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THE ARTIST OF NOT BEING GOVERNED: THE EMERGENCE OF THE POLITICAL SUBJECT

Abstract

The chapter addresses the conditions of possibility of the emergence of the political subject. Drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou and Martin Heidegger, we develop a formal notion of the subject as a worldly being that subtracts itself from its intra-worldly identity, traversing a condition of its own 'inexistence' in its world. It is this subtraction that makes possible the emergence of a subject of a genuinely universalist politics that is not tied to particular worlds. We shall then elaborate this idea in the context of the recent messianic turn in continental philosophy, addressing both the advantages and the limitations of the messianic account of the subject in Agamben's reading. The chapter concludes with the discussion of the composition of the political subject that navigates a middle course between the 'dogmatist' universalization of subjective capacity and its 'spontaneist' limitation to those already inexistent in their world.

Introduction

The political subject is in for a comeback. After three decades of (post)structuralist unease regarding the very notion of the subject, contemporary continental or 'post-continental' thought (Mullarkey, 2007; James, 2012) has come to reassess and reassert this notion. Recalling the title of the well-known anthology 'Who Comes after the Subject?' (Cadava, Connor and Nancy 1991), one is tempted to answer: the subject him-, her- or maybe it- self. Yet, this reassertion is evidently not a matter of rehabilitating a constitutive or transcendental subject as a foundation of political (or other) practices but rather of tracing its formation in these practices.

Nonetheless, the fact that the subject is an immanent *effect* of practices does not mean that it is entirely *produced* by the existing regimes of power and knowledge, rationalities of government or apparatuses of control. The subject must be rigorously distinguished from the more general notion of agency, whose modes may well be prescribed by the existing order. Contemporary theories of political subjectivity, articulated in different ways and contexts by such different authors as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Ranciere emphasize the way the subject emerges through what we shall call a dis-identification from its 'place' in the world. Subjectivity is not merely irreducible to a positive identity but actually emerges in the act of distancing or subtracting oneself from one's identity, insofar as the latter is a product of power relations and governmental rationalities. While the (post)Foucauldian governmentality approach tends to emphasize subjectivation as a process of the subject being formed *in* the practices of government, the theory of the subject that we shall outline in this chapter emphasizes the formation of the subject *against* these practices. Of course, being-against is only possible *within* what one is against, hence it would be facile to speak of a wholly different site of subjectivation. What changes from the Foucauldian approach to subjectivation to the more recent accounts of Agamben and Badiou that are the primary inspirations for our approach, is less the site than the *vector* of subjectivation, which is directed from within what in the Foucauldian-Deleuzian idiom was termed positivity, apparatus (*dispositif*) or diagram (Foucault, 1990: 77-89; Deleuze, 1988: 21-37), and what we, following Badiou, shall term 'world', to its exteriority, outside or the void. Nonetheless, even this shift is hardly a matter of the abandonment of the Foucauldian approach to subjectivity as such; after all, Foucault's own late theorization of the subject unfolds under the aegis of the critical question 'how not to be governed' as the 'art of not being governed quite so much' (Foucault, 1997: 44).

In this chapter we shall address the conditions of the emergence of the practitioner of this 'art of not being governed' (ibid., 45). It is important to emphasize that these conditions pertain strictly to the possibility of the emergence of the subject and not to the actualization of this possibility, which remains contingent. In our approach, political subjectivation is not a matter of necessity – it is perfectly possible that there aren't any political subjects in a given situation, context or world. Nonetheless, as this chapter shall demonstrate, the possibility for subjectivation does exist in any situation and indeed emerges from its very structure.

Our task is therefore restricted to outlining the general logic of subjectivation: how is something like a subject possible at all? How can there emerge, in any given world, characterized by a certain positive relational order, a figure defined by a distance it takes from this order and the possibilities of agency it prescribes?

In the following section we shall outline the background for our argument in Badiou's phenomenology of worlds and introduce the figure of the 'inexistent' as the object of political practice. We shall then proceed to develop a formal notion of the subject as a worldly being that subtracts itself from its intra-worldly identity and contrast it with non-political, reactive and obscure forms of subjectivation. We shall elaborate this notion in the context of the recent messianic turn in continental philosophy, addressing both the advantages and the limitations of the messianic account of the subject in Agamben's reading. The penultimate section discusses the question of the composition of the political subject in a critique of two approaches to this problem, the spontaneist valorization of the inexistent and the dogmatist overstating of subjective capacity. In the conclusion we shall reaffirm the dependence of the subject on the specific attunement or mood (*Stimmung*) that enables its subtraction from the order of the world.

The Inexistent

Slavoj Žižek once attributed to Lacan what seems the simplest and yet the most accurate definition of the subject as 'that which is not an object' (Žižek 1995). Transferring this apparently self-evident statement from the psychoanalytic context to the phenomenological one, we shall posit it as the starting point for our account of the subject: the *subject is that which is not an object of the world*, where the object is defined as a regulated mode of appearing in the world (Badiou, 2009a: 199-230). Any being, be it inorganic, animal or human, becomes an object of the world as soon as it is endowed with a particular identity (or a plurality of them) within a positive order of any given world, be this the world of medicine, music, elections, war, development or diplomacy. To say that the subject cannot be an object is then to say that it is irreducible to any intra-worldly identity, it is never simply a 'worker', 'bourgeois', 'intellectual' or 'immigrant' defined in positive and objective terms. And yet, the subject cannot simply be *transcendent* in relation to the world, since the

latter is the only possible site for its activity. Whatever is not an object of the world does not appear there and hence could not possibly act in it. How is then a subject possible at all?

In order to resolve this paradox, we must address the distinction between being and appearance that is central to Badiou's philosophy. The *being* of every worldly object pertains to its status as an inconsistent multiplicity amid other such multiplicities (2005a: 58): ontology as a discourse on being *qua* being does not deal with individual beings or particular classes thereof, let alone the relations between them, but only with the sheer facticity of there being a multiplicity of beings. In contrast, *appearance* is only possible within a determinate situation or 'world', governed by an ordering structure that Badiou terms the *transcendental*, which assigns to every being a degree of existence in it (2009a: 101, 121-122, 241-242). While, in Badiou's materialist approach, whatever appears in the world is real, i.e. always has a foundation in being, the inverse is not necessarily true. It is possible for a real being, e.g. an illegal immigrant, a woman, a clandestine militant, a transsexual, a child, etc, *not* to appear in the world to which it ontologically belongs. This non-appearance may take the form of the explicit deprivation of some social groups of civil rights and liberties, the ban on political parties, the censorship of certain positions in the media, the exclusion of some topics from proper conversation, or, quite literally, the prohibition on the sheer appearance of a person, object or image in public.

In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou terms this element that *is* but does not *appear* in the world its *inexistent* (Badiou, 2009a: 321-324).¹ Since its degree of existence in the world is nil, this element cannot by definition be considered a proper object of the world: at best, it designates the zero degree of objectivity. It nonetheless remains an object in the different sense of the goal or *objective* of politics in the Badiouan understanding of the term as a radically universalist 'truth procedure' (Badiou, 2005a: 340-342; 2008: 151-153, 2009b: 241-

¹ For an earlier and somewhat different treatment of the concept of the inexistent in Badiou's work see Badiou, 2009b: 259-265. In this work Badiou has not yet made a distinction between being and appearance and the theme of inexistence is addressed in terms of the internal exclusion of the subject and its topological excess over the place it is assigned in the situation. Nonetheless, his empirical examples of the inexistent (e.g. immigrant proletariat in the national community) clearly resonate with his later elaboration of this concept in *Logics of Worlds*. See Bosteels (2011: 244-249) for a more detailed comparison of the use of the concept in the two texts.

273). What politics *does* in the world is raise the inexistent element to maximal intra-worldly existence, endowing a being of the world with appearance in it.²

Be it a question of overcoming racial discrimination, legalizing ‘illegal immigrants’, recognizing gender equality or acquiring independent statehood, politics affirms that whatever is denied existence in the world nonetheless possesses being and ventures to grant this being maximal existence in the world in question. The political imperative thus consists in *leveling* the ontological difference: what *is* must also be brought to *appearance* in the world and, moreover, it must appear maximally. In accordance with the famous line from the *Internationale*, what was nothing (in the world) must become everything (Badiou, 2005b: 115; 2011, 61).

We may grasp Badiou’s notion of the inexistent with the help of the more specific concept of *homo sacer*, presented in Giorgio Agamben’s theory of sovereign power. *Homo sacer*, a being that may be killed with impunity as a matter of neither sacrifice nor homicide, functions as the exact obverse of the figure of the sovereign in the Schmittian sense as the one who decides on the exception: both figures are ontologically *in* the world yet phenomenally *outside* it, the former in the mode of majestic pseudo-transcendence and the latter in the form of abject, zero-degree immanence: ‘the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns.’ (Agamben, 1998: 83) In more general terms, we may define the sovereign as the one who can make any being of the world inexistent, while the inexistent is the object of anyone’s sovereignty, i.e. that in relation to which even the lowliest dweller of the world in question perceives itself as all-powerful. And yet, if inexistence is never inherent in the being of the element itself, but is rather a product of the relational order of the world, then this status is always contingent, just as every positive order and every sovereign decision, which have no ontological correlate (Badiou, 2009a: 217-220, 250-251). This means that the inexistent can always be brought to existence by the

² For a more detailed discussion of this understanding of politics see Prozorov (2013a: chapter 2). Our approach to politics distinguishes it rigorously from ‘government’ understood in the sense of the positive administration of the order of the world. While government is oriented towards the maintenance and stabilization of the order of things, politics is inherently subversive of it, since it affirms those elements of the world that its order has reduced to inexistence.

transformation of the transcendental, be it through the amendment of laws or the change in the social consciousness, reform from above or revolt from below.

It is this transformation that is precisely the task of politics and, more specifically, of the political subject, which emerges in the space between the transcendental of the world and its inexistent element. Insofar as the subject cannot be anything extra- or otherworldly, it must exist within the world, yet this appearance cannot be reducible to that of a worldly object: the subject is *in* the world but not (wholly) *of* the world. In other words, the subject exists within the world as an *exception* to its objectivity. 'Every subject persists insofar as it resists its conversion into an object.' (Hallward, 2003: 242) This is why the existence of the subject in any given world can never be presupposed from the outset: while every human world is certainly populated with (individual or collective) *agents*, their agency becomes subjective only insofar as it takes exception from the positive order of the world. This is why 'there are few subjects and rarely any politics.' (Badiou, 2009b: 28). In Badiou's account, political subjectivity is not something that is always already at work despite its negations, disavowals and repressions but rather something that must be produced and maintained in adverse circumstances. While, as we shall argue below, political subjectivation is a permanent possibility in every world, its actualization and persistence depend on worldly beings' taking exception to the order of the world they dwell in, including their own identities and modes of agency.

In Badiou's theory of the subject in *Logics of Worlds*, the subject is a *body* (a positive intra-worldly being or group of beings) that is capable of producing effects that transcend the order of 'bodies and languages' that positively regulates this world (2009a: 45). The subject is precisely '[the] 'except that', the 'but for' through which the fragile scintillation of what has no place to be makes its incision in the unbroken phrasing of a world.' (Ibid.) The subject is thus an intra-worldly being or group of beings that raises the inexistent of the world to maximal existence, yet is also *itself* characterized by inexistence, insofar as it *subtracts* itself from the transcendental order. Since the subject has its entire consistency in this subtraction, it is not defined by its own identity, be it individual or collective. For this reason, it is pointless to make any distinction between individual and collective subjects. Rather than attempt to grasp the subject as *a* being defined by individual or collective predicates, we shall approach it as a mode of existence, into which a worldly being can

enter: rather than *be* a subject, one is *in* the subject, in a mode of existence which is more singular than any individual (since it exposes one's being as such) and more universal than any collective (since it is devoid of any distinction or predicate).

Dis-Identification

This mode of existence may be elaborated with the help of the Lacanian figure of the 'not-all' developed in his discussion of feminine *jouissance* (Lacan, 2000: 78-81). The subject of politics cannot be an exception to the world in the sense of transcending its order – in fact, such exceptionality rather characterizes the sovereign who sustains the hegemonic pseudo-universality of a community by transgressing its order in the manner of the Freudian primal father. Instead, the subject is fully immanent to the world, yet its subjection to its intra-worldly identity is *not all there is to it*: it is there in the world but 'not all there', its subjection being merely 'somewhere' in the infinite process of subjectivation (ibid.: 103). This is why it is impossible to understand the process of subjectivation in terms of plenitude of identity: the subject is not a worldly being *plus* a 'transworldly' bonus of subjectivity, but rather a worldly being *minus* its maximal degree of existence in the world.

Thus, the subtractive process of subjectivation consists in the *deactivation* of one's worldly identity or, in Badiou's more technical terms, the weakening of one's degree of existence in the world. The subject of politics must first slide down the existential ladder of the world, only to be resurrected to maximal existence *together* with the inexistent object as a possible yet never guaranteed result of its practice. Obviously, this does not mean ceasing to exist in the sense of death or existing in an asthentic or withered state – on the contrary, being a subject is an experience of extreme existential intensity (cf. Badiou, 2009a: 507-514). This weakening pertains strictly to the degree of one's positive existence as an object of the world, the extent to which one's very being coincides with one's objective appearance in the order of the world. In order to become the subject of politics, of the affirmation of universality within particular worlds, the worldly being must dis-identify with its particular 'place in the world' and in this manner merge, if only momentarily, with its inexistent element.

The experience of dis-identification resonates with the states of symbolic destitution that we commonly tend to associate with the states of 'desubjectivation' rather than any ascent to subjectivity. Yet, as Giorgio Agamben has argued at length in various contexts, subjectivation and desubjectivation are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually constitutive, so that the subject is nothing but the witness to its own desubjectivation, its loss of intra-worldly identity. In Agamben's linguistic theory of subjectivation the subject is always necessarily split between the poles of subjectivation (the passage of the living being into language) and desubjectivation (the expropriation of the living being in the purely linguistic existence of the subject as a mere pronoun 'I' that indicates the instance of discourse) (Agamben, 1999: 87-135; 1995: 95-97). In order to be constituted as a subject of language, the individual must undergo the expropriation of its concrete living being and enter the abstract linguistic system, identifying itself with the absolutely insubstantial shifter 'I'. On the other hand, once constituted as the subject of enunciation, the subject does not encounter the wealth of meaning to be transmitted, but rather the web of signifiers beyond its control. 'The subject has no other content than its own desubjectivation; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject.' (Agamben, 1999: 106)

How is this experience of dis-identification possible within a transcendently regulated world? The transcendental of every world prescribes a myriad of particular identities that the subject may assume and move between, ranging from one's official self-description to the obscene 'secret self'. What this distribution of intra-worldly identities must necessarily exclude is the ontological condition of possibility of the world itself. For thinkers as different as Heidegger and Badiou, this condition is nothing other than the *void*, the Nothing in which beings and worlds come to appear (Heidegger, 1977: 104-108; Badiou, 2005a: 57-58, 2009a: 112-114. See also Prozorov 2013a, chapters 1, 3). The void itself cannot appear within the positivity of the world without undermining its consistency. Indeed, every instance of its appearance is a moment of rupture, in which the relational order of one's world appears suspended and all things appear in their sheer being, i.e. as an inconsistent multiplicity (Heidegger, 1995: 136-143). It is precisely this experience of the opening of one's world to its conditions of possibility that illuminates the contingency of its positive order and makes possible one's subtraction from it.

Thus, the possibility of dis-identification is established by the very structure of the world as the order of appearance that has no foundation in being. Since there is no necessary correspondence between being and appearance, the order of appearance, including the identities of the world's objects, remains radically contingent. It is therefore possible for any being of the world to dissociate itself from its manner of appearance in the world, to disappear in worldly terms. Thus, the subject who disrupts and overturns the order of the world finds its condition of possibility in the same principle that constitutes this world itself. Since the void as a 'universal part' of every world (Badiou, 2005a: 86-88) may *always* erupt in the world and reveal the inconsistent multiplicity of being beneath the veneer of positively ordered appearance, the subtraction from one's identity remains a permanent possibility in every world. Thus, there can only be a subject because the object is itself 'not all', i.e. the objectivity of the world is inconsistent, harbouring the void within itself.

(Wo)Man of the World, Reactive and Obscure

The subtractive experience of being 'held out in the Nothing' (Heidegger, 1977: 108) is evidently an exceptional or anomalous mode of dwelling within a world, whose transcendental order serves precisely to insulate the positivity of the world from any irruption of the void and thereby stabilize the existence of worldly beings in their assigned identities. Thus, while subtractive subjectivation is an ever-present possibility in every world due to the latter's ontological inconsistency, it is not ever-present in actuality but is rather exceptional and rare. In the absence of the disclosure of the void worldly beings remain defined by their intra-worldly identity or their 'place' in the world (Badiou, 2009b: 4-12). In terms of Badiou's dichotomy between the positive stability of 'place' and the disruption of 'force' in *Theory of the Subject* (2009b: 13-50), these (wo)men of the world are wholly *placed* beings, whose interest consists in having every disorderly force neutralized so that everything and everyone would remain in their place. These worldly beings are most certainly endowed with *agency* in the world, yet this agency remains wholly objectified by the order of the world and does not attain subjectivity in the sense espoused in this chapter.

The phenomenon of voluntary servitude, famously analyzed by Etienne de la Boetie in the 16th century (2008 [1576]) and widely addressed in modern political philosophy, particularly

in the light of the Nazi and Stalinist experiences of the 20th century, becomes easier to understand in the context of the phenomenology of worlds. Rather than exemplify renunciation, perversion or escape from one's originary freedom, voluntary servitude actually characterizes one's everyday experience of being in the world, an inauthentic mode of everydayness that Heidegger termed 'falling' (*Verfallen*) (Heidegger, 1962: 219-224, 274-281). Since one always finds oneself 'thrown' into the world, one's positive identity constituted and sustained by its order, one's everyday comportment is evidently oriented towards maintaining, reproducing and securing this identity, which we perceive as our innermost 'self'. The participation in the reproduction of the order of the world through the identification with one's place in it is not the exception but the rule. As Heidegger remarks, falling being-in-the-World is simultaneously *tempting* and *tranquilizing*, offering both enjoyment and security, the enjoyment of security and the security of enjoyment (ibid.: 221-222). In fact, for this servitude even to appear *as* servitude and not as the free expression of one's worldly identity, something must happen that would weaken the hold of this identity on one's being and transform a (self-)governed object into an 'artist of not being governed'.

In contrast to the normality of voluntary servitude, politics is an exceptional force that disrupts the order of distributed and differentiated places in its drive for the maximal existence of the inexistent, which affirms freedom (from places), equality (of places) and community (without regard to place). To a (wo)man of the world, wholly reducible to its series of identities, this affirmation can only appear as meaningless turmoil that achieves nothing but the *dis-placement* of everything, making a mess of the world. Whatever problems there might be with the world (and all sensible people would agree that the world is not perfect), they are best dealt with by the established authorities through constructive adjustments and piecemeal improvements. There is thus always already a foundation for constructive cooperation that would ensure orderly progress towards greater freedom, equality and community in our world. The partisans of politics must merely abandon their idealistic illusions about absolute emancipation, full equality or non-exclusive community to realize that the existing authorities are already doing the best they can in this direction and, while it would not hurt to give them a little push forward once or twice, an antagonistic relationship with the powers of the world would only jeopardize the gains already made in making the world 'a better place' and making one's own place in it a little better as well.

This line of reasoning exemplifies what Badiou calls *reactive* mode of subjectivity (2009a: 54-58), which seeks to negate the political irruption and subsume its effects under the 'way of the world'. The subsumption consists in the claim that whatever novelty the political practice has introduced (e.g. emancipatory legislation, egalitarian practices, new forms of community), it might have been attained in its absence, by the 'evolutionary' operation of the intra-worldly ordering mechanisms. Insofar as the irruption of politics is at all admitted, it is reduced to a momentary 'time of troubles', incapable of yielding any positive consequences for the world.

If political affirmation persists in its destabilization of the transcendental, the reactive mode may be transformed into a less tolerant stance, characteristic of the *obscure* subject (ibid.: 59-61). After all, when political praxis takes disruptive forms, from strikes and occupations that jeopardize the pursuit of one's affairs in the economic network of the world to the leaks of government secrets that jeopardize one's sense of intra-worldly security, things have certainly gone too far. What began as the movement in the name of perfectly agreeable ideals of freedom, equality and community went terribly wrong, ending up hijacked by extremists of all guises, from know-nothing youths looking for an excuse to riot to professional terrorists, bent on destroying our 'way of life'. It is therefore imperative to restore the world to its senses by giving emergency powers to security services that alone are capable of dealing with the threat to the very existence of the world as it is and thus to *our* very existence as worldly beings. While the reactive subject seeks to preserve the existing order against the disruptive effects of political affirmation by subsuming them under the transcendental order, the obscure subject ventures to destroy the effects of political affirmation as such, occulting the 'new present' that political practices produce. This occultation proceeds by the construction of the phantasmatic figure of a pure, transcendent social body, devoid of political divisions of the kind introduced by political subjects. It is in the name of this phantasmatic body that the material or bodily effects of politics, new emancipatory, egalitarian or communitarian forms of life, must be destroyed.

As long as a being of the world identifies completely with its place in it, any political disruption of the particularistic and hierarchical order of places will be perceived as a threat to be countered reactively or obscurely, rather than an event to be faithful to. It is important to note that this negative response of the (wo)men of the world to political

affirmation has nothing to do with their ontological (or, for that matter, anthropological) characteristics and everything to do with their degree of existence in the world. Reactive or obscure negation of politics does not arise from the *being* of beings but from their transcendently prescribed intra-worldly *identity*, with which these beings identify to the maximal degree. It is this coincidence of the worldly being with one's place in the world that leads to the perception of every political practice as threatening the order that ensures the stability of these places. As long as the existence of a worldly being is reduced to persistence in its place, the preservation of the worldly order, including the preservation of its inexistent elements, is literally an existential necessity. This is why political subjectivation is relatively rare. Yet, as we have seen, the reduction of one's being to one's place in the world has no ontological foundation, which makes this subjectivation a permanent possibility. The subject is an exception whose possibility is established by the rule itself.

As Not

This understanding of subjectivity as conditioned by the traversal of inexistence resonates with recent attempts in political philosophy to critically re-engage with the heritage of Judeo-Christian messianic thought, particularly Pauline messianism (Derrida, 1994, 2005; Žižek, 2001; Nancy, 2008; Badiou, 2001b; Taubes, 2004; Critchley, 2012). In the First Letter to the Corinthians Paul explicitly identifies the messianic subject of 'being in Christ' with the inexistent, the 'refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things' (1 Cor. 4, 13, cited in Badiou, 2001b: 56). The position of the messianic subject in its world is thus from the outset characterized by lack, weakness and ultimately non-being. Yet, it is precisely this status that confers upon the subject the power of radical transformation of the world: 'God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.' (1. Cor. 27-28, cited in Badiou, 2001b: 47. See also Critchley (2012: 157-165).) The messianic subject traverses inexistence in its world, becoming 'the thing that is not', in order to absolutize the existence of the inexistent and thereby transform the transcendental order of the world, 'bringing to nothing things that are'.

More specifically, our definition of the political subject as the worldly being that subtracts itself from worldly determinations accords with Agamben's interpretation of St Paul in his *Time that Remains* (2005). For Agamben, the paradigm of the ethos of the messianic subject is provided by the Pauline expression 'as not' (*hos me*), used in the First Letter to the Corinthians to describe existence in the messianic time:

But this I say, brethren, time contracted itself, the rest is, that even those having wives may be as not having, and those weeping as not weeping, and those rejoicing as not rejoicing, and those buying as not possessing, and those using the world as not using it up. For passing away is the figure of this world. But I wish you to be without care. (I Cor. 7: 29-32, cited in Agamben, 2005: 23)

The formula 'as not' must be distinguished both from the affirmation of the identity of the opposites (e.g. weeping is *the same as* not weeping) and the identification of one term with another (e.g. weeping is *in fact* rejoicing). Instead, its significance is contained in the tension within the concept itself, which is undermined from within by the revocation of its content without altering its form. The 'as not' should thus be kept rigorously distinct from the rather more familiar form of 'as if', which, from Kant onwards, was widely used in philosophy to posit fictitious conditions as 'regulative ideas', guiding action in the present (Agamben, 2005: 36-37. See also Taubes, 2004: 53-54, 74-76). In contemporary political philosophy, this logic is operative in the Derridean version of messianism, whose famous slogan of 'democracy to come' presupposes, precisely by virtue of its clear distinction from any 'future democracy' (see Derrida, 2005: 90-93), that it is never actually going to arrive but must rather motivate contemporary praxis *as if* it were already here.

On the contrary, the Pauline 'as not' does not leave the subject any vantage point, from which one could profess the 'as if' fiction of the already redeemed humanity: 'The messianic vocation dislocates and, above all, nullifies the entire subject.' (Agamben, 2005: 41) Thus, Agamben's messianic subject is an intra-worldly being that subtracts itself from its identity and place in the world, continuing to inhabit it in the 'as not' mode. This subtraction requires neither the exodus from the world into fantasy and fiction nor the violent destruction of the world, but rather calls for existence in the world in the condition of the perpetual tension between its conservation as a dwelling place and its nullification as the

prescriptive order of places. It is not a matter of transcending the world but rather of rendering its transcendental *inoperative*. Thus, it is possible to understand Agamben's minimalist approach to messianism as the 'tiny displacement' that leaves things 'almost intact' (Agamben, 1993: 53), but nonetheless makes all the difference. What this displacement consists in is precisely the weakening of the degree of one's intra-worldly existence, the dis-identification with one's place in the world, which enables the subject to 'reside in the world without becoming a term in it' (Coetzee, 1985: 228).

In Agamben's theory of politics this movement down the existential ladder of the world is the sole telos of politics, which has dispensed with every positive project of transformation in favour of the affirmation of inoperativity as the originary ethos of humanity (Agamben, 2000: 140-142; 2011: 245-253). This renunciation of all future-oriented transformative action is understandable in the context of messianic politics, which, despite its assurances to the contrary (Agamben 2005: 62-73; Derrida, 1994: 61-95), can never entirely break with the eschatological problematic. If we already dwell in the time that remains, if the end of days is indeed near, then it is simply not worth our while to take the risk of a frontal confrontation with the existing order, given its imminent decline, withering away or collapse. This is the interpretation that Jacob Taubes offered of Paul's invocation of the logic of the 'as not' in 1 Corinthians 7:

[This] means: under this time pressure, if tomorrow the whole palaver, the entire swindle were going to be over – in that case, there is no point in any revolution. That's absolutely right, I would give the same advice. Demonstrate obedience to state authority, pay taxes, don't do anything bad, don't get involved in conflicts – for heaven's sake, do not stand out! (Taubes, 2004: 54)³

Of course, the affirmation of inoperativity might also proceed from the wager that one's mere disengagement from the world might be crucial in *accelerating* this demise by virtue

³ While Agamben's reinterpretation of Pauline messianism does not invoke eschatological themes (2005: 31-43) and explicitly differentiates messianic time from eschatological time (ibid.: 62-78), the wider context of Agamben's work certainly reveals eschatological motifs of its own, be it the permanent theme of the self-destructive tendency of the late-capitalist society of the spectacle, the bankruptcy of peoples and nations, the expiry of all historical tasks, etc. Various forms of eschatology inevitably make a comeback in the messianic discourse, since the ethos of dwelling in the 'as not' makes little sense insofar as the 'not' in question (the end of the existing state of affairs) is not held to be imminent. See Prozorov 2010 for the more detailed discussion of these themes.

of destabilizing the transcendental order of places. In the *Ethics of Postcommunism* (Prozorov 2009) I have traced this logic of inoperative politics in the social practices of the late-Soviet period, in which frontal dissent was supplanted by an ethos of cultivated disengagement from the positivity of the Soviet world that contributed to the sweeping, if relatively peaceful, unravelling of the system in the 1980s, precisely at the moment it sought to found itself anew on the basis of greater societal involvement in the Perestroika period. Thus, there may be good strategic reasons to restrict political practice to the subtraction from the transcendental, since rendering various aspects of the transcendental inoperative might be sufficient to deactivate or even destroy the entire order. Nonetheless, as the post-Soviet society found out to its eventual disappointment, the transcendental of the world may well maintain itself in the partly deactivated or inoperative condition, just as it may easily tolerate the diminished, 'as not' existence of some of its objects. The sheer deactivation of the ordering force of the transcendental does nothing to raise the inexistent objects of this world to existence. This is why the political subject must go beyond the minimally messianic disengagement from the world in the 'as not' mode towards the actual redemption of the world, i.e. the overturning of those aspects of its transcendental that authorize the inexistence of some beings in it.

Against Spontaneism and Dogmatism

Let us now address the implications of the subtractive logic of subjectivation for the composition of the political subject. Is political subjectivity restricted to certain beings of the world or can every worldly being in principle become a faithful subject of politics? In *Being and Event*, Badiou discusses two diametrically opposite answers to this question, *spontaneism* and *dogmatism*. The spontaneist approach asserts that 'the only ones who can take part in an event are those who made it such' (Badiou, 2005a: 237). In this approach, the only possible subject of a political sequence is the one defined by the predicate that this politics affirms, e.g. working classes in labor politics, women in feminist politics, ethnic minorities in the politics of minority rights. In the phenomenological terms of *Logics of Worlds*, spontaneism is qualified as the claim that the political subject must originally belong to the inexistent element that comes to exist maximally as a result of political practice

(2009a: 391-396, 468-475). This approach would therefore reduce the set of political subjects to the 'subaltern', repressed or marginalized beings that must overcome their inexistence themselves. The spontaneist approach does not recognize the possibility of subtractive subjectivation in the sense of the *weakening* of one's intra-worldly identity, hence it is only those who *already* inexist in the world that can act politically to transform it, while the well-placed '(wo)men of the world' will always end up on the side of the existing order.

This approach, familiar to us from various strands of identity politics, endows the inexistent object with a normative privilege arising out of its particular features. This paves the way for the understanding of politics as a transgressive inversion of hierarchies, whereby those 'missing' in the world, lacking a place in it or relegated to the invisible site of suppressed existence, are suddenly given the exclusive 'pride of place' in the world to come *because of* the very same predicates that formerly authorized their inexistence. In contrast to this valorization of the inexistent, in our approach the only 'value' of the inexistent consists in the sheer *fact* of its inexistence, which from a universalist standpoint is sufficient to make it the object of political practice.⁴ Politics brings the inexistent to existence not because of any particular features of this element that presumably render it deserving of existence in the world. Indeed, it would be absurd to valorize the inexistent element, since as a minimal and non-decomposable degree of appearance it may lump together absolutely different beings who only share the fact of having been consigned to inexistence. It does not matter *what* inexists and *why*, nor is there any reason to think that whatever happens to inexist in the world is in any sense 'better' than what exists strongly or maximally. Inexistence is not targeted because of the empirical attributes of those resigned to this status but because it is in itself devoid of any ontological foundation: in their being, all beings in all worlds are by definition in common as free and equal and no variation in the degrees of existence could ever be ontologically authorized. Thus, the political process of overcoming inexistence is

⁴ This approach to the inexistent also characterizes the work of Jacques Ranciere (1999), whose notion of the 'part of those who have no part' emphasizes the *structural* character of the 'non-part' condition, which permits the assumption by this particular group of the universal claim to embody the 'people' as such. There is nothing in the particularity of the excluded group that authorizes this ascent to universality, other than the fact of the exclusion from the positive world as such. A comparison of Ranciere with Ernesto Laclau (2005) is instructive here. While for Laclau universality can only be an ultimately fake effect of the operation of hegemony that weaves together chains of equivalence around a master signifier, for Ranciere universality is precisely what *escapes* these chains by virtue of its exclusion or self-exclusion from the hegemonic domain. Ranciere's true universality is whatever does *not* fall under Laclau's fake universality.

entirely heterogeneous to the affirmation of particular identities, even marginalized and suppressed ones, but rather seeks to overturn this marginalization or suppression as a contingent mode of the government of the world.

The notion of inexistence also permits us to reconsider the privilege granted in contemporary ethico-political thought to the figure of the Other (Levinas 1999, Derrida 1995, 1996. For a critique see Badiou, 2001a: 18-29). The in-existent is by definition the Other of any non-minimally existing worldly being, simply because, in contrast to the latter, it does not appear in the world *at all*. Yet, this alterity is not the *property* of the other itself, according to which it could be valorized or devalued, but rather the *function* of the transcendental order, which relegates various beings of the world to various degrees of existence, including the minimal one. It is this function that politics seeks to overturn, without any regard for the particular identities currently lumped under the rubric of inexistence. Politics targets the otherness of inexistence and remains utterly indifferent to the alterity of particular worldly beings, which is an elementary fact of ontology.

[Infinite] alterity is quite simply what is. Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences. But what we must recognize is that these differences hold no interest for thought, that they amount to nothing more than the infinite and self-evident multiplicity of humankind, as obvious in the difference between me and my cousin from Lyon as it is between the Shiite 'community' of Iraq and the fat cowboys of Texas (Badiou, 2001a: 25-26).

This attitude of indifference to difference appears to run contrary to the critical orientations that translate the ontological insights of 'philosophies of difference' of e.g. Foucault or Deleuze into positive precepts of identity politics. Yet, the indifference in question is arguably already at work in these philosophies themselves, whose affirmation of the primacy of difference on the ontological level should not be confused with the valorization of the different, minoritarian or subaltern in their ontic positivity. For instance, Foucault's famous call for the 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges' (Foucault, 1980: 81) ought to be understood in characteristically Foucauldian austere and minimalist terms, whereby the 'subjugated knowledges' in question are entirely exhausted by the knowledge of their subjugation and have no positive content that would replace the knowledge authorized by

the oppressors. Similarly, the Deleuzian affirmation of minor politics is furthest away from the valorization of the particular features of the minorities in question, which for him was a path to a 'micro-fascism': 'Marginals have always inspired fear in us and a slight horror. They are not clandestine enough.' (Deleuze and Parnet, 1989: 139. See also Thoburn 2003, chapter 2)

The latter point is crucial from our perspective. The 'marginals' that scare Deleuze are precisely those members of the inexistent group who make their positive identity (i.e. their *appearance*, currently foreclosed in the world) the foundation of the claim to maximal existence in the world: we appear to be nothing, *but because of what we are*, we desire to become everything. It is to this 'what we are' that a universalist politics is utterly indifferent: in ontological terms, the inexistent is a being like any other (free, equal and in common with other elements of the inconsistent multiplicity) and in ontic terms it does not appear in the world at all, hence there is literally nothing in particular to say about it. Politics is not an *expression* of one's downtroddenness or marginalization, as if they were something to be perversely proud of, but an attempt to *overcome* them, hence no personal experience of these conditions is necessary, precisely because there is nothing positive in such experiences. Thus, the privilege that spontaneism grants to the inexistent must be withdrawn without any hesitation.

Yet, having discarded spontaneism, we should also be wary of embracing the opposite approach that Badiou terms *dogmatism*, according to which *every* being of the world is always already a political subject in some latent sense. This approach expects the political affirmation to seize the entire world at once, suspending its transcendental order of places and making possible its wholesale reconstruction on the basis of the ontological principles of community, equality and freedom. Dogmatism ignores the particularizing ordering power of the transcendental, wishing it away as a lifeless and inert pseudo-power of the kind Foucault derided in his critique of the 'repressive hypothesis' (Foucault, 1990: 15-49). Yet, a positive world, be it a family, a corporation or a nation-state, may well attain the maximum of tranquility and depoliticization without actual recourse to violence but through a combination of blackmail and seduction, cooptation and conformism, security and enjoyment. The transcendental order of the world is then maintained by making its reproduction a matter of *interest* for the beings positively constituted in it. The machine of

intra-worldly governance may then run 'by itself' while the world's inhabitants remain content to remain in their prescribed places and in identity with themselves. Any political affirmation would invariably be received by such 'enworlded' beings as a threat to their secure worldly existence and invite reactive or obscure responses. The existence of 'placed' beings that we have termed '(wo)men of the world' is not a superficial distortion, beneath which we find the political subject in a latent form, but rather a fundamental experience of dwelling in the world, out of which the subject may or may not emerge in an act of subtraction.

Thus, while we reject the spontaneist thesis, we must also reject the dogmatist one. While there is no privileged identity for a political subject and everyone in principle *can* become one, not every being in the world undergoes this becoming, precisely because it does not follow automatically from one's anterior positive identity but rather involves the weakening of its hold on one's existence. Politics is not a practice that one can engage in while keeping one's worldly identity wholly intact. That is why anyone at all, e.g. workers, aristocrats, Greeks, painters, hypochondriacs, foreigners, cyclists, film stars, can participate in the political process, but only insofar as they are not only or, better, *not wholly* workers, aristocrats, Greeks, etc. – that there is something *more* in them that makes them always *less* than their worldly identity.

At first glance, this condition by definition applies to those whose degree of existence of the world is already minimal and whose being evidently exceeds their appearance. However, it would be incorrect to automatically endow the inexistent elements of the world with the status of faithful subjects of politics. It is equally possible that the beings subsumed under the minimal degree of existence assume the reactive mode of subjectivity, negating all political affirmation in the illusory hope that they can evade their inexistence by obeying and conforming to the order of the world. This quietism of the downtrodden, who hope to cease to be inexistent by diligently behaving *as* the inexistent, is at the very least as prevalent historically as their engagement in political practice. Another possibility, historical examples of which are also numerous, is the assumption by the inexistent beings of the obscure mode of subjectivity, i.e. their active destruction of the effects of political affirmation in the service of sovereign power: from the reign of Napoleon III to the paroxysms of Italian fascism and German Nazism we observe the participation of the

inexistent of the world in the destruction of the very politics that affirms the maximization of their existence in the world (cf. Thoburn, 2003: 50-58). Thus, those already inexistent in the world are certainly *capable* of assuming political subjectivity, but whether they do so or not is entirely contingent and depends on the actual unfolding of the political sequence, in which faithful, reactive and obscure modes of subjectivity remain available options.

The Subject's Stimmung

We have seen that inexistence is not a fixed category of the world that is grounded in some positive identitarian predicates, hence the possibility of becoming a subject is not restricted to those *already* inexistent in the world but also pertains to those beings, whose degree of existence is weakened from a maximal or intermediate position towards the minimum. This weakening may take place as a matter of the positive transformation of the transcendental order, whereby a formerly existent identity becomes subjugated, excluded or repressed and thus joins the ranks of the inexistent. Such events as the Nazi revolution in Germany, the Pinochet coup in Chile or the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan provide an abundance of examples of formerly apolitical 'worldly beings' becoming subjectivized as political militants as a result of their relegation to inexistence by new regimes. But, more importantly for our purposes, it may also take place as a result of the immanent change of the worldly being in question, who ceases to be wholly defined by its place in the world and thereby becomes capable of transforming it.

As we have argued above, this change takes place as a result of the disclosure of the void as the ontological condition of the world, which manifests the contingency of its positive order and momentarily suspends its force. For Heidegger this disclosure is never immediately available but is only possible in what he called a fundamental attunement or mood (*Stimmung*). While Heidegger privileged such specific experiences as boredom and anxiety as exemplars of this world-disclosing mood (1962: 228-234; 1995: 82-143), we suggest that numerous other experiences are also capable of fracturing the unity of one's intra-worldly existence and disturbing the full coincidence of the worldly being with its place in the world. It is possible to be 'held out into the Nothing' as a result of living through a natural disaster or a civil war, of surviving an illness or losing a loved one, but also as a result of more

mundane experiences of melancholy, insomnia, an amorous encounter, etc. Evidently, the list of such experiences also includes coming into contact, if only by accident, with an ongoing political sequence, which, while by definition threatening the existential security of the (wo)man of the world, might also appear beguiling or even seductive in the manner of the proverbial forbidden fruit.

Of course, none of these experiences in themselves guarantee fidelity to the ontological universality manifest in them, yet neither does anxiety, which could just as well be drowned in drink, or boredom, which could be escaped by mindless shopping. World-disclosing moods are not defined by their substance but rather by the degree of the subtraction from the world involved in them. What is important to emphasize is the dependence of the constitution of the subject, conventionally understood in terms of willful and purposeful activity, on something as passive as a *mood*, in which we habitually find ourselves without purpose and often against our will. The subtraction from one's intra-worldly identity is an experience that the being of the world undergoes or suffers rather than decides on and pursues. The active intervention in the world that defines all politics is thus conditioned by an essentially *passive* experience, whereby one's worldly existence is affected and minimized. The subject is any being that moves from the experience of this minimization towards the maximization of the existence of what the order of the world declares to inexist.

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