reasoning is dispensed with (whence the ‘negation of the negation’).

In nuce, the first critical route follows the structural overcoming of the difference, which otherwise grounds the opposition. Against the law of the broken

middle—which asserts the impossibility of a position bridging the divide between two mutually opposing positions—a possible solution lay in the conservation and transformation of the sense of those propositions in circulation. In a remark on the antinomies that appears in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel claims: ‘A true solution can only consist in that two determinations, in being opposed and yet necessary to one and the same concept, cannot have validity in their one-sidedness, each for itself, but have truth rather only in their sublated being, in the unity of their concept.’¹⁶⁰ The ruinous effects of the antinomy are eliminated dialectically, the conflict resolved and peace restored.

2. In the first case, the act of misrecognition committed by the two positions comprising a logical opposition is subject to correction and thus this effect of misrecognition is transitive. But with this, the second possibility, an opposing judgement is reached: the misrecognition between two sides wielding opposing theses is necessary and intransitive. This necessity develops out of the very question that forces thought to fork in two opposing directions. And judged in this way, this effect of misrecognition serves as grounds for the abandonment of the very questioning that gives rise to the conflict in the first place. The effect of misrecognition annuls any problematic that gives rise to the antinomic form. This would be the *sceptical* position. The parties that comprise the antinomy are themselves victims of a certain questioning that offers no available way out than through the interminable exchange of dogmatic propositions. It is in light of this that—at least regarded from this perspective—it is not the alternatives that should be dispensed with, but the very question framing these alternatives. This critical response is to be framed as sceptical, inasmuch that the aim of this approach is in the destruction of the very grounds for posing the problem in the first place. We can look upon its aims as entirely negative, in its wish to wash its hands of any problem that gives rise to antinomic conflicts, so that thought may conduct its tasks in a way that brackets out such questions metaphysics has thought it opportune to raise.

3. Against the first possibility, the dialectical method—which would annul its structural necessity through a higher order of dialectical synthesis, and thus expose the problem of the antinomy as transitive, as a problem that can both be structurally and logically overcome—the misrecognition is, *pace* the sceptical position, necessary.

¹⁶⁰ G. W. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 21.181.

However, unlike the sceptic, it is not a misrecognition that divests us of the power to raise the question from which the antinomy issues forth. Against the first possibility, there is no way of overcoming the difference through the promise of synthetic unity. But, at the same time, rather than the law of non-contradiction being upheld, resulting either in the thetic decision to commit itself to one of the two possibilities presenting themselves or in a sceptical repudiation, thought throws itself fully into embracing the vitiating effects of a contradictory relation. It does so not to see the effects of the contradiction as disabling, but as indeed generative of positive effects. The contradictory and aporetic effects produced therein, are embraced on point of fact of a genetic productivity in their mutual deformation; a certain set of possibilities are circumscribable in spite of the impossibility of resolving the dispute by conventional logical means. We can call such approach *deconstructive*.

In these three *critical* possibilities (*dialectical*, *sceptical* and *deconstructive*), we have a double modulation: first, a modal change in the very nature of the ‘misrecognition’ that ensnares those parties that comprise the antinomy and second a change in the very status of the problem, which is but the structural condition by which the antinomial pairing of thesis and anti-thesis appear. In tablature form, they can be represented in the following way:

Approach	Antinomy	Misrecognition	Result
Dialectical	Reconcilable	Transitive	Solution through synthesis
Sceptical	Irreconcilable	Intransitive	No Solution but dismissal
Deconstructive	Irreconcilable	Intransitive	Solution through aporia

Either this misrecognition is a structural illusion that can be corrected, which would permit therefore the resolution of the conflict (*dialectical*), or the process of misrecognition is necessary, englobing all possible responses to the problem (both *sceptical* and *deconstructive*). Obversely, either the problem is properly constructed and yields a solution that might overcome the ceaseless dogmatic to-ing and fro-ing between

thesis and antithesis, between claim and counter-claim (both *dialectical* and, quite differently, *deconstructive*), or the endless to-ing and fro-ing is a structural effect of the question posed, and, by implication, must be dismissed outright, unless thought is to ensnare itself in questions that are irresolvable and offer no positive solution (*sceptical*).

Irrespective of the modulations, the changes of emphases, there is a constant running through all three approaches: each begins with the antinomy as its object. It takes the antinomial form, the either/or of the broken middle, as constituting a problematic that thought cannot but encounter—whether in order to fashion for it a resolution, to dismiss on the grounds of the futility of searching for a resolution to such dilemmas, or to continue to work within the aporetic form of their impossibility.

The critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant offers a further way as to how thought might comport itself in relation to an antinomic distribution of terms, irreducible to any of the abovementioned approaches (albeit to differing degrees). The fact, however, is that much of post-Kantian philosophy has, in one way or another, been an attempt to move beyond Kant on this particular issue; the many attempts to defuse the effects of the restlessness of Reason, of the conflicts arising out of rational principles (in the presentational form of the antinomies), are for this reason very much instructive.¹⁶¹ While there has been the recognition that reason is the subject of no ends of antinomial tribulations, the task has been somehow to find the requisite solution to restore once more harmony to Reason. Certainly, the same might be said of Kant. The figure of the tribunal, of critical philosophy as the seat of ultimate adjudication in bringing peace and order to metaphysics is a sentiment expressed by Kant at the beginning of the first prefatory note to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where the task is ‘to undertake anew the most difficult of all its tasks, namely that of self-knowledge, and to institute a tribunal which will assure to

¹⁶¹ This point, among others, is cogently made by John Llewlyn, in an essay entitled ‘Kantian Antinomy and Hegelian Dialectic’, in *Hegel’s Critique of Kant*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) pp87-103. Much of the philosophy immediately after Kant was animated by what was to be understood by Kant’s expounding of a ‘critical philosophy’. In the aftermath, there was the exchange of claim and counter-claim between Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, about the ends of critique and an evaluation of the limited successes of each of their respective endeavours. Each accused the other of a residual dogmatism, which meant grasping a given problem in its ‘one-sidedness’. Not fully realising the end of critique meant not traversing the two sides of a given opposition (whether this be ‘subject-object’, ‘phenomena-noumena’, ‘freedom-necessity’, ‘spirit-nature’, etc.) Thus Fichte, Schelling and Hegel all accused Kant of residual dogmatism. Hegel diagnosed this ‘one-sidedness’ in all of his contemporaries, and laid claim to the only thorough-going critical philosophy, which, only by way of the dialectic, could overcome all ‘one-sidedness’, by integrating all possible sides within the unity of the concept. The reversal given here is particularly pronounced, given that, for Kant, the dialectical use of reason was the source, and not the remedy, of dogmatic inferences.

reason its lawful claims, and dismiss all groundless pretensions, not by dismissing all groundless pretensions, not by despotic decrees, but in accordance with its own eternal and unalterable laws.¹⁶² Kant's thought develops in a similar vein, at the end of the first *Critique*, in the section entitled 'The Discipline of Pure Reason'. There we read: 'In the absence of [a] critique reason is, as it were in a state of nature, and can establish its assertions and claims only through war. The critique, on the other hand, arriving at all its decisions in the light of fundamental principles of its own institution, the authority of which no one can question, secures to us the peace of legal order, in which our disputes have to be conducted solely by the recognised methods of *legal action*'.¹⁶³ Yet, irrespective of what Gillian Rose might have termed Kant's 'legal formalism',¹⁶⁴ there is, from within the bounds of the first *Critique*, space to think the presence of a counter-tendency. A space, far from circumscribing the law as itself constitutive of Reason, marks out thought's transgressions of its own law as belonging equally to this faculty.¹⁶⁵ The antinomies have the disclosive feature of showing reason 'in conflict with itself', 'exhibiting bedazzling but false illusoriness', an indubitable feature of metaphysical reasoning.¹⁶⁶ This is not something either to be resisted or put to one side. Kant's question

¹⁶² Immanuel Kant, *Pure Critique of Reason*, Axi

¹⁶³ Ibid. A751/B779

¹⁶⁴ Gillian Rose, *Dialectics of Nihilism: Poststructuralism and the Law* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1984)

¹⁶⁵ Jean-François Lyotard (see: *Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History*: Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), David-Menard (*La folie dans la Raison Pure: Kant lecteur de Swedenborg* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique, 1990)) and Alberto Toscano (see: *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2010; pp98-149)) are notable recent examples of attempts to draw out the restlessness of Reason that is never domesticable in Kant's critical philosophy, even if it takes up residence within the system. In spite of some of his explicit statements to the contrary, it is the maddening excesses of Reason that cannot be brought to heel by any legalistic framework. In a somewhat different way, this is cogently conveyed by Robert Pippin, in *Kant's Theory of Form* (London: Yale University Press, 1982), who, in a book that takes as its object the question of Form and transcendentalism in Kant, is very alive to the inconsistency and variation that lay at the heart of the Kantian project, according to which the articulation between his transcendental turn, which sought to inquire into conditions of possibility for X, and metaphysics proper, which interrogates the being of beings and the sufficient reason for things, is riven with instability. He writes that 'one could, with at least some textual evidence, claim (1) that the Critique is a special kind of metaphysics, (2) that it is only a critique of the presuppositions of all rationalist metaphysics, (3) that it is meant to be only a preparation for a legitimate metaphysics of natural science and or a practical metaphysics of morals, or (4) that the positive sections of the work are only a "theory of knowledge" and no inherent or theoretical connections with metaphysics of any variety are intended.' n18. p17.

¹⁶⁶ What must be born in mind is that the 'antinomy' is not the only manifestation of 'transcendental illusion', that is, of thought going beyond the parameters of what is knowable through experience. The 'Transcendental Dialectic', which takes the problem of 'transcendental illusion' as its problematical object, is broader than the antinomy, which remains only a specific form by which the problem of transcendental illusion is encountered. Please see Michelle Grier, *Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

is to ask what if the possibility of the antinomy shows no possibility of being overcome, but instead its form takes us to a set of issues that are intractable, the problematical space of which we must forever occupy. What if such illusoriness is not to be dispelled but, precisely, on account of its constitutive character, must instead be observed and accounted for, and all the while lived with? Kant thus writes:

There exists, then, a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason—not one in which a bungler might entangle himself through lack of knowledge, or one which some sophist has artificially invented to confuse thinking people, but one inseparable from human reason, and which, even after its deceptiveness has been exposed, will not cease to play tricks with reason and continually entrap it into momentary aberrations ever and again calling for correction.¹⁶⁷

In contradistinction, then, to the dialectical approach that will register all problems as transitive, containing within themselves the seeds of their own solution,¹⁶⁸ Kant will see inherent in the antinomic form itself a structural inadequation between solutions and problems: the antinomies remain ‘problem[s] to which there is no solution.’¹⁶⁹ He will testify to the insolubility of the problematicity of the antinomy, but, against the sceptic, will refuse to dissolve the Ideas that operate within that problematical structure.¹⁷⁰ Kant’s approach is disjunctive from the other possibilities inasmuch that it is

¹⁶⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Pure Critique of Reason*, A298/B354

¹⁶⁸ Recall Karl Marx’s claim that Man only asks the question for which he is capable of providing an answer. In this way, the solution antedates the question, and the problem is purely transitive. This will be of some importance in the considerations of Marx, and the Marxian treatment of the problem of the Idea of emancipation, developed in Chapter Four of this thesis.

¹⁶⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Pure Critique of Reason*, A328/B384.

¹⁷⁰ This is cogently noted by Gilles Deleuze at the beginning of Chapter 4 of *Difference and Repetition* (London: Athlone Press, 1997): ‘Kant refers to Ideas as problems ‘to which there is no solution’. By that he does not mean that Ideas are necessarily false problems, but, on the contrary, that true problems are Ideas, and that these Ideas do not disappear with ‘their’ solutions, since they are the indispensable condition without which no solution would ever exist.’ p168.

On a slightly different note, on the question of differentiating the Kantian approach from deconstruction, caution is required. In this case, the difference is much more nuanced. Certainly, the critical and deconstructive approaches will echo both the irreconcilability and intransitivity of the antinomial form, and will seek to re-occupy a place within a transformed structuration of the terms in play. The differences will lay at the order of consequences, which means, specifically, at the order of the Idea. To what extent does deconstruction wage its critical struggle against the Idea, and thus see, intrinsic, to the Idea itself an aporetic display of contradictory predications? Suffice it to say, the status of the Idea in deconstruction has, in recent years, been subject to much investigation, both by Derrida himself and those engaged in some form of deconstruction. Some have sought to diagnose a deficit in any affirmative philosophical gesture. In response both Derrida and some Deconstructionists have had something to say on Ideas of Justice, Emancipation, Freedom. The question is whether in doing so, Deconstruction gravitates within the orbit of a set of Kantian gestures once more? To what extent,

not the Ideas themselves or the structure of the problematic that give rise to *contradiction*. One of the merits of Kant, which is elegantly shown by David-Menard, is that for the most part Kant shows problems and Ideas to contain little in the way of contradiction (*Widerspruch*) at all, but are conflicts (*Widerstreit*), operating in the mode of contraries.¹⁷¹ Crucially, the antinomies set up not *formal or logical contradictions* but what Kant will term *real oppositions*.¹⁷² This renders talk of solution and irresolution void. Rather, the way that thought can retrieve the sense and potency of Ideas from the conflicts they have given rise to is, according to Kant, to interrogate the presuppositions that serve as a ground for the putative stand-off between claim and counter-claim. The aim is not to intervene at the level of determining the essence of the object of the Idea under dispute, but of ‘pointing out that in the making of the assertion something has been

ultimately, can one account for the practice of deconstruction within the form Kant presented in the antinomies? So as to be in a position to see such Kantian glimpses, please see: Jacques Derrida’s *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), where, against himself, Derrida admits of ‘a certain dignity’ attached to the Kantian deployment of Ideas (in their regulative form) p83; and Drucilla Cornell’s ‘Rethinking Legal Ideals after Deconstruction’ in *Law’s Madness* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006), in which Cornell attempts to supplement Derrida with Kant’s understanding of ‘aesthetic ideas’, as drawn from the *Critique of Judgment*. pp147-69.

In making these comments, please do not read into this Critical and Deconstructive difference any of the discussions pertaining to Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida. The difference being intimated here shows no predilection for Habermas’ Kantianism over Derrida’s deconstruction—quite the opposite, in fact. We have to be careful about wanting to reduce all contemporary allusions to Kant in the realm of political inquiry back to Habermas. In order to show something of the heterogeneous uses and ends that Kant is put to, suffice it to recall Michel Foucault. Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Ranciere, all of whom have shown an interest in investigating the powers of Kant’s critical method, with each remaining far removed still from Habermasian communicative action.

¹⁷¹Thus David–Menard writes in *La folie dans la Raison Pure: Kant lecteur de Swedenborg* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique, 1990): ‘mais le face à face typographique signale ici une distinction que la grammaire de la negation negligee: une antinomie, c’est un conflit de la raison avec elle meme (*widerstreit*) et non une contradiction (*widerspruch*)’ p30. Furthermore, consider David-Menard, «le coeur de la Critique de Raison Pur est une réflexion sur le pouvoir de la négation» p29, where the antinomial form stages the way in which alterity can be situated in the work of thought, in thinking.

David-Menard’s text is merit-worthy in many respects, not solely because she identifies in the antinomies, specifically, and the transcendental dialectic, generally, a constellation of issues of central importance that are not singular to the dispositif of the first critique, but to the general trajectory of Kant’s thinking (from the pre-critical works to his later political writings)—which, for her, involves a thorough recasting of the question of negation and the law of contradiction.

On the question of this difference, we should also note Jean-Francois Lyotard who remarks that Kant’s antinomies are ‘*differends* par excellence’ *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (London: Minnesota Press, 1988) p168—which, again, would capture something of the dissensual, conflictual and frictive nature of the antinomies, rather than as an ordered and symmetrical contradiction.

¹⁷² A conflictual negation has not the same status as a negation through contradiction. Only the latter permits of no traversal of the bi-focal structure. Real opposition, on the contrary, does not conform to the logic of the broken middle and therefore cannot be exhaustive of possibilities and of thought thereby.

presupposed that is void and merely fictitious removing [...] [thereby] its alleged foundations.’¹⁷³

It is, specifically, to Kant’s account of the critical utility of the antinomial form that our attention shall turn, providing as it does the setting for the particular way this thesis proposes for constructing the set of problems surrounding the idea of emancipation. With a more examining eye two questions need to be raised at this juncture: what specific weight did Kant himself place on the antinomies as a way of presenting his critical method? What specific issues can be said to develop out of Kant’s operation?

The Antinomies as the Presentation of Critique

It is said that were Kant to have rewritten the *Critique of Pure Reason* for what would have been a third time, he would have chosen to begin his investigation into the possibilities and limits of human knowledge not with the chapters about the transcendental aesthetic, which serve to establish the central tenets of transcendental idealism, but with the antinomies of the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’, thought a less central—though doubtless indispensable—part of the First *Critique*.¹⁷⁴ What ought one to make of this admittedly hypothetical editorial change? Was it the case that Kant was attributing to the antinomies a central and pre-eminent function in the general architectonic of his investigations into the possibilities of synthetic *a priori* knowledge or might it have been just a symptom of his fastidiousness, his incurable neurotic compunction to tinker with his system. Let us immediately put to one side a facile psychologism that would wish to make hay with *ad homiens*. We are left with at least two possibilities, equally plausible. The first is to say that Kant’s idea for a further set of amendments to the *Critique of Pure Reason* derives from its *presentational* potency.¹⁷⁵ The editorial amendment that Kant was said to entertain is justified on point of fact that the antinomial form affords access into the problematic that will guide the project as a whole. It would be a way of setting up, of staging, the problem that governs the investigation into Metaphysics and the plea the critical interrogation gives rise to for the

¹⁷³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A388.

¹⁷⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p238.

¹⁷⁵ Such a position is represented by Paul Guyer who writes that, so as ‘to avoid the snares of paradox’, Kant’s recourse to the antinomies was ‘primarily methodological’. *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p387.

moderation of epistemic claims. Such an explanation is proffered by Kant, as early as May of 1781. In a correspondence with Marcus Herz about the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes:

This sort of investigation will always remain difficult, for it includes the *metaphysics of metaphysics*. Yet I have a plan in mind according to which even *popularity* might be gained for this study, a plan that could not be carried out initially, however, for the foundations needed cleaning up, particularly because the whole system of this sort of knowledge had to be exhibited in all its articulation. Otherwise I would have started with what I have entitled the "Antinomy of Pure Reason," which could have been done in colourful essays and would have given the reader a desire to get at the sources of this controversy. But the school's rights must first be served; afterwards one can also see about appealing to the world.¹⁷⁶

Kant harbours at least an inclination to present *The Critique of Pure Reason* in techni-colour, according to which the 'antinomy of pure reason' would be instrumental in garnering the interest in the wider project that Kant had with meticulous care and patient labour constructed, a way of getting 'at the sources' of those metaphysical controversies, the sources of which take us above the petty squabbles between doctrines, and to the Ideas themselves, the objects of dispute:¹⁷⁷ 'the World', 'God', 'Freedom', 'the Soul'. If a way can be found to foreground these Ideas, which undoubtedly have a general interest beyond the closeted setting of metaphysics, and in a way preserving their universal appeal, then all the better. Kant already dedicated the third section of the Antinomy of Pure Reason to the general interest the Ideas of Reason provoke, claiming that they intuitively speak to 'a certain practical interest in which every well-disposed man, if he has understanding of what truly concerns him, heartily shares.'¹⁷⁸ It is in this way that Kant speaks of such a plan as bordering on a popularisation of his thought, an address to the world, which would go beyond the otherwise putative esotericism of a work that had first of all needed to read to the warring tribes and factions of the metaphysical schools their rights in the rather dry and formal manner that the police are said to carry out their business in the Preface to the Second Edition to the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

¹⁷⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence*. p201

¹⁷⁷ These comments strike a rather different chord to the ones that make up the final passages to the Preface to First Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. There, Kant writes about the sparing use examples in the book, claiming: 'These are necessary only from a popular view, and this work can never be suitable for popular consumption.' Axviii.

¹⁷⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A466/B494

A little more is going on in this suggestion of Kant's, however. Such an amendment can only be entertained once the foundations and the general architectonic have been properly secured. On this reading at least, the antinomies would be little more than 'window dressing', presentational adornments. Even before the foundations have been put in place, and the hard labour of erecting a building in which thought might reside can begin (which Kant tells us at the beginning of the 'Transcendental Doctrine of Method' should be little more than a 'dwelling-house, just sufficiently commodious for our business on the level of experience, and just sufficiently high to allow of our overlooking it'¹⁷⁹) the plans for such a building are still in a process of being drawn. Much work must be carried out before such a popularisation drive can be considered. But this cannot be the case, or if it is, then more might rest on the question of presentation than would first be warranted. Firstly, an ambivalence on the part of Kant is clearly discernible. Kant may speak of the popularisation of his system as subordinate to the complexities of that system's articulation—with the antinomy of pure reason as simply the servant of any future drive to a broadening of his system's appeal. Yet it is the antinomies themselves that open towards the source of all that gives the *Critique of Pure Reason* its vitality. The second possibility, then, is that the antinomies are not only a pedagogical aid for understanding, a kind of propaedeutic. On the contrary, the antinomial form contains within it the very crux of the problem, a way of distilling, in microcosm, both the aims and implications of his critical philosophy. When considering their place within the wider architectonic of the *Critique*, Kant may have been attributing a greater force to the antinomies, which otherwise, constituting merely a third of the Transcendental Dialectic—itsself only comprising half of the Transcendental Logic, which along with the Transcendental Aesthetic made up the Doctrine of Elements—could easily be dismissed as marginalia. Again, in a letter, this time written seventeen years after the original publication of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant clarifies the role of the antinomy in his system thus:

It was not the investigation of the existence of God, immortality, and so on, but rather the antinomy of pure reason—"the world has a beginning; it has no beginning, and so on, right up to the fourth (sic!): there is freedom in man, vs. there is no freedom, only the necessity of nature—that is what first aroused me from my dogmatic slumber and

¹⁷⁹ Kant *Critique of Pure Reason*. A707/B735

drove me to the *critique of reason itself*, in order to resolve the scandal of ostensible contradiction of reason with itself.¹⁸⁰

The role that the antinomic method plays undergoes redescription. When Herr Garve misreads the central purpose of the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’, Kant is compelled to set him straight. Rather than the antinomies being the servant for understanding the Ideas of Reason, what, responds Kant, is truly fundamental, is the very *form* by which these contents find their contradictory and illusory character. The discovery of the antinomial *form* sets Kant on his way, serving as the very precipitate for his critical philosophy. No less than the very undertaking of the critique of reason itself is said to be possible only as the consequence of the discovery of the insoluble antinomies of Reason. This can already be seen in the Preface to the First Edition of the *Critique*. Kant’s opening gambit is to diagnose the affliction that befalls Reason: ‘Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is not able to answer.’¹⁸¹ This is enough to bring on a maddening neurosis: thought is predisposed to inquire into things that it has neither the right nor the resources available to make inquiries about. Such questions require a departure from experience, on which basis knowledge is obtainable. But by exercising itself in an act of pure speculation—uncoiling a set of ‘ever higher, ever more remote conditions’ that cease to have any direct relation to either experience or to the categories of understanding with which appearances are organised—thought lacks any possible grounds of appeal to ward off any contesting claims. It is in this sense that Kant will speak of metaphysics as ‘the battle-field of these endless controversies’¹⁸², resulting in a ‘prevailing mood of weariness and complete indifferentism’.¹⁸³ Philosophy, embroiled in mock-combats, pseudo-criticism, is reduced to the ceaseless exchange of claim and counter-claim between opposing sides of warring metaphysical factions, with little of any consequence being secured for philosophical posterity.

There is therefore a certain primacy accorded to the problem of the antinomies—a thought seemingly far divorced from ascribing to them a secondary

¹⁸⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence* p572.

¹⁸¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Avii

¹⁸² *Ibid.* Aviii

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* Axx

function alone, as part of a drive to disseminate the critical message.¹⁸⁴ Kant is attributing to the antinomial method an equally potent ‘agent’ for curing metaphysics’ *hypersomnia*.¹⁸⁵ This puts a different complexion on why Kant might have entertained the idea that the *Critique of Pure Reason* would be better served with an immediate presentation of the antinomies. They might have been first introduced, because there is something in the genetic structure of the antinomic form that takes us to the core of Kant’s contribution to a critical (as opposed to either a dogmatic or sceptical) mode of philosophising.

We have two alternatives. The antinomy as having first and foremost a presentational function, a way of simply setting up a set of problems where the solutions will lay elsewhere, and second a more substantive operation, by virtue of which the

¹⁸⁴ This primacy was a view aired many times by Kant, both publicly and in private correspondences—not only afterwards as a retroactive interpretation of his own thought, but indeed prior to the original publication of the First Critique; the antinomies are inextricably bound up with the genesis and the development of his philosophical itinerary. In the *Prolegomena*, Kant understood the employment of the antinomic method to be ‘a powerful agent to rouse philosophy from its dogmatic slumber and undertaking a critical examination of reason itself.’ Here Kant, perhaps guilty of lacking a little metaphorical imagination, recycles the same trope of critical awakening, which had appeared only a few pages prior in the preface to the *Prolegomena*, in his appraisal of Hume. It is the image of Hume as the external force jolting Kant’s philosophical consciousness that abides, often raised as a conveniently economical soundbite to encapsulate something of the critical turn in Kant’s philosophy.

¹⁸⁵ On the question of ‘who’ or ‘what’ is said to be the catalyst for the critical turn that Kant took, there are many contenders besides Hume. To give some notable examples: Richard Velkley offers a convincing account of why the ‘copernican turn’ was not so much instigated by Hume, but why, behind this philosophical revolution lay the figure of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As Velkley writes, in setting up the riggings for his claims: ‘The unpublished ethical reflections of the 1760s are crucial for understanding Kant’s critical philosophy, since they disclose a “Rousseauian turn” that precedes and conditions the better-known “transcendental turn” in Kant’s thinking.’ Please see: *Freedom and the Ends of Reason: On the Moral Foundation of Kant’s Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989, p2). On a different tack completely David-Menard offers a quite novel exposition of the genesis and development of Kant’s thought, which attributes much of the force of Kant’s mature work to his encounter with the idiosyncratic thoughts of Swedenborg. Accordingly, it was Swedenborg’s lapidary that was formative in Kant’s rethinking of Reason. What Swedenborg was responsible for presenting, however indirectly, was the maddening excesses of Reason itself. The transcendental dialectic, organised as it is around the ‘transcendental illusion’, derives, at least on David-Menard reading, from an indiscernibility between the rational and the pathological, between the reasonable and the fanatic, which Kant encircled in his pre-critical text on the dreaming consciousness of beings and the reverential character that Swedenborg ascribed to it. Please see: *La folie dans la raison pure: Kant lecture de Swedenborg* op.cit. There are other names that could also be added. What all this tells us ultimately about the specificity of Kant’s contributions, about the intellectual tributaries that come to source the Kantian system, may very well be a question for the history of Ideas. What the antinomy has, in its favour, above and beyond the contributions made by particular thinkers, and by which Kant’s own thinking and mode of philosophising were formed, is that we encounter a specific conceptual operator, which plays a positive role in both the exposition and the organisation of the Kantian system as a whole. Can the same be said about Rousseau or Hume, whose undeniable influence may have marked the content of Kant’s thought, but perhaps not the formal mechanisms by which Kant’s Critical Philosophy comes to be presented?

antinomies themselves transport us into the genesis of critique *as such*. Neither possibility need exclude the other. We can attribute to such a method both a presentational function and a critical insight of the utmost profundity. Much can be learned from this two-fold justification. For our part, interest in the antinomial form is, on the one hand, for purposes of presentation. It will offer a clear and direct way into some of the more intractable problems that the Idea of emancipation has given rise to, and thus will bring an air of much needed formality to proceedings. Emancipatory Ideas (along with Ideas of the political) have tended to be amenable to certain metaphysical ideas, such as the transcendental search for the unconditioned cause i.e. the Cause of the cause, which itself is not itself conditioned by a preceding cause, the attempt (again transcendental) to present a totality of All objects of experience, and to investigate, in short, into the in and of itself of an Idea of Reason of which it is committed to knowing.

How, then might we fair if, following Kant, we undertake, at the very beginning of our enquiry into issues of a quite different order, an examination of the impasses and cul-de-sacs that thought leads us into when addressing the Idea of emancipation? It is to this issue that we shall now turn in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

An Antinomy between Emancipatory and Political Reason

‘It does not proceed in a beautiful straight line but in a lightning-like zigzag.’

Rosa Luxemburg.¹⁸⁶

This chapter begins by entertaining the following question: How is it that, as logical operators, emancipation and politics have been deemed to be at variance?

Doubtless, this is a rather presumptuous question with which to start. ‘History’ will no doubt teach us a quite different lesson. Were we to turn the leaves of our political history books we would be forgiven for thinking that, far from emancipation and politics being at cross-purposes, the demand for emancipation has been a continual rallying cry for political mobilisation. This need not be restricted to the generations of worker-militants that understood in this the release from the necessities of wage-labour and the advent of a qualitatively new form of society, furnishing man with the optimal conditions for human flourishing and creativity. It includes also the more prosaic (but by no means less significant) demands for suffrage and citizen rights made by specific groups, and whose demand for emancipation would be exhaustive of this accession into the arena of politics. On these two bases alone the encounter between ‘emancipation’ and ‘politics’ seemingly has intelligibility. It is certainly not at all obvious why the issue of emancipation could be said therefore to be at odds with political action.

Yet if the question raised is not immediately obvious, this is because the leaves of the books here being turned are not historical but something else. In raising the question, the presumption made is to assume that the reader knows from where it is posed. Once this is made apparent though, this thesis will show itself in a different light.

The site for our inquiry is philosophy, and it starts from altogether different premises. This intervention shall not therefore take place at the level of emancipatory discourses themselves. In this way, it cannot be confused with a phenomenological

¹⁸⁶ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg: Reform or Revolution and the Mass Strike* (London: Haymarket Press, 2007)

accounting for the historical appearing of concrete struggles for emancipation. Rather the nature of this intervention functions at, admittedly a more rarefied level, at one place removed from the political struggles that have given, or presently give, sustenance to the idea.¹⁸⁷ The datum for this inquiry will be a body of philosophical discourse about emancipatory discourses. Given this important caveat, what then are the premises with which such an intervention (philosophical in design) begins?

Philosophers would not deny that something called an emancipatory politics expresses a meeting of two terms. And yet, according to philosophical wisdom, it is the precise mode of this meeting which is to be placed in question. Such a questioning would take the following form: the relation of politics and emancipation is transitory only, and depending on the type of emancipation sought the direction of this *transitoriness* will differ in one of two exemplary ways. On the one hand, it is possible to understand an emancipatory politics as a politics conditioned by an Idea of ‘emancipation’ externally sourced, namely sourced through an appeal to a state of affairs to-come, with which politics then is responsible to force as an actuality. Such a politics would be the means to

¹⁸⁷We start therefore not with the phenomeno-logical stuff of sense and signification (with how such signifiers have come to be used and deployed in actually existing socio-political situations) but the logical spaces within which these concepts appear as theoretical and philosophical datums, where both emancipation and politics come to appear in philosophical discourses—and the meaning with which each is inscribed—is as much a product of their philosophical employment as it could be said of any independent (outside) measure. It is from within the space of logical possibilities, which particular philosophies have both engendered and foreclosed in thinking both ‘emancipation’ and ‘politics’, that we reach a *formal impasse* (an ‘antinomic’ regulation of terms), which offers up (in an immanent way) the possibility of a structural dislocation of extant possibilities. This change of tact alters things quite dramatically, and, admittedly, is not without its critics. Acknowledgement of this comes by way of a quote from Judith Butler. Not without irony does Butler have this to say about logical modes of argumentation: ‘Logic can only have its own history, the conceptual history of prior logics, and that history will remain purified of any and all social content. Housed always within the social, but never *of* it, this logic appears to be the site of a new dream, the dream of pure thought, pure possibility in thought and, hence, perhaps also, transcendence of the social itself as the new goal for ‘emancipation.’ Judith Butler, ‘Poststructuralism and Postmarxism’, *Diacritics* (Winter, 1993) p9. The desire for conceptual purity, for formalisation, so that thought might exercise itself in terms of pure possibility, is anathema to Butler’s historico-hermeneutic approach. She sees in this gesture a return to metaphysics—to the heinous crimes of abstraction and idealism.

Here, we shall disagree with Butler. A philosophical accounting that, both trans-historically and trans-spatially, lays out the minimal content which affords intelligibility to the term emancipation, without determining its appearing, might be the new dream of a ‘pure possibility’ in thought, as Butler might say, but, at base, it has as its virtue a conception of thinking that traverses the bounds of philosophical inquiry, leaving open the possible ways in which, specifically and concretely, an emancipatory politics is articulatable—affirming thereby the power of political thought that defines a sequence of politics as properly transformative. Ultimately, it comes down to philosophical predilection: Butler is a thinker of ‘limit’ whereas it will be the challenge here to think under the category of the new. For whereas a limit can always be circumscribed—that is, historically localized—a localisation or positive circumscription of the new would be a contradiction in terms (at least philosophically, though it is to be acknowledged, not politically speaking).

satisfy the higher rational end of emancipated Man. But it would, in principle, be operative only insofar as this end is yet to be realised. The attainment of this transcendent end would render politics—as the means by which such an end is delivered—inoperative. Such a politics of emancipation would, more appropriately, be emancipation *from* politics. On the other hand, however, an emancipatory politics can be understood in a way in which the transitoriness moves in the opposite direction. Thought in this way an emancipatory politics would signify the passage into political community. This notion of emancipation would not be understood as an end in itself, but the means by which one accedes into public life. Again it would be inappropriate to understand this as an emancipatory politics, properly speaking, but rather a definition of emancipation in which the entry into the place of politics is made possible.

Looked from these two perspectives, the point from which this chapter starts loses some of its mystique and slowly takes form.

Meta- and Infra Political Principles of Emancipation

These philosophical extrapolations however have a function beyond simply pointing out the inequality inherent in the conjunction that would otherwise hold together the terms: emancipation *and* politics. Two distinct philosophical tendencies have staked out a position and counter position along this fragile intersection. The starting point has been to suppose a terminological disjunction, using this separation so as to fasten a little harder on the meaning of one term alone at the expense of the other. For the purposes of this thesis, the two positions shall be referred to as *meta*-political and *infra*-political interpretations of emancipation. As a meta-political principle, emancipation is seized as the highest end of political action. The meaning of emancipation, however, is seized in a way that is vertical to political process; vertical, in the sense that the seizing of the meaning of emancipation in its essence, its ideality, necessarily takes us beyond the vicissitudes and contingency thereby of its political articulation. For the sake of economy this can be expressed notationally as $e-p=I$ (where $-p$ is the subtraction of politics, affording emancipation, e , to be thought in its unicity, expressed numerically as I).¹⁸⁸ Contrarily, to understand

¹⁸⁸ The way in which the ‘metapolitical’ is employed here is similar, though by no means identical, to Jacques Rancière’s use of the term in *Disagreement* (London: Minnesota Press, 1999) pp80-6. While the ‘metapolitical’ has both here and in Rancière the same designation (namely, a species of philosophical thought that seeks to debunk the primacy of politics, by exposing it to a non-political substratum), the relation between the *arche* and the *meta* is more interwoven in the account developed

emancipation as an infra-political principle is to judge emancipation as beneath the dignity of politics (as *infradignatem*). But it comes to this judgement from the vantage point of politics as a dignified and noble enterprise and looks down at the demand for emancipation as an object outside its jurisdiction, as either non- or pre-political. At best, it privileges political being beyond the act of emancipatory deliverance that delivers up those who make claims for political membership, so that such forays might better serve the act of circumscribing the domain of politics and thinking what is proper to that place. Again, for reasons of economy and formality, we can express this tendency as $p-e=I$ (where $-e$ is the subtraction of emancipation, affording politics, p , to be thought in its unicity, expressed numerically as I).

One of the principal problems the next chapters encounter is the said inequality between the terminological figures of emancipation and politics. As a matter of course, the purpose of outlining this as a problem is not to assent to any such philosophical tendency that takes as its starting point the transitory relation of emancipation and politics (whether this results in the affirmation of emancipation as a meta-political ideal or its dismissal as infra-political (whether dismissed as pre or non-political), the corollary of which is to better seize what is distinctive about the political). Where philosophers have shown an inequality in their relation, this thesis will hope to demonstrate the opposite possibility. This shall be achieved by proposing that a thinking of emancipation cannot be regarded as either a passage into the stable place of politics or as an end beyond the actual state of social malady and political power. What lies beyond this proposition is something to be put on hiatus momentarily, so that first the logical consequences that subtend the analytical separation of politics from emancipation, both in its meta- and infra-political forms, might be properly explicated.

Two related obstacles have gotten in the way of thinking an emancipatory politics in a genuinely combinatorial and immanent manner. First, many have made sense of an emancipatory politics by recourse to a means-end logic. As long as an emancipatory politics is understood through the lens of a means-ends ratio, its two constituent parts can only be regarded as the undoing of each other. When emancipation is understood as the means to satisfy the entry into political life or politics is reduced solely to the means by which an emancipated state of affairs is to be attained, in neither sense can it be said that

here. Whereas ultimately Rancière maintains a categorial difference between the archipolitical and the metapolitical vis-à-vis philosophy's political relation, here the metapolitical principle of emancipation is to be understood at the same time as an *arche*-principle, as that which functions both as ground and horizon for political action.

the terms are given equal status as logical operators. Simply, where one begins the sense of the other seemingly terminates.

What regulates this type of demonstration is a two-fold presupposition. The first is the preponderance with *place*—place understood as a destination, a goal, an object, as an end at which one arrives or enters into. The two dominant ways by which the relation of emancipation and politics has been thought therefore have both divided up any possible conjunction into discrete units so that one term functions as place and the other operates only as route of access into this place. In its meta-political form, a politics of emancipation is a politics which has its object already constituted as a place to be instituted, a destination to be realised. A politics of emancipation, this way understood, is reduced only to the support of this higher end, reduced to how best politics is to serve this end. In this way, politics is measured only in terms of the most efficacious way in which this end might be brought about. Tethered to an external measure, politics is thus shaped in ways to suit the emancipation of humanity from all exploitative relations and subterfuge. However, the forms into which the elasticity of a politics of emancipation have been shaped has led to insidious relations of control and domination, obstructing thereby the very course of human liberation, for which a politics of emancipation would said to be a promise. In terms of the preponderant concern with place, the same can be said of the infra-political dismissal of emancipation as, at best, pre-political or otherwise *infradignatem*. The emancipation of a ‘politics of emancipation’ is the deliverance into the pre-constituted stage of political community. A politics of emancipation, this way conceived, is relegated only as entry into the stable and ordered place of political belonging, the realm of reciprocal citizen rights and communitarian obligation. Tied to politics as a designated place, emancipation would be thought as the accession of the excluded into the realm of political membership. A passage from a position outside political community to their inclusion in this community need not speak of the transformation of what it means to engage in politics, operating instead solely as the transformation of the juridico-political status of individuals or the formal political recognition of a particular collective cohort.

The second presupposition is a predisposal to deploy the means-ends dyad so as to cash out a *normative* predilection on the part of the thinker for either an emancipated society or political being as the highest end. It concerns what is distinctive about each terminological figure in isolation. The means-ends dyad, serving a particular logical function in this regard, affords the possibility of isolating one term as this ‘highest

end', of labouring over the meaning of this end and of attributing to this end a particular conceptual privilege. We can track how this logical deduction is arrived at in one of two ways. First, from the position of emancipation as an infra-political principle: if emancipation is understood as the passage that leads (as the means by which one is led) into politics then what of politics, specifically? What of the meaning of that place which lies at the end of this passage, along the right side of the line where the desire for a certain understanding of emancipation has come to an end and the political way of life has begun?

From the perspective of emancipation as an infrapolitical and a metapolitical principle, a means-end schema operates not only to divide up the scene into two discrete *moments* ($e \rightarrow p$, $p \rightarrow e$), but to fasten attention on one of the *elements* alone ($e < p$, $e > p$) as the transcendent object around which the other, subordinate, term makes its determinate orbit.

On the occasions that philosophers have separated out emancipation from politics—or, politics from emancipation—this act of conceptual divination has been to better point out the *distinctiveness* of one of the two terms. This is the case, for example, when, in 'On the Jewish Question', Karl Marx speaks of emancipated man as the highest end to be achieved—emancipation as an Idea promising the restoration of the human world *in toto*, of every human relation, of Man, to himself and for himself, *indivisibly*.¹⁸⁹ The bloated prestige of the *political* citizen, both bounded and conditional, is exposed as but a partial and hollow existence in light of the universal soul that is carried around by each and every man; 'human life is more "infinite" than political life', and unconditional emancipation will only be satisfied once politics as a way of living and organising men is overcome (whence $e > p$).¹⁹⁰ Or, contrariwise, when Hannah Arendt merely reverses the priority and places political existence over and above the banal factum of Man's biological constitution.¹⁹¹ Politics discloses the plurality of human existence, giving lie thereby to the liberatory fiction of the sameness of a repressed property belonging to a species, restored through the accomplishment of universal emancipation (whence $e < p$).¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', *Marx-Engels* (London: Norton Press, 1978) p46.

¹⁹⁰ Karl Marx, 'Critical Marginal Notes', *Marx-Engels* (London: Norton Press, 1978) p131.

¹⁹¹ On the relational difference between *zoē* (mere life) and *bios* (a type of living specific to a particular collectivity) and how this difference relate to Arendt, please see Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) pp126-35.

¹⁹² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: CUP, 1999) p7.

What these examples present to us is that when emancipation is understood either meta-politically or infra-politically—two tendencies that can be expressed notationally, as $e-p=1$ and $p-e=1$ respectively—the *One* in both these equations represents the *unicity* of a privileged term; the property of unicity is the condition under which the conceptual separation between politics and emancipation finds sanction. This is to say, an investigation about what is unique and proper to either politics or emancipation gives rise to the positing of their categorial difference.

Two obstacles, then, have proved to be stumbling blocks for thinking an emancipatory politics: the deployment of a means-end reasoning and a preponderant concern with place. ‘Place’ and ‘distinction’, on the one hand, and ‘distinctiveness’ and ‘unicity’ on the other, are logically bound together, as if what is most distinctive or exceptional about either ‘emancipation’ (from the position of its meta-political affirmation) or ‘politics’ (from the position of the infra-political diminution of emancipation) necessitates that it be given the dignity of a place, a structure, a boundary-line.¹⁹³ For its part, this thesis will stake much on overturning both the means-ends logic and the tying of the destiny of the concept to the sanctity of a place, both of which bedevil the prevailing accounts of emancipation (whether in its ‘principled’ affirmation or an equally ‘principled’ dismissal). The overturning of these premises is a central aim of this thesis, so that it might be possible to think emancipation and politics both equally and combinatorially, and not in terms of a liberation—a release—from politics or an understanding of emancipation as a passage *into* politics.

¹⁹³ Consider the following passage from Hannah Arendt: remarking on the origins of the polis, Arendt draws a distinction between the orders of publicity and the political. While the appearing of things in public is the ‘prerequisite of all real appearances in the world’, this condition of publicity is an insufficient condition for the existence of politics, because ‘[t]he public space does not become political until it is secured within a city, is bound, that is, to a concrete place that itself survives both those memorable deeds and the names of memorable men who performed them and thus can pass them on to posterity over generations. This city, which offers a permanent abode for mortal men and their transient deeds and words, is the polis; it is political and therefore different from other settlements (for which the Greeks had a different word *astē*) because it is purposefully built around its public space, the agora, where freemen could meet as peers on any occasion.’ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, p123. Also, consider the closing passage from Arendt’s essay, ‘Truth and Politics’: ‘What I meant to show here is that this whole sphere, its greatness notwithstanding, is limited [...]. And it is only by respecting its own borders that this realm, where we are free to act and to change, can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises.’ pp263-4. While it is important to agree with Arendt that ‘not everything is political’, so as to think the specificity of what we understand by the political (which is to say its distinctiveness), it is to resist the temptation that overcomes Arendt in circumscribing politics with too many second-order specifications. Instead it is to say that *while not everything is political, politics can arise anywhere and at any time.*

While required is that we must first divest ourselves of any means-end schema before we think anew the Idea of an emancipatory politics, this relinquishment cannot be extended to the attribute or quality of ‘distinctiveness’. The consequence of separating out emancipation from politics has been to show that ‘emancipation’ and the practice of ‘politics’ are two Ideas that portend novelty (we shall see the effects of this in later discussions of Hannah Arendt and Karl Marx). This attribution of distinctiveness in the form of newness—a newness that emancipation as a futural Idea promises and politics, as a thinking-in-act, exhibits—is to be preserved. A demonstration as to what makes both politics and the Idea of emancipation distinctive in this way must, however, refrain from overlaying a set of second order distinctions as a means by which to satisfy the question of the quality of their distinctiveness. How, then, is it possible to tie emancipation and politics together in a way that preserves the novelty that each, in their own right, is said to portend? How might this be achieved in such a way that does not either reduce emancipation to a mere logical function for the emergence and installing of political life or makes politics the simple function of a rational principle, ruling over the destiny of political practice (whether as a regulative ideal or as ontological destiny)?

To relinquish the security of place, of the certainty that this affords, is a necessary precondition in order to equip more ably a thinking that has concern for the new, doing so under the general conditions of undecidability and contingency.¹⁹⁴ This thesis argues that, once released from place, the philosophical task of thinking an emancipatory politics must do so under the aegis of the aleatory. ‘*Nec regione loci certa nec tempore certo*’ (‘in uncertain times, at uncertain places’)¹⁹⁵, words first uttered by the Epicurean materialist, Lucretius. The late Louis Althusser was to think a materialist practice of philosophy in this way too, transmitting something of its operativity by way of a simple locomotive metaphor: while the idealist steps on a train knowing exactly when the train will depart and when it will arrive at its destination, the materialist knows neither from where it has come nor toward where it is heading.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ To think the ‘necessity of contingency’ at its most ontological level is a task that some notable thinkers have undertaken in recent years. Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* (London: Continuum, 2008) is an important contribution. Alain Badiou, with the use of set theory and the primitive distinction that has enabled him to draw between consistent and inconsistent multiplicities (where the ‘One’ becomes an operation rather than a given) is a fundamental contribution to an aleatory materialism (Please see: *Being and Event* op. cit). Louis Althusser’s late work on aleatory materialism (see: *Philosophy of the Encounter: 1978-1987* (London: Verso, 2006; pp164-207) is also an exploratory way to think contingency at its most primordial level.

¹⁹⁵ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926)

¹⁹⁶ Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts a Long Time* (London: Vintage Press, 1994)

An inquiry acknowledging the *aleā* shall think both emancipation and politics equally, at the same time, neither functioning as the hidden transcendent destiny of the other. This can be demonstrated logically. If the meta-political attestation of emancipation does so by extricating it from the vicissitudes of politics and the infra-political displacement of emancipation is on account of better specifying the place of politics (according to it a structure, an institutional setting) then the encountering of emancipation and politics, deposes the preponderant concern with the quest for place, folding both into the same movement. It unbridles itself from thinking the beginning and end of things (whether this be emancipation as a process prior to politics, as a rite of passage one has to pass through in order to begin the political life, or whether the success of revolutionary politics marks the highest end as the realisation of universal emancipation), and thinks, in their stead, the hazardousness of their conjunction. It is to think neither emancipation nor politics as destiny (not as $e-p=1$ or $p-e=1$), but as *encounter* ($p+e\neq 1$), where the encountering of two operators along an immanent plane is the production of the new and hazardous.

This thesis holds out for the possibility of offering a description of an emancipatory politics without place, which would enlarge (at least at the level of philosophical discourse) the possible and plural ways in which the new can be affirmed (and thereby better accounts for the source of novelty for which both politics and emancipation have, conceptually, functioned as operators). This means that a virtue be made out of the old adage that less is more, and make these concepts operate with the minimum content, the minimal possible description, which will nevertheless ensure the intelligibility of what is understood as an emancipatory politics, but not in a way that would cast these terms so far and wide that all permutation be covered and thereby failing to capture anything of the *specificity* that would make a politics of emancipation—*qua* politics and emancipation—thinkable.

This will transform not only how one understands ‘emancipation’. It will transfigure the way in which politics as an operator is to be understood from the two established ways of doing so. Divested of place, an emancipatory politics would be the designation of something both mobile and punctual, interrupting the formal distribution of places and predicates regulating the appearance of institutionalised politics. No particular ‘emancipatory politics’ need be countenanced; such a mode of investigation goes against the more general and philosophical tenor of this thesis. Equally it would go against the description without place to be provided here, that is, an understanding of novelty (under

the frame of a politics of emancipation or, better phrased still, an emancipatory politics), which is here to be thought without ontical designation, without prior assignation or placement.¹⁹⁷

Against the backdrop of these general remarks the following pages shall seek to accomplish the following. First, a framing of the problem concordant with the

¹⁹⁷To offer a description of emancipatory politics without place is *not* to say that an *act* of emancipatory politics is without place, which would doubtless be a senseless statement. It is to wonder though whether, philosophically, an entreaty on emancipation must already be without place in its readiness to think formal conditions for the new. Minimally circumscribed at this early juncture is that an emancipatory politics be defined as interruptive, as a mode that does not remain tethered to the formal spaces in which politics is said to take place, but is mobile and aleatory, precisely. The point however—and one readily conceded here—is that a description of this mode of politics is not without precedent. It has been thought extensively, and thought under some different names. In recent philosophical and theoretical discourse, a ‘democratic politics’ has been adjudged as the appropriate ‘name’ for designating interruptive and novel political sequences. Democracy is embodied in act and not reducible to its actual, realised instantiations (this is the case for thinkers such as Wendy Brown, William Connolly, Simon Critchley, Bonnie Honig and Chantal Mouffe, all of whom have, in different ways, sought to redescribe democracy in such a way that is excessive of its formal designation). *Mutatis mutandis*, a ‘communitistic politics’ has been recast not as a politics *for* communism (as a determinate end, as an object to realise) but an indeterminate communism. Communism becomes the immanent production (an enactment and exhibition) of its principles of egalitarianism and justice interior to the hazardous unfolding of a political sequence. Here the work of Slavoj Žižek, Antonio Negri, the later Althusser (as well as the early writings of Alain Badiou, who spoke of a ‘communist invariance’) can be considered. In both cases, the move is nigh on identical: there is the grammatical switch from thinking the proper nouns of ‘Communism’ and ‘Democracy’ as states of affairs—permanent, institutionalised orders enshrined in constitutions—to their adjectival forms, in which shorn of substance, such syntagms function instead as operators, constitutive of the *process* of politics itself. A democratic political act or a communitistic practice would therefore exhibit in an immanent way, in the unfolding of a sequence, their associative *qualia* (equality, freedom, collective decision making, etc).

The question, though, is the following: do the recastings of a democratic or communist politics, along the lines stated above, offer a description without place, as is hoped for in this thesis? Is there a meaningful difference between framing the same mode of political relation under different nominations? Here an ‘emancipatory politics’ is to be considered as operating at a more basic, ontological level than any other name, even if (for all intents and purposes) it is a description of the same phenomena. Whether one attests to a ‘[radical] democratic politics’ or a ‘communist politics’, these are *descriptions with place*. To avoid misunderstanding, to say these appellations are with place is not the same thing as suggesting that they are tied to an objective space (for example, the formal place of liberal democracy or Soviet Communism); this is precisely what all of the above are seeking to avoid. However it is more of an *existential* place to which a description of *a* politics (irreducible to the stable settings of institutionalised politics) is tied. Communism or Democracy are placeholders for historical investment, tied to particular political sequences, and specific ways of thinking the *release* from the stability of what appears as an objective and well-ordered regime of both being and belonging. An emancipatory politics would be the invariance of an interruptive politics, whereas democracy or communism would be part of a varied taxonomy of names under which *emancipatoriness* has been both specifically thinkable and practiceable. This is why Alain Badiou, in a more recent essay, has said that there is a point when ‘communism’ and ‘democracy’ become the same thing. For him, what both share is that they are names approximating a concept of ‘rebellious subjectivity’ or an ‘emancipatory politics’.

more broad description of a philosophical stand-off between emancipation as a meta and infra political principle. The foregoing problematic, sketched above, is best presented in the form of an antinomy of emancipatory and political reason. But, what of the philosophers said to exhibit the features of thesis and antithesis *vis-à-vis* the relation sought between a politics and the desire for emancipation? While a veritable ensemble of 'proper' names could be attached to the interpretations of emancipation as *meta* or *infra* political principles, for the sake of economy exclusive attention will be given to two particular thinkers, both of whom provide a sufficiently strong foothold into the problem at hand. On the one side the fashioning of emancipation into a meta-political principle will be typified in the work of Karl Marx. On the other, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt will be taken as the paragon of the dismissal of emancipation as an infra-political principle. The proper names of 'Marx' and 'Arendt' will stage this dispute about, in the case of the former, the 'place' of emancipation in the transitivity of political action and, in the latter, the 'place' of politics with respect to emancipation as a transitory process.

For the sake of brevity a further reduction can, at this time, be entertained so that the entire problematic is boiled down to two exemplary statements. From the perspective of the Arendtian dismissal, we read from her monograph, *On Revolution*, that: 'the desire for liberation ends when the desire for freedom as a political way of life begins.'¹⁹⁸ Arendt's entire operation can be said to take place at the boundary line between the end of emancipatory desire and the beginning of political freedom, so as to better point out their difference. From the position of Marxian thought, we read 'politics is a cloak to be cast away to disclose the truth of Man's socialist soul.'¹⁹⁹ The Marxian operation turns around the transitivity of politics to the historical destiny of emancipated being. This antinomic spacing of terms—which finds a certain co-ordination through the pairing Marx and Arendt—will now need to shift from a set of general remarks regarding the formal outline of the antinomy of emancipatory and political reason to a localisation of its problematical features in the work of situated discourses.

Marx and Arendt

The work of both Arendt and Marx is here of particular explanatory value, and for three different reasons:

¹⁹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, (London: Penguin, 1990) p33.

¹⁹⁹ Karl Marx, 'Critical Marginal Notes', p129.

(1) First the entire problematic, from which this thesis takes its departure, crystallises around the conceptual separation courted by these thinkers. What Marx accomplished with the idea of ‘emancipation’, a similar operation was performed by Arendt on the meaning of the political: under their guidance both syntagms are elevated as portents of novelty. In each case, the other term (politics for Marx, emancipation for Arendt) is deployed to shore up this distinctiveness, either by way of it operating as a prelude (as a logical moment in the unfolding of the privileged object) or as an opposition (a negative term from which the privileged object is to be distinguished). With the greatest economy, formulations such as those quoted above function as distillates, condensing the full weight of the conceptual disjunction between the terminological figures of emancipation and politics waged at the level of philosophical discourse. There is then in Marx and Arendt an apparent perspicuity about their lines of reasoning. This fact alone might prove sufficient cause. There is however an added, second, reason.

(2) With Marx and Arendt, two thinkers who engage in lexically ordering the priority of emancipation over politics (in the case of Marx) and the reverse (as is the case with Arendt), we do not witness only individual decisions taken by particular authors, the effects of which are restricted to the bounded place of their singular inquiries. We have two thinkers who take possession over the meaning of what it is to be political (Arendt) and emancipated (Marx), transforming the meaning and amplitude of these terms. Both thinkers provided definitions somewhat anomalous from what preceded them, but definitions which were every bit as peculiar as they might be said to be exacting in their specificity.²⁰⁰ They are specific, in that from within the context of their own

²⁰⁰The term ‘peculiarity’ is not misjudged here. Many, for example, have been baffled by Arendt’s conception of politics. Churlish commentators have dismissed her thinking as entirely ‘idiosyncratic’, accusing her of deploying concepts in a way only she could understand. Many then have been pejorative in their ascription of Arendt’s peculiarity. Not that it need convey negative connotations. Arendt herself is the first to admit her way of seizing the political question cuts across the grain of common understanding. Her retracing of the link between politics and freedom (freedom though as something different to emancipation—this will require further commentary later) is one such exercise in pronouncing theses which could be said to stand out from what is most commonplace about thinking politics. One need only to quote from Arendt’s portrait of Walter Benjamin, where she writes approvingly of his *atypicality*, depicting Benjamin as an anarchic and subversive thinker, who ‘destroys the context in which his object once was only part of a greater, living entity [...] cleansing the chosen object of everything that is typical about it’; it is ‘only the *uniquely* genuine’, Arendt adds, with which Benjamin is concerned. (see Arendt’s ‘Introduction’ to Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1998) pp7-55.

In two concomitant forms therefore does the term ‘peculiarity’ resonate with the thought of Arendt. One negative, a reproach made by others, exterior to the Arendtian disposition—casting judgement about the manner of her approach to political problems—and the other positive, affirmed by Arendt, as a quality of the power of thought, a quality of those who, rather than being

emergence, what Marx was to outline as the task for real liberation dislocated with a general acceptance as to what was sayable about the meaning of emancipation, Arendt was to accomplish with her recasting of the meaning of politics; both allowed thought to move thereby in different and unanticipated directions. Their peculiarity (though better described as their definitional novelty) is thus the effect of a discontinuity with regard to their own contemporaneity.

Marx and Arendt could be said to have taken possession over the meaning of ‘emancipation’ and the ‘political’, respectively. In what sense can this claim be said to have validity?

Today’s intellectual terrain still exhibits the war-scars from the opposing forces of the Marxian allegiance to an idea of ‘human liberation’ and the Arendtian dismissal of the emancipatory demand in the name of a recommencement of the political. The present scene does little to reflect a forgetting of the conceptual breaks induced by Marx (on the topic of human liberation and communistic-man) and Arendt (on the topic of the ‘greatness’ of political life, in its irreducibility to administrative tasks and social issues), but instead represents a reification of these very definitional recastings. The thetic decisions taken by Arendt and Marx have, in this sense, only too well transcended the locality of their original site of enunciation and now, permanent ciphers on the philosophical landscape, constitute the general horizon of visibility as to what is understood about the ideas of politics and emancipation, in general terms, and the possibility of emancipatory politics, more specifically. This serves as the second

beholden by their times, rise above them, redistributing the sense of things.

The same can be said of Marx also. Louis Althusser’s entire project in both *For Marx* (London: Verso, 1996) and *Reading Capital* (London: NLB, 1970) was an attestation to a mutation in the very fabric of thought that Marx was responsible for effectuating. Under the concept of an ‘epistemological break’, Althusser sets himself the task of thinking the *singularity* of the Marxian theoretical revolution. This singularity would imply the peculiarity of Marx’s thinking. On account of this peculiarity, Marx would stand apart from what is generally accepted, breaking with the presuppositions undergirding the dominant forms of philosophising (German Idealism) and political economy (anglo-saxon empiricism), and radically reconfiguring both the operation of thought and the objects on which such a new way of thinking operates. Whether Althusser would have extended this epistemic rupturing to the idea of emancipation (which, admittedly remains a term restricted to the young Marx, still more or less under the conventions of what at the time was philosophically in vogue (German idealism)) is another matter. Nonetheless, of significance is the centrality of the word ‘peculiarity’, equally present in the reception of both Arendt and Marx’s work, and which can be traced textually, as either a term used by detractors, quick to point out the difficulty of application, or by defendants, equally quick off the mark to single out the distinctive quality, the novelty of their thinking. Its normative inflection aside, ‘peculiarity’ is an invariant descriptive feature conveying something of the break, for which both thinkers are responsible in enacting with regard the intelligibility of emancipation as the advent of communist-man (Marx) and the political as a portent of the ‘new’, the ‘great’ and the ‘plural’ (Arendt).

justification. It is as though recent political philosophy has felt compelled to decide between the figures of 'Marx' and 'Arendt' as if everything about the demand for 'emancipation' and 'political belonging' hung on these proper names alone. Perspicuous in this regard is the revolving door of philosophical predilection, which has seen Marx and the idea of human emancipation exit the scene and under the injunction of a 'return to the political' has welcomed, though not exclusively, the work of Hannah Arendt.²⁰¹

Written during the fading embers of the Marxist revolutionary sequence, Claude Lefort's little tribute to the work of Hannah Arendt is particularly instructive on this issue.²⁰² Commenting on the length of time it took for the French intelligentsia to become receptive to the thought of Arendt, Lefort attributes such a long silence to the prolonged hopes of workers revolution and imaginisations of an emancipated and fully transparent society (carried by the promise of Communism and the advent of new Man). As Lefort expresses it, the grip that Marxism had on the politico-philosophical debate in France throughout the twentieth century 'was an obstacle to the reception of Arendt's ideas [on the political]'; 'only with its collective disenchantment were a number of new questions asked more and more frequently'²⁰³, a mode of questioning for which Arendt could then serve as a guide, re-orientating thought along different premises. These remarks are indicative, conveying as they do a seemingly terse opposition between the names of 'Marx' and 'Arendt', each constituting the limit, the theoretical blockage for the

²⁰¹ The long historical trajectory of Marxism testifies to the grip that Marx has had on the politico-philosophical accounting of emancipation. On the other side, Hannah Arendt has, in recent years, attracted much attention. To give a selection of the more interesting appraisals of Arendt's contributions to a rethinking of the political, please see: Dana Villa's *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Peg Birmingham's *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights* (Indiana University Press, 2006); Seyla Benhabib's *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Craig Calhoun and John McGowan (eds), *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, (London: Minnesota Press, 2001); Linda Zerilli's *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2000); Claude Lefort, 'Hannah Arendt and the Question of the Political' *Democracy and Political Theory*, (Oxford, Polity, 1988) and Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) pp126-35.

This is not to say that the recent re-tracing of the political is drawn exclusively from the thinking of Arendt. Carl Schmitt's influence on debates regarding the political is immense also. Please see: *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007). Arguably a faultline could be drawn between the two conceptions of the political that can be distilled from the work of both Schmitt and Arendt i.e. the antagonism of the friend/enemy distinction of Schmitt against the associational inflection that Arendt's places on political action. This would be the conclusion reached by Chantal Mouffe. Please see: *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 2005)

²⁰² Claude Lefort, 'Hannah Arendt and the Question of the Political' *Democracy and Political Theory*, (Oxford, Polity, 1988) pp45-57.

²⁰³ Ibid p48.

other, such that in the midday sun of Marxist theory many were blind to the insights of the Arendtian interpretation of the political. Only with the former fading into twilight would the Arendtian star shine the brighter.²⁰⁴

It is not only the mutual exclusivity of the philosophical figures of Marx and Arendt, Lefort is entertaining, but the stand-off between particular thematics, which Marx and Arendt give body to. The opposition between Marx and Arendt would be the personifications of an antinomy that takes hold between the thinking of the transcendental ends of emancipation and the essence of the political. In this connection it should be recalled that the philosophical need, as the French philosophers Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy were to articulate it, to ‘retreat the political’ (an injunction present amongst an array of notable French philosophers in the nineteen eighties) was a reaction to the forgetting of the political by way of its absolute territorialisation (in the sense of both its eclipsing and completion), which years of thinking the preponderance of social revolution as the key to prise open the secret of man’s liberation had only served to nurture.²⁰⁵ To return to the political would be on the necessary condition of turning away from the idea of emancipation, for it was with the turning toward the demand of universal liberation (in the form of Communism) that bore the forgetting of the political in modernity.

The void left by the failure of those political systems that bespoke nominally of Communism has perhaps translated as the voiding of the very category of emancipation, as if the destiny of a concept could so easily be tied to the one thinker. The following question would, at this point, have to be raised: what is lost when an isonomy presents itself between a proper name and a concept, between in this case the thought of Marx and the thinking of emancipation? The indubitable fact that Marx’s recasting of emancipation, under the promise of communistic-man, played a decisive role in shaping the way in which generations were to think the ultimate task of emancipation—of the specific goals to be attained and the means by which such an end is to be attained—should not obscure the fact that, as the political theorist Ernesto Laclau has rightly commented, ‘the history of Marxism [does not] overlap with the history of emancipatory projects’, the Marxian referent does not exhaust the grammar of emancipation.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Ibid p45.

²⁰⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political* (London: Routledge, 1997). It is of note that, amongst others, Alain Badiou, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Jacques Rancière, all contributed to the ‘Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political’.

²⁰⁶ Ernesto Laclau, ‘The Time is out of Joint’ in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996) p82.

Acquiescence on this issue affords the broadening of possibility. While little can be said about the precise appearing of emancipatory politics to-come, a general logic can nevertheless be worked out, in which the Marxist interpretation would be *one way* in which a politics of emancipation has been seized (inasmuch that, at base, 'Marxism' is a name that indexes a singular emancipatory subjectivity, the collective figure of the 'proletariat'), but would be an instance that has, for a list of reasons not possible to enumerate here, come to a close. Crucially, though, the atrophying of the particular dreams of proletarian freedom from the shackles of the wage-relation, with which Marxism shared its purposefulness, would not mean the end of 'emancipation' as a meaningful operator for politics.

Marx and Arendt: two names who have fixed the debate as to what is sayable about the categories of emancipation and the political respectively. The destiny of each term, tied to the 'rigid designators' of these proper names, makes it all the more peremptory though that this thesis starts with them, even if it is with the intention of arriving at someplace else, said to be irreducible to the ways in which the terminological figures of emancipation and politics have been interpreted hitherto. The rehearsal of the arguments of Marx and Arendt in Chapters Four and Five is, this way conceived, to express not a beeline for one, accompanied by the complete abandonment of the other. The temptation to reproduce this dyadic structure will however be a distinct possibility if the meaning of politics is continually regarded at variance with an understanding of emancipation. By taking as axiomatic the inequality of the constitutive terms at play in an emancipatory politics, both Arendt and Marx derive a disjunction of terms, which then facilitates their exclusive concern with the propriety of political life and emancipated being respectively.

As far as the question of emancipation is concerned, we are to present their thoughts on the issue as antinomic, properly speaking. This is said in the knowledge though that some commentators have sought to read Arendt along the lines of Marx and Marx from the angle of Arendt, concluding that each might learn something from the other, that differences can be bridged and horizons fused. This is no doubt possible, but it is worth wondering whether in cloning these proper names we are taken any place different as regard the terms at stake in this inquiry? It must be shown how the antinomy that takes root between Marx and Arendt is not so much of the order of radical incommensurability, possible to falsify in the name of some form of rapprochement. Rather, the two thinkers form an opposition grounded on shared suppositions, where, with

the perfectly inverted images produced therein, each thinker shows him and herself as a reflection of the other. Arendtians and Marxists will be aware of the limitations of the metaphor of inverted figures, and the effects of retardation this produces in thought. Both Arendt and Marx were sufficiently aware of how a simple turning upside-down of received wisdoms preserve the structure of what is most problematical, and in the greatest need of critical interrogation. Putting a model of thought the right-side up is no guarantee that the mystified shell be peeled away and its rational kernel extracted; as Althusser rigorously scrutinised, a stretch too far for even the most supple of philosophical minds.²⁰⁷

Therefore, attempts to appease the opposition between Marx and Arendt are certainly possible. Not that they would do anything to question the shared assumptions that regulate the appearing of the terminological disjunction between emancipation and politics. The reader should cast an eye back to what earlier were described (albeit in a provisional and cursory manner) as the impediments obstructing the possibility of thinking their relation immanently and combinatorially, for which there were three features: one, the logical deployment of a means-end schema that unties the intelligibility of an emancipatory politics and separates its two constitutive parts as discrete moments in a determinate process; two, the preponderance with place, with place as destination and, three, the figure of the One. Specifically, though, they are present (and it will be incumbent upon me to provide the evidence) in both the Marxian attestation to emancipation as a meta-political principle and the Arendtian affirmation of the political (via the infra-political dismissal of emancipation as no more than pre-political). So as to think the relationship between the logical operators of emancipation and politics differently, both terms must be wrested away from these presuppositions. It means ultimately exiting the stage of the dispute between the would-be antipodes of Marx and Arendt.

Nonetheless Marx and Arendt are somehow exemplary of what this thesis understands as the two dominant ways of thinking the transitoriness of the relation

²⁰⁷Louis Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', For *Marx*, (London: Verso, 1996) pp89-94. We should equally recall Arendt's mindfulness about the operation of dyadic inversion, which she examines extensively in her essay, 'Tradition and the Modern Age' in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin, 1991). In the epochal shift between the classical and the modern, a concatenation of reversal and inversions come to light ('*fides* against *intellectus*, practice against theory, sensuous, perishable life against permanent, unchanging, suprasensuous truth,' p35), but where both repudiated opposite and liberated other ultimately 'show their meaning and significance *only* in and through this opposition.' p36.

between politics and the demand for emancipation. So far two reasons have been offered: first, the perspicuity of their line of reasoning; both Marx and Arendt clearly exhibit the features of a meta and infrapolitical interpretations of emancipation. Second, Marx and Arendt are proper names that have, philosophically, shaped the terrain as to how this relation of terms is to be thought. There is a third further justification. Though, this will appear in flagrant contradiction with the first.

(3) The positions taken by Arendt and Marx, along opposing sides of a divide about the meaning of political belonging and emancipatory being respectively, may be more or less intractable; the same however cannot be said of the ways in which these positions draw out a justification for the positing of such a conceptual difference. The demonstrations deployed are variable and not altogether consistent. Textual examples can be cited that, far from reflecting a rigid dichotomic separation of terms, present instead an equivocal categorial distinction, in which their meaning and function undergo various shifts of emphases and degrees of differentiation. There are moments, for example, when in Marxian thought the difference between the meaning of emancipation and politics undergoes both expansion and contraction, when, that is, the difference between the terms appears maximal—politics as sending revolutionary ends off-course (as is the case in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*) or on other occasions when Marx reduces politics to the handmaiden of the state (such as in Marx's 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right')—or, conversely, when the gap is attenuated and politics becomes primary in the process for emancipatory fulfilment ('Class struggle as the motor of History', the antagonism of the proletarian-worker and the bourgeoisie, etc.). The same goes for Arendt too, according to which the demand for emancipation appears as a necessary pre-condition for the establishment of the public realm (emancipation as 'not itself political [...] [even if] an indispensable prerequisite of all things political'²⁰⁸, as Arendt writes) and conversely a preponderant demand that runs the risk of undoing the political relation altogether (particular passages from *On Revolution* that derogate liberatory desire for exuding excessive pathos,²⁰⁹ for *ressentiment* and other reactive drives²¹⁰). The multiple ways in which this difference is handled by both Marx and Arendt cannot help but alter the precise operativity of the terms at stake in their thinking. These instances (which, during the course of the subsequent two chapters, will of course

²⁰⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* p117 and also 'What is Freedom?', in *Between Past and Future*, p148.

²⁰⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* p234.

²¹⁰ *Ibid* p125.

require better specification) will alert us to the fact that there is nothing which would ontologically proscribe the possibility of thinking the equality of their encounter (something in their very being that confounds the sense of their proper encounter), only a logical structure into which these two terminological figures have been inserted, that is, a formal means-end schema in which, teleo-logically constructed, predestines thought to arrive at a determinate place, either in praise of the Political or in expectation of Man's emancipatory fulfilment.

In Marx and Arendt, therefore, not only is there justification for their exclusivity in the first stages of this thesis as paradigmatic cases of the more general and formal tendencies this thesis labels as the meta-political and infra-political interpretations of the meaning of emancipation. Both in the manner of exhibiting the main features of both positions have still, today, shaped the contemporary terrain for the thinking of the intelligibility of an emancipatory politics.

Altering the premises and transforming the grammar of an emancipatory politics, *stricto sensu*, from either a politics of emancipation (emancipation as the historical destiny of politics), or political emancipation (emancipation as marking the passage into political life) will entitle different conclusions to be drawn from what is, in the thought of both Marx and Arendt equally, a putative disjunction of terms.

Chapter Four.

Marx's Dilemmas: To Know the New

‘All men begin by *wondering* that things are as they are, as they do about self-moving marionettes, or about the solstices or the incommensurability of the diagonal of a square with the side; for it seems wonderful to all who have not yet seen the reason, that there is a thing which cannot be measured even by the smallest unit. But we must end in the contrary and, according to the proverb, the better state, as is the case in these instances too when men *learn* the cause; for there is nothing which would *surprise* a geometer so much as if the diagonal turned out to be commensurable.’

—Aristotle.²¹¹

‘True class revolt in essence surprises. It is a war by surprise, the generic brutality of scission. How could the established rule of the old put up with a deduction of what tends to break it asunder?’

—Alain Badiou.²¹²

Marxian thought has bequeathed to us an emancipatory theory. It constitutes the site of a double articulation between the possibility of a science of social formations, on the one hand, and, on the other, the affirmation of a political struggle waged in the name of the proletariat, in the furtherance of the cause of the liberation of humanity from ‘all exploitation, oppression, class distinction and class struggle.’²¹³ The abiding question remains: how to interpret this inheritance?

The history of Marxism, none other than the living legacy of the body of work immaculately preserved in some fifty volumes,²¹⁴ can itself be read as the setting of

²¹¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, 983a, ln 14-20.

²¹² Alain Badiou, ‘Le Flux et le parti (dans les marges de *L’Anti Oedipe*)’, *La situation actuelle sur le front de la philosophie*. p24.

²¹³ Freidrich Engels, ‘Preface to the German Second Edition’ of the *Communist Manifesto*, p70.

²¹⁴ The number cited here refers to the English publication of the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*

a protracted struggle on where the accent between the stringency of a theoretical *dispositif* and a political manifesto, is to find suitable placement, between the demands that issue forthwith from the ‘community of science and the worker’s movement’,²¹⁵ between the categorial systematicity of the analytic of *Capital*, on the one hand, and committed affirmation of the revolutionary subjectivity of the proletariat, on the other.²¹⁶ This antinomy between theoretical and practical reason, between the theoretical interrogation of causes and the political irruption of a constellation of events that would give rise to the search for an explanatory cause may, as Luckas presents it, constitute the symptomal weakness of bourgeois thought, but it is historically overcome by the synthetic unity of theory and practice of Marxism.²¹⁷ Marxism, then, would be less the setting for the juxtaposition of two possibilities the committed revolutionary might choose to partake in, more the possible knot binding the dual imperative of changing the world and knowing the world within which social transformation is to be effected. Error would lay with those who insist on breaking the scene of history’s tasks in two, of undertaking an illicit transposition of an outmoded division between intellectual and manual labour, which Marx had already critically surmounted.

But whether presented either dialectically or antinomically, the Marxian presentation of a theory of emancipation amounts to the exhibition of a set of problems that are not effaced via the synergetic calibration between theoretical and practical tasks. Instead, it must be asked, to what extent does this otherwise critical corrective to the unilateralism of either a theoreticism or a politicism give rise to the effects of a new unilateralism, this time not revealed at the level of the form by which thinking and action are to enjoin in the pursuit of emancipatory ends, but at the level of emancipatory content, such that both theory and politics converge as the co-sender of the ultimate deliverance of such ends?

The overarching purpose for this chapter is to draw a line underneath a defence of emancipation that operates unilaterally, which is to say *dogmatically*; this, a first precondition for thinking anew the Idea. The dogmatic defence elevates emancipation to the status of a meta-political principle, and Marx offers one such way

(MEGA).

²¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) p145.

²¹⁶ Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, (New York: Autonomedia Press, 1991) p8.

²¹⁷ Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, (London: Merlin Press, 1971).

into thinking this particular comportment towards emancipatory ideas. To approach the Idea of emancipation dogmatically has numerous implications. One particularly specious problem to be foregrounded at the very beginning is the consequences that Marx's thinking of emancipation (a thinking that sought to *know*, through a definitive and direct presentation of the Idea of universal emancipation as the advent of Communism) has on the seizing of the new, the event. To what extent, then, are we to judge Marx as a thinker of novelty?

The Marxist philosopher, Ernst Bloch, would wish to settle the issue. The new, writes Bloch, 'had hardly found a single philosopher before' Marx.²¹⁸ As he writes:

The New: it circulates in the mind in first love, also in the feeling of spring and yet it has nevertheless hardly found a single philosopher. It permeates, though it is forgotten time and again, the eve of great events, together with a highly characteristic mixed reaction of fear, being armed, confidence; it founds, in the promised Novum of happiness, advent consciousness. It runs through the expectations of almost all religions, in so far as primitive, even ancient oriental future consciousness can be properly understood at all; it pervades the whole of the Bible, from Jacob's blessing to the Son of Man who makes everything new, and to the new heaven, the new earth. Nevertheless, the category Novum has not been described anything like adequately enough, and found no place in any pre-Marxist world-picture.²¹⁹

The question of the new is particularly fraught in the context of the History of Marxism, and is to serve as a suitable route into the aporia that underwrite Marx's commitment to the Idea of emancipation, once *knowledge* of this Idea is secured and divorced from the vicissitudes of political action (and thought turns away thereby from thinking emancipation as an Idea and towards its conceptual seizing).

In *On the Jewish Question*, Marx makes a conceptual distinction between the task of 'political emancipation' (indelibly marked by the scars of religiosity, deifying the state at the expense of civil society, and therefore elevating the abstract "citizen" above man's concrete existence,) and 'true emancipation'.²²⁰ Marx inverts thereby the problematic by exposing the chimera of abstraction that cleaves to political forms, and commences his inquiry with man's concrete relations as the progenitor of Value. Social labour provides the narrative for the historical development of human existence, and

²¹⁸ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume One*, (Cambridge: MIT, 1996) p201.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Karl Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978).pp26-52.

serves as the story-board for the emancipation of humankind. Labour, as the source by which man impresses his personality on nature: Man reveals himself to be a-part from the natural world: both a part of nature's design—for it is nature itself from which man evolves—but, at the same time set apart from other beings, on point of fact of a capacity to escape the bounds of necessity, to exercise a freedom that is disjunctive from all other beings). Man is a transformative being, and History the documentation of this transformational capacity: the condition *sine qua non* of man's creative ingenuity, labour, the self-generative act, marks out human capacity from animality.

“True liberation” demands therefore a “social revolution” not simply a “political one”, one which must take root in the everyday relations of man's labour activity. It is this idea of liberation (‘human’, ‘generic’ emancipation), which Marx privileges over and above political emancipation; ‘human life is more infinite than political life’, Marx writes in his letter to Arnold Ruge.²²¹

Politics, on the other hand, is the great fiction guilty of separating man's species-being, of dividing between man's practical life (which carries within itself the kernel of communal life) and the externalisation of Man's attributes onto the transcendent abstract form of the State. Man is condemned to lead a double life: split between his ‘political existence’, in which he is regarded as a “citizen”, one among equals, *and* his ‘practical existence’, where he remains the slave to the factory-owning-Capitalist, under the conditions of pauperisation and alienation, wage-labour and the commodity-form. A seemingly clear hiatus exists between the reality of man's existence, in which men are the objects of capitalist exploitation, and a political life that obscures these relations of social subordination by ascribing the same political identity to all. As Jacques Rancière discusses, Marx's concern lay in the idea that ‘the egotistical property owner is matched by the non-property owner whose *rights* as citizens are only there to *mask* radical nonright.’²²² This, the essence of Marx's critique of Hegel.²²³ Marx sets about the task of the reconstitution of the social body (divided between the State and civil society); that the presently objectified political form, exteriorised from Man's being and projected onto the State, is to find its coincidence only within man's properly practical existence. Only with the augmentation of a social revolution, one in which no sphere of existence is left

²²¹ Karl Marx, ‘Critical Marginal Notes’, Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) p162.

²²² Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, (London: Minnesota Press, 1999) p83.

²²³ Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*’ Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) pp16-25 and pp53-65.

untouched, will the material capacities of men be disclosed, and the immanent potential of Man fully liberated:

It is not radical revolution, *universal human liberation*, which is a utopian dream for Germany, but rather a partial, merely political revolution which leaves the pillars of the building standing...[for] the role of the liberator [in political revolution] can pass successively in a dramatic movement to different classes in the population, *until* it finally reaches the class which achieves *social freedom*; no longer assuming certain conditions *external* to man, which are none the less created by human society, but organising *all* the conditions of human life on the basis of social freedom²²⁴

Substituting ‘political emancipation’ (political revolution) with ‘human liberation’ (social revolution), Marx provides an opening onto a different accounting of emancipation, extending its parameters beyond the limited contours of the formal topography of the state and parliamentary democracy. It is insufficient to begin with the practical questions of identifying the attendant subjects of the emancipatory task i.e. ‘who should emancipate’ or ‘who is to be emancipated’? Marx will insist, the question as to the mode of emancipation to be effected needs to be first straightened out. The Marxian inquiry takes root, here, at a more originary plane, putting to one side a restricted demand for political recognition, which would only serve to leave ‘the pillars of the building standing’, with the sources of injustice and systemic oppression remaining in place. If the question about the mode of emancipation to be effectuated must come before the subjective nominations of the who of the ‘emancipator’ and the ‘emancipated’, it is because this question interrogates the very suppositions that would otherwise be left untouched by those that take the meaning of the emancipatory task as already given, and therefore fill in the form of emancipation with the particularity of a predicative collective figure (the emancipation of the ‘Jews’, of ‘women’, or of whatever other excluded elements that are without formal political authorisation). This modulation in the very casting of the demand of emancipation permits Marx to play upon a categorial difference between emancipation in its restricted and generic senses, in its ‘political’ and ‘social’ declensions, giving rise to its own transcendental investigation, namely, the requisite accounting for the conditions making possible true emancipation as a lived and fulfilled reality.

²²⁴Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*’ Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) pp62-4.

With the cogency of these insights offered by Marx (of the utmost importance and profundity), a rather uncertain path is all the same embarked upon.²²⁵ Marx *drifts* from thinking the constitution and dissemination of emancipatory ideas in political terms. This drift takes place at the same time as the search begins for the appropriate guarantees for thinking the transcendental of human emancipation: whether this be ‘anthropological’, couched in terms of man’s species-being, or, alternatively as a cipher that gains its full intelligibility against the backdrop of the transitivity of a ‘historical process’ or, even, whether this be presented in the form of an intransitive ‘ontological postulate’. In all these cases, the attempt is to locate the truth of emancipation’s promise embedded within an anterior logic posited as constitutive of man’s concrete relations as “productive man”. The truth of liberation is divorced from its political constructability, the fulfilment of emancipation irrevocably tied to the machinations of the coming-to-be-of-communism.

But the *passage into* communism displaces the question of emancipation; the latter preserved only as a moment within a global process transcending it. We can track such a set of displacements in a fable regaled by the great Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, in his candid acknowledgement that the precondition for any rethinking of emancipatory ideas first rests on the divestiture of the futile hope in the eschatological version of the Communism-Event. The voyage to the land of Communism, he writes, is

[...] like a very wide river very dangerous to cross [...] we would have an enormous sand barge, in the form of political and union organisations, which would hold everyone. But in order to negotiate the eddies, we would need a ‘helmsman’, namely State power in the hands of revolutionaries. Class domination by the proletariat over all the hired oarsmen in the galleys a further requirement (wages still exist as does private interest), otherwise domination by the proletariat would be finished. The ship would then be launched but the oarsmen would have to be watched during the entire voyage and strict obedience demanded of them. If they failed in their task, they would be replaced at the appropriate time and even punished. If, however, they succeeded in crossing this vast river of shit, then on the horizon would be the shore with sunshine and soft spring breezes. Everyone would disembark; there would no longer be strife between individuals and interest groups as relationships would no longer be those of the market-place. Instead, there would be fruit and flowers in profusion for everyone to gather and enjoy.

²²⁵ Cf. Ernesto Laclau’s first contribution to *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality* (London: Verso, 2001) where, in light of the passage from Marx’s ‘Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’, he undertakes the task of making apparent Marx’s ambiguities.

It would be a time for Spinoza's 'joyful passions' and Beethoven's 'Ode to joy.'²²⁶

From the model of 'the party-form' ('the ship launched [...] with its oarsmen') to the exclusion and abrogation of certain elements of the socially oppressed from partaking in the emancipatory subjectivity (which Marx places under the nomination of the *lumpenproletariat*),²²⁷ the promise of 'true emancipation' is weighed down with the accumulation and condensation of a set historical and conjunctural determinations. The truth of emancipation takes on an indiscernibility with respect to its *other*. Perpetually deferred for the securing of Communism as a lived reality, emancipation becomes once more an Idea for which change is wrought only for the unchanging form of injustice to hold sway.

Certainly, Marx posits Communism as a necessary completion of the present state of being. It is less a distant continent, but 'already here', in that Capital lays the conditions for its own overcoming. This, we shall call—from this point on—the *always-already* of Communism. This *always-actuality* bespeaks the principle of immanence. But the principle of immanence (present already, even if equivocally, from as early as Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*) is itself an insufficient condition. To argue otherwise carries with it two principal implications: firstly, that the tendency toward the true society of reconciliation is self-generative, a process that has inscribed genetically the unity of subject and object; secondly, that Communism and Capitalism are of qualitatively the same substance. No rupture or break needs to be effectuated to accomplish a passage between two orders; there is the realisation of the already inherent within the extant.²²⁸

If however either of these two suppositions are relaxed then the real conditions of Communism remain of the order of the possible. Communism remains a *potentiality* to be fully actualised through the 'social revolution' orchestrated by the

²²⁶ Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts a Long Time* (London: Vintage, 1993). pp224-5.

²²⁷ Please see: Peter Stallybrass, 'Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat', *Representations* 31 (Summer 1990): 69-95, and Jacques Rancière's *The Philosopher and His Poor*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004)

²²⁸ The second of these implications need not be upheld alongside the former. To the extent that Communism and Capitalism might be said to be of the same substance, we can see in this the full realisation of the principle of immanence, of which both Michel Henry and Antonio Negri provide interesting interpretations. We shall need to account for Antonio Negri's reading of Marx (which, operates in the form of a double gesture, speaking in the name of Marx as a way of wishing to go beyond him) in a later part of this chapter.

proletariat—with all the suggestions that this convokes in terms of both a structural scission and historical discontinuity, a ‘ruptural unity’ or ‘radical break’. This change of course—the acknowledgement of the necessity of a socio-political ‘rupture’ out of which the ‘emancipated community’ is to be augured—will, for the purposes here, be captured under the modal form of the *not yet* of communism (and which, with further specification, can be expressed in two ways: the *not-yet-of-communism-as-excess* and the *not-yet-of-communism-as-blockage*). It is the aim of this chapter to understand that the shuttling between these two moments, between the *always-already* and *not yet*, and—interior to the not yet—between what is structurally *excessive* and *deficient* about the conditions of possible Communism in the actuality of the present, opens up a set of equivocations about how the emancipatory task is put to work by Marx. To be demonstrated, then, is the way in which the *always-already* of the Communism-Event as a knowable possibility overdetermines the incompleteness thesis (hence the *not yet*), the result of which risks forsaking the emancipatory idea and the advent of the new that would signal its arrival.²²⁹

Riddling Emancipation

Consider the famous passage from *The German Ideology*:

Communism is [...] not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.²³⁰

Communism, as the Young Marx notes, ‘is the riddle of history solved’²³¹, the resounding answer to the question: what constitutes the real conditions for man’s possible liberation? The conditions, however, are already in place. The solution prefigures the raising of the question: communism is not a thought-effect, an illumination triggered by the question of the possibility of liberation; on the contrary, it is paradoxically the very cause for its raising. *The coming-to-be of communism, the realisation of man’s own*

²²⁹ One should not merely intuit from this what one may wish to call ‘totalitarianism’ (i.e. Fascism, Nazism, State Socialism, etc.). We should resist at all costs the sloppily constructed judgement that the seeds of totalitarianism can be located in Marx’s texts—not that this has prevented many from advancing such hastily and often politically expedient conclusions.

²³⁰ Karl Marx *German Ideology*, Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) p162.

²³¹ Karl Marx *1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) p84.

potential as a meaning-endowing being, capable of self-activity and collective praxis but whose own affirmative (co-)existence is, in reality, blocked by the alienating relations constitutive of the extant social formation, is the provocation for posing the question of human liberation. The task of true emancipation, the question of its very possibility, do not manifest *ex nihilo*. The idea, born not from the brains of men, ‘is an [...] *historical act*.’²³² An act, certainly, which already carries with it a dual signification. The realisation of *liberation* sets itself up to be an *historic* task, as a *monumental event*—the event to end gloriously in the fulfilment of man’s species-being. An act, then, elevated to the status of an *historical imperative*—carrying with it all the images of an urgency, a forcing, and so on. But, at the same time, an imperative that places a demand upon us—not an ethical demand couched in terms of the structural impossibility of its fulfilment (the ‘I must go on’ (the *das sollen* in German), because I am obligated to do so, in spite of never being equal to the demand placed upon me), but, rather a demand of historical necessity (the I must (of *müssen*), an irreversible compulsion that sanctions no alternative course of action). The possibility of liberation is *historical*; the result of the final step taken along a path *already* put in place by that which has gone before and a course guided by that which is to-come. The point of emergence of the emancipatory promise is contemporaneous with the concrete determinations that weigh upon the mind of man in capitalist society. The *continuum* of historical time has communism as its point of arrival, and capitalism as the *last* antagonistic social form that, at once, bears the signs of its own overcoming but, in an attempt at self-preservation, conceals its very potentiality for bearing such an event. When the final step is made it will not be into the unknown, rather it will draw together from the given, from the real conditions already *in situ*, conditions giving rise to the ‘being-together’ of communism. The question of ‘liberation’ (along with the political tasks it entails)—where both question and task are gathered from the concrete ground of History—undergoes a further determination: the existence of communism is viewed from the ontological aperture of *social-being*.

If access is granted into the *eschaton* of the Communism-Event at a particular point in time, along the topographically determined site of being as social-being, we know, also, in what way the emancipatory task addresses itself to a subjectivity, to the proletarian-worker. Man becoming-conscious of the possibility of ‘true’ emancipation is a symptom of the “life-situation” of the masses, of the determinate place

²³² Karl Marx *German Ideology*, Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) p162.

that millions of wage-labourers occupy on the factory-floor in the world of capitalist expropriation. There is, therefore, an enchainment of concrete determinations, focusing attention thereby on the real and material basis upon which the solution of universal emancipation shows itself: from the position of the present, from *within* the bounds of Capitalism, from the structural fragility of the position of the precarious proletarian, one arrives at the cross-roads of communism, allowing the task of universal emancipation to be unequivocally posed. This is how, for Marx, Communism can be *the* solution inscribed upon the process of History and liberation the thought-effect of the coming-to-be of the true community of workers.

It is well known how this logic culminates in the ‘Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*’, with the formal conjunction between ‘tasks’ and ‘solutions’.²³³ Man poses only such questions for which he has already the solution.²³⁴ The solution *is* communism and the question of human liberation is only made intelligible once the answer makes itself known to us; the question of emancipation is epiphenomenal to the coming-to-be of communism. True emancipation becomes a task in the wake of the maturity of existing material conditions. It is an idea born from the movement toward which conditions, both material and real (forces and relations of production), are tending.

The idea of emancipation ceases, for Marx and the history of Marxism, to have any meaning outside the horizon of communism; it remains a *task* that gains its intelligibility as a moment within an already discovered ‘solution’. ‘True emancipation’ (human liberation) is no *infinite task*, not a continual question to be raised to those who, occupying positions of structural power, would otherwise seek to dismiss it; *it is a finite principle that has its own guarantee in the necessary movement toward the telos of the Communism-Event*. The emancipatory imperative is invested solely in the very actualisation of communism. Since Marx assumes the conditions for its actuality are already in place, the fact that the Idea of emancipatory fulfilment has both its derivation and fulfilment in communism constitutes the point of its greatest strength, certainly. If, furthermore, Marx sees in Communism a causal chain of events and a series of structural mutations, both illuminating the process by which it is to be achieved, then History, as the concrete measure for social change and process over metaphysical postulate and immutable substance, operates as the strongest assurance for man’s true liberation.

²³³ Karl Marx ‘Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*’ Karl Marx Selected Writings (Oxford:OUP,1977) p391.

²³⁴ Ibid.

Nothing here will be revelatory. And we should spare ourselves the blushes of holding Marx to account for his claim that Communism is *the* solution to the *task*.²³⁵ The aim is instead to locate a set of constitutive ambiguities, tensions, contradictory logics that render this very solution unstable. How, then, will this chapter proceed? The strategy deployed will be to identify in what way Communism comes to vacillate between two positions: between, on the one hand, the *not yet of communism* (which can itself be split into two further possibilities: the *not-yet-as-excess* and the *not-yet-as-blockage*) and, on the other, its *always alreadiness*. Here it is worth drawing one's attention to the fact that these two characterisations of Communism are not so much diametrically opposed. Indeed, with the way in which they are rendered ('the not yet' and 'the always already'), we can sense that the latter tends to overdetermine the other. All the same, the consequences yielded from these two alternatives are, in the last instance, in tension with one another. To begin, attention will focus on the first reconstruction: the *always-already* of communism.

The Temporary Suspension: The 'Always-Already' and 'Not Yet' of Communism

An understanding of the logic of the always-already will become clearer once the tropological movement underwriting the Marxian textual economy has been attended to. Birth and natality: an entire metaphysics of life is operative in the work of Marx.²³⁶ We should know the scene well enough by now: the Marxist diagnosticians of yesteryear, gathering round to inspect the possibility of 'human emancipation', could just as well be substituted for the image of the midwife, the surgeon, surrounding the patient on the maternity ward. The 'birth pangs'²³⁷ of communism; the arrival of a community of plenitude 'stamped with the *birth marks* of the old society from whose womb it emerges.'²³⁸ And the worker, the appointed midwife, who knows what is expected of him,

²³⁵ There has been renewed interest in the possibilities of Communism. A volume of articles (with some very notable contributions for Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy, Slavoj Žižek and Antonio Negri) has recently been published as the culmination of a conference dedicated to the theme. Normally by Communism, what is often meant is Communism along the lines of a Regulatory Idea, in the Kantian sense, rather than as a law of historical development or a model to be instantiated in the world. Please see: *The Idea of Communism* (London: Verso, 2010)

²³⁶ A point sustained in Michel Henry's *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.)

²³⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, (London :Penguin, 1990) p93.

²³⁸ Karl Marx, 'Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*' Karl Marx Selected

but if needed reminding, will hear Marx exhort: ‘there are no ideals to realise [save setting] free the elements of the new society with which the old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant.’²³⁹

This recourse to metaphor itself serves a purpose in understanding the meaning accorded to “emancipation” by Marx. If Marxian thought constitutes an ‘epistemological break’ from the Utopianism of yesteryear, pouring scorn over Utopian Socialism for precisely treating liberation as a thought experiment, as an idea external to material relations²⁴⁰—if, that is, the Marxian solution to emancipatory ideas traverses the limits of idealism by asserting how ‘[a]ll mysteries which [have hitherto] misled theory into mysticism [must] find their rational solution in human practice’²⁴¹—then it is because the liberatory horizon must be thought solely as immanent to this world. *Neither* beyond it, as otherworldly—the consequence of which would be the necessity of an intercession nothing short of the divine— *nor* through a *forcing* of the thought of *the* communistic society onto a reality malleable enough to be moulded around the ‘concept’; but, on the contrary, *anutopic*.²⁴² The infinite and unconditional are folded back onto the bounded world, onto that which is conditioned.²⁴³

As *always-already*, Communism is to be thought not at the limit of that mode of production which it seeks to supplant. It is seized as both a vital *predicate* of Capitalism at the same time that it remains the *subject* of the latter’s very dissolution. Not the *other* of capital, Communism rather *inheres* within it. On account of this, no distinction exists between being and non-being, on the one hand, or, on the other, between that which *is* real and that which *is ideal*. The true demarcation is the thin line which separates *potentiality* from *actuality*, *the possible* from *the real*:

Writings Oxford:OUP, 1977 p391.

²³⁹ Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) p636.

²⁴⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 1994) pp114-18.

²⁴¹ Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) p144.

²⁴² A phrase taken from Balibar’s *The Philosophy of Marx* (London: Verso, 1996) p22. Nonetheless, Mysticism and idealism are both in a relation of *ex-timacy* (to borrow a portmanteau-word from Lacan) with the Historical materialist; two tendencies of thought, explicitly denounced and dismissed by Marxism, cleave all the more insistently to the interiority of its theoretical apparatus.

²⁴³ See: Yirmiyahu Yovel’s *Spinoza and other Heretics: The Adventures of Immanence*; Antonio Negri’s *Marx Beyond Marx*, (Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey Publishes, 1984) and Jean Hyppolite’s *Logic and Existence* (New York: SUNY, 1997; pp180-5) Yirmiyahu Yovel states, for example that: ‘Whatever emancipation is in store for humanity will be attained by the inner working and immanent laws of reality itself, not, as in Kant and the Utopian Socialists, by imposing an external moral will upon reality.’ p98.

The basis [of Capital] offers the possibility of the universal development of individuals, and the real development of individuals from this basis consists in the constant abolition of each limitation once it is conceived of *as* a limitation and *not* as a sacred boundary. *The universality of the individual is not thought or imagined but is the universality of his real and ideal relationships.* Man therefore becomes able to understand his own history as a *process*, and to conceive of nature (involving also practical control over it) as his own real body. The process of development is itself established and understood as a prerequisite. But it is necessary also and above all that full development of the productive forces should have become a *condition of production*, not that determined *conditions of production* should be set up as a boundary beyond which productive forces cannot develop.²⁴⁴

There is, then, the continuum of progress, a ‘world historical process’, as the Young Marx refers to it, by which the fate of capitalism is sealed. A homogenous time, in the sense that the intelligibility of this process is subsumed under a principle of organisation derived from the present moment. But, at the same time, the *always-already* of communism—the index of which is the universalising tendency of capital—remains *potentiality*. And as long as it is potentiality, communism remains a *not yet*, temporarily suspended; liberated man lingers along the intersection between the *potentiality* of the ‘now’ and the *actuality* ‘to come’, between the possibility of its future and its actual presence.

With this switching between possibility and actuality we can understand, structurally speaking, the ambiguity of communism’s novelty.

It has already been said in what way both communism and capitalism can be thought as constitutive of one another. This thesis gives rise to a number of possible presentations of anticipatory signs of Communism; the presence of Communism shows itself through a set of differentiating structural-effects. Principally, three can be identified:

First, in the living labour of the proletariat. The commodity-form is the coagulation of a set of relational practices and historical processes, and yet this lived time is veiled by the otherwise eternal and transcendent form through which the commodity shows itself to consciousness²⁴⁵ (with its metaphysical and theological accrudiments, ‘in

²⁴⁴ Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, p440.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. Thus Marx writes in *The Grundrisse*: ‘The social character of activity, as well as the social form of the product, and the share of individuals in production here appear as something alien and objective, confronting the individuals, not as their relation to one another, but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them and which arise out of collisions between mutually indifferent individuals. The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital

which the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character').²⁴⁶ Labour-power is 'value-positing', and endows the commodity with its transcendent valence as that which has autonomy over the process of production. On the other hand, what is returned to the worker is the fixed price for his day's work, which is not commensurate with the labour that transforms the thing into goods for consumption. 'Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.'²⁴⁷ We have, then, a first sign of the actuality of communism in the form of a counterpoint: the capitalist as the ex-proprietor of what is proper to man as a productive being, and communism, as the freeing up of Man's ownmost possibility, already actual in subjective form.

Second, traceable through the acute and sporadic irruption of instances of class struggle, in which the insignia of communism shows itself through the free and self-organisation of the working classes, in their active seizing of the political apparatus—typified in the collective power of the revolutionary-subjectivity of the Paris Commune that, on 30th March, 1871, hoists up 'the flag of the commune' and it immediately represent 'the flag of the World Republic'.²⁴⁸ The situated subjectivity of the proletariat, subtracting itself from the generalising effects of political imperialism and economic enslavement, offers thereby a universal address in the form of its promise as the class to dissolve all classes.²⁴⁹

Third, in the continual revolutionising of the means of production of Capital; technological developments directly impact on the emergence of new productive relations, and are themselves precipitative in changing relations of distribution, consumption and accumulation.

In each of these possible presentations (vitalist, political, structural-economic) Communism is revealed to be not mere possibility, but as something already actual. 'Communism' operates immanently, by means of its descriptive designation, circumscribing a set of formal indications in the *hic et nunc*. But what sort of actuality is this? Certainly, it is not fully actual; each manifestation proves to be deficient in some way, offering partial glimpses of a future that will be *more than* the sum of its constituent

condition for each individual - their mutual interconnection here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing.' p157.

²⁴⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital* (London: Penguin, 1990) p165.

²⁴⁷ Ibid p342.

²⁴⁸ Friedrich Engels, 'Introduction' to *The Civil War in France*, Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) p623.

²⁴⁹ Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*, Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) p631.

parts, more than the examples that, both historically and tendentially, can be put together in the present conjuncture as signs of the real and material conditions on which Communism is grounded. Technological progress and large-scale changes at the level of modes of production, do nothing, on their own, to satisfy the conditions into Communism—‘electrification *and* the power of the Soviets’, as Lenin was to impress on those who otherwise chose to neglect the political stakes of class struggle. The same applies to the counterposition between the living labour of the worker and the dead labour of Capital: the labour-power of the worker is the actual and real principle around which Communism is organised. But it will not unburden itself so easily of the dead weight of the commodity form. Capital is not the extraneous matter to be peeled away, such that, unencumbered, labour power harnesses its full and unlimited potential, free of the chain of wage-labour and the parasitism of the capitalist. The pure content cannot be thought outside of the revolutionising of the form by which the labour-content is delivered, which Capital itself accelerates, in its movement toward the real subsumption of all social relations under its form, toward the proletarianisation of the class structure, and toward the concomitant complexification and technisation of the production process. The same would equally hold for Communism’s *political* determination. In terms of the Communist insurrection by the proletariat, the empirical instances in which class struggle appears in the open remain nonetheless an insufficient condition for the actualisation of communism. This is a lesson that Marx will raise as a reminder to the Blanquists and the anarchists—both guilty, according to Marx, of ‘political windbagery’ and ‘democratic demagoguery’—that, a radical revolution is not possible under *any* conditions; ‘it is possible only where the industrial proletariat, together with capitalist production, occupies at least a substantial place in the mass of the people.’²⁵⁰

We have, then, the *semblance* of Communism’s actual appearance in light of a three-fold demonstration of its immanent features.

If, though, there is Communism’s semblance, it is because a distinction is supposed between the particularity of these ciphers, and the totality comprising Communism as a full and completed project. The idea of a semblance is meaningful as a measure in light of that totality, which thought projects back onto the present through a prescriptive act about what ought to be. There is then an equivocation at the eye of the present. Fragmentary examples are collated, indicating the tendencies that pave a way

²⁵⁰ Karl Marx, *After the Revolution: Marx debates with Bakunin, Marx-Engels* (London: Norton Press, 1978) p544.

toward the projected future, for which not everything is given. Required therefore is that certain conditions be created, though in the form that the projection already sanctions.²⁵¹ Communism offers itself as the very lens through which to view the already-pregnant possibility interior to the extant social formation. Such that if ‘the basis of capital offers a possibility of the universal development of individuals’, it remains undetermined what precisely accounts for the identification of possibilities as possibilities within the present: whether it is the image of communism, the projection of an unalienated society—which stands-in for plenitude, the full development of productive forces, the *completion* of the process—or whether it is, inductively, through casting one’s attention over a set of historical features gleaned in capitalism itself that one is drawn towards a certain direction by which humanity is said to be tending. The movement between possibility and actuality can be thought from one of two different perspectives, then. From the actuality of the now that furnishes both man and history with a possible Communism, or from the decree of Communism that projects onto the present the actuality of its possibility. An equivocation exists between the actual and the possible, between potentiality of the Communist-Event and its actuality.

Interior to the principle of Communism’s immanent unfolding, we have the image of communism rendered as an incomplete sequence (the *not-yet*). There is the ‘structural incompleteness’ of communism, permitting one to infer the logical impossibility of a pure correspondence between the new-as-emergent-within-the-old (the actuality of the present conditions under capital) and the actual instantiation of the new (the possibility of the Communism-*Event*). This incompleteness is itself marked by equivocity. We shall name them first, *the-not-yet-of-communism-as-excess* and second, *the not-yet-of-communism-as-blockage*.²⁵² These two theses—both locatable within Marx’s writings—coalesce around the same problem. How to think the new? How to accord to the emergence of what is to come the quality of newness—as signalling a genuine break from general relations of injustice, poverty, hardship and oppression doled out by the extant system of social relations? But, at the same time, how might this vision

²⁵¹ An equivocation that is discussed in Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *Just Gaming* (London: Minnesota Press, 1999). In the case of Marx, Lyotard writes, ‘we are dealing with discursive orderings whose operations are dual, something that is characteristic of the west: on the one hand, a theoretical operation that seeks to define scientifically [...]the object the society is lacking in order to be a good or just society; on the other hand, plugged into this theoretical ordering, there are some implied discursive orderings that determine the measures to be taken in social reality to bring it into conformity with the representation of justice that was worked out in the theoretical discourse.’ p21.

²⁵² Or more succinctly defined as the disenchantment thesis, and works along the plane of negativity.

of a new set of possibilities be unburdened of its mystical and utopian valence, and instead be given what some will regard as the ‘dignity’ of a realism, rigorously demonstrated as realisable and achievable, and not just an empty possibility? The two tendencies constitutive of the not-yet of communism give rise to this double problematic: knowledge and novelty. These tendencies would serve to offset the otherwise latent determinism in thinking communism as ‘always-already’ present. Between these two alternatives, the actualisation of the true community is, as noted earlier, held in suspension.

The task of the coming-to-be of liberated man is inadequately represented by merely indicating the potentiality inherent in the bowels of the dominant mode of production. Certainly, there is sufficient space within Marx to think the complexification of this process. For one, Marx gives weight to the interior blockage, the phenomenological barrier frustrating its movement. This interpretative possibility has particular perspicuity in the Young Marx’s thematic rendering of alienation (namely, the estrangement of man’s existence from his human essence as productive being, and which is apparent in the reduction of the worker to the commodity-form, to a being-as-object, whose own subjectivity is admonished through the exploitative processes of valorisation of capital, of the oppressive relation of wage-labour etc.). But, there remains also a second reading, that fastens upon the incongruence between the form and content of capitalism, between, what Antonio Negri frames as, the restrictive structural power of capital (*potesta*) and the excessive content constitutive of the communism of workers’ power, which, in the *Grundrisse*, is identified as the ‘immeasurable measure of labour’ (*potenza*).²⁵³ This ‘not yet’, thought as either the pause in the cadence of History or as that which remains undomesticatable in historical time, complexifies the logical structure of the Communist-Event. Nonetheless, what both tendencies positively connote about the instantiation of Communism nonetheless remains divergent. The first (drawing sustenance from the thematisation of alienation) politically orients itself around the exigency of a *forcing*, a final push toward the founding of a new society, the home for liberated humanity. In the thematic orientation that Marx gives to emancipation in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, the realisation of man’s plenitude is predicated upon a *radical break* with the capitalist order, a rupture convoking both the ‘dissolution’ and ‘destruction’ of intransigent structural relations hitherto frustrating

²⁵³ Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution*, (London:Continuum, 2002) p77.

socio-political transformation.²⁵⁴ This specific inflection accorded to the incompleteness of communism is itself problematic, and shall be examined in due course. What, though, of the second tendency, which plays instead upon the inherent antagonism of capitalism, between the formal power (*potesta*) of capital and the constituent potency (*potenza*) of worker's struggle? This possibility shall now be considered in more detail.

First Orientation: The-not-yet-of-Communism-as-Excess

The bi-furcatory logic we have diagnosed as constituting the 'not yet' of communism now needs further deepening. The tendency can first be organised around an 'ontological excess' on the side of Communism, along the side of the active forces that give material life to the idea. It designates a certain set of possibilities that cannot be contained within the existing societal form. Here, Communism remains qualitatively different to that which is extant, even though it is drawn from the same substance of what is. 'The issue at stake', declares Marx in the 'Holy Family', remains 'the foundation of the *new*.'²⁵⁵ Once more the perennial tension between thinking the continuous cycle of life *and* the advent of the novel comes to the fore. How does indicating an 'excessive' dimension inherent in Capitalism's very constitution—in which the *communistic quality* of social relations, subsumed under the quantitative form of capital and the money-form as universal-equivalent, find release from their existing appearance—serve to ease this tension? We still remain within the bounds of both the principle of immanence and the materialist dialectic, in thinking what constitutes the precise relation of this non-relation, permitting one to think, at one and the same time, the Communism-Event in both its continuity with, and its irrecusable difference from, the capitalist system. This is the case, for example, in the analysis presented in *The Grundrisse*, in which the structural limits constitutive of this specific mode of production are revealed as not being 'sacred boundaries', as impervious to traversal, but, on the contrary, as limitations continuously transgressed. *The Grundrisse* tentatively presents a reconfigured account of the very existence of the communist-Event: communism becomes its own measure, autonomous from the circuitry of capitalist relations and thus the guarantor of its own realisation; it is the 'beyond' which nevertheless is *always-already* here.²⁵⁶ To what extent would this

²⁵⁴ Karl Marx 'Marginal Notes', *Marx-Engels* (London: Norton Press, 1978) p98.

²⁵⁵ Karl Marx, *The Holy Family*, *Marx-Engels* (London: Norton Press, 1978) pp134-5.

²⁵⁶ A similar point is made by Etienne Balibar, in his *The Philosophy of Marx*. Also important in this regard is Ernesto Laclau's 'Beyond Emancipation', in *Emancipation(s)*, (London: Verso, 1996), an

image of a constitutive excess continually running beyond the limitations of the structural form of capital—of thinking Communism as the immanent exception to the present situation, and not merely homogeneous with it—alter the internal logic of the constitution of Communism?

So as to address this question directly, we can trace the source of an interior fold within the thinking of communism, a fold that allows for the presentation of two differing accounts of how *knowledge* of the *new* of the Communism-Event is to be provided for. A famous passage from the ‘Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*’ in which two statements sit paratactically, but nonetheless plot two possible paths in the context of thinking the category of antagonism:

Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production. No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, [...] The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production—antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from the social conditions of life of the individuals; at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution to that antagonism. This social formation brings, therefore, the prehistory of human society to a close.²⁵⁷

In light of this, the problematic that Marx introduces is itself pivotal, and shall need to be expressed in the following way: what is the precise nature here of the antagonistic relation? How is the relation between continuity and discontinuity a piece with the irreducible antagonism between society’s economic structure and its social relations? We have more than one possibility. The first advances how ‘no social order ever perishes before *all* the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed.’ Here, there is no antagonism, strictly speaking. The motor of history as

article which has wider significance than that to which is being attributed here. Just for the record, Laclau lays out what he calls the six dimensions of ‘emancipation’, all of which are logically untenable. It is their very instability which is used in order to discredit the Marxian account of liberation. At this stage, however, our interest lies in what Laclau captures under the fourth dimension: ‘the *pre-existence* of what has to be emancipated *vis-à-vis* the act of emancipation.’ Thus, for ‘the liberation of something which precedes the liberating act’, as Laclau later adds, we have replaced it with the idea of ‘the always-already.’ Ultimately, the effect is more-or-less the same.

²⁵⁷ Karl Marx ‘Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*’ Karl Marx Selected Writings (Oxford:OUP, 1977) p391.

identified with the vicissitudes of class antagonism is brought into alignment with the movement interior to the orderly transition between modes of production. Understood diachronically, we are faced with a formal contradiction between the old and the new, and which resolves itself through the sequential procession of social orders. There is no suggestion of temporal scission, only the confirmation of a contradictory relation, which, in already bringing with it the solution to its own impasse, translates as a process of simple continuity: a given social formation (capitalism) will only be overturned *once* its own forces of production have been fully exhausted. We are in the bounds of the stable equilibria of thermo-dynamics, evident in the following description that Marx offers in the *Communist Manifesto*: ‘with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are *more and more equalised*, in *proportion*, as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labour.’²⁵⁸ The entropy of a particular state of affairs will be fully compensated within the system at large: the accentuation of crises, the pushing down of wage-labour, the simplification of the class structure is concomitantly tied to the sharpening of class antagonism and the proletarianisation of the masses, hastening the arrival of the decisive hour of the revolutionary overthrow and the fulfilment of emancipatory time. This inverse proportionality marks out a structural adequation between the tendential crises of capital and the affirmative will of the proletariat. Here, we can be assured that there is nothing suggestive of any constitutive excess of Communism over Capital.

But, an interesting twist is encountered immediately afterwards. Marx continues: ‘higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb itself.’ On what grounds does this formulation differ from the first, namely that ‘no social order ever perishes before all the productive relations for which there is room in it have developed’? *Prima facie*, very little would appear to separate out these two formulae. There is still the presence of dialectical synthesis, that the decisive hour of Communism (‘higher relations of production’) will only be consummated once all contradictions are gathered together. Even so, a subtle shift is apparent. In the second formula the matter is in deciding upon the very question of the existence of communism. Its real conditions of existence remain not only the index of a

²⁵⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. p89.

possible future, circumscribing the preconditions that need to be guaranteed for Communism to be possible. By real conditions of existence, we are in the grip of the immanence of its own actuality, in the ‘here’ and ‘now’. This is the route that Marx takes in *The Grundrisse*, as already noted. And we need to account for the logic that augments this recasting.

We can trace a movement between the orders of the possible and the actual, between the actuality of capitalism as determinant *in the passage into* communism, and the possibility of communism as the actual passage out of the relations of capitalism. Between these two formulations, the order of prioritisation is placed in reverse. As such the particular interpretation we are examining is not predicated on change as the cyclical process of systemic culmination and depreciation, as in Marx’s description in the *Communist Manifesto*, but as a system constantly dislocated from within, surpassed by the multiple points at which the workers themselves take flight from the processes of standardisation and expropriation, the lifeblood of the vampiristic inclinations of capitalist accumulation. No longer is it the existing course of things that holds sway in the organisation of the communism-event; it is communism which is determinant in the transformation of social relations. Communism is the active term, not the passive possibility that must await its turn to be carried along by the dialectical movements of history. Capitalism, therefore, is not the construction of the necessary and sufficient conditions for Communism, Communism is, rather, the creative ‘destruction of exploitation and the emancipation of living labour. Of non-labour.’²⁵⁹ We see this in Marx’s account of how surplus value is made possible through the interior difference drawn between necessary and surplus labour, between, on the one hand, the labour time needed to make a given commodity—and which constitutes also the actual time required for the labourer to reproduce the conditions of his own subsistence—and surplus labour, which, on the other, the capitalist takes from the worker, forcing the worker to produce beyond the necessary time required for the minimal conditions of his existence to be sustained and for equivalential value between producer and product to obtain.

Surplus labour is a point of structural instability at the very heart of capital. At the same time as it functions as the *condition per quam* for capital (the process of autovalorisation specifying social relations under capitalism)—as well as, concomitantly,

²⁵⁹ Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx* p83.

constituting the object of a wrong for the worker²⁶⁰—this immanent determinant, which marks out both the ‘profitability’ on the side of the capitalist and the ‘extortion’ experienced on the side of the worker, is also the immanent point of release from the machinations of capital. Surplus labour is (on the side of the worker) needless and, *mutadis mutandis*, is identified by the worker as possible non-labour time. As surplus, this labour-time signifies possible free-time, a time in which the proletarian worker operates in ways irreducible to the logics of auto-valorisation and exploitation in capital. A time that Marx describes as ‘free[ing] everyone [...] for their own development’: ‘the measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time’, he writes, which ‘the mass of workers must appropriate’. In this struggle for appropriation, we read, that

its historic destiny [Bestimmung] is fulfilled as soon as, on one side, there has been such a development of needs that surplus labour above and beyond necessity has itself become a general need arising out of individual needs themselves and, on the other side, when the severe discipline of capital, acting on succeeding generations [Geschlechter], has developed general industriousness as the general property of the new species [Geschlecht] - and, finally, when the development of the productive powers of labour, which capital incessantly whips onward with its unlimited mania for wealth, and of the sole conditions in which this mania can be realized, have flourished to the stage where the possession and preservation of general wealth require a lesser labour time of society as a whole, and where the laboring society relates scientifically to the process of its progressive reproduction, its reproduction in a constantly greater abundance; hence where labour in which a human being does what a thing could do has ceased.²⁶¹

A passage that, at its very close, incubates the tender hope raised from the pages of the young Marx, that the emancipatory content of existence under communism would satisfy the optimal conditions for human flourishing. The image of man, freed of the necessities of the labour relation, partaking in a panoply of activities that contribute to a well-rounded and fully-formed being, that is to say, to a ‘richness of individuality’: poetry in the morning, fishing in the afternoon. Time under communism would be creative time.

This idyll is not merely the preserve from another theoretical period, when Marx had permitted his thoughts to run ahead of himself, affording a moment to entertain what might be. This glimpse of an alternative tendency in thinking communism, present

²⁶⁰ Thus we read in the *Grundrisse* ‘What appears as surplus value on capital's side appears identically on the worker's side as surplus labour in excess of his requirements as worker, hence in excess of his immediate requirements for keeping himself alive.’ p325.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

in the *Grundrisse*, issues its own empirical examples of a freedom born out of the immanent break with the transcendental rules that the capitalist lives by. This is evident in a specific passage from the *Grundrisse*: a report on an Indian plantation takes Marx's eye in showing the effects of this tendency of communist re-appropriation. He does so by bringing to the reader's attention the moral disapproval that the capitalist ideologue levels at a community of Jamaican free-slaves who are said to 'content themselves with producing only what is strictly necessary for their own consumption, and, alongside this 'use value', regard loafing (indulgence and idleness) as the real luxury good; how they do not care a damn for the sugar and the fixed capital invested in the plantations, but rather observe the planters' impending bankruptcy with an ironic grin of malicious pleasure, and even exploit their acquired Christianity as an embellishment for this mood of malicious glee and indolence.'²⁶² A way of living that rankles with the moral ideologues of capital, who see in this the slackening of unproductive labour.

Marx offers up historical evidence of the existence of interstitial spaces of communistic re-appropriation, of autonomous spaces created by the worker themselves, which remain antagonistic to the capitalist order of surplus value and productive labour-time.

Here we may choose to follow the commentary offered by Antonio Negri, who has done more than any other exegete to explicate these possibilities. Negri casts this principal antagonism in Capital as operating between two orders of temporality, between two temporal intensities. On the one hand, a merely extended and standardised time as the time of capitalist development: the time of the structure imposing on the working day a generic and equivalential price, a price with which the worker exchanges a quantity of labour time and labour-power for an hourly wage from the capitalist that will satisfy the conditions of subsistence. This is a mere quantitative time. Time as measure of quantity. On the other hand, an intensive and heterogeneous time that cannot be domesticated within the regime of capital, because as surplus, as excess, transgresses the very process of capitalisation, even if, at the same time, it remains constitutive of it. Communism is the immanent actuality of free-action explored within the bounds of capitalism through the creativity wrought from non-labour. Negri writes accordingly:

When the capital relation has reached the point where it explodes,
the liberated negation is not a synthesis: It knows no formal equivalences

²⁶² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp325-6.

whatsoever. Working class power is not the reversal of capitalist power, not even formally; Working-class power is the negation of the power of capital. It is the negation of the centralized and homogeneous power of the bourgeoisie, of the political classes of capital. It is the dissolution of all homogeneity. This methodological "plural", this multilaterality triumphs. We cannot impose on liberated subjectivity any uniform and flat scheme for organizing social reality. Surplus labor has a uniform aspect in the capitalist project. The wage refigured the shape of capital. When the wage as it developed became self-valorization and reappropriation of surplus labor, it was the end of all rules useful for development. There is no more profit because labor productivity is no longer translated into capital. There is no more capitalist rationality. Subjectivity not only liberates itself, it liberates a totality of possibilities. It draws a new horizon. Labor productivity is founded and spread socially. It is both. a magma which gathers and recomposes everything, and a network of streams of enjoyment, of propositions and inventions which spread out across a land made fertile by the magma. The communist revolution, the emergence in all its power of the social individual, creates this wealth of alternatives, of propositions, of functions. Of liberty. Never has communism appeared as synonymous with liberty as in these pages of the Grundrisse [...].²⁶³

As remarked above, the antagonism addressed here is less the dialectical relation between two oppositional tendencies—playing themselves along a homogeneous temporal plane—but the disjunctive synthesis between two orders of time. The principal antagonism, then, constituted in and through these two temporalities are comprised of the ‘vertical’, ‘authoritarian’ time of labour and value (the exploitation of necessary labour in order to accumulate surplus value), designated by the master, of the capitalist-expropriator and the auto-valorisation of a time that subtracts itself from labour and value—a ‘horizontal temporality’ of the collective subject of the worker, alive with its own ‘democratic, collective tempo’.²⁶⁴ This, therefore, is the site upon which the class struggle is waged, and waged indefinitely; the passage of communism, effected by labour-force—intertwined as it is with the new emergent productive force—becomes the site of a continual transgression of the structural limitations wrought by capital.

This *excessive* or *affirmative* attribution, which finds expression in and through the spontaneous irruption of revolutionary praxis, shifts the basis for thinking the communist-event as process, not as *telos*: a permanent revolutionary process, which takes as the site of communism’s actuality the active communal re-appropriation of surplus labour. This is certainly of a piece with the *immanentist* logic, which we have already

²⁶³ Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx* p150.

²⁶⁴ Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution* pp66-9

observed, even if, this time the point of complete instantiation of Communism as a fully realised end is deferred interminably: ‘the lonely hour of the last instance never arrives’, as Althusser pointedly remarks.²⁶⁵ It is for this reason that we can still think this possibility with the use of the modal form of the ‘not yet’, even though we are not thinking the Communism-Event in the form of a deferred and as yet unrealised situation. The process of emancipation engendered here is not one of breaking irreversibly free from the capitalist form, but forging lines of creativity from within the referential frame of capital itself. Antonio Negri will, in his lectures on the *Grundrisse*, argue that everything ultimately hinges on how the notion of the transition of Communism is to be countenanced, claiming: ‘it is not the transition that reveals itself (and eliminates itself) in the form of communism, but rather it is *communism that takes the form of the transition*.’²⁶⁶ It is in this that we identify a difference between the first orientation we had located in Marx’s attempt to think Communism in its always-already declension. A difference between the determinism of a historical linearity, of the successive supersession of different social formations—in which the genesis of communism as the highest stage of social relations is already locatable within the anteriority of what lay before it—and a freeing up of the plural ways in which communism as an evental-praxis comes to *tran-sist* in the world. Communism is thus to be thought solely as process.

All the same, this latter interpretative possibility remains caught within the parameters of the *always alreadiness of communism*, and as such the excessive dimension attributed to Communism remains part of the same aporetic constellation within which the foregoing model had operated. The question is, as it was before: how to think the *novelty* of communism at the same time as a *rigorous* thinking of its material conditions of possibility? With the possible interpretation we are at present entertaining, these conditions are stretched to a point that the extant system is itself augmented with a dynamacy: Capitalist-time and Communist-time constitute an interminable and inescapable antagonism, and form one and the same substance. This would be the lesson drawn from Capitalism’s tendential movement towards real subsumption, the process of complete territorialisation of all relations by capital which at the same time creates continual lines of deterritorialisation, opening up commodity flows and new market-frontiers. Real subsumption indicates the removal of any point of exteriority vis-à-vis the system of capitalism at the same time as it points to the equalisation of all struggles

²⁶⁵ Louis Althusser, ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, *For Marx*. p113.

²⁶⁶ Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*. p153.

against the system. When all is housed under capitalism, then everyone, without exception, is in a social struggle against the imposition of its transcendental laws. Through this process, the line with which to separate where Capitalism ends and Communism begins is shot through with indiscernibility. Certainly, this indiscernibility is sufficient to expunge the emancipatory task of any residual Manichaeism, of removing any attempt to think Communism in a relation of exteriority with the unjust order of capitalism. With the topography flattened out under the tendency of real subsumption, the movement of liberation is to be thought not simply as possibility but as something both real and actual. This would, of course, be the central message conveyed in the passage from *The German Ideology*, already cited, namely ‘communism’ as itself a real movement. But the real movement of what? Not necessarily History. This would be more in keeping with a movement of serial progression between discrete social orders in time—an interpretation we have already considered, and it has been discussed in what ways this is an unsatisfactory accounting of the emancipatory process. Rather, Communism is to be understood in terms of the real movement of Being. Here Being and not History. This places Communism on a different keel. Why Being? We have to ask ourselves the attendant question, namely what other authority might one appeal to, which, at one and the same time, presents itself as, potentially, the highest and the most factual line of enquiry? What *is* need not be examined in terms of what endures about a being, irrespective of a matrix of external conditions that otherwise might cause a change in the mode of its appearance. Being need not be that which is obdurate, self-subsisting. An investigation into the question of Being that considers Being and Appearing, Being and Becoming not as antonyms, but as two sides of the same alloy, would be to accord to Being itself a genetic productivity. It is in this way that, *via analogia*, a certain articulation is sought between the quality of Being itself and the historical value accorded to the revolutionary process of proletarian struggle. Communism is interpreted as the materialist principle metabolically calibrated with the Truth of Being: Being as movement, productivity, and Communism as the historical tendency that traces this movement of production—in the form of the constituent power of the masses, the creation of value by the worker, the political freedom exercised through class struggle. Ontological necessity meets historical liberty. In this happy coincidence, a set of implications must be faced up to. First, that if communism finds ontological refuge, then as the law and truth of Being, Communism as a movement is irrepressible, indestructible. It cannot be destroyed or annulled, but will always be. This entails a second order

implication, namely the autonomisation of the process of Communism. The possible valences that political action may take in history become secondary to the generic movement of Communism that, calibrated with the movement of Being, gathers together all actual instances of struggle as their ontological expression. Third, at the same time as we find a possible pluralisation of the ways in which the creativity of the workers can be indexed as participating in the movement of Communism, we have at the same time a contraction in the very passage of emancipation itself.

If we are speaking of a contraction of emancipation, then this is because as the real name of Being—as the very force by which what *is* never comes to rest—Communism (the privileged name for emancipation) is the name for the production of what is in the process of its becoming. But this co-extensionality between Being and Communism runs the risk of making the novelty of emancipation entirely undifferentiated and aspecific. Whence the following conundrum: Being is itself novelty, therefore all *is* new. But if all is new then the copula intercedes so as to make the new something supermundane, raising the question whether the new loses the very quality that is otherwise ascribed to it, namely as that which is discontinuous, irreducible, with what *is*. This forces thought to gravitate around a decision of the utmost significance. Is the process of emancipation homogeneous to what is, entirely immanent to Being, or does it reveal itself as an exception, breaking with the order of the actual? How heterogeneous is the Idea of emancipation to what is decreed actual?

This interpretative possibility, that thinks Communism in terms of *the not-yet-of-communism-as excess*, is shorn of any semblance of negativity. The question ceases to be in what way the possibility of a qualitatively different society is to gain actual traction, but of how to affirm the actuality of communism as that which exists through its *trans-isting*. The strictly immanentist logic of the ‘not-yet-of-excess’ substitutes the ‘beyond’ of transcendence for the security of an ‘ontological’ principle that remains, nevertheless, always-already here.

Second Orientation: The-not-yet-of-Communism-as-Blockage

If the foregoing orientations do little to resolve the relation between the new and the known conditions from which communism is to emerge, then what of the further possibility already introduced as the not-yet-of-communism-as-blockage? The tonality of this thesis is more sombre. Such a tendency finds a principal set of sources in Marx’s

early writings, though in the hands of Marx the refrains we are locating need not make for any feelings of sobriety.²⁶⁷ In his erudite *Studies on Marx and Hegel*, Jean Hyppolite is adamant that ‘alienation’ constitutes the correlative term of emancipatory praxis. Thus he writes: ‘What would be the meaning of history and the significance of the revolutionary movement if it were not clarified in existence through the awareness of alienation and the resolves to surmount it?’²⁶⁸ Alienation is the omega to the alpha of liberation; the presence of one certifies the absence of the other. A being estranged is a broken, damaged, separated being and emancipation is the forensic operation that takes as its object the lacerated body to be reconciled, restored to its health.

Alienation and liberation form a combinatory logic. Nonetheless, there remains a certain impropriety in tracing the passage from a being separated to the reunification of this being as an unmediated process, dividing the present state of affairs from its overcoming, as if the movement between two states were a purely transitive one. Rather alienation is the knot which blocks this very tendency. The re-embodiment of the disembodied social subject does not unfold, so to say, developmentally; alienation constitutes the very impediment, to further development. Cast as *obstruction* alienation becomes surmountable only through an act of *transcendence*.²⁶⁹

One of the tasks here is, precisely, to ascertain the status of the category of alienation in Marx; whether, that is, alienation is not a historical condition of existence through which liberated man passes, but points towards something more obdurate (if not intransitive) with respect to man’s place in the world.

Alienating relations, separating man from himself—as well as from his fellow man—are a defining characteristic of social relations under capitalism.²⁷⁰ This can

²⁶⁷ To name but five crucial texts, see: S. Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996); Seyla Benhabib’s *Critique, Norm and Utopia* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2000); Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999; pp11-84); Jean Hyppolite, *Studies on Marx and Hegel* (London: Harper and Row, 1973; Preface and chapters 4-7 in particular) and lastly, but certainly the most intriguing (given the position he once occupied in Structural-Marxism!)

²⁶⁸ Jean Hyppolite, *Studies on Marx and Hegel*, p126.

²⁶⁹ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978)

²⁷⁰ The contemporaneity between the emergence of alienation and the structural dominance of capital is an interesting move on the part of Marx. In contradistinction to ‘objectification’, which, borrowing from the Hegelian tradition, is ontological, alienation, on the other hand, remains purely historical—an essential predicate of capitalism, but, nonetheless, not to be confused with a transcendental concept. It may be a case of alienation being part of the furnishings of, as it were, a *regional* rather than of a *general* ontology. And yet, what are the implications of this? Rudimentarily, there are two possibilities: first, if alienation shows itself to be the product of its own historicity then it is easily dispensed with.

be gleaned, certainly, from a cursory reading of the texts written by the early Marx. Man lacks his capacity for self-activity, and is reduced to the most passive of beings. Forced to selling his labour-power for a wage, man is estranged from his ownmost form of self-expression. Work, as Marx posits in Kantian vernacular, ceases to be an end in and of itself, but instrumentalised is solely a means to satisfy mere subsistence living. Marx will write of the principal tragedy surrounding work for the labouring classes in the following manner:

that to the worker the purpose of his activity seems to be the maintenance of his individual life, and what he actually does is regarded as a means; his life activity is in order to gain the means to live.²⁷¹

With the extension of the money-form to every sphere of life, where money guards over man's meaningful relations, emptying them of any positive content²⁷²; with the continual territorialisation of capital, which exhumes the living labour of workers and transforms it into its antipode; and with the once active subject turned into a being-as-object-for-other—oneself a victim of the commodity-form—humanity becomes ensnared within a heteronomous logic that plays within a movement of ever-decreasing circles and traces the descent into barbarity. Still, it is a question of teasing out the intensity of these structural relations. If capital is responsible for the perpetuation of indifference, inauthenticity, for cutting adrift the individual from collective life; if indeed these

Hence Marx's claim, the dissolution of capitalistic relations will bring the end to man's estrangement. In a sense, what alienation truly does is to accentuate the qualitative difference that holds between that which is and that which will come-to-be, but in so doing, makes the possibility of instantiating the unalienated society further beyond the reach of the oppressed. Relatedly, there is another corollary, and which works against the former. This would require us to consider the following: if capitalism itself brings into being alienation, then it is sandwiched in-between other social configurations, previous modes of production, which were not, and, in the future, will not be, alienated. The risk here is that Marx is guilty of wanting to recover a sense of communal life that prefigures modernity. This is perhaps being rather unfair to Marx, but it was certainly a problem which some Western Marxists inherited. Interestingly enough, Claude Lefort suggests something similar in his 'Marx: From one Vision of History to Another', in *Social Research*, winter, 1978. Finally, it is worth quoting Hyppolite, who, in *Logic and Existence* (New York: SUNY, 1997) rightly details the problem by advancing that 'there is a negation in history, an alienation; but it holds only for history and it is up to history to resolve this problem that it poses [...] History then has created the conflicts and will put an end to them.' pp182-3.

²⁷¹Karl Marx, 'On James Mill', *Marx-Engels* (London: Norton Press, 1978) p118.

²⁷²See: Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, *Marx-Engels* (London: Norton Press, 1978) and Theodor Adorno's 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening' in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, edited by Arato and Gebhardt (London: Continuum Press, 1998; see pp273-77 in particular)

relations can be construed as self-valorising, as, in their own right, existentials which come to be intimately related to one's way of being-in-the-world, then it appears that the possibility for political praxis is squeezed between the heteronomous logic of capital and the law of the state. As Marx notes, 'never in any earlier period have the productive forces taken on a form so indifferent to the intercourse of individuals *qua* individuals [...] from whom these forces have been wrested away and robbed of all real life content.'²⁷³

The subject remains captive by determinant relations that keep all in their place. Humanity has built for itself a cage by which it has become imprisoned, to cite that oft-quoted metaphor of Weber's. What is the precise character of alienation that we can trace in certain works of Marx? There is certainly not one particular relation meant as the principal form by which alienation announces itself to the worker. There are at least four determinations, which operate not on the same level, and neither with the same intensity nor effect:

First, man is alienated from the products of his own activity. This is an alienation that comes to separate the subjectivating act of labour and the product as object, which is stamped with the subjective character of the labourer.²⁷⁴ It is, however, an estrangement wrought through necessity, in the necessary form of externalisation—the anthropological feature of Man's activity which Hegel had already sought to uncover in the *Philosophy of Right*.

Second, man is estranged from himself, specifically the physiological activity that marks out man's proper human capacity as a productive being, which he nonetheless has lost immediate control over. This second mode of alienation serves also to specify the principal social relation, that is to say the wage relation, between the dispossessed proletarian and the capitalist expropriator. The relation of alienation in this sense is described by Marx in the following passage from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*: 'This relation [of alienation] is the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him; it is activity as *suffering*, strength as *weakness*, begetting as *emasculating*.'²⁷⁵ A concatenation of privative terms is proffered here, an enchainment of dialectical reversals intensifying the severity of man's predicament under capitalism: the suffering, emasculated, pauperised

²⁷³ Karl Marx, *German Ideology*, Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) p190.

²⁷⁴ Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) pp76-77.

²⁷⁵ Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) p75.

wretch. This modality of alienation can be thought as a structural relation, which defines the point of alienation in and through the exchange relation between two antagonistic positions in the production process. But in fact Marx will specify this particular mode as ‘self-estrangement’, as opposed to the ‘estrangement of the thing’, which, above, we have already addressed.

Third, there is the mode of alienation that Marx will consider to be relational proper, not with respect to subject and object or that identifies an interior diremption within subjectivity itself, but an estrangement that is inter-subjective, an estrangement interposed between man and man, between, structurally, proletarian and capitalist. Man is therefore estranged by another. Here we read: ‘every self-estrangement of man from himself appears in the relation in which he places himself and nature to men other than and differentiated from himself.’²⁷⁶ Humanity is split, divided and distributed between antagonistic positions within the relations of production.

Fourth, we have the explicit recuperation of the thematisation of religion, which is extended so as to encompass the problematic of politics and of the state. The theologico-political problematic of alienation is received as a problem regarding the autonomisation and transcendence of Ideas: men lose themselves in the asphyxiating and rarefying air of a realm of Ideas beyond the concrete circumstances of Man’s lived existence. The state and the church proselytise tales of the just, of the virtuous, of possible freedoms and of communitarian fraternity (the ‘parish of believers’, the ‘community of citizens’²⁷⁷), but, in receiving these wisdoms, men remain alienated from both their essential and material content.

This, therefore, is to trace out at least four meanings Marx will attribute to processes of alienation. Given the ubiquity of these processes of estrangement—the pervasive nature of their distribution, the strength of their seizure—what of the possibility of fleeing their grip? We have already explicated one possibility: the hope of the proletariat anticipating the effects of the liberated society through a re-appropriation of their own creativity in the form of surplus labour time. But this must come with the acknowledgement that this is achieved by way of a sequestering of the problematic of estrangement. The problem of alienation on such an interpretation undergoes an analytical attenuation. What happens though when alienation becomes the optic through which the

²⁷⁶ Ibid. p77.

²⁷⁷ Cf. Karl Marx ‘Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*’ Karl Marx Selected Writings (Oxford: OUP, 1977)

principle of emancipation gains both its philosophical intelligibility and political exigency? Here the problem remains, as Daniel Bensaid summarises: ‘How, being nothing, to become everything? Such is the unsolved mystery of emancipation starting out from a condition of subjection and alienation.’²⁷⁸

Certainly, many have wondered whether the thematic of ‘estrangement’—the splitting of man’s body in two—is marked by ‘transcendence’, and thus a sinking back into religiosity.²⁷⁹ Alienation draws its efficacy from accentuating the gap, a polarity, between that which is and that-which-is-to-come. This widening of the hiatus is a symptom of the tension inscribed in Marx’s discourse between the material and real force of communism as an anutopia and communism’s ineliminable utopic trace.²⁸⁰ But, crucially, the passage between the two moments—from the ‘is’ to the ‘to come’—ceases to have any guarantee, in so far as to say that the workers themselves are nevertheless constituted in and through the estranged social relations of capital and therefore become, to paraphrase DH Lawrence, not the saviours but rather are those in need of saving.²⁸¹

In *The Holy Family*, Marx may assert that the proletariat is itself capable of imminently transcending its own conditions of existence²⁸², that ‘a large part of the[...] proletariat is already *conscious* of its historical task and is continually working to bring this consciousness to full clarity’²⁸³, but, at the same time, it is a matter of indexing the historical lessons that Marx will be compelled to extricate from less sanguine events. After the disappointments of 1848 and 1871, Marx—a thinker doubtless of the conjuncture as much as a thinker of the structure—is moved to recast the political stakes of the actuality of the Communism-Event.²⁸⁴ This is then to arrive at the central problematic deriving from the privileging of ‘alienation’. In recognising the

²⁷⁸ Daniel Bensaid, *Marx For Our Times*, (London: Verso, 2003) p155.

²⁷⁹ See for example: Yirmiyahu Yovel *Spinoza and other Heretics: The Adventures of Immanence*, Antonio Negri also writes, in his book on Spinoza: ‘Theology is a theory of alienation that serves Power [that is, ‘constituted power as *potestas*]: dualism, as always, in service to Power, as a line of the legitimation of command [...]’ *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics*.p227. We must, absolutely, recognise Martin Heidegger’s onto-theological problematic as having the utmost salience here, also. Please see n22 of present manuscript.

²⁸⁰ For a clear account of this, see Seyla Benhabib: *Critique, Norm and Utopia*. Chapters two and four are of particular importance.

²⁸¹ ‘And so it goes on, with the saving of people./God of justice, when wilt thou teach them to save themselves.’ D.H Lawrence, ‘When Wilt Thou save the People?’

²⁸² Karl Marx, *The Holy Family*, Marx-Engels (London: Norton Press, 1978) pp134-5

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁴ It is to Etienne Balibar’s merit that, in his little book on Marx, due emphasis is placed on accounting for Marx’s thought as indivisibly related to the vicissitudes of the conjuncture. Etienne Balibar’s *The Philosophy of Marx*. pp5-10.

indeterminacy at play in the movement toward the liberatory horizon—acknowledged, for example, in the concession that the working-classes cannot become-conscious by their own volition (there can be no spontaneous action in the completion of its historical task)—how then to guarantee the safe passage of liberation? We are faced here with what Jacques Derrida terms the logic of *supplementarity*: a set of additional thetic decisions grafted onto the existing theoretical system, which do not necessarily logically follow from the premises already established, but nonetheless are needed in the working through of lacunae, inconsistencies, evasions, intrinsic to its own textual economy. The logic of supplementarity exposes thought to the contingencies of its own operations, rendering the theoretical infrastructure less stable.

Contrary to Benhabib—who regards an oscillation between immanence and transcendence (or what she calls a politics of ‘fulfilment’ and ‘transfiguration’) as being an ambiguity that has its root in the Young Marx’s philosophical heterodoxy²⁸⁵—the problem is more productive, showing Marx’s thought not to be beholden by a set of incompatible ideas circulating in and around German Idealism, but a thought exposed to its outside, and therefore to the concrete problems that beset the thinking of communism. Marx—a thinker of immanence—is nonetheless forced to fold a form of transcendence back onto the immanent plane along which communism is otherwise said to proceed. This short-circuiting finds its highest expression in the relay between, what we have chosen to render as, the ‘always-already’ and the ‘not yet’ of communism.

This ‘not-yet’ that comes to block the immanent movement of the potentiality/actuality of the communism-Event does not result in the displacement of immanence. We are not left with the negativity of a ‘beyond’, of a constitutive gap which is impossible to cross (“O! Communism, impossible communism!” as Marx was to retort, in his polemic against the French Utopians). In the first instance, the relation between the ‘not yet’ and the ‘always-already’ can be brought together as a perfect circularity. If, in the present, we face a breach between the alienated and emancipatory society—and this difference underwrites the *qualitative change* society is to undergo—then, since the foundations for the new society are already in *situ*, this hiatus comes to be filled with its own positivity already prior to its own arrival. The ‘beyond’ positioned on the other side of the fissure that marks out the qualitative break between what is and that which will come to be, is already intelligible and knowable. A projected image of the transparent

²⁸⁵Cf. Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia*. pp32-69.

community-to-come is thus on hand to suture the gap. How does alienation come to shore up this model, or in what way does it, conversely, serve as the barge that stymies its completion? As Hyppolite attests, the idea of estrangement is both the condition of possibility for human liberation—in that, as the *other* of species being, it constitutes the negative pole of the alienation-liberation doublet, between which the movement toward emancipation as a completed and fulfilled state of being takes place—and yet it remains the very blockage that frustrates the tendency: there are the conditions which are already installed, which are nascent in the extant socio-economic structure, *but* which are internally obstructed by the image of dead labour, of surplus value, etc; there is species activity, the essence of man, *but* which remains only potentiality in a capitalist society that, in perpetuating alienation, annuls its very possibility. The adverbial disjunctive (the ‘but’) delivers up the following lesson: were it not for the existence of these obdurate conditions then we know that what, at the present time, is conceived only as possible would come to pass and indeed be. This lesson transmitted through the adverbial clause of the ‘but’ is delivered by those who are the self-appointed eyes and the *cogito* for those less fortunate ones, enveloped as they are within the immanent effects of a structure that distorts and refracts, causing the misrecognition of their real situation. It is a lesson that Louis Althusser wishes to relay to the masses after a night spent at the theatre. In his notes on a materialist theatre, Althusser draws an analogy between the distance that separate the actors on the stage of a Bertolazzi or Brecht performance from the spectators waiting on the wings and the ineliminable distance drawn between the theoretician and the spontaneous consciousness of the workers on the political scene. According to Althusser, what both Bertolazzi and Brecht accomplish through certain dramaturgical devices is ‘to produce a critique of the spontaneous ideology in which men live’, such that a ‘play cannot be reduced to its actors, nor to their explicit relations—only to the dynamic relation existing between consciousness of self-alienated in spontaneous ideology and the real conditions of their existence.’²⁸⁶ The critical implication drawn from this structural dynamic unites the scientific with the aesthetic in relation to the revolutionary task: there are certain elemental relations, forces, structural tendencies that remain latent with respect to the manifest content announced by those who take their place on the *scene* of the conjuncture, ‘a deep meaning, beyond their consciousness—and thus hidden from them; visible to the spectator as far as it is invisible to the actors—and therefore visible to

²⁸⁶ Louis Althusser, ‘The ‘Piccolo Teatro’: Bertolazzi and Brecht’, *For Marx*, pp144-5.

the spectator in the mode of perception which is not given, but has to be discerned, conquered and drawn from the shadows which initially envelops it, and yet produced it.²⁸⁷ This lesson, which lodges itself within the very conjunction between the ‘always already’ and ‘not yet’ of communism, has as its addresser an overseer, an appointed member to secure, in hazardous and volatile conditions, the directionality of the movement of the masses towards human liberation, to give presence to an otherwise ‘invisible’ and ‘silent discourse’. The obvious question arises: what or whom guarantees the becoming-conscious of the proletariat; who or what is to safeguard the internal movement of the emancipatory subjectivity, as it necessarily transforms itself from a being-in-itself (the working class) to a being-for-itself (proletariat)? We begin to encircle a particular antinomy that the Idea of emancipation gives rise to. If emancipation is a demand that has a sense of historical urgency, it is on account of the state of incarceration and political domination by which the subject engaged in emancipatory struggle finds him or herself burdened. But, in which case, how can this act of liberation be self-originating? It cannot come from the spontaneous will of the subjected subject, because were this so then, *stricto sensu*, the subject would already have been emancipated? The accomplished act would show oneself as already free, giving lie thereby to the posited real structural impediments that are said to present the precarity of one’s situation. With the idea of self-emancipation, it can be argued we enter into contradiction. Rather, if man is in need of emancipation, this is because he lacks the capacity to effectuate change by and through his own volition (‘the Doctor cannot cure himself’, to speak with Aristotle), and requires therefore the assistance of another (‘the Doctor cures the maladies of the patient’). Emancipation would track the course of a residual heteronomy, a subjected subject who must be guided out of his place of social incarceration, awoken from the lacerating effects of ‘emasculatation’, and from the dulling of the senses this subordinate position produces therein.

In surmising that emancipation must be engendered from without, we can identify in this a set of possible points of mediation: the party-form, which, as Brecht was famously to remark, is the revolutionary body with countless eyes, and the pedagogue, the *savant* of revolutionary knowledge, whose power of sight (*theoria*) has a particular quality of discernment.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ Ibid pp146-7.

²⁸⁸ In parenthesis, it is important to note that whilst this difficulty begins with Marx, it was to find its fullest expression in Marxist-Leninist discourse; which then raises the issue as to one’s willingness to

From this rendering of the Communism-Event (the ‘not-yet’ of communism as subject to the blockage of alienating relations) there can be no unmediated movement between the thought and action of the proletariat. The ciphers of a figuration of the proletariat as autonomous, already making actual its liberty (as Negri interprets particular passages from the *Grundrisse*), otherwise swim against the tide of a wave of conjunctural observations and politico-strategic decisions that envelop the later Marx and his attempt to think the immensity of the challenge befalling the realisation of the Communism-Event. There is then the warranted intercession by something other, a third-term: *the party-form*, which becomes the placeholder for its organisation, alongside the committed theoretician who provides the requisite analysis of the structure and the conjuncture, both of which keep political forces in a state of relative containment. The installation of the party apparatus, the incarnation of both the present and future interests of the masses, functions, as we know, as the mediating force in the construction of the collective identity of the proletariat. Certainly, the sense given to emancipation—namely that emancipation must be brought about from without, from a source that does not strictly coincide with the subjective-will of the masses—carries with it its own contradiction, inasmuch that in the name of emancipating the oppressed it keeps in place a formal division of inequality between those who know and those who do not know what they must know in order to do what they are destined to realise.²⁸⁹ Through the production of directives, prescriptions, as well as disciplinisations and proscriptions, the party functions as the point of actualisation

concede a transmutation, an exegetical distortion, between Marx’s own work and the Marxist ideologues proceeding from him. The risk, of which we are aware, would be to read the tragic consequences of the last one hundred years of actually-existing socialism as necessarily leading out of Marxian thought. There is *no* necessary articulation here; there can be no algorithm of such a sort which weds Marx-the-thinker to the reality of the instantiation of the Marxist doctrine. This is then to uphold the view (common to a number of thinkers, such as Balibar, Nancy, Derrida, Benhabib, etc), that, in Marx’s *oeuvre*, there *are* contingencies, the products of which are ciphers, suggestions, remarks, counter-remarks, etc. Marx bequeathed to us a set of problematics. Suffice to say, both his own existence and the enduring existence of Marxism cuts across a multiplicity of political conjunctures, fragmented into innumerable directions. If one readily traces a thread which leads one to stress the continuity between Marxian theory and actually existing socialist states—but, nevertheless, a concession would have to be made which thereby acknowledges the other possible routes available for the proletariat’s future success in the completion of their liberatory task.

²⁸⁹ A point immaculately shown in Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Fives Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. These thoughts are a crystallisation of a set of political and philosophical reflections incubated during the period of 1968 and its immediate aftermath. For a more polemical and conjunctural account of similar themes, please see Jacques Rancière’s *Althusser’s Lesson*, [*Le Leçon de Althusser*.]

of the collective body of the proletariat and the effective execution of its immanent tasks.²⁹⁰

Granted, the category of ‘alienation’ proves to be critical in fleshing out the internal blockage that renders the translatability between the present society and the coming-to-be-of-communism incomplete (the not yet), thereby rendering more pronounced the hiatus between pre-history and history. The corollary is that the liberatory leap, which humanity has to make in the reclamation of its species being, is all the greater. This breach, a chasm that sets the two worlds apart, is riddled with all the trappings which, for sure, were to haunt certain strands of Western Marxism. As Ernst Bloch remarks, there is the ‘sterility’ of existence under capitalism, but there will also be the glorious birth of the new that shall emerge from such conditions of sterility. In what way might man ‘rid himself of all the muck of ages and become fit to found society *anew*’—the muck and impurities that man, as a living, concrete and historical being, is himself inevitably marked by? Such dilemmas only serve to underwrite the breach separating the worlds of capitalist exploitation and human liberation.

Certainly, there is the dialectical interplay between these two moments: the *aufgehoben* (sublation) and *aufbewahrt* (preservation) of the ‘old’ within the ‘new’. Be this as it may, the dialectical method and its treatment of the new, remains a harbinger of obscurity. By the same token, though, would one proceed any further were Communism

²⁹⁰Evident from this partitioning is the disjunction between, on the one hand, a theory of emancipation and, on the other, the everyday emancipatory struggles of political subjects. The result of this scansion is two-fold: first, the ontological primacy of the intellectual in orchestrating emancipatory struggle, and, complimentarily, the further displacement of political practice in Marxist discourse. Were we to agree that Marxist-Leninism once ascribed to the Party the task of representing the interests of the working-class, that the *raison d’etre* of its functionaries was to assist in the *importation* of a revolutionary consciousness from outside, then the political undergoes a retreat in a theoretical discourse which valorises the ‘intellectual *qua* scientist’ as the true ‘vanguardist’ of emancipatory politics. The lexical ordering of workers struggle-party-intellectual, constitutive of the Marxist discourse, restores order to political struggle and hence a specific place is assigned to the working class. A place then which is altogether residual. It is the product of a dual displacement that pushes the proletariat further to the margins, forever subordinate to *both* the party, which installs the conditions of it becoming conscious, *and* the intellectuals who think the possibility of these very conditions.

A list of those who have identified a set of injustices and contortions effected through and by the prominence of this logic of mediation would prove to be too long and heterogeneous. Nonetheless, to name a certain number of the most interesting and productive contributions: Alain Badiou, Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Rancière, Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (to name just these, but who, unlike some renegades of the New Philosophy movement (Bernard-Levy, Andre Glucksmann, Christian Jambet, Sylvain Lazarus, for example) never saw this as an opportunity of prescribing the end to all emancipatory pursuits and of returning to the fold of liberal-democracy).

to be considered in the form of an originary birth—perhaps, one may even say, an immaculate conception? Perhaps not. Either way we can trace a logical hiatus that is interposed between the materialist thesis of locating the potentiality of the Communism-Event inhering in the *present* (the ‘always already’) and the *clean break* necessitated for communism to show itself in its resplendent novelty. Is this, then, one may ask, the irresolvable problematic to which Marx falls victim; the perpetual vacillation which constitutes the enduring image of a figure who, in the words of Etienne Balibar, will forever be known as ‘the last utopian announcing the end of the very possibility of utopias’?²⁹¹ The thin *fissure* that traces out the line between the end and the beginning of History, between death and birth, exploitation and ‘true’ emancipation, is, in Antonio Negri’s ironic words, ‘a qualitative leap into the beyond’—this is to say, a ‘beyond leap’²⁹² for which neither pre-constituted plan nor scientific blueprint can prepare us. And yet, we may well ask, would this not mark out the minimal precondition for thinking the true advent of the new?

Marx is here to serve as a point of departure; no longer is it germane for philosophy to think the Idea of emancipation within the formal conjunction of ‘tasks’ and ‘solutions’. Even if, in *On the Jewish Question*, Marx posed a question of the most salience, demanding that one interrogate ‘the essential conditions of the emancipation to be demanded’ (and thereby raised the question to the level of transcendentality) we cannot settle for the same solution. Communism is not *the* answer to the question of emancipation. This might be best described as the *liberationist fallacy*: to think liberation as a determinate task, as a link forged between the broken chain of pre-History and History *proper*; or, to view it as a pledge, a promise, located along the interface between the *potentiality* (‘to-come’) and the *actuality* (the ‘now’) of communism, emancipation as a lived and permanent condition held in suspension until the communistic society is itself finally actualised. Yet these foregoing remarks need not demand that thought vanquish the idea of emancipation on the ground that there lay in its invocation something inauspicious. Thought philosophically, posing the Idea as a question serves as the sole requirement. It is to speak with Kant, namely that Ideas are problems; as an Idea, emancipation never begins with a solution. It certainly does not materialise as a thought-

²⁹¹Etienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, (London: Verso, 2000) p124.

²⁹²Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*. p153.

effect of a logic deemed more profound (be it History, the State, God, Being); all trace of epiphenomenalism must, as a matter of course, be rescinded. Thus, despite Marx's ingenious move to fold the solution into the question, that is, of anticipating 'human liberation' by enveloping it into the always-already of communism, emancipation in actuality has only manifested as a form of *questioning*, as an unrelenting enquiry to those that would otherwise close their ears to it, to those who would wish to deny its very relevance, or, even to those that would already look upon the task as already completed. This is to bring one's attention to the knife-edge along which we are seeking to re-think the new in politics that holds true to emancipatory encounters.

There can be no final resting place for the emancipatory idea; neither sealed within the expanse of communistic life nor buried in the hallowed cemetery of failed ideas. It is crucial that, contrary to some, emancipation, did not die along with actually-existing socialism. It remains within the imagination of many who partake in politics, who participate in collective praxis.

Addendum. Aporias of the New: Some Laclauian Reflections

The logic of communism, Laclau perceptively writes, is caught within a dilemma. This dilemma was here presented exegetically through a reading of Marx. But, following Laclau we could present our discussion in a more formal way, which would have the virtue of better circumscribing the antinomial form within which Marx's thinking of Communism operates.

First Communism is an idea that proceeds from the cut it makes with an extant situation. Laclau interprets this as an essential structuring principle of any politics of emancipation, referring to it as its 'dichotomic dimension'.²⁹³ In an act of retroactivity, *post-eventum*, whatever is liberated from certain injurious practices sets out to establish relations discontinuous with what has gone before. An actual situation bedevilled with relations of oppression, from which 'a people' (we can leave undetermined the referent here) wish to be emancipated, is contrasted with a future time that will be expunged from such relations. Between the old order and the advent of the new a stark difference is constructed around the presence and the absence of oppression. The logic follows the law of the broken middle. *Either* there is the achievement of emancipation as a universal

²⁹³ Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1991).

condition of existence *or* there is not. The two possibilities are mutually exclusive; there is no other possibility between a pre-emancipated and post-emancipatory situation.²⁹⁴

But, does a situation ever present itself in the ordered form of a logical contradiction, or is it the case, following Kant, we are in the less certain zone of real oppositions? Consider an unjust situation which is comprised of relations w, x, y, and z and a new situation, which contains within it a, b, c, and z. There is the transformation of three relations but the fourth is a fixture of both. In this case, is the situation still pre-emancipatory (on point of fact of the continuity of z across both situations) or can it be considered post-emancipatory (given that a relative break and transformation of three of the elements has been effected)? Obviously, taken discretely, the change in relations, $w \rightarrow a$, $x \rightarrow b$, $y \rightarrow c$, are indicative of emancipatory transformations, but taken as a whole? Is it possible to announce the attainment of a fully emancipated society when, in this example, z is a point of continuity between them? Even if we can register a transformation in a constellation of relations, it is still difficult to know if any relation continuous with the foregoing situation is not irrevocably marked by that previous situation, harbouring thereby the trace of the injustice of that preceding order. On this basis, only the radicality of a break, both absolute and without condition, could establish emancipation as a universal condition of existence.²⁹⁵

Three corollaries follow. First, the old and new are radically disjunctive; there can be no logical join between them. Take a situation and a new situation which breaks radically with it, if the break is properly speaking radically disjunctive then there can be nothing in the former entailing the appearance of the latter. Second, the discontinuity between two orders must therefore imply indetermination in the content of what proceeds from the old order.²⁹⁶ Third, little can be known about what follows the act of emancipation; the emancipated society to-come must be shrouded in an opacity resistant to knowledge.

Marx, as we have seen, did not leave undetermined the shape of things to come. Much has been staked on not only the cessation of injustices, but the form and appearance that this will take and *mutatis mutandis*, the type of social organisation this will lead to. The ‘dichotomic operation’ is coupled together with what Laclau names as its

²⁹⁴ Ibid p6.

²⁹⁵ Ibid p5.

²⁹⁶ Ibid p4.

second essential structuring principle, namely the ‘dimension of ground’,²⁹⁷ which accords to a particular emancipatory struggle sufficient reason for its imminent advent. Its *eventality* is supplemented by the *knowability* of its event, we could say. This second constitutive dimension is not meant exclusively in the colloquial sense, namely how things look from ‘the ground’—as if it were a question of stressing the importance of exchanging abstract principles for an understanding of the concrete conditions that make intelligible the actuality of the struggle. The dimension of ground refers more technically to what lies beneath. Not therefore to the phenomenality of historical conditions, but to the conditions regulating the historical consciousness with which collectivities makes sense of their struggle. In this sense it is unavoidably metaphysical. Topographically speaking, the ground is to be interpreted as *infrastructural*—namely that which gives support to, is a foundation for. It is on the basis of which that any putative emancipatory discourse gains its potency, through an identification of its own struggle with the extended terrain of a general social affliction that interposes itself in all regions of social being. That which identifies the general with the particular, the whole with the specific, which articulates its own desire for emancipation with the general interest of society—by virtue of its ability to penetrate beneath a perceived morass of injustices and identify that which grounds a given societal configuration in order to transform this ground—is said to be perspicuously placed to carry out the task of universal emancipation. Accordingly only an emancipatory discourse that confronts the underlying cause of societal malady, equating all modes of social oppression as emanations of the same fundamental structuring principle, will be equal to the unconditional Idea it promises. The universality of emancipation depends on the extension of the terrain upon which a given collectivity stakes out its struggle, which is to say the potency of its address rests on the extent to which it constitutes the ground for all struggles.

Laclau will identify a fundamental incompatibilism between the two structuring principles by which an emancipatory discourse is said to be organised.²⁹⁸ Thus, we read that: (i) Emancipatory discourses are both with and without ground; (ii) Emancipation is said to be both continuous and discontinuous with what is extant. On the one hand what serves as a ground, what secures for a given emancipatory struggle a primacy vis-a-vis its ability to transform in a fundamental way the organisation of the social, limits the effects of the dichotomic dimension, which dispenses with the ground

²⁹⁷ Ibid p4.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

that bridges across two orders, and fastens instead onto the abyss, the chasm that divides.²⁹⁹ Laclau explains elsewhere:

the first requirement of a rationalist and naturalist discourse presenting itself as an attempt to radically reconstruct society is for all transitions to be intramundane. In that case the achievement of the universality peculiar to a transparent society can only be the result of the transference of the omnipotence of the Creator to the *ens creatum*. But with inexorable logic it then follows that there can be no dislocation possible in the process.³⁰⁰

Laclau stages a fundamental antinomy here constitutive of emancipatory Reason, showing a set of inner conflicts raging from within itself: immanence and transcendence, the radical break between two orders and the necessity of a ground so as to render intelligible the break between a pre- and post-emancipatory situation, and the antinomy between the event of the new and the anticipatory advent of *eschaton*. Laclau dutifully follows the critical route as his own propaedeutic to a recasting of emancipatory Ideas. It is for this reason that this little addendum has been inserted.

²⁹⁹ Ibid p7.

³⁰⁰Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, (London: Verso, 1990; p75.)

Chapter Five

Politics Has an Outside: Emancipation

‘If we understand the political in the sense of the *polis*, its end or *raison d’être* would be to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom as virtuosity can appear. This is the realm where freedom is a worldly reality, tangible in words which can be heard, in deeds which can be seen, and in events which are talked about, remembered and turned into stories before they are finally incorporated into the great storybook of human history. Whatever occurs in this space of appearances is political by definition, even when it is not a direct product of action. *What remains outside it* [...] may be impressive and noteworthy, *but it is not political*, strictly speaking.’

Hannah Arendt.³⁰¹

‘It is the business of politics to make *that* sort of separation its business.’

J-F Lyotard.³⁰²

Reading Hannah Arendt is analogous to an encounter with a Gestalt drawing. Look once and there is the rugged contours of a decrepit lady; blink and the entire scene falters. The harsh, jaded appearance of the old woman vanishes to reveal the smooth lines of a younger, more vivacious looking figure. There is no way of deciding between the two. Both are constitutive of the image that confronts the gaze.

Akin to this pictorial ambiguity, as a figure of political thought, Hannah Arendt is undecidable. On first look it is possible to see ‘the reluctant modernist’³⁰³, if not a political antiquarian, vexed by the problems of modernity. With a second take what appears is a quite different profile: a veritable post-modern; a thinker embracing contingency, who, philosophically, exhibits a dexterity of thought liberated from the

³⁰¹ Hannah Arendt, ‘What is Freedom?’ *Between Past and Future*, p153.

³⁰² J-F Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p187.

³⁰³ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003)

shackles of ‘the tradition’ of metaphysics and, politically, moves freely around, avoiding for support ‘the banisters’ of any ideological dogma.

There are more than two Arendts, if the truth be told. Every commentary brings with it the distillation of a different Arendt: a Wittgensteinian Arendt that dissolves all logical problems so that they be reduced to their linguistic construction; an Aristotelian Arendt of political nobility with a philosophical predilection for drawing analytical *distinctions*; a Nietzschean Arendt of the *agon*, of heroic deeds and aristocratic virtue and a Habermasian Arendt of communicative competence and associational ties. This sense of multiple translations, a body of work that fractures and fragments into a multiple of selves, could be said about all manner of writers that it makes the analogy function more as a general law of interpretation, rather than being illustrative of the precise problems that beset an engagement with the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt. This is doubtless the case. What is of more immediate interest is the basic perspectival switch, the alternate shifting between—if invectives are permissible for the sake of an analytical short cut—the conservatism and the radicalism of her thought.

Arendt was uncomfortable with the title of philosopher. When afforded an opportunity to do so, she would disavow and undertake a quick self re-description. The name of “political thinker”—“a thinker of politics” and “political events”—seemed more apposite. Not a contemplator of eternal essences and metaphysical truths, but a historically committed commentator, caught up within a thicket of political problems.

The two nouns with which Arendt courted as best approximating her own way of operating—a ‘thinker’ of ‘politics’—cut a quite conspicuous figure, however, when events of the twentieth century have been such that, according to the philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy, knowing what it means to think or what it means to do exactly have become fraught with uncertainty.³⁰⁴ This is particularly perspicuous in Arendt who had, on the question of thinking, observed in ‘mass society’ the increasing instrumentalisation of thought.³⁰⁵ The trial of Eichmann was a symptom of a general condition of absent mindedness, a sheer thoughtlessness in the manner by which programs—sanctioning the extermination of peoples—were carried out with such compliance and efficiency.³⁰⁶ The Eichmann case, whilst singular, was symptomatic nevertheless of a more general concern

³⁰⁴Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political* (London: Routledge, 1997)

³⁰⁵See: Hannah Arendt, ‘The Threat of Conformism’, *Essays in Understanding 1930-54* p423.

³⁰⁶Hannah Arendt, *The Life Of the Mind: Thinking*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1977) p4.

with an increasing technocratic and bureaucratised society, allowing little time for reflection, placing value instead on the expediency of tasks. Set against this backdrop, what it means to think in times for which thought has such diminishing value is not immediately obvious.

The reading of Arendt advanced here must be regarded as a consequence of the specific problematic into which this thesis inserts her: that of an *antinomy of emancipatory reason*. For the sake of clarity, once more what is meant by this turn of phrase? Philosophers have reasoned about emancipation in one of two ways, either by elevating emancipation to the order of a rational principle, the meaning of which is in search of its own transcendental guarantee, or by reducing it to a preliminary process, which is to serve as a logical prelude to the main event of political belonging. A logical transition between two terms—a transitory relation between the meaning of politics and the meaning of emancipation—presents itself. On the one hand, emancipation can be understood as that which lay at the ‘end’ of a process—as an object to seize, a species-being to reclaim, a historical destiny to realise, for example. Politics becomes part of the process (a fundamental part, maybe), but, if it plays its part, it does to a script that is already written, to a musical already scored: *become who you are*. Here the space for the new to appear is minimal.

The logical ordering is also reversible, which means, on this occasion, emancipation understood as a term that delivers up political existence as a logical end. Emancipation would be less the *meta-political* principle, the rational kernel of political action, but the *pre-political* condition for accession into political living.

What implications can be drawn from this? Schematically, the thinking of politics and the thinking of the meaning of emancipation do not occupy equal place, even if they can be said to operate within the same logical space. They are subject to an interior ordering, a logical prioritisation about which concept functions as *the aprioristic term* and which constitutes its subordinate other. Divorced, emancipation constitutes the outside of politics, either as *antecedent* to or beyond the political. As terms, politics and emancipation function as two discrete moments in a process, which culminates in thinking the specificity of one alone by way of the other's subordinate position.

The context into which we insert Arendt, then, is both general and specific: a general problem that concerns the relation between politics and the meaning of emancipation. We can say a logical antinomy takes hold on account of this analytic

separation between the meaning of politics from the content ascribed to emancipation. The effects of this have already been observed in the previous chapter on Marx, where we encounter the valorisation of emancipation as an idea and the concomitant marginalisation of politics. But they will also be in operation in the thought of Arendt, for whom, philosophically, an understanding of politics must be freed from the tutelary of the Idea ('universal emancipation', whether in the form of 'Communism', a 'national liberation struggle', 'sisterhood') so that politics regains its dignity as an operator, an autonomous process, as a *praxis* constituting an end in and of itself.

One might reasonably contend that by inserting Arendt into this problematic, there is the risk of distorting her thought by seemingly magnifying a feature of Arendt's thinking that belies its relative confinement. Two comments are necessary here about the *specificity* of the Arendtian-figure and its precise relationship with the general problematic this thesis is in the process of circumscribing.

First, the idea of emancipation may not have been engaged with by Arendt in any sustained way, but it is not entirely devoid of function in Arendt's thought either. As an idea 'emancipation' has unavoidably a place within Arendt's critique of philosophy's way of understanding politics, which, Arendt contends, has been based upon the model of *Homo Faber*—according to which, from a place 'outside', ideas are made and shaped and then imposed upon the malleable substance of politics.³⁰⁷

The philosopher relates to politics as the artist or the artisan (the tailor, the cobbler, the blacksmith) interacts with the object he produces. Arendt writes: 'the final product determines and organises everything that plays a part in the process—the material, the tools, the activity itself and even the person participating in it.'³⁰⁸

Second the apparent inattention the idea of emancipation receives might be as instructive as a concept properly thematised. To explain: the way in which the antinomy of emancipation shows itself is not through an equally rigorous engagement with both terms that would constitute it. It would not be correct to say that a rigorous affirmation of one of the terms at play is coupled with an equally sustained negation and dismissal of the other. More exact is to say that a certain antinomy is the consequence of a two-sided unevenness in the way in which its constitutive terms are presented. In the case of Arendt, an extolling of the virtues of political action does not directly mirror the

³⁰⁷ Hannah Arendt, 'Truth and Politics', *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, p242.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p216.

repudiation of emancipation as an Idea; neither has equal billing. It is from the margins of her text that we are to locate its presence. From what is said in praise of the political a set of remarks can be isolated according to which some notion of emancipation (and it will be seen that this notional content is subject to variation) functions as a way of better specifying the meaning of politics. It operates as a kind of negative condition for the investigation that animates her thought, namely to seize the political life in its specificity.

In the latter parts of Chapter Three, an admittedly contentious claim had been raised, namely that, in spite of a sustained commitment to ‘plurality’ as a *prima principia* of political living, Arendt can be understood as a thinker of the ‘One’. This was an assertion however that paid little attention to its demonstration. Here we must make good on this claim, demonstrating the extent to which Arendt’s thinking of the plurality of politics takes shelter under the ‘One’ of *the* political rather than pushing this multiplicity to its most extreme point so that plurality is not said to be *solely* a property of political life, but constitutive in its most profound sense. It is to insist that there is not *the* political, but, as Gilles Deleuze understood, ‘many politics.’³⁰⁹ This means plurality penetrating the category of politics, exposing its thinking to the manifold cases that are not unifiable under a limited field of predicates and descriptive features. It is to begin along the path of understanding the idea of politics by, first, acknowledging the real of its radical plural character, itself a corollary of casting politics in terms of the event: the event of politics as that which happens (*quod*) politically, but also as that which happens *to* thought, a happening that causes a mutation in the very thinking of politics (something already discussed in the introduction of this thesis). More concretely, all of this would mean that rather than thinking politics by starting with the question of the ‘what’ of its transcendental structures—so as to furnish thought with the conditions making politics both possible and identifiable—ascribing plurality only as a secondary predicate of these transcendental structures, the task in thinking political *novelties*, the *event* of politics (two principles that, in her own way, Arendt herself pledges allegiance to) must think the possibility of a politics that commences by questioning the *quid*, the ‘what’ of the meaning of politics. Here we come up against the limit of Arendt’s thinking of the event and political novelties. But, precisely, it is against this very limit that the thinking of an emancipatory politics must start on its long journey. Before a law of History might be made out of it, or a normative vindication of the liberal polity that, with a polite nudge,

³⁰⁹ Gilles Deleuze, ‘Many Politics’, *Dialogues II*, pp124-147.

welcomes the disenfranchised and the politically excluded into its domain (with the lineations of this public political space kept intact), the demand of emancipation raised by collectivities has historically operated more as an immanent operator, challenging the ‘who’ and the ‘what’ that counts as political.

To demonstrate all of the above will require us to pass through a set of distinct phases:

First it will need to be shown in what way Arendt repudiates the metaphysical supports that have accompanied *discourses about emancipation*. Note at this point, Arendt’s comments will be strictly *intra-philosophical*, concerning specifically the relationship between philosophy and politics, and the manner in which some Idea of universal emancipation comes to interpose itself between these two poles. This means—at least at this level of analytical engagement—that her claims do not address the political function of emancipation, only its philosophical appropriation and the effects subtending philosophy’s seizing of this idea. Arendt shows how philosophers have misunderstood politics, suppressing the particular *qualia* that Arendt identifies in the elevation of politics as a privileged mode of acting. Politics is not simply an empty vessel, a carrier of Ideas, or a means with which to place into the service of a transcendent end—politics, a *praxis*, is not a *poiesis* (in the Aristotelian parlance Arendt adopts). This phase is formative, in that it establishes three central elements of the Arendtian epideictic on politics: first, that politics, extricated from the *One* of the Idea, is essentially tied to *plurality*; second, that politics, exhumed from the necessitarian logic that the philosopher imposes upon it, is the space that opens up to, and is opened up by, an experience of *freedom* and third, that removed from an image of adequation drawn between thought and being, between the Idea and the real, politics is said to be finally liberated as the progenitor of *novelty*.

Plurality, freedom and novelty. In response to these three philosophemes—and with respect to the distinct theses that will be used by Arendt to expound their primacy—we shall need to demonstrate how, in each case, a question can be raised targeting the felicity between word and deed. The first will be to investigate the ways in which the figure of the ‘One’ is reinstalled in her thinking of politics in spite of a quite explicit disavowal. While Arendt pursues a thinking of politics predicated on plurality—which binds the plural to the very possibility of political action—the very attribute that is said to mark out the *distinctiveness* of politics is occluded by a finessing of what is *distinctive* about politics through the introduction of a concomitant set of *distinctions* that begin to give a bounded and restrictive sense to the political once more.

Furthermore, we need to show in what way ‘emancipation’ (this time as a political process) is a casualty of the Arendtian procedure; the reappearance of emancipation on the scene of Arendt’s thinking functions as both an *anti-political* and *pre-political* principle. Here it is a matter of showing that the role of emancipation is restricted to shoring up the *specificity* of the political.

This is by no means a small undertaking. But it is important that each stage is carried out in as exhaustive a way that both space and time here make available.

The Things they Make with Ideas: Philosophy and *Homo Faber*

To the chagrin, no doubt, of his supporters, who saw in his compositional technique the marching order towards a pure and rational form of composition that would break irrevocably with the expressivist precepts of classical tonality, the twentieth century atonal composer, Arnold Schoenberg claimed that he did not compose principles, only music.³¹⁰ Is this difference, which in this case insinuates itself between the self-interpretation provided by the *practitioner* of art and the enthusiasm that a certain artistry provokes in the formalising compunction of the art *theorist*—interpreting in what he receives a new model for the future of artistic creativity—a lesson that we might apply to our investigation, addressing as it must the difference in the rhythms and demands separating out two orders of thought (in the case of this thesis the difference between the political practitioner and a philosophical thinking that takes as its object the practice of politics)? What happens when the desire to theorise about politics distils from the concrete history of political struggle the invariant principle of emancipation, elevating it to the status of the *prima principia* of political action? Certainly, the previous chapter of our inquiry, which had addressed the particular trajectory that in Marx the principle of emancipation passes through—only to show (what must nonetheless now be well established) the impasses and cul-de-sacs it is burdened by—would issue a set of negative refrains and proscriptions against such a gesture. The question now to be raised is whether the idea of emancipation is indeed salvageable? Or do we face the prospect of a necessary trade-off; the forsaking of emancipatory ideas so that, liberated from the shadows of

³¹⁰ Arnold Schoenberg quoted in Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, p389.

necessity and freed from the shackles of a norm forged from the philosopher's tools, politics is to be seized as a process without end?

Hannah Arendt would seemingly leave less than a modicum of doubt. Transcendent and Rational Ideas—that is, Ideas which gain their authority from a place exterior to political action—are inimical to what lies at the heart of political life, namely ‘the disclosive capacity for action, for beginning *new* and *spontaneous* processes.’³¹¹ The making of principles—both univocal and uniform—derogates the process of political action. This fabrication veils the attribution of disclosiveness by which political deeds arise in the world. Furthermore, they serve as a container for the spontaneous, a sequestering of the unforeseeable that irrupts on the occasion of men gathering together and engaging in political activity.

In Marx, the principle of ‘human emancipation’, carried by the name Communism, operates neither as an idea to attain nor a state of affairs to establish but a tendency toward which humanity is heading, and gives thereby a specious materialist gloss to an age-old philosophical operation.³¹² The inscription of an Idea on the palimpsest of social being is not too far removed from the eternal forms over which Plato presides in the *Republic*. Arendt explains: ‘First there is the perceiving of the image or shape (*eidos*) of the product-to-be, and then organising the means and starting the execution.’³¹³ The philosopher relates to politics as the artist or the artisan (the tailor, the cobbler, the blacksmith) interacts with the object he produces, insofar as to say that ‘the final product determines and organises everything that plays a part in the process—the material, the tools, the activity itself and even the person participating in it.’³¹⁴

The artisan *qua homo faber*—for example, a tailor—knows when he wakes up every morning, barring any contingencies, in what his working day will consist. In the tailoring trade, his daily chores are already set out for him in advance: to produce attire for the gentry. Everything else follows from the end to attain. He knows the materials he will be working with, the tools he will use, the rules he needs to follow, if he is to produce

³¹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p230.

³¹² In the Second Volume to the *Life of the Mind*, on ‘Willing’, Arendt writes that ‘the extravagances of materialist speculation are quite equal to the follies of Idealist metaphysics.’ p198. The foregoing passage offers an interesting reflection: ‘the Idealists’ speculations were pseudo-scientific, now, at the opposite end of the spectrum, something similar seems to be going on. Materialists play the game of speculation [...] their speculations produce, not ghosts like the game of the Idealists, but materialisations like those of spiritualist séances. What is so very striking in these materialist games is that their results resemble the concepts of the Idealists.’ pp197-8.

³¹³ Arendt, *Human Condition*, p225; ‘Introduction Into Politics’, *The Promise of Politics* pp130-31.

³¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p216.

clothing. Of course, he could try to sew with a rock or use gauze as a material for a jacket, or think that he would like to experiment with his mode of producing the jacket in some irreverent way. But then he would not be a tailor; for he would have nothing to show for his making. All practices and meaning are endowed with intelligibility in accordance with the result towards which they tend.

What in part governs this philosophical exaltation of the Idea—and the model of making within which philosophy understands its relation with the political as, so to say, an extra-philosophical datum—is a deeply held suspicion regarding politics. There are three ways in which philosophy, as an extension of the figure of *Homo Faber*, exhibits this deep-seated suspicion:³¹⁵

1. *Through the deployment of a means-ends schema.* Philosophers who have placed politics in the service of the Idea (whether this be ‘The Good’ for Plato, ‘Justice’ for Aristotle, ‘Right’ for Locke, ‘*Volk*’ for Heidegger, etc), have concomitantly reduced politics to the instrument of that idea.³¹⁶ The principal effect is the reduction of the plurality of political existence to the ‘One’ of the idea that suppresses this inherent plurality. In philosophy’s determination of politics, Arendt remarks, ‘it is the nature of ends to degrade everything in their service to mere means, and to reject as useless anything that does not serve them.’³¹⁷ This constitutes a double bind: either political action is assented to because it is congruent with the Idea posited as an end or political action deviates from the ends and thus is not recognised strictly as an instance of politics *qua* the means by which the posited end is to be actualised (rather like the tailor who has a shop without clothes to sell). Either way there is the suppression of the plurality of political action.

2. *Through the derogation of politics via its determinate negation.* If politics and the Idea follow a means-ends schema, then politics is destined to be eclipsed once the Idea is achieved. This is the case with regard the communist ideal, which for Marx means ‘a politics-less community’³¹⁸, and which Arendt comments, ‘is not at

³¹⁵ Due to space constraints these three are only cursorily adumbrated. For a more, thorough account, this thesis points the reader in the direction of Dana Villa’s *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.)

³¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, p229.

³¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, ‘Introduction into Politics’ *The Promise of Politics*. p120.

³¹⁸ *Ibid*

all utopian [...] but is simply appalling.³¹⁹ The premise according to which politics implies its own disappearance is, for example in Marx, identifiable in the radical disjunction that political life installs between the ‘abstract’ citizen (equal and free according to the law) and the ‘concrete’ suffering experienced under the economic laws of wage labour and surplus value. The rights of man and the citizen, as we noted in the previous chapter, are for Marx a sense of right masked as radical nonright, covering over the fundamental wrong structuring the topographic profile of society. A politics, which reveals the diremption of modern man, becomes the terrain on which man has his consciousness aroused about the precariousness of his plight. Providing this fracture separating out man’s concrete existence from man’s abstract projection as political citizen remains, the politics of class struggle is necessary. But in eliminating this line of separation—healing this experience of an inner diremption in man—this political necessity disappears. Politics is thus to be understood as a vanishing mediator.

3. *Through advancing a thesis about the plasticity of politics.* The instrumental value with which politics is accorded, both in terms of it being understood as a means in the thrall of a higher end or principle, and with respect to its disposability, contains the germ from which violence grows as a justifiable means, both as a means of carrying forward the realisation of an Idea antagonistic towards what is extant and as a way of disciplining political deviants, erring from the route set forth to realise the Idea. Politics therefore becomes the means by which all means are justified. Leaning on Lacoue-Labarthe’s reading of Heidegger, this is what Dana Villa calls the ‘plastic art’ of politics abandoned to the will-to-power.³²⁰

It is the ‘One’ to which her own thinking serves as a counterpoint, when Arendt attests to an originary binding between political living and the human condition of plurality. The beginning of *The Human Condition* is in this respect unequivocal: ‘Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter’, Arendt claims,

³¹⁹ Ibid p153.

³²⁰ Dana Villa *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*. pp253-9. See also: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics* (London: Blackwell, 1990). pp66-7.

corresponds to the human condition of *plurality*, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life.³²¹

Politics fits not within the rigid form of an Idea. For politics is composed of a plurality of men—whose experiences are variable and judgements not harmonisable under the commonality of experience or a transcendental norm. This makes for the advent of a gathering something precarious and riven with unpredictability.³²² The condition of plurality, then, becomes the condition for the irruption of the new, the possibility an event (*das Ereignis*), which is ‘miraculous’ in the sense that its worldly appearing is not derivable from any objectively given condition or metaphysical principle or Idea.

The category of the ‘new’ becomes considerably more broad than we had observed in Marx. Here we should recall how the chapter on Marx began. Ernst Bloch extolled Marx as the ‘philosopher of the *Novum*.’ In the pre-Marxian universe, Bloch writes, the category of the New ‘has not been described anything like adequately enough.’³²³ Arendt would neither deny the premise on which Bloch begins, namely the centrality of a ‘thinking of the new’ to any understanding of politics—nor that Marxism remains an attempt to give an account of it. What would be denied by her is the conclusion Bloch reaches concerning the success of Marx’s thought in this pursuit, and particularly Marx’s claim to *know* that which, per definition, must be foreclosed to apodictic knowledge. The ‘new’ is a category strained by the rationalist suppositions that tie Marx to the philosophical tradition. The Idea of ‘Communism’, of ‘universal emancipation’ might itself signal the new. But, in the form of an Idea to which politics binds itself instrumentally, it leads to no end of aporia. If the idea ascribes in any strong sense the form and content with which the idea will find its realisation, there can be no newness in the Idea. The Idea could only be a sign of novelty, but only on the condition that it remains indeterminate in terms of its content. But in that case, its indeterminate content would waylay the *eschaton* for the *agon*, opening up the idea of Communism to a set of competing claims as to the precise meaning of the end to obtain as well as the means by which to attain this now contested end.

³²¹ Hannah Arendt *Human Condition* p7.

³²² Hannah Arendt ‘Politics and Truth’, *Between Past and Future*.

³²³ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, p201.

Arendt speaks of the sublimation of the individuality of each and every person by ‘a unitedness of many into one [as] basically [an] *antipolitical* [principle].³²⁴ Arendt continues by adding, ‘from the viewpoint of the world and the public realm, life and death and everything attesting to sameness are *non-worldly*, *antipolitical* experiences.’³²⁵ What is ‘one’ (for example the existential certainty that we are ‘beings-toward-death’) does not serve as a ground for political belonging. While there may be irrefutable ‘truths’ about human existence, they have little disclosive quality—being both extensionally too thin and too broad to penetrate the happening that politics exhibits, which, in its being, is contrarily hazardous and ‘evental’. Attestations of ‘sameness’ (whether the proclamation be ‘we are all human beings’, ‘we are all *homo laborans*’, etc.)—stripped back to some kind of primordia (blood and sinew, productive beings, rational agents, and so on)—are anti-political or *apolitia*.³²⁶ What is anti-political is the

³²⁴ Hannah Arendt *Human Condition* p214.

³²⁵ Ibid

³²⁶ Hannah Arendt, ‘Introduction into Politics’, *The Promise of Politics*, Arendt yokes together a predicate of our mere existence (e.g. the fact that we are beings-toward death) as insufficient to counsel the question of politics, with (and somewhat elliptically) ‘everything else attesting to sameness’. And yet it is what might be caught up in this ‘everything else’ which has more interpretative potency. Politically—which is a way of speaking specifically about the political experiences that shaped Arendt’s thinking on these matters (the rise of totalitarianism, the systemic extermination of the Jews, the dangers of a bloated bureaucracy in the west, etc.)—the turn toward ‘sameness’ would have been a preoccupation of modernity itself: the ‘fantasmatic figure of the One’, of seeking to ground the being of political community on the transparency of an identitarian principle (substantives such as ‘Race’, ‘Labour’, religion, being such candidates). Arendt wants to make as a political point: that such political experiments were an attempt to be done with politics, because they sought to suppress what is most irrepressible about political action, its plurality—both in its unexpectedness and incalculability.

This historical examination of the political in modernity, results in Arendt tracing out a strange encounter between the ‘other-worldliness’ of philosophy and the anti-politics of modern political formations. Strange, because such a coincidence goes against what in numerous places she cites as an originary disjunction between two ways of living—the life of the philosopher and political living. Very early on in ‘Truth and Politics’, Arendt tells us of how, in antiquity, the philosopher parts company with the political citizen, precisely because of the former’s depreciative stance toward ‘plurality’: ‘to the citizen’s ever-changing opinions about human affairs, which themselves were in a state of constant flux, the philosopher opposed the truth about those things which in their very nature were everlasting and from which, therefore, principles could be derived to stabilise human affairs.’ *Between Past and Future* p233. Philosophy would be reacquainted with the political in the modern age, in the act of politics’ auto-suppression. The anti-political gloss of modern politics would be on account of its philosophical determination, meaning its derogation of the plurality of politics and its substitution for the orderly rule of the one. In search for what Lacoue-Labarthe (in a paper about Heidegger’s involvement in Nazism) coined the ‘transcendent ends in politics’ the twentieth century would be remembered for its taking flight from the world in order to guarantee for man a destiny, which his dealings in-the-world obviate him from perceiving. It would give the ‘other-worldliness’, to which Arendt speaks in relation to ‘life’ and ‘death’ (by virtue of which our thrownness into, as well as our falling out of this world, are experiences that remain forever inexplicable and unintelligible to us) a more violent denotation. Giorgio Agamben, one of Arendt’s more unorthodox readers, has advanced

reduction of the manifold to the stable regime of the ‘one’. The ‘specificity’ of the political, on the other hand, would hold firm in courting the plural-being of existence: ‘the calamities of action all arise from the human condition of plurality [...] The attempt to do away with this plurality is tantamount to the abolition of the public realm itself.’³²⁷

But, if an opposition is staged between the ‘one’ and ‘plurality’, what is the particular character of the plurality laid claim to by Arendt? It shall be proposed that on balance it is a *restrictive* conception. By restrictive, one should understand a conception that does not allow her central intuition to penetrate the order of the ‘what’ of politics. Rather ‘plurality’ is a predicate housed within the ‘what’ of the particular ascriptions Arendt attaches to the political. The full implications of the positing of plurality are not carried through to their logical conclusion. There is a ring-fencing of the political by Arendt, an operation of rigid designation undertaken by her in determining the objects, places and subjects deemed countable as ‘political’. Plurality is kept as the *property of* political action, though, ultimately is not *constitutive of* politics, at least not all the way down. Plurality is that which *resides*, takes up residence in a surround which Arendt enframes as public. There is however a radical plurality that roams the borders of these places; marauding, nomadic, characters that populate her own texts.

Before we examine this textually, some notes are required on Arendt’s method of inquiry, which will lay the groundwork for the difference between the order of what is *distinctive* about politics and the order of distinctions that Arendt operationalises in order to give the *quid*, the what, of politics greater specification.

the claim of the inseparability of politics and philosophy, to which we read: ‘brought to the limit of pure being, metaphysics (thought) passes over into politics (into reality), just as on the threshold of bare life, politics steps beyond itself into theory.’ *Homo Sacer* (London Stanford University Press, 1998, p182)

A veritable hive of intellectual activity has, in recent times, taken place on the crypt of western metaphysics. Many have pursued the connection between the orders of the philosophical and the political, and have declared their ‘total completion’—which is to say, their closure. This is not a theme that I wish to pick up on here explicitly. Rather, what needs to be appreciated is that while a certain Arendtian motif has provided ‘grist for the mill’, so to speak, for those who would countenance the eclipse of the ‘virtuosity’ of politics, the figurative replacement of the city-state with the concentration camp (as we read in Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*), Arendt does not so easily fall into a discourse about the liquidation of the political. With this in mind it is worth highlighting that for Arendt the encounter between the orders of the philosophical and political is not originary but derivative. Arendt begins with the separation of their paths and not their confluence. We can say the derivation of the ‘anti-political’ is not only deployed to define a certain experience of the modern age, but is there to protect the essence of politics from any conceptual atrophy which is at risk in and through its philosophical seizing.

³²⁷Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. p220.

The House Arendt Builds

In a revealing symposium, a very candid exchange was to take place between Arendt and several discussants about the precise operativity of her thinking. Much consternation was caused over the way in which Arendt appropriates terms—what one respondent labelled as her idiosyncratic, her quite ‘peculiar’ intellectual practice ‘of taking a word that has perhaps more than one meaning in the ordinary understanding and giving it a very special meaning (unique to herself) and then proceeding from there to reach striking, paradoxical conclusions.’³²⁸ Another, dismayed by the convenience of her dualistic thought, remarks with some perplexity: ‘you know darn well that one cannot consistently make that distinction [between social and political being] [...] the two are inextricably connected.’³²⁹

How does Arendt respond to these complaints? She does so by labelling her intellectual operation as Aristotelian; her starting point, she affirms, is always the assertion that “A and B are not the same.” She begins, therefore, by distinctions. Whence the categorial oppositions between the ‘social’ and the ‘political’, ‘emancipation’ and ‘freedom’, ‘violence’ and ‘power’, ‘contemplation’ and ‘action’, which constitute the pillars around which the architecture of Arendt’s thinking is built. ‘This space that Hannah Arendt creates in her work’, comments one commentator, is one into

which we can walk with the great sense of walking through an arch into a liberated area, with a great part of it occupied by definitions [...] [As regard] the distinctions themselves—I would say that each one within this liberated area, within this free space—each distinction is like a little house. There is this stability in which labour lives in its little house, and work in another, and the political is strictly segregated in its house from the social. So that all this space created by her is actually furnished.³³⁰

The integrity or otherwise of this metaphor will not detain us. In spite of its convolution, though, it hits upon something quite striking. Mary McCarthy speaks of a clearing, a possibility of walking unencumbered around the ‘free space’ or a ‘liberated

³²⁸Hannah Arendt, ‘On Hannah Arendt’, *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979) p337.

³²⁹ Ibid p316.

³³⁰ Ibid p337.

area'. Arendt would therefore be responsible of clearing the clutter and confusions of modern thought. And yet something else happens: a space populated by the stable dwellings of concepts—not just empty shells, but forms 'actually furnished.' The free space, on closer inspection, reveals itself to be not so open, but marked by properties, positive attributions and other forms of exclusion. Arendt's commitment to what she calls an Aristotelian procedure is in this way double edged. On the one hand, it promises to restore order to a space for which time has left it requiring a veritable spring clean, a clearing up of the clutter, a reordering of the furniture. On the other, it risks making things far too orderly and, in its way, inhospitable to unknown guests.

It is true that the 'political' cannot be an empty form. Were this to be the case then its ascriptive power would be a nullity. Required therefore is that the category of the political is not without content, properties, positive characteristics and so on, making it both intelligible and functional in providing thought with an analytic of empirical events. At the same time, there appears something anti-political about this otherwise necessary conceptual move, something that goes against the spirit of the ontological opening that would bind political action to the exhibiting of the new, to the order of a 'happening' (*quod*)—it would run counter to the very principles that Arendt seeks to enliven in the pursuit of *vita activa* against the contemplative repose of the "philosopher"³³¹, whose concern is not the *quod* of a happening (in all its fragility and precariousness) but with the *quid* of the essential determinations and organising principles for politics. Bonnie Honig (who, for the most part, is generous in her accounting of Arendt's work) concedes this much: 'Arendt's vision of politics remains rather constricted,'³³² later extemporising in the following way:

a reading of Arendt [is possible] that might point out that Arendt assigns unsettling practices like politics, to a rather narrow set of sites and objects, insisting that politics stay there lest it disturb the reassuring identities and roles, the predictabilities, of daily life. Fearful that total politics would be like living without the ground on which we stand, Arendt does not politicise the private realm; instead, she reconciles us to its determinations, constructs and closures and to the public-private distinction that keeps them safe.³³³

³³¹It is true that Arendt is quite clear that novelty and stability should not be regarded as ontologically distinct and separate. This is one such opposition that Arendt wishes to dissolve, rather than to maintain (the other being 'freedom' and 'politics', which has already been touched upon, but on which more needs to be said later).

³³² Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of politics*. p118.

³³³ Ibid p202.

For Honig's part, what is held out for is a 'radicalisation' of Arendt, who is more than what she says, and who suggests more than her texts explicate.³³⁴ In this way Honig undertakes a *symptomal* reading that frees up the exegetical labour from the surfaces of the so-called manifest content of Arendt's pronouncements and locates a textual topography that permits the possibility of seizing repressed possibilities, latent or displaced thoughts. It is not the place to comment upon this well-established method of thought-retrieval, nor on evaluating what, more substantively, Honig hopes to achieve with Arendt by way of what she calls a 'radicalisation'. To bring Honig to the reader's attention at this juncture is instead to shore up Arendt's act of 'mastery' (of one-ness) over the ways in which politics is said to appear.

With certain things established, attention will now turn to two tasks, the first of which shall seek to think the extent of her commitment to plurality (and the tools at her disposal, against the 'one', to hand over ontological primacy to the 'new', under the aegis of the event); the second will bring us back to the central concern of this thesis, namely the question of emancipation, by focusing on the manner of her disengagement with the idea as an issue *for* politics. On this occasion her engagement with the idea takes place not at the level of philosophy, but at the level of political engagement. The disconnection she makes with the idea of emancipation will harbour a redoubt of the 'one' in her own thinking on politics.

It to ask, therefore: How plural is Arendt's definition of politics? And relatedly, how empty can we say this definition is, once we have established that it is marked by the definitional exclusion of the idea of emancipation?

Plurality Bound

'What is the subject of our thought? Experience! Nothing else.'³³⁵ This unequivocal statement can be taken as Arendt's avowal to a certain empirico-inductivism against, in the mode of the hypothetico-deductive, the wild speculative excesses of theory. But its significance goes beyond the form of epistemic claims. The experiences of Arendt and an entire generation—caught within the pincer grip of totalitarianism and the foreboding

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Hannah Arendt, 'On Hannah Arendt', *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979) p308.

doom of nuclear meltdown—mark a turning in the very way of engaging with the world.³³⁶ The indelible mark of the tortuous experiences left on the consciousness of Arendt permit her to make the following judgement: that the predicament of modern man is severe. The age is ‘worldless’ and humanity walks through the ‘desert’, exposed to the sandstorms of ‘totalitarian movements’, ‘themselves well-adjusted to the conditions of the desert.’³³⁷ Humanity is at a loss. Under these extreme conditions the temptation would be to flee from the scene entirely, to take refuge in little oases of solitude. Though, this is not an option Arendt countenances. In the specious presence of politics (where ‘everything appears political’), for Arendt politics *proper* is perspicuous by its absence. What is worldless about the modern condition is the absence of an understanding of political activity as that which *worlds*.³³⁸ Politics makes worlds, on the basis of which politics can be said (in the infinitive) ‘to world.’ If we are to resist the real possibility of nihilism, and withdraw into a state of asceticism, we must learn once more:

The art of politics, [which] teaches men how to bring forth what is great and radiant—*ta megala kai lampra*, in the words of Democritus; as long as the *polis* is there to inspire men to dare the extraordinary, all things are safe; if it perishes everything is lost.³³⁹

A fine line separates the heroicism of the successful preservation of political living, and the pathos that exudes from its privation. Is there, then, little surprise that a zero-sum schema is deployed to better shore up the monumental, ‘historial’ importance of the political realm? In the modern age such a reminder is timely. The ‘art of politics’ now needs relearning. The *polis* gives us reason to hope. It is presented as the shining example, for two capital but very different reasons.

First its hermeneutic recovery is there to show something of the essential feature of politics, its capacity to disclose. We read: ‘it shines forth’, appearing with a ‘radiance’ and luminosity. Its recovery then has an ontologico-descriptive function. It delivers what is *distinctive about* politics, that is, a quite minimal predication as to what is political about politics.

³³⁶ Hannah Arendt, ‘Concern with Politics’, *Essays in Understanding: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*. (New York: Random House, 1994)

³³⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Random House, 1996) p202.

³³⁸ For a clear exposition of the category of world in Arendt (and its political implications): See Linda Zerilli, *The Abyss of Freedom*.

³³⁹ Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. p206.

A politics that exhibits the plurality that beings are is a politics ‘fundamentally attuned’ to the world and allows for the construction of worlds. Here an ontological prioritisation of politics is sought. With this prioritisation, we should not consider such a move to be contentious; a whole generation of thinkers (most of whom can be regarded as our contemporaries) have waged the ‘primacy of politics’.³⁴⁰ The point of contention is rather staked out in terms of where this primacy is to take us; there are two principal ways in which the privileging of politics logically unfolds, two approaches which nonetheless are united in maintaining the *distinctiveness* of the happening of politics. The first, which can be named democratic—in the broadest sense of the term—remains at the level of this ontologico-description and embraces the *manifoldness* of politics, doing so by not sifting through the ‘ambiguous actors’ that populate the political scene.³⁴¹ And a second approach, named (albeit figuratively and therefore admittedly inadequately), aristocratic, which does not stop at the ontologico-descriptive level, but goes further by introducing a set of second order (ontic) descriptions. The difference between these two ways is the difference between a description of politics that presides over what is *distinctive about* politics—that skews the definitional content to its positive features—and a description that raises the question: *from what, precisely*, is politics distinct? This does not mean simply the differentiation of object domains or regions of being (separating ‘politics’ from ‘science’ or ‘religion’) but rather a legislating over what counts as politics (with respect to the objects, subjects, processes, to be labelled as political).³⁴² In the case of the latter, therefore, the definition operates *ex negativa*, the effect of which is a restriction imposed on the places in which a politics can be said to *appear*. This is in contrast to the former understanding of politics, which, entirely mobile, thinks politics in accordance with the Lucretian dictum: ‘*Nec regione loci certa nec tempore certo*’ (“*at uncertain times and in uncertain places*”)—dispensing with the traditional topographical model that divides social being, let us say classically, between ‘civil society’ and ‘state’ or between the ‘social’ and the political’, against the backdrop of relatively stable, sedimented, and repetitive practices.

³⁴⁰ This generally accepted axiom takes on many various hues and appearances. Such as in the work of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Oliver Marchart, Claude Lefort, Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, Bonnie Honig, Jacques Rancière (to a degree), Alain Badiou (to an even smaller degree) etc.

³⁴¹ Jacques Rancière, “Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?”, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103: 2/3. Spring/Sumer, 2004.

³⁴² Paulo Virno, *The Grammar of the multitude* (New York: Semiotext, 2005)

Arendt, then, follows what is the minimal (though resounding) affirmation of politics (that which inquires into what is *distinctive about* politics) with a further set of conditions that would secure for the political its empirico-transcendental identity. Its ontological *distinctiveness* is paired up with a set of ontical circumscriptions, of *distinctions*, all of which when added piece by piece to the system regulate the ways in which the being of politics is sayable, marshalling therefore the ways in which politics can be said to appear and, even, when what appears is dismissed as something other-than politics.

If the accusation sometimes levelled at Arendt has any traction—that she is a classicist, a nostalgist, pining for the simplicity of the *polis*—then it is because Arendt’s reminder, that ‘as long as the *polis* is there to inspire men to dare the extraordinary’ all is not lost, contains within it the perfect counterpoint to the mixing and blending forms and the indifferentism of ‘mass society’.³⁴³ The charge as to whether Arendt is an antimodernist, an anachronistic thinker seeking to reel back modernity is not one that specially concerns this thesis.³⁴⁴ What Arendt takes issue with is the mixing of forms, objects and topoi, absent from classical figurations, but produced within the modern epoch, where what ‘counts’ as political loses any stable measure, but becomes a mobile operator, which criss-crosses the traditional lineations of different object domains.

Cast in its starkest terms, the switching between ontological postulation and ontical description—between what is most *distinctive* and what is most *distinct* (topographically speaking)—about political living plays itself out in specific passages of her thematic study, *On Revolution*. Some time shall be spent tracing this analytical switching in those famous sections where Arendt presides over the ‘social question’:

³⁴³ Arendt claims: ‘the rise of mass society has made excellence anonymous, [changing] the content of the public realm beyond recognition.’ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p49.

³⁴⁴ This question might cause us to ask of the Arendtian study whether the general ‘happening’ of politics (that is, politics as a way of being that delivers up something ‘new’ to the world) undergoes an ontical restriction, insofar as it serves as a way to fasten a little harder onto what happens in its classical forms, causing us finally to wonder that far from affirming the novelty of politics *as such*, it is a discourse tinged with melancholia, with the affirmation only of a particular (classicist) mode of politics. Seyla Benhabib’s description of Arendt as the ‘reluctant modernist’ is noteworthy here (see: *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003). This reluctant modernism might be construed as reluctance about affirming the modern forms by which politics appears, a reluctance buttressed by intransigence about the *exemplarity* of the Greek *polis*, as the *exemplary mode* of its appearing. This gives the Arendtian praise of the political, and the zero-sum schema it gives rise to (‘as long as the *polis* is there to inspire men to dare the extraordinary, all things are safe; if it perishes everything is lost’), a particular direction. The analytical distinction, upon which the sanctity of the political (in its specificity) depends, carries with it a normative predilection for a specific way that this distinctiveness shows itself.

The desire not only to be equal or resemble, but ‘to excel’—which according to John Adams, [is] ‘next to self-preservation, will forever be the great spring of human actions.’ [But ‘this by no means opens the political realm to the many’]. Hence the predicament of the poor after their self-preservation has been assured is that they remain excluded from the light of the public realm where excellence can shine; they stand in darkness wherever they go. As John Adam’s saw it: “the poor man’s conscience is clear; yet he is ashamed [...] he feels himself out of the sight of others, groping in the dark. Mankind takes no notice of him. He rambles and wanders unheeded. In the midst of a crowd, at church, in the market [...] he is in as much obscurity as he would be in a garret or a cellar. He is not disapproved, censured, or reproached; he is only not seen.’³⁴⁵

A little later Arendt makes the following summation:

[John Adam’s insight about the political predicament of the poor lay] in the crippling consequences of obscurity, in contrast to the more obvious ruin which want brought to human life, but it could hardly be shared by the poor themselves; and since it remained a privileged knowledge it had hardly any influence upon the history of revolutions or the revolutionary tradition.³⁴⁶

Much offers itself for comment in these passages. None more so than how the qualitative difference separating politics from other modes of being reveals itself. First, we read: ‘to excel’ is the guiding virtue of political deeds. It is a subjective attribute a piece with the minimal ontological postulation, which bespeaks of the political as *that which shines*.³⁴⁷ What unites subject and object, the *subjective* comportment of ‘excellence’ and the shining of the ‘that-which’ of politics, is a principle, as common parlance would express it, ‘of standing out from the crowd’. A fact compounded once Arendt has further remarked that the public realm is not open to the undifferentiated anonymity of the masses. The incursions into the place of the political by the masses or *le peuple*—which, against Rousseau’s aggrandisement in the form of the *volonté générale*, Arendt assigns to the ‘rule of the one’, to the anti-political binding of the ‘many into

³⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt. *On Revolution*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990) p69.

³⁴⁶ Ibid p70.

³⁴⁷ This point of unity between subjective comportment and the object-quality of the political sphere is described by Arendt in *The Human Condition*: ‘Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm.’ p180.

one’—is the cancellation of the specificity of political virtue, the dissolution of its distinctiveness.

Is what is posited as *distinctive* about politics conflated with the *distinctions* of a type that fend off the uncertain and the ambiguous and restore order to the realm of political action? Do we so quickly reach the limit of Arendt's plurality, and thus restrict the possible ways in which politics as an operator for the ‘new’ is sayable?

By the time John Adams talks of the affliction of the poor as one of ‘visibility’ and not ‘drudgery’, things become particularly hazardous. Excluded from the incandescent rays of the political realm, the ‘poor’ are only decipherable by their shadows—we are told of their opacity, of their obscure and enigmatic forms, ‘standing in darkness wherever they go’, none of whom dwell in the realm of political freedom, but are condemned to the ‘rambling’ and ‘wandering’ existence of the nomad. The poor walk in the ‘market place’, the ‘church’ in a ‘crowd’, wherever they walk to it makes little difference. They do not appear.³⁴⁸ It is from the standpoint of the political (from Adams’ privileged position) that these observations are brought together. From the inside looking out, the place from which the political legislator views things, Adams can see things about others that those others cannot see about themselves. We encounter a double tragedy in Adams’ discourse. Arendt knows of one (the other is the prerogative of the reader). She tells us that Adams cannot but feel for those whose plight is to remain in the dark, so to speak, both in the sense of ignorance—of a knowledge they are destined not to benefit from (Adams’ privileged insight, we are told, will have no impact on either the history of revolutions or the revolutionary tradition)—and a life (the life of freemen and political action) that eludes them. The second is the analytical necessity of this tragedy. Using John Adams as her mouthpiece, Arendt conveys the centrality of the operational category of ‘appearance’, of ‘disclosure’ (we are told: politics operates by way of what ‘appears’, of a ‘coming to light’, of a making one seen, rather than the intellectualist operation of depth retrieval of some essence or truth). It is a way for her to prise open the contingency and the unpredictability of things, her way of following the principle of plurality, the *conditio per quam* of political existence that Arendt lays bare in the *Human*

³⁴⁸ Jacques Rancière has also pointed to this passage as deeply symptomatic of the duplicitous nature of the Arendtian view on politics. Speaking about John Adam’s claim ‘that the misfortune of the poor lies in their being seen’, and lacking the capacity to be visible, he goes onto add: ‘Her opposition returns us to the old opposition in ‘Greek philosophy between men of leisure and men of necessity, the latter being men whose needs exclude them from the domain of appearance and, hence, from politics.’ See: Jacques Rancière, ‘Politics and Aesthetics: An Interview’, in *Angelaki*, 8:2 (2003), p202.

Condition. But the use of Adams, however, has a function other than marking out the ontological *distinctiveness* of politics. Ancillary *distinctions* are introduced (light/dark, freedom/necessity, nobility/masses) which conceptually regulate ‘what’ and ‘who’ counts as political. It is an analytical necessity that plays on Adams’ pathos, so as to better show up the difference between ways of living, but that, in drawing out this difference, infinitises the distance between them.³⁴⁹

What Arendt calls the ‘political predicament of the poor’ becomes more a predicament about Arendt and her envisioning of the political. The quandary is not so much about the poor’s non-place in the conducting of political deeds, but, at one and the same time, about the analytical breach that Arendt maintains so as to afford politics its specious dignity along with the operational quandary that Arendt faces when the claim surrounding the quality of the *distinctiveness* of the political comes to be tied to how to draw out *this* distinctiveness.

History will dissolve the predicament which Arendt hangs round the neck of the poor and the wage-labourers. This is notable in the *Human Condition* where, in the central chapter extolling the glory of human action, we find a little section dedicated to ‘the labour movement’. With its admittance, we find not the crippling effects of ‘invisibility’, of an image of the poverty-stricken and the *animal laborans* as locked within the repetitive drudgery of mere living, of the necessitarian and heteronomous conditions of subsistence (for the most part averse to the experience of freedom of political citizenry). But shorn of the obscurity and the nonappearance of the earlier account, Arendt will speak of the moment when the workers enter onto the ‘scene of History’, when ‘a whole segment of the population was more or less suddenly *admitted* to the public realm, that is, *appeared* in public.’³⁵⁰ History, then, may dissolve the predicament of the poor (and Arendt is moved to concede the transitoriness of this predicament), but how (if at all) does this acknowledgement alter Arendt’s general framework? Everything turns round the nature of the appearance, the ‘how’ of the worker’s visibility. In what way does Arendt choose to mark their appearance? The quoted passage is on this matter quite suggestive. We read, the workers are *admitted* onto the public realm. But this means that for something or somebody to appear, what must first be satisfied is the condition of being admitted. In the example of the workers, only on

³⁴⁹Ibid. p203. Again, Jacques Ranciere has perceptively remarked that the Arendtian conception of ‘political appearance simply mirrors the traditional ‘Platonic’ opposition between those who are deemed able and those who are not.’

³⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition* p218.

account of their accession into an already constituted, bounded place—whether described as an arena, a realm, or a domain—do they, as citizens, become members of a political setting and can be said to have appeared thereby. It expresses therefore a topographical determination: politics is something into which one is granted access. There is the circumscription of a space in which one can be said to be engaged *politically*, and that *this* space is exhaustive of both one *being political* and of one *doing politics*. It is neither the factory-floor nor the workhouse, neither the *oikai* nor the Sabine Farm, which become the site of political action, and which may stage the appearance of the event.

Formally, little changes between the problem surrounding the poor's crippling invisibility in *On Revolution* and the appearance of the workers onto the political scene in the *Human Condition*. If Arendt makes more than a passing remark about this specific appearing, this is because empirical events dictate that she honours this 'emancipation *into* politics.'³⁵¹ The question is how the Arendtian worldview manages to account for this event whilst not compromising the particular exposition of its integrity it countenances? The fact that the section concludes with a warning about 'workerism', about the modern risk of the 'withering of the public realm', implies a sense of unease.³⁵² None of this unhinges the remaining redoubt of spatial fixity and the topological determination of politics.

Certainly, it may be necessary to resist any claim that asserts the omnipresence of politics (that 'everything is political'). The act of deciding what is distinctive about political thought and action undoubtedly rests on such a reticence—and we can follow Arendt this far, this is true. Nonetheless we must find ourselves in a position to wager that *while not everything is political, politics can arise anywhere and at any time*. The possible affirmation of the *eventality* of the event (or to say 'the *eventness* of the event') depends on this. But, such a possibility does not prevail in the Arendtian presentation of the political, which lacks both mobility and punctuality. Instead, an integral form of the political domain endures, within which the plurality of men take up their residence. Better to keep uncluttered the setting of politics, so that its distinctiveness can be more easily attended to (via a set of second-order distinctions). This, however, places undue strain on her commitment to plurality as antidote to the mastery of the 'one'. If one of the features of the 'one' is the foreclosure of the 'new'—the irruption of what is

³⁵¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*. p147

³⁵² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. p219.

exception to the stable order of things—under the task of mastering what is, then what prevents Arendt’s plurality from foundering on the certainty that she accords to politics?

‘*Nec regione loci certa nec tempore certo*’ (‘in uncertain places, at uncertain times’). Real plurality would escape the shelter of the ‘one’; only by way of a thinking that unbridles politics from all designations of certainty will the category of the new be fully liberated.³⁵³ It is a difference between a restrictive plurality, which sacrifices the plural ways in which politics can be put to work) and a ‘plural politics’—a thinking of politics that dispenses with the unitary assignation of the ‘political’ as a specific place or domain for the *appearing* of action and the happening of politics.³⁵⁴ The latter is the *desideratum* of a properly consistent withdrawal from the grip of the ‘One’. Alain Badiou cautions that it is not sufficient to invoke the categories ‘plurality’ or ‘multiplicity’. ‘What counts’, he continues, ‘is never a *plurality regulated by a common norm*, but the *plurality of instances of politics* which have no common norm.’³⁵⁵ He continues: ‘There are *only plural* instances of politics, irreducible to one another, and which do not comprise any homogeneous history.’³⁵⁶ To come to this conclusion requires the dispossession of any ontical content as to the meaning of politics, but it is precisely this emptiness (this category devoid of all extraneous content) which Arendt is not at liberty to provide.

Before advancing any further, it might be contended that the emergent interpretation we are here countenancing has, despite the safeguards put in place, erred on the side of being partial and reductive, of suppressing the countervailing evidence that could be harnessed in providing a more generous reading.

What stands as arguably the most compelling basis on which to accord to Arendt a radicality, and which therefore would expose the reading developed here as uncharitable, is the originary binding between ‘politics’ and ‘freedom’. The following passage can in this regard be considered as exemplary:

The question which arises is whether and freedom are at all compatible, *whether freedom does not first begin precisely where politics ends*, so that freedom cannot exist wherever politics has not yet found its

³⁵³ Some recent commentators have sought to argue that, against the weight of evidence to the contrary, Arendt’s thinking of politics is an assault on any kind of certainty as regard the forms and ways in which politics is said to appear, and thereby is an affirmation of ‘radical contingency’, of ‘real plurality’. It is not a question of saying that such suggestions are entirely absent in Arendt, though they are undeveloped—passing refrains, which are just that, suggestive only. We might wish to consider for example in the *Human Condition* when Arendt remarks: ‘the *polis* is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the *organisation of the people*.’ p198.

³⁵⁴ Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*. (London & New York: Verso, 2005.) pp10-14.

³⁵⁵ Ibid p23.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

end. Perhaps things have changed so much since classical times, when politics and freedom were deemed identical, that now under modern conditions they must be definitely separated.³⁵⁷

This would in part represent the compelling evidence needed for the case against Arendt to be thrown out of court.

When Arendt thinks the question of freedom, she does so in a way that is incongruent with the method by which her thinking customarily operates. Arendt changes tack from the Aristotelian preoccupation with distinguishing one thing from another to a type of inquiry that seeks to think together two ideas that have otherwise been thought as disjunctive. Much of philosophical reflection, Arendt writes, has divorced the notion of freedom from politics, restricting freedom to the willing-ego. What has been passed over in silence is a framing of freedom in terms of collective practice—which takes as its starting point politics and the ‘being-together’ of a community. Arendt sets out her intention thus:

to the question of politics, the problem of freedom is crucial, and no political theory can afford to remain unconcerned with the fact that this problem has led into “the obscure wood wherein philosophy has lost its way” [...] the philosophical tradition [...] has distorted, instead of clarifying, the very idea of freedom such as it is given in human experience by transposing it from its *original* field, the realm of politics and human affairs in general, to an inward domain, the will, where it would be open to self-inspection.³⁵⁸

An originary co-belonging between political life and freedom replaces a preponderant concern with their separation. We read: ‘freedom is actually the reason that men live together in political organisation at all. Without it, political life as such would be meaningless.’³⁵⁹ But equally, freedom would be powerless were it not for the political stage that provides for it the setting for its collective performance. Politics, the highest form of freedom, preserves within it the fragile and restless treasure of all human existence, namely the ‘freedom to *act*.’³⁶⁰ Obviously, to advance a logical chiasmus, so that freedom is politics and politics is freedom, draws thought into the orbit of the circular.³⁶¹ Yet, one can have one of two opposing views about this reciprocal binding of

³⁵⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Promise of Politics* p109. op.cit; See also ‘What is Freedom?’ *Between Past and Future*.

³⁵⁸ Hannah Arendt, ‘What is Freedom?’, *Between Past and Future*, p145.

³⁵⁹ Ibid pp146-9.

³⁶⁰ Ibid. See also: *On Revolution* p232.

³⁶¹ ‘Freedom as a demonstrable fact and politics coincide and are related to each other like two sides of

terms. First it might be said that this circular reasoning discloses very little: if politics is granted intelligibility through its relational binding with something one might wish to call freedom, and yet at the same time, freedom does not serve as a definitional ground for that which it is supposed to make intelligible, but in order for its own intelligibility to obtain, depends in turn on that very object it is deployed to explain, then we end up none the wiser as to the meaning of either term. It is far too formal, empty of propositional content, a thesis which errs on the side of vacuity and unintelligibility. On the other hand it can also be argued that the emptiness of this tautology is its principal virtue. Beyond their co-constitutivity, little more is offered about the character of politics and freedom, other than their interdependence. It would leave both *open* and *plural* the possible ways in which both politics and freedom might come to be enacted, without an *a priori* determination of their content. Linda Zerilli's *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, a text which uses Arendt to recast the way in which a feminist political practice might be thought, places much emphasis on what she describes as the abyssal character of freedom.

This particular gloss that Zerilli gives to Arendt holds, but only if the balance is redressed from the weight of distinctions that sharpen what is distinct about politics, and tilted in favour of this one definitional synonymy, which does not necessarily require one to agree with what Arendt says politics is not, but has the affordance of affirming what it is, in its 'fragility and inconsistency.'³⁶² To define politics negatively, by distinguishing from what it is not, delimits the spaces by which it can be said to appear. Contrariwise, to hang its definition on a positive ascription (particularly one as broad as a notion of public freedom) would extensionally broaden its categorial scope.³⁶³

the same matter.' Ibid p149.

³⁶² Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005). It would still be incumbent upon Zerilli to explain away these counter-assertions about the topographically delimited nature of politics, which are clearly in evidence in the following passage: 'Freedom, wherever it existed as a tangible reality, has always been *spatially limited* [...] Freedom in a positive sense is possible only among equals, and equality itself is by no means a universally valid principle but, again applicable only with limitations and even within spatial limits.' (*On Revolution*, p275)

³⁶³ So as to succeed in this endeavour, Zerilli has to suppress much in Arendt that is discordant with her own intentions of thinking a freedom-centric politics that deepens democratic practices. It is not enough that Zerilli begins by framing her reading as 'generous' *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, op.cit. p4. The extent of her generosity is only better understood once the reader accounts for the exegetical liberties that Zerilli takes with Arendt's texts. The tethering and cropping that Zerilli partakes in, so as to force the issue about Arendt's 'post-foundationalist' insights into the question of political action, discloses the constitutive ambiguity with which each statement of Arendt's is shot through. Whilst a reappraisal of Arendt's work is in vogue at the present time, thinkers like Honig, Benhabib and Wendy Brown appear to be rather more nuanced in the way they reengage with the Arendtian corpus. Rather than presenting Arendt as a post-foundationalist (as thereby 'one of us', 'a

Since our own task is one of investigating the notion of emancipation—seeking to examine its primal connection to politics—is there not clearly discernible here a profound congruence between our own and the Arendtian discourse (in that Arendt tries to re-route some notion of freedom into political experience, so that freedom is not thought apart from politics but is understood, precisely, to be essential to the political)? Is it not simply a case of two different words being used to express the same *philosophical* problematic, the same *political* phenomena?³⁶⁴ Perhaps—but ultimately no. Such an interpretation would play on a synonymy, on assuming that ‘freedom’ and ‘emancipation’ are, on the one hand, denotative for Arendt of the same phenomenal experience (politically), and, on the other, have an identical logical function (philosophically). This however is not so. Before the isomorphism of freedom and politics is advanced, Arendt has already made a prior distinction between ‘emancipation’ (or ‘liberation’) and ‘freedom’. There is the obvious example from *On Revolution* where Arendt claims how it is always a question of knowing when ‘the desire for liberation ends when freedom as a

contemporary of ours’) *as if* it were an accomplished fact, the virtue of, say, Honig’s gesture, is the concession that one has to *radicalise* (*to sharpen, deepen, clarify*) what we find in Arendt before she can, from a poststructuralist perspective, be collared as ‘one of our own’. Please see: *Bonnie Honig, Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (London: Cornell University Press, 1993)

³⁶⁴ Certainly, we must be acutely aware of a certain *formal* resonance that plays between what we have, in earlier parts (particularly in chapter 3 of our study), identified as a straining of the relation between the Idea of emancipation and the process of politics and the Arendtian critical interrogation of a set of philosophical tendencies that would drive a wedge between for her, an experience of freedom and politics. One particular manifestation of this, indexed by both us and Arendt is the way in which politics is posited as coming before the fulfilment of a certain idea of the wholly and unconditionally free (for Arendt) or emancipated (for us) life. Thus Arendt poses the rhetorical question, at the beginning of her examination into the (non-)relation between politics and freedom, which we have already cited: ‘Is it not true, as we all somehow believe, that politics is compatible with freedom only because and insofar as it guarantees a possible freedom *from* politics?’ We find in this syntactic form, and in the preposition that Arendt places due emphasis upon, an almost identical formulation to our own, namely that politics and an Idea *x* should not be thought as relating as two successive states, passing in and out of one another. This is absolutely true. All the same this would only mark, by all means, a necessary but at the same time partial crossing of ways. And, this for some crucial reasons: the formal similitude between these two approaches is overdetermined by the ideas inserted into this critical schema. Freedom and emancipation (or liberation) do not mean the same thing for Arendt. The fact that she performs an interior conceptual cut between these two Ideas, or (for her) two experiences, tells us much about a certain *mode* of politics that Arendt-the-thinker invests in, rather than about the scrupulous integrity of the posited difference between forms of freedom. So as to think the specificity of the political, to provide politics with a certain ontological distinctiveness, the idea of emancipation is subordinated to an idea of freedom that is more attuned to the ‘being-together’ of political association, of the exchange and dispute of Ideas between a community of equals, as opposed to what she ultimately takes as the preponderant negativity of emancipation as a break or a release from a particular state of affairs. But through this act of conceptual division Arendt limits, rather than expands, her visibility in terms of the political appearances by which the new or the novel can take. It is for this capital reason that the trace of an otherwise similar critical operation is exposed to be the case, but only *prima facie*.

political way of life begins.’³⁶⁵ Not only is it *not* the case that ‘liberation’ (or emancipation) and ‘freedom’ ought to be read as interchangeable terms, but what can be read as a relation between freedom and politics—as if the co-constitutivity of the terms in play were self-grounding—is predicated on the absencing and displacing of ‘emancipation’ as a political operator.

Emancipation as the Other of Freedom

Arendt has commonly stood accused of presiding over some questionable conceptual distinctions: the private and the public; the social and the political; necessity and freedom, etc. Where she remains steadfast in the courting of these distinctions, others have paved a course between them. There is nevertheless one categorial difference to which commentators have paid little attention, but which, as this thesis posits, can be viewed as the organising principle for all the others: emancipation and freedom.³⁶⁶ This particular

³⁶⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* p33.

³⁶⁶ An etymological pursuit will be Hannah Arendt’s way of giving credence to the analytical wedge she forces between ‘freedom’ and ‘liberation’. The suspicion is if anything prevents the ‘authority’ the etymologist derives from tracing back the weight of equivocations and elisions, with which the modern word is burdened, back to the purified and noble origins of a lost and forgotten classical age, from being, on closer inspection, a mere veil for what Jacques Lacan used to refer to as *linguis-tricks*, a linguistic gymnastics that has the reader jumping through hoops to follow the paper trail on good faith alone?

On this particular problem, the scrupulous Hannah Fenichel Pitkin offers some interesting comments. (Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, ‘Are Freedom and Liberty Twins?’ in *Political Theory* 16:4 1988.) Left flat with disappointment by the results of Arendt’s hermeneutical recovery, Pitkin makes the following observations: ‘Arendt continues to use various semantic markers and modifiers that should, according to her own distinction be redundant [...] Her claims either refer to “freedom” in such a general way that one cannot tell whether they are intended to ignore, include, or contrast with “liberty” [or “liberation”]; or else they refer specifically to the Greek *eleutheria*, which is the ancestor of neither English word, and thus cannot help to distinguish them.’ p523. Arendt’s own textual ‘confusions’ and semantic ‘inconsistencies’, the heteroclitite appropriations and multiple interpretations that subtend the decision to affirm the difference between political freedom and emancipation are not merely idiosyncratic. These are hesitations that themselves mirror, at the level of general etymological discourse, inconclusiveness about the difference between freedom and liberation. Pitkin writes: ‘the etymological origins of “freedom” and “liberation” remain disputed, and thus cannot authoritatively settle anything about the essence of these concepts.’ p531

Arendt knows only too well the risk she is taking here. She would be the first to concede that events never play themselves out with the conceptual clarity by which the political philosopher thinks. She admits as much when broaching the difficulty of locating precisely ‘where the mere desire for liberation ends and the desire for freedom as the political way of life begins.’ Arendt makes plain an incontrovertible truth that any foundation of the consociation of the public realm is not without liberatory effects. The institution of the place of political freedom and communal relation would not be possible without a passage taking those concerned away from the tutelage and heteronomy of tyrannical authority. This passage, as a kind of clearing, a break (or release) from less enlightened forces, is the concessionary gesture that Arendt is obliged to give, an acknowledgement

difference seems to slip beneath the radar, partly because, when all is said and done, there is something redeemable in the essential connection that Arendt draws between politics and the experiencing of freedom, and, perhaps, according to the dictates of political experience, something irredeemable, precisely, about the metaphysical desire for human emancipation. ‘Nietzscheans’ and ‘Foucauldians’ would be at one with the Arendtian dismissal of emancipation as a virtuous idea, because such a desire smacks of slave morality, the scurrilous affect of *ressentiment* and negativity.³⁶⁷

How does emancipation (the other side of freedom, and by implication the other of politics) come to interpose itself in the thought of Arendt, and once more expose the restrictions placed upon her thinking of plurality as the condition for thinking novelty in politics—just as Arendt’s affirmation of ‘plurality’ (as an attempted rebuttal of the effects of ‘mastery’ and thus the denigration of the philosophical figure of the ‘one’) has here been considered to be too *restrictive*?

As remarked previously, Arendt is exemplary in her dismissal of emancipation. If there is sufficient reason to refer to her whole trajectory of thought as following the principle that emancipation is *infradignatem*, beneath the dignity of politics, then this is because the Arendtian displacement of emancipation from the scene of politics shows that the *proper* place of politics is once more circumscribed. As with Arendt’s attestation to plurality (and the self-imposed restrictions she places upon it) equally the freedom that is posited as the necessary and sufficient condition for the operativity of politics does not, as it were, free politics from the ‘what’ of its definitional specification, and which Zerilli concludes, ‘cannot be proved like a truth or possessed like a substance, but only practiced or enacted by present and future generations.’³⁶⁸

that the interest of liberation and political freedom might in fact intertwine in the act of ‘beginning anew’ which has as its legislative force in the institution of a body-politic.

³⁶⁷ Please see, for example: ‘A Critique of Pure Politics’ in *Why I am not a Secularist* (London: Minnesota Press, 2000) pp163-89. William Connolly, who offers a very cogent reading of what is described as Arendt’s ‘political purity’, is nonetheless quick to second Arendt’s displacement of the question of liberation or emancipation. In a plea for Arendtians to re-route an understanding of the political within the social once more, Connolly takes exception to the equation that Arendt makes between the desire for liberation and the social question, writing: ‘Arendt here binds “liberation” to the social question by restricting her attention to a “Marxist” engagement with that question.’ (p180). Connolly continues, ‘but there are approaches that proceed against (social questions such as) poverty and job insecurity without binding either pursuit to liberation.’ (Ibid). The problem for Connolly, therefore is the elicited use of liberation to discredit the political imbrication of the social, when the political valence of specific social problems are not reducible to the *ultimates* of human emancipation. Connolly thereby affirms rather than questions the Arendtian dismissal of the Idea emancipation in order to salvage the social as a political datum.

³⁶⁸ Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* p182.

Arendt's displacement of emancipation as a political category is not univocal. There are three ways by which she sets out its dismissal:

1. A critique that operates interior to philosophy. Arendt's critique of emancipation is bound up with her interrogation of Marxism, specifically, and more generally her quasi-Heideggerian destruction of metaphysics. The metaphysical appropriation of Ideas has as a principal consequence the mishandling of the political in terms of a forgetting of its *essential determinations*. Emancipation is thus registered as the drift into *apoliticism*.
2. A critique that operates at the level of political events, and shows the political demand of human emancipation (which finds its point of articulation in a set of ambiguous political figures, such as the undifferentiated 'masses', the irreverent Youth of the student revolts, the victimised and impressionable 'children' of the civil rights ferment, etc.) as giving rise to all manner of dubious effects, often tending towards the possible unbinding of the political relation. Emancipation is therefore indexed as an *anti-political* principle.
3. Arendt's displacement of emancipation as *pre-political*, namely as a moment in a logic according to which a given group moves from a position of political exclusion to a position of political membership. There is, then, the necessary concession to account for the historical transformations and expansions in the quantity of political enfranchisement (e.g. the entry of the labouring classes, women, etc, into the public realm), and results in Arendt claiming that the Idea of emancipation is a necessary but insufficient condition for political living.

We encountered (1) at an earlier juncture of this chapter: emancipation is seen as an example of an Idea to which politics surrenders its own autonomy. The priority of the Idea over the act results in the auto-suppression of what are politics' most distinctive qualities. Philosophy ties politics to the 'One' of a determinate end and an ultimate meaning. What is suppressed is the inherent plurality of politics. (2) and (3) though function on a different level entirely. Functioning along the order of political events themselves, Arendt seeks to demonstrate in the case of (2) that the principle of emancipation endangers the integrity of the political. In (2), we can say that the gap between emancipation and politics is maximal. Whence the description that 'emancipation' as an idea is anti-political, as somehow inimical to the body-politic. In (3) Arendt strikes an altogether different tone, and the difference shrinks, even though it

remains ineliminable. The gap between the categories of politics and emancipation is minimal. We shall now look at each in turn, and tease out the different implications that each of these formulations has for Arendt's thinking of politics.

The first way in which the Arendtian discourse shows scepticism toward the idea of emancipation (and its limited political utility) can be gleaned from her study, *On Revolution*. Here, the whole tenor of Arendt's demonstration concords with a certain Nietzschean disdain for slave morality.³⁶⁹ In this sense, the demand for emancipation invokes something of a cathetic discharge of negativity and destruction. Such a judgement is evident from the passages describing the events proceeding the storming of the Bastille, when 'the raging masses of Paris'³⁷⁰, 'the stream of the poor' pour onto the streets with a delirium and frenzied irreverence. Arendt speaks of '[a] breakdown of traditional authority [which] set the poor of the earth on the march, where they left the obscurity of their misfortunes and *streamed upon* the market-place, [with] their *furor* seem[ingly] as irresistible as the motion of the stars, *a torrent rushing forward with elemental force and engulfing a whole world*.'³⁷¹ The willful act of nihilistic intent is one that englobes the entire fabric of societal relations, dissolving all meaningful associational ties. This 'irresistible force', 'like a torrent rushing forward' 'drags everything and everybody into a streaming movement'³⁷² of violence and suffering.

Note that Arendt is describing the moment in which the poor and the wretched flee from their obscurity. But such a description of the poor is worlds apart from John Adams' meditations, which Arendt reflects upon in other passages from the same text. We need to consider how, in the context of the storming of the Bastille, Arendt chooses to convey this attempted *departure from* obscurity, in terms that are rich in natural imagery, as if to establish a mode of appearing that is not strictly speaking an instance of *political* appearance. Unlike John Adams' observations, according to which the poor are politically passive—incapable of making themselves appear on the public stage—here there is the powerful upsurge of the masses into the public arena. An appearing of the poor wrought from 'necessity', however, and not from an authentic act of freedom, which, precisely comes to reside within the 'artifice' of human affairs and not the bosom of nature. The way in which the people take to the streets then is an appearing, although an impoverished one. Their visibility is not of the order of an 'excelling', of a

³⁶⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* p106.

³⁷⁰ Ibid p112.

³⁷¹ Ibid p113 *Emphases added*.

³⁷² Ibid

‘standing out from the crowd’; it is a gathering of everything and everybody. For Arendt these scenes are the gratuitous picture of the maddening masses.

Two things come into sharp focus. Not only is Arendt sceptical of the way in which the masses appear to demand their collective emancipation, Arendt is suspicious too about the philosophical subtext underwriting the events. Her attack on the issue of emancipation is an assault on its meta-political meaning: namely, the idea that to liberate man supposes the abrogation of political appearances, the withdrawal from the theatrical and the performative. What lies behind the desire for emancipation in the case of the French Revolution is an image of natural man. Stripped bare and unmasked, Man would stand in its denuding form as a wanton and pitiful soul, unbound from the ties and constraints of sociability and political community.³⁷³ Not only is Rousseau’s naturalistic impression of Man the source of attack, but also the young Marx, who infinitises human life over and against the bounded and finite life of the political citizen; Marx writes of the the superiority and absolution of a form of emancipation as ‘human liberation’ over mere ‘political emancipation’, so as to better release humanity from the grip of both the arbitrary and contingent communitarian attachments of religious and national identity, and revealing unencumbered universal Man, without mediation, fully immediate and transparent to himself and to others.³⁷⁴

Arendt queries the pathos of the masses, which the Jacobins themselves helped to foster by their insistence to revel in a naturalist metaphoric (a ‘stripping bare’,

³⁷³ Interestingly, in *Being and Event*, Alain Badiou comments that ‘communism would in reality be the unlimited regime of the individual’ p109. With the destruction of the state, communism would bring an end to the regime of representation (beit communitarian ties, class affiliations, etc) and would, in principle allow for the simple presentation of beings. Badiou does not himself assent to this state of affairs—for ontological reasons, citing that the Marxist utopia rests on an ontico-ontological misunderstanding about the destiny of the state (as if the disappearance of the bourgeois state would bring to an end the representational function of the state as such, instead of thinking more ontologically, that representation is the *sine qua non* of the State, in its operation as that which legislates and regulates over the existence of things). Indeed, as Badiou warns: ‘if the government and even the material substance of the state apparatus can be overturned or destroyed; even if, in certain circumstances it is politically useful to do so, one must not lose sight of the fact that the state as such—which is to say the re-securing of the one over the multiple of parts (or parties)—cannot be so easily destroyed.’ (p110). Nevertheless, what remains is that the logical consequence of the successful instantiation of communism for Marx and Engels would have been the victory of authentic individuality. In this connection, a similar point (though based on completely different premises) is offered by Michel Henry, who dismisses both *social-ism* and *communism* as political distortions of Marx’s true success, which lay in developing a complete metaphysics of man, in which emancipation would be the liberation of life.

³⁷⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, p80.

an ‘unmasking’ etc.)³⁷⁵. This takes on extra significance once Arendt extols the political centrality of a *persona* as ‘the mask’ of a legal personality, ascribing to an individual the ‘part [s/he is] expected to play on the public scene.’³⁷⁶ The capacity for political actors to take on a role not reducible to their brute existence is bound up with the play of appearances constitutive of the human artifice. But the poor are privative, ‘without a *persona*’, each one ‘an individual without rights and duties, perhaps a ‘natural man’—that is, someone outside the body politic of the citizens, as for instance a slave—but certainly a politically irrelevant being.’³⁷⁷ Some subjects are politically obscure, we are told. The obscurity of the political consequences of the French Revolution is therefore an obscurity about the subjects that partake in its eventual sequence, as well as an indiscernibility about the places in which the revolution as a happening takes root.

Two things are run together: a mass invasion of the scene of history (expressed by Arendt as ‘the streaming of the masses onto the Parisian streets’, the ‘explosion’ of ‘overwhelming forces’ of ‘raging frenzy’³⁷⁸, of ‘impotent’ and ‘blind’ violence³⁷⁹) and an argument about political being and the integrity of this being. This affords Arendt to argue that the irruption of the masses is at variance with the exhibition of political integrity. Here emancipation is less a political principle that discloses the virtuosity of praxis, but more the rabble raising dictum that blocks the passage to the foundation of freedom as an enduring political way of life: ‘revolution, when it turned away *from* the foundation of freedom *to* the liberation of man from suffering, broke down the barriers of endurance and liberated, as it were, the devastating forces of misfortune and misery instead.’³⁸⁰

Is this a localised incident, unrepresentative of the more general trajectory of Arendt’s thought? It might be argued—and not without basis—that the French Revolution is an example indicative of a quite specific problem about the mixing of philosophical and political forms. Arendt is documenting what happens when a revolution is grounded on philosophical reasoning, a revolution that is implicated in the amphibologous act of misattributing universal and unconditional claims (present for example in the declaration of the Rights of Man) to what remains only a historical and conditioned case. Were this

³⁷⁵ Ibid p106.

³⁷⁶ Ibid p107

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid p111

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Ibid pp111-12

indeed the case then it would be quite remiss to generalise Arendt's negative judgements about emancipation, when these reflections are tied to one specific manifestation. But, this is far from being a localised incident. We should recall, for one, Arendt's quite indifferent remarks addressing the Student Revolts in the late sixties, commenting that many of those involved were too easily misled by 'not just vandalism, violence, bad temper, and worse manners, but the growing infection of the movement with ideologies.'³⁸¹ But perhaps more compellingly, Arendt's controversial text on 'Little Rock' provides a further example.

In the fall of 1957, in the throgs of an escalation of civil unrest in the Deep South about the heinous crimes exacted on the Black communities, the state government of Arkansas took the legislative decision to commence the desegregation of schools, which previously had operated under the logic of apartheid. This legislative measure was met with local hostility from the white population; an intransigence on behalf of many in the face of social reform, which bordered on rabid aggression and mass hysteria. Arendt feels compelled to offer some reflections on the events that unfolded after a series of photographic images, taken on the first morning of the new school term, had caught her eye. What did these photographs show and what did Arendt take them to signify? First, the images served to document the dangerous route that nine black schoolchildren made towards a newly desegregated school in which white and black peers could equally associate. The pictures show these high school children surrounded by a swathe of white children and adults goading and jeering their presence, with both officials and the military interceding so as to prevent the real possibility of a lynching.

In the interpretation that Arendt offers of these images, she at once assumes the incapacity of children to exhibit political rationality, as well as decrying the imposition of political responsibilities on the young. Children should not have been put in a position of political expediency in this way. She raises the question, 'have we now come to the point where it is the children who are being asked to change and improve our world?'³⁸², drawing the implication of the 'burden' that one places on the child every time he or she is exposed to the frenetic and antagonistic nature of social struggle. Yet at the same time, there is a palpable sense of threat in these images, clearly visible in the act of her being goaded and jeered (generally violated) by her white peers ('It will be hard for

³⁸¹ Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Press, 1972; p98).

³⁸² Hannah Arendt, 'Reflections on Little Rock'. *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, (London: Penguin, 2000) p235.

the white youngsters, or at least those among them who outgrow their present brutality, to live down this image'³⁸³, Arendt remarks).

The rabid mob, 'the gang rule'³⁸⁴, the unsettling inevitability that the child, entirely heteronomous, will always cling to the coattails of the 'other' for guidance, even if this guidance comes from a morally salubrious source—the direction in which the guide tends does not matter for the child. Arendt observes: 'to the extent that parents and teachers fail him as authorities, the child will conform more strongly to his or her own group'³⁸⁵, to an authority that lacks all official and formal sanction; the child's judgements, weightless and unsubstantiated, blow in the wind (hot and cold, from all possible directions) of 'public opinion'. A problem, in that children are condemned twice over: they not only lack the right but are said to lack the ability to establish a public opinion of their own—which, of course, explains the proscription of their political right to begin with. Deprived of both right and ability (or doubtless deprived of their right *because* of their putative incapacity) their way of making themselves heard is only through either the maddening noise of the rabble or as the mutable pitiful victim, thrown into the vitiating processes into which they have been thrown and over which they exercise little control.

Arendt then plays upon the split figure of the child. It is a splitting that gains its acuity in the photograph that Arendt will dissect in order to make whole once more. The double-representation of the child unites around the same message of political proscription. The figure of the child as victim, burdened by the weight and immensity of issues for which her shoulders are too small to carry; but a sorry diminutive figure, thrown into the throng of the maddening masses of an impressionable and irrational youth. The condensation of two representational figures of the child, a configuration, which allows Arendt to impart the one lesson she would have us draw from this image, namely that the lives of children and the political life are best kept apart.

The principal question is not whether children show the cognitive capacities to engage in politics or not. More important is the line that Arendt draws underneath the feet of the children to proscribe their presence in political affairs. There is a logical fault-line, which one can trace when following the trajectory of Arendt's thoughts: there are those that have the capacity, predisposing them to politics, and therefore engage

³⁸³ Ibid

³⁸⁴ Ibid p243.

³⁸⁵ Ibid

politically; those who have not therefore should not. The assent that Arendt gives to emancipatory crossings (peculiar instances of transgressions) is minimal. When they do irrupt, and all manner of obscure figures transgress the topographical spaces that have been drawn out, Arendt's inclination is to police the borders.

Certainly, it is significant that the idea of emancipation is not entirely erased in its connection to the political life, and in this sense we can identify an articulation at play in the Arendtian operation which, although exists in her work, remains of minimal (but by no means negligible) intensity. Hannah Arendt, a hermeneutist steeped in verses of historical knowledge—but also a thinker who places much value on indexing the new—is moved to acknowledge the empirical force that the demand for emancipation is shown to have in the transformation of the historical appearance of the political in modernity. This we had reason to mention at an earlier part of this chapter, with respect to her accounting for the 'labour movement' in *The Human Condition*. The transformative processes that the public sphere has undergone in modernity have principally a quantitative character, however. It is understood in terms of the *extension* of political rights and political enfranchisement to *greater* numbers of the *populous* as a whole: the *widening* of political membership, of those that can partake in the public realm as both engaged and active citizens. In the modern world, in a time that has forgotten the meaning of the political, and where the moment has come to relearn the art of political propriety once more, this epoch, saddled with its loss, carries with it, at least, the embers of a hope of a political future. The apogee of the otherwise long nadir of our modern political experiences, Arendt notes, lay in the events surrounding the emancipation of both the working class and women.³⁸⁶ Were this to be considered a concessionary gesture on the part of Arendt about the connection between emancipation and politics, then it is not without immediate qualification. It would mark out in the modern epoch the *promise* of politics. The demand for emancipation appears as a necessary pre-condition for the establishment and maintenance of the public realm, but does not necessarily satisfy the necessary conditions that Arendt will herself install as an act of politics. Arendt will write that emancipation is '*not itself political* [...] [even if] an indispensable prerequisite of all things political.'³⁸⁷

Arendt begins her inquiry into 'What is Freedom?' in similar fashion. But the contextual backdrop will take her back to the origins of political time, to the *agora*

³⁸⁶ Hannah Arendt, 'An Introduction *into* Politics', *Promise of Politics*, p144

³⁸⁷ Hannah Arendt, 'What is Freedom?', *Between Past and Future* p147.

and to the founding act of liberation that makes possible the political life for the few. In order for the freeman to be free to live the political life, Arendt recalls, he must have been first emancipated from forces of necessity and utility.³⁸⁸ But liberation is not, in the context of Greek antiquity, the direct deliverance of the liberated into the ambit of political relations: 'Freedom needed, *in addition* to mere liberation, the company of other men who were in the same state, and it needed a common public place to meet them—a politically organised world, in other words, into which each of the free men could insert himself by word and deed.'³⁸⁹ For freedom to be possible as a political way of life, further conditions must be satisfied; man may become emancipated, but, *stricto sensu*, he is not free once released from a set of relations, routines, practices: the freeing up of a certain metabolism of life must be met with the possible entry into another rhythm or cadence of living altogether. Freedom as an Idea made concrete in its effects requires that man enters into association with equals; only in concert do men enact their freedom through the lived and active exchange of discourse. The power of discourse, of language that augurs the relation between men through communicability, contributes in the opening up of worlds, in the disclosure and emboldening of deeds, giving both shape and tonality to appearances. 'Without a politically guaranteed public realm,' Arendt surmises, 'freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance.'³⁹⁰ The content attached to this politically certified public realm, however, undergoes some variation in the texts. We have remarked before now the bounded character of what goes under the name of guaranteeing the political space. It is revealed in the topographical differentiation that Arendt undertakes so as to separate the political from its outsides: 'the gulf' or schism between orders of existence that Arendt plays on in her attempt to think the specificity of the political relation, having the ancients 'crossing it daily to transcend the narrow realm of the household and 'rise' into the realm of politics'³⁹¹ or 'the wall or boundary line' that, on other occasions replaces the figure of the abyss, such that the political space gains its positivity through the contiguous arrangement of spheres of living surrounding it. At the same time, it is true to say that, at certain junctures, there appears something quite fluid and mobile about the publicity of political spaces that Arendt describes, particularly on

³⁸⁸ Ibid p147.

³⁸⁹ Ibid p144.

³⁹⁰ Ibid p147. And in *The Human Condition*: 'The calamities of action all arise from the human condition of plurality, which is the condition *sine qua non* for that space of appearance which is the public realm.' p220.

³⁹¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* p33.

those occasions when politics is accounted for by way of a quite minimal principle of a gathering of the common. After all, in *The Human Condition*, we encounter the lines ‘Wherever you go, you will be a polis’, an insignia that Arendt raises as a reminder that political spaces are irreducible to the physicality of extended space, but are the products of the relations that take shape between political equals, between participants engaged in both word and deed.³⁹² The political space thus becomes defined as ‘the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly.’³⁹³ One understands in this description that the endurance of the political is predicated on keeping open the inter-subjective relation between, as Arendt speaks of it, the I and Thou, and not in the sanctity of structured bounds of the city-state. This is Arendt at her least constrictive. The political comes close to being unbound from any spatial or topographical determination, attributed with an aleatory and unpredictable quality, bespeaking a mobility in its localisation, in which politics may arise anywhere and at any time. All the same, we must acknowledge the weight of textual evidence that pushes everything in a different direction, and indeed we can detect a certain equivocity that inheres in those passages which seem to offer something more. We know that the public realm appears in a more substantive form. This substantialisation of political spaces works itself out in more than one way. Beyond the spatial metaphors that Arendt deploys in order to accord a distinctiveness to the political (and which we have traced above), we can trace an argument in which the spaces of politics gain their endurance in and through a set of collective ties, customs and communitarian symbols. Both freedom and plurality show themselves against the backdrop of a shared horizon of meaning, of cultural practices, shared norms and values. It is ‘only as a member of a community that man is ready for action.’³⁹⁴ These values have no uniformity across time and space; there is instead the ‘manifoldness’ of the communitarian bond that derives from the localisation of a sense of shared history, a common tradition.³⁹⁵

No contradiction need be traced between the ways of thinking the endurance of the political that we have surveyed here. It could be said that for the pluralisation of political spaces to make their effective appearance within the world, the world in which they appear, supposes that something be shared out between the citizens of a given polity;

³⁹² Ibid pp198-9.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of Mind*, p201.

³⁹⁵ Hannah Arendt, ‘What is Authority?’, *Between Past and Future*, pp120-41.

that, for a given political sequence to appear, it must do so by *appearing for* a community of actors, in which a general set of principles and ways of being in the world are commonly accepted by its members. On this understanding, we would have to accept that the condition of a plural politics is once more secondary, conditioned by the existence of a political community able to re-cognise and corroborate between its membership what is said to take the form of a political appearance. A sense of the mobility of politics is predicated on the communitarian 'We' on whom the appearance of politics *qua* politics depends.

All these variations in administering the public use of freedom with some form of political certification force us to address the following question: when we speak of the relation between emancipation, freedom and politics, what logical process does this give rise to in Arendt? If freedom convokes the necessity of some stable political setting ('a political community' bound by tradition and cultural practices, a 'political community bounded spatially', a community brought together under the jurisdiction of the law, a constitution, etc.) then without this stability freedom would be emancipation from a state of affairs, a negative and indeterminate force that serves solely as a break with what has been; it would do no more than designate the cessation of the old, and insufficient on its own to bring in the dawn of the new. Arendt speaks of emancipation as this privative and formless force. She often attaches a meiotic qualifier to its experience as *mere* liberation or emancipation, in order to impress on her reader its inadequacy as a political category.

How to bring these observations to a point of unity? For the sake of economy, we can formalise a certain tendency in the Arendtian account by proceeding syllogistically:

P1. Freedom is political.

P2. Emancipation is an experience that precedes Freedom.

C. Emancipation is not political.

Is her thinking violated through the use of the syllogistic form? Clearly, Arendt would not have chosen such a mode of presentation, though there can be no denying that her way of differentiating emancipation from freedom can take on this form. Her philosophical procedure requires an internal fold in the experience of freedom, in order to show something of the specificity of the political, of its distinctiveness with respect to other forms of existence. Liberation as a passage between necessity and

towards freedom dramatises a set of differences with which politics is to be contrasted. What does this do to the idea of emancipation, which now appears in the crib of the Arendtian understanding of politics? The following can be surmised: emancipation is turned into something that, while not a part of, still contributes in rendering intelligible, the political. It is a *material* precondition for living the political life (Arendt says this much); but this positing of emancipation as a phase through which freedom as a way of life is possible, functions equally as a *logical* presupposition for the Arendtian operation of specifying what is distinctive about politics. It functions as an internal moment within Arendt's discourse on politics.

Logically, the marginal presence of an idea of emancipation puts into play all of those lineations drawn out between spheres of existence—between the orders of the family and community, between private conjugation and public disclosure, between the reproduction of the species and the creativity of human existence *in nuce*, between the basic necessities of life and the liberty and freedom associated with living well—all of which serve as the backdrop against which the political shows itself. Emancipation designates the movement across such lines. But in designating a movement between them, it does little to question the roles and the ordering of existence distributed between the contiguous positioning of places and spheres (*topoi*), and from which such lines appear. In transit, emancipation serves only to confirm them. The meaning of emancipation authorised by Arendt is used to disclose the differences between modes of life, states of existence, spheres of being, etc., which are themselves produced from within the Arendtian account of politics. We must allow this tautology of self-referentiality to stand.

To permit this tautology to stand is, however, to unleash a set of paradoxes. The paradox of the origination of the public realm would be one such effect. An entry into the 'politically guaranteed public realm' as the manifestation of freedom (as opposed to the negative release that emancipation only grants) supposes that the space into which men make manifest their freedom—as something tangible and practical—is already given. But the historicity of the political is such that the space for politics is not something necessarily to be received, but, at certain points, is to be created at the very moment that liberation from forces of necessity and social tutelary is itself effected. How to account, then, not for the *logical*, but the *real* genesis of the political? And in so doing what happens to the distinction between the pre-political desire for emancipation and the experience of freedom as a political way of life at the point of the institutionalisation of

the political itself, when, that is, the public space for political deeds and the guarantor of freedom, is not given but is still to be constructed?

This paradoxical effect that destabilises the otherwise clear and distinct cut that Arendt would otherwise make to separate emancipation from freedom undergoes intensification in the modern problematic of the political revolution. This problem Arendt considers in light of the revolutionary events of America and France during the latter part of the eighteenth century. Remarking on the necessity for these revolutions to break irrevocably with the colonial ties of British rule and the monarchism of the ancient regime respectively, Hannah Arendt concedes that it is difficult to know when exactly the desire for emancipation ends and freedom as a political way of life begins: ‘The men of the eighteenth-century revolutions had a perfect right to this lack of clarity’, it is pointed out, ‘for the acts and deeds which liberation demanded from them threw them into public business, where intentionally or more often unexpectedly, they began to constitute that space of appearances where freedom can unfold its charms and become a visible and tangible reality.’³⁹⁶ The analytical distinction that Arendt wishes to preserve, therefore, will have to be forced onto the vicissitudes of events that do not so easily conform to the distinction that otherwise allows her to draw out the difference between politics and other forms of existence.

To what extent, therefore, is this categorial difference, which Arendt meticulously addresses, tenable—this difference which reduces emancipation as functioning at the borders of political belonging, both as an internal moment within, but ultimately exterior to, what provides specificity to political living, namely freedom, incubated in the existence and endurance of the public realm? The reason for distinguishing emancipation (or liberation) from freedom is more of a logical necessity, a function of the general way in which Arendt attempts to think the specificity of the political, rather than something of the phenomeno-logical course by which political events themselves unfold. The logical necessity is a product of the itinerary she embarks upon, of thinking the specificity of the political. Certainly, this art of conceptual divination gains its exigency in the receding light of the political in ‘dark times’. The logical declension that, from time to time, her thought shows is a conjunctural response to the perceived disappearance of what Arendt will circumscribe as the propriety of political action. The historical situation is such that, with the onset of the complete

³⁹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* p33.

territorialisation of the political by its outsides, what must be undertaken once more is its thematic retreatment.

Emancipation gains a little clarity in the writings of a thinker who has little time for it. For emancipation is an operation that functions despite the resistances of a political philosopher to contain its effects; it is the act that puts in suspension the ‘what’, the quiddity, of politics: emancipation as the name for a particular straying from the regulated bounds as to what is deemed ‘political’, in any given space, at any given time. This must be the main reason why philosophy hitherto has struggled to come to terms with thinking the peculiar relation between emancipation and politics—and on the basis of which an estranged relationship can be spoken about, philosophically speaking. If emancipation is a name for a certain straying, then it cannot so easily be tracked down to an origin, a particular point. Its wandering would be a happening not a substance, neither a thing nor an object. It would evade the capture of any conceptual net the philosopher would use to trawl the sea of possibilities. But, an Idea of emancipation would not be carried away by its own fragility either. Empirically, historically, we know some of the substantive demands that have been staked out around this idea. As an act, Politics, both plural and singular, would be the process by which emancipation becomes something more than the operator of transgression. The effects that result from a certain political sequence would be bound up with what Jacques Rancière would call a repartitioning of what is visible, sayable, thinkable, are specific to that situation. A multiple, heterogeneous politics would make it nigh on impossible to divine the lineations of a set of determinant tasks and demands that might be attributable to emancipation as an Idea. This gives lie to the old task of putting to work an idea of emancipation as a meta-political or transcendent principle. In its wake, such an understanding also debunks a certain propensity to make of the logic of emancipation a game that operates around the loss and the retrieval of what is proper to a particular oppressed group.

The idea of emancipation has been both the victim of an underestimation and of hyperexpectation. The truth probably lay somewhere in-between. Indeed, as modern history might attest to, emancipation is something more than the liberals would understand by it (that is, the accession of political suffrage, the evolutionary and gradualist step of extending membership to previously excluded parts of a community), in that it actively transforms the space of political action. But, doubtless, it is something less than what would be supposed by the grand narratives of emancipation, namely the great

struggle for the restitution, and fulfilment of, 'Humanity', of 'History'. It is in light of these final remarks that we shall conclude with a quote from Jacques Rancière, who captures something of where the frontiers are to be drawn with regards to the travails of thinking emancipation. He writes:

When one assumes that we have passed beyond the age of modernist emancipatory reason, the age of the grand narrative of the people and the proletariat as the universal victim, one reconfirms in fact, even in a controversial way, the ruling idea of emancipation: the idea of the dreaming cogito, the epic of a collective subject asked to identify its history with the awakening of the dream, the disenchantment of the disenchanted and reenchanting world. But the idea is highly questionable because the age of emancipation is not firstly the age of a collective task assigned to a collective subject. It is first of all the age of a new dispersive life of meaning ...when the availability of writing endows any life, or the life of anybody, with the capacity of taking on meaning, of entering into the universe of meaning.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁷Jacques Rancière, 'The Archeomodern Turn', *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996) p29.

Chapter Six

Emancipation Muted:

The Grip of the Event and the Ethical Drift

‘I said, it lived, it gave—
fragrance—was near enough

to explain that quality
for which there is no name;

I do not want to name it,
I want to watch its faint

heart-beat, pulse-beat
as it quivers, I do not want

to talk about it,
I want to minimize thought,

Concentrate on it
till I shrink,

dematerialize
and am drawn into it.’

H.D.³⁹⁸

So far, between the figures of Arendt and Marx, a putative antinomy subsists; flanked on the one side by an extolling of the virtues of political deeds at the expense of the idea of emancipation, and on the other by an affirmation of the idea of emancipation that altogether subordinates the question of politics. In the case of the latter, this epiphenomenalism of politics announces itself either in turning the political into an effect of a referent transcending it or from the furnishing of a ground out of which politics

³⁹⁸ H.D. ‘Tribute to the Angels’, *Trilogy*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997) p77.

is said to emanate the Truth of a deeper lying substratum, in the form of an objective process or a real abstraction, whether this be a 'Structure', 'History', 'Being', 'sociality'. There is, in truth, a redoubled epideictic involved in this symmetrical positioning of proper names; Arendt and Marx offer two discourses that speak 'in praise of' one of the terms in operation. Axiologically, Marx places value on the task of human emancipation over the restrictive life of the political citizen; it is human communal life that is infinite over the bounded life of the citizenry's membership to a political community. On the other hand, Arendt speaks in praise of the political. As the source of novelty, politics is the experiencing of freedom which breaks with the orders of natural necessity and social drudgery. Not that it the case that emancipation operates exclusively as an outlying term, where its significance in thinking political novelties is by Arendt left entirely unconsidered; need we be reminded that the presence of one term entails not the total absence of the other? No, we are dealing with contraries and not contradictory terminological figures. As such the role that emancipation plays within the Arendtian operation of thinking the political is shot through with undecidability. Emancipation is considered as an internal moment within, but ultimately exterior to, what provides specificity to political living, namely freedom incubated in the existence and endurance of the public realm. Whence the posited categorial difference, which accounts for the desire of liberation as *either* a demand that is satisfied before the political task of building the *novus ordo saeculorum* is undertaken or, once the foundations are secured, *or* serves as the demand that brings a certain group, collectivity, a sub-set of society into the fold of the extant bounds of political community. It is *pre-political*, which is to say two things. It is posited by Arendt as a *real* precondition for the foundation of political life to be properly instituted as well as enhanced in society, but it is considered to be insufficiently political. What is posited as a real condition for the possibility of politics is, however, equally a logical consequence of the Arendtian operation. It is a *logical* precondition for her own thinking, inasmuch that, as a process which accounts for the journey made between orders of existence, emancipation draws out the difference between these orders. The Idea of emancipation is therefore marked by a transitivity, a movement that ferries across the bounds of the non-political and the political, properly so-called, doing so until which time no more inhabit the banks of the marooned, and therefore, deemed unnecessary to make any further journeys, the Idea suffers the ignoble fate of being decommissioned. What we find, then, is that when a positive valence is given to the Idea of emancipation (and this, by no means, is the only interpretation accorded to it), it constitutes something of a limit

category; an idea that sustains the fiction of the political, at the same time as it endangers its integrity, of occluding the very specificity that Arendt wishes to preserve.

The Arendtian task hits upon the following crux: how to think the specificity of the political, that is, to affirm what is distinctive about politics, when, in part, what comprises its distinctiveness are the dual attributions of ‘eventality’ and ‘novelty’ that she otherwise perceptively accords to the possibility of its appearing? More specifically, if it is the ‘event’ and the ‘new’ that bespeak something of the quality of politics, then what becomes of any further analytical task that would wish to proceed by thinking the *quid* of politics, of furnishing politics with a set of stable and invariant identificatory traits? How might the *quod* of the happening of politics (as event) be articulated with an investigation into its *quid*? A veritable *leitmotiv* adorning Arendt’s writings is the thought that ‘events, by definition, are occurrences that interrupt routine processes and routine procedures; only in which nothing of importance ever happens could the futurologists’ dream come true.’³⁹⁹ But, if politics is of the order of the event—an opening that, for Arendt, brings forth the spontaneity of free action, interrupting within a world that is otherwise conditioned—then to what extent does this sudden irruption of what Arendt couches in terms of the ‘miraculous’, of an ‘infinite improbability’, go against the set of hard-edged analytical distinctions she seemingly countenances, so as to think the political as something to be drawn apart from its posited others, itself the principal effect of seeking to grasp the political in its genericity. To think politics as *event* need not be prohibitive of an inquiry that would take as its concern the *being* of politics, which is to say, to investigate ‘what is specifically political about politics’ (that otherwise detains her); for sure, it is a question that must be ventured into—though in a way that attempts to tie together the *event* of its being along with the *being* of the event of politics. Such an inquiry mounted on the essence of politics will have stringent demands placed upon it, necessitating great vigilance on the part of the inquirer so that the balance between being and event does not tip exclusively into one of these domains. This would be the risk that haunts Arendt, however. Her thinking may open itself to *the political event*, but goes no further in thinking the event as that which *affects* both politics itself as well as the very thinking of politics; it stops short of indexing the immanent transformation by which the ‘what’—tied to the content of political forms—undergoes.

³⁹⁹ Hannah Arendt, ‘On Violence’, *Crises of the Republic*, p109.

All the same, it is only through Arendt that we come to be in a position to ask the slightly modified question: how might the specificity of the political be thought so as to think both the multiple and novel ways in which a politics can appear, without this occluding the possibility of thinking something of the being of politics?

In contrast to the Arendtian understanding, which ultimately says too much about the *quiddity* of politics and too little about the event (the *quod*), what is proposed here boils down to the following contention: that before politics is the embodied performance of freedom, as Arendt would think it, perhaps it is rather the case that politics is the continual act of emancipating what, in any given situation, is left uncoun- ted or is discounted as political.⁴⁰⁰ Emancipation here would not only be of subjects and collectivities, but of objects, names, demands and places, which otherwise languish as portents of political impropriety. Arendt ultimately falls down on the side of the well- ordered *politeia*, to the detriment of thinking a certain dimension of the event. That she does think politics in terms of the event is ultimately undone by way of her own unilateralism, according to which the event is recognised only as that which happens *in* politics and not, concomitantly, as that which happens *to* politics.

It is to the thought of Jean-François Lyotard that attention now turns, not by way of a solution to this antinomial pairing, but as another twist in re-thinking the relation between politics and emancipation, and as a further raising of the bar of the challenges to be faced if the task of rethinking this relation is to remain consequent in thinking both the new and the event in politics. Why, more specifically, turn to the work of this particular thinker, to whom recent history has dealt a rather unkind hand? To straighten something out from the beginning, it would not be to justify the choice by playing on some contrast between Arendt the ‘reluctant modernist’ (or the ‘classicist’, which does not quite amount to the same thing) and the ultra-modernism of Marx, with then Lyotard entering the fray, in order to complete the triptych, as the appointed post-modernist. It is less therefore for the good of periodicity that Lyotard is to provide a further flank to the arguments being investigated into here. Pigeon-holing Lyotard as a post-modernist would come with the obvious dangers of reducing the internal complexity and variance of thought to what is a

⁴⁰⁰ This, at least, is a question (as we recalled at the time of assessing Arendt) that does not escape the notice of Bonnie Honig, who, with a slightly different set of references and terminological figures, identifies this problem in Arendt. See: *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*.

homogenising temporal designator. Even if, it is true, Lyotard did more than most to engage with the question of his time, his own contemporaneity, and did so by trying to make sense of it through the appellation, ‘postmodern’, he never intended for *la condition postmoderne* to take on the valence of an epochal break, as marking a significant shift in the aeons of historical time.

Moreover, to order the discussion in this way would have the needless, and quite unscrupulous, effect of imposing on proceedings a quite rigid linearity (and, by extension, teleology (whether we look upon this as progressive or regressive)). Such an approach would have a direct effect on how the two other thinkers, addressed up to this point, come to be viewed. It is best, then, that we disabuse ourselves of such a simplistic accounting of philosophical themes and tendencies by dispensing with any method that seeks to emplot proper names along the extended plane of the history of philosophy.

So it is for other reasons—both of a general philosophical and thematic nature, as well as in terms of the interior functioning of the thesis—that a critical exploration of the thought of Jean-François Lyotard is deemed necessary. We shall organise these reasons around the following four points:

1. *Thematically*. Lyotard offers a set of reflections on the question of emancipation which take us beyond the ‘crisis of narrative legitimation’ and the otherwise famous incredulity he voices about *les grands récits*—the privileged *genre* of discourse in modernity, to which the modern idea of emancipation is said by Lyotard to be irrevocably tied. The Lyotardian scepticism toward emancipatory ideas is not reducible to the now commonplace invectives raised against the *eschaton* of ultimate ends, the subject-elect of unconditional deeds and the *summum bonum* of absolute knowledge. Were this so then an entire chapter to account for these well-trammelled criticisms, when only a footnote might suffice, would prove needless. Rather, the efforts made by Lyotard to think through the problematic of emancipation are sufficiently more varied and modular to instigate a more careful and prudent evaluation. Lyotard will ultimately oversee the topological displacement of emancipation from the scene of politics to that of ethics. The tracing of this movement is significant. This displacement between registers can be seen as a symptom of Lyotard’s more originary commitment to the categories of the event and the new. It is on the bases of their thematic centrality that Lyotard embarks upon a more receptive rationality, a thinking the attunement of which consecrates the ‘different’, the ‘heterogeneous’, the ‘other’, not by way of its subsumption within a theoretical or

conceptual schema that hopes to make the different chime with what is declared to be the case or what ought to come to pass—to make an identity out of the different, once more—or, even, to suppress the different by disqualifying it on the basis of a certain irrationality or unintelligibility, nonsense or impenetrability, it is said to harbour. Rather, guided by the fragility of both the event and the new (which can as quickly disappear as they make their appearance), the question becomes how might thought honour the appearing of the event as a happening, without this happening being caught under the ‘pre-text’ of an anticipatory discourse?⁴⁰¹ This puts a different slant upon proceedings. With respect to the categories of the new, of the event, what have we noted thus far? That, on the one hand, the revolutionary Event of Marx operates at the greatest point of extension, to the point of vacillating between the already-known of the Communist-Event—stamped already on the genetic structure of Capitalism—and the radical disjunction separating alienated man and his redeemed future; that, on the other, Arendt presides over the irruption of the plural and the evental, but, all the while, seeking to capture them as predicates of a relatively stable politics. Lyotard, however, will comport himself toward the event at the greatest point of its localisation and intensification, demanding ‘a high degree of refinement in the perception of small differences’:⁴⁰² the event is as much the subtle shift in a sound texture, in the slightest variation in colour pigmentation on the painter’s canvas, as it is the great leaps forward in social progress, the marching of the masses. We will be required therefore to pay greater attention to the shifts in modulation that the category of the event undergoes and to think through the implications subtending this *granulation* of the event in the thinking of politics.

2. *Structurally*. Up to now we have been operating within a set of antinomies to which the thinking of emancipation itself gives rise. The focus on Marx and Arendt is to hone in on a particular antinomial spacing of terms that, in their respective itineraries, are, in the last instance, marked by a degree of separation: the relation—which is transitory at best—between politics and emancipation is riven with ambivalence and discord. Lyotard provides a point of exteriority from which to view both the causes and effects of this antinomy (irreducible as his position is to either thinker or tendency), as well as disclosing the falsity of this opposition. A passage through Lyotard will provide a way of indexing the unilateralism enveloping both the Marxian affirmation of human

⁴⁰¹ J-F Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*, p27.

⁴⁰² *Ibid* p18.

emancipation (paired as it is with the derogation of politics, in the form of universal liberation as a deliverance *out of* political forms and practices) and the Arendtian asseveration of politics (which itself is coupled together with a restriction placed around the function of the Idea of emancipation in relation to politics, such that emancipation serves predominantly as an introduction *into* politics). Lyotard assists in exposing a two-sided dogmatism, applying equally to Arendt's scepticism toward the emancipatory Idea that nonetheless serves as a foil for a certain political Puritanism as it does to the handling of the task of emancipation by Marx.⁴⁰³ This *imperium principium* of 'divide and rule'—a principle under which both Marx and Arendt operate—covers over two things. First, it masks the interior heterogeneity of both ideas of emancipation and politics, neither of which can be made to clearly gravitate around a set of clearly defined tasks. Second, that far from the two requiring to be kept as discrete as logically possible (and as far as it is phenomenologically permissible to do so), the two find their eventality as mutual co-operators.

It is for this reason that Lyotard is included. His insertion into the problematic at this point is due in part to the *positive* contribution he makes to the set of arguments here being laid forth. But, at the same time, he has a *negative* function in relation to the broader development of this thesis. The problem with Lyotard ultimately rests *not* on the premises on which his thinking is predicated ('multiplicity', 'the event', 'novelty', thought as a presentative, rather than a *re-presentational*, operation) but in the conclusions he reaches: Lyotard exchanges politics for the arrest of ethical passivity. We can index in his thought a two-fold despair. Disparagement targeted at politics as a mode of practice sufficiently calibrated to serve as repose for the new and, second, incredulousness towards the deployment of Ideas bound up with political voyages to unchartered lands. Suspicion is equally shown, therefore, towards the thesis that puts forward the autonomisation of the political (Arendt) and the anti-thesis that speaks of the heteronomy of politics, guided by an Idea that is outsourced from without (Marx). Here a third way is discernible, which must now be critically examined: a withdrawal from the scene of the (non)relation between politics and emancipatory Ideas altogether, in order to preserve something of the eventality of the event, which is forgotten by those very discourses that would otherwise wish to pay homage to its irruption. Art (not politics)

⁴⁰³ On the subject of Arendt's purism, the reader is to be reminded of William Connolly's critical accounting of the Arendtian understanding of the political, already cited in the previous chapter. Please see: 'A Critique of Pure Politics' in *Why I am not a Secularist* (London: Minnesota Press, 2000) pp163-89.

becomes the paradigm for thinking what lays at the essence of the event, namely its uncontrollable and untameable *qualia*. This quality resides in the poem that ‘retains the unspoken within its words’⁴⁰⁴, in the painting that harbours the trace of the unrepresentable within the frame of pictorial representation,⁴⁰⁵ and music as the articulation of sonorous matter with non-matter, according to which ‘what is audible in an *opus* is musical only inasmuch as it evokes the inaudible’⁴⁰⁶, etc. Politics and philosophical Ideas are trapped within the metaphysical game of wishing to present the All; the singularity of the event is the victim of this incurable propensity. But Art? It would be a form of presentation that keeps in play that which cannot be controlled, that evades all representational capture, and that exceeds its own inscription. Art, according to Lyotard, remains faithful to the event, precisely, in its respect for the unrepresentable. The event is not a slave to the movement of the Idea or to the programmatic intents of a politics; in artistic presentation, the obverse holds: the happening that thought undergoes in the encounter with the artwork is indexable by way of a feeling that excites it; thought hostage to the event of sensuous materiality. Whatever discursive cover is given to this affect will invariably betray the event that touches it, however.

It is with this double transmutation (from politics to art as the paragon of the event, from rational ideas to aesthetic feeling as the evental sign), that the Idea of emancipation can be thought to be muted in the thought of Jean-François Lyotard.

3. *Philosophically*. Lyotard is in many ways a modern heir to Kant and to critical philosophy. When tracing the trajectory along which his thinking unfolds, the figure of Kant becomes an increasingly conspicuous presence. This forcible presence shows itself in three ways: first, with respect to the themes explored (a set of thematics that principally animate Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* and that come to preoccupy Lyotard, such as the ‘analytic of the sublime’, ‘reflective judgement’, ‘aesthetic ideas’, and so on); second in terms of the devices deployed (the exposition of the fallacies of a philosophical realism that commits thought to ‘transcendental illusion’, a critical exposure presented in the form of ‘amphibologies’, ‘paralogisms’ and the antinomies also (recast in terms of the ‘differend’ etc.)), and third in terms of the critical models that Lyotard borrows from Kant and which organise Lyotard’s operations: the models, on the one

⁴⁰⁴ J-F Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p244.

⁴⁰⁵ J-F Lyotard, *The Inhuman*.

⁴⁰⁶ J-F Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p220.

hand, of the judge, the plaintiff, the law-court, and on the other, the topographical model of the *kampfplatz*, the battle-ground for the ceaseless conflict between warring parties. This Kantianism separates Lyotard from any straightforward scepticism, no doubt. Although we must acknowledge the thin line that separates the critical and the sceptical methods already in the Kantian system. We can identify those passages in the first *Critique* where Kant acknowledges indebtedness to the sceptical procedure. The antinomial presentation, for example, shows a certain affinity with the sceptical method ‘of watching [...] a contest of assertions’,⁴⁰⁷ or, indeed, even more explicitly, that ‘only to transcendental philosophy does the sceptical method belong essentially.’⁴⁰⁸ But finally we know also that the minimal difference between a critical and sceptical orientation comes down, in the last instance, to the issue of preserving a space for Ideas. For Kant this means reeling in the excesses of metaphysics, at the same time as making space within its own territory for the regulative deployment of Ideas of Reason. Lyotard will not follow Kant in proceeding along the path of rational ideas, but, nor will this leave him to court any straightforward scepticism either. There is an admission of hesitancy in the thinking of Lyotard, a thinking hovering between, on the one hand, the sophistic of both the conventionalism of opinion and the conditionality of cases and, on the other, the philosophical *desideratum* for the unconditioned and entrustment in the immutability and eternity of the Idea.⁴⁰⁹ To stave off the risks of nihilism and indifferentism the sophistic position is saddled by, Lyotard duly follows the Kantian two-step strategy of the critique of reason and its qualified reconstitution, not, though, through the retreatment of the Idea but via an ethical supplement in the form of a finely attuned sensibility towards the barely presentable. This ethical supplementation will ultimately derive from a deep-seated suspicion about both the political, in general, and, specifically, the emancipatory Ideas associated with a certain mode of politics. It is for this reason that, with the necessary caveats in place, Lyotard ultimately occupies the position of the sceptic, at least with respect to the thematic direction accorded to this thesis.

4. *Methodologically.* In light of the previous remark, Lyotard raises a challenge to the very methodological justification that has been offered during this thesis. In a formal way, it has been claimed that Kant provides a set of operations and modes of

⁴⁰⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A424/B452.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid. A424-25/B452-53.

⁴⁰⁹ J-F Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, pp73-4.

critical presentation (in the forms of the ‘antinomies’, the logics of ‘subreption’ and ‘amphibology’ that comprise of the Kantian theory of ‘transcendental illusion’) that allow for the desisting of both the dogmatic metaphysician and the sceptic. What Kant achieves at the level of philosophical reason and, specifically, on the issue of the acceptable bounds of knowledge, this thesis seeks to perform by way of an inquiry into political reason and, specifically, on the matter of the effective deployment of emancipatory ideas. In the thesis presented herein, Lyotard nonetheless takes up his place alongside the position of the sceptic, on the questions of both the possibility and the desirability of the Idea of emancipation. With Lyotard, therefore, we have an intriguing counterpoint, a thinker who plumbs the depths of a brooding scepticism and resurfaces as someone who seizes the secret of the fragility and the aporetic nature of the category of the event: ‘the watchman of the night’⁴¹⁰ is at the same time, as Badiou observes, ‘the guardian of the morning’.⁴¹¹ What, though, does this convergence in critical method, which nonetheless leads to a quite sizeable divergence at the level of philosophical consequences, tell us about the changes in accentuation, the uses and misuses, the fidelities and liberties taken with the Kantian method?

It is from within this quadrant of reasons—thematic, structural, philosophical and methodological—that the thought of Lyotard is to be addressed. We shall begin, though, by reintroducing the category of the event.

Philosophy and Event

Lyotard is not simply the ludic bombast of postmodern irreverence. Behind the valence of libidinised desire an otherwise deep sobriety and timidity suffuses his thought. These two descriptions are not necessarily contradictory. There are ways to bring into alignment the excessive hedonism and libidinised desires of Lyotard’s early writings and the image of a privative thinking—which stages a permanent vigil to bear witness to the intractable differend. The critique of philosophy and the concomitant assent of the event would provide two nodes around which these extremes might be brought into line. It is a double-edged problematic that Lyotard will introduce in the following passage:

⁴¹⁰ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend* (London: Minnesota, 1988)

⁴¹¹ Alain Badiou, ‘La Gardiennage du Matin’ in *L’exercice du differend: Jean-Francois Lyotard*, English translation in *Pocket Pantheon* (London: Verso, 2010) p90.

I know nothing about what I have to say. Nor do I know anything of this love of knowledge and wisdom with which the Greeks have infected us under the name of philosophy. For it seems to me that I have only ever loved what will not let itself be known or what will not create wisdom in the common way. Perhaps these remarks will not even have been made from a place. In any case, not a named locality. And not a Utopia either. I would prefer to grant it the privilege of the real. Let us leave its name, its label, in suspense.⁴¹²

What is to be left in suspense is the event, the confounder of knowledge, that which will not let it be known to the knower. The event as recalcitrant to the wisdom of the philosopher, and thus on this basis escapes the charge of the philosopheme. Discharged from the order of the concept, there is a certain anti-philosophical gloss to the event and its fragile appearance. We can glean as much from the essay ‘Sensus Communis: The Subject in *statu nascendi*’, written from the same period: ‘if thought, insofar as it is philosophical, consists in thinking by concepts’, Lyotard writes, then with the event (as that which is ‘insensible to intellectus’) ‘philosophy touches on that thought that is not philosophical, touching on it precisely because it cannot handle it.’⁴¹³ And yet, at the same time of circumnavigating the contours of the event, Lyotard never relinquishes the title of philosopher; we should recall the pronouncement with which *The Differend* commences, that ‘the time has come to philosophise.’⁴¹⁴ And at the beginning of his dossier on *The Postmodern Condition*, also, where the philosopher is described as the one who does not know, as opposed to the ‘expert’, who ‘knows what he knows and knows what he does not know’⁴¹⁵, and is satisfied to operate within these specified limits. Certainly, this could be construed as a sophistic appropriation of philosophy, of eliminating that which separates the philosopher’s vocation to search out the true from the canvassing of mere opinion of a doxography; a philosophy that abdicates its central responsibilities and tasks in thinking, under the principles of sufficient Reason, of returning to the things in themselves, of securing for thought *a priori* truths, and so on. Yet can things be rendered so simply? Lyotard plays on a certain figuration of the philosopher—Kantian in its general lineation. It is an image of the philosopher who

⁴¹² J-F Lyotard, ‘The Grip’, *Political Writings* .p148.

⁴¹³ J-F Lyotard, ‘Sensus communis: The Subject in *statu nascendi*’, *Who Comes after the Subject?* p218.

⁴¹⁴ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend*, pxiii. Note that Lyotard deliberately verbalises philosophy, in the same way that Immanuel Kant does in the passage entitled the ‘Doctrine of Method’ in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: ‘One does not do philosophy, one philosophises.’

⁴¹⁵ J-F Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, pxxv.

remains restless with the confines of limited technical knowledge and, at every moment, seeks to tear asunder such limitations, drawing its sustenance from what is unexpoundable and only indirectly presentable.

Lyotard acknowledges that an understanding of the ‘event’, a ‘happening’, an ‘occurrence’, must operate within the following paradox: it is that which escapes immediate intelligibility and yet, in order to be remembered, consecrated, it must, at some stage be marked, named, fixed; the event calls to be enframed, so as to ‘take its place thereby in the network of what has happened.’⁴¹⁶ A torsion, then, institutes itself between philosophy and the event: the event opens up thought; thinking closes in upon the event. It is an uncomfortable alliance that Lyotard’s thinking at every turn stages, between the necessary rigours of thinking the event and the event that traces the limit of the rigours of that thinking.

Thinking the Event as Presentation and the Unpresentable.

In *Le Différend*, it is written that ‘there *are* events’.⁴¹⁷ The lover of what does not let itself be known nonetheless phrases, as the copula designates, what *must* be known, namely that events *are*. There are therefore some things that are to be known so that the unknown be possible to arrive.⁴¹⁸ This deduction, acknowledged by Lyotard, flies in the face of what Aristotle criticised as the paralagistic reasoning that cleaves to the claim: ‘*epistèton to agnôston, ésti gar épistèton agnôston hoti agnôston*’ (‘that the unknown can be known, on the ground that it can be known to be unknown’).⁴¹⁹ What Aristotle finds fallacious in such reasoning is that the knowable does not function in the same way in both the claims comprising the inference. The conclusion (‘that the unknown can be known’) is not supported by the premise (‘that it can be known to be unknown’). Whereas the conclusion suggests that what is unknown can be the object of a determinate knowledge, all that the premise offers is the barely minimal knowledge of the

⁴¹⁶ J-F Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p82

⁴¹⁷ J-F Lyotard, *The Différend* §132.p79.

⁴¹⁸ *The Différend* is no less than a dedication to the event. As he writes at the preface’s end: ‘In writing this book, the A[uthor] had the feeling that his sole addressee was the *Is it happening?* It is to it that the phrases which happen call forth. And, of course, he will never know whether or not the phrases happen to arrive at their destination, and by hypothesis, he must not know it. He knows only that this ignorance is the ultimate resistance that the event can oppose to the accountable or countable use of time.’ *The Différend* pxvi.

⁴¹⁹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1402a; cit. in J-F Lyotard, *The Différend* §129. p78.

indetermination of its object. Taken discretely, though, these two statements tell us something about the interior split that any philosophy encounters when it addresses the event. It is a question of knowing with how little one can furnish the event so as to equip it with a minimal sense without it being imperceptible and unapparent to thought. At the same time, it is a question of knowing how much one is at liberty to say about the appearing of the event without its *eventness* being eliminated by and through a series of thick descriptions and identifiable predications that make it all too apparent, as if it were directly deducible from what is already knowable.⁴²⁰

In claiming ‘there *are* events’, Lyotard is not inconsistent with the earlier self-deprecating description of the philosopher as someone who does not know—it is not the case here that the philosopher knows more than he is letting on. Rather, the very condition for the state of privation that the philosopher solicits in terms of knowledge is that there be the possibility of a break with what is habitual, what is expected, with what is given, *in fine*, the experience of the ‘impossible possible’, which dislocates with received wisdoms, shoring up the contingency of what otherwise is sanctioned as necessary.⁴²¹

Lyotard tirelessly repeats that one perform a reversal of priorities with regard to a thinking of the event, such that the *quidditas*, the ‘what’ of a particular event is secondary to the *quod*, the ‘that it happens’ of the event.⁴²² The latter, logically prior to the former, entails no knowledge in the sense of any determination of the specific way in which the event is to appear (in terms of the message or the meaning it is delivering) for it to be indexable as event. Nonetheless, all the same, it demands that the event be something rather than nothing and it still be thinkable prior to its phenomenological appearance. Lyotard will present the following alternative: ‘[either] one can strive to determine this something by setting up a system, a theory, a programme or a project—and indeed one has to, all the while anticipating that something. [Or] [o]ne can enquire about the remainder, and allow the indeterminate to appear as a question-mark.’⁴²³ The following difference between knowing and thinking the event is thus supposed: to have prior knowledge about how a prospective or anticipatory happening is to come to pass is not the same as the minimal knowledge that subtends the positing that events *are*, in both

⁴²⁰ Alenka Zupancic discusses this question at length in a text entitled ‘Enthusiasm, Anxiety and the Event’, *Parallax*, 11:4 2005, pp31-45.

⁴²¹ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend* ‘Aristotle Notice’ 3.4, p75.

⁴²² J-F Lyotard, *The Inhuman* p91.

⁴²³ Ibid

their multiplicity and heterogeneity ('Neither the Commune nor May 1968 were heard coming, sounding notes of preparation'⁴²⁴, writes Lyotard in an early text, which nonetheless does nothing to prohibit a way of thinking their silent march, creeping up behind the backs of those who would otherwise keep their ears to the floor for such tremors in social existence, their advent being all the more clamorous because of their unexpectant charge).

Anything that touches on fixing the meaning of the event in advance of its happening is to limit one's receptivity, by way of first seeking to anticipate what might happen (which would, from that position, eliminate the *eventality* (or *eventness*) of *that* event), but, by extension, it would be unreceptive to the plural ways in which a happening can appear, appearing in ways that may remain antagonistic towards what a particular mode of thought expects to receive.

Here, Lyotard offers a way of problematising the two routes through which the event has been approached so far, in the work of Marx and Arendt. Marx develops an entire theoretical *dispositif* to account for and explain the imminent Event of Revolution and the advent of Communism. Marx's desire to know the event leads him to determine the All of its imminent appearing. We have seen in what ways this leaves a set of paradoxes and aporias in its wake, particularly in thinking the question of the new, which oscillates between a Manichean hypostasis, on the one hand—a radical break that would be so radical to leave the societal effects wholly indeterminate—and, on the other, an almost continuous development between orders which renders the new unapparent. Arendt sought to free politics from any such destinal trap, but is beset by her own aporias when thinking together the specificity, the 'what', of politics and the evental attribution she ascribes to political action. Added to this, there is something ultimately empiricist about Arendt's understanding of the event, an empiricism which reveals itself particularly in what can be framed as the historical events she selects for hermeneutic investigation (the Great Revolutions of 1775, 1798, and 1917, etc.).

On what basis does the category of the event acquire a centrality interior to Lyotard's field of visibility?

It is important first to identify the fundamental status of this category, which will, for Lyotard, take us all the way to a questioning of the meaning of both world and

⁴²⁴ J-F Lyotard, 'Several Silences', p91.

being. *The former* because there is no one world, but the coexistence of a multiplicity of worlds:⁴²⁵ unbridling it from its cosmological valence as a global category—that is, as a referential totality into which all possible objects are designated and from which their sense is secured—Lyotard thinks a world from a point of localisation, a world that is as much a book authored by Robert Musil, a selection of poems by Rilke, as it is a local farming village on the foothills of the Himalayas or a party congress of the Chinese Communist Party. A world comes to be instantiated through ‘a network of quasi-deictics formed by names of “objects” and by names of relations given between those givens’⁴²⁶, and not then as a meta-structure that legislates over the given, and houses all possible relations, objects and names. *And the latter* because being is no longer that which is given or gives (*es gibt*), but is that which is posited and phrased. Being is tied to the operation of presentation, not the mimetic act of re-presentation; being occurs, as event, and does not concur with the real. Lyotard will drive the category of the event all the way down so that it penetrates what we understand by a world, disturbing what can be said of being, and transfiguring in this very same process our very sense of the real. These are big gestures, certainly. It is important therefore that, before advancing to the central concerns of this chapter—which, as in the chapters prior to this one, take as its cue the task of rethinking the relation between politics and emancipation—we come to recognise the depths reached when thinking with the category of the event.

Following Lyotard in thinking the event requires that one supposition be immediately rescinded. No longer must reality be taken as an objective datum, for events then to be borne out of that reality. Such, however, is the standard way of approaching the issue. An event that has its point of emergence not only from *within* a world (which is less in question), but (and thus more disputable) that its genesis be traceable through, and thus reducible to, a set of *real* causes that condition its appearing in that world (i.e. economic, political, social, juridical, etc). The historian, the sociologist, the political scientist take events as objects to be enquired into, whether to be interpreted or explained, which, like all objects, appear in a way befitting of objecthood, namely that any given event be ascribed a stable set of identificatory traits, that is, incontestable facts that would be sufficient for it to be verified and validated. For example ‘the battle of Waterloo’ is the name that designates what took place on Sunday the 18th June 1815, at the coordinates 50° 40' 45" N, 4° 24' 25" E, involving the French Napoleonic Army, on the one side, and

⁴²⁵ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend* §235. ‘There is not yet one world, but some worlds.’

⁴²⁶ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend* §60 and §133.

an Anglo-Prussian coalition on the other. A historical-event would, at its most minimal degree, conform to the same protocols that any naming would undergo, whether this be a thing or a person, namely, that it be situated in both a space and a time and furthermore be fastened to a set of essential properties that do not fall foul of self-reference. From these basic stipulations, which make at the very least the event identifiable and (in the words of Donald Davidson) ‘individuated’,⁴²⁷ other enquiries might be made into not only *what* happened there, through a thicker description of its particular details—a sifting through factual evidences and testimonies that bring out particular features of that which took place (as one might undertake forensic studies of)—but *how* it happened, that is, an explanation of the processes, the network of causes that contributed in the appearing of this historical event (as one might think the process by which a glass bottle is made, i.e. through an amalgam of sand particles and colouring agents, under the conditions of both intense heat and pressure and processes of moulding and cooling). Can an event be reduced to its situated place within a given context (such as a glass bottle that stands on the foothills between a cliff face and the splashing sea)? Is an event to find both its truth and meaning in a reality outside of itself, such that its coming to existence is the synthesis of a set of causes and conditions that would make what happened possible (like, to repeat the example from before, the manufacturing process by which a glass bottle comes to be)?

It is not as though these standard ways in which the event is approached are wrong *per se*—it is, Lyotard will comment, ‘the daily bread’ of university research.⁴²⁸ Nonetheless, what such approaches pass over is a more fundamental level of enquiry that takes as its starting point the *being* of the event, or the eventness (eventality) of the event, that is to say, the particular quality of the event that secures its identity—and therefore touches upon what is proper to it—such that what is ‘evental’ is irreducible to its appearance within a context, a reality, a situation. What can be said about the event is not to be limited to empirical causality.

If the event is not reducible to any substratum of reality, then this is because the actual or real is not self-subsisting; it is not a substance that serves, in Lyotard’s idiolect, as a stable referent that in and of itself provides the index by which to ascertain knowledge about that which took place.⁴²⁹ Prosaically put, the problem, so writes

⁴²⁷ See Donald Davidson, *Essays on Action and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002) pp163-81.

⁴²⁸ J-F Lyotard, *Inhuman*, p93.

⁴²⁹ This amounts to restating that a concept or name (for example, ‘reality’) does not imply its existence. It is important to note that here Lyotard is entirely consistent with Kant and, particularly, the reading of Kant that Heidegger developed in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (London: Indiana

Liotard, is that ‘no one can see reality properly so-called.’⁴³⁰ Reality must be supposed by those who would wish to see it, either in its full splendour or in its brutal repugnance. But, in either case, those who would wish to verify it, rather than showing this to be so, must declare it to be *the case*, by *phrasing* the reality they are seeing.⁴³¹

Liotard offers the example of two men, Jean and Jacques, speaking of their acquaintance Louis, about whom Jacques has heard neither hide nor hair in recent months. Jean gives assurances, recalling that Louis was *there*, at a concert he had already told Jacques about. But this does not suffice: whereabouts at the concert and when specifically? Jean provides details of where in the vicinity of the concert hall Louis was seated (‘in the back, on the right-hand side, looking toward the stage’) and on which date (‘the Saturday before last Christmas’), so as to corroborate his first statement. The evidence he provides however does little to quell any apprehensions about the present circumstance of Louis. Jean’s declaration of Louis’ *being-there*, his localisation (‘I saw him, he was there!’), is not equalled by the specific and detailed instance he proffers (a meeting that took place some months before). The proper name, ‘Louis’ is presented through a specific case, but through *that* case alone.

This preponderance of the ‘case’ stages a three-fold undecidability. *First* it stages an instability between the designation of a certain reality and reality as such: whatever ‘is the case’, thus phrased, is decreed actual. Nonetheless the actual of the case serves as only an *instance* of what is, and as an instance it makes up not the sum of all reality (or in the case of Louis, the sum of all that makes up the existence of Louis). The case thus has provisionality. *Second* the ‘case’ stages an undecidability between what is and what occurs. A presentation of a case situates a certain thing in a world, but, as something particular, the case itself functions as an occurrence, as that which happens, or as that which might occur in the world it is phrasing. Etymologically, the case preserves something of its original meaning of an event as a chance occurrence, an opportunity, or mishap—deriving from the Latin *cadere*, meaning ‘to fall’, an inflection particularly conspicuous in the German *der Fall*.⁴³² *Third*, the case is a way of situating a particular

University Press, 1991), a central text which took as one of its central points of anchorage the thesis that ‘being is not a *real* predicate’. This claim is famously made by Kant in his refutation of the Ontological argument concerning the existence of God in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

⁴³⁰ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend* §49.

⁴³¹ *Ibid* §47-50.

⁴³² This sense of the case, as a happening or an occurrence, is today still present in statements such as ‘in case it rains later, it might be best to bring an umbrella’, or, ‘in any case (i.e. irrespective of

referent, but the case does nothing to prove that the addressor doing the situating was there to corroborate his or her testimony.⁴³³

It is for this reason that Lyotard writes that reality itself is not of the order of a situation that presents itself (in the form of the ‘as such’ of the real or the actual), but a presentation of something that itself has to be situated (in the form of a case). Borrowing a critical term from Kant, the former is but the stuff of ‘metaphysical illusion’; assumed is that one can simply be the recipient of the given, in its presence.⁴³⁴ Presentation is, however, not the sum total of all that is, nor is it that which presents itself in itself; presentation carries with it the very impossibility of either presenting the all or representing the in and of itself of the object to be represented. Presentation is what Lyotard will call ‘the *event* of its inapprehensible presence.’⁴³⁵ Here, the category of the event takes on a quite distinct inflection. Whatever is presented is an event, the event of what not comes to be in spite of it coming to be. This is a negative condition. Presentation is here deemed evental on account of a constitutive lack, an incapacity or limitation that indelibly marks the presentative operation. To use an example that Lyotard provides: say that one wishes to give an account of language, one cannot merely show ‘this is language’; one can only present the referent of the sentence (language in this case) by situating it deictically, such that ‘language is *this* and *that*’.⁴³⁶ Presented is a case, not the sum of all cases. What it presents leaves something not presented; it harbours a trace of the unrepresentable.

This impossibility, circumscribing the event in terms of that which resists full presence, logically entails the necessity of an infinitude of possible articulations and linkages. If there is no presentation that can exhibit the all, then there is already another thing to phrase, or a different way to phrase it, or another phrase that might provide a modulation in the tone and direction of subsequent phrasings, such as to ‘clarify’, ‘expound’, ‘negate’, ‘contradict’, ‘justify’, ‘derogate’, ‘describe’, ‘explain’ (or in non-verbal phrases) ‘a sigh’, ‘a shrug of the shoulders’, ‘the scratching of one’s head’, ‘a

whatever happens) I shall remain dry’, or when, for example, the detective informs his junior that the case is closed, he declares that the case—an undecided investigation already underway—is now finished, decided, complete.

⁴³³ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend* §49.

⁴³⁴ We should bear in mind everything that Derrida had to say about the ‘metaphysics of presence’, which would of course be another way of framing this metaphysical illusion. C.f *Of Grammatology* (London: John Hopkins, 1997)

⁴³⁵ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend* ‘Kant Notice 1’ p61.(emphases added)

⁴³⁶ *Ibid* §95.

raising of the hand' etc. The phrase is the basic unit by which presentations are possible.⁴³⁷ No one phrase (the valence of presentation) is itself sufficient. One phrase demands that there be another, and then another, *ad infinitum*.⁴³⁸ What keeps this procedure infinite, without closure? First, the process is riven with both equivocity and contingency. Any given phrase can undergo modulation from the co-variability of four determinations by which the phrase is composed. Every phrase supposes that it possesses *sense*, that it plots a relation between an *addressee* and an *addressor*, and that it contains within it a *referent*. Within this quadrant of constituent parts (the matrix of which Lyotard nominates a 'universe'), innumerable permutations are possible that keep subsequent linkages variable and phrases equivocal.⁴³⁹ Each phrase, marked by a certain

⁴³⁷ It is important that the 'phrase' is not conflated with the form of the utterance or the sentence. This would harbour the possible misunderstanding that the problematic Lyotard is developing is derivable from, and thereby reducible to, language. The following passage would appear to clarify both the extendibility and plasticity of what Lyotard understands by the phrase: 'French *Aïe*, Italian *Eh*, American *Whoops* are phrases. A wink, a shrugging of the shoulder, a taping of the foot, a fleeting blush, or an attack of tachycardia can be phrases.—And the wagging of a dog's tail, the perked ears of a cat? [...]' §110.

For all the interesting insights that Geoffrey Bennington pulls out of his reading of *The Differend* in his otherwise impressive book *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), confusions are generated because Bennington insists on speaking of the sentence as both the central and basic unit of Lyotard's analysis. To his credit, Bennington does offer a justification as to why *phrase* is best rendered as sentence (pp123-4). Even so, his interpretative decision to speak of 'the sentence' still places unnecessary limits on the investigation that Lyotard is setting forth in this text, rendering obscure the connections that this has on the later Lyotard's preponderant concern with both art and aesthetic feeling.

⁴³⁸ Lyotard's claim must be understood ontologically here, and not of the order of an ethical prescriptive. Thus he writes in *Ibid* §102: 'For there to be no phrase is impossible, for there to be And a phrase is necessary. It is necessary to make linkage.' Also, please consider: 'To link is not a duty, which 'we' can be relieved of or make good upon. 'We' cannot do otherwise. Don't confuse necessity with obligation. If there is a must (*Il faut*), it is not a You ought to (*Vous devez*).' *Ibid* §135

⁴³⁹ In §137 of *The Differend*, Lyotard offers an extensive description of a particular phrase that exhibits these possible permutations, and is worth quoting in full:

A phrase can be formulated in such a way that it co-presents several universes. It can be equivocal, not only with regard to the sense, but also with regard to the referent, the addressor, or the addressee. For example: *I can come by your place*. Equivocation can affect *I*, *come by*, or *your*. Restricting ourselves to the modal *can*, here are some co-presented universes:

- 1.1 I have the ability to do it.
- 1.2 I have the time to do it.
- 1.3 You have a place and I know the address.
- 2 It's possible that I'll do it.
- 3.1 I desire to do it.
- 3.2 I desire that you tell me to do it.
- 4 I have permission to do it.

Ability (1), eventuality (2), wish (3), right (4). Description (1,2,4); representation (3.1) (in

undecidability (indexed in a variety of ways) is such that there is no necessary logical entailment from that which is phrased to the next: ‘a phrase may entail several referents, several senses, several addressees, several addressors. Each of these four instances may be marked in the phrase or not.’⁴⁴⁰

What, though, of silence? Is not what remains silent the privation of a phrase, and thus, strictly speaking, a *non*-phrase? Does not silence annul the four constituent parts that a phrase convokes, and in their absence, are we not led to conclude that silence signifies *total undetermination* with respect to the addressee, the addressor, sense and referent, and therefore an absolute undetermination (the nothing of silence) that signifies a *complete determination*, marking thereby the end of all possible phrases? Such a claim would entail the following deduction: when there is silence there is, first of all, a lack of both an addressee and an addressor through which communicability or sense is shared. An address supposes the situation of someone addressing another. Nothing is said, therefore no address is made. It could further be assumed that without the transference of articulated speech between interlocutors a referent is lacking by which the apportioning of sense is itself possible. Silence invokes no determinant referent, and in abrogating reference falls short of the condition of sense that makes possible both intelligibility and communicability. That silence is devoid of sense does not mean it is nonsense (which would nonetheless suppose the exchange of some phrases). It appears as something senseless, as what cannot be sensed. In the absence of all of these four determinations—that comprise a phrase-universe—how could there possibly be the play in modulation and variability between these four poles, which, for one, accounts for an indetermination demanding that yet another phrase is necessary, that one more be presented so as to situate that which had already been phrased, in order to accord to it a particular determination or direction? On this account, silence would be the negation of the phrase, because it denies the very permutability, which, immanent to any phrase-universe, keeps the series open, decreeing that there is always something else to be phrased. If the phrase is the unit by which ‘being’, a ‘world’ is presented, then silence is non-being, it is senseless, worldlessness.

the sense of Habermas’ “representative” phrases: *I want, I fear, I desire that....*; regulation (3.2) (as in: *I order you, I beg you, I promise you to...*). Not only is the sense of *I can* equivocal, but its equivocalness is passed on to the other instances: *your* is not the same if it is part of the described referent or if it is the addressee of a prescription; the same goes for *I*. §137 pp80-1.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid. §25.

All the same, the question of silence is a principal problematic guiding *Le Différend*. In a text that provides a systematic account of the phrase as the basic unit by which a world and Being itself is presented—that ties the presentation of being to the concatenation of phrases—what remains inarticulatable, serves not as the point of limitation to the general argumentational structure that Lyotard erects, but rather is the stage upon which the problematical figure of that-which-is-not-but-must-be-phrased reveals itself with full dramatical force. The notion that silence is a non-phrase, that it is the *terminus* of phrasing, the negation of presentation, a non-happening or non-occurrence, is an assumption that Lyotard exposes as, precisely, inimical to the fostering of a sensibility towards the event, an assumption that, when nurtured, turns a deaf ear to the barely audible, suppressing the modulation that silence—as a negative, and not a non-, phrase—contains within itself.

Le Différend commences with an extended meditation upon the historical revisionism of Faurisson, and others who sought to deny the extent of the atrocities of the Holocaust.⁴⁴¹ Such an opening gives historical and political prescience to a mode of phrasing considered as nothing, but is precisely something. Faurisson advances that the silent victims prove the non-existence of the chambers. To claim that the gas chambers existed would require that a witness be found to corroborate their existence. But since all victims would have perished in the gas-chambers, how can such evidence be proffered? Whence the monstrous logical inference that the chambers did not exist; for were there to be a survivor who claimed to witness first hand their reality then they would either be dead or could not have been ‘there’. Silence is taken, therefore, as the point of logical and argumentational impasse. It would be to advance any one of the following accusations: “the fact that you have nothing to say suffices that what you want to say cannot be said”; you lack “the evidence”, “the wherewithal”, “the competence”, that is, in sum, your silence indicates the lack of the means to show what you wish to present to be the case, etc. Silence falls when the game is up and all is lost. And yet, for Lyotard, silence is not the assignation of the phrase’s absence—the abrogation of sense, the foreclosure of address, the nullity of the referent. Silence is itself a phrasing, though a ‘negative phrase’ (but not a non-phrase).⁴⁴² Here the figure of silence is not that of Wittgenstein’s, as it is presented in the *Tractatus*—where what cannot be spoken about must be passed over in silence. The silence that accompanies the inability to put into phrases nonetheless invokes

⁴⁴¹ Ibid §2.

⁴⁴² Ibid §24.

an affect—a feeling of ‘displeasure’, of ‘pain’, of ‘restlessness’, ‘incitation’, ‘respect’—and that this cathetic state remain a phrasing.⁴⁴³ As a negative phrase, a muted affect (‘a silence touched with emotion’, Lyotard will remark) is signalled, a sign that can be the effect of either the active denial or the forced withdrawal of any one of the instances by which a phrase-universe is plotted. There is then, after all, an indetermination about how the silence is to be interpreted, and this indeterminacy comes to be registered from two points of view at once. From the one side, the addressor who interrogates the silent:

the survivors remain silent, and it can be understood 1) that the situation in question is not the addressee’s business (he or she lacks the competence, or he or she is not worthy of being spoken to about it, etc.); or 2) that it never took place; or 3) that there is nothing to say about it (the situation is senseless, inexpressible); or 4) that it is not the survivor’s business to be talking about it (they are not worthy etc.).⁴⁴⁴

And, from the other side, with respect to those remaining silent, a silence that

can just as well testify against the addressee’s authority (we are not answerable to you), against the authority of the witness him- or herself (we, the rescued, do not have the authority to speak about it), finally against language’s ability to signify gas chambers (an inexpressible absurdity).⁴⁴⁵

An indetermination exists in the interpreting of silence. We shall leave in abeyance the implications of this indetermination until later in the chapter. At this juncture, however, it is sufficient that we understand silence not as nothing, but as a muted sign that remains both *com-mute-able*—where the Latin particle of the *com-*, translatable as *with*, designates a silence shared out between subjects, between the instances of addressee and addressor, but, all the same is not communicated other than through a negative presentation—and *permutable*, such that a silence can be subject to interpretative modulation. Rather than marking the end of the law of necessity (‘that there is always something to phrase’), the inarticulate, the barely audible, the mutic sign beseeches the *necessary* continuation of that law (‘new phrases must be found’, ‘institut[ing] new addressees, new addressors, new significations and new referents’).⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴³ Ibid §135.

⁴⁴⁴ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend*, §26.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid §27.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid §21.

Phrases, then, but silence as a negative phrase, also: the presentation of what *is* is an operation and the phrase (negative, gestural, linguistic) functions as the operator by which—through cases—‘things’, ‘objects’, ‘events’, ‘proper names’ (in short, referents) are presented. The extra-discursive ‘real’ is none other than an intra-discursive operation. This would be a first order implication. But it would also be, as one says, the otherwise expected thin edge of the wedge. The further, and more impressing, implication is that presentation—and thus the unit of the phrase as the way in which presentation is achieved—is brought under the connivance of the event. Before the event is real, the real is itself eventalised. ‘Reality is a property of a referent that remains to be established.’⁴⁴⁷ And the establishing of a reality depends upon the presentative function of putting into phrases. Framed ontologically, it would be a matter of asserting that Being is event; what *is* is interwoven from the fabric of a heterogeneous series of phrases and presentations: ‘*Is* is not *which is*’, Lyotard will write, it is not graspable nor is it indicative as being ‘over there’, in ‘this’ or ‘that’ place, contemporaneous with the referee who is making reference to the referential content of some situation. Rather, the copula *is* ‘signifies there *is*, it happens.’⁴⁴⁸

This is why Lyotard speaks of the phrase-event (quoting Gertrude Stein approvingly, ‘[a] sentence has wishes as an event’⁴⁴⁹), with the intended aim of extricating what is phrased from the order of *re-presentation*. Such a phrase would suppose a referent (an object, name, Idea) that could simply be denoted by the referee. Were this so then a finite system of possible statements could be inferred from the adequation of *res cognitans* with *res extensa*. But a representation of the world or reality is precisely what is foreclosed, because the referent, or the reality referred to, does not logically antedate the presentation of what is real (or what is phrased as the case). The presentation of a state of affairs is achieved through it being put into phrases. In this sense what is real is itself an occurrence, a happening, where an unlimited number of phrases can proceed from whatever is first phrased, and where an innumerable type of articulations serve as possible linkages between phrases.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid §131.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid p68.

⁴⁵⁰ In an analogous, though by no means identical, way to the performative in speech-act theory. See Geoffrey Bennington on the differences between the two. *Lyotard Writing the Event* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) pp123-33.

The event, inextricably tied to presentation (and not to re-presentation), is a certain way of accessing the question of being as itself an occurrence, a happening.⁴⁵¹ Here the event is at its greatest point of extension; Lyotard makes of the event something *super-mundane*, not in the sense that the event is of this world (namely, *intra-mundane*—this is most often the case, for sure), but in the sense that the event becomes an attribute of the very operation by which things are presented as part of phrased-worlds.⁴⁵² Here a further implication must be accounted for: there is no external relation between thinking and event, invoking the standard opposition of the thinking-subject and the object-event. This entails the following corollaries: there can be no measure interposing this relation so as to bridge the gap between these two orders (such as ‘adequatio’, ‘truth’). Thought has neither to adequately describe what has happened, nor to present the truth of a happening or an event. Both suppose that there could be a particular thinking (in the form of a description, an explanation, an understanding, etc.) which could provide the *best* and *most* faithful account. If the event is both the cause and a result of thought’s presentative operation, then that which touches thinking at such a primordial level will directly impact on the way in which thought seizes what exists outside of it. Touched by the event, thought is itself a movement an occurrence, a movement that is incited to phrase what seizes it.

“Je ne sais quoi?” Lyotard, Kant and the Evental Sign

To better understand this set of corollaries, we can recall Kant’s canonical reading of the French Revolution, an interpretative episode that Lyotard appeals to in order to think through the implications of his own analytic of the event. Lyotard sees in Kant’s short observations on the unfolding revolutionary actions of the Jacobins a distillation of how the event comes to be registered by thought without thinking being ensnared within a web

⁴⁵¹ J-F Lyotard’s attempt to break free from the logic of mimetology, and everything that the law of representation convokes—the ‘model’, the ‘image’, the ‘semblant’, etc—has been subject to critical probing by his erstwhile colleague, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. C.f ‘Talks’, *Diacritics* 1984. Lacoue-Labarthe’s concern is whether Lyotard does not reproduce a too schematic and reductive understanding of mimesis qua representation, that compromises thereby the tenability of a set of distinctions Lyotard seeks to infer from the break with representative thought. There is the suggestion of an uncritical regress at the very point where a break with a set of philosophical effects would be effectuated, and which has Lyotard cleaving all the harder to the very premises that give rise to the effects Lyotard admonishes.

⁴⁵² This is a point taken up by Jean-Luc Nancy in his essay on Lyotard, entitled ‘Of Creation’ in *The Creation of the World or Globalisation* (New York: State University, 2007) pp57-75.

of illicit dialectical inferences. Here Kant judges this revolutionary uprising not on established facts; the eventuality of the event—its eventual *quality*—is not contained in any underlying objective datum requiring theoretical forensics, or any subjective virtue embodied by those, first hand, carrying out the deeds, which calls, from theory, the labours of moral exhumation. Instead it finds its *qualia* in the feeling of enthusiasm inculcated in the spectators who watch on at what is unfolding; those in whom an occurrence is indexable, despite such onlookers having no direct stake or interest in either the endurance of its coming to be or in hurrying along its transitive passing. The event, then, is confirmed through the indirect presentation (in the mode of a feeling) by agitated onlookers. An affect, as Kant writes, that remains a ‘mode of thinking’, which, even if ‘it betrays itself’, does so because it is pushed into new and hazardous situations.⁴⁵³ It matters not one jot what posterity is to hold for these upheavals, how, that is, historians and theoreticians and other interested parties will sift through the facts and tease out the consequences that befall it, evaluating *post eventum* ‘what’ occurred there, why and how it happened. The *qualia* of the event will still be raised beyond doubt because it served, at that moment, to incite thought to offer a presentation of it; such is the task of thought, to ‘honour’ its occasion.⁴⁵⁴

As a consequence of revisiting this example of Kant, a qualification can be added. If the event is itself part of the presentative operation of thought, it does not follow that thought possesses mastery over the event. The relation is not one of identity—as if thought were identical to the event it thinks—even though the event accounts for the movement of thinking, of the thetic act of presentation. The event is as much the unrepresentable that cleaves to the underside of whatever is presented (the constitutive blindspot of presentation) as it is the very event-phrasing that comprises the operation of presentation. Two moments that must be thought in their very coincidence. Why must these two moments be considered indissociable? Were the event strictly consubstantial with its thinking then the validation of a certain happening would be prey to a dialectical inference, namely the assumption that an occurrence can be satisfactorily presented through the presentative operation. This would constitute an illicit use of reason, taking the thought-event as the real-event, claiming that what it presents is an offering of the ‘Truth’ of that which occurred. The event of an eventual presentation can therefore

⁴⁵³ Immanuel Kant, ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’, *Political Writings*.

⁴⁵⁴ See Rudolph Gasche, *The Honour of Thinking* p275-96 and Jelica Sumic-Riha, ‘Saving the Honour of Thought’ *Parallax* 5:4 1999 131-144.

seamlessly lead into the dogmatic oases of ‘transcendental illusion’, in which a claim is made about the cognisance of something that lay beyond all bounds of cognition,⁴⁵⁵ the presentation of the event mistaken for the in-itself of the event. It would be, for example, to take the indeterminate *cathexis* (affect) that excites (and that passes as marking the movement and occurrence of thought) and to fill it in with a determinate content, such that the feeling (which *knows* no meaning), which is aroused as news arrives about the overthrow of Louis XVIth and the collapse of the *ancien regime*, is translated into an unequivocally positive judgement, used to affirm that there is always reason to revolt, in support of the universal ‘Good’ these events represent and the conviction that such acts of insubordination be repeated in all situations across the continent. Or, conversely, to read off from the indeterminacy of a feeling, a negativity that results in the categorical denunciation of what has taken place as leading ineluctably to terror, disaster, to a general state of anomie.⁴⁵⁶ Revolution itself is ‘formless and shapeless’, it is ‘nothing that can be validated’.⁴⁵⁷ In giving form, a determinate shape, to what remains devoid of such quality, the critical passage is passed through, boarded up in the name of presentative closure. The passage of the ‘critical *passage*’ would involve keeping open the inexhaustivity of presentations of the event, the passage as constituting a gap, an unbreachable remainder for which no presentation can definitively phrase, and this remainder be signalled through a feeling, which acts as a precipitate for thought, entirely indifferent however with respect to the direction in which that thinking tends.⁴⁵⁸ For, ultimately, ‘a momentous deed is still only a datum’, Lyotard reminds us, ‘it certainly allows for several readings [...] [and] it is just an equivocal object which may be grasped by one phrase or the other,

⁴⁵⁵ J-F Lyotard, *Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) pp31-2.

⁴⁵⁶ This is the basic antinomial distribution of positions that Kant critically circumscribes in *The Contest of Faculties*, in ‘A Renewed Attempt to Answer the Question: ‘Is the Human Race Continually Improving?’ Kant perjures the positions of both a panglossistic providentialism—what Kant refers to as eudaemonism—which affirms that the Human Race is unceasingly progressing and a terroristic catastrophism, which, conversely, reads off from the past and into the future the indefinite regression of civilisation. pp177-190 in *Political Writings*, edited by H.S Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid p33.

⁴⁵⁸ Immanuel Kant, ‘Negative Magnitudes’ in *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*. Kant readily acknowledged the difficulties of inferring anything from feeling, densely intricated as they are by a multitudinous set of contradictory messages and affects. Thus on the futility of measuring human happiness, Kant writes: ‘[...]the calculation is not humanly possible, for it is only feelings of the same kind which can feature in such calculations. But the feelings which we experience in the highly complex circumstances of life appear to vary a great deal, according to the variety of ways in which our emotions are affected.’ p220.

indifferently.⁴⁵⁹ The equivocality of the datum, and the indeterminacy of the affect that this arouses, means that ‘a single referent—say a phenomenon grasped in the field of human history—can be used *qua* example, to present the object of the discourse of despair, but also *qua* bit of guiding thread, to present analogically the object of the discourse of emancipation.’⁴⁶⁰

Thought furnishes an indirect and partial presentation, only. The event, while unknowable remains nonetheless thinkable. Whosoever elides the epistemic distinction between know-ability and think-ability falls into illusion, slipping back into dogmatic metaphysics once more. Kant, in doing no more than offering a sign of an event (*begebenheit*) in the form of an aesthetic feeling exhibited by a crowd of enthusiastic spectators, says, at least on Lyotard’s account, as much as can be stated about the eventuality of the event without compromising the critical *modus* by which Kantian thought operates.

What does Lyotard’s use of this example—the interpretative direction in which he seeks to steer the Kantian judgement surrounding the events of the French Revolution—tell us about the Lyotardian treatment of the event? The event as the movement of the phrase, yes; but the way in which ‘event’, ‘phrase’ and ‘movement’ relate to one another can be read in two associated ways: on the one hand, the phrase as that which, as sender, delivers something of the event (providing a positive valence to what occurs) and, on the other, the event as the cathectic *movement* that demands to be phrased, which serves as the propulsion for thought to present: the event as aesthetic feeling, which solicits a movement from outside thought (that confronts thought and compels thought to think by way of an interest that does not derive from the thinking-subject) and the presentation of thought as a movement that seeks to exhibit what has touched it. Lyotard will claim to locate in Kant what he names a ‘vibration’, a vibrato of the event that plays unceasingly between these two moments, between an attuned sensibility and a speculative urge on the part of reason to gain some kind of access into the supersensible realm of unconditional and unexpoundable Ideas. Certainly, this is a movement that reflects back on Lyotard’s thought. Lyotard recognises and diagnoses in Kant the plasticity of the evental sign because of the structural affinity it is said to share with his own operation. We began above by underlining a central contention of *The Differend*, namely ‘there are events’, events co-occur with modes of presenting and

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid p27. See also: *The Differend*, ‘Kant Notice 4’ p164.

⁴⁶⁰ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend* ‘Kant Notice 4’ pp163-4.

phrasing. At the same time, however—as we have noted also—what the event marks is the impossibility to present the all. The event is as much the insignia of the unrepresentable as it is an immanent effect of presentation. There is, in Lyotard, a *libration* of the event (just as there is in Kant a ‘vibration’), a wavering between a set of axes: between the event of presentation and the event as that which resists presentation; between the unit of the phrase and its negative associate, silence; between a philosophy which gives a transcendental gloss to the necessity of phrasing and an ethics, which supplements this necessity with an obligation to phrase anew. What is identified as a *libration* here should not be regarded as an inconsistency on the part of Lyotard but an aporetic effect that the ontology of the event bears within itself.

This rather extended consideration serves as no idle digression, but as a way of gaining proper access into the central question that is meant to detain us, namely the relation between politics (as a domain of thought and practice) and the Idea of emancipation (as a mode of presentation that provides valence to political thought and practice). The critical question is in what way politics and the Idea of emancipation are, from the position that Lyotard stakes out, consistent or inconsistent with the tasks of thinking the event? Here everything is ultimately organised by the very term that serves as the title of the book around which the idea of the unknown occurrence coalesces, the differend. As the pivot upon which the Lyotardian account of the event rests, we can isolate a set of statements that trace a long and protracted process of unhinging that Lyotard subjects the political to. Politics is increasingly withdrawn from the tasks that issue forth from thinking the event.

The Evental Hinge; Politics Unhinged

The basic argumentational development of *The Differend* proceeds, as we have seen, in the following fashion: Lyotard writes, ‘facts do not come before phrases.’ Reality (X) is not given, but must be phrased; to phrase is to present. The presentative operation is not the mimetic act of re-presenting a state of affairs, a situation, an object: if not given then X cannot antedate the phrasing of X, such that the X would provide the datum of an occurrence that thought would seek to adequately render conceptually. To present is itself the occurrence in the form of a case that cannot present the all of X but only an aspect of it. This is so because of a three-fold indeterminacy. Firstly, an

indetermination at the order of X—which, without presence, is matter deprived of any intrinsic intelligibility. Secondly, an indeterminacy at the order of the phrase which presents X, and which only gains a certain determination through the linkages that join one phrase to the next. Presentation is bound by time; there can be no simultaneity in the presentation of a multiplicity of phrases, only a succession or seriality of phrases. One phrase must follow another, and another, and then one more, and one other, sequentially ($t_1, t_2, t_3 \dots t_x$). But just as much as a phrase can only follow another phrase—time as duration dictates this to be so—an articulatory linkage is necessary, in order to give a certain direction to what has been phrased. These linkages take multitudinous paths. Couched in a variety of genres, cast in a plurality of idioms, a multiplicity of different rationalities themselves phrase X, determining the direction of what has been phrased through different modes of linkage. Due, then, to the condition of temporal succession and the equivocity of the unit of the phrase there is no necessary linkage, though, absolutely, a linkage *is* necessary.⁴⁶¹ This would be the third point of indeterminacy.

These logical steps, which Lyotard is clear to develop at length, disclose a certain *pragmatics* of the phrase. The preponderant concern is with the *ta pragmata* of the case and its chance occurrence; the case demands that thought operate within the immanent bounds of what that case issues forth vis-à-vis a set of possible linkages, combinatorial strategic movements (both descriptive and prescriptive), so that thought be both just and consequent in response to the occurrence as a case at issue. Faced with the indetermination of the case there cannot be a determination at the order of the rules and meanings by which a contingent case is to be situated. No *a priorisic* or logically deducible schema is provided that commits thought to follow a determinate path. A profound indetermination at the level of presentative operation, at the level of linking phrases, forecloses any possibility of there being a determinability of the sense or of the order of phrases, which is not itself part of the general situation of indetermination that gives rise to presentation. This pragmatics logically entails also a generalised *agonistics*—the placing of reality by phrasing it brings with it a general dissensus, a dispute between phrasings of reality through a multiplicity of cases: ‘a phrase, which links and which is to be linked, is always a *pagus*, a border zone where genres of discourse enter into conflict over the mode of linking’.⁴⁶² ‘There is conflict, therefore’,

⁴⁶¹ Ibid §136. ‘To link is necessary, but a particular linkage is not.’ And in §40: ‘to link is necessary; *how* to link is contingent.’ (emphasis added)

⁴⁶² J-F Lyotard, *The Differend* §218.

Lyotard reasons, but ‘the conflict is not between humans, or between any other entities; rather these result from phrases.’⁴⁶³ The implication regarding the event is as follows: at the very moment that a phrase happens, the happening of that phrase is denied by another possible phrase. Phrasing is the necessary way of enframing which at the same time silences, denies, misunderstands, another event-phrase. As Lyotard writes, in a way that compresses the entire problematic:

A phrase ‘happens’. How can it be linked onto? By its rule, a genre of discourse supplies a set of possible phrases, each arising from some phrase regimen. Another genre of discourse supplies another set of other possible phrases. There is a differend between these two sets (or between the genres that call them forth) because they are heterogeneous. And linkage must happen ‘now’; another phrase cannot not happen. It’s a necessity; time, that is. There is no-non phrase. Silence is a phrase. There is no last phrase. In the absence of a phrase regimen or of a genre of discourse that enjoys a universal authority to decide, does not the linkage (whichever one it is) necessarily wrong the regimens or genres whose possible phrases remain unactualised?⁴⁶⁴

The differend takes place between multiple phrase universes, a dispute that cannot be justly resolved, because no agreeable criteria can intercede between the disputing parties. The text itself provides a detailed topography of the differend, which does more than invoke the generalisation of the *kampfplatz*, bringing to mind the landscape of flat planes and open vistas, the horizontality of which offers no advantage to any of the combatants. Such a generalised topography, which the text of *Le Differend* appears to carve out, would, certainly, be drawn and overdrawn by a set of political metaphors (cribbed together from the agonal figures of ‘conflict’, ‘civil war’, ‘combatants’). And yet the space that *Le Differend* draws is considerably more variegated than this unilateralisation of struggle implies. The locus within which the phrase appears, Lyotard informs us, is a *pagus*, a rustic dwelling, a place lying outside the limits of the city-walls. As defined in and through this liminal zone, the phrase constitutes a zone of indiscernibility. All the while this indeterminate territory is manned by a contiguous arrangement of genres (a veritable ‘archipelago’ of islands⁴⁶⁵, if permitted to mix metaphors), each seeking to capitalise on the propriety that the phrase otherwise lacks. A

⁴⁶³ Ibid §188. ‘There are stakes tied to genres of discourse. When these stakes are attained, we talk about success. There is conflict, therefore. The conflict though is not between humans or between any other entities; rather these results from phrases.’

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid xii.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid ‘Kant Notice 3’ p130.

set of genres set out their stakes. Each genre—composed of its own rules, its own procedures and protocols—tugs a given phrase across a route toward its own dominion, determining its sense, its value, ordering and arranging it by both anticipating the subsequent phrase as well as placing it in alignment with phrases that it supposes, and that serve thereby to constitute the horizon against which the intelligibility of the present phrase is secured. For this reason all genres are necessarily teleological, tending toward a determinate end: the infinitude of phrases are organised in such a way that a particular genre would offer interpretative closure. A genre provides direction, meaning, determining the otherwise boundless multiplicity of the phrase. The *pagus* is the threshold within which the determination of the indeterminate plays itself out between the meetings of heterogeneous genres. Sometimes there exists a *détente* between what are otherwise differentially calibrated genres; in this way the *pagus* is the object of a *pax*, a temporary truce drawn between would-be rivals as to the accepted rules defining the referent of what is in dispute, as well as the stakes of the disagreement. But even in the broad acceptance of a set of rules by which a certain reality is temporarily secured between genres, this does nothing to obtain unconditional consensus, doing little to eliminate the constitutive equivocation of the phrase. It succeeds only in displacing this genetic indetermination, pushing further to the margins a set of phrased-possibilities and linkages. Such possibilities, in a position of inadequation with respect to the rules that have been established between other genres, are ignored, silenced, repressed, annulled; new wrongs, in the form of differends, are given rise to, where what might have been put into phrases is precluded from having been so. ‘Internal peace is brought at the price of perpetual differends on the outskirts’,⁴⁶⁶ intensifying the points of dissensus. For sure this war of *polemos* offers a model that seems genetically inscribed with the signature of politics. But, ‘the political’ has a very uncertain place within the general problematic set up in *Le Differend*, specifically, and the trajectory of Lyotard’s thinking, more generally.

Certainly, the claims raised in *Au Juste*, published a few years before, and which in many ways anticipate many of the problematics developed in *Le Differend*, would not harbour such uncertainty. There, Lyotard pronounces himself as a “politician”, not a “philosopher”. Still, even here there is little straightforward in this double-game of identification and disavowal. The status of his discourse remains not philosophical—to be understood in the ‘proper sense of the term’, he qualifies—but political, in a way,

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid §218.

nonetheless, *still* ‘to be defined’; Lyotard remarks, a complete conceptual overhaul of what it is to be political must be undertaken.⁴⁶⁷ Even with the identification of the irreducibly political character of his own discourse, the precise political valence is veiled once more; it awaits determination. It is this undetermination that contributes to a certain structural undecidability with respect to politics in the thinking of Lyotard.

Gérald Sfez has put together a set of interesting reflections on this issue.⁴⁶⁸ As far as the question of politics is concerned, much hangs on determining the point of articulation between two related thoughts emerging out of the three-fold articulation of ‘event’, ‘presentation and the ‘phrase’:⁴⁶⁹ one, the problem of the differend as such, according to which something ‘asks to be put into phrases and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases the right away’;⁴⁷⁰ two, the possible response to this intractable problem, namely that ‘at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics *perhaps*, is to bear witness to differends by finding new idioms for them.’⁴⁷¹ Lyotard hesitates over the place of politics in furnishing new phrases for possibilities otherwise repressed or displaced, marginalised or silenced. The use of the adverbial qualifier (‘perhaps’) in qualifying the position of politics here—when neither literature nor philosophy are subject to the same ambiguity—is a mark of such disquietude.

In other passages, this reticence tips into open abjuration. Politics shows signs of being in a state of dereliction, a catacomb of vanquished hopes, empty promises. To what extent do we notice Lyotard making preparations for its abandonment? Clearly, it is discernible in the examples that escort the peremptory task of ‘waging war among the genres of discourse.’⁴⁷² The political figure is absent from a list that otherwise constitutes the artistic trinity of Joyce-the-writer, Schoenberg-the-composer, Cezanne-the-painter. Lyotard continues: ‘when Cezanne picks up his paint brush, what is at stake in painting is put into question; when Schoenberg sits at his piano, what is at stake in music; when Joyce grabs hold of his pen, what is at stake in literature.’⁴⁷³ In each of these cases, at issue is the questioning of the givenness of the stakes of a genre. There exists the possibility of a transvaluation of the measures by which a ‘pleasing’ painting (in the case

⁴⁶⁷ J-F Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, (London: Minnesota Press, 1999) p55.

⁴⁶⁸ Cf. Gerald Sfez, *Jean-François Lyotard, la faculté d’une phrase*. Paris: Galilée, 2000.

⁴⁶⁹ Gerald Sfez, ‘The Writing of the Differend’, *Minima Memoria: In the Wake of Jean François Lyotard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) pp86-106.

⁴⁷⁰ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend*. §23.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid* §22.

⁴⁷² *Ibid*.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid*.

of Cezanne), the chromatic textures of a music composition (in the example of Schoenberg), a ‘work’ of literature (in Joyce) are evaluated. The stakes by which a genre (the genre of pictorial presentation, of music, of literature) is organised are reconfigured when a painting, an opus, a novel compels the addressee to question the ‘what’ of the referent of that genre, provoking in her not the exercising of determinate judgement—such that the case is either subsumed or rejected on the basis of a set of general rules and protocols regulating the ‘what’ (*quid*) of ‘painting’, ‘music’, ‘literature’—but incites a reflexive judgement about the relation of the particular case with respect to the general laws that both pre- and pro-scribe examples of what is definable and knowable through that genre, such that any new instance cannot be included within the general, but calls for the institution of a new set of rules, issuing the demand that novel ways of presenting what remains unpresentable (interior to a genre) must be invented. Would not the same possibility hold for politics? Logically, yes; but on the condition that, one, the political be said to constitute its own genre, and that, two, politics be in a position to continually issue a set of critical cases that remain in conflict with the genre that otherwise seeks to define and arbitrate over the *what* of its practice and the *ends* of this practice. But at the same time, proper names from the taxonomy of politics are left suspended from the list of examples Lyotard otherwise provides in giving weight to the injunction of waging a permanent revolution against genres of discourse. How to account for this equivocation?

True, Lyotard writes ‘the linking of one phrase onto another is problematic and that this problem is the problem of politics.’⁴⁷⁴ Politics becomes inextricably bound with the primitive operation of linking. We must be careful to divine two problematics attached to the articulatory unit. First, as we have noted already, the necessity of linking gains its intelligibility as a formal problem of time (*la fois*), specifically, the seriality of the phrase, which circumscribes the impossibility of presenting everything at once: presentation occurs, it unfolds in and through time, piecemeal, ‘phrase by phrase’. What comes to be presented, therefore, is what is forged through the link as an articulated set of phrases. Time as seriality explains the preponderance of the linkage. What of politics, then? In what way is the problem of linking a political problem? What status are we to assign to this statement in relation to the transcendental claim set forth, namely that time possibilises the phrase? The political is not a way of accounting for the happening or the occurrence of the phrase. When cast as fundamentally a political problem, the problem

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

addresses the possible content ascribable to the link. Not, then, *how* is the link possible—in the form of a transcendental inquiry into what conditions account for its necessity—but a question that opens up towards the problem of the determination of the link at the level of its content, namely, *what* linkage will be made between two phrases? In advancing this claim Lyotard seemingly elevates the political to a status not restrictive to one particular genre, as though the political would take its position beside other possible ways of determining phrases (such as the speculative-dialectical genre of metaphysics, the economic genre of Capital, the cognitive genre of science), but as an analytic of the general situation in which genres struggle in a process of commanding the otherwise intractable problem of the heterogeneity and permutability of the phrase: ‘there are hegemonies of genres, which are like figures of politics [...] fighting over modes of linking.’⁴⁷⁵ An articulation between the process of linking and the political is on this occasion presented analogically, through metaphor. What does this and the previous claims imply? That every thought harbours a politics? Yes, inasmuch as to link is at base a political stratagem and that, further, thought is possible only through the concatenation of phrases, with the equivocity of what is put into phrases being continually subjected to protocols and rules of verification that a certain genre posits in order to determine the direction of their sense. Politics would be in everything, and everything would be in politics—given that what is is the product of the presentative procedure, and there is a multiplicity of genres struggling over the meaning, value, the direction of a given state of affairs or object to be presented. Lyotard would seemingly be entertaining the absolutisation of the political, even if such a claim undergoes immediate qualification. Since the political would constitute the genre to house all genres, a meta-genre, a consequence that would itself be the result of the illicit paralogistic act of transcendentalising appearances, of elevating politics, as a realm of empirical appearance, to the transcendental rule of what accounts for all appearances. Would not this unilateralisation of the political mark the descent into metaphysical impropriety once more?

Were politics to set down “the rules”, “the ends”, “the stakes”, ascribing value, attributing meaning and direction to the heterogeneous field of phrases and genres that comprise the field, such unilateralism would perhaps more than harbour a conceit to give, in the last instance, direction to the permutability of the phrase, to function as the

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid. §200.

totality within which all occurrences and genres reside and are brought to order. But this conceited gesture would only place it within the orbit of the famous Russellian paradox of seeking to identify the unconditional term to account for a conditioned series. Either such a term—set apart from the object-series—can be identified to account for a conditioned series, but remains itself unaccounted; or, the term is part of the series it takes as its object—which is to say, it is immanent to that series—and is unable to both include itself within, as well as comprise the totality of that series. The thesis appertaining to the transversality of the political, as the genre of genres, is untenable, on account of this inconsistency. If politics serves as the model by which the rules of presentation are delivered, then what accounts for the delivery of the political as the general principle by which the rules of the presentative operation as such are established? Does politics constitute the exception to the law of presentation? If yes, then presentation is not all there is; there is the presence of a law (politics, in this case) not the result of the presentative operation. However, if all that exists is the result of what is presented then this debar any ultimate presentation of the conditions making presentation possible, without these rules accounting for their own unsurpassable authority.⁴⁷⁶ For these reasons, the status of the political undergoes the following qualification in §192 of *Le Differend*: ‘everything is political if politics is the possibility of the differend on the occasion of the slightest linkage. Politics is not everything, though, if by that one believes it to be the genre that contains all the genres. It is not *a* genre.’⁴⁷⁷ Here the political is understood as purely a formal category; no precise content is accorded to what, specifically, the political relation will consist in, save only serving to circumscribe the general condition of a struggle between a multiplicity of phrase-universes, for which there lacks any transcendent principle or common measure to arbitrate over putative disputants.

The unilateralisation of politics, at this point in Lyotard’s work (anticipated though already in his *Au Juste*), circumscribes the terrain of a generalised agonistics. In *Le Differend*, specifically, this general topos of the *agon* gives rise to the inevitable wrong committed through the effacement of a suppressed occurrence, and from which the existence of a differend is traceable. Politics would be the ‘incessant interdiction of possible phrases, a defiance of the occurrence, the contempt for Being.’⁴⁷⁸ Interdiction,

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid. In this connection, Lyotard writes: ‘In philosophical discourse, every phrase that presents itself as the rule to this discourse must be submitted to equivocation and dialecticalisation and be put back into play.’ ‘Hegel Notice’ p91.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid §197.

defiance and contempt. Drawn into an inviolable law of violation, politics is presented not only in terms of the problem about the content ascribed to the link; it is tied irrevocably to the transcendental problem regarding the generation of differends, such that it is the consequence of the contestatory ‘what’ of the linkage, and the necessity of giving determination to the indeterminacy of this link, that circumscribes the political. How then can politics be both the general condition by which differends proliferate, at the same time that politics is said to take its place as a particular way in which a differend might be justly phrased? Whence the equivocation, the adverbial qualification in the form of the ‘perhaps’, that latches onto the possibility of politics as generative of the differend.

It is the case, certainly, that, as a text, *Le Differend* constitutes something of a crossroads in thinking through the implications of politics with respect to the event: the event as immanent to the presentative operation, on the one hand, and as that which resists presentation *qua* the unrepresentable, on the other. The principal task of Lyotard’s later work becomes one in which the precise operativity of politics is ‘worked through’ (in the Freudian sense) in light of this problematic; in this respect *Le Differend* marks a decisive beginning. But it is also a text that offers a set of openings Lyotard will later signal as only blind alleys. The site harbours the trace of a hope of exploring the possibility of a ‘philosophical politics’, divorcing this from both the politics of “intellectuals” and of “politicians”.

But this will lead up a blind alley. The proposal of a philosophical politics is subsequently put aside by Lyotard, the philosophical unhinged from the political. Politics ceases to be either the principal site (topos) or the privileged metaphor (tropoi) by which the differend gains analytic intelligibility, but is increasingly revealed to be split between two equally unsatisfactory poles.

First, politics is adjudged ineffectual as a surface of inscription for the consecration of the differend. We have already collected a number of elements as to why Lyotard claims this to be so. Nonetheless, let us be more explicit in detailing this point. Politics follows the destinal path of the genre of speculative metaphysics that had previously served as the central antagonist in setting out an ontology of the event-phrase; as written in *Le Differend*, speculative metaphysics constitutes the attempt of expiating the indetermination of the occurrence in the quest for an absolute presentation of the ‘True’. However, since, according to Lyotard, the phrase is shot through with equivocation—such that the sense of a phrase is only given through the subsequent link attached to it, subjecting the phrase thereby to a multiplicity of interpretative

possibilities—‘Truth’ cannot be expressed in one phrase alone. And if the True cannot be given in a single phrase, then it is prey to the indetermination of the link. For Truth to be established, then, the problem of contingency must be overcome, a task to be carried out by fixing the problem at its source, namely at the unit of the link, so that the contingency of the formation of phrases becomes waylaid for the necessity of a determinant way of linking phrases. How is this solution sought? Through the presentation of the result, of fixing the final phrase that will organise all preceding phrases, and give thereby direction to the links that articulate a series of presentations, moving towards a given destination that delivers their sense. Lyotard explains elsewhere: ‘if one wants to control a process, the best way of so doing is to subordinate the present to what is [still] called the ‘future’, since in these conditions the ‘future’ will be completely predetermined and the present itself will cease opening onto an uncertain and contingent ‘afterwards’.⁴⁷⁹ What is fixed as the final phrase is the basis upon which all possible events are determined before the taking-place of their occurrence; it provides the interpretative seal by which the meaning of all possible events are enveloped. This explains the otherwise beguiling claim of the speculative metaphysician, which Lyotard presents in the form, ‘nothing will happen that has not already happened.’⁴⁸⁰ The metaphysical gesture here does not merely consist in the thought that all possible events are a simple repetition of what has been in the past, the reprisal of the dictum found in the book of Ecclesiastes that *nihil novi sub sole* (“there is nothing new under the sun”). The statement is ideal not real, meaning that the object of the statement indexes not the reality of events (that, ontologically, all change in the world is a repetition of the same), but the ideality of the conditions under which the event is recognised as such. Thus the statement ‘nothing will happen that has not already happened’ means ‘nothing will happen’ unless it happens in the way prescribed by the phrase that fixes the future. Either something takes place, where whatever takes place is the taking place of the phrase-event prescribing what shall take place; or nothing has taken place, because what threatens to have taken place remains unrecognised by the phrase-event that prescribes what it means for something to have taken-place. An occurrence is, then, already pre-determined, its sense fixed in light of the ends by which everything that comes to pass shall be judged. The indetermination of the occurrence is forgotten by speculative metaphysics, the event readily vanquished.

⁴⁷⁹ J-F Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p65.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid. ‘Hegel Notice’ p105.

Politics too plots a certain course through this problematic, and, on such shared bases, is adjudged incapable of fostering a sensitivity, which is to say, a responsibility to the event. On the matter of Lyotard's own involvement in the Algerian struggle for national self-determination, he notes, then, a similar logic suffusing the discourse of the political militant that had earlier been examined as constitutive of speculative metaphysics:

Fascinated by the theoretical and practical power of dialectical materialism, this freshman in radical militancy was naturally convinced that a society as contradictory as Algerian society, one in which injustices were so flagrant, couldn't avoid resolving its aporia, no matter the means it would take or the amount of time this resolution might take. In calling the impending uprising a resolution, he was predetermining it in terms of the following either/or alternative: either, if it happens, it will be a resolution, or if it is not a resolution, it will not happen. This alternative is constructed according to the principle of dialectical formulation that everything that happens happens thanks to its meaning [...] the stronger the will, the worse one hears.⁴⁸¹

The will to change the world in accord with its own image dulls the senses, quickens the vivacity by which conclusions are drawn, weakens an attentiveness to the complexity of things, *in nuce* politics is inadequately calibrated to the singular demands that, each time, an event issues.

Politics, then, is found guilty of forgetting the event Lyotard will otherwise heed as thought's principal task to consecrate. Not only because of the faculty of the will, by which politics is thrown into action, and which functions as a resistor to the pulsation of the event.⁴⁸² Politics is guilty too of a self-forgetting, of repressing the event that lay at the point of its own origination. Intolerable for any politics, a polity, for a political community, is exposure to the indetermination of its own existence, and this in spite of the fact that the political relation calls to be invented, that the task of forging a political relation emerges out of the nothing that borders on the presentative operation calling for a community to be phrased. This invention is evidenced through the immanence of the nominative procedure of the collective 'We', presented in the form of constitutions ('We the people of x'), petitions ('We the under signed'), political declarations. In these examples, the sense of a collective identity is interwoven from a myriad of phrases, it is the result of the assignation of the collective pronoun to an immanently articulated set of

⁴⁸¹ J-F Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*. p26.

⁴⁸² J-F Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p117.

prescriptions and predications that give specific content to the ‘We’ that it convokes. The ‘We’ does not so much secure the universalization of its message to all (the ‘We of all Humankind’); rather the message (produced out of a set of phrases) localises the content of a conditional ‘We’, conditioned upon the receiving and acceptance of whatever is said to found it.

But if a politics is responsible for inventing the bond (*liaison*) that augments a sense of commonality, then, once it has augured the set of linkages that give consistency to this presentation of the common, it must guard against whatever might unbind (*deliaison*), or make inconsistent the community it presents. The irruption of the contingent, which had first called forth the task of inventing the political bond, risks tearing asunder the fragility of its union. Redescribed as the management of the unmanageable, politics becomes tied if not to the active suppression of this primordial contingency then to the sequestering and containment of it; consumed by paranoia, overcome by ‘the sharp and vague feeling that the civilians are not civilised and that something is ill disposed toward civility, all of this engenders [in politics] the suspicion that plots are being hatched [...] easily engendered [too] are trials, the denunciation of scapegoats, the exclusion of the *xenos*, the accusations made against opposing parties, slander eristics.’⁴⁸³ The full force of this tirade finds historico-political prominence in cases of the indefatigable expulsion of the ‘foreigner’, the ‘alien’, the ‘heretic’, the ‘traitor’ that are routinely undertaken by political authorities—in the form of state programs, revolutionary and counter-revolutionary terror, legislative directives, religious decrees—so as to restore a sense of propriety to the common once more. The process is interminable, because the problem is intractable: there is no proper of the communal bond, but the bond needs to be forged, and what is forged must endure. In issuing solutions to the intractability of this problem, what is endangered is what is said to be proper to the event, namely the impropriety of contingency. This is to say, proper to the event is the occasion of the improper, something, though, that is vanquished so that the search for the proper grounds on which to erect the common of the political community can re-commence.

Lyotard plays upon a parallelism between metaphysics and politics. Though, this mirroring of discourses does not single out Lyotardian thought for any special attention; the positing of a co-belonging of political action with metaphysical ends is

⁴⁸³ J-F Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p190.

identifiable in the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben too. Hannah Arendt had also reason to draw a certain line of connection between philosophy and politics (and, indeed, a line can be followed that unites Arendtian and post-Heideggerian retreatments of the political), but, in the case of Arendt, such reflections were countenanced in order to better extricate politics proper from the machinations of philosophical speculation, so that, once more, the light irradiating from great politics might re-emerge from out of the shadow of metaphysical ideas, which had once threatened to eclipse the appearing of political deeds. Lyotard represents a radicalisation of the Arendtian gesture, in that the principal task ceases to be a re-directing of politics away from its possible confluence with more perilous waters. Metaphysics and politics are twinned at their source, according to which their analytical separation is adjudged a futile operation. Such judgement finds its crystallisation in one of Lyotard's last texts, entitled *Heidegger and "the jews"*. Here, Lyotard writes of the *terminus* of metaphysical legitimation as accounting for the onset of a crisis in the authority of politics, in its capacity to effectively realise the principles of 'justice', of 'the Good' that it raises in response to what it identifies conjuncturally as general acts of injustice, evil, of states of anomie and disorder. The philosophical resources that had once given discursive form to politics as an operator—"the authority of a metaphysical model, of "ideas" , "nature", of divine truthfulness or goodness, of rational ideals"⁴⁸⁴—now in a state of disrepair, leave politics entirely unmoored and prey to the sedentary waters of a passive nihilism.

If, for the later Lyotard, the first point of unease surrounding politics is an ineffectuality to inscribe the differend—due to the weight of expectation and the severity of thought's tasks that political thought places on the shoulders of the event—then this is flanked by the simultaneity of a second tendency, which runs in quite a different direction: politics increasingly becomes the controvertible transistor by which events become processed as simple litigious claims, for which redress is achievable in their accommodation within a system of increasing complexity and differentiation. In this manner politics handles with quiet efficiency the disputes that arise from within the social field. The availability of human rights provisions, the periodic publication of reports from NGOs and other agencies denouncing a particular aspect of a government's record in office, the expansion of quasi-judicial institutions and organisations monitoring and

⁴⁸⁴ J-F Lyotard, *Heidegger and the "jews"* p77.

regulating instances of injustice, cruelty, state repression, the presence of all of which serves to solicit continuous re-adjustments and recalibrations to the prevailing order without the necessity of demanding any systemic alternative.⁴⁸⁵ Politics had once hung on the unknown and barely existent, on the invention of a collective identity that would take on the responsibility of ushering in a brave new world; ‘their combat invoked some ideal—the Common Folk, Freedom, the Individual, Humanity, in sum—not yet received within the system at that time; or if it was in principle received, it was in point of fact violated.’⁴⁸⁶ But, according to Lyotard, the contemporary situation gives rise to a transformation in the stakes of political action: ‘the practice of activism [...] becomes a defensive practice’, an activity of consolidation and extension of what is already provided for, rather than a forcing into existence of what has not the right to exist:

we must constantly reaffirm the rights of minorities, women, children, gays, the South, the Third World, the poor, the rights of citizenship, the right to culture and education, the rights of animals and the environment [...] Society permits us, requires us to act accordingly: because it needs us to contribute, in that order that is our own, to the development of the global system.⁴⁸⁷

Lyotard would have us witness the endogeny of Political action, its complete domestication in what is described as the ‘system’ of development. Clear to speak of development here, and not progress, Lyotard does so in order to preserve something of its *atelic qualia*: the planetary territorialisation of techno-capitalism (a principal sub-system) seeks not to achieve any determinate end other than its own sustained longevity through the exchange of goods and services, through the metonymic displacement and substitutability of desires. Process prevails over product: the building up of further networks, of new markets; the development of new calculations and technics for which the measurement and manipulation of otherwise indistinct, indiscernible phenomena is made possible, and which moreover afford a refinement in the specification of the differentiating rhythms of cultures and forms of life. No longer are a set of ‘demands’ levelled against a unreceptive and sclerotic structure that must be overturned

⁴⁸⁵ Lyotard writes that ‘the intrinsic constitution of the system is not subject to radical upheaval, only to revision. Radicalism is becoming rare, as is every search for roots. In politics alternation is the rule, while the alternative is excluded.’ J-F Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, (London: Minnesota Press, 1997) p199.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid p204.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

for both the form of the demand and its contents to be met, the task of public criticism and political agitation is an immanent principle posited by the system; it is, as Etienne Balibar notes, the ambivalence politics harbours, that ‘all protest can turn into legitimation since, against the injustice of the established order, protest appeals not to something heterogeneous to that order, but to identical principles.’⁴⁸⁸ The demand, then, is issued by the system itself, requiring from its subjects that they work *for* it, *towards* the further complexification of the system, accelerating processes of differentiation and contributing to its concomitant flexibility.

This description calls from Lyotard the raising of a new question: if politics had once remained proximal to the differend, once serving to index what had not been received, then when everything is already receivable by the system—when there no longer remains anything radically heterogeneous to the present order, and hence all demands are recognisable and translatable into a generally accepted taxonomy of principles, collective names, civil codes and rights—then, under these conditions, politics is understood not only as having little need for the consecration of the differend, but, more extreme still, the question raised is whether any longer the differend exists within the systemic prism for which politics constitutes its reflexive operator?⁴⁸⁹

For two capital, but contrasting, reasons Lyotard’s later work drifts away from the assignation of politics as a principal site for examining the happening of the event: on the one hand, a certain ‘Politics’ is described as ineffectual in inscribing in thought the differend because of the vertiginous demands that a political thinking places on the indeterminacy of the future event; on the other hand, the effectivity of a ‘politics’ in the neutering of the differend through their efficient transformation into litigious and decidable claims. Lyotard’s later work, then, is instead an extensive elaboration of the philosophical stakes of thinking the event once untied from its political validation. Despite this disjoining of philosophy from politics, the stakes of philosophy remain unaltered: to bear witness to the intractable differend, that is, to the injustice wrought from the conflicts between heterogeneous phrase universes.⁴⁹⁰ The ethical task addressed to philosophy remains the ‘watchman’ who waits patiently, staging ‘the vigil for an occurrence, [so that] the anxiety, and the joy of an unknown idiom, [can begin].’⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁸ Etienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, (London: Verso, 2002) p7.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid p70.

⁴⁹⁰ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend*. pxi and §263.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid §135.

What, though, of emancipatory Ideas? How does the unhinging of politics from the event affect their standing? Unlike both Arendt and Marx, the Lyotardian response is not to play on a disjunction between politics and emancipation, in which the affirmation of either one of these terms comes at the expense of the categorial attenuation of the other. Lyotard will rather think the Idea of emancipation as constituent in the practice of politics, and will abjure both on the basis of this essential co-belonging. We have the presentation of the relational binding between emancipation and politics then, but a negative presentation. Lyotard offers not an occasion for affirming their co-implicative structure—because the conjunction of politics and emancipatory Ideas brings thought proximal to what is evental in social existence; it serves instead as an occasion for their joint repudiation on the grounds of an irresponsibility towards the fragility of the event—since, according to Lyotard, the logic of an emancipatory politics pulls thought further away from the demands of thinking the unrepresentable as that which resists presentation.

In the remainder of this chapter, focus shall shift from the political—and the modulation that politics undergoes in relation to the category of the event—to the role of emancipatory Ideas, in order to account for their associated relation with respect to what is both evental and political—and the instability in the character of this three-fold relation. If, in the work of Lyotard, politics increasingly gravitates around two contraposed, but equally unsatisfactory, poles, then Ideas of emancipation share in the same fate, at one and the same time split between the metaphysical bombast of an ultimate and unconditioned presentation of a redeemed and reconciled future antagonistic towards a present reality marred by relations of inequality and systemic injustice, and the systemic assimilation of Ideas into a present, in which Ideas construct no division between the paucity of the actual and the plenitude of a possible future reality, but instead are homogeneous with the actual, and as such serve as sources of legitimation for the authority of the extant order.⁴⁹² There is then a mirroring of the problematic of politics at the level of the Idea.

Before this chapter addresses how Lyotard enquires into the Idea of emancipation and the ambivalences the Lyotardian examination harbours, we shall

⁴⁹² As is the case with the political process, the ends of ‘emancipation’, Lyotard surmises, ‘[are] no longer situated as an alternative to reality, as an ideal to be conquered despite reality and to be imposed from the outside’, they are ‘the objectives the system seeks to attain in one or another of the sectors that make it up: work, taxes, marketplace, family, sex, “race,” school, culture, communication.’ J-F Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p69.

illustrate, by way of an extended example, the particular problems that a politics is saddled by when emancipatory Ideas are deployed so as to institute difference between the actual-present and the future-possible, to disclose, in Lyotard's words this time, 'a gap between Ideas and observable historical-political reality [so as to] bear witness not only against that reality but also in favour of those Ideas.'⁴⁹³ In what ways does the following example dramatise the inefficacy of political Ideas both to create such differences and to bear witness to the event of the differend, the principal concern of Lyotard's?

Politics and Ideas: The Muting of the Event of the Differend

Let us consider the following speech-situation: It is the day of the periodic ritual of parliamentary elections—the formal means by which the citizen exercises her political right—two persons, (let's name them, for the sake of simplicity, person *x* and *y*) are engaged in a dispute about what it means to be a Democrat in the present conjuncture. They communicate in the same language; they have in their possession the same linguistic competences and aptitudes. And yet a dispute gathers momentum between the pair, which is rather more than a mere difference of opinion. We are witness rather to a radical dispute, the result of which will be a chasm between worlds, between realities, where any possible bridging across the worlds that a discourse plots will only lead to the privation of at least one of the presented parties, accordingly depriving them of the capacity to phrase the dispute in such a way that is felicitous to their testimony.

Both persons *x* and *y* lay claim to the status of democrat. Person *x* measures his own democratic credentials in accordance with his dutiful commitment to the rules of political engagement laid down by the constitution, where, at election time, to be a good democrat means to participate in the electoral process—if not by canvassing on the part of a particular party, then at the very least to keep abreast of the latest political developments: to study the form-guide, and make an informed and mature decision on the basis of the policy-pledges that the parties commit to manifesto. On the other hand Person *y* understands himself to be a democrat also, though his convictions are such that he reacts uneasily to the current system under which democracy is operative, claiming that there is but the tiniest morsel of policy difference separating the right from the left; that the

⁴⁹³ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend*, §259.

democratic act as it comes to be registered by the state is but an empty formalism, the most minimal of concessions shown to the will of the people.

Come Election Day Person y decides what any person in his position would do: to withdraw from the democratic process and abstain from voting. And yet how can person y show to x both the validity of his grievance and the legitimacy of his act? How might this be phrased in such a way that the full force of his perturbation be recognised, without compromising its potency? The difficulty that is faced here is compounded by the dilemma within which person y will be ensnared. In response, then, person x will issue person y with a stark choice, which takes the form of the broken middle: Either you are a democrat, in which case you will participate in the electoral process. Or by not engaging in the democratic processes, you cannot consider yourself a democrat. If democrat (d) then vote (v); if not vote then not a democrat. The logical deduction is as violent as it is simple in its execution. The question is the following: how can both this reasoning by exclusion (either d or not d) and the implicative reasoning (if d then v) be assailed by person y ? Required from him is a presentation, by way of a phrasing, of showing the existence of another way of thinking democracy in a way that will be accepted by the other party. But this is not so straightforward. Let's say that, much to the bemusement of the addressee, our person y declares: 'This is not what Democracy looks like!'—a sentence that will doubtless cause much bafflement, surrounded as they are by the indicative signs pointing toward the objects of an Idea of democracy: 'the polling station', 'the ballot box', 'the colourful rosettes' adorning the seasoned campaigners, along with the other democratic paraphernalia (the 'tellers', the car park floor strewn with political leaflets, etc). There is his admonishment of the refineries of liberal democratic processes, but lacking still is not only the presentative capacity to give a positive account of what would be properly speaking democratic—an exhibition of the existence of this other possibility (still left in abeyance)—but also a successful negation of what passes as the description of the actual presentation of democracy.

We can think of other possible instances when the speech-act, '*This is not what democracy looks like*', can easily be understood and verified—and where, moreover, protocols exist to handle such a grievance. A falsification of the count, alterations made to the electoral register, the active prevention of parts of the electorate to partake in what is their political right. In these cases both the evidence is ready-to-hand and processes available by which to correct these errors and miscarriages of political right. But in the first case, where person x voices his disquiet about the reality of democratic forms, the

stakes of the dispute are such that there exists, from the position of his addressee, very little to corroborate his grievance. One could reduce the issue to the misuse of deictics. That the ostension ‘this’, which is used to negate what is presented as the established state of affairs, is misplaced, at variance with the established facts—a performative that misfires, or that is incapable of properly landing a hit on its target, because what is lacking is any act that might show up positively a different presentation of what the Idea of Democracy inheres in, which is not already recoverable within the extant phrasing of democracy. If for example, our person *y* spoils his ballot, this act will have but the anonymity of anyone and no-one who might equally have misunderstood the procedure of voting—spoiling their ballot by an accidental slip of the pen, or perhaps caught within the bind of indecision. Alternatively, even if he orchestrated a protest against the current democratic system, person *x* would doubtless say that this very act of protesting functions as an affirmation and not at all a negation of the present order of things.

But, even so, this is less the result of the impropriety of the phrase that is put into circulation by our person *y*. It has more to do with the object in question for which an appropriate phrasing is sought. What is in question, what, precisely, constitutes the dispute? We can say that it is the putative object of these two discourses (the Idea of Democracy) which is without any stable referent. Democracy: an Idea of political reason, whose possible presentations are in excess of any putative form instantiated at any given time, in any given place. The ‘as such’ of democracy (as it exists in actuality, for example liberal democracies) is only an aspect of an Idea and not consubstantial with it. Lyotard will note: ‘an object which is thought under the category of the whole (the absolute) is totalitarian.’⁴⁹⁴ For,

any party, that is, the addressor of an ostensive phrase validating a description, attests (or thinks he or she is attesting) through this phrase to the reality of a given aspect of a thing. But he or she should by that very score recognise that other aspects which he or she cannot show are possible. He or she has not seen everything. If he or she claims to have seen everything, he or she is not credible. If he or she is credible, it is insofar as he or she has not seen everything, but has only seen a certain aspect. He or she is thus not absolutely credible.⁴⁹⁵

The problem here is two-fold and impresses itself on both person *y* and person *x*, (though the effects are registered differentially). On the one hand, the problem

⁴⁹⁴ J-F Lyotard, *The Differend* §70.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

burdening the anti-democrat democrat (person *y*) lies precisely in accomplishing an interpretative incision in the established order of phrases—to find a way of showing up the not-All of any presentation of the real, so as to open a way toward a transcendence of that description of things. One will doubtless think there is no such quandary for person *x*. But his overzealous identification of the actual with the Idea carries with it the dialectical reversal of ostensible democrat to consummate totalitarian. So as to avoid such a painful inversion, a concession must be granted: that to be credible one must not lay claim to the All, to the absolute. It is within this redoubled problematic of the credible that a differend takes hold, and it is precisely the dilemma of credibility that Lyotard will raise against both politics and the Idea of emancipation as a mishandling of the differend. We shall now turn our specific attention to the sceptical critique raised by Lyotard against emancipatory Ideas.

Emancipation: The Credibility Dilemma and Forgetting the Event

On the basis of Lyotard's ontology, any discourse of emancipation stages the 'credibility dilemma' described in the above example. Such a discourse wishes to anticipate the advent of its own event in the form of an unconditional fulfilment. But its unconditionality rests on an ability to present the all. It must account for all possible events and happenings, as well as serve as a portent of an Event that will signal the end of events. The incredulity towards metanarratives of emancipation is based thereby upon the *in*-credibility of these two claims. The impossibility to present the All and the impossibility to bring an end to events, for Lyotard the name for Being itself.⁴⁹⁶ The dilemma is discussed in two related passages from Lyotard's 'Missive on Universal History'. The first provides a list of examples that shows an Idea wandering between different narratives, as though the Idea knew not how to get to where it needs to get to. An Idea, which is less concerned with whom it travels with, just that it arrives. He begins,

The thought and action of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are governed by an Idea (in the Kantian sense): the Idea of emancipation. It is, of course, framed in quite different ways, depending on what we call the philosophies of history, the grand narratives that attempt to organise this mass of events: the Christian narratives of the redemption of original sin through love; the *Aufklärer* narrative of emancipation from ignorance

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

and servitude through knowledge and egalitarianism; the speculative of the realisation of the universal idea through the dialectic of the concrete; the Marxist narrative of emancipation from exploitation and alienation through the socialisation of work, and the capitalist narrative of emancipation from poverty through techno-industrial development. Between these narratives there are grounds for litigation and even for differends. But in all of them, the givens arising from events are situated in the course of a history whose end, even if it remains beyond reach, is called universal freedom, the fulfillment of all humanity.⁴⁹⁷

The Idea, in the Kantian sense—an important qualification. For the first rule of Kantian critique is that the Idea has no direct presentation in experience. It can only be thought, not known. To proceed under the misapprehension that it is knowable is to commit the subreptic fallacy of amphibologous reasoning, namely to illicitly accord a fragment of empirical history with the status of transcendental, to make what is but a sign or a *hypotyposis* a general principle of “Politics”, “Sociality”, “Man”, “Being”, etc. The problem is at least two-fold. First, as an Idea that can be thought—and not known—there is always the possibility that it can be drawn into and appropriated by innumerable different and incompatible versions of the same promise. But since a universal rule is lacking, there exists no way of arbitrating between different narratives of emancipation. There is only the prospect of an interminable dispute giving rise to differends between the techno-rationalist, Christian, Marxist Revolutionary and Free-Market Capitalist. Second, there is always the supervening of happenings that serve to shore up the illicit moves made by those who would entertain such hopes:

In the course of the past fifty years, each grand narrative of emancipation—regardless of the genre it privileges—has, as it were, had its principle invalidated. All that is real is rational, all that is rational is real: “Auschwitz” refutes the speculative doctrine. At least this crime, which is real is not rational. All that is proletarian is communist, all that is communist proletarian: ‘Berlin 1953’, ‘Budapest 1956’, ‘Czechoslovakia 1968’, ‘Poland 1980’ (to name but a few) refute the doctrine of historical materialism: the workers rise up against the Party. All that is democratic is by the people and for the people, and vice versa: ‘May 1968’ refutes the doctrine of parliamentary liberalism. Everyday society brings the representative institution to a halt. Everything that promotes the free flow of supply and demand is good for general prosperity, and vice versa: the crises of ‘1911 and 1929’ refute the

⁴⁹⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, ‘Missive on Universal History’, *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-85*. (London: Minnesota Press, 1993) p27.

doctrine of economic liberalism, and the crisis of '1974-79' refutes the post-Keynesian modification of the doctrine.⁴⁹⁸

For every discourse promising universal liberation there is a case that resists being placed within the envelope that would otherwise seal its promise. For the exponent of each of these narratives a choice presents itself: either the case is to be silenced by denying its validity (thus giving rise to a new differend), or in accepting the case it must concede the extensional reach of its own discourse. Either way it annuls its own credibility. Just as there are events, there are differends, which serve to disrupt the well-ordered picture of the world that the advocate of universal emancipation seeks to render immaculately. Emancipation must continually brush up against its own impossibility.

'The end of grand-narratives', proclaimed by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* is provided with its own ontological rigging and set against its own historical backdrop. The status of Lyotard's own examples must be taken as 'signs', which can only *indicate* at best a tendency. What they cannot be regarded as are real referents as facts, which would suppose that their meaning were directly transmissible from the events themselves (as discussed previously in this chapter). But this issues Lyotard with his own dilemma. Either his pronouncement of the consummate failure of the Idea of emancipation is itself not credible, for if it were he would not derive a categorical refutation from what are only conditioned cases. Or, in order to be credible, he cannot dismiss, *once* and for *all*, emancipatory Ideas. Neither offers the requisite proof for the refutation of emancipation that he wishes to deliver in his 'Missive on Universal History'. As Alain Badiou was quick to remind Lyotard at the time, 'the end of metanarratives' is cut from the same cloth as the dogmatic metaphysics of the philosophies of History.⁴⁹⁹

This logical contradiction is perhaps a symptom of the way in which Lyotard ultimately errs on the side of a sceptical critique, one that dislocates with the Kantian variant at the very level of the Idea. Kant placed importance on salvaging the power of the Idea from dogmatic metaphysics, by retaining it through its regulative use. Certainly, Lyotard does not wish to dispense with all reference to the Idea, but there is very much an apparent hesitation on his part, which is dramatised in the case of emancipation.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid p31.

⁴⁹⁹ Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, (New York: SUNY, 1992) p31.

Lyotard often comes close to arguing that something in the Idea of emancipation predisposes it to dogmatism. But were this so, Lyotard would be equally guilty of transcendentalising appearances. If the first rule of Kantian critique is that the Idea has no direct presentation in experience; the second rule is that the fallacy committed in putting to use an Idea does not lie in any *particular* Idea but rather in the manner of its deployment. Or, to be more exact, *all* Ideas lead thought to commit transcendental illusions, on point of fact that Reason is pushed to transgress its limits, to present something for which it cannot know and the presentation of which thought can never exhaust. On this account, there would be nothing specific to the Idea of emancipation that would make it subject to critique any more than to critique the Idea as such. But to entertain the latter possibility would, for Kant, necessarily lead to a drift into scepticism once more.

Lyotard's allusions to Kant—numerous, extensive, and of great depth—are marked by a hesitation. On the Fifth Day of his conversations with Jean-Loup Thébaud—which comprise the volume entitled *Just Gaming*—Lyotard expresses his 'hesitation' between two positions. He remains caught in two minds between the 'conventional wisdoms' of the sophists and the 'Enlightened' critical metaphysics of Kant.⁵⁰⁰ It is the hesitation itself which will serve as a third possibility—and neither the agonistics of the sophists nor the regulatory Ideas of Reason that gave rise to a moment of undecidability. It is this ethical timidity that the rest of the chapter shall dedicate itself to thinking, which marks the withdrawal from both the spaces of politics and emancipatory Ideas, but in honour of the event.

Emancipation: Heteronomy and the Ethical Hold

Lyotard, as we have seen, places himself between the event as presentation and the unrepresentability of the event. The former sanctions the ontological claim that there are events. It speaks in the imperative mood that we 'must' phrase, that to make links between phrases (and *mutatis mutandis* the existence of events) is itself a necessity. The 'must' is 'not an obligation, a *Sollen*', Lyotard writes, 'but a necessity, a *Müssen*.'⁵⁰¹ Here, the 'must' is to be understood in the way in which it is presented in the closing line

⁵⁰⁰ J-F Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, pp73-4.

⁵⁰¹ J-F Lyotard, *Differend* §102.

of Beckett's *Unnameable*: 'I must go on, I can't go on, I will go on.'⁵⁰² The imperative mood of the 'must' overburdens the feeling of any sense of impotency or incapacity expressed by the modal verb ('I cannot') forcing one to continue, even in spite of oneself ('I will go on').

But things are equivocal. If there is the ontological claim that issues from the statement 'there are events', then the second claim—the unrepresentability of the event, 'the event of its inapprehensible presence'⁵⁰³—while not contradicting the previous axiom, opens itself up to an ethical supplementation that does not lead directly from the ontology Lyotard develops in the *Differend*. That there is something unrepresentable is, true, the negative condition that ensures that there is still more to say, that we must go on, that there will always be something else to phrase. It is on such basis Lyotard adjudges the Idea of emancipation to be futile; the name of the emancipatory Event (the 'Revolution', the day of the 'second coming', the realisation of unfettered 'Free Markets', etc), would mark the cancellation of all events. But, at the same time, the unrepresentable introduces an equivocation at the heart of the event and its thinking. The 'must' begins to modulate between necessity and obligation, between *Müssen* and *Sollen*. The necessity of the event begins to give way to a preponderant concern with not *that* it happens but *how* thought must comport itself toward the fragility of that which happens, at risk of being silenced, violated, damaged, wronged by another phrase.⁵⁰⁴ Neither the agonistics of multiple rationalities nor the recourse to some regulatory Idea is deemed satisfactory. Lyotard will substitute a hesitation between two doctrinal possibilities (the Sophism of agonistics and the Kantianism of Ideas of Reason) and turn to the effect of 'hesitancy' as itself containing the possibility of a solution.

What Lyotard calls 'passibility'—a neologism formed from 'possibility' and 'passivity'—functions as the ethical attunement to that which happens.⁵⁰⁵ 'Passibility' would be a hesitancy in the face of what may or may not occur, not only in the sense of not seeking to anticipate the meaning of any possible happening, but moreover facing up to the possible impossibility that nothing may take place. As Lyotard explains, when the painter encounters a blank canvas, the artist must face the real prospect that nothing may happen.⁵⁰⁶ There is a moment of hesitation bordering on anxiety that obligation will lay

⁵⁰² Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Everyman, 1997)

⁵⁰³ J-F Lyotard, *Differend* p61.

⁵⁰⁴ Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, pp11-18.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid* pp119-128.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid* p92.

with thought commencing a vigil for that which has not yet come to pass, but in coming to pass, carries with it the risk of being passed over, forgotten, vanquished. Lyotard proposes an ethics of the event, an ethical comportment that couches thought's task in terms of an act of privation in the face of what may or may not happen, a complete disarming, so as to evade all mastery and therefore be ready to welcome the unexpected in both the mystery and density of its alterity:

In order to take on this attitude you have to impoverish the mind, clean it out as much as possible, so that you make it incapable of anticipating the meaning, the 'what' of the 'It happens...' The secret of such asceticism lies in the power to be able to endure occurrences as 'directly' as possible without the mediation or protection of a 'pre-text'. Thus, to encounter an event is like bordering on nothingness. No event is at all accessible if the self does not renounce the glamour of its culture, its wealth, health, knowledge and memory.⁵⁰⁷

If *Le Differend* gives rise to a situation of a generalised agonistics, according to which an unbounded multiplicity of phrases are subject to an interminable struggle by genres of discourse to determine their sense with no one genre securing for all others the rules by which peaceful consensus is to obtain, then in subsequent works, the *agon* of the political is shorn of any self-sufficiency: 'polemos is not the father of all things, he is the child of [the] relation of the mind to a thing that has no relation to the mind.'⁵⁰⁸ The relation of struggle between modes of presenting what calls to be presented, is substituted for the non-relation between thought as a presentative operation and what does not make any direct plea to be presented. Thought ceases to be the active constituent that shapes, and gives direction to, what demands to be put into phrases, but entirely passive and derivative, it is at the behest of something that is entirely indifferent to it, something which withdraws and recedes, that which cannot be handled or grasped because it calls neither to be handled or to be grasped, but is, mute matter. The event increasingly coheres around this indifference to the compunction of thought and, *mutatis mutandis*, to the will that propels thought to determine matter. Whereas the event of the differend asks to be put into phrases—and thought's responsibility is to invent new idioms for what are otherwise injured by forms of presentation not properly calibrated to the specificity of the case—the event becomes increasingly cut adrift from the dependency it otherwise has on thought and that, through such dependency, serves only to reinstall the autonomy of the thinking-

⁵⁰⁷ Jean Francois Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*, p18.

⁵⁰⁸ J-F Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p190.

being once more: ‘matter does not question the mind, it has no need of it, it exists, or rather insists, it *sists* ‘before’ questioning and answer, ‘outside’ them. It is presence as unrepresentable to the mind, always withdrawn from its grasp. It does not offer itself to dialogue and dialectic.’⁵⁰⁹ This recasting of the event puts politics on the opposing side of a dividing line. It is not only the case of foregrounding the derivative character of politics—in positing the primacy of matter—but of highlighting that politics, like metaphysics, ‘[...] is a way for the mind to forget it, to forget the *coitus impossibilis* that engendered it and never stops engendering it.’⁵¹⁰

That which evades and escapes the mastery of the concept will become a pressing concern for Lyotard and which, during the course of his later investigations, will be indexed by different notions: the ‘indeterminate’, ‘the anobjective’, ‘an immaterial materiality’, all of which are infinitely modulated through a nuance, a texture, sonority of the timbre etc.⁵¹¹ Art, and not politics, becomes the paradigm of the event for the Lyotard: the painting of Cezanne and its ‘pure occurrences of unexpected colours’,⁵¹² a composition by Webern and the resonance of an unheard chord, etc.

An evasion of mastery, of autonomy, a welcoming of the possible through a state of privation and passivity; such ideas begin to pervade the later texts of Lyotard and serve as the stage for another confrontation with the Idea of emancipation. If before the refutation of emancipation was staked out by Lyotard in ontological terms, taking its aim at the credibility of any metaphysical defence of the Idea, then the second time around the point of contention is waged ethico-politically. The problem with the Idea of emancipation becomes a problem about a flight from responsibility, a wish to be completely autonomous and free from all relations to others, a desire to command over and take possession of both the self and what is other than the self:

Emancipation consists of establishing oneself in the full possession of knowledge, will, and feeling, in providing oneself with the rule of knowledge, the law of willing, and the control of emotions. The emancipated ones are the persons or things that owe nothing to anyone but themselves: Freed from all debts to the other.⁵¹³

⁵⁰⁹ J-F Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p142.

⁵¹⁰ J-F Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p190.

⁵¹¹ J-F Lyotard, *The Inhuman*. pp135-52.

⁵¹² J-F Lyotard, Jean Francois Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*, p18.

⁵¹³ J-F Lyotard, ‘The Grip’, *Political Writings*, p150.

Yet, long before it can be said to be the modern dream of autonomy and self-possession, emancipation would be about the passivity of the child, the slave, whose condition for liberation is controlled by another. Lyotard will seek to play upon this ambivalence.

Of Latin derivation *ēmancipāre* would mean, literally, the release from the condition of being seized (*capere*) by the hand (*manus*). *Prima facie*, this would not seem incongruent with its modern understanding; perfectly consonant, for example, with the opening lines of Kant's answer to the question, 'What is Enlightenment?', namely an image of man wresting himself from the guiding hand of another, of him showing the courage to seize his autonomy.⁵¹⁴ In reality though the idea of emancipation in antiquity harboured more than an ambivalence. The Institutes of Justinian would convey something of a redoubled sense of heteronomy upon which the idea of emancipation would play, of remaining in the thrall of another even in the act of release. Under Roman Law, on issues falling within the remit of the household, the basic classification of persons was drawn between *sui iuris* and *alieni iuri*, separating those who exercised power and those in the custody of a freeman, between those exercising self-ownership and those possessed by another. Emancipation was not to be seized, to be taken, but was a gift that the benevolent master would bestow, often feeling a prick of moral conscience before the time of his death. The Spartacus rebellions notwithstanding, there lacks in the pre-modern understanding something of the subjective force, the cathectic courage, the moment of actively seizing and taking-in-hand one's liberty, we attribute to recent emancipatory struggles.

Before the circulation of the money-form, slaves, as objects (*res*) for transfer, would readily be exchanged in the marketplace. The practice itself would involve the congregation of freemen surrounding slaves, laying claim over the chattels through the physical act of seizing with the hand. There was very little difference, on a formal level, between this act of exchange from the performative act of the manumission of slaves. In the presence of a group of witnesses, the master and the local magistrate (*praetor*), the slave would have his freedom bestowed by the touch of a wand (*vindicta*).⁵¹⁵ Emancipation therefore would be the act of freeing (*e-*) a slave from the

⁵¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' *Political Writings* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991) p54.

⁵¹⁵ This particular practice is mentioned in Chapter VI, article 18 of the Institutes of Gaius, and it reads: 'No slave under the age of thirty years, who had been manumitted, can become a Roman Citizen unless set free by the wand of the praetor, after proof of good reason for the manumission had

hand (*manus*) that seizes (*capere*) accomplished through placing one's hand once more on the slave. It would bring to light a sense of the double bind, of an experience of heteronomy redoubled (that even in the act of release, of freedom, one is in the grip of another).

One has to be wary of a set of variations in the consequences extricated from this 'antiquarian' or 'premodern' understanding. On the one hand, one could find resonances in the Pauline discourse of religious salvation. In Saint Paul's epistle to the Galatians, for example, an analogy is drawn between the process of Christian redemption and the act of emancipating a minor from the order of *pater familias*. Saint Paul writes: 'During our minority we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe, but when the term was completed, God sent his own Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to purchase freedom for the subjects of the law, in order that we might attain the status of sons.' (Galatians 4:3-6.). Man's self-incarceration is a condition of dependence that comes to an end with the deliverance of man into the home of the lord as one of his sons. Two orders of minority are operative here; liberation is the passage taking us from one heteronomous order to another. A recurring set of tropes in Saint Paul speaking of the 'home' of our lord, the 'house of God' further radicalises the heteronomy of freedom. A radicalisation accomplished through the complete inversion of the process of emancipation of the son from the power of the patriarch—where the process of salvation is for Saint Paul the movement that takes us from the deserted isolation and existential atomism of the natural world to the *Oikos*, the house of the lord.

But one would not need to restrict one's attention to antiquity to trace out the effects of this way of thinking emancipation as operating within and, not disjunctive from, the law of the other, of heteronomy. Any temptation to draw a line of periodicity between the pre-modern and the modern understanding of emancipation will be too quick. Hegel will make a maxim out of 'liberation as duty'⁵¹⁶ in his notion of the ethical life, which will extricate liberty from the empty formalism of libertarianism, where an

been established in the presence of the council.'

⁵¹⁶ As if to make the whole question more contorted, in an addendum to §149 of *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel equates libertarianism with slavery. He writes: 'When men say we will to be free, they have in mind simply that abstract liberty, of which every definite organisation in the state is regarded as a limitation. But duty is not a limitation of freedom, but only of abstract freedom, that is to say, of servitude. In duty we reach the real essence, and gain positive freedom.'

unbridled subjectivity ‘remains wrapped up in its own unreality’, and where ‘in duty alone the individual freely enters upon a liberty that is substantive.’⁵¹⁷

In the later writings of Lyotard, then, we find, in a different guise, a set of refrains that play quite intentionally on the etymology of emancipation, focusing specifically on *manceps*, ‘the grip’.⁵¹⁸ If Lyotard is moved to see something salvageable in the event of emancipation, then this event is not the advent of Man’s freedom, it is not the result of the deeds of men overcoming oppression in the political sphere so as to expand their freedoms. It is quite the reverse. Emancipation is the grip of the event that seizes thought, issuing commands to be received and placing thereby the receiver in an incurable debt. The problem, according to Lyotard, is that ‘for two millennia, in political, epistemic, economic, ethical, technical and perhaps even poetic thought and practices, modernity has traced its path by criticizing supposed “givens”. The West does not accept gifts.’⁵¹⁹ This is the errancy of the Idea of emancipation, according to Lyotard. It is already unreceptive, inattentive to the reception of the event.

The grip will afford Lyotard the opportunity of instituting on the site of emancipation a disjunction between an ethics and a politics of the event. As a political demand, emancipation promises the release from the grip of the other, to prise oneself away in order to attain autonomy, autarky. But the ‘grip’ is the permanent reminder that one is in the possession of another, held captive, the other’s hostage. The grip is a duty of responsibility; if the emancipated as autonomous life were a possible life, absolute emancipation (a complete release from the other) would be the act that breaks with ethical responsibility. Lyotard concludes: ‘the emancipated ones are the persons or things that owe nothing to anyone but themselves: freed from all debts to the other.’⁵²⁰ The ethical inflection that Lyotard would wish to place on the idea of emancipation would be to invert its putatively ‘modern’ political understanding: not to evade the grip of what is other, but, at every turn, to remain in its thrall, to be touched indelibly and indefinitely by the demand that is issued forth from the singularity of its advent in the form of the event as that which happens.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁷ G Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §149.

⁵¹⁸ J-F Lyotard, ‘The Grip’, *Political Writings*, p150

⁵¹⁹ Ibid. p151.

⁵²⁰ J-F Lyotard, ‘The Grip’, *Political Writings*, p150.

⁵²¹ Ibid p155.

Lyotard will adduce that politics and emancipation form a tragic pairing; the two drawn invariably into a set of metaphysical illusions: politics remains in search for what it cannot properly prove or know. For Lyotard, on the contrary, as a philosopher of the event, the only thing that he can know is the fact that there must be events to keep him in a state of hesitancy, asking: 'Is it happening?'⁵²² Lyotard takes us to the far ends that thought is capable of drifting in order to honour the occurrence of the new. It leads to the place of solitude and privation, but, more importantly, with respect to this investigation, it marks the vexed flight from the foreclosure of political novelties and the muting of emancipatory Ideas. A redoubled annulment.

⁵²² J-F Lyotard, *The Differend* §264.

Concluding Reflections

In Light of the Idea: The Place of Emancipation in the Field of Philosophy's Political Visibility.

The structure of this thesis follows a well-rehearsed two-step routine: a *critical examination* of a set of issues arising from the ways in which the Idea of emancipation has been thought in relation to politics, giving rise to a *positive recomposition* of the possibility of thinking their relation. This approach is in keeping with the general movement of a critical philosophy—whether this be, as set out in *Being and Time*, Heidegger's recasting of the question of Being after critically identifying the 'forgetting of Being' that had becalmed much of philosophical thought⁵²³ or Hegel's overcoming of the dogged unilateralism of much of German Idealism—see-sawing as it did between the sides of noumena and phenomena, freedom and necessity, spirit and nature, subject and object—by way of the development of a genetic and dialectical phenomenology. This is not to ignore Kant—it would be mystifying to do otherwise—who speaks of the importance of this integrative procedure in the second preface of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. There it is said that setting out the limits of possible knowledge, of reeling in the more exuberant excesses of metaphysics, is not the sole task of an immanent critique of Pure Reason; 'in reality', he adds, it 'has a positive and very important use.'⁵²⁴ Accordingly, this positive contribution lay in affirming 'an absolutely necessary practical employment of pure reason'⁵²⁵ in which thought must take the inevitable step *beyond the limits* of what is corroborated through experience, and, in this sense, contravenes the principles of the understanding which, in accordance with the categories, secures synthetic a priori knowledge only of sensible appearance, and allows for no extension of the categories to what lay beyond what is conditioned by time and space. For Kant, this practical deployment finds its point of articulation in morality. Under whatever name this second move is ventured, one can nonetheless say that the prerequisite of any philosophy, which proceeds in a putatively critical manner, is to pass

⁵²³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).

⁵²⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A802/B830.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.* A786/B824.

through these two moments: both destructive *and* creative. The temptation of dogmatism lies behind any attempt to move immediately to the affirmation of an idea, principle, theorem, while the refusal to move beyond the negative critical examination remains the sceptic's predilection.

First, then, and returning specifically to the inquiry set out in this thesis, we can ascribe the following meaning to this formal structure. The first set of operations undertaken—entirely negative—have served as an attempt to circumscribe the limits of reasoning within which the idea of emancipation has played its part. Whether in a supporting-role or as the lead part, emancipation has shared the stage with the category of politics. But, never have the idea of emancipation and the practice of politics been thought in a way that satisfactorily accounts for them as taking to the stage together, so to speak. Less figuratively, what has proved absent is an account that thinks in terms of their co-belonging or co-appearing, and not then in terms of their disappearing or displacement. We can gather together a set of variations in which their relation is either said to be transitory or negatory, corruptive or instrumental, deficient or excessive.

Emancipation is said to find its consummate realisation in the *negation* of politics as a practice. This would be the arresting judgment of Marx. Yet at the same time we know that Marx looked at things in another way, identifying the political with class antagonism. *The Communist Manifesto* famously proclaims 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles':

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeymen, in a word oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carr[ying] on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight [...]⁵²⁶

Politics is both the institutionalisation of the 'Two' of antagonism just as it is the very process that appears only so as to disappear once more.⁵²⁷ Arendt offers a different set of reflections, whereupon the relation between politics and emancipation is placed in reverse. Emancipation is an amphibologous category that cannot be realised in reality, but in forcing through its realisation, the results are the imperilling of the spaces for politics. This is Arendt's preponderant thesis. But at the same time there is the acknowledgement that 'the simple fact of the emancipation of women and the working

⁵²⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p79.

⁵²⁷ For an interesting discussion of this please see: Jacques Rancière's *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 1995) pp34-6.

class'⁵²⁸ alters the way in which political questions are framed in modernity. This 'radically new face'⁵²⁹, which at one point Arendt writes of politics thought in the light of emancipatory struggles, is never fully expounded by Arendt. It is rather left to indicate the passage that introduces otherwise excluded elements into the visibility of already established public spaces. Emancipation as an 'entry', an 'introduction' into politics, but not itself *a* politics, which functions as an operator that effectuates a shift in the very visibility of what is and what is not political. There is the redoubt of a prejudice in Arendt that allows her only to recognise that at best emancipation is a pre-political condition, and welcomed only as far as it operates as the accession of the workers and women into political life.

If the work of Jean-François Lyotard has been considered then this is because present in his work is not so much a concern for the nature of the relation between emancipatory ideas and political forms, but a concern for the event and its consecration. Lyotard's contribution to these discussions can be seen as assisting in showing the aporias of a one-sided account of both the Ideas of emancipation and politics. Marx's commitment to the advent of emancipatory man serves as *the* Event, but as Event—as the *eschaton* of unconditional ends—it entails the Event to expiate all events. Arendt's commitment to the political is on account that it is the privileged name for events. But, Arendt faces the problem of wanting to know exactly what distinguishes the political (the shelter for events) from its outsides and affirming only those events that coincide with the meaning she ascribes to the Idea of politics she champions. A veritable circularity subsists. Lyotard will therefore locate an inconsistency bordering on an infidelity to the very possibility of the happening of the event that the Ideas of 'emancipation' in Marx and 'politics' in Arendt are said to open themselves towards. To *know* the meaning of 'emancipation' or to determine the *what* of politics is to foreclose the very possibility of the event as that which, on the one hand, breaks with the known and, on the other, that which happens prior to the determination of its meaning. Each strategy gives rise to its own differends, to a set of events that cannot be correctly phrased and are thus silenced and violated. It is this risk of muting events that preoccupies Lyotard, but such a preoccupation comes at the price of fleeing from the possibility of

⁵²⁸ Hannah Arendt, 'An Introduction *into* Politics', *The Promise of Politics*, p144.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*

rethinking their relation. Both emancipation and politics are sacrificed at the altar of the purity of the event.⁵³⁰

This negative component has, therefore, required that we trawl the depths of certain texts of thinkers that have had something to say about the (non) relation between emancipatory ideas and politics. It has also taken us through the high-roads of transcendental interrogation. A set of antinomies disclose a set of intractable problems surrounding the suppositions undergirding a politics of emancipation, which on pain of conflict and inner-contradiction, may be taken by some as sufficient reason to put to one side the whole ordeal, and—as, for example, Rorty would think it reasonable to do—‘to invent new tools to cope with new situations.’⁵³¹

Saying this, however, a re-thinking of this relation is duty-bound to affirm in one and the same gesture, one, the importance for thought to think the event (as Lyotard understood), two, the significance of the evental attribution that politics, as a happening carries with it (as Arendt recognised), and, three, the centrality of emancipation as a task to be thought (a commitment that Marx never wavered from).

These concluding reflections will at least begin the task of providing the requisite positive contribution (a task that had already commenced in chapter one of this thesis). As the title above announces, the form this recomposition takes is the presentation of emancipation as an Idea: in light of the Idea, how might philosophy think emancipation in a way that affirms the novel and the evental in politics? We need to fix in our mind—at the level of philosophical thought, that is—in what way one can think politics in light of an idea. But, not solely to think politics, but to think politics in a way that is both consistent with and consequent in tracing out a thinking of politics that does so by way of the categories of the ‘new’, of the ‘event’.

There are some suppositions which are duly being made here, and are best disclosed immediately. First, the Idea. By Idea, this thesis operates under the following, basic, definition: an Idea is a mode of presentation (distinct from the concept, the category, an intuition) which has no corresponding object in experience. An Idea is not reducible to any spatio-temporal determination, and therefore lacks any direct representation in the world. This established, why attempt to rethink the relation between emancipation and politics in this way, which would be, after all, eminently orthodox and

⁵³⁰ This is immaculately shown by Jacques Ranciere, ‘The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics’ *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* London: Continuum 2010; pp184-205

⁵³¹ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers* Volume 1. p211.

therefore potentially hazardous? What is to profit from this approach? Would not the image of the philosopher wielding Transcendent Ideas in order to think politics return us to some very questionable suppositions about the place of philosophy in political matters, and the subordinate role that politics takes in relation to its own affairs?

The Return of the Repressed? Politics Suppressed for the Good of the Idea

There is a type of question we shall need to consider that addresses itself to the *eschaton*, raised at the end of times (or at the prospect of such times). The end of times, which supposes the culmination of tasks and the realisation of Ideals, would at one and the same time be—in the *superlative*—the best and worst of times. The best, because what had been agonisingly strived for had finally been reached; there would be the joy of fulfilment. But, the worst, because it would be the night when all cats are grey. This Hegelian jaunt is important to focus minds on the problematic harboured by the Idea—the Idea which, according to Hegel, puts philosophy forever in the service of the ‘divine’⁵³², of both the ‘the unconditional’ and ‘the absolute’. It is against this backdrop that the following question, raised by the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, in an article entitled ‘The Immanence of the World Beyond’, is to be considered. He wonders

What will we do when we will have become forever what the Middle Ages called a traveller—a *viator*—a man of the earth and not the blessed in heaven, a *viator* forever condemned to his living condition, a kind of prosaic immortal without any transcendence or struggle to give meaning to the undefined pursuit of being?⁵³³

It shall be recommended that this question has a sense best left undetermined. Our own overdetermined senses may however make us particularly receptive to hear within its posing the condemnation of present circumstances. We might be quick to identify in this question first of all a description of our own contemporaneity. This privative figure of the *viator*, who lacks the possibility to transcend his immediate situation, condemned to be marooned on an earth of spent hope, would find his home in a present which for some has itself taken on the appearance of a ‘post-political’ void. This predicament would be perfectly concordant with, for example, the hostile environment that Alain Badiou describes in his little book on Saint Paul. The fertile fields in which the

⁵³² Hegel, *Lectures on The History of Philosophy Vol. 3*.

⁵³³ Quentin Meillassoux, ‘The Immanence of the World Beyond’ p473.

new and experimental might otherwise take root—‘art’, ‘science’, ‘politics’ and ‘love’ (what he calls the ‘four truth procedures’)—providing the possibilities of breaking with the logic of what is extant, run the risk of today being obliterated by the planetary machinations of a ‘culture-technology-management-sexuality system’, a system perfectly calibrated and attuned to the rhythms and demands of market enterprise and ‘commercial presentation’.⁵³⁴ It is the age of techno-globalisation, likened by Jean-Luc Nancy to the ‘gloom’ of obscurity hanging over ‘a land of exile’ and a ‘vale of tears’.⁵³⁵ But the particular phrasing of the question we receive from Meillassoux is more ambiguous. First, note that the question is posed in the future perfect (‘What we do when *we will have become forever* condemned...?’). Its address is to a time that has yet to come to pass. Far from it speaking to a present of limited transformative possibilities, the question is posed to the day when the great transformation would have been achieved, when all tasks are accomplished and victories won, and man wanders the earth fully at ease with himself and the world around him.

The ambiguity that the question plays upon therefore brings two otherwise contrary times to a point of indiscernibility. The realisation of Ideals in a future time mirrors a present that has evacuated all sense and meaning in political principles, and calls for the residents of the world to merely adapt to the system. This indifferentiation would, after all, be the moral of Hume’s allegorical tales about the just community needing no idea of the just and, on the other, the community that bases its exchanges on expediency alone. It would also be the reason for Arendt rallying against the utopic dreams of the young Marx that would be nothing short of a living nightmare,⁵³⁶ a nightmare that Arendt flips back onto her own lived present, tending as it does towards a state of worldlessness and desertion: two situations coalescing around the same forgetting of the meaning of politics.⁵³⁷

But, when Meillassoux enquires into the dawn of a day in which man is emancipated from the struggle for freedom, when justice has been absolutised and peace received, the playful reverie of Marx is to be consecrated. Rather than be drawn into the same argumentational orbit of Arendt, Meillassoux sees precisely in what others (along with Marx himself, in circumstances where more circumspection was demanded) would have left to the mice, a precious thought worth saving:

⁵³⁴ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (London: Stanford, 2003) p12.

⁵³⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalisation* (New York: SUNY, 2007) p42.

⁵³⁶ Hannah Arendt ‘Introduction into Politics’, *The Promise of Politics*, p153.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

I believe that what remains the advent of justice [...] is precisely what Marx had promised—and perhaps this in truth his most extraordinary promise, even if today it is held in contempt even by his most inventive heirs; there will be a communist life, that is to say, a life finally without politics. In other words life without the unspeakable enthusiasm which proceeds from all these things in those beautiful souls? To live beyond war, violence and sacrifice—even in a world of war, violence and sacrifice—that is what is at stake in the intimate transformation of the eschatological subject.⁵³⁸

Meillassoux, then: a lone dissenter in a mass of enthusing voices that have taken to the championing of political process over the fixation of determinant ends and grand designs. General discussions in the area of political philosophy have recently tended to gravitate around the issue of an ontology of politics, some even entertaining the prospects and the desire for a fully functioning Leftist political ontology. Under the insignia of the ‘primacy of the political’, the recent gesture has been to divorce the sedimented ways in which politics circulates in and around society (limited to the parliamentary chamber and its legislative responsibilities, the ballot box and the periodic casting of votes, international summits and the decisions made by political statesmen and lobbyists) from another more antagonistic—an interruptive and dissensual—mode of politics, irreducible to any particular regime or system. Against this tendency, the course Meillassoux tacks is as peculiar as it is ardently classical. Meillassoux contemplates the necessary moment when ‘politics is suppressed’⁵³⁹, the determinate negation of politics as the horizon toward which our most cherished struggles for justice must tend. This gesture brings us full circle. If the Idea is to be thought as unconditional, as absolute, then what can this possibly entail other than the coming-community as *apoliteia*? What is the point of engaging in a struggle that will not be satisfied with seizing the absolute, unconditional, so that one be fully delivered not from a particular injustice, but injustice as such? Unless, as one less than charitable critic has phrased it, in turning politics as an end in itself, the risk is the purposelessness and decadence of a ‘politics for politics sake’⁵⁴⁰—once the dream of aesthetes and artists for an autonomous art.

This manner of questioning returns us to the scene of a fundamental ambivalence regarding politics and Ideas, between means and ends, between the strife and

⁵³⁸ Quentin Meillassoux, ‘The Immanence of the World Beyond’ p473.

⁵³⁹ Ibid. p474.

⁵⁴⁰ Richard Wolin, *Heidegger’s Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Lowith, Hans Jonas and Herbert Marcuse* (London:Princeton Press, 2001) p248

struggle of the *agon* and the peace and tranquillity of the *eschaton*, between the conditionality of political struggle and the unconditional Idea. A set of faultlines, then; are they bridgeable? This is an issue that, at certain points in this thesis we have already touched upon. Here, however we need to think through this antinomy in order to offer the requisite recasting of the tripartition of philosophy, politics and emancipatory ideas.

The thesis that has been developed up to this point has as one of its critical aims a questioning of the very assumption that politics and emancipatory ideas must, at some point, part ways. This parting of ways is deemed necessary, because of what is perceived as the invariable disharmony between the abstraction and inflexibility of Ideas, on the one hand, and the concretion and vicissitudes of political practice on the other. A disjunction, as is the case with Arendt, comes to institute itself between the solitariness of the thinker and the necessity of acting-in concert in political matters, between the One and the many: ‘the “one” in the speechless and actionless end of thought, which is the perception of truth as the supreme possibility of measuring up, so to speak, to the ‘oneness’ of the idea or God’⁵⁴¹, against the plurality of men, whose incalculable acts would evade all such measure.⁵⁴² The problem with the Idea is that it is the enthronement *of the One by the ‘one’* who thinks it, who would wish to force it onto a state of affairs that does not conform to the structured and orderly presentation of the concept. This need not result in the contemplative repose of the philosopher who wishes, as Nietzsche writes, to disjoin the ideas of the ‘good’ and the ‘just’ from their embeddedness within a conditioned set of presuppositions and traditions, liberating them so that they become mere empty logical operators, the objects of parlour games for the dialectician.⁵⁴³ It equally lends itself to the rise of the political fanaticist on a ‘metaphysical crusade’.⁵⁴⁴ The problem, writes Albert Camus, is that while ‘philosophy secularises the ideal, tyrants soon appear who secularise the philosophies which gave them their right.’⁵⁴⁵

The idea: the seat for what is both eternal and universal, both transcendent and abstract, is seemingly at variance with the vicissitudes and concretion of political life.

We need to consider, though, in all seriousness what other mode of representation is open to philosophy? Or, put another way, is not what specifies

⁵⁴¹ Arendt ‘The Tradition of Political Thought’, *The Promise of Politics*, p61.

⁵⁴² Ibid

⁵⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §430. pp234-35

⁵⁴⁴ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, p77.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid

philosophy as a particular mode of thinking the thought-figure of the Idea? This is not to say that other modes of thinking—for example, the thought of those engaged in a political action of some kind—do not make use of Ideas. It is obvious that they do ('Democracy', 'Revolution', 'Freedom', 'Fraternity', 'Community', etc. would be just a few examples). But, arguably, such other modes of thought are not defined exclusively through such employments. On the other hand, philosophy's *modus operandi* has arguably been consumed by the following two-fold task: one, to think by way of Ideas; two, to think not merely with the use of Ideas but to think the Idea as such. At the level of philosophy, philosophers articulate their thoughts in terms of ideas. But there are different philosophical accounts of the Idea, just as there are different Ideas to be accounted for (God, the Good, the Beautiful, the World, Reason, the Absolute, etc.). Kant on his own presents us with four species of Idea: 'transcendental Ideas'; 'transcendent Ideas' (or 'rational Ideas'); 'immanent Ideas' (or 'aesthetic Ideas) and 'Ideals'.

Certainly, this thesis is not concerned with thinking about *any* idea, but rather the Idea of emancipation, which admittedly will bring with it a particular set of demands and questions. Why might one wish to think emancipation as an Idea? There are other possibilities, this is true. We might wish to think 'emancipation' at the level of the *demand*, as Ernesto Laclau understands the term, namely as a concrete claim made by a particular claimant addressing a certain political order.⁵⁴⁶ This is no doubt an important way of capturing one of the basic modes of presentation by which political action (itself a mode of thought) is itself possible, as well as moreover a possible (but by no means exhaustive) way in which emancipation may operate politically. Nonetheless, it will not help specify the relationship that philosophy has to politics, which is *principally* neither as a politics itself nor as a theory. In the case of the latter, as a theory, the demand would be used as a unit of analysis (which, at the level of theory, would turn the 'demand' into a *category* of a theoretical schema) to explain the genesis and development of political processes. And in the case of the former, if philosophy were to operate with the demand as a way of thinking emancipation it would either be because it is addressing the issue of the emancipation of the community of philosophers or that it is raising the demand of emancipation on behalf of some other oppressed group. Of course, politics is not exhausted through the demand either, and nor would emancipation be only thinkable in these terms. Laclau would not deny this. We could as easily think emancipation as a mode

⁵⁴⁶ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, (London: Verso, 2005) p73.

of presentation that goes beyond any singular demand and functions instead as the gathering instance, the pulling together of a multiple set of demands, which is irreducible to any of the demands aggregated—what Laclau will call an ‘empty signifier’ (which, when defined as pointing toward a ‘universality that cannot be represented in a direct way’, could easily be thought as a *mode* of Idea).⁵⁴⁷

Emancipation might be thought in terms of a *concept*. By concept (in contrast to the Idea—a difference must be insisted upon here), one ought to speak of a mode of representation to which one has attached a determinant set of properties and characteristics. Take the colour ‘Red’, for example. One can provide a concept of ‘Red’ or ‘Redness’ by saying that it is any colour which has a wavelength between 630 and 750 nanometers. The concept of Red contains the essential properties that will ensure that Red is identified as Red in its Redness in all possible situations. In the case of providing a concept of emancipation, the possibility of doing so requires that knowledge be accrued as to what it means to be ‘emancipated’, to be ‘emancipatory’, for a society (or an individual) to have satisfied the conditions for emancipation to have been attained, etc. As a concept, we would have a set of finite indicators with which to isolate, compare and contrast putative cases of emancipation. But, rather like the poet who does not describe with concepts the reddish shades of the leaves from a maple tree on an autumnal evening, the use of the concept would not specify philosophy’s relation to politics, or define philosophy’s way of thinking emancipation. One of the problems with the concept is that it is not conducive to thinking the new. A concept wishes to identify the essential properties of X so that X be knowable. But were the Idea of emancipation to be indeed knowable, then cases of a politics of emancipation would merely conform to what is both expected and thus what might be anticipated to be the case. Whatever is new is per definition what cannot be known in advance of its appearing. Thus for it to be recognizable as a possible case of an emancipatory politics—and therefore not to be discarded out of hand—its novelty is already compromised.

It was proposed in earlier sections of this thesis that the relation of emancipation and politics is to be understood in terms of co-operators. This is to say, to

⁵⁴⁷ Ernesto Laclau, ‘Identity and Hegemony’, *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality* (London: Verso, 2000) p56. Everything rests on the *mode* of the Idea, which need not be thought in terms of a Regulative Idea, in the Kantian sense, or an Eternal Form, in the Platonic sense, or even the Hegelian invariant of the Idea as a concrete universal. But, if none of these possibilities then what other mode of Idea is available? This is the crucial question.

think the ‘emancipatory’ in an emancipatory politics is to think the operation performed when, in given a particular situation, the ‘what’ that defines ‘what’ counts as political, is placed in question. One emancipates a subject, one invents a new name for a collectivity, one liberates an object, one discloses a place, which were all otherwise not recognised as political. At the same time, the specific meaning attributed to emancipation is always immanent to a certain political happening; which is to say, we can neither isolate the political nor the ‘emancipatory’ outside the process of which the two terms are the active operators, namely the ‘event’. Necessary is that the right articulation be found between the ideas of emancipation and politics, placing on each term an equal weight, putting the two terms on an even keel. To hold politics hostage to a transcendent Idea it will never live up to would not only do politics (and those who engage in politics) a disservice but concomitantly it would reduce the Idea to something inert. Of central importance is that we see politics as an immanent operator of that Idea, and not its servant.

Formally speaking, the logical moves being adopted here have been deployed by others, but with different (though by no means incommensurate) terminological figures. On the subjects of ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘justice’ (signifiers closely associated to the figure of emancipation, though by no means reducible to them), recent exercises in French philosophy have sought to think how each of these Ideas relate to politics. There has been a general movement away from thinking their relation in the genitive form—a politics *of* freedom, a politics *of* equality, a politics *of* justice. In each of these cases the preposition directs politics to the Idea as a determinant object; whether we speak of freedom, equality or justice, politics becomes the process by which a pre-constituted object (as a cognisable idea) is to be realised, whether as a goal or an end to attain. The meaning of each Idea would be worked out before the process of politics had already begun. The Idea would both put on track such a politics and just as quickly derail the same political sequence for not living up to its promise.

This relation of the transcendence of idea as ideal over politics as the interminable process of realising the purity of the ideal is to be substituted by an immanent corroboration between politics and ideas, so that, *hic et nunc*, a politics is considered already an exhibition, a practice, a singular (but a singular as part of a plural) manifestation of emancipation, of equality, of justice, etc. In a discussion about the philosophical uses of Justice with respect to politics, Alain Badiou writes of Ideas more generally that rather than them serve as the horizon of our political actions through the fixing of definitions or the issuing of proofs, one must ‘proceed via the understanding of

the axiom.⁵⁴⁸ This axiomatic turn would mean that a politics is not held to account by the adequacy of the description of the Idea it posits. What is important are the implications that a situated politics unfolds from the axioms it starts from, which prescribes what is already the case and not what should be so. An axiomatic thinking therefore does not say *f because a, b and c* (to think axiomatically is not to offer justifications). Rather, it proceeds instead in the following way: *given f then a, b, c*, where *f* is not proved or defended, but is the point from which new immanent deductions are possible. Principles of equality, justice, or emancipation serve thereby as starting points from which a given politics sets out, not as perfected states to arrive at, or as external measures to measure up to. In this way Ideas are not ‘concepts for which we would have to track down more or less approximate realizations in the empirical world [but] conceived as operators for seizing an egalitarian politics [...] it designates what is rather than what should be.’⁵⁴⁹ A similar sentiment is transmitted by Jacques Rancière at the end of his five lessons of intellectual emancipation, where politics is the ‘seizing in every sentence, in every act, the side of equality’, equality which is ‘not an end to attain, but a point of departure, a supposition to maintain in every circumstance.’⁵⁵⁰ It is a trajectory which is also followed and immaculately drawn out by Jean-Luc Nancy, who argues:

What is bad in [any] regulating infinity is that [...] freedom, equality, not to mention fraternity, are guaranteed beforehand in the Idea and at the same time delivered to the infinite distance of a representation in whose element the right to these Ideas is by definition contained [...] But if [for example] freedom is on the order of fact, not right, or if it is on the order in which fact and right are indistinguishable, it must be understood differently [so that] the political act of freedom is freedom (equality, fraternity, justice) in action, and not the aim of a regulative ideal. That such an aim could or should belong to this or that pragmatic or political discourse (it remains less and less certain that this would be a pragmatically desirable and efficient mediation or negotiation with the discourses of Ideas) does not impede the political act from being at the outset freedom’s singular arising or re-arising, or its unleashing.⁵⁵¹

In a more compressed formulation, Nancy will add: ‘Fighting “for” freedom, equality, fraternity, justice does not consist merely of making other conditions of existence to occur, since it is not simply on the order of a project, but also consists

⁵⁴⁸ Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p99.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁵⁰ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, p138.

⁵⁵¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988) p75.

immediately affirming, *hic et nunc*, free, equal, fraternal, and just, existence.’⁵⁵² For Badiou, Rancière and Nancy, then, the challenge for philosophy is to affirm the co-appearance of politics and freedom in any politics of freedom, the co-constitutivity of politics and equality in any politics of equality, etc. In this way, one might be in a better position to emancipate the novelty of politics from the prison-walls of a bounded concept.

Such a procedure would have the added benefit of avoiding the dialectic of ‘will’ and ‘despair’ that has dogged the revolutionary tradition from its beginning (a falling in and out of love with politics when ideas have, with an empirical inevitability, been just as quickly rescinded and atrophied as they had once been raised in hope of a new beginning) and instead begin with an unwavering affirmation of what a politics can do, what it can bring into being that dislocates with what is generally accepted, with what constitutes the common sense of a given regime of being-there.

It remains a question, then, at the level of philosophy, to think emancipation in the form of an Idea and not to think it in terms of a *demand* that might address a given political order (i.e. ‘We, the philosophers, demand that all be emancipated from...’) or to think the demand as *a category* by which to think how emancipatory struggles come to exist in the world (as might be the case in an explanatory political theory) nor, finally, as *a concept*, which would claim to offer a definition of what it is to be emancipatory.

Only in the light of the eternity of the Idea might we be equipped with the ultimate riposte to those who would say we are the inhabitants, the wandering *viators* of ‘post-emancipatory’ times.

⁵⁵² Ibid p169.

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