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Resistance and Revolt in Pre-Political Times*

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I.

Few terms in the language of the Left are as frequent, or as ambiguous, as resistance. Among the reasons for its ubiquity, and its equivocity, is no doubt the fact that it permits one to invoke oppositional energies and practices without having to wade into the often intractable distinctions between rebellions, revolts, reforms and revolutions. It does so by foregrounding antagonistic practices lying beneath the threshold, or beyond the radar, of formal, organised politics, be it on the side of the forces of order or of its adversaries. It is in this respect that the question of resistance – and this is what I'd like to dwell on in the bulk of this presentation – is bound to that of the boundaries of the political, and in particular to what a number of thinkers have specified as *pre-politics*, or the *pre-political*. Resistance also allows one to draw on forms of action whose historical origins and manifestations are disparate, but which persist as more or less implicit paradigms for the anti-systemic imaginary. Two are particularly salient: on the one hand, the everyday forms of resistance of subalterns against overpowering domination (be this slavery, colonialism, or the subjugation of peasantries by central state authorities); on the other, the formation of irregular or partisan armed bands against foreign

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occupation (from the 1808 Napoleonic war in Spain to contemporary Iraq or Afghanistan, though the intellectually formative reference – and one which, unlike the ones just mentioned, is not sullied by the aura of reaction – is to be found in the anti-Nazi resistances of the Second World War). There are obvious enough connections between these two paradigms: the presence of power as domination (or indeed occupation) and the seemingly reactive character of action are among them. We can even identify, especially in revolutionary anti-colonial writings, from *The Black Jacobins* to *The Wretched of the Earth*, synthetic treatments of these two strands. Yet in terms of how the term resistance is employed in their theoretical uptake, the differences are considerable. Due to its far greater role in current debates I will here be focusing on the first, subaltern resistance.

Everyday resistance against domination is most often juxtaposed to the restrictive standards imposed by an ideal-typical conception of political and/or revolutionary action which treats a particular trajectory (be it that of bourgeois politics in liberalism, or of workers' revolutions in Marxism) as the standard, thereby expunging forms of action already silenced by the historical record from our thinking of politics. The writings of James C. Scott, Ranajit Guha and much of the Subaltern Studies tradition, in different ways, contribute to this paradigm, which could be seen, so to speak, to 'provincialise' a certain conception of revolutionary action – though we should also note that this is a strand of thought that has its sources (and critical targets) in Marxist social histories, namely Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* and EP Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, *Whigs and Hunters* and various essays. In his essay on 'Everyday Forms of Resistance', Scott declares that 'much of the politics of subordinate groups falls into the category of "everyday forms of resistance," that these activities should most definitely be considered political, that they do constitute a form of collective action, and that any account which ignores them is often ignoring the most vital means by which lower classes manifest their

political interests'.[1] Ordinary forms of class struggle under conditions of domination – in which outright rebellion is most often met with overwhelming force – are dissimulated,[2] aimed at securing material interests and giving one's group room to breathe, and, albeit grounded on a communal climate of opinion and solidarity, are not accompanied by formal organisation. The small arsenal of relatively powerless groups includes 'such acts as foot-dragging, dissimulations, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, arson, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, anonymous threats, and so on'.[3] Much of Scott's energies are expended in trying to counter those who emphasize the cumulative function of such acts in reproducing a structure of domination, providing a kind of safety valve.

An example of this, which covers much of the same inventory of actions as Scott, is Eugene Genovese's treatment of slave resistance in the US South in *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. Genovese underscores what the dialectic of resistance and accommodation in this, to borrow his words, 'class war under the most unfavourable conditions'. Like Scott, Genovese notes the character of resistance as a tactic born of a deep asymmetry of power, though unlike Scott he proposes that within this

[1] James C. Scott, 'Everyday Forms of Resistance' *Copenhagen Papers in East and Southeast Asian Studies* 4 (1989), p. 33. Contrariwise: 'The case against moving everyday forms of resistance closer to the center of the analysis of class relations rests on the claim that these activities are marginal because they are 1) unorganized, unsystematic and individual; 2) opportunistic and self-indulgent; 3) have no revolutionary consequences and/or 4) imply in their intention or logic an accommodation with the structure of domination. An argument along these lines necessarily implies that "real resistance" is organized, principled, and has revolutionary implications'. (p. 51)

[2] 'Much of the ordinary politics of subordinate groups historically has been a politics of dissimulation in which both the symbols and practices of resistance have been veiled. In place of the open insult, the use of gossip, nicknames and character assassination; in place of direct physical assault, the use of sabotage, arson, and nocturnal threats by masked men (e.g. Captain Swing, the Rebecca Riots, Les Demoiselles); in place of labor defiance, shirking, slowdowns, and spoilage; in place of the tax riot or rebellion, evasion and concealment' (p. 54).

[3] Scott, 'Everyday Forms of Resistance', p. 34.

domination a certain hegemony (in this case plantation paternalism) took hold, making resistance and accommodation two sides of the same coin. In his words:

> Each new defeat, each abortive conspiracy, confirmed the slaves in the thought that rebellion meant suicide. Meeting necessity with their own creativity, the slaves built an Afro-American community life in the interstices of the system and laid the foundations for their future as a people. But their very strategy enmeshed them in a web of paternalistic relationships which sustained the slaveholders' regime despite the deep antagonisms it engendered. The slaves' success in forging a world of their own within a wider world shaped primarily by their oppressors sapped their will to revolt, not so much because they succumbed to the baubles of amelioration, as because they themselves were creating conditions worth living in as slaves while simultaneously facing overwhelming power that discouraged frontal attack.[4]

It is symptomatic that Genovese not only underscores the ambivalence of resistance, but that he himself is ambivalent towards it, at one point judging that certain forms of resistance, such as arson and theft, weakened the 'self-respect' of slaves and their 'ability to forge a collective discipline appropriate to the long-term demands of their national liberation',[5] and at another lauding the way in which 'slowdowns and resistance to overwork' provided a sense of community strength and the 'rudiments of organization'.[6] More than any kind of a Marxian teleology, it is a morality of labour that governs judgments such as these. Collective resistance to work is a prelude to antagonistic group consciousness, unlike individual challenges to law, property and propriety. But the upshot is that, though resistance serves not just to survive with a modicum of dignity, but to mould a durable communal identity and moral economy, on the grounds of which future

[4] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage: 1976), p. 594.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 609.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 621.

antagonism may flourish, it is also a kind of *katechon*. By the latter I refer to the Pauline doctrine, dear to Carl Schmitt, of an action that restrains the triumph of evil but which can also be regarded, like the calculus of the lesser evil more generally, as perpetuating at a lower intensity the very thing it is opposing.

While the dialectic of resistance and accommodation is one that, at least for a time, partakes of the reproduction of hegemony and the endurance of domination, Scott's image of resistance is one that at least potentially heralds the possibility of a shift to something like a plebeian molecular revolution. The spectacular defeats of open challenges may be compensated by the aggregate effects of imperceptible erosions of power. Whether as implicit strategy or as what he calls 'tactical wisdom', everyday resistance may thus attain or prepare what a revolutionary surge on its own cannot attain (Scott gives the examples of uncoordinated mass desertions from the Confederate armies in the US civil war, and from the Tsar's divisions in 1917). In his words:

> The small rebellion, the doomed slave uprising, may have a symbolic importance for its violence and its revolutionary aims, but for most subordinate classes historically such rare episodes were of less moment than the quiet unremitting guerilla warfare that took place day-in and day-out. Everyday forms of resistance rarely make headlines. But just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, thousands upon thousands of petty acts of insubordination and evasion create a political and economic barrier reef of their own. And whenever, to pursue the simile, the ship of state runs aground on such a reef, attention is typically directed to the shipwreck itself and not the vast aggregation of actions which make it possible.[7]

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 49. See also the following statement: 'Each of these small events may be beneath notice and, from the perpetrator's point of view, they are often designed to be beneath notice. Collectively, however, these small events may add up almost surreptitiously to a large event: an army too short of conscripts to fight, a workforce whose

It is worth pausing on a very significant dimension of this picture of resistance: though it can be encountered in disparate situations, its 'natural' home is in subjugated communities which have 'customs in common', or indeed which enjoyed, prior to the imposition of more uniform, and uniformly dominant, state and capitalist powers, certain customary rights. Such everyday forms of resistance are often founded on the memory of such commonality and on the trauma of its abrogation. In the wake of Thompson's *Whigs and Hunters*, Scott gives the example of poaching: 'the activity itself was part of the traditional subsistence routine of the rural population, an activity embedded in customary rights. Poaching as a crime, therefore, entails less a change of behavior than a shift in the law of property relations. It is the state and its law which suddenly transforms these subsistence routines into everyday forms of resistance'.[8]

Here we can note one of the problems raised by present invocations in the capitalist heartlands of such a paradigm of resistance. For, even if conscious of the location of such resistances in situations of accumulation by dispossession or formal subsumption, rather than under the integrated sway of the value form, those who speak of the present in terms of this kind of resistance make a material, spatial and moral claim about contemporary groups who in a sense have customs in common to defend, even if said customs are not at all 'customary' – as in various arguments for the

footdragging bankrupts the enterprise, a landholding gentry driven from the countryside to the towns by arson and assault, tracts of state land fully occupied by squatters, a tax claim of the state gradually transformed into a dead letter by evasion' (p. 37). Also: 'A pattern of quiet resistance both symbolically and materially suddenly becomes generalized, massive and open as the political situation presents new possibilities that previously seemed utopian. The French peasantry who burned chateaux and abbeys in 1789 were presumably not perfectly allegiant retainers to their kings and lords in 1788' (p. 58). Scott also quotes this passage from Marc Bloch: 'Almost invariably doomed to defeat and eventual massacre, the great insurrections were altogether too disorganized to achieve any lasting result. The patient, silent struggles stubbornly carried out by rural communities over the years would accomplish more than these flashes in the pan'.

[8] Scott, 'Everyday Forms of Resistance', p. 38.

production of new commons in contemporary forms of life and labour. Perhaps the most explicit statement of this position can be found in Paolo Virno's attempt to resurrect the category of a right to resistance, employed in seventeenth-century political thought, for the needs of the twenty-first. Against those who would pose the question of power and violence in terms of the seizure of the state and/or the negation of capital Virno argues that:

> The 'right of resistance' consists of validating the prerogatives of an individual or of a local community, or of a corporation, in contrast to the central power structure, thus safeguarding forms of life which have *already* been affirmed as free-standing forms, thus protecting practices *already* rooted in society. It means, then, defending something positive: it is a *conservative* violence (in the good and noble sense of the word.) Perhaps the *jus resistentiae* (or the right to protect something which is already in place and is worthy of continuing to exist) is what provides the strongest connection between the seventeenth century *multitudo* and the post-Ford multitude. Even for the latter 'multitude', it is not a question of 'seizing power', of constructing a new State or a new monopoly of political decision making; rather, it has to do with defending plural experiences, forms of non-representative democracy, of non-governmental usages and customs.[9]

It's a strange right this, as it is not (nor, we might argue, could it ever be) sanctioned by any law or authority, except that of a collective defensive practice – thus bringing this concept closer to a problematic of dual power, as sketched out in the practices of the Panthers, some of the Italian autonomia or Zapatismo. Though Virno knowingly qualifies his use of the term conservative, it may be worth dwelling more on its ambivalence.

After all, Locke's own defense of the right of resistance was founded on the non-negotiable imperative to conserve property, whilst, as

[9] Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. by Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004) pp. 43–44.

Domenico Losurdo has argued, Kant's refusal of the right of resistance rested in large part on his opposition to the Vendée uprising against the French revolution, and to the use of *jus resistentiae* as an argument to protect feudal privilege against the equalizing dimensions of centralized state power. I am not disputing Virno's portrait of such a right to resist in terms of a defensive paradigm – which is no doubt apt for certain dimensions of peasant, anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles (though these often turn out to be much less 'conservative' and 'traditional' than they may at first appear, as the history of millenarian revolts demonstrates). Nor the idea that, as struggles for social reproduction under the adverse conditions of a capitalist offensive, contemporary social movements could be deemed conservative in a non-pejorative sense (an argument also put forward by Pierre Bourdieu). Resistance, be it dissimulated or more open, is often, as Scott noted, 'a stratagem deployed by a weaker party in thwarting the claims of an institutional or class opponent who dominates the public exercise of power'.[10] But the kinds of resistance envisioned by Virno supposes that a contemporary multitude has been able to produce plural experiences, forms of non-representative democracy, non-governmental usages and customs that it can defend. I don't deny the existence of interstitial spaces and practices, worth expanding and fighting for, but current struggles suggest that the most urgent struggles are firmly on the terrain of social reproduction and the capitalist state – take the education struggles in Quebec, Chile or Puerto Rico, which have taken a mass resistance to particular measures of marketisation and austerity as the starting point for a more totalizing challenge to capitalist power. Plural experiences, forms of non-representative democracy and non-governmental usages and customs are definitely part of this political equation, but they are products and dimensions of struggle, not independent realities that one can defend. For in a way, though all current struggles are defensive, there is nothing to defend – in the simple sense that what we witness is not a valorization of the welfare state compact, but a sober recognition that this is the terrain of struggle, a terrain which – to

[10] Scott, 'Everyday Forms of Resistance', p. 52.

paraphrase Shelley's essay on reform – is strewn with 'trophies of our difficult and incomplete victory, planted on our enemies' land'.

In this respect, I think we can also voice suspicion about those positions that treat the positivity of resistance not in terms of (new) customs to defend – in what we could call an ethical (in the sense of *ethos*) model of resistance – but on the basis of an *ontology* of resistance. The most well-known statement of this position is of course that of Hardt and Negri. As they declare in *Multitude*: 'resistance is primary with respect to power'.[11] This statement translates a particular social ontology in which, as against the negative correlation between domination and resistance in the works of Scott or Guha, there is something like a positive correlation between resistance and the modalities of capitalist power:

> The first principle that guides the genealogy [of liberation struggles] will refer to the historical occasion, that is, the form of resistance that is most effective in combating a specific form of power. The second principle will pose a correspondence between changing forms of resistance and the transformation of economic and social production: in each era, in other words, the model of resistance that proves to be the most effective turns out to have the same form as the dominant models of economic and social production. The third principle that will emerge refers simply to democracy and freedom: each new form of resistance is aimed at addressing the undemocratic qualities of previous forms, creating a chain of more democratic movements.[12]

Though Hardt and Negri's correlation more than flirts with faddish claims about the 'network model of organization',[13] they also recast the workerist thesis – Tronti's 'Copernican revolution' – about the primacy of class struggle, arguing that capital 'depends on the multitude and yet is

[11] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 64.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 87.

constantly thrown into crisis by the multitude's resistance to capital's command and authority'.[14] Now, though I don't wish to dwell on this overmuch, I think it is worth noting that for the two authorities on which Hardt and Negri rely for the argument about the primacy of resistance – namely Tronti and Foucault – the primacy of resistance is a strategic and heuristic thesis, not an ontological one.[15] It allows a partisan or agonistic insight into the shaping of power by struggle, but does not translate into the speculative thesis that a creative or already emancipatory force is the origin of power's mutations – which is to say, in a sense, the cause of its own domination. Foucault's explicit rejection of what he calls the ontological conception – by which he understand the idea, erroneously attributed to him, of a Power capital P forever juxtaposed to minor and hopeless resistances[16] – should be extended to any vitalist conception of

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 90.

[15] And even the heuristic thesis about the primacy of resistance is qualified by the historical archive, as this comment of Foucault, cited by Scott, suggests: "It was against the new regime of landed property - set up by a bourgeoisie that profited from the Revolution - that a whole peasant illegality developed . . . ; it was against the new system of the legal exploitation of labour that workers' illegalities developed; from the most violent such as machine breaking . . . to the most everyday such as absenteeism, abandoning work, vagabondage, pilfering raw materials…" Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 274.

[16] 'If I had an ontological conception of power, there would be on the one side Power with a capital P, a kind of lunar, supraterrestrial agency, and then on the other the resistances of the unfortunate who are forced to bend in the face of power. I believe that an analysis of this type is totally false; power is born from a plurality of relations that are grafted on something else, are born from something else and make possible something else. Whence the fact that, on the one hand, these power relations inscribe themselves into struggles that are for example economic or religious struggles – and it is therefore not fundamentally against power that struggles are born; but, on the other, power relations open up a space in the midst of which these struggles develop'. Michel Foucault, 'Précisions sur le pouvoir. Réponses à certaines critiques', in conversation with P. Pasquino. Originally published in *aut-aut* 167-168, September-December (1978), pp. 3-11 and republished in *Dits et Écrits tome III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994),

resistance as a generic, generative force. We should accept neither resistance as the secret virtuality and always-already of power, nor resistance – as in the *nouveaux philosophes* and dubious ethical sublimations of the term[17] – as an ethical position of dissidence against power, the latter being a position which often amounts to a celebration of resistance purely and simply as the resistance against politics, the state, or more generically, mastery, in a manner that presents any directed collective project of transformation as tainted by the original sin of power taken and exercised.

II.

So far, I have considered resistance in terms of the problems raised by defensive or reactive paradigms of anti-systemic action. Among the facets of such resistance are its potential character as accommodation or reproduction, its invisible or molecular erosion of state powers, and its broadly speaking ethical dimension, be it in terms of the defense of an ethos of customary rights or, less persuasively as the moment of ethical insurgence or intransigence against domination. But there is a question that shadows this whole force-field of questions, that of the standing of *politics*, and of the numerous polemics around the political character of various resistances. Because of the significance of this question of the non- or more specifically pre-political – evident also in the temporality of resistance as a kind of *holding out* before radical change – I want to explore it in greater

pp. 625-635 [p. 630]. All translations from the French are my own. See also Foucault's minimalist definition of power: 'power is nothing but a certain modification, the often differing form of a series of conflicts that constitute the social body, conflicts of an economic, political type'.

[17] See André Glucksmann, as quoted in Julian Bourg's *From Revolution to Ethics: May 68 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: Mcgill-Queen's University Press, 2007): 'The Russian dissidents can … help us to better understand ourselves... Keeping in view our own experience, we are free to meditate on the universal treasure of resistance to state violence' (p. 252). This ethical position finds its *Ur-text* in Albert Camus's *The Rebel*.

depth, through its mobilization in the writings of Alain Badiou. Badiou himself, in a brief piece on Jean Cavaillès, the Spinozist logician and Resistance leader immortalized in Jean-Pierre Melville's remarkable *The Army of the Shadows*, in fact presents resistance as the paradigm not of a class project or of a moral stand, but as a radical moment which unites theory and practice and makes politics possible. Resistance is for him 'a logical break with circulating and dominant opinions', for in the final analysis 'every resistance is a break in thought, through the statement of what the situation is, and the foundation of a practical possibility open by this statement'.[18] In this second part of my paper I want thus to explore the way in which resistance as break and the pre-political are linked, in particular by considering Badiou's recent reflections in his short book *The Rebirth of History* on what, using an expression also explored by the anthropologist Alain Bertho, he calls our 'time of riots' – an appellation which is itself perhaps a hopeful naming for a set of events which no longer fits so neatly under the heading of resistance, with its particular temporal and ethical dimensions, as well as its correlation with a certain conception of power.

Now, the link between the pre-political and a politics of revolt, riot, and uprising defined by the lack of revolutionary consciousness and orientation is of course not specific to Badiou. It defines the various attempts by historical materialism, ever since Engels's *The Peasant War in Germany*, to draw – along the axes of temporality, subjectivity and (capitalist) totality – the border between revolt and revolution. When the British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, in *Primitive Rebels*, sought to apply Engels's schema to the study of modern millenarian movements among the peasantry in the impoverished and peripheral areas of European countries suffering the dispossessions and upheavals of capitalist modernisation (Sicily in Italy, Andalusia in Spain), it was the category of the pre-political that in many ways organised his research. In this framework, millenarianism emerges as a reaction-formation whose primitive character is to be understood in political terms: the peasants who

[18] Alain Badiou, *Abrége de Métapolitique* (Paris : Seuil, 1998), pp. 14 and 17.

respond to the capitalist cataclysm by mobilising on millenarian grounds are not yet capable of attaining the organisational solidity and political impact that qualify mature varieties of anti-capitalism – namely, the labour movement – which have grown in the belly of the capitalist beast. Noting that they still make up the numerical majority of the world's masses, Hobsbawm famously refers to the objects of his book as '*pre-political* people who have not yet found, or only begun to find, a specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world'.[19]

If politics entails an organisation of means in view of calculable ends (Hobsbawm's classically 'programmatic' premise) then these movements are indeed pre-political – though perhaps this should be understood in the sense of proto-political, of harbouring a radical potentiality to which alliances and struggles could accord a real political valence. Hobsbawm's compelling thesis is that it is precisely the all-encompassing negativity and 'impossibilist' desire for a wholly new world of millenarian movements which makes them – unlike other forms of pre-political mobilisation, such as social banditry – politically modernisable.

The critique of Hobsbawm's political model of millenarianism played an important role in the genesis of subaltern studies in India. For Ranajit Guha, the very notion of the 'pre-political' occludes the logic of peasant revolts in the subcontinent, but more importantly it takes their practical consciousness and political subjectivity – the *negative* consciousness and *negative* subjectivity – away from those who time and again rose up against the rule of the British Empire. For Guha, this logic and this consciousness are based on a politics that systematically negates the radical distance and oppression that characterises the subaltern's relation to the imperial authorities, as testified to by the types of violence employed by the peasant rebels. As Guha writes, 'once the glare of burning mansions died down and the eye got used to the facts of an uprising, one

[19] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: Norton, 1965), p. 2.

could see how far from haphazard it had been'.[20] For him, the idea of 'pre-political people' suggests forms of blind spontaneity or false consciousness that do not do justice to the distinctive features (the 'elementary aspects') that can be gleaned from more than a century of peasant insurgencies. What's more, since economic exploitation took place in late eighteenth and nineteenth-century India through the application of direct force, 'there was nothing in the militant movements of the rural masses that was not political'.[21] (This return us once again to the paradigm of resistance against domination, rather than within a mesh or a dialectic of 'productive' power.)

The formulation and formalisation of the pre-political in Badiou's *Peut-on penser la politique?* in many ways prolongs, in an arguably more dialectical vein, his own articulation of Engels's treatment of the 1525 revolution of the common man in terms of the theory of 'communist invariants', in *De l'idéologie*. What is at stake in the 1985 text, with its schematic division into the destruction and recomposition of Marxist politics is at one and the same time the abandonment of a totalising, transitive, programmatic and/or expressive conception of revolutionary politics *and* the refutation of the 'idealism' that would – as in much post-Marxism – vouch for the potential upsurge of politics from any point whatsoever within the landscape of subjection and domination. Abandoning the canonical temporal and subjective understanding of pre-politics in the likes of Hobsbawm – where it would come *before* real revolutionary politics on a developmental line, and would somehow stand *beneath* the attainment of full political consciousness – Badiou compellingly presents the pre-political as the problematic field and material of a politics of non-domination, of communism. What are pre-political are situations, not people. As he writes in *Peut-on penser la politique?*: '*I call pre-political situation* a complex of facts and statements such that worker and popular singularities find themselves collectively

[20] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 20.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

engaged within it, and such that a failure of the regime of the One is discernible in it. Thus, an irreducible 'there is (some) Two'. Or: an unrepresentable point. Or: an empty set'.[22]

Pre-politics is itself an evental effect, to the extent that it already defines a situation in which the closure of action within the law and language of a situation has been undermined. The pre-political in this regard is not a kind of social latency, but already a political effect. But politics, that is organised, transformative politics, does not involve the mere recognition or assumption of this new alteration and duality, this dysfunction in the One, but its extension, through a series of consequential inquiries and decisions, beyond the original situation. Whence the definition: 'I call *politics* what established the consistency of the event within the regime of intervention, and propagates it beyond the pre-political situation. This propagation is never a repetition. It is a subject-effect, a consistency'.[23] But this propagation does not take the shape of a strategy that would invest pre-identified levers of power and transformation. It intervenes in the world, but is not of the world, to the extent that it has already broken with its criteria of possibility. Hence, in arresting counterpoint to the idea of philosophy as a grasp of one's time in thought, the notion of a 'deafness to one's time', to everything within it which 'impossibilises' politics. As Badiou declares, in homage to Rousseau: 'It is important to put all the facts aside, so that the event may come'. Even more starkly, perhaps, Badiou argues that the wager-intervention which defines his conception of the politics of non-domination is always *beyond analysis*: 'An intra-political defeat is for me the interventionist incapacity to disjoin politics from analysis. To fail is not to interrupt a given state of certainty'.[24]

The pre-political is here created, and it is created by that deafness, that laying aside of the material rationality and immanent law of a given state of affairs. The historically assigned essence of the impossible is thus to be

[22] Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), p. 76.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 77.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

deaf to the voice of the time.

> A pre-political situation is thus created, whose principle, it is clear, is interruption. Interruption of ordinary social listening, the putting aside of the facts. That is why the police arrives, which is always the police of the facts, the police against the deaf. "Are you deaf?", says the cop. He's right. The police is nothing but the amplifier of already established facts, their maximum noise, addressed to all those whose speech and action attests, because it is historically impossible, that they are hard of hearing.[25]

The pertinence of this détournement of the Althusserian scene of interpellation to our present day is considerable, both in terms of an increasing refusal to tolerate the injunctions to listen to social and economic reason, and in terms of the repressive repercussions meted against this strategic, liberating, pre-political deafness. And it is in this pre-political separation from the pervasive, persistent demand to bow down to the way of the real world, that collective subjectivity finds its resources, as Badiou encapsulates in a striking definition: 'The organised collective body is above all a constructed deafness to the injunction of established facts'.[26]

To follow the threads tying this formalisation of the pre-political to the development of the theory of the subject and to a politics of the event would of course transcend the purposes of this talk. But I think we can identify a number of crucial questions bequeathed by *Peut-on penser la politique*'s to contemporary reflection on the problem of the pre-political, and differently, at times contrastingly, articulated in *Le Réveil de l'Histoire*, a book whose sustained reflection on this problem would almost warrant subtitling it, *Peut-on penser la pré-politique?*

First, the problem of revolution – whose 'classical' figure continues to haunt contemporary reflections on resistance and revolt. In the conclusion of *Peut-on penser la politique?*, with the reference to the

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 96.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 110.

workers' movements in Poland which had defined for him what he elsewhere called 'the expatriation of Marxism', Badiou writes:

> That the infinite is the evental consistency propagated by the risk of intervention makes it so that this infinite is never presentable. Inadmissible at its source, politics is unpresentable in its procedure. In this way it is both radical and interminable. Since there is no halting point nor symbol of its infinity, politics must give up the sublime. This is doubtless why, in subjective terms, it distances itself so strongly from the revolutionary representation. As one sees in Kant, the sublime indexing of revolutionary historicity is present from the origin. But let us be attentive to that which is perhaps the deepest characteristic of the Polish movement, which is the constant internal struggle against the sublime of action.[27]

The Polish reference alerts us to an interesting change in the periodisation and judgment of political sequences. What in *Peut-on penser la politique?* had appeared as an inaugural precursor of a workers' politics beyond an expressive teleological theory of working-class revolution, is re-read in *Le Réveil de l'histoire*, alongside the Iranian revolution, as signalling the end of the 'clear period of revolutions'. Along with this periodising shift, comes a considerable change in philosophy's prescriptions. Not only does *Le Réveil* propose what could, in provocative contrast with Badiou's philosophical tenets, be termed a totalising representation of History as emancipation, but it also shifts registers, as Badiou's texts on the idea of communism already had, from restricted action to a much more global horizon of opposition. The tonal shift is thus also the index of a conceptual rearrangement. In what I don't think is a merely terminological question, the abandonment of the 'revolutionary representation' has morphed into the demand for its reinvention. If the 'the present moment is in fact that of the very beginning of a popular global uprising against this [capitalist] regression', as Badiou declares in *Le Réveil*, then we could say the problem has been reversed: no longer struggling against the sublime of action, but

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 115.

against its self-imposed restrictions, its false modesty. When, in *Le Réveil*, Badiou notes that 'an open, shared, and universally practicable figure of emancipation is lacking', is he not saying that what we most lack is... a revolutionary representation? If finding a political *form* means drawing force from a *shared* Idea, can we really say we've left the politics of representation behind? Is there not a recognition in the very formulation of the idea of communism by Badiou, and others, that there is an insurpassable need for 'ideology', which is to say for a *representation* that would both orient and mobilise? That 'affirmative singularities', to establish a kind of duration, are obliged to establish a kind of fiction of consistency?

This question of representation is the second problem opened by inquiring into the standing of the pre-political across these two books, which can serve as theoretical and periodising markers both for Badiou's thought and for the thinking of politics (of resistance and revolt in the shadow of revolution) more broadly. I would hazard that some of the oppositions that sustained Badiou's thought – along with that of other thinkers and currents – through the 'Restoration' that followed the 'red decade' of '68-'77 have lost their metapolitical pertinence, if not necessarily their intra-philosophical coherence.[28] Along with the displacement of revolution by event and resistance, and the repudiation of totality through multiplicity, I think there is something increasingly problematic – as indexed by Badiou's own turning to a discussion of communism in terms of the idea, the symbol or even the fiction – about the equation between emancipatory and non- or anti-representational thought (an equation often undergirded by a facile slippage between epistemic representation and parliamentary representation).

In *Peut-on penser,* Badiou had recast the dialectic, in keeping with another, French genealogy, as an anti-representational thought. This is

[28] On the persistent theme of the 'Restoration' in Badiou, see Nina Power and Alberto Toscano, 'The Philosophy of Restoration: Alain Badiou and the Enemies of May', *boundary 2*, 36:1 (2009), pp. 27-46.

dialectics as a thought-practice of the wager and the exception. 'One will recognise a dialectical form of thought', writes Badiou, 'by its conflict with representation. Such a thought stalks in its field the unrepresentable point, which testifies that one is touching on the real'.[29] And: 'Thought, which does not represent, produces effects, through the interruption of a chain of representations. Every dialectical thought is therefore above all an interpretation-cut'[30] – the refusal or break with representation is articulated with a hypotheses about a capacity for truth, the existence of a procedure in which truth circulates without being represented. There is a certain irony then, in contrasting such formulations – which I believe still deeply determine Badiou's thought – with the unproblematic way in which Badiou treats the existence of capital as totality and the necessity for a totalising representation of revolutionary or emancipatory politics in *Le Réveil* and other recent texts. A politics of the event is predicated on the inconsistency of structure and the inexistence of totality, but inasmuch as both of these are thought as partisan, contradictory and processual, surely a certain notion of the event *is* compatible with a *dialectical* conception of totality. The irony then is that in *Le Réveil* Badiou seems to propose a representation of contemporary capitalism – as oligarchy, banditry and regression to the age of Empire – much more seamless and non-contradictory than any which a Marxian theory of value or crisis could ever allow itself. Conversely, the discussion of the Idea seems to put far more store and emphasis on representation than a relatively orthodox Marxism ever did. Marx's conception of a communist movement as a form of negative praxis may suffer from an ideological and motivational deficit, but it is telling that he rarely conceived the deficit of political agency principally in terms of a deficit of ideational coherence. As he noted in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844: 'In order to supersede the idea of private property, the idea of communism is enough. In order to supersede private property as it actually exists, real communist activity is necessary'.

In *Le Réveil*, Badiou establishes an arresting progressive

[29] Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?*, p. 86.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 88.

phenomenology of our contemporary pre-political forms of antagonism, identifying the peculiarities of and relays between immediate, latent and historical riots [*émeutes*]. The categories of the pre-political and the event are accordingly recast:

> A pre-political *event*, a historical riot, is produced once an intensive over-existence, articulated with an extensive contraction, defines a place in which the situation as a whole is refracted in a universally addressed visibility. You can identify an evental situation at a glance: because it is universally addressed, you are gripped, like everybody else, by this universality of its visibility. You *know* that the being of an inexistent has just appeared in a place that is proper to it. This is indeed why, as we've said, no one can deny it publicly.[31]

In this conceptually compressed passage, Badiou is in a sense both reviving the Kantian theory of the historical sign, of a presentation of the universal and of its publicity, and undoing it – tellingly, by explicitly presenting subjective localisation of the break with the One of the situation, in phenomena like the popular occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo, as a 'representation of the whole by contraction',[32] where the whole is the People, again a category that seems inseparable from a problematic of representation, and from its familiar impasses, namely the internal division of the people between *sujet de l'énonciation* and *sujet de l'énoncé*.

If representation can be revisited in terms of the revolutionary idea and the revolutionary subject, I think it should also be revisited in terms of the question of capitalism. In staging his engagement with this question via the post-workerist theme of capitalism as creative, cognitive and postmodern, in order to repudiate it, I think Badiou, in *Le Réveil*, has eluded a more interesting political and philosophical problem, which is that of the relation between crisis and event, capital and its negation. Though this is a vast topic, especially in what concerns the articulations and disjunction

[31] Alain Badiou, *Le Réveil de l'Histoire (Circonstances 6)* (Paris: Lignes, 2011), pp. 104-5.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

between capital and the state, the political and the economic, I would simply wish to indicate that if we think through the problem of crisis and that of the limits to capital – as what Marx called an 'automatic subject' and a social form, rather than merely as an organisation of banditry by the 1%, which it *also* is – we may want to dissent with the idea that 'it is certainly not capitalism and its political servants that reawaken History, if we understand by 'reawakening' the upsurge of a capacity which is both destructive and creative and whose aim is to really exit the established order'. Though it would be 'historical mysticism', in Gramsci's words, to think of 'the' crisis as a unified phenomenon, one cannot gainsay its capacity to *negatively totalise* movements that are otherwise disparate, and which now are *not* united by a project, programme or Idea, but by their opposition to what Badiou rightly presents as an intolerable regression. In that regard any idea of communism will also need to contend with the malevolent objective spirit of the crisis, with the bad new, as what is in fact impelling, without in any way determining or automatically generating, the propagation of pre-political situation across sites which have no pre-given ideological or subjective commonalities.

Dialectics, historical materialism, and communism can in many respects be defined by their relationship to the pre-political. Is the latter a latency, potential, presupposition, or teleologically-oriented movement? In our times of riots, which are also times of anxious enthusiasm, Badiou's thinking of the pre-political is arguably a significant testing-ground or interlocutor for anyone concerned with rethinking the articulation between philosophy, revolution and politics today. To his formalisation and phenomenology of our time of riots, I would wish to add the need to move beyond the oligarchic image of capital, so pertinent but also so misleading today, to really think the political valences of an ongoing crisis, the differential specificity of the pre-political in crisis, which is also to say the unpredictable but non-arbitrary intertwining of political sequences and capitalist temporality. Not to do so treats the pervasive form of social organisation and over-determination of politics, baldly present today in terms of the increasingly open 'dictatorship of the bourgeoisie' (where

dictatorship should be understood not just as domination but as a logic of permanent emergency powers), as a kind of backdrop, or a purely subjective figure of enmity (oligarchs, bandits, the 1%), rather than as a crucial condition for movements, which, to the extent that they tackle the brutality of capital's abstract domination, and its concrete personifications, cannot but engage in a practical critique of political economy.