

Time, Narrative, and the Political

The Dislocated Logic of Political Foundations

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PhD Thesis

I, Jack Reilly confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

‘In the city, the streets are nicely laid out. And you drive on the right and you have traffic lights, etc. There are rules. When you leave the city, there are still roads, but no traffic lights. And when you get far off there are no roads, no lights, no rules, nothing to guide you. It’s all woods. And when you return to the city you may feel that the rules are wrong, that there should be no rules, etc.’

- Ludwig Wittgenstein

‘Nothing is built on stone; all is built on sand, but we must build as if the sand were stone.’

- Jorge Luis Borges

Abstract

From the earliest works of political theory dealing with the constitution of legislative and executive powers to more recent theories of revolutionary change, there has always been an urgency among political thinkers to theorise moments of radical transformation. The central claim of this thesis is that narratives of radical political transformation necessarily pass through a moment of opacity or circularity. Moreover, I propose that narrative opacity can be theorised while maintaining a rigorously materialist ontology.

The first chapter reads Søren Kierkegaard's 'moment' as describing a change which is irreducible to its prior conditions. Rather than requiring a theological paradigm, I claim the moment can be read as indicating a fractured materialism in which ontological incompleteness has a temporal character. Throughout the second, third, and fourth chapters, I show how speculative and theoretical accounts of political change necessarily encounter moments of narrative opacity. In contractarian accounts of political origins we find an unavoidable narrative distortion characterising the founding moment in which, as Rousseau openly states, an effect must serve as its own cause. The authority of the God-like sovereign of Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* is shown to be reflexively determined through the recognition of a political subject, while reflexive determination itself produces irresolvable narrative distortions. The same dislocated chronology that shows up in Hobbes and Rousseau can also be located in Badiou's concept of the event. The event cannot be construed as a single, indivisible unit; instead, it contains a split between the sheer occurrence and the intervention or nomination that registers the occurrence as an event. As in Rousseau, an effect must serve as its own cause, albeit at the cost of narrative intelligibility. The final chapter ties the preceding arguments together through reference to the 'transcendental materialism' of Adrian Johnston and Slavoj Žižek.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council for having funded my research between 2012 and 2015.

The conversations, debates, and experiences that led me to write this thesis are too numerous to mention here. I would, however, like to thank a few close friends whose input and support has been utterly invaluable to me. Conversations with Emily de Villiers and Rosie Ledger throughout my childhood and adolescence were formative in the strongest possible sense. Simply put, I would not be the person I am today had it not been for their companionship. Dave Boldrin and Saraid McIlvride were enormously supportive during a difficult period of my life and I will always be grateful. Tom Bienias and Murray Curnow provided comic relief and a welcome distraction from academic work. Frequent bouts of verbal sparring throughout 2012-2013 with my then flatmates Rory Kirkwood and Rachel Mulvena helped awaken me from two years of intellectual hibernation. I was able to clarify and refine my ideas during a crucial stage in the writing of this thesis only with the help of Veronika Pehe. Ingvild Lohne Frøyen encouraged my original masters application in 2008, and has always been one of my most trusted, supportive, and loyal friends. The unexpectedly difficult task of arriving at a final title for the thesis was accomplished only with the help of Alice Olsson. She is both a valued friend and a formidable interlocutor.

I would like to thank my students for making my job as a teacher so enjoyable and for mercilessly subjecting my esoteric interpretations to the cold light of their critical scrutiny. I am also grateful to Andreas Kalyvas, Wolfhart Totsching, and two anonymous reviewers for providing illuminating feedback on an earlier iteration of the argument comprising the third chapter of this thesis.

I feel extraordinarily lucky to have benefited from the supervision of two of UCL's most gifted academics. There is no doubt that without the help and support I received from Kevin Inston and Tim Beasley-Murray this project would not have been possible. For three years, Kevin has been one of my most attentive and thoughtful readers—if there is any semblance of a sustained argument among these pages, I have him to thank. As for Tim, it would be no exaggeration to say that, over the past decade, his guidance and mentorship has had a profound and formative influence on my academic trajectory. I first met

Tim as an undergraduate student on The History of European Political Ideas (a course I would later go on to teach between 2014 and 2016) where he introduced me to many of the thinkers and ideas that gave shape and impetus to the direction of my postgraduate study. Sometime during the first year of my PhD, Tim made a comment that has stuck with me ever since: the thesis is not simply about an arbitrary topic or idea that one happens to have taken up an interest in; rather, the idea serves as a proxy for one's own self-exploration. This means that, ultimately, the thesis is always about its author. The topics, concepts, and ideas that the author encounters are so many strands woven together in the fabric of a metaphor for the author's ownmost inexhaustible thought. I am grateful to Tim for all his help and guidance over the years. It is a privilege to have been his student.

My interest in politics and my ability to write (more or less) coherently is a result of my parent's utter dedication to my education. My entire family have been incredibly supportive throughout the writing of this thesis and I owe them more than I can possibly begin to express here.

Introduction

In his essay, ‘Interpreting Revolution within the French Revolution’ Claude Lefort notes the ‘opacity’ which arises as ‘the effect of the dissimulation of something that has entered the register of the thinkable for the first time’.¹ It is a statement that neatly expresses the central thread around which the chapters of this thesis are woven—the idea that, when faced with the task of describing the radical political events of the modern era, opacity is not incidental, but essential. Historical analysis meets with certain limitations as soon as it begins to grapple with events in their symbolic dimension—not so much as a stable picture to be exhaustively examined and described, but as a field of representation in which the perceiving subject is unavoidably implicated. Our interest is in the politico-philosophical consequences of these limits of the ‘register of the thinkable’ and the opacity they indicate. More specifically, this thesis explores the theorisation of political opacity’s temporal extension and narrative articulation. If we are dealing with, as Lefort puts it, ‘something that has entered the register of the thinkable’, we are dealing with a point of entry which should occupy an identifiable moment in time. But to describe this point in terms of opacity and dissimulation is to signal that the site does not reveal itself fully to us, that

¹ Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. by David Macey (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988), p. 93.

something is withheld, displaced, or concealed. The effacement of the contingency of a founding political gesture persists as a narrative distortion that derails both empirico-historical and speculative renderings.

If we are to admit the inscrutability of certain moments of political change, we are also thereby bound to explain how this inscrutability comes about, to demarcate its parameters, and to deploy new concepts in the service of greater understanding. I follow in the methodological footsteps of Kierkegaard whose technique of ‘circumnavigation’ involves, as James Berger argues, the “[mapping] of an unknown area by circling around it”.² To that end, I identify the opacity associated with the political event as a temporal phenomenon, arising from certain unavoidable structural constraints encountered in the narrativisation of moments of political change. The Hobbesian covenant, the Rousseauian social contract, the Schmittian decision, Badiou’s event, and Žižek’s Act each attempt to suppress, delineate, or expose a paradox which is fundamental and essential rather than incidental. Moreover, the paradox we can detect in each thinkers work has implications for our understanding of the temporality of political change that are only properly unfurled in Rousseau and Žižek. To paraphrase Quentin Meillassoux, the contingency that marks a founding political act is necessary; one cannot have a political foundation without the persistence of some trace of contingency, even if its status is that of a gap or breach.³

There is a rich tradition of scholarship which seeks to conceptualise revolutionary events in terms of their temporal heterogeneity and, in light of the depth and breadth of that tradition, this project cannot hope to provide anything

² James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 3–4.

³ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. by Ray Brassier (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010).

like an exhaustive analysis.⁴ Having said this, our approach will be to articulate a specific position vis-à-vis the problems associated with political temporality via a series of engagements with key thinkers from the tradition of political philosophy. But if this is to be our approach, we also need to provide a rationale for the selection of thinkers to be included in this study, and perhaps more importantly, justify the absence of others. The first point to make is that I have selected for analysis those thinkers whose work pertains directly to the genesis or transfer of authority. This is ultimately what is at stake in Hobbes, Rousseau, Schmitt, and Hans Kelsen. There are no doubt a vast number of other theorists who are interested in the same phenomenon, however, the key dimensions of the issue I wish to draw attention to can be set out through reference to the aforementioned thinkers. Nonetheless, there are also theorists whose omission might seem to be an oversight. The two clearest examples are Hegel and Heidegger, each of whom have had a deep and enduring influence on many of the theorists considered in the final chapters of the thesis. In the case of Hegel, I have opted to investigate two contemporary interpreters of Hegelian philosophy (Žižek and Adrian Johnston) whose joint philosophical project I believe to be worthy of attention for its own sake rather than merely as a heterodox reading of Hegelian philosophy. Likewise, Heidegger has no doubt exerted an enormous influence on thinkers

⁴ There are already several important works focusing on this tradition. See, for example: Koral Ward, *Augenblick: The Concept of the 'Decisive Moment' in 19th- and 20th-Century Western Philosophy* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008); *The Moment: Time and Rupture in Modern Thought*, ed. by Heidrun Friese (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001); Andrew Gibson, *Intermittency: The Concept of Historical Reason in Recent French Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). Other valuable studies which make a significant contribution to the secondary literature on temporal heterogeneity albeit without necessarily making it their primary focus include the following: Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009); Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, ed. by Anthony J. Steinbock (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008); Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009); Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (London: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

such as Claude Lefort, Jacques Derrida, and Ernesto Laclau, however, my position is that each of these theorists are sufficiently distinctive to warrant analysis on their own terms rather than merely as exponents of a Heideggerian political ontology. In addition, there is already existing scholarship exploring the impact of Heideggerian thought on political philosophy.⁵

It is worth clarifying some of the terms mentioned above before we proceed. For the purposes of this study, ‘radical political events’, ‘founding acts’, and ‘political transformations’ are taken to be rough synonyms, indicating a change in the locus of authority, but crucially, one that does not occur through pre-existing legal mechanisms. For a transfer of authority to be radical, it cannot appeal to law as its ground, but must instead appeal to a more fundamental power, to a more basic ground. In the case of Hobbes and Rousseau, the covenant or social contract is a radical political event by virtue of the fact that it occurs in a legal, and indeed normative, vacuum. With respect to subsequent political events, ‘radicality’ indicates overt recourse to exceptional (which is to say, extra-legal) political measures and, usually, an appeal to a higher authority than law. To clarify by way of example, both the French Revolution and the American Declaration of Independence would qualify as radical political events. In both cases, there were no pre-existing legal frameworks which could authorise the acts and declarations of the political actors involved. The narratives of political origins described in the social contract tradition also constitute radical political events insofar as they describe the investiture, concentration, or transfer of authority in a particular body—the sovereign. In contrast, an event which remains within existing legal parameters and follows normal protocols is not a radical political

⁵ See, for example: Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*.

event. For example, an election result, no matter how unexpected, cannot be considered 'radical' in the sense intended here. Even if an election result has been swung by illegal means, this cannot constitute a radical political event since there has not been an overt appeal to a higher authority than the usual democratic procedural norms despite the fact that those norms have been flouted in practice. Furthermore, the various actions taken by the National Socialist government in Germany in 1933 (including the curtailment of constitutional rights, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and so forth) are not technically extra-legal. All these actions were ultimately carried out within a pre-defined legal space set out in Article 48 of the Weimar constitution and can, in principle at least, appeal to that constitution as their authorising ground.

A further clarification concerning the status of radical political events as historical or speculative also needs to be briefly addressed. Below, I will make the case that radical political events present themselves as opaque regardless of whether we are dealing with those which are supposed to have occurred historically (the American Declaration of Independence or the French Revolution) or those which are the subject of speculative or theoretical expositions (the Hobbesian covenant or the Rousseauian social contract, for example). Nonetheless, this thesis consistently opts to probe existing theorisations of radical political events rather than focusing on empirical examples. This is a decision which needs to be justified at the outset. The first point to make is that I do not discount the value of historical analysis and that I recognise the need for further research in this direction. Having said this, the argument made in this thesis could not be properly supported if I were to limit my analysis to empirical examples. Given that we are concerned with identifying limitations to the narrative exposition of certain historical events, empirical data

will not yield much insight. This is because, insofar as we have historical data which can be successfully narrativised without remainder, we are still working within the very boundaries I wish to identify and delineate. The more productive approach for my purposes is to attend to the logical problems encountered when thinking through a radical political change since these logical problems will help identify the limit of narrativisation. The exploration of these boundaries must therefore take place through theoretical and conceptual, as opposed to empirical, analysis.

Through the close reading of selected passages from a range of different texts, I hope to construct a dialogue between thinkers who might be more often read in isolation. The unconventional juxtaposition of Søren Kierkegaard and Thomas Hobbes, may seem jarring to some readers, however, the merit of such an approach is that it provides a richer and more fertile terrain within which novel interpretations might germinate. The methodological approach of this thesis can therefore be seen to take a Lefortian line. Interpretation is not the careful elucidation of an objective and immutable meaning which is to be preserved through different historical periods and gradually nourished by ever deeper exegetical excavations. While the reconstruction of the text's meaning within the context of its own historical moment may well be a worthy enterprise, this in no sense exhausts the meaning of the text; on the contrary, the text's meaning is not something which could be permanently stabilised or protected from the onslaught of subsequent interpretative activity. The only stable position with regard to, for example, Hobbes' *Leviathan*, is one that recognises the text's continued openness to interpretation and the incommensurability of these interpretations with respect to one another. I am interested in pursuing an approach that explores earlier texts in the light of current philosophical

questions. The meaning of the work for its own period may still be of marginal interest but this should not derail the more urgent task of bringing the work to bear on new situations and new problems. Such an approach is accompanied by an awareness that the work of interpretation is bi-directional, involving both an absorption and a projection which cannot be disentangled from one another.

Before asserting the permanence of certain kinds of paradox marking the political, we should be clear in advance about what we mean by a political paradox and what might enable us to confidently assume its permanence. Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* may be of some use here. To recount the central thesis presented in *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur argues that temporality is, 'the structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity' while narrativity itself is 'the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent'.⁶ While they are not equivalents, time and narrative are in a relationship of mutual implication; it is only insofar as a collection of occurrences can be narrativised that their temporal dimension becomes apparent to us. Moreover, in the very act of narrativisation (or what Ricoeur calls 'emplotment') we deploy a universal experience of temporality since it is this common experience which transforms events into a coherent narrative. Now, for the purposes of this enquiry, the co-implication of time and narrative is of vital importance. In short, if we are unable to successfully represent certain kinds of political events in narrative terms, if emplotment fails to produce coherence and intelligibility, then we can confidently assert that these political events fall outside the universal experience of temporality, or, at the very least, we are forced to refer to a highly peculiar notion of temporality in order to articulate such events in narrative terms. When, in the

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrative Time', *Critical Inquiry*, 7.1 (1980), p. 169.

chapters that follow, I refer to disjointed, distorted, or heterogeneous temporalities, it is because Ricoeur has enabled us to grasp the way in which atypical temporal modalities are implied by the encounter with insurmountable resistances to emplotment.

One could argue that an unwarranted leap between the possibility of emplotment and the human experience of temporality is being made here. This might be the case if we were only interested in the emplotment of historical narratives or fictional narratives. With respect to the former, we may be unable to successfully narrativise a set of events due to insufficient information about actors' intentions or due to our inability to properly include or discount the impact of a chance occurrence. Alternatively, Ricoeur has noted that fictional narratives may employ temporal modalities which are far more complex than those marked by temporal succession and which readers/viewers are nonetheless sensitive to.⁷ Having said this, we nonetheless do need to admit that an event presenting itself as a sudden break with the past (or, stranger still, retroactively caused by subsequent events), insofar as it cannot be read in terms of a linear, unidirectional causal succession, is unintelligible according to the logical grammar of time. As to this logical grammar of time, Jonathan Culler provides a neat summary:

narratological analysis of a text requires one to treat the discourse as a representation of events which are conceived of as independent of any particular narrative perspective or presentation and which are thought of as having the properties of real events. Thus a novel may not identify the temporal relations between two events it presents, but the analyst must assume there is a real or proper temporal order, that the events in fact occurred either simultaneously or successively.⁸

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), II, p. 25.

⁸ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 171.

When the term ‘unintelligibility’ is used below, it simply indicates the impossibility of applying the assumptions that would hold if we were dealing with ‘real events’ in the sense Culler uses here. Radical political events are clearly not entirely beyond comprehension, but our comprehension needs to operate at a further remove. For example, in confronting the contracting moment described in Hobbes and Rousseau, the task for comprehension involves the delineation of a certain field of narrative unintelligibility. We can no longer simply apply a logical grammar of time; instead, we must show how and why the effort to apply it fails and understand the implications of this failure.

As a corollary to my central argument concerning the temporal paradoxes associated with radical political events, the following chapters will also advance a radical materialist ontology. As will be shown, only a rejuvenated, non-positivistic materialism can avoid the twin-pitfalls of determinism and dualism. The former is unacceptable insofar as it relegates human freedom to the status of an epiphenomenal impression while political action becomes nothing more than the second-order unfolding of higher, autonomous quasi-natural forces. The latter would simply comprise a displacement of the problem in the guise of a solution, relying on a spiritual realm beyond the reach of worldly human endeavours while the boundary between the mundane and the divine itself remains untheorised.⁹ Only an unflinching materialist ontology which avoids vulgar positivism can serve as the ground for meaningful political action.

⁹ Of course, presented in these terms we have nothing more than ‘straw man’ dualism. There are few theorists who would seriously contend that revolutionary events are divinely inspired. Having said this, the danger is that as Watkin identifies, political philosophy outwardly avows its atheism while remaining parasitic on theistic models. Christopher Watkin, *Difficult Atheism: Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 95–99. The issues emerging from the intersection of theology and political philosophy will be dealt with in the third chapter of this thesis.

Advancing a radical materialist position will also mean engaging with a commonly invoked paradigm of revolutionary activity: the revolution as miracle. While I am aware that the metaphorical use of the term ‘miracle’ to describe a revolutionary act does not necessarily entail a latent politico-theological orientation, it is important to clarify what is meant by ‘miracle’. Traditional theological thought on the idea of the miraculous has taken the miracle to be an intervention in worldly affairs by an external force. The miracle is an event which cannot be reconciled with our common understanding of the world and its laws. As St Augustine puts it, ‘When [...] things happen in a continuous kind of river of ever-flowing succession, passing by a regular and beaten track, then they are called natural; when, for the admonition of men they are thrust in by an unusual changeableness, then they are called miracles’.¹⁰ Conceived in this way, the miracle is interruptive; it breaks the continuity of the natural world and exerts independent causal force upon it. Theologically speaking, when God intervenes directly in the world, the incommensurability of God’s act with our everyday experience gives rise to a sense of the miraculous. Aquinas, in turn, holds to a notion of the miracle that retains the broad strokes of Augustine’s position whilst introducing additional consideration of what today we might call the distinction between the epistemological and the ontological. In short, Aquinas recognises that there is a difference between an event labelled as a miracle due to our inability to understand its causes, and alternatively, a miracle whose cause is not natural, but divine.¹¹ The former is only apparently miraculous (i.e. it appears that way from our limited perspective) whereas the latter is miraculous in its essence.

¹⁰ Augustine, ‘De Trinitate’, in *Patriologiae Latinae*, ed. by J. P. Migne (Paris, 1861). Cited in J. Houston, *Reported Miracles: A Critique of Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 9.

¹¹ Houston, p. 21.

Crucially, for both Aquinas and Augustine, the miracle does not result from any natural process nor from human agency; it is the result of God's will.¹² Alternative ways of understanding the miraculous have departed from this notion of 'intervention' and have sought to advance a notion of the miracle which is not an objective event, emanating from a transcendental beyond, but is to be understood as requiring some form of pre-existing faith or receptivity on the part of the witness. One exponent of this conception of the miracle is Franz Rosenzweig whose argument in *The Star of Redemption* takes human freedom as fundamental and goes on to show how traditional conceptions of the miracle would undermine this freedom.¹³ The tradition of thought on the miracle positing it as an intervention would hold that miracles can produce new believers (if an atheist becomes convinced that God has performed a miracle, then by definition they have ceased to be an atheist) whereas the tradition of thought requiring receptivity might hold instead that miracles do not produce new believers so much as awaken an already-existing (albeit perhaps latent) faithful disposition.¹⁴ Likewise, for Rosenzweig, the miracle is a sign whose status and meaning depends on its apprehension by human subjects. In either case, insofar as a

¹² A related distinction which could be considered relevant to this thesis is that of *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* stands for gradual, linear, regular time while *kairos* is the fleeting moment of an opportunity for change. The *kairotic* instant is one in which a significant change occurs, perhaps a change that seemed implausible, or even impossible, prior to the moment. As such, there is clearly some connection between the *kairotic* moment and the concept of the moment I am interested in here. Nonetheless, it is not evident that *kairos* describes the kind of change I am interested in. A moment of opportunity is not necessarily one that resists narrativisation. Even if it appears to be qualitatively distinct from *chronos* in its suggestion of discontinuity, it does not necessarily point to a change that impedes narrativisation.

¹³ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. by Barbara E. Galli (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). My understanding of Rosenzweig's notion of the miracle relies on the account provided in Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*, pp. 87–112.

¹⁴ In fact, the situation is more complex than this. As we will see with Kierkegaard, latency gives too much weight to pre-existence whereas in reality this latency can only be conceived as a kind of openness, or, as Kierkegaard might put it, the possibility of possibility. Other more recent interpretations have suggested that latency is itself a retroactive effect of the miracle. See, for example: Michael O'Neill Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectic* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), pp. 43–50.

miracle requires some degree of receptivity on the part of the perceiving subject, it is no longer clear that miracles are the pure product of divine intervention. To be sure, it is possible to hold that the miracle requires both subjective receptivity and divine intervention, but the crucial point is that if this intervention is no longer the sole independent cause of the miracle, the boundary between the divine and the mundane becomes blurred.¹⁵ This is why, for Kierkegaard, God is absolute otherness and belief in him is ‘absurd’. There is no way to locate the boundary between the transcendent and the worldly because we can never be sure that a miracle, conversion, or revelation is in fact divinely inspired. It is precisely this ‘uncertainty’ which constantly surfaces in Kierkegaard’s thought that marks the beginning of the possibility of a transcendental materialist ontology—that is, an uncompromising materialism (but one that nonetheless contains a blind spot) which is equipped to work through the aporias of political theology.

The argument set out below is divided into five chapters. The first of these deals with Kierkegaard’s notion of the instant which, as I will demonstrate, is a concept that can be repurposed for a radical materialist politics. If traditional readings of Kierkegaard have restricted themselves to discussions of the theological and existential themes in his writing, contemporary readings (most notably by David J. Kangas and Michael O’Neill Burns) have shown how a secular formal model of change can be isolated in Kierkegaard’s work.¹⁶ My own

¹⁵ This blurring is at its most radical in Rosenzweig who refers to a kabbalist myth: ‘God speaks: If you do not bear witness to me, then I am not.’ God’s existence is left radically undecidable, subordinated to the ‘testimony of man’. Franz Rosenzweig, ‘Atheistic Theology’, in *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. & trans. by Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000), pp. 23–24. Cited in Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*, p. 146, n. 27.

¹⁶ David J. Kangas, *Kierkegaard’s Instant: On Beginnings* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007); Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectic*.

interpretation takes up the task of exploring this model of change with a mind to unpacking its political import in subsequent chapters.

The second chapter takes two central figures of the social contract tradition, Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in order to develop the argument that radical political change (the foundation of political life through a contract would be an example of such change) cannot be successfully rendered as an intelligible, linear narrative. In reading Hobbes and Rousseau, two alternative strategies for dealing with the aporetic moment of political origins emerge. Hobbes deploys a rhetorical strategy designed to suppress the moment of origin, passing directly from the preconditions of political life to the moment of accomplished agreement between citizens. Rousseau, in contrast, is fully aware of the paradox of the founding act and openly states the circularity that emerges in our attempt to narrativise the origin. In both cases, our interest is not in simply criticizing Hobbes or Rousseau for some lapse or short-coming; rather, we should note instead how the speculative encounter with the political origin arrives at an insoluble moment of narrative opacity. The moment of the contract's signing contains a paradox which is both an irreducible and essential, as opposed to an incidental, feature of a particular account.

If the first and second chapters focus on narrative opacity in relation to origins, the third chapter makes the argument that opacity, or more specifically, retroactivity, characterises political transformations as much as political origins. Carl Schmitt and Hans Kelsen are read together in such a way that enables a radical democratic reading of both thinkers and challenges Schmitt's idea of the contamination of theological and political conceptual schemata. The central thrust of the argument is that the paradigm of the miracle must be abandoned in favour of a reading of the 'sovereign decision' as reflexively determined. The

decision necessarily relies on a moment of recognition by a non-sovereign entity and, as such, contains a previously unacknowledged radical democratic potential. In the final third of this chapter, I briefly look at the way these topics have been taken up in the works of Jacques Derrida and Ernesto Laclau, each of whom draw attention to the retroaction and opacity that characterises radical political change.

The fourth chapter addresses Badiou's contribution to a theory of radical political events, or, as Badiou might put it, the emergence of the new.¹⁷ I set out the ontology that supports Badiou's theory of the event before exploring the non-linearity and narrative opacity that mark the relationship between event and subject. Essentially, I begin by taking the uncontroversial position that for Badiou, as for thinkers considered in previous chapters, the event resists its full exposition and that a zero-level opacity is the positive condition of an evental occurrence. From this starting point, I then develop the argument that the temporal circularity we have noted in Hobbes, Rousseau, and Schmitt also persists in Badiou's ambivalence concerning the relationship between 'intervention', 'event', and 'subject'. It is not only the 'event' itself that is indiscernible; the ordering of the various concepts Badiou deploys in order to describe the emergence of the event requires the abandonment of linearity in favour of a paradigm that recognises an effect's serving as the possibility condition of its own cause.

The final chapter looks at the recent contributions to a theory of radical political change from Slavoj Žižek and, to a lesser extent, Adrian Johnston. I

¹⁷ It will be noted that in my analysis of Badiou I focus almost exclusively on *Being and Event*. This is partly for reasons of space, but also because the point I wished to make regarding Badiou's notion of radical change seemed to be articulated most clearly in this text. I do not doubt that a more wide-ranging study of Badiou's works would be able to make a more thorough and comprehensive argument concerning the relation between subject and event.

explore the notions of the political subject, of retroactivity, and the political gesture Žižek calls the ‘Act’ in order to locate these concepts in a broader philosophical position that Adrian Johnston has termed ‘transcendental materialism’.¹⁸ Both Žižek and Johnston turn out to be thinkers of the constitutive distortion—when it comes to radical political acts, the ‘truth’ of the act is not its meaning but rather its *openness to meaning*. The risk and promise of political action resides in this openness. Transcendental materialism provides a repertoire of concepts enabling the development of a more nuanced position on political transformations, one that avoids both the dualism implied by a hard transcendentalism as well as positivism in its various guises. Moreover, it is a materialism which is compatible with the way humans experience history, both as a process in which their actions ‘count’ and have an impact on outcomes, but also as an escalating crisis which continually escapes them. Crucially, when viewed from a transcendental materialist perspective, the possibility for radical change inspired by human agents acting in concert is preserved albeit with the vital caveat that humans inevitably misrecognise the scope of their own agentic activity. I conclude this chapter by turning the insights of Žižek and Johnston’s transcendental materialism back upon Kierkegaard in order to set out a final characterisation of the decisive moment.

In his *Archaeologies of the Future* Fredric Jameson makes the following remark: ‘Here as elsewhere in narrative analysis what is most revealing is not what is said, but what cannot be said, what does not register on the narrative apparatus’.¹⁹ As will become clear throughout the chapters of this thesis, that

¹⁸ Adrian Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 1.

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso Books, 2007), p. xiii.

which ‘does not register’ in various accounts of political foundation and transformation, that which resists narrative inscription, is the possibility of collective praxis. If in Rousseauian, Badiouian, and Žižekian accounts we find collective action again occupying centre stage, we should also recognise that asserting authentic free action (not epiphenomenal pseudo-autonomy) means accepting the impossibility of narrative closure. As Johnston reminds us ‘the price we have to pay for situating ourselves normally in reality is that something should be foreclosed from it’.²⁰ And it is for this reason that Johnston’s transcendental materialism (which he describes as a contemporary extension of historical and dialectical materialisms²¹) can serve a prism through which the most basic paradoxes of political philosophy can be elucidated.

²⁰ Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, p. 42.

²¹ Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*, p. 2.

Chapter One

Kierkegaard's *Øieblikk*

'Three cheers for the flight of thought, three cheers for the perils of life in service to the idea, three cheers for the hardships of battle, three cheers for the festive jubilation of victory, three cheers for dance in the vortex of the infinite, three cheers for the cresting waves that hide me in the abyss, three cheers for the cresting waves that fling me above the stars!'

- Søren Kierkegaard

The dominant tendency within the scholarly literature on Kierkegaard is for commentators to centre on his contribution to Christian theology and existentialist philosophy.¹ While this effort has been productive, for the purposes of this chapter these aspects of his thought will need to be bracketed in order to focus on the concept of the instant, found in Kierkegaard's earlier works and often neglected by the critical commentary.² In so doing, I situate my approach alongside Michael O'Neill Burns who has suggested that a 'political reading of Kierkegaard needs to strategically "forget" the 20th century (which focused on the

¹ This is the direction taken in much of the introductory work on Kierkegaard such as C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). More substantial studies which have also been limited to the existential and religious aspects of Kierkegaard's thought include: Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1984); Merigala Gabriel, *Subjectivity and Religious Truth in the Philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010).

² It may be useful to mention here that, for the sake of convenience, I will be imputing to Kierkegaard various views and positions which were published pseudonymously. Whether or not this is legitimate will not be a central concern here since the overriding task is to deal with a set of ideas which, pseudonymously published or not, were in fact conceived by the individual Kierkegaard, were written by him, and are, to a greater or lesser extent, associated with him today. In attributing these ideas to Kierkegaard, I do not intend to make any broader assumptions about his commitment to them, nor would I wish to present them as capable of being slotted neatly into Kierkegaard's corpus.

existential and ethical interpretation of his work) and re-commence by placing his ontology in a properly 19th century context'.³ Strategic forgetfulness in the manner suggested by Burns need not constitute a direct attack on pre-existing positions on Kierkegaard; rather, it seeks to draw the implications of Kierkegaard's works for our current philosophical epoch. The instant is worthy of analysis insofar as it can shed light on certain problems in political philosophy.

As a concept, the instant has an interesting pedigree. Not only does it emerge as a response to, and engagement with, the German Idealist tradition, but it also establishes a new conceptual space concerned with thinking the exceptional as opposed to the normal, the intensive as opposed to the extensive, within which theorists such as Carl Schmitt would later begin to work.⁴ The central contention presented in this chapter is that Kierkegaard's instant can provide a conceptual springboard for new insights when applied to our conceptualization of time and change in political philosophy.

At its most elementary, the instant is a concept which describes the temporal discontinuity which accompanies a qualitative transformation. It mediates, without stabilizing, the passage between two discrete states. As such, the concept of the instant need not be limited to the eventual genesis of faith (as was Kierkegaard's intention) but can contribute to a deeper understanding of qualitative transformations in other areas of human life. This analysis of Kierkegaard's works on the instant will demonstrate their utility as a conceptual resource for thinking about forms of political change. To give an idea of the kind

³ Michael O'Neill Burns, 'A Fractured Dialectic: Kierkegaard and Political Ontology After Žižek', in *Kierkegaard and the Political*, ed. by Alison Assiter and Margherita Tonon (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), p. 120.

⁴ The resonance between Kierkegaard's works and those of the philosophers of the German Idealist tradition are noted in Kangas, p. 167. The influence of Kierkegaard on Carl Schmitt is most evident in Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. by George Schwab (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 15.

of political change under consideration, it is worth noting at this stage that the transformations described in Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Rousseau's *The Social Contract* can be thought of as 'qualitative'. Each involves the genesis of law and authority, as well as corresponding notions of obligation, obedience and duty on the part of the political subject. Likewise, the change implied in Carl Schmitt's sovereign decision, in Alain Badiou's Event, and in Slavoj Žižek's Act can also be understood as qualitative in this sense. Below, I argue that the condensed, aporetic time of the instant can be shown to illuminate the temporal structure of moments of subjective transformation in such a way that allows us to avoid models dependant on a decisionist logic (in which transformations are merely imposed by a unilateral decider) whilst also moving beyond deterministic and dualistic philosophical positions. To put this another way, I read Kierkegaard's instant as accomplishing something very specific: the instant expresses a kind of change which is not the pure result of a subjective decision, divine intervention, or the result of circumstances. Nor can the moment be a combination or balance between these factors. Nonetheless, the price to be paid for this neither/nor character of the instant is an ontological undecidability which expresses itself as a narrative blind spot.⁵ As soon as we attempt to include the instant in our retrospective narrative of a transformation, we encounter certain unresolvable paradoxes which themselves testify to a certain zero-level opacity or

⁵ There is a well-documented tension within the scholarship on Kierkegaard as to the voluntarist/non-voluntarist character of Kierkegaardian faith. Alongside M. Jamie Ferreira and Steven M. Emmanuel, I will attempt to outflank this dispute by reading the relationship between grace and will as essentially undecidable. Kierkegaardian faith is neither reducible to a subjective decision, but nor does it require God's grace as its prerequisite. See: Jamie M. Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Steven M. Emmanuel, *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).

unintelligibility. Kierkegaard's work on the concept of the instant serves us insofar as it represents a philosophical exploration in this direction.

Kierkegaard's instant and the associated concept of the 'leap' are invoked in the course of reflections on the possibility of a subjective transformation, but also in the context of discussion dealing with the question of origins. It is vital to bear in mind that these questions imply one another. To refer to a political transformation is also to reignite a whole raft of philosophical problems concerning origins. In hunting the illusive origin, one cannot find a proper conclusion since, as Kevin Inston notes, 'the origin always presupposes an anterior moment which negates it'.⁶ The circularity one encounters when approaching the origin of legitimate authority is itself indicative of its qualitative status. This chapter will establish a reading of Kierkegaard's concept of the instant that will subsequently enable more explicitly political investigations in later chapters.

Reading Kierkegaard as a political thinker may appear to be an unconventional strategy. Equally, treating Kierkegaard's instant as if it were applicable to secular transformations as opposed to being limited to Christian conversion goes against the grain of Kierkegaard's own statements as well as against the tide of the academic literature.⁷ Against these charges, the position presented here can be justified if we accept the premise that the instant is, first and foremost, a philosophical concept, albeit a philosophical concept that throughout Kierkegaard's corpus has also been used to describe certain kinds of religious experience. The concept of the instant does not restrict us to a particular

⁶ Kevin Inston, *Rousseau and Radical Democracy* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 19.

⁷ There are two notable exceptions here. The first is Kangas's *Kierkegaard's Instant*. The second is the recent monograph by Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectic*.

content, be it religious or secular; instead, it implies a formal structure, a certain kind of transformation with specific features. Following this premise, my enquiry will carry out a two-fold task. Firstly, it will isolate the philosophical characteristics of the instant as they appear in Kierkegaard's texts. The analysis of these characteristics will subsequently inform our reading of theories of political change in later chapters. Rather than a secularisation of Kierkegaard's thought (the question of political theology will be dealt with in the third chapter of this thesis) I will seek to read Kierkegaard as a philosopher whose thought, while predominantly oriented toward religious tasks, can nonetheless be redeployed in alternative ways so as to generate new insights.

It is worth noting at the outset that Kierkegaard constantly shifts position with respect to the idea of the instant. One cannot speak of a single understanding of the instant in Kierkegaard's work that is gradually unfolded; instead, we are obliged to conceive it as comprising several distinct facets. It represents a way of thinking beginnings insofar as it enables us to break out of the circularity of origins through the idea of a sudden 'leap'.⁸ Subsequent transformations can then be thought of as referring back to this original groundlessness. Thus the instant implies an elementary possibility that always remains open to reactivation.⁹ Even the way we relate to the present itself, as the imperceptible slice of time between past and future, can for some scholars, be seen through the idea of the instant.¹⁰

⁸ See Kangas, pp. 160–180; Ward, pp. 1–35.

⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. by Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 86.

¹⁰ For an account of Kierkegaard's moment as the unique and irreducible 'now' time expressed through the glance, see: Heidrun Friese, 'Augen-Blicke', in *The Moment: Time and Rupture in Modern Thought* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), pp. 73–90. This would also be closer to the classical notion of the instant as a vanishing moment of transition: 'The instant seems to signify something such that changing occurs from it to each of two states. For a thing doesn't change from rest while rest continues, or from motion while motion continues. Rather, this queer creature, the instant, lurks between motion and rest – being in no time at all – and to it and from it the moving thing changes to resting and the resting thing changes to moving'.

It is, however, a notion that concerns our understanding of subjectivity as well as temporality. Kierkegaard's broader project, as will be demonstrated, is to stake out a space in which free subjective commitment is possible as well as a notion of human freedom that is not simply a matter of a free choice between alternatives. This is necessarily accompanied by, to follow Kosch's reading, 'a principled scepticism about the possibility of causal explanations of action', which is itself grounded in a specific ontological position.¹¹ Although it will prove beyond the scope of this chapter to tie together all the disparate elements of Kierkegaard's concept, it may be possible to bring into focus those aspects of the instant which can be most productively applied to political theory.

The particular dimension of the instant I wish to draw attention to is that of a temporal break or hiatus through which newness can emerge and, crucially, the subjective experience of this break as a revelatory encounter with truth. As I will show below, the instant has import for political theory insofar as it stands for an intermediary event between two incommensurable states.¹² The instant itself can appear both as the moment of origin through which representation, freedom, and subjectivity become possible, or alternatively, as a moment in time (which is better thought of as a moment falling between or overlaying periods of chronological time) which precipitates an unforeseeable transformation.¹³ Kierkegaard writes about the instant in both senses, however, the reading

Plato, *Parmenides*, trans. by Mary Louise Gill and Paul Ryan (Cambridge: Hackett, 1996), p. 156, d–e.

¹¹ Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p. 179.

¹² This point finds support in Kierkegaard's comments concerning the, 'incommensurability between a historical truth and an eternal decision'. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), I, p. 98.

¹³ We find the former incarnation of the instant receiving treatment *The Concept of Anxiety* while the latter is expressed in *Philosophical Fragments, Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and *The Moment and Late Writings*.

proposed here holds that these versions are structurally compatible, describing two features of the same notion. Indeed, the instant, the moment, and the leap all seek to describe characteristics of the particular kind of transformation in which Kierkegaard is interested. Understanding these concepts in Kierkegaard's work is then a case of conceiving the moment of origin which establishes consciousness and representation while reading subsequent 'events', that is, subsequent moments of transformation, as traumatic intrusions of this original groundlessness. If the instant is often read in a limited way, as referring solely to an individual's religious awakening or even to the daily choices made by individuals, a broader treatment will attempt to address the ontology implied by the instant as a category of subjective experience.¹⁴

The relationship between the three terms (instant, moment, and leap) requires some clarification before we proceed. While 'moment' and 'instant' are two alternative translations of the Danish term *Øieblikk* and refer to the event of transformation itself, the term 'leap' is a translation of *Spring* and indicates additional emphasis on the subjective dimension of the event. That is to say, 'leap' suggests a greater degree of agency than 'instant'. The question of agency will be looked at later on, but for now we must simply note that the three terms which can be found in the secondary literature are in fact derived from two terms (*Øieblikk* and *Spring*) in the original Danish. The decision to gloss *Øieblikk* as 'instant' or 'moment' could well be arbitrary in some cases given that the two terms are more or less synonymous. When the two options for translation are distinguished from one another intentionally, as we find in Kangas, it is in order

¹⁴ For an example of this kind of reading, see: James Giles, 'Kierkegaard's Leap: Anxiety and Freedom', in *Kierkegaard and Freedom* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). Giles's reading will be dealt with below.

to draw attention to a specific reading. Kangas states, ‘I prefer “the instant” in order to underscore the central conceptual meaning of the term: it points to a discontinuity, a suddenness. The term “moment” more suggests continuity and duration, a span of time. An instant passes before one even knows it as there; a moment, though ephemeral, lasts’.¹⁵ As will become clear in the argument that follows, the qualities of *Øieblikket* Kangas wishes to emphasise (suddenness and discontinuity) are also the central points for investigation here. Nonetheless, the distinction between ‘instant’ and ‘moment’ drawn by Kangas will not be observed and both terms will be used synonymously. This decision is taken simply to avoid confusion when switching between the more frequently used gloss (‘moment’) and Kangas’s less conventional ‘instant’. In contrast, the term ‘leap’ is a different, but related, concept derived from the Danish *Spring*. The relationship between the moment and the leap remains unclear in Kierkegaard’s texts, however, there are several passages seeming to encourage a reading which holds the two concepts to be closely connected. The key passage occurs in *Philosophical Fragments*: ‘Does it not have to be taken into account, this diminutive moment, however brief it is – it does not have to be long, because it is a *leap*. However diminutive this moment, even if it is this very instant, this very instant must be taken into account’.¹⁶ Even though direct references to the connection between the moment and the leap are rare, the connection established in *Philosophical Fragments* is taken to be strong enough to support an interpretation that holds the two concepts to be aspects of the same event.¹⁷ As noted above, Kierkegaard’s use of the term leap suggests a movement which is accomplished by a subject, it

¹⁵ Kangas, p. 200, n. 14.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 43.

¹⁷ To add weight to this connection, it seems significant that Kierkegaard uses the same metaphor to refer to both the moment and the leap. In different works, we find both leap and moment described as the flight of a ‘plunging eagle’ or the leap of a ‘wild beast’.

is a subject that decides to leap, a subject who does the leaping, whereas in contrast the moment indicates a more complex category which cannot easily be read as the result of a subjective decision. To put this another way, for now it is enough to say that the moment is the aspect of the event which is perceived by a subject as simply happening, while the leap is the gesture through which the subject appropriates and accepts the consequences of the event. The challenge is to think the two concepts together without succumbing to the temptation to think them in terms of a linear chronology.

Qualitative Leaps and Passive Decisions

One encounters this idea of the moment as an absolute beginning in *The Concept of Anxiety* in which Kierkegaard presents the birth of subjectivity in relation to sin.¹⁸ His decision to frame this aspect of his thought in terms of sin, while serving to indicate the ethical dimension of Kierkegaard's inquiry, should not distract us from his central concern which is the transcendental problem of genesis.¹⁹ Sin is introduced in the moment that subjectivity emerges, distinguishing itself from the totality of being.²⁰ Sin is therefore best understood as a sudden delimitation whereby subjectivity becomes aware of itself as a distinct agency with a capacity for free action. In contrast, the preceding stage characterised by innocence is here conceived as absolute possibility, a pure, indeterminate 'being able' which has not yet been resolved in any direction. How, then, is the movement from innocence to sin accomplished? Kierkegaard's solution relies on the concept of anxiety: 'In this state [innocence] there is peace and repose, but there is simultaneously something else that is not contention and strife, for there is indeed nothing against which to strive. What is it? Nothing. What effect does it have? It begets anxiety'.²¹ Kierkegaard invokes the sense of vertigo, the sheer openness of absolute possibility which condenses as anxiety:

Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness. Further than this, psychology cannot and will not go. In that very moment everything is changed, and freedom, when it again

¹⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. & trans. by Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), VIII.

¹⁹ The most sophisticated account of Kierkegaard as a thinker of beginnings is provided by Kangas, p. 161.

²⁰ Here my account draws support from the reading of *The Concept of Anxiety* presented in Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectic*, pp. 38–50.

²¹ Kierkegaard, VIII, p. 41.

rises, sees that it is guilty. Between these two moments is the leap, which no science has explained and which no science can explain.²²

Prior to this 'leap' between two moments, freedom exists as a suspended potentiality; innocence is lost in the transformation of this potential, not into something determinate, but into awareness of the fact of potentiality. Since this awareness itself is sinful (insofar as it presupposes the Fall), subjectivity must be considered coextensive with sin. The contraction of sheer possibility into a self-conscious willing ego, singling out one possibility from the horizon of possibilities, occurs through the sudden awareness of anxiety, induced in the moment of 'looking down', that is, through the realisation of the extent to which, beneath all determinations and supposed foundations, we are free. This abyssal notion of possibility should be understood in a precise way. It is, as Kangas maintains, an absolute possibility that exists prior to the isolation of a single definable possibility: 'This possibility, it will turn out, is the "weightiest of all categories"'. It cannot adequately be thought as *determinate potential* awaiting its actualization. The possibility of possibility is possibility beyond a horizon of realization, a beginning in excess to any telos (thus an anarchic beginning).²³ As such, in the 'instant' Kierkegaard offers us a notion which accomplishes the genesis of self-conscious subjectivity while suspending any question of the conditions which exist prior to the instant. This emphasis on the possibility which characterises origins comprises the core of Kierkegaard's challenge to Danish Hegelians for whom a given moment of change is always already inscribed in an overarching necessity.²⁴ Likewise, prioritising possibility over necessity also

²² Kierkegaard, VIII, p. 61.

²³ Kangas, p. 167.

²⁴ For a passage containing some of Kierkegaard's criticisms of the Danish Hegelian position on history and reason, see his 'Interlude' in Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 89–110. Also see: Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 364.

provides the key to understanding Kierkegaard's prohibition on thinking innocence and guilt in terms of a linear chronology:

Innocence, unlike immediacy, is not something that must be annulled, something whose quality is to be annulled, something that properly does not exist, but rather, when it is annulled, and as a result of being annulled, it for the first time comes into existence as that which it was before being annulled and which now is annulled.²⁵

If innocence is only thinkable retrospectively, from the position of one who has fallen into sin, it cannot represent a lost state; on the contrary, the loss itself is primary since it is only through the loss that a relation to lost innocence becomes possible. The 'prior condition' of innocence is not simply irrecoverable but is better thought of as a virtual or projected state, one that was never occupied since it designates the non-distinction of self and other. Thought cannot recapture or imagine innocence; insofar as every thought is necessarily the thought of an individual self, thinking re-establishes the original separation through which guilt came about. The Fall is thus to be held as an event which stands at the limit of recoverable human history, or, as Eagleton states, 'Sin has no place or source, lying as it does under the sign of contradiction. To sin is to have always already have been able to do so'.²⁶ For a conscious subject it is no longer possible to conceive of a period prior to consciousness because thought necessarily entails a posited subject or object.

In thinking origins according to a sudden instant of separation, Kierkegaard places himself in dialogue with Schelling whose 'abyssal decision' has much in common with Kierkegaard's 'qualitative leap'.²⁷ The congruity between their respective positions is evident in the following quotation from Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations*:

²⁵ Kierkegaard, VIII, pp. 36–7.

²⁶ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 178.

²⁷ For contemporary scholarship on the relationship between Kierkegaard and Schelling, see: Kosch, pp. 87–200; Kangas, pp. 167–170.

But precisely this inner necessity is itself freedom; the essence of man is fundamentally his own act [...] Man is in the initial creation, as shown, an undecided being – (which may be portrayed mythically as a condition of innocence that precedes this life and as an initial blessedness) - only man himself can decide. But this decision cannot occur within time; it occurs outside of all time and, hence, together with the first creation (though as a deed distinct from creation) [...] The act, whereby his life is determined in time, does not itself belong to time but rather to eternity.²⁸

The initial moment of origin, the moment through which an original act is performed, occurs outside time. In both Kierkegaard and Schelling the interpenetration of the eternal and the temporal is necessary if the subject is to be established as an entity which exists in time. The point at which Schelling and Kierkegaard diverge can be located by focusing on the source of the transformation from undifferentiated being to self and other, to subject and object. For Kierkegaard, the transformation comes about through a ‘foreign power [anxiety], that laid hold’ and provoked the realisation of self-hood and self-determinacy.²⁹ Selfhood cannot be awoken purely through God’s prohibition since God’s ‘Thou shalt not’ must be directed at an individual, one who has the ability to choose whether to obey or transgress. In the following quotation Kierkegaard brings this aporia into view:

When it is stated in Genesis that God said to Adam, ‘Only from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you must not eat,’ it follows as a matter of course that Adam really has not understood this word, for how could he understand the difference between good and evil when this distinction would follow as a consequence of the enjoyment of the fruit? / When it is assumed that prohibition awakens the desire, one acquires knowledge instead of ignorance, and in that case Adam must have had the knowledge of freedom, because the desire was to use it. The explanation is therefore subsequent.³⁰

Kierkegaard’s Adam cannot be in a position to receive God’s prohibition since for him to be capable of doing so would imply a pre-existing understanding of himself as a distinct entity with all the properties and capacities this would entail. The

²⁸ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom and Related Matters*, trans. by Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 50–51.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, VIII, p. 43.

³⁰ Kierkegaard, VIII, p. 44.

prohibition narrative presupposes that which it sets out to explain, namely, how humans emerge as autonomous agents with the capacity to do good or evil. To put this in other words, the event of the Fall effectively presupposes itself in Kierkegaard's account. In order for God's prohibition to be valid and just, its addressee, Adam, must be capable of understanding its meaning, but if Adam already has this capacity then the Fall must already have taken place. In contrast to Schelling's quasi-volitional model of subjective autogenesis, Kierkegaard recognises that the origin cannot be the result of a volitional act but that it demands a new concept of decision. Kierkegaard's instant expresses the circularity encountered in an origin which presupposes itself.

It is vital to give due emphasis to the property of the instant Kierkegaard is suggesting here. God, through his prohibition, effectively already treats Adam as a free individual capable of judging the rightness of his actions for himself, and yet it is this very capacity which the genesis narrative sets out to explain. Adam is thus in the peculiar position of being both absent and present at the moment of genesis: he must be present in order to receive and understand God's prohibition, but equally he must be absent (qua reflecting, acting subject) since the prohibition precedes the emergence of human subjectivity which occurs through the Fall.³¹ The difficulty in interpreting the genesis myth noted by Kierkegaard is that it requires us to view the original moment in terms of a superposition of mutually exclusive states.³² This is in fact the stance taken by Eagleton who

³¹ My position here, that the Fall implies a fantasised state of 'lost innocence', is supported by Eagleton, pp. 178–180.

³² The term superposition is here borrowed from quantum mechanics where it describes the way in which an electron exists simultaneously in all possible states at a given moment, collapsing into one of these states under observation. It is a concept which can be deployed here in order to indicate the features of an event's unintelligibility. When an event requires mutually exclusive sets of prior conditions, we can express the paradox by saying that these conditions are superposed, i.e. that the contradiction must simply be asserted as such.

succinctly sets out the paradoxical kernel of Kierkegaard's thought with respect to origins, 'The paradox of this project is that the self both does and does not exist prior to this revolutionary crisis of self-choosing: for the 'choice' to have meaning the self must somehow pre-exist that moment, but it is equally true that it emerges into being only through this act of decision'.³³ Kierkegaard's concept of the instant aims precisely to delineate the contours of this paradox. The most challenging passages in *The Concept of Anxiety* seek to account for the way in which Adam freely accomplishes the very gesture which is supposed to generate his capacity for freedom and, crucially, the distinction that we are forced to recognise between this originary, groundless freedom, and the subsequent freedom of choice. Kierkegaard is seeking to articulate a form of freedom that is not experienced directly as a free choice, but that is definitively lost to experience such that, retrospectively, it is not possible to make any assessment about choices or realised potentials.

It may be illuminating to consider the influence of Kierkegaard's instant (and the form of freedom it drives us towards) upon the thinking of Jacques Derrida. In *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, Derrida presents us with the following imperative: 'What must be thought here, then, is this inconceivable and unknowable thing, a freedom that would no longer be the power of a subject, a freedom without autonomy, a heteronomy without servitude, in short, something like a passive decision'.³⁴ The incalculability of this kind of decision would preclude in advance the possibility of a thorough exposition or narrativisation; it should rather be understood as an automism, an urgency that proceeds without

³³ Eagleton, p. 180.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 152.

reference to a pre-existing schema of value. An autonomous decision would recognise in advance an array of options so as to weigh up the relative benefits of each. But the very possibility of this decision must be conditioned in advance by a more fundamental decision through which outcomes are posited as desirable or undesirable, possible or impossible. It is this decision which condenses the very field of options such that these options become intelligible and organized within a schema of value. And it is precisely because this 'passive decision' establishes the parameters of the knowable that it cannot be 'founded on or justified by any *knowledge as such*'.³⁵

The 'qualitative leap' cannot be a discrete object of reflection because it is already the very event whose occurrence provides the conditions for reflection. Kierkegaard refrains from providing an account of the characteristics of the qualitative leap (aside from his claim that it is an 'intermediate term' which is accompanied by anxiety) since this would seem to lend support to the idea that the leap is reducible to a set of objective phenomena:

The possibility is to be able. In a logical system, it is convenient to say that possibility passes over into actuality. However, in actuality it is not so convenient, and an intermediate term is required. The intermediate term is anxiety, but it no more explains the qualitative leap than it can justify it ethically. Anxiety is neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom; it is entangled freedom, where freedom is not free in itself but entangled, not by necessity, but in itself. If sin has come into the world by necessity (which is a contradiction), there can be no anxiety. Nor can there be anxiety if sin came into the world by an act of abstract liberum arbitrium.³⁶

The qualitative leap is thus an event through which a new relation is posited; it is neither reducible to preconditions nor the consequence of a free choice.³⁷ The phenomenological correlate of the qualitative leap is anxiety, indicating freedom

³⁵ Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, p. 145.

³⁶ Kierkegaard, VIII, p. 49.

³⁷ Kierkegaard remains quite consistent here. In his *Philosophical Fragments* he writes, 'faith is not a knowledge' (p. 62) and in the same volume claims, 'faith is not an act of will; for all human willing is efficacious only within the condition' (p. 62).

in a latent, entangled state. My appraisal of the instant here differs from that of Burns (notwithstanding the broad areas of agreement between our respective positions) in whose assessment of the moment we find an overemphasis on the subject's free will. Burns states: 'we must reiterate that faith is in no way a synthetic act that resolves a contradiction for spirit but rather a holding together of the contradiction in a willed act'.³⁸ Such comments risk a reductive understanding of the instant as pure subjective volition. If we are dealing with a free act, it is to be understood an instance of 'entangled freedom', a form of freedom that undercuts our intuitive, commonplace understanding of the concept. The task that follows the recognition of this difference is to trace the form of freedom's entanglement. It is this approach which leads to the paradox that Kierkegaard constantly draws our attention to as well as allowing us to understand why he repeatedly forbids a thorough, sequential elaboration of the transformation. Kierkegaard's point is that the qualitative leap is necessarily irreducible to a series of temporal events.³⁹

As mentioned above, the terms 'instant' (*Øieblikket*) and the 'qualitative leap' (*kvalitativt spring*) are not identical. Both refer to the radical and decisive commitment made by an individual in the face of uncertainty. Nonetheless, the term 'instant' refers to the temporality of the event as a pause or break in time whereas 'leap' emphasises the subject's own engagement, the passionate intensity of the gesture through which a qualitative transformation is achieved and sustained. If the leap were to be mapped across a period of time which had duration and which could be retrospectively plotted, we would no longer be dealing with a leap in the Kierkegaardian sense. It is intrinsic to the leap that its

³⁸ Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectic*, p. 94.

³⁹ Kierkegaard, VIII, p. 44.

emergence is experienced as sudden. There can be no awareness of the arrival of the moment, but only of the fact that it has already occurred. In a comprehensive study on the concept of the leap in Kierkegaard's work, Arnold B. Come encourages a reading which focuses on this suddenness: 'a new quality can never arise out of a continuous quantitative determination, rather, it "appears with the suddenness of the enigmatic"'.⁴⁰ It is this focus on suddenness which gives the event its utterly fleeting, transitory character, however, equally important is the subjective dimension of the event which always requires, 'a choice, a passion, a resolve'.⁴¹ Given that both the leap and the instant can refer to the same event, the distinction between them can, at times, seem negligible, however, it should be borne in mind that the choice of terminology when referring to the instant/leap has implications for the dimension of the event that is being emphasised. The distinction will also become significant when we look at the changes in Kierkegaard's own thinking concerning the instant/leap between, for example, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Sickness unto Death*. While these changes will be dealt with below, it is useful to know at the outset that it is Kierkegaard's approach to the subject's involvement, choice, or decision which undergoes a shift in relation to the opposition between possibility and necessity. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard tells us unambiguously that 'the leap is the category of decision', immediately elevating the subjective dimension, the obligation upon the subject to commit to a single possibility.⁴² But in Kierkegaard's later works, while the leap still requires a subjective decision, the status of the decision has changed such that it is now

⁴⁰ Arnold B. Come, *Kierkegaard as a Humanist: Discovering MySelf* (London: McGill-Queens University Press, 1995), p. 254.

⁴¹ Come, p. 257.

⁴² Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, I, p. 99.

seems to constitute a necessary step: 'freedom really *is* freedom only when, in the same moment, the same second, it *is* (freedom-of-choice), it rushes with infinite speed to bind itself unconditionally by the choice of attachment, the choice whose truth is that there can be no question of any choice'.⁴³ To redeploy Derrida's term, it seems that we are dealing with a 'passive decision', that is to say, a decision that is experienced as having already been made, or a decision to follow through with what is necessary.⁴⁴

⁴³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. & trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, F-K (London: Indiana University Press, 1970), II, p. 68.

⁴⁴ Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, p. 152.

Service to the Idea

Having established the qualitative leap as marking an originary act of separation or differentiation, the task will now be to show how the re-intrusion of this groundlessness in the lives of freely acting individuals comes about and the effect it has. As will be shown, the human capacity to commit to action (which is entirely distinct from a commonplace understanding of the freedom to choose among several options) relies on a reading of origins characterised by the spontaneous emergence of subjectivity: ‘By a qualitative leap sin entered into the world, and it continually enters into the world in that way’.⁴⁵ The qualitative leap is not to be thought of as a once-and-for-all act; it is the gesture through which a commitment is made, or to put this another way, subjective commitment has particular qualities which only become comprehensible through Kierkegaard’s leap/instant and related concepts. Kierkegaard writes:

Here again we have the Moment, around which everything indeed revolves. Let us recapitulate. If we do not assume the moment, then we go back to Socrates, and it was precisely from him that we wanted to take leave in order to discover something. If the moment is posited, the paradox is there, for in its most abbreviated form the paradox can be called the moment.⁴⁶

Without the moment, Kierkegaard argues, we return to the Socratic world of persistent ironic distance; a departure from Socrates marks the possibility of faith, of commitment to a position which cannot be undermined through this kind of distancing. This would not be a gesture that cancels all ironizing. Irony marks the very form of commitment since every position is already subverted from within.⁴⁷ It is thus precisely our profound uncertainty with regard to any

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, VIII, p. 111.

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 51.

⁴⁷ Here I follow Eagleton, p. 176.

particular position that necessitates, and makes possible, an excessive, unreasoned commitment.

In the leap a notion of the good is posited, this being the content of the subject's commitment, however, anxiety nonetheless persists in the individual's relation to this concretely posited content. Kierkegaard's message is that commitment does not free one from anxiety; it always emerges from anxiety since, 'humanly speaking, consequences built upon a paradox are built upon the abyss'.⁴⁸ Anxiety can therefore be understood in part as the subjective response to the awareness of continuing possibility and openness which characterises every situation.⁴⁹ If the instant accomplishes the passage between two states with each state representing a presupposed grounding faith or commitment, anxiety is the constant suspicion that each state will ultimately prove to be a transitory 'unwarranted actuality'.⁵⁰ This is why Kierkegaard also finds objectionable the naturalization of faith as an element of the social, as fully assimilated into a functioning social whole. Faith is persistently obtuse, as Eagleton puts it, 'Faith is *kairos* rather than custom, fear and trembling rather than cultural ideology, [it is resistant to] the purposes of political hegemony'.⁵¹ Nonetheless, anxiety also enables commitment insofar as commitment without anxiety would be transformed into certainty. Kierkegaard is determined to show that uncertainty is not an obstacle to commitment but is rather its positive condition.

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 98.

⁴⁹ For a reading of anxiety as a subjective counterpart to freedom's possibility, see: Gordon D. Marino, 'Anxiety in The Concept of Anxiety', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 318–9.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, VIII, p. 113.

⁵¹ Eagleton, p. 184.

The form of freedom encountered in the instant has a precise status. As we saw above, it refers to a subjective event which is neither dependant on, nor fully independent of, the activity of the subject. Put simply, what we have in the instant is a sudden, destabilizing recognition of the scope of possibility and the incalculability of these possibilities, accompanied by the experience of anxiety. It is worth noting at this stage that there remains a lack of consensus within the scholarship on this topic and, for this reason, the possible objections to the position taken above will need to be dealt with. One objection to the reading of the instant offered here is presented by James Giles whose article, ‘Kierkegaard’s Leap: Anxiety and Freedom’ seeks to show how the notion of the leap merely reflects Kierkegaard’s understanding of human choice:

Now although Kierkegaard often refers to the leap in relation to sin and, for the most part, is not particularly concerned about choices that might lack ethical or religious significance, it is clear that such a leap is supposed to lie behind all of our free choices, not just the sinful or evil ones.⁵²

There are several problems with the position given in this statement. The distinction implied by Giles is between ‘all our free choices’, on the one hand, and ‘the sinful and evil ones’ on the other, and yet this relies on a commonplace notion of sin that Kierkegaard does not adhere to. Throughout *The Concept of Anxiety* Kierkegaard uses the term sin to cover the very fact that humans are capable of making their own free judgements while human freedom is the ability to act on those judgements. A Kierkegaardian notion of sin captures the sense in which the ‘choice’ that establishes the possibility of choice cannot itself be conceived as a choice in the traditional sense of the term—it is ‘entangled freedom’, a freedom that is anxious, hesitating on the brink of its own actualization.⁵³ As Kierkegaard

⁵² Giles, p. 75.

⁵³ For an excellent enquiry into Kierkegaard’s non-volitional understanding of free transition, see: Ferreira. Ferreira convincingly argues that Kierkegaard’s notion of faith is neither volitional nor compelled but instead relies on a subjective capacity for imagination: ‘the qualitiveness

states, ‘Anxiety is neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom [...] nor can there be any anxiety if sin came into the world by an act of abstract *liberum arbitrium*’.⁵⁴ Kierkegaard’s other main usage of the notion of the leap (in distinction to the leap as the transition from sinlessness to sinfulness) is the leap by which man becomes faithful. This, again, is not simply a ‘free choice’ in the manner indicated by Giles, it is an act that reworks the entire schema of value according to which all other choices are made.

Kierkegaard’s position with respect to freedom and the question of choice are developed at length throughout his various journals and other writings.⁵⁵ The notion of ‘entangled freedom’ seems to unfurl itself somewhat in the following passage:

Furthermore, Christianity can say to a man: You shall choose the one thing needful, but in such a way that there must be no question of any choice—that is, if you fool around a long time, then you are not really choosing the one thing needful; like the kingdom of God, it must be chosen *first*. [...] Consequently, the very fact that there is no *choice* expresses the tremendous passion or intensity with which one *chooses*. Can there be a more accurate expression for the fact that freedom of choice is only a formal condition of freedom and that emphasizing freedom of choice as such means the sure loss of freedom? The content of freedom is decisive for freedom to such an extent that the very truth of freedom of choice is: there must be no *choice*, even though there is a choice.⁵⁶

Kierkegaard here anticipates an insight that today is often associated with the work of Alain Badiou, namely, that our awareness of an array of choices from which we are required to simply make a selection is a sure indication that our choice will not be free in any valuable sense.⁵⁷ Freedom, when we exercise it, is not experienced as freedom of choice, nor is it experienced as volition or willing; on the contrary, it is precisely in our moments of greatest freedom that we feel

and freedom of the transition are what is at stake for Climacus in the concept of the leap and [...] do not require an intentional volition or decision’ (p. 19).

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, VIII, p. 49.

⁵⁵ These can now be found in the multivolume edition Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, ed. & trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, A-E (London: Indiana University Press, 1967), I.

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, II, p. 68.

⁵⁷ Alain Badiou’s position will be set out in detail in the penultimate chapter of this thesis.

ourselves to be bound to a single, immutable course of action. To explore what this means in practice, let us take two examples. The obvious example for Kierkegaard would be conversion. When an individual converts to Christianity (or assumes their true responsibilities as a Christian as opposed to merely observing out of habit) this is clearly an act which must in some sense be considered to be free. A person can be forced to behave in accordance with religious doctrine, but no one can be forced to *believe* in the truth of that doctrine (although they may well be forced to falsely attest to that belief). And yet at the same time, it would be nonsense to expect someone to simply ‘choose’ to convert to Christianity. Conversion cannot be achieved through decision conceived in the standard way.

To take a second example, favoured by Badiou, when a person has fallen in love, the experience is akin to revelation in sense that is neither something that can be forced or performed voluntarily. And as with conversion, one is not fully present as a reflecting, conscious subject at the moment of the event itself; instead, one simply becomes aware that the love-event has already taken place. Once it has taken place, there is no possibility of opting out; an individual can refuse to follow through with the consequences of the event, but they cannot voluntarily shed their sense of obligation or rather, they cannot choose not to feel the new obligations as compelling. Refusal would be a choice, but it is a choice made possible within the new horizon of choices established by the event. In a similar vein, Kierkegaard argues, ‘a person has the most lively sense of freedom when with completely decisive determination he impresses upon his action the inner necessity which excludes the thought of another possibility’.⁵⁸ So there is

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard, II, p. 74.

freedom of choice in Kierkegaard's thought, but this form of freedom is secondary to a freedom experienced as the sudden issuing of an absolute imperative. As soon as freedom of choice is asserted as the highest choice, the possibility of experiencing a higher freedom is foreclosed.

Wild beasts and plunging eagles

An important passage dealing with the points raised thus far can be found in *The Moment and Late Writings*: ‘No, something decisive is introduced differently from anything else. Like the leap of a wild beast upon its prey, like the strike of the plunging eagle, something decisive is introduced – suddenly and concentrated in one sortie (intensively)’.⁵⁹ The change brought about by the instant does not occur in time but is to be read as a kind of dissonance through which a subject’s internal self-relation is abruptly reorganised. This is why the instant is a subjective phenomenon: the new recognition or insight which occurs in the instant is not merely something passively appropriated by a subject, nor is it a straight forward decision on the part of the subject. Ferreira refers to this as the ‘non-standard character of the decision’, stating, ‘Climacus describes it by using both the idiom of a wonder which “happened” and the idiom of a “decision”, implying that both are equally appropriate’.⁶⁰ Kierkegaard’s idiosyncratic formulation requires us to view the instant as a borderline concept which resists reduction to subjective (voluntarist) or objective (deterministic) explanations. It is concentrated as opposed to diffuse, intensive as opposed to incremental. There is no temporal moment which can be confidently held up as the moment of change since it is not something witnessed—its apparent suddenness is a consequence of its atemporality, that is to say, the moment appears as sudden because it is a pure disturbance *of time* which cannot be located *in time*. In a manner similar to Ferreira, I would like to suggest that the subjective act Kierkegaard often describes as a decision is in fact far closer to a moment of

⁵⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard’s Writings (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), XXIII, p. 93.

⁶⁰ Ferreira, p. 48.

recognition, or at least that any decision is necessarily conditioned by a prior recognition. Ferreira explains her position as follows:

The decision (or decisive movement) which occurs in virtue of the oscillation of our attention is not subject to “will-force” in the way in which the effort of attention preliminary to that decision may be. We cannot will to recognize something in the same way that we can will to focus on what may help us to recognize it.⁶¹

Understanding the genesis of faith in terms of recognition as opposed to decision provides the key to Kierkegaard’s oblique turn of phrase: ‘When existence gives movement time and I reproduce this, then the leap appears in just the way a leap can appear: it must come or it has been’.⁶² The leap is timeless insofar as it does not occupy an identifiable moment in chronological time; instead, it exists as a name for a discontinuity which is suddenly inscribed in time. Put another way, the proto-believer is not fully present in the moment of recognition; it is only after the moment of recognition has taken place that the possibility of willing emerges—either I can wilfully take up the consequences of the truth I have recognised, or I can repress this truth and neglect its consequences. Nonetheless, just as in the former case it is still possible to be unsuccessful, in the latter case, the repression of the recognition is also its obliteration. As such, the status of the instant is undecidable. It cannot be confidently held up as an event in itself, but only as a gap or opening which serves as the precondition for transformation. Kangas is thus correct to note, ‘The instant of inception takes no time: it gives time. The initial opening of time could never itself become a moment within time. It would therefore be, precisely, a departure that would always already have ceased prior to, and as the condition of, the present.’⁶³ We should conclude, with Kangas and Ferreira, that there is no possibility of witnessing Kierkegaard’s

⁶¹ Ferreira, p. 102.

⁶² Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, I, p. 342.

⁶³ Kangas, p. 46.

instant: the subjective experience of the instant is the sense of realisation that previous convictions have collapsed, a certain unavoidable truth has emerged and it will no longer be possible to relate to the world in the same way.⁶⁴

As briefly mentioned above, Kierkegaard's instant is able to accomplish two quite different procedures. Not only does it enable us to think through the initial gesture of subjectivity through which a self-other relation is established (this reading is drawn from Kangas for whom the discussion of the instant is first and foremost a discussion of origins), the instant also stands for the moment of insight, the sudden shift in the subject's relation to an objective situation.⁶⁵ Writing under the pseudonym Haufniensis, Kierkegaard states: 'Only when the eternal strikes the stream of time and forms the synthesis of time and eternity does the particular moment gain significance'.⁶⁶ It is a moment in which the truth of a situation (a truth concerning the horizon of a situation's possibility which ultimately refers back to the origin of subjectivity as a groundless act of self-positing), formerly unavailable, becomes suddenly apparent, forcing the subject to relate to herself in a different way. For Kierkegaard, this new understanding must be thought of in terms of the production of religious faith which is brought about by a fleeting exposure to the eternal, by the intrusion of the eternal in historical time. It is 'absurd' for Kierkegaard, insofar as it is the historical emergence of an eternal truth. Only by holding fast to this paradox in its very absurdity does faith become possible for the individual. The revelation of

⁶⁴ Kierkegaard's understanding of truth is dealt with by Schacht who describes it as a subjective appropriation of essence; a person is truthful when they actualize their essence. Richard Schacht, 'Kierkegaard on "Truth Is Subjectivity" and "The Leap of Faith"', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 2.3 (1973), 297–313.

⁶⁵ Kangas, p. 167.

⁶⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. & trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, L-R (London: Indiana University Press, 1975), III, p. 821. Cited in Ward, p. 7.

religious faith is unique insofar as it cannot be deduced, as Kierkegaard repeatedly points out, from the standpoint of ‘worldly sagacity’, which ‘stares and stares at events and circumstances, calculates and calculates, thinking that it should be able to distil the moment out of the circumstance’.⁶⁷ Or alternatively, as Kierkegaard tells us in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

Inasmuch as the absurd contains the element of coming into existence, the road of approximation will also be that which confuses the absurd fact of coming into existence, which is the object of faith, with a simple historical fact, and then seeks historical certainty for that which is absurd precisely because it contains the contradiction that something that can become historical only in direct opposition to all human understanding has become historical. This contradiction is the absurd, which can only be believed. If a historical certainty is obtained, one obtains merely the certainty that what is certain is not what is the point in question.⁶⁸

There is nothing which exists within the historical capable of providing a sure foundation religious commitment. Faith is instead one’s willingness to recognise a new commitment as absolutely binding even in the absence of any grounding rationale. Uncertainty is the condition for such a commitment since, if it were possible to be certain, no commitment would be necessary; everything would instead be immediately known and understood.

The experience of the moment is one that resists narrative recuperation. It is for this reason that Kangas described the moment in terms of trauma: ‘trauma is less an experience than a quasi-experience, for what defines trauma is a tear in the fabric of presence itself [...] The effect of the traumatic event is a dephasing of consciousness from its own temporality: the temporal ‘now’ is no longer lived as an integral moment relating to past-present and future-present, but placed out of time and out of being.’⁶⁹ The experience of the instant is traumatic insofar as it indicates a discontinuity within the fabric of being itself. This leads Kangas to

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard, XXIII, p. 338.

⁶⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 213.

⁶⁹ Kangas, p. 53.

assert the impossibility of naming the moment, ‘except through some kind of rupture.’⁷⁰ Likewise, John Milbank argues that from the concept of the moment it follows that, ‘subjective consciousness arises as a kind of special permutation of material motion.’⁷¹ The instant is unrepresentable since it designates a break within the ontological field. And insofar as the instant is a concept that marks the genesis of subjectivity, in both Kangas and Milbank we see a connection made between ontological non-closure and subjectivity. ‘Subject’, it seems, is not the result of a divine gift, not something added to raw materiality; rather it emerges immanently from the inner torsion (or as Kierkegaard would say, from the ‘paradox’) internal to the empirico-historical. Further support for this interpretation can be found in Kierkegaard’s work on irony: ‘But the outstanding feature of irony in these and similar instances is the subjective freedom which at every moment has within its power the possibility of a beginning and is not generated from previous conditions’.⁷² Irony stands for the non-coincidence of being with itself. It is the enduring subjective capacity to distance oneself from all determinations, to render every determination as transient. Scheifler is therefore correct to note that, ‘the emptiness of irony, the nothingness (silence) it expresses can be conceived as infinite possibility’.⁷³ This is also why the subjective truth which is revealed through the instant is not available to reason but appears to the passionate individual.⁷⁴ Reason, utilized by ‘worldly sagacity’ and science, is appropriate to the analysis of objective phenomena, not the subjective world of

⁷⁰ Kangas, p. 6.

⁷¹ John Milbank, ‘The Sublime in Kierkegaard’, *The Heythrop Journal*, 37.3 (1996), 298–321 (p. 303).

⁷² *The Kierkegaard Reader*, ed. by Jane Chamberlain and Jonathan Rée, 1st edn (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), p. 35.

⁷³ Ronald Schleifer, ‘Irony, Identity and Repetition: On Kierkegaard’s The Concept of Irony’, *SubStance*, 8.25 (1979), 44–54 (p. 48).

⁷⁴ Schacht, pp. 306–7.

faith and commitment. Elsewhere the passionate individual is referred to by Kierkegaard as, ‘the right man [...] the man of the moment’, in contrast to the gaze of worldly sagacity for whom the instant never comes.⁷⁵ Likewise Kierkegaard excludes the ‘Socratic point of view’ from properly witnessing the moment: ‘From the Socratic point of view, the moment is not to be seen or to be distinguished; it does not exist, it will not have been, and will not come’.⁷⁶ Revelation in this sense is not merely a subjective reaction to a changed situation; it is better understood as a moment in which subjectivity is suddenly thrown off kilter, finding itself taken up by a new commitment through exposure to an ontological break.

For ‘worldly sagacity’ to distil the moment from the circumstances would imply that the moment were reducible to that which preceded it, that it could be, in principle, foreseeable given a sufficiently thorough analysis of a situation. Kierkegaard’s rebuke against ‘worldly sagacity’ is that it seeks to treat the moment as an event in time as opposed to being a synthesis between the temporal and the eternal. If the moment simply described a given segment of normal time it would have a finite, positive, knowable content. It would not, on this reading, be a ‘new thing’, but would be a necessary element of the whole of which it is a part. Put another way, a moment of time is available for narrative representation if we are able to describe its prior conditions and its consequences, and to thereby establish its place within a broader narrative. Kierkegaard’s moment, in contrast, is that which cannot be assimilated into narrative since it occupies an interstitial position with respect to two radically heterogeneous periods. As a synthesis of the

⁷⁵ Kierkegaard, XXIII, p. 338.

⁷⁶ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 52.

temporal and the eternal, the moment stands as a hard boundary, impervious to narrativisation and irreducible to knowledge. As Kierkegaard states,

Faith is above reason. By reason [Leibniz] understands, as he says in many places, a linking together of truths, a conclusion from causes. Faith therefore cannot be proved, demonstrated, comprehended, for the link which makes a linking together possible is missing, and what else does this say than that it is a paradox. This, precisely, is the irregularity in the paradox, continuity is lacking, or at any rate it has continuity only in reverse, that is, at the beginning it does not manifest itself as continuity.⁷⁷

The paradoxical gesture which breaks continuity and makes a faithful commitment possible is necessarily experienced as a sudden occurrence even if this suddenness is invisible retrospectively. It is important not to read the above quotation as outlining a characteristic of human psychology which prevents subjects from perceiving an underlying continuity, which nonetheless remains operative, until after the event. The discontinuity which marks the beginning of faith runs, so to speak, all the way down. It is not merely a subject's epistemologically limited mode of relating to being which gives the impression of discontinuity; on the contrary, each event bears witness to the fractured ontology Kierkegaard's moment suggests.⁷⁸ Why must this be the case? Principally because even if there is, as Kierkegaard states, 'continuity in reverse', the fact that this continuity is not present at the beginning indicates an unoblittable break between the perspective that characterizes the beginning (marked by possibility and openness) and that which marks the perspective of finality (apparent closure, continuity). This insight will inform the subsequent discussion of Kierkegaard's contribution to contemporary political theory, particularly post-foundational (Ernesto Laclau and Jacques Derrida) and transcendental materialist (Slavoj

⁷⁷ Kierkegaard, III, p. 399.

⁷⁸ This point finds support in Burns, 'A Fractured Dialectic: Kierkegaard and Political Ontology After Žižek'.

Žižek and Adrian Johnston) theories of political transformation which locate discontinuity precisely at the level of ontology as opposed to epistemology.

There is a possible objection that needs to be dealt with at this stage. Although we have sought to read the moment in Kierkegaard as an ontological rather than epistemological concept (as primordial and constitutive as opposed to a second-order perspectival distortion) does Kierkegaard not often affirm the point of view of finality as one in which all contingency is eradicated? Are we not left with a variant of philosophical dualism in which the transcendent is preserved as well as the God's-eye view to which the historical appears as a single unbroken whole? Steven Shakespeare, Edward Mooney, and Michael O'Neill Burns are to be commended for enabling us to move beyond this position. In his recent volume, *Kierkegaard and the Refusal of Transcendence*, Shakespeare convincingly argues against the finality and completion suggested by Kierkegaard's invocation of the 'God's-eye view': '[In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard] states that existence is a system for God, but by its own logic, there is no valid standpoint from within existence from which such an assertion could validly be made. It assumes the God's eye view it seeks to establish'.⁷⁹ Likewise, in Burns' and Mooney's respective accounts, the notion of God as 'divine personality' is jettisoned in favour of a reading that repositions God as the possibility condition for radical change. Mooney describes Kierkegaard's God as 'the power that grounds our agency as selves [...] the ultimate field of possibility'.⁸⁰ The divine is thus nothing other than 'absolute freedom'.⁸¹ Repositioning the transcendent in this way, as emerging from within immanence, becomes possible so long as we

⁷⁹ Steven Shakespeare, *Kierkegaard and the Refusal of Transcendence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 3.

⁸⁰ Edward F. Mooney, *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard's Moral-Religious Psychology From Either/Or to Sickness Unto Death* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 92.

⁸¹ Mooney, p. 92.

preserve a distinction between Kierkegaard's references to the God of biblical narrative (the God who makes commands and prohibitions) and God as a way of designating a limit or absolute otherness. From this position, it becomes clear that there can no longer be a firm boundary between the transcendental and the immanent. As Shakespeare puts it, we should assert 'the identity of the transcendent and the immanent' and seek to frame Kierkegaard's paradox not as the interruption of the immanent by the transcendental, but rather as the (internally generated) complication of immanence.⁸²

The status of the moment as emerging from the discontinuity implied by existence is vital to grasp since Kierkegaard's overriding aim is to construct the moment in such a way that allows it to generate a kind of newness which could not be reabsorbed back into a rigid system. If the moment were solely a consequence of objective phenomena, or if it were logically determined from the beginning, we would remain at the level of necessity with each apparently new occurrence being itself derived from the circumstances or premises. Likewise, if the moment originated purely from the willed activity of the subject, we would have a commonplace voluntarist account in which the subject is at liberty to act as they wish. Finally, to retain a conception of the moment based on divine intervention would also rob the acting subject of the contingency and risk required for genuine commitment since the moment would be fully subsumed within the historical for God. The crucial manoeuvre that takes place within the most recent literature on Kierkegaard is one that obliterates the opposition between transcendence and immanence so as to reposition the transcendental as the immanent torsion that provides the condition for subjective freedom.

⁸² Shakespeare, p. 16.

What kind of freedom does this ‘transcendence within immanence’ then leave us with? It would be the freedom to experience oneself as taken up by an absolute duty, a duty that one cannot be ‘reasoned out of’ or dissuaded from observing. To take Kierkegaard’s own example, once Abraham recognised the meaning of God’s command, there was no way in which he could avoid experiencing it as an absolute imperative. His only choice was to act in full knowledge of the absurdity of his predicament.⁸³ Part of the message of *Fear and Trembling* is therefore that, at the level of subjective experience, the origin of a faithful disposition through the moment is experience as the opening up of the temporal such that an absolute (eternal) duty can become effective. This is the sense in which we should interpret Kierkegaard’s telling phrase, ‘The moment is precisely this (which is not due to circumstances), *the new thing, the woof of eternity*’.⁸⁴ The moment provides scope for subjective freedom in a very specific sense—it allows for a free act which exceeds the established parameters of an individual’s character and the situation’s objective possibilities; rather, it is an event through which those very parameters are revealed as contingent and a new disposition, faith, or commitment becomes possible.

⁸³ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, I, pp. 203–5.

⁸⁴ Kierkegaard, XXIII, p. 338. Miller introduces a distinction between objective uncertainty and objective absurdity with the latter held as the climax of Kierkegaard’s argument in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. While this distinction exists in the text, it will not be vital to observe it here since the difference between objective uncertainty and objective absurdity seems to be one of degree rather than one of quality. Ed L. Miller, ‘At the Centre of Kierkegaard: An Objectivity Absurdity’, *Religious Studies*, 33.4 (1997), 433–41.

Necessity, Possibility, Actuality

In his *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard tells us that each historical moment is characterised by possibility.⁸⁵ Moreover, possibility, by passing into actuality, does not thereby become necessary. Although it is clear that the past is unchangeable, it does not follow from its permanence that the past did not also contain other unactualized possibilities.⁸⁶ Instead, ‘the past is not necessary, inasmuch as it came into existence (a contradiction), and it becomes even less necessary through any apprehension of it’.⁸⁷ Kierkegaard is not being entirely serious when he argues that the past can become ‘even less necessary’. The point to be appreciated here is that the notion of historical necessity is being problematized through a counter-argument that in any given situation there are numerous possible outcomes and that even though only one outcome can be actualised, this does not allow us to conclude that this outcome was necessary in advance of its actualization. The appearance of historical necessity is not due to an inherent characteristic of history, but to the position of the observer who when confronted with the apparent immutability of the past, misreads this immutability as necessity: ‘The contemporary does not see the necessity of that which comes into existence, but when centuries lie between the coming into existence and the viewer – then he sees the necessity’.⁸⁸ This passage reintroduces two possible interpretations. The first interpretation would maintain the possibility of retrospective access to past events *in their necessity* while accepting that contemporary actors embedded in the process of history’s unfolding have

⁸⁵ The Danish Hegelians against whom Kierkegaard directs his arguments are likely to be Hans Lassen Martensen and Ludvig Heiberg. See: Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 386.

⁸⁶ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 72–88.

⁸⁷ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 79.

⁸⁸ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 79.

their view distorted by their partial, curtailed perspective. As suggested above, the alternative approach taken here views *both* forward and backward views to be victims of a perspectival distortion, which amounts to saying that the distortion is essential as opposed to incidental. As Shakespeare puts it, ‘existence simply is not the kind of thing that could be ‘seen-as-a-whole’ without converting its contingency into necessity, and therefore negating it’.⁸⁹ Kierkegaard is not proposing an underlying necessity which secretly orchestrates historical events, only becoming perceptible after the passage of centuries; on the contrary, it is in fact the passage of centuries which creates a kind of perspectival illusion, erasing unactualized possibilities in favour of a single, causal trajectory.

Kierkegaard’s central objection to the Danish reading of the Hegelian teleological vision of history is that it leaves no space for human freedom; freedom is instead simply assimilated without remainder.⁹⁰ Historical necessity presents us with a version of events which leads inexorably to a pre-given outcome. The role of human subjects would not be to actively decide upon certain outcomes, the very notion of decision would no longer be meaningful:

If the past had become necessary, then it would not belong to freedom any more – that is, belong to that in which it came into existence. Freedom would then be in dire straits, something to laugh about and weep over, since it would bear responsibility for what did not belong to it, would bring forth what necessity would devour, and freedom itself would be an illusion and coming into existence no less an illusion.⁹¹

A human decision would be reduced to a hollow act of validating an outcome which itself has the status of a foregone conclusion. The appearance of freedom

⁸⁹ Shakespeare, p. 4.

⁹⁰ It should be emphasised here that the version of Hegelian historical necessity Kierkegaard attacks is not one that would be recognised by many contemporary scholars of Hegel. It is a version which Kierkegaard received through his contact with Danish Hegelians such as Hans Lassen Martensen and Ludvig Heiberg but which no longer stands as a dominant interpretation of Hegelian thought. In fact, Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel can even be regarded as compatible with contemporary approaches to Hegel which seek to prioritise the role of contingency in his thought. For an account of Kierkegaard’s reaction to Hegelianism, see: Hannay, p. 386.

⁹¹ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 77–8.

would be the result of an epistemological limitation, the subject's incomplete knowledge of a given situation, whereas at an ontological level the subject's decision would be already determined in advance. A position holding that historical events occur by necessity must also rule out newness regardless of whether this newness is thought to be generated by a free act or to emerge spontaneously by other means. In a system governed by necessity there cannot be any newness, at least not in the sense Kierkegaard intends, since every outcome is in principle given in advance and available from the outset.

The passages from *Philosophical Fragments* quoted above bring us closer to Kierkegaard's ontology. As is already clear at this stage, with Kierkegaard we are dealing with a vision of reality which includes rifts and gaps, breaches and breaks. Come offers an instructive account of Kierkegaard's position:

[B]oth in *Fragments* and in *Postscript*, the eternal necessary laws, discerned by human rational analysis of both the structures of nature and the macro movements of the world-historical process, do not annul or set aside or swallow up [...] that peculiar event that is dialectical in respect to time in that, on the one hand, it is an observable fact of history and yet, on the other, it hides within it an unobservable pause before a breach which cannot be bridged by either logical or physical force but only by the leap of freedom which is enable by the courage to believe against all evidence to the contrary.⁹²

Kierkegaard begins with an idea of subjectivity as an entity in a state of becoming, without a pre-determined final goal, and from this position develops a compatible ontology, one that does not threaten the characteristics of subjectivity he views as most valuable. Necessity, as understood by Danish Hegelians such as Hans Lassen Martensen and Ludvig Heiberg (who were the main source of Kierkegaard's encounter with Hegelian philosophy), would render human freedom impossible since all action would be absorbed by pre-existing conditions, temporality would be abolished under a system in which everything is given in

⁹² The dominant interpretation of Kierkegaard's thought as a philosophy of discontinuity is Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*.

advance, and the individual subject would no longer exist as a ‘freely acting cause’.⁹³ For human history to include humans themselves as active participants, as agents in the process, we need a theory of the decision which is not the validation of a pre-determined outcome, but is instead a groundless, anarchic act which consistently subverts explanatory paradigms. Such an act is not determined, but nor is it a random activation of a single possibility. Nonetheless, we must not mistake this freedom as mere freedom of choice—as Come is aware, it must be a form of freedom that is incalculable and perhaps even *experienced as necessity*. The moment can then be considered as a kind of pure occurrence, the indivisible particle that remains after all efforts at explanation have been exhausted.

This brings us to an unexpected conclusion with regard to Kierkegaard’s ontology. If Kierkegaard is proposing a non-totalizing, incomplete ontology, we need to decide where this incompleteness is located.⁹⁴ It is Kierkegaard’s statements concerning the self’s status as a synthesis which provide the clue here. Thought of as a synthesis, the subject expresses both the incommensurability and the paradoxical unity of opposites. The subject, at a specific, unique moment in time, is able to bridge the chasm between the temporal and the eternal, or to put this another way, the human subject is able to elevate a single moment in such a way that it inaugurates an eternal commitment. The moment as ‘missing link’ is coextensive with, or expressed by, this sudden gesture or movement which is *nothing but* the phenomenological trace of an ontological discontinuity. Our reading of Kierkegaard’s moment as a ‘missing link’ needs to be kept in mind

⁹³ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 76.

⁹⁴ The key exponent of this interpretation of Kierkegaard’s ontology is Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectic*.

throughout subsequent chapters as we attempt to discern a temporal aporetic in the works of political thinkers from Hobbes and Rousseau to Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek by way of Carl Schmitt and Ernesto Laclau.

Hobbes, Rousseau, and the Unsquared Circle of Political Foundations

‘For the hypothesis of a state of nature implies the existence of a beginning that is separated from everything following it as though by an unbridgeable chasm’.

- Hannah Arendt

The previous chapter established the basic contours of Kierkegaard’s concept of the moment. Our task will now be to set out and discuss the conceptual links between the moment as a particular kind of transformation that resists reduction to pre-existing conditions, and the transition from a pre-political state of nature to political life in Hobbes and Rousseau. While the correspondence between these two types of transformation may initially appear tenuous, there are important reasons for pursuing the comparison suggested here. Foremost of these is the fact that neither Hobbes nor Rousseau give us an incremental narrative of the exit from the state of nature; instead, the precise chronology of the transformation is opaque in both accounts. Far from attempting to derive a complete, fully articulated chronological account from these theorists, I propose that the temporal distortion afflicting the contractarian narratives of Rousseau and Hobbes must be positively asserted as such. In line with the overarching claim of this thesis, temporal dislocation in *Leviathan* and *The Social Contract* is an irreducible feature of narratives of political origins and radical political change.

There is no entelechial movement from the natural to the political in either Hobbes or Rousseau; instead, we find the sudden break of a contingent event. I will introduce two terms in order to aid our understanding of political foundations in Hobbes and Rousseau: superposition and hiatus.¹ The former applies to situations in which counterfactual scenarios must be simultaneously asserted within the same narrative (i.e. they must be ‘superposed’) despite the resulting contradiction. The latter serves to capture the perspective of the subject undergoing the change; the passage from one order to the next is not seamless, but entails a moment of openness or ‘in-between’ time.

Temporal opacity is the narrative correlate of the qualitative change contracting individuals are required to accomplish with respect to their psychological disposition and their social relations.² In Hobbes and Rousseau, the founding moment of political life bears a structural affinity to Kierkegaard’s notion of the instant but the suddenness of the transformation does not simply imply an unexpected event of short duration. Instead, the suddenness of the contract’s institution relates to a certain circularity or groundlessness which continues to persist beneath the appearance of a consolidated political order and which reappears in narratives that attempt to delineate the political order’s founding moment. Just as for Kierkegaard groundlessness and absurdity represent the positive condition of faithful subjectivity, the unbridgeable gap that

¹ As mentioned previously, the term ‘superposition’ is borrowed from quantum mechanics and designates the simultaneous occurrence of mutually exclusive states. It describes one aspect of the paradox that emerges in the attempt to narrativise moments of sudden transformation.

² See, for example, Martinich who offers a two-step account of the transition from the state of nature. For Martinich, a distinction is introduced between, on the one hand, the primary state of nature in which there are no laws of nature and no concept of obligation, and on the other hand, a secondary state of nature which remains a condition of war albeit one in which some basic notion of obligation exists. For reasons I will set out below, this solution cannot be accepted, however, Martinich is correct in his diagnosis of the problem - Hobbes’s account lacks the conceptual resources required to generate the necessary change in individual subjective dispositions. A. P. Martinich, *Hobbes* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 78–79.

separates political life from the state of nature does not prove to be an obstacle to politics, but is in fact that which animates political discourse and prevents ossification.³ The difficulties encountered by Kierkegaard in his account of the genesis of subjectivity can be detected in the emergence of a political subject. In both cases, one must account for the mediatory dynamic that can effectuate the transformation. Our overarching concern is to trace the contours of this dynamic without losing sight of the discontinuity and paradox it designates. Placing Kierkegaard, Hobbes and Rousseau in dialogue will allow us to establish the political dimension of Kierkegaard's moment as well as delineating an ineradicable moment of temporal complexity in both Hobbes and Rousseau's account of political origins.

In confronting either Kierkegaard's moment or the moment of political origins, we are dealing with an event that cannot be explained according to the principle of sufficient reason. That is to say, the set of conditions preceding the event cannot exhaustively account for the resultant change.⁴ Kierkegaard's moment, particularly the version of the moment offered in *The Moment and Late Writings*, is a concept that can be mobilised to understand transformations that are irreducible to pre-existing conditions. Kangas is therefore to be supported in his assessment of Kierkegaard's moment as radically spontaneous:

The specific nature of an event is that it *presupposes itself*. That is to say, an event becomes possible only in the moment it becomes actual; its possibility for happening arrives only in the very moment of its happening. An event is always and essentially 'the sudden'. It breaks discontinuously upon the present as an interruption. An event is not in the present or an unfolding of possibilities coiled up in the present, but the qualification of the present in terms of its actuality *and* possibility. As an event or leap, sin becomes possible only in the moment it is actual—not 'before'.⁵

³ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, I, p. 203.

⁴ Kierkegaard repeatedly emphasises this feature of his argument. See, for example, Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, I, pp. 93, 203.

⁵ Kangas, p. 173.

While for Kierkegaard the moment is bound up either with the emergence of subjectivity (*The Concept of Anxiety*) or with the experience of revelation (*The Moment and Late Writings, Philosophical Fragments*), we can nonetheless risk the hypothesis that a comparison between the structure of these events can yield insight when applied to political events. Just as the revelatory event comes into being in a single movement, becoming possible in the same moment it becomes actual, so must the social contract come about suddenly, as a definitive cut with the past. Spontaneity is nonetheless a deeply problematic notion for social scientists and political theorists alike. There is a tendency amongst scholarship on Hobbes to view spontaneity as indicating an inner incoherence or paradox.⁶ As I propose above, the position taken here is that the paradoxes associated with political origins do not necessarily entail a theoretical *impasse*. Indeed, we will discover that these paradoxes should not be suppressed in our narratives of political change (be they speculative or empirico-historical) but should provide impetus for further conceptual work. By mobilising Kierkegaard's moment as capable of illuminating paradoxes in both the Hobbesian and Rousseauian social contracts, it will be possible to make a valuable contribution to contemporary debates concerning political origins and to demonstrate that a political reading of Kierkegaard's moment can be both plausible and compelling.

This contribution will propose that placing Kierkegaard in dialogue with Hobbes and Rousseau produces a two-fold insight concerning the temporality of free action. Firstly, when we consider the position of an involved subject in an

⁶ This slippage between spontaneity and incoherence can be noted throughout the otherwise excellent account provided by Matthew H. Kramer, *Hobbes and the Paradoxes of Political Origins* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997). Having said this, Kramer's accusations of incoherence do not mean the same as my own. When Kramer charges Hobbes with incoherence, he means to suggest that Hobbes has failed to reason correctly or has begun from false premises. When I use the term incoherence, I am pointing to a feature of narratives of political origins that is necessary and ineradicable as opposed to a particular feature of the Hobbesian account.

evental, transformative situation, we are forced to recognise the situations profound undecidability. This undecidability does not imply that any decision is possible, nor that a certain decision will improve the likelihood of a given outcome, but that the status of any decision is necessarily open and can only be fixed retroactively. The stability of a given event's meaning is conditioned, but not determined, by a decision. For an acting individual, the decisive moment (the moment at which we are suddenly forced to choose) is not experienced as a seamless linear progression, but rather as a hiatus between separate and distinct natural, social or political systems.⁷ Nonetheless, this experience of hiatus is lost to the retrospective view, which aims at narrative consistency. Fixing the meaning of an event depends on such a procedure—hindsight reduces the moment of indeterminacy to a vanishing point such that the contingency of the event is sublated into a teleological historical vector.

A final point should be raised before turning to Hobbes and Rousseau's versions of the social contract. Scholars who defend the social contract tradition as a valuable theoretical resource do so not on the basis that the contract represents a real, historical event marking the origin of politics and law among humans.⁸ Instead, the social contract is to be viewed as a speculative anthropological discussion of how the origin of political authority can be regarded as legitimate as opposed to an act of usurpation or imposition.⁹ The social

⁷ The term 'hiatus' is here borrowed from Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 205.

⁸ Hobbes himself suggests he is sceptical as to whether the condition of war ever existed to the extent he describes in *Leviathan*. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 89. Also see: David Gauthier, 'The Social Contract as Ideology', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 6.2 (1977), 130–64 (p. 135). B. T. Trainor, 'The Politics of Peace: The Role of the Political Covenant in Hobbes's *Leviathan*', in *Thomas Hobbes: Critical Assessments*, ed. by Preston King (London: Routledge, 1993), VOL. III, POLITICS AND LAW, pp. 616–625; Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 240–242.

⁹ For a useful discussion of these alternative views of the social contract, see W. R. Lund who also claims that Hobbes consciously distinguishes between historical and hypothetical

contract narrative serves to illuminate certain aspects of our current situation by revealing the kind of origin that our political configuration presupposes. It can therefore be held, as Leyden says, to retain 'logical force and to have no special reference to a particular historical period'.¹⁰ In the discussion that follows, debates about the historical accuracy of various incarnations of the social contract narrative will be set aside in order to engage with the contract as a quasi-mythical occurrence. Underpinning this engagement is the proposition that at some point in our distant past political relations did actually emerge and came to be considered, to a greater or lesser extent, as legitimate. The discussion offered below is not an attempt to dismantle the social contract as an empirical event; the task is rather to highlight the temporal complexity one discovers when faced with narratives concerning political origins and to show how these complexities can be elucidated through careful analysis.

understandings of the covenant: 'The Historical and "Political" Origins of Civil Society: Hobbes on Presumption and Certainty', in *Thomas Hobbes: Critical Assessments*, ed. by Preston King (London: Routledge, 1993), VOL. III, POLITICS AND LAW, pp. 727–738.

¹⁰ Wolfgang von Leyden, *Hobbes and Locke: The Politics of Freedom and Obligation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), p. 67.

Hobbes and the Aporetic Genesis of Political Obligation

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes describes the natural condition of mankind as anarchic and characterised by war and suffering: ‘Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man’.¹¹ The absence of a common Power entails the absence of property since the possession of goods is only guaranteed by the possessor’s use of force. Likewise, there can be no sense of justice in the state of war since each individual has unlimited right.¹² Justice is based on law, which in turn relies on the presence of a common power.¹³ Given the approximate equality of strength and intelligence between men, there will be an inevitable tendency towards conflict where two or more men desire a thing that cannot be enjoyed by both.¹⁴ For Hobbes, the resulting situation is one in which men will always be inclined to suspect each other of aggression and take pre-emptive steps to secure greater power. Power itself is defined as a ‘present means to obtain some future apparent Good’.¹⁵ It follows from this formulation that men will seek to guarantee, through all means necessary, the satisfaction of both their immediate and their future desires. This unlimited striving for greater power, unchecked by a sovereign, generates scarcity and thereby contributes to the misery and suffering men experience in the state of nature.

Against the backdrop of the state of war described in *Leviathan*, Hobbes presents us with a series of laws of nature immediately after a brief commentary

¹¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 88.

¹² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 90.

¹³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 90.

¹⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 87.

¹⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 62.

on natural liberty, with the former apparently necessitating the voluntary limitation of the latter and leading to man's exit from the state of nature. The precise status of these laws is a point of contention within the literature on Hobbes.¹⁶ Hobbes is quite clear that the state of nature is one of unlimited liberty, and yet we nonetheless find this claim alongside arguments which posit the laws of nature as forbidding man from doing, 'that which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same; and to omit that by which he thinks it may be best preserved'.¹⁷ Law, as Hobbes tells us, 'is a Precept, or generall Rule' which obliges man to engage in, or refrain from engaging in, certain behaviours. It is, however, difficult to see how obligation can exist in the state of nature described by Hobbes given that there is no higher power to compel men to act in any particular way.¹⁸ To be sure, it is possible to find passages in which the normative force of the laws of nature seems to be muted—for example, Hobbes notes that 'These dictates of Reason, men use to call by the name of Lawes, but improperly: for they are but Conclusions, or Theoremes concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence of themselves'.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the dominant tendency in Hobbes's *Leviathan* is to formulate the laws as imperatives.²⁰

¹⁶ For a comprehensive survey of the positions taken on this issue, see the various contributions to *Critical Assessments*, ed. by Preston King (London: Routledge, 1993), VOL. II, POLITICS AND LAW. For a more recent account of the debate, see: Brian Tierney, 'Natural Law and Natural Rights: Old Problems and Recent Approaches', *The Review of Politics*, 64.03 (2002), 389–406 (pp. 389–406).

¹⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 91.

¹⁸ An additional difficulty encountered in any discussion of the laws of nature concerns the variation in Hobbes's own position. In *Leviathan* (p. 91), Hobbes unambiguously describes the laws of nature as forbidding certain behaviours. Elsewhere, Hobbes distinguishes the laws of nature from a stricter notion of law, which, 'is the speech of him who by right commands somewhat to others to be done or omitted'. Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. by Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 56.

¹⁹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 111.

²⁰ Here I agree with A. E. Taylor who correctly reads the laws of nature as forbidding and prescribing certain actions, not merely describing the way men behave. See: A. E. Taylor, 'The Ethical Doctrine of Hobbes', in *Thomas Hobbes: Critical Assessments*, ed. by Preston King (London: Routledge, 1993), VOL. II, ETHICS, p. 26. For this reason, I also reject J. F. Wilson's

The position developed in *Leviathan* according to which the Laws of Nature are to be seen as imperatives produces an inconsistency since, as Hobbes states, there can be ‘no obligation on any man, which ariseth not from some Act of his own’.²¹ Elsewhere Hobbes writes,

when a man hath [...] abandoned, or granted away his Right; then is he said to be OBLIGED, or BOUND, not to hinder those, to whom such Right is granted, or abandoned, from the benefit of it: and that he Ought, and it is his DUTY, not to make voyd that voluntary act of his own: and that such hindrance is INJUSTICE.²²

All obligation is ultimately rooted in an original act of submission through which every man except the sovereign relinquishes his natural right. For this reason, obligation cannot precede the covenant; it emerges exclusively through the covenant. There are, as Oakeshott points out, no commands that can be inherently or self-evidently binding.²³ The contradiction is also noted by Berns who states, ‘[N]atural rights and traditional natural law are, to put it simply, yet altogether accurately, incompatible; to espouse one teaching is to make it impossible to reasonably espouse the other’.²⁴ Likewise, Newey frames the issue as follows:

If everyone has a right to everything, that seems to imply that there can be no natural obligations or duties. For suppose that there were such a natural duty, which applied to some individual – say, to do or refrain from doing something. But then I do not

approach, which reads Hobbes’s notion of obligation as dependent on the presence external impediments, with the implication that the laws of nature do not oblige because they do not present external impediments to human action. The problem here is that we would be left with a weak notion of obligation after the political covenant since obligation would only exist as direct physical force. Moreover, given this form of obligation, it remains unclear why obligation emerges from an act of submission. If physical force obliges, it does so regardless of whether the obliged party submits. See: J. F. Wilson, ‘Reason and Obligation in *Leviathan*’, in *Thomas Hobbes: Critical Assessments* (London: Routledge, 1993), VOL. II, ETHICS, p. 373.

²¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 150.

²² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 92.

²³ Michael Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), p. 96.

²⁴ Walter Berns, ‘The Constitution as Bill of Rights’, in *How Does the Constitution Secure Rights?*, ed. by R. A. Goldwin and W. A. Schambra (Washington, WA: AEI, 1985), p. 55. Berns’s use of the term right does not easily map onto Hobbes’s notion of the right of nature since the latter is already curtailed to the extent that it provides only that man, ‘use his own power, as he will himselfe, for the preservation of his own Nature; that is to say, of his own Life’. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 91. Liberty in the state of nature is a more expansive concept and entails a more stark contradiction with the law of nature insofar as it describes, ‘the absence of externall Impediments’. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 91.

have a right not to do that thing (or not to refrain from doing it). So I do not have a right to everything, and so not everyone has a right to everything.²⁵

For Hobbes's account to be consistent, either the laws of nature must be positive (in the sense of positing a fact, i.e. not normative), describing as opposed to obliging behaviour, or alternatively, Hobbes's notions of authority and obligation as derived from an act of submission must be revised. To pursue the latter strategy would be deeply problematic since Hobbes's entire theoretical edifice relies on the idea that obligation stems from an act of submission—this is why the origin of the *civitas* must take the form of a covenant. Introducing any ambiguity concerning the possibility of uncovenanted obligation would risk undermining the central argument of *Leviathan*; if uncovenanted obligation were possible, Hobbes's arguments about man's intolerable condition in the state of nature would lose their logical force. If humans are already obliged to behave in certain ways in the state of nature, such that certain forms of agreement become possible, we might then reasonably question the necessity of the covenant itself. At the very least, for humans to be obliged to act in a just manner (as Hobbes at times seems to suggest) in the state of nature would significantly diminishes the need for the instauration of an all-powerful sovereign to control them.²⁶

Despite the concerns raised above relating to the possibility of uncovenanted obligation, there is a significant and well-established body of scholarship holding reading Hobbes's laws of nature as already obligating in advance of the political covenant. A. E. Taylor's "The Ethical Doctrine of Hobbes" seeks to establish the reasonable pursuit of interest and the avoidance of

²⁵ Glen Newey, *Hobbes and Leviathan* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 88.

²⁶ This issue is raised by Jean Hampton who makes the point that the individuals existing in the state of nature need to be irrational enough to require a sovereign (rather than simply make and enforce agreements among themselves) and yet also be rational enough to be able to institute the sovereign. Jean Hampton, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 85.

contradiction as the foundation of Hobbes's ethical position. Although I have briefly presented some compelling reasons for rejecting this approach above, it is nonetheless worth running through Taylor's arguments to see if they hold under closer scrutiny. The central statement of Taylor's thesis sets out the problem in the following terms:

There are really two distinct questions before Hobbes, the question why I ought to behave as a good citizen, and the question what inducement can be given me to do so if my knowledge of the obligation to do so is not in itself sufficiently effective. According to his repeated declarations, it is a certain fact of psychology that I shall violate the law and break the peace if I believe that I stand to gain by doing so. Hence the importance for him of arguing that I never really stand to gain by such conduct, since the recurrence of the state of "war of every man against every man" is a disadvantage to me which cannot be offset by any compensating advantage. But the Hobbesian answer to the other question, why I ought, or am obliged, to be a good citizen is quite different; it is, quite explicitly that I have, expressly or tacitly, pledged my word to be one, and to violate my word, to refuse to "perform my covenant as made," is iniquity, *malum in se*.²⁷

Taylor's central claim is that Hobbes's theory of obligation relies on logical consistency. If I agree to perform a task, I clearly will that task to be done. If, then, I subsequently choose not to perform as promised, I have placed myself in contradiction by both willing and not willing the same thing. To be clear on my position here, I do not dispute Taylor's point that Hobbes presents the laws of nature in normative terms; Hobbes consistently speaks of the laws as imperatives that oblige action, not merely as descriptive statements about human behaviour. The problematic step in Taylor's argument resides in his assertion of the laws of nature as obligatory insofar as they prescribe reasonable action. Taylor is quick to point to Hobbes's description of the laws of nature as 'dictates of reason' in support of his argument, however, to my mind this is illegitimate. What we find in Taylor's account is in fact two distinct forms of obligation collapsed into a single imperative. On the one hand, we have the obligation to keep promises made, but this obligation only holds if we are already obligated to accept the

²⁷ Taylor, VOL. II, ETHICS, p. 23.

dictates of reason as a normative paradigm for our actions. There is only one clear mechanism for founding an obligation in Hobbes and it is the transferral of one's right onto another person.²⁸ If I promise to perform, my promise is binding only if I already experience myself as obligated in a more fundamental way to obey the laws of nature. Moreover, even if I experience the laws of nature as binding upon me, there is no reason why I could not simply release myself from this obligation and the obligations that follow from it. As Hobbes himself tells us, it is not possible for an individual to be obligated to themselves:

Nor can one be obligated to oneself; for since the obligated and the obligating party would be the same, and the obligating party may release the obligated, obligation to oneself would be meaningless, because he can release himself at his own discretion, and anyone who can do this is in fact free.²⁹

In practice, while an individual might be persuaded of the binding force of the laws of nature, the restrictions flowing from the observance of the laws are self-imposed. There is nothing to prevent an individual from releasing himself from his obligation to obey the laws of nature given a certain set of circumstances, and indeed, based on Hobbes's description of the state of nature, we have good reasons to expect this sort of discretionary observance of the laws of nature to be pervasive.

An additional problem in Taylor's account presents itself in the understanding of duty. Taylor argues, 'It is my personal interest that the miseries of anarchy should be prevented; by disobeying the civil law in any particular, I am, so far, contributing to the recurrence of anarchy; *ergo*, it is always to my interest to conform to the law. And to say that this is to my interest is equivalent to saying that it is my duty; my duty, in fact, means my personal interest, calmly

²⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 92.

²⁹ Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 84.

understood'.³⁰ We shall see below why this alignment between interest and duty does not dissolve the difficulties associated with the exit from the state of nature in Hobbes. For now, it is enough to note that such an impoverished notion of duty fails to account for the kinds of behaviours humans actually perform in the name of duty. Duty, commonly understood, is precisely the commitment that sustains actions which put one's personal interests in jeopardy. When the state calls upon young men to go to war, they oblige out of duty, not because upon reflection they decide that fighting on the battlefield is in their interests. Of course, it can be objected that the preservation of the state may simply be in the individual's highest interest regardless of whether they survive the war, but this line of thinking soon results in a conceptual morass in which any given set of actions, no matter how risky or self-destructive, can be retrospectively rationalised as having been compatible with the individual's dominant interest.

It would seem that there are two distinct notions of reasonable action at play in Taylor's account. First, we have reasonable action directed at self-preservation. Second, actions may be described as in accordance with reason insofar as they are not based on a contradiction. In the first case, an individual may make promises and intend to keep them, but if this is motivated by self-interest, then it is possible the individual will renege should circumstances change. In the second case, the individual experiences their promises as binding. To break a promise would be to contradict oneself since the very making of a promise implies one is aware of the *ought* implied by the statement 'I promise'. However, in this case, as we have noted above, humans in the state of nature are already equipped with a capacity

³⁰ Taylor, VOL. II, ETHICS, p. 23.

to make and keep promises, and the need for an all-powerful sovereign is no longer evident.

A further variation on the role of the laws of nature is offered by Carole Pateman. Pateman concedes that, strictly speaking, there can be no obligation in the state of nature.³¹ If the laws of nature are to be understood as dictating reasonable behaviour for men, there can still be no sense in understanding an individual's performance in accordance with the laws of nature as obligatory. Having affirmed this, Pateman goes on to argue that the laws of nature are 'principles of reason that enable men to live peacefully or socially'.³² Once a pre-given end is accepted (an end to the state of war) we may be in a better position to accept the laws of nature as the reasonable means to achieving that end. This solution would be convincing, except for the fact that we nonetheless remain in the peculiar situation whereby we need to project into the state of nature a final destination (peaceful, social life) which pre-political human activity is organised towards. Pateman's solution cannot be properly applied to the state of nature *in-itself*; rather, the laws of nature are only nameable as principles guiding action in the state of nature as it appears *for us*, as social beings who have accomplished the exit from the state of nature and for whom the means to peaceful, social life are more evident. Once one adopts the perspective of an individual actually existing in the state of nature, the laws of nature become nonsensical. Indeed, the laws themselves are quite inappropriate guidance for an individual whose life is essentially organised around self-defence and pre-emptive attacks against potential competitors. Put another way, if we posit a distinction between natural

³¹ Carole Pateman, *The Problem of Political Obligation: A Critique of Liberal Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 43.

³² Pateman, p. 48.

man's short-to-medium term goals (the satisfaction of his immediate and future desires) and his long-term goal (peaceful, social life) we still have yet to explain how this long-term goal arises in the imagination of natural man and why he would set aside his immediate interests in order to pursue it, particularly when this would render him vulnerable to his numerous enemies. Pateman thus remains unable to fully disentangle temporal complexity in the Hobbesian narrative of origins insofar as her model of the state of nature relies on natural man's having obtained insights (regarding the rational means to achieving his long-term goals and the inclination to pursue these goals over his immediate interests) that would only be available to him after the covenant has been made.

An additional alternative reading has been presented by Oakeshott, and later, in an article defending Oakeshott's reading, by D. Krook. This reading abandons wholesale any aspiration to read Hobbes's *Leviathan* as a speculative anthropology of the origins of man and instead proposes to read the text as a logical structure. Krook clarifies the position as follows: 'There is neither a sequence of events in time nor even an hypothetical sequence in hypothetical time, but only premises and deductions, antecedents and consequents, definitions and the meanings of definitions'.³³ The question of the chronological ordering of events in *Leviathan* thus no longer applies; instead, we simply have a set of elementary propositions with a raft of deductions and inferences that follow logically from them. There is no need to pose the question of the emergence of obligation because obligation now emerges by way of necessity from the collection of presuppositions and accompanying successive logical deductions set out in the text. The advantages and disadvantages of such an approach are beyond

³³ D. Krook, 'Mr. Browns Note Annotated', in *Thomas Hobbes: Critical Assessments*, ed. by Preston King, Vol. II, Ethics (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 90.

the scope of our discussion here, however, the very fact that some scholars are driven to read Hobbes's *Leviathan* in this way (as a logical structure as opposed to a speculative narrative of origins) is of interest insofar as it betrays the utter intractability of the problem of temporality in the text. For Oakeshott and Krook, it is easier to abandon chronology wholesale than to attempt to unpick the paradoxes that ensue from attempts at chronological ordering. My argument, as will by now be clear, is that one can arrive at a novel reading of Hobbes precisely by focusing on the narrative distortions that emerge from a diachronic reading.

A Hobbesian account of political origins can be understood in terms of superposition since, prior to the making of the covenant, obligation must be supposed to exist *and* to not exist. Put another way, if we hold obligation to emerge with the political covenant, the covenant itself becomes impossible; if we hold obligation to exist in the state of nature (i.e. if we understand the laws of nature to prescribe rather than simply describe behaviour) the covenant becomes unnecessary. Given that we are examining a work of speculative anthropology as opposed to an historical account, the superposition of mutually exclusive states in Hobbes does not equate to a claim about how things 'really were' prior to political life. Instead, our claim is that the attempt to reconstruct the passage from an imagined state of nature to contemporary political life necessarily entails unresolvable paradoxes.

Felix Culpa

In Chapter 16 of *Leviathan* Hobbes makes some pertinent remarks on his understanding of representation and authority. Concerning representation, Hobbes makes the following observation:

A PERSON, is he, whose words or actions are considered, either as his own, or as representing the words or actions of an other man, or any other thing to whom they are attributed, whether Truly or by Fiction. When they are considered as his owne, then is he called a Naturall Person: and when they are considered as representing the words or actions of an other, then is he a Feigned or Artificiall person.³⁴

The distinction between ‘natural persons’ and ‘artificial persons’ is clear. Each individual has her own words and actions. When an individual’s words and actions are their own (deriving from their own thoughts, wishes, and intentions), they are a ‘natural person’. When an individual behaves as a proxy for the actions and words of another, they can be said to be a representative or an ‘artificial person’. The individuals comprising the proto-political multitude are natural persons while the sovereign is an artificial person authorised by the multitude to act as their representative. In light of this distinction, we need to pay attention to the difference between the natural person of the sovereign and the function of the sovereign as an office which is generated through the covenant and occupied by (but not identical with) a flesh-and-blood individual. As Hobbes puts it, ‘A multitude of men are made one person when they are by one man, or one person, represented [...] For it is the unity of the representer or representative, not the unity of the represented, that maketh the person one.’ Moreover, and crucially for Hobbes’s argument, the multitude are not capable of representing themselves except through a sovereign. If the multitude were able to act in a unified way, this would undermine the sovereign’s power since it would introduce another locus of

³⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 111.

authority and thereby diminish the power of the sovereign. Martinich outlines Hobbes's position as follows:

Hobbes would not want the sovereign to be the creation of the commonwealth because if the sovereign were, then the sovereign would directly represent the commonwealth, not each individual subject. The danger, as far as Hobbes is concerned, is that the authority of the sovereign would be mediated by the authority of the commonwealth, and this would open the door to some theorist to argue that the sovereign may fail to represent the commonwealth correctly and that the constituents of the commonwealth, the subjects, could make this judgment.³⁵

The commonwealth can therefore not act as a single entity except when it is represented by the sovereign. To put this in other words, Hobbes wishes to shore up constituted power by showing how it is prior to, or more essential than, constitutive power. On Hobbes's reading, constitutive power can only be held by individuals, not by groups.

The problem here is that the original political act seems to imply, if not require, a political group (one resembling a commonwealth) and not a disparate multitude of individuals. The negotiation and coordination that would necessarily precede the covenant indicate that the fundamental shift made by the multitude to something resembling a commonwealth has already occurred. The multitude, in coordinating the contracting moment, and in recognising themselves as collectively belonging to the group who are to be represented by the sovereign, must be thought of as existing prior to the sovereign. And insofar as they act in concert when carrying through the inaugural political gesture, they are capable of representing themselves.

The difficulty of arriving at notions of duty, obligation, and legitimacy in the way Hobbes suggests is compounded by additional features of the covenant. As we have already seen, Hobbes presents us with a state of nature containing

³⁵ A. P. Martinich, 'Authorization and Representation in Hobbes's *Leviathan*', in *The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes*, ed. by A. P. Martinich and Kinch Hoekstra (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 335.

men who fear death and wish to preserve their lives, but who nonetheless live in a condition of war generated by their desire for power (specifically, the power to satisfy future desires). Even if we accept, with Hobbes, that a primordial multitude could recognise their situation is intolerable and that it is in their collective interest to relinquish their natural right and institute a common power, there nonetheless remains an additional hurdle outlined by Sreedhar: ‘Distrust invalidates a covenant, because the parties do not accept each other’s declaration of will (or intention to perform). In the state of nature, such accepting of intention will be rare because the first performer will not be able to form the belief that the second performer has the relevant intention to perform’.³⁶ Oakeshott frames the problem in even starker terms: ‘the risk that he whose part it is to be the second performer will not keep his promise [...] must always be great enough to make it unreasonable for any man to consent to be a first performer’.³⁷ Hobbes himself seems to recognise the seriousness of this problem in his comments on the first performance of covenants: ‘For he that performeth first, has no assurance the other will performe after [...] And therefore he which performeth first, does but betray himselfe to his enemy; contrary to the Right (he can never abandon) of defending his life, and means of living’.³⁸ Of course, although Hobbes is describing covenants made in the state of nature, the political covenant itself must also be considered to have been made in the state of nature. The event which Hobbes’s entire argument is geared towards would seem to be rendered impossible so long as self-interest is taken to be man’s dominant, if not exclusive, motivation.

³⁶ Susanne Sreedhar, *Hobbes on Resistance: Defying the Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 45.

³⁷ Oakeshott, p. 126.

³⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 96.

This aspect of covenant making is touched upon by Carl Schmitt in his study of Hobbes's *Leviathan*: 'The terror of the state of nature drives anguished individuals to come together; their fear rises to an extreme; a spark of reason (*ratio*) flashes, and suddenly there stands in front of them a new God.'³⁹ The ambivalence of this passage is striking. Even though Schmitt refers to the 'spark of reason', the tone of the writing implies a spontaneous transformation, a revelatory shift in perspective—from one moment to the next humans are suddenly equipped with the new ability to reason their way out of the state of nature an into political life. If we are to accept Schmitt's reading, we still need an account of how this sudden spark of reason arises. Hobbes emphasised that the only precedents upon which the first performer could base their decision are failed covenants since there can be no examples of successful covenants made under conditions of war.⁴⁰ But if this is true than the 'spark of reason' seems insufficient.

Schmitt's account of Hobbes is relevant here in a further way. In addressing the problem of the priority of sovereign (constituted) power and multitude (constitutive) power, Schmitt makes the following comment: 'If this construct were viewed from its result, for the perspective of the state, what it would reveal is that the state is something more than and something different from a covenant concluded by individuals. [...] Even though a consensus of all with all has been achieved, this agreement is only an anarchico-social, not a state, covenant.'⁴¹ Clearly, the reason Schmitt takes up this interpretation of Hobbes is because he

³⁹ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Symbol*, trans. by George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein (London: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 31.

⁴⁰ Hobbes holds covenants formed under the conditions of the state of nature to be void: 'Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words, and of no strength to secure a man at all'. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 117.

⁴¹ Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 40.

regards the sovereign as the fundamental, transcendent power. The sovereign cannot be derived from any other power; its power cannot hinge on the consent of the multitude. Nonetheless, in advocating this position vis-à-vis the covenant, Schmitt must rely on a position that Hobbes explicitly rejects, namely, the idea that covenants can be made in the state of nature. As soon as the possibility of ‘anarchico-social’ covenants is accepted, the need for the sovereign is diminished and Hobbes’s assertions concerning the terror and brutality of the state of nature are undermined.

Even if Schmitt’s two-fold (anarchico-social, then political) covenant is accepted, further questions immediately surface apropos the issue of actual obedience. While Hobbes has set out the various motivations which prompt natural man to leave the state of nature, motivations which appeal primarily to man’s rationality, there nonetheless remains a requirement for a moment of profound irrationality which must be passed through in order to actually exit the state of nature. Despite having made the covenant and surrendered their rights to the new sovereign, there can be no real guarantee for any man that the other signatories really intend to relinquish their rights in practice. The obligation to obey the sovereign, which stems from his authorisation by the newly founded body politic, exists *formally* as soon as the covenant is made but only exists *actually* when members of the *civitas* recognise the efficacy of the covenant and the authority of the new sovereign through their obedience. The separation between the formal agreement and actual obedience introduces an uncertainty that threatens to undermine the covenant. This is because, for the first performer, the decision to obey must be a deeply irrational, unprecedented gesture. The central point here is not that it is impossible to exit the state of nature, but rather

that a satisfactory etiological account cannot be arrived at. The exit cannot be accomplished *through reason alone*.

The first performer's act is also philosophically interesting in a further way. Up until this act, humans have a kind of freedom specific to the state of nature, that is, the freedom to do as they like and to pursue their interests. The impediments to their free choices can only come from their interactions with their environment. The act of the first performer is free in a qualitatively distinctive way. It is not the spontaneous, pre-reflective pursuit of impulse, but the decision to perform an action that goes against these impulses. From the perspective of those belonging to the state of nature, and indeed from the perspective of the first performer, this can only appear as a senseless act of self-sabotage. Nonetheless, as act which breaks away from the eudaemonistic pursuit of interests, this first performance can be understood as the original act of human autonomy. Such a reading brings us unexpectedly close to Kierkegaard who presents us with his own account of the first performer problem, insisting that an individual's 'willing the good' must pass through a 'break' in order to be actualised:

There is a halt, a leap. [...] abstractly thought, there is no break, but no transition either, because viewed abstractly everything *is*. However, when existence gives movement time and I reproduce this, then the leap appears in just the way a leap can appear: it must come or it has been. Let us take an example from the ethical. It has been said often enough that the good has its reward in itself, and thus it is not only the most proper but also the most sagacious thing to will the good. A sagacious eudaemonist is able to perceive this very well; thinking in the form of possibility, he can come as close to the good as is possible, because in possibility as in abstraction the transition is only an appearance. But when the transition is supposed to become actual, all sagacity expires in scruples. Actual time separates the good and the reward for him so much, so eternally, that sagacity cannot join them again, and the eudaemonist declines with thanks. [...] The transition is clear enough as a break, indeed, as a suffering.⁴²

It is worth scrutinising this passage for a moment. The phrase 'viewed abstractly' is Kierkegaard's way of saying – 'viewed from the perspective of an outsider, as

⁴² Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, p. 225.

someone who is not themselves embedded in the process'. From such an abstract perspective, the first performance is a rational act because it brings about a situation that is favourable to the actor involved. The perspective of the performer herself is something else entirely. For her, there are no guarantees, no objective guidelines to follow—the decision to act is made from a position of radical undecidability. This is why Kierkegaard's eudaemonist is incapable of accomplishing this kind of transition. He is able to see the benefits of performance, but 'actual time separates the good and the reward'. The good that his performance might bring about cannot motivate him to risk the 'suffering' that the transition requires. While the first performer's act gives rise to the new political order and even the very possibility of ethical action, it is important to retain a perspective that recognises the blind wager of the first performance.

The temporality of the first performance can be understood according to the concept of hiatus introduced above. Recall that a hiatus marks the brief moment separating natural, social, and political orders. Insofar as an individual belongs to the state of nature, her conduct follows the principles of Hobbesian ego psychology—attraction to those things that are pleasurable and aversion from those that are painful.⁴³ Likewise, after the covenant has been established and proven effective, new kinds of conduct become possible since they now produce predictable, stable outcomes. In both the state of nature and the *civitas* humans use their capacity to reason to guide their behaviour, however, when one considers the position of the first performer it becomes clear that the transition from one order to the next is not seamless—at least one individual must occupy an in-between period which she cannot reason herself out of. This would then be

⁴³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 38.

the Arendtian hiatus found, ‘between the end of the old order and the beginning of the new’ with our first performer occupying the position of the Arendtian ‘beginner’:

It is in the very nature of beginning to carry with itself a measure of complete arbitrariness. Not only is it not bound into a reliable chain of cause and effect, a chain in which each effect immediately turns into the cause for future developments, the beginning has, as it were, nothing whatsoever to hold onto; it is as though it came out of nowhere in either time or space. For a moment, the moment of beginning, it is as though the beginner had abolished the sequence of temporality itself, or as though actors were thrown out of the temporal order and its continuity.⁴⁴

Hiatus is, for Hobbesian first performers and Arendtian beginners, the interim or gap through which a new beginning can emerge. Human action that occurs in this interim gains a new quality. The agent, finding herself out of place, can commit a deed which is ‘free’ in the sense that it is distinct from the activity that occurs either in the state of nature or in the *civitas*; insofar as it takes place in a temporal hiatus, human action cannot be guided by reasoning. Any act that does occur will be presuppositionless in the moment of its accomplishment. It is not arbitrary insofar as it is an unconsidered act; rather, it is arbitrary because no amount of consideration can produce firm expectations about a likely outcome. Arbitrariness is thus one way of describing the act’s inherent undecidability.

The paradoxical origins of law, obligation, and the new political community also appear in Oakeshott’s account of the political subject’s disposition as the essential counterpart to the sovereign’s authority. As Oakeshott argues,

The covenant by itself is not a sufficient cause of a *civitas*; it gives authority, but it merely promises power. The necessary and sufficient cause of a sovereign possessed of the authority and the power required to establish a condition of ‘peace’ is a covenant of this sort combined with a sufficiently widespread disposition (displayed in overt acts) to observe its terms; for the sovereign’s power is only the counterpart of his subject’s disposition to obey.⁴⁵

This quotation points to a further weakness with the linear reading of the formation of the *civitas*. One cannot arrive at a sequentially consistent account of

⁴⁴ Arendt, pp. 205–206.

⁴⁵ Oakeshott, p. 128.

the making of the covenant because both the sovereign's authority and the subjective inclination to obey *presuppose each other*. Without authority, obedience is meaningless just as without the subjective inclination to obey, authority is ineffectual. If we accept that neither effective authority nor actual obedience can be generated without already presupposing its counterpart, our narrative of origins must include an instant in which both come into being spontaneously.⁴⁶ Narrative must pass in a single manoeuvre from a moment in which the conditions are in place to a subsequent moment in which political life has been established in its entirety. This characteristic of the social contract narrative is identified by Bonnie Honig who isolates the paradox of foundations as concerning the perspectival deficit that characterises the pre-political multitude:

In the paradoxical moment of founding, however, no member of the community can yet be said to possess the needed perspective, which can only come post hoc, to form the rules or identify or advocate for a collective good by which the people need to already have been acculturated in order to be not a 'blind multitude' but a 'people' capable of the autonomous exercise of popular sovereignty.⁴⁷

In line with Honig's reading, we should see how the impossibility of proposing a consistent and plausible chronological reading of the original contract does not indicate a deficit to be remedied; rather, it indicates an inherent deadlock pertaining to the narrativisation of moments of radical political change.

One can isolate the very moment in Hobbes's *Leviathan* at which the people emerge as a political entity. Having affirmed the necessity of a Common Power, Hobbes describes the covenant as,

more than Consent, or Concord; it is a reall Unitie of them all, in one and the same person, made by Covenant of every man with every man, in such a manner, as if every man should say to every man, *I Authorise and give up my Right of Governing my Selfe, to this Man, or to this Assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy Right to him, and Authorise all his Actions in like manner*. This done, the

⁴⁶ This is the conclusion reached by Alexandre Kojève, *The Notion of Authority*, ed. by François Terré, trans. by Hager Weslati (London: Verso, 2014), p. 33.

⁴⁷ Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*, p. 19.

Multitude so united in one Person, is called a COMMON-WEALTH, in latine CIVITAS.⁴⁸

In these lines, one of the critical moments of *Leviathan* is passed over in silence. The formal agreement to relinquish rights clearly fails to provide sufficient conditions for actual authority to be bestowed on a specific individual or assembly. The phrase, 'this done' serves to cut short any questions concerning the performance of the citizens by conflating the promise to obey with actual obedience.⁴⁹ One can only view this passage as a hasty attempt to elide the real paradox that surfaces as narrative approaches the moment of origin. Such a manoeuvre is necessary if one wishes to protect the coherence of the narrative as a whole, and yet for our purposes it is precisely the moment of narrative incoherence that must be isolated and analysed. If Hobbes's task is to render the exit from the condition of war as a necessary event, condensing the moment of transformation into a single sentence is a rhetorical strategy that effaces the contingency of the moment, closing off the undesirable possibility of non-obedience.

⁴⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 120.

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard himself prohibits this kind of manoeuvre because it '[confuses] promise with performance, the superscription with the execution'. *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 90.

Hobbes via Kierkegaard: Continuity in Reverse

Hobbes's reluctance to create a narrative of the transition from natural man to citizen as a purely contingent, spontaneous act leads to certain fundamental, and I argue irresolvable, paradoxes. The position taken here is that these paradoxes can be elucidated given an appropriate conceptual repertoire. As will be demonstrated, one of Kierkegaard's key achievements was to provide a way of understanding the spontaneity that characterises certain events without subsuming spontaneity under a broader necessity. At this point it is worth recalling Kangas's comments concerning Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*: 'The specific nature of an event is that it *presupposes itself* [...] an event becomes possible only in the moment it becomes actual; its possibility for happening arrives only in the very moment of its happening. An event is always essentially "the sudden". It breaks discontinuously upon the present as an interruption'.⁵⁰ The Hobbesian 'event', the making of the covenant, thought of now through Kierkegaard's concept of the instant, is precisely an event that must presuppose itself. The making of the covenant and the corresponding change in subjective disposition occur, as Kierkegaard would say, 'suddenly and concentrated in one sortie, (intensively)'.⁵¹ In Hobbes, the 'interruption' of the covenant remains sudden despite his effort to ground it in features of the pre-existing situation (i.e. the ego psychology of natural man and the Laws of Nature). The merit of Kierkegaard's position is that the instant no longer requires this conditioning; instead, the momentary appearance of paradox signals a break in continuity,

⁵⁰ Kangas, pp. 172–173.

⁵¹ Kierkegaard, XXIII, p. 93.

which makes a qualitative change possible. This break is Kierkegaard's 'missing link', which he outlines in relation to faith:

Faith cannot therefore be *proved, demonstrated, comprehended*, for the link which makes a linking together possible is missing, and what else does this say than that it is a paradox. This, precisely, is the irregularity in the paradox, continuity is lacking, or at any rate it has continuity only in reverse, that is, at the beginning it does not manifest itself as continuity.⁵²

The appearance of continuity after the event is the result of an effort to render visible the moment at which a series of quantitative, empirical determinants suddenly gave rise to a qualitative outcome. The above quotation indicates that the change in disposition presupposed by the social contract finds its structural parallel in the moment of religious conversion in Kierkegaard. Neither change can be reduced to a series of stages, nor can they be explained via linear, causal models. Hinting at the possibility of 'continuity only in reverse' is to be seen as Kierkegaard's way of drawing attention to the disparity between the engaged, faithful subject who experiences the beginning of faith and the retrospective view which seeks to explain faith in terms of continuity.

The radical nature of the qualitative change as well as its suddenness can only be accounted for by fully asserting the paradox of origins. If it becomes possible to account for the subjective event through a series of incremental quantitative changes, with each change being fully reducible to the situation it emerged from, this is the surest sign that one is either misperceiving the quality of the event, or alternatively, superimposing an artificially coherent narrative on the change in question. The resonance between Hobbes's covenant and Kierkegaard's moment reaches its apogee in the latter's comments on decision and duty:

The transition from eudæmonism to the concept of duty is a leap, or, assisted by a more and more developed understanding of what is most prudent, is one finally

⁵² Kierkegaard, III, pp. 399–400.

supposed to go directly over to virtue? No, there is a pain of decision which the sensuous (the eudæmonistic), the finite (the eudæmonistic) cannot endure. Man is not led to do his duty by merely reflecting that it is the most prudent thing to do; in the moment of decision reason lets go, and he *either* turns back to eudæmonism or he chooses the good by a *leap*.⁵³

In a telling passage, which could almost be addressed to Hobbes, Kierkegaard insists that ‘duty’ emerges from the ‘pain of decision’ as opposed to mere reflections on a prudent course of action. Passing from the state of nature to the *civitas* cannot be represented as a linear sequence; there is an inevitable detour in which prudence is found to be insufficient and ‘reason lets go’. What enables man to commit fully to the good, rather than merely doing his duty insofar as he considers it prudent (and as has been demonstrated above, this would be an impoverished notion of duty), is precisely the passionate excess of the ‘moment of decision’. The ego psychology of natural man cannot generate duty.⁵⁴ There is a gap that separates the self-interested, sensuous man of the state of nature from the duty-bound citizen, one that is strictly irreducible. Heinecken successfully conveys this image of the Kierkegaardian moment *qua* gap:

To such absolute purity of heart a man does not attain by quantitative increments and gradual approaches. A man must be born anew in each moment of decision to attain such purity of heart in which he wills only one thing. To such a purity of heart he does not unfold naturally when the conditions are right. Here there must be a qualitative break. There must be a real leap which leaves a gap, the gap of qualitative transition, which cannot be bridged by a series of quantitative changes however minute you make them.⁵⁵

Kierkegaard’s contention, as Heinecken correctly identifies, is that this gap signals the subjective moment of change in which man becomes ‘*a new creature*’

⁵³ Kierkegaard, III, p. 19.

⁵⁴ S. M. Brown’s reading attempts to show that Hobbes wished to deduce his moral doctrine from prudential grounds. Brown’s key claim is as follows: ‘Our use of ought, Hobbes insists, is meaningful only if we presuppose or take for granted both that men can do their duty and that duties on the whole are directly or indirectly productive of what men themselves regard as their own good’. In a similar manner to Pateman’s argument (discussed above), Brown regards Hobbes as positing in advance that which he should be seeking to explain. Encouraging the reader to presuppose or take for granted ‘ought’ cannot help us derive the emergence of ‘ought’ from statements about what ‘is’. See: ‘Hobbes: The Taylor Thesis’, in *Thomas Hobbes: Critical Assessments*, ed. by Preston King, Vol. II, Ethics (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 108.

⁵⁵ Martin J. Heinecken, *The Moment Before God* (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1956), p. 113.

through a qualitative shift.⁵⁶ The Hobbesian covenant is tailored in order to appear as the natural consequence of tendencies that pre-exist it; in contrast, for Kierkegaard, ‘the quantitative is confined within its limits’ with each qualitative change requiring ‘Thought [...] whose task it is to cut the thread [...] every time the quantitative attempts to create a new quality’.⁵⁷ The ‘gaze of worldly sagacity’, which can perhaps here be cautiously identified with a Hobbesian perspective, fails to perceive the subjective dimension of the moment of transformation and, in limiting itself to the field of objectively verifiable phenomena, fails to take account of Kierkegaard’s most basic lesson: that truth is subjectivity.⁵⁸

Kierkegaard’s argument should not be seen as an attempt to undermine or devalue objective, ‘quantitative’ knowledge in general; his position is rather that approaching faith or duty with a focus on this kind of knowledge misperceives these concepts in their vital dimension. This dimension remains opaque when faith and duty are scrutinized by ‘worldly sagacity’ which ‘stares and stares at events and circumstances, calculates and calculates, thinking that it should be able to distil the moment out of the circumstance’.⁵⁹ ‘Worldly sagacity’ here stands for the attempt to impose a narrative that views a subjective transformation as conditioned as opposed to spontaneous. Kierkegaard writes,

The moment is precisely this (which is not due to circumstances), *the new thing, the woof of eternity* – but at the same instant it manages the circumstances to such a degree that it illusively (calculated to make a fool of worldly sagacity and mediocrity) looks as if the moment emerged from the circumstances. There is nothing for which worldly sagacity is so feverishly eager as the moment; what would it not give to be able to calculate correctly! Yet there is nothing more certain of being excluded from ever seizing the moment than worldly sagacity.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 22–23.

⁵⁷ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 123.

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, I, p. 203.

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, XXIII, p. 338.

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, XXIII, p. 338.

In contrast to Hobbes, who attempts to build full and internally coherent explanations of events and their origins, Kierkegaard's emphasis lies on the contingency suggested by a moment of beginning which exceeds linear explanations. The inability to render the event intelligible is not a consequence of a failure on the part of the interpreting subject; instead, it is better thought of as an incommensurability inherent to the event itself. If, subsequently, an event begins to appear as if it were in fact already inscribed in a pre-existing logic, for Kierkegaard, this appearance is itself actually the product of our limited, historically bounded perspective. The retrospective view of worldly sagacity condenses evental openness, recasting it as the logical conclusion of a preceding situation. In this way, the fleeting hiatus that characterises the notion of the instant developed by Kierkegaard is concealed under the guise of a linear narrative involving stable progression.

A corollary of this position is Kierkegaard's insistence that objective uncertainty, far from proving an obstacle to faith, is actually the positive condition of faithful subjectivity.⁶¹ If it were possible to arrive at faith through a sober analysis of a given situation, the notion of faith itself would be weakened since the value of faith, and indeed any kind of subjective commitment, is that it is a response to a situation which is characterised by opacity and therefore in principle undecidable. This is the reason faith is to be considered distinct from knowledge. Heineken provides a demonstration by applying Kierkegaard's notion of faith to romantic love:

If [a man] will act only after he has the evidence reasonably on his side [...] he is like the man who places all the ladies of his acquaintance in a row and figures out prudently which one will make him the best wife, cook, bed-partner, child-bearer, drawing-room companion, tennis-partner, and so on, before he will commit himself

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, I, p. 203.

in 'love.' All such 'objective' guarantees are an evasion of the immediate commitment.⁶²

Here, Heineken brings to light an interesting dimension of Kierkegaard's containing a clear anticipation of the position developed by Alain Badiou. The latter includes love in the four conditions he holds to be capable of generating truths (the other conditions being art, science and politics) and argues that such truths are always in principle indiscernible.⁶³ To put this in other words, the quality that enables love between humans is not located on the level of being and cannot be anchored in any objective characteristics of either person; on the contrary, it signals a momentary rupture in being. Fidelity to an event (in this case, falling in love) represents a commitment that withstands the event's undecidability. Badiou writes:

Ethics, I said, comes down to the following imperative: 'Decide from the standpoint of the undecidable.' [...] Given that undecidability is a rational attribute of the event, and the salvatory guarantee of its non-being, there is no other vigilance than that of becoming, as much through the anxiety of hesitation as through the courage of the outside-place, both the feather, which 'hovers about the gulf', and the star, 'up high perhaps'.⁶⁴

Several motifs in this passage echo Kierkegaard's position on truth, commitment, and undecidability. The 'anxiety of hesitation' and 'the courage of the outside-place' are both reminiscent of Abraham's terrifying ordeal described in *Fear and Trembling*.⁶⁵ At a rhetorical level, both Kierkegaard and Badiou include metaphorical tropes that signal the vertiginous experience of an evental moment. Kierkegaard's 'yawning chasm' finds its parallel in Badiou's feather, which, 'hovers about the gulf'.⁶⁶ Badiou's ethical position proves compatible with Kierkegaard's insofar as it is not rooted in any concrete set of presuppositions

⁶² Heineken, p. 267.

⁶³ Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, ed. & trans. by Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 62.

⁶⁴ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. by Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2007), pp. 197–198.

⁶⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. by Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 2003).

⁶⁶ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 123.

concerning the good, but is characterised by an absence of grounds, by a fundamental undecidability. As we saw in the previous chapter, the undecidability that underpins Kierkegaard's notion of paradox provides the condition upon which faith becomes possible. The existence of God is indemonstrable and, as such, can only be an object of faith, not knowledge. God's indemonstrability is asserted in Kierkegaard for the same reason that the event's indiscernibility is crucial for Badiou—in both cases it is necessary to conceptualise the *Abgrund* so as to secure the possibility of human freedom. This is a topic we will return to in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

The covenant demonstrates the possibility of an exit from the state of nature not as the untainted product of rational deliberation, but as a sudden, unprecedented shift in perspective. It is not enough for pre-political individuals to behave *as if* covenants are possible; for the proposed covenant to be successful, individuals must unanimously behave as if an effective, binding covenant were *already* in place. The paradoxes one comes up against in analyses of the Hobbesian covenant are not symptoms of an incomplete argument which can be gradually muted or resolved through more sophisticated explanations; on the contrary, paradox is inherent to the object of analysis itself.⁶⁷ An analysis that attempts to grasp the moment of exit must begin with this insight and proceed to think through an exit in terms of a heterogeneous temporality which resists assimilation into chronological time.

In order to test whether the positions stated above can be considered theoretically robust, it is worth taking into account the counter arguments from

⁶⁷ For studies dealing with the Hobbesian paradox, see: T. H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* (London: Longmans, 1941), p. 69; George Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), pp. 464–465.

those who defend Hobbes according to a gradualist logic of incremental change and progress through experience, and who would therefore not recognise the similarities between Kierkegaardian and Hobbesian accounts of transformation. One such approach is offered by Claude Ake.⁶⁸ Ake argues that the possibility of a transition from the state of nature to political community is already present in Hobbes, whose account of human psychology allows for changes over time, eventually producing an individual capable of making covenants, which are recognised as binding. The key psychological property here is that of imagination, or the train of imagination, which Hobbes refers to as '*Mentall Discourse*'.⁶⁹ Hobbes goes on to identify two types of mental discourse: 'One, when of an effect imagined, wee seek the causes, or means that produce it: and this is common to Man and Beast. The other is, when imagining any thing whatsoever, wee seek all the possible effects, that can by it be produced; that is to say, we imagine what we can do with it, when wee have it'.⁷⁰ From this position follows a further observation concerning man's prudence, that is, his understanding of past and future events:

A *Signe*, is the Event Antecedent, of the Consequent; and contrarily, the Consequent of the Antecedent, when the like Consequences have been observed, before: And the oftner they have been observed, the lesse uncertain is the Signe. And therefore he that has most experience in any kind of businesse, has most Signes, whereby to guess at the Future time; and consequently is the most prudent: And so much more prudent than he that is new in that kind of business'.⁷¹

Prudence is a kind of knowledge one can acquire in the state of nature concerning events that have occurred and their relationship to other events in a linear chain of events. While one cannot be certain of an event's occurrence without observing it directly, one can infer likely scenarios which may have led to, or which may

⁶⁸ Claude Ake, 'Social Contract Theory and the Problem of Politicization: The Case of Hobbes', *The Western Political Quarterly*, 23.3 (1970), 463–70.

⁶⁹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 21.

⁷⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 21.

⁷¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp. 22–23.

result from, an observed event.⁷² Understanding the Hobbesian notion of prudence is important here because, for Ake, there is no requirement that natural man act rationally in order to exit the state of nature, only that he act prudently.⁷³ Prudence mitigates the factors which characterise the state of nature (appetite, diffidence, equality and vainglory) since prudent men are less likely to conduct themselves in ways which risk injury. The increase in prudence (which, as we have noted, is simply a consequence of experience) does not change human nature, but does modify human behaviour.⁷⁴ Ake notes that the state of nature, if occupied by prudent men, would increasingly resemble the kind of *civitas* that the covenant is supposed to produce. Moreover, if we accept Ake's account, the exit from the state of nature becomes a certainty because, 'the development of man into a prudent being is virtually inevitable'.⁷⁵

Having established how prudence arises inevitably in the state of nature and how it would modify the behaviours of natural man, Ake goes on to claim that we are now dealing with a state of nature in which, 'some degree of social cooperation [is] possible'.⁷⁶ This marks the point at which Ake's interpretation becomes untenable. Throughout *Leviathan* Hobbes is at pains to demonstrate how antagonism is inherent to the state of nature, and moreover, how it is precisely this ongoing antagonism that is the defining characteristic of the state of nature. This is made clear through remarks in which Hobbes characterises the state of nature as a state of 'Warre':

Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man. For Warre, consisteth not in Battell onely, or

⁷² See Hobbes's comments on 'conjecture' in Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 23.

⁷³ Ake, p. 467.

⁷⁴ Ake, p. 468.

⁷⁵ Ake, p. 467. Ake, "Social Contract Theory and the Problem of Politicization", p. 467.

⁷⁶ Ake, p. 469.

in the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known.⁷⁷

On the page following the above quotation, Hobbes delivers his famous passage concerning the various human social practices that are impossible in the state of nature given that cooperation as such is impossible. To be clear, it is not impossible to imagine a version of the state of nature in which cooperation occurs, but rather, it is impossible to see how cooperation can occur in the specific version of the state of nature Hobbes envisages. Thus men live only with, ‘what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withall’.⁷⁸ The fact that prudence emerges as a guide for action in the state of nature does not necessarily foster cooperation, rather, prudence can be thought to exacerbate the condition of war insofar as men who are constantly under threat of attack, and, at least occasionally, actually attacked, will be inclined to attack others pre-emptively. Pre-emptive attacks on others may well be the most prudent course of action in the state of nature. Moreover, following Hobbes’s argument that contracts are impossible in the state of nature, prudence will never dictate obedience to a contract in situations where obedience would be against one’s own interests. Although men might obey contracts when it is expedient for them to do so, this is not a politically useful notion of obedience since it would not provide the foundation of an enduring contract.

We have seen above how Kierkegaard’s moment allows us to think through the emergence of a new resolve or commitment in the human subject. It is by virtue of the uncertainty that pertains to a situation that a decisive commitment can be generated. If, on the contrary, a decisive commitment could be generated through empirical observation, we would no longer be dealing with a valuable

⁷⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 88.

⁷⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 89.

notion of commitment since this kind of commitment could not outlast the conditions that gave rise to it. The individual citizen needs to feel sufficiently duty-bound such that they will continue to obey even in situations where obedience exposes them to danger. So, to take the example of a new citizen of a Hobbesian state, the commitment to obey the new sovereign expressed through the signing of the covenant, would be unreliable if it could not withstand changes in circumstances. Hobbes admits as much when he points out that citizens always retain the right to defend themselves if their life is in danger even against the sovereign.⁷⁹ What makes Kierkegaard's notion of commitment politically useful is that it is framed in such a way that makes it independent of empirical circumstances. As Come argues, 'Kierkegaard insists that the element of a resolve or a commitment is something other than being plausible or reasonable. Indeed [...] a resolve is the only thing that can bring the rational process of reflection to a halt, because it is a qualitatively different kind of mental state or event from being plausible or reasonable'.⁸⁰ It is this kind of disposition we must assign to the first performer. Given that, as has been demonstrated above, the first performer will never be able to draw sufficient motivation to obey the sovereign from an empirical analysis of the situation, he must be seen to be resolved already, before the good reasons for obedience become apparent. Again, Come's account of Kierkegaard's notion of resolve applies here:

Seeing what is the one thing needful, what is demanded, in this situation by one's inner sense of the absolute unconditional good, places one in and at that unique moment of possibility that can and will never be repeated, namely, the moment of resolve to enact that one and only possibility here and *now*, 'at once', in spite of all one's 'repented' (admitted and accepted) fallibilities, weaknesses, failures, and in the face of irresolvable uncertainty of the outcome (aggravated by others' criticism and opposition).⁸¹

⁷⁹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 93.

⁸⁰ Come, p. 272.

⁸¹ Come, p. 278.

The crucial point is that even in a situation such as that of the first performer where exiting the state of nature really is in his (and everyone else's) interest, the perspective from which these interests would be apparent only once the exit has taken place. Commitment, conceived in this way, will be important in subsequent chapters as we turn to Badiou's notion of fidelity.

A further link can be made between Kierkegaard and Hobbes by considering the former's *The Book on Adler*. In this text, Kierkegaard makes the following remarks on the individual's relation to the established order:

When the single individual only reproduces the established order in his life [...], then he relates himself to the established order as the normal individual, the ordinary individual; he unfolds the life of the established order in his existence. [...] As soon, however, as the single individual lets his reflection move him so deeply that he wants to reflect on the basic presuppositions of the established order, he is at the point of being inclined to wanting to be a special individual. and as long as he reflects in this way he is rejecting the *impressa vestigia* of the established order, is *extra ordinem* on his own responsibility.⁸²

It is clear that Kierkegaard's account of the 'single individual' has a bearing on our discussion of the first performer. In reflecting on the basic presupposition of the established order, the single individual is able to uncover its truth, that is, she is able to see how the established order is contingent and mutable. If one can take up a position outside the established order, that means that one is not fully determined by it and this non-determination by the established order is precisely what allows us to conceive of an individual capable of being a first performer in the Hobbesian state of nature. Rather than reproductively renewing the life of the established order, this individual is able to bring, '*a new point of departure in relation to the basic presupposition of the established order*'.⁸³

Having considered some of the ways in which Kierkegaard's works can be mobilised in order to aid our understanding of the Hobbesian covenant, the focus

⁸² Søren Kierkegaard, 'The Book on Adler', in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 419.

⁸³ Kierkegaard, 'The Book on Adler', p. 419.

will now turn to an alternative version of the social contract elaborated by Rousseau. As with Hobbes, Kierkegaard's instant provides us with a means of rendering visible the paradoxical transformation of natural relations into political relations suggested by the making of the social contract, however, there are several features specific to Rousseau's formulation that warrant additional scrutiny. As will be shown, many of the inconsistencies that Hobbes attempted to obfuscate or suppress in *Leviathan* are explicitly asserted in Rousseau's *The Social Contract*. More specifically, where Hobbes attempts to erase the moment of contingency that characterises the contract's institution, for Rousseau, the status of the contract as a contingent decision is openly presented as such.

Rousseau, the Lawgiver, and the Openness of the Political

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau sets out his task in the clearest possible terms: ‘I want to inquire whether in the civil order there can be some legitimate and sure rule of administration, taking men as they are, and the laws as they might be’.⁸⁴ As with Hobbes, Rousseau seeks to demonstrate how sovereignty can be legitimised through an act of authorisation.⁸⁵ Although for both thinkers power can only be legitimate if it is authorised, Rousseau immediately distances himself from Hobbes in arguing, ‘There can be no possible compensation for someone who renounces everything. Such a renunciation is incompatible with the nature of man, and to deprive one’s will of all freedom is to deprive one’s actions of all morality’.⁸⁶ For Rousseau, contra Hobbes, we are no longer dealing with an act involving the total surrender of rights but the mutual surrender of rights which, because of its mutuality, is no longer a real loss: ‘each, by giving himself to all, gives himself to no one, and since there is no associate over whom one does not acquire the same right as one grants him over oneself, one gains the equivalent of all one loses, and more force to preserve what one has’.⁸⁷ The Hobbesian citizen gives up his unlimited natural right while the sovereign retains it. The sovereign’s right over other individuals thus remains unlimited as it was in the state of nature, except that now all other individuals have become his subjects by renouncing their right to impede him.⁸⁸ In contrast, Rousseau’s mutual surrender of rights

⁸⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. & trans. by Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 41.

⁸⁵ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 44.

⁸⁶ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 45.

⁸⁷ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 50.

⁸⁸ This is a slight over-simplification of Hobbes’s position. While Hobbes certainly does conceive of the covenant as a surrender of rights, elsewhere in *Leviathan* Hobbes also writes about the sovereign as the newly created embodiment of the will of citizens: ‘this is more than consent, or concord; it is a real unity of them all, in one and the same person’. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 120. It is therefore not the case that one simply surrenders one’s capacity to pursue one’s interests to

occurs between each individual and the newly founded collective, or, ‘the total alienation of each associate with all of his rights to the whole community’.⁸⁹

Law acquires force when it is one’s duty to obey in all circumstances, not merely when it is expedient to do so. Put another way, it is not enough to rely on individuals obeying the law because they recognise that it is in their interest, they must view this obedience as right in itself. If they view obedience in this way, they do not obey as rational egotists but citizens with a duty to the *civitas*. Duty is itself derived from a contract between equal and mutually consenting individuals—as Rousseau claims, ‘the commitments which bind us to the social body are obligatory only because they are mutual’.⁹⁰ Mutuality therefore anchors Rousseau’s notion of legitimacy.

The version of the social contract described by Rousseau can be seen as logically antecedent to the Hobbesian covenant. Early in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau makes a few brief remarks on Grotius that could be applied equally to Hobbes, ‘A people, says Grotius, can give itself to a king. So that according to Grotius a people is a people before giving itself to a king. That very gift is a civil act, it presupposes a public deliberation [...] this act, being necessarily prior to the other, is the true foundation of society’.⁹¹ The corresponding problem in Hobbes, as has been mentioned above, concerns the way in which, in order to surrender rights to a single member of their group, Hobbesian individuals are already required to engage in the kinds of behaviours (discussion, bargaining, promising, and so forth) which are supposed to be made possible by the covenant. Rousseau is thus able to suggest that Grotius (and by extension, Hobbes) is

the sovereign; Hobbes’s more radical position is that the sovereign’s will is itself the unified articulation of the will of the body politic.

⁸⁹ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 50.

⁹⁰ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 61.

⁹¹ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 49.

dealing with a surrender of rights which is possible (despite being illogical and undesirable from Rousseau's point of view) only after another more basic act has taken place—that of the constitution of the people as such, or, as Rousseau puts it, 'the act by which a people is a people'.⁹² For Rousseau, this act must occur prior to any discussion of law or systems of government since the latter 'presupposes a public deliberation'.⁹³

The transformation of the multitude into a people is accompanied by a series of changes in individual's dispositions and attributes. As Rousseau writes,

This transition from the state of nature to the civil state produces a most remarkable change in man by substituting justice for instinct in his conduct, and endowing his actions with the morality they previously lacked. Only then, when the voice of duty succeeds physical impulsion and right succeeds appetite, does man, who until then had looked only to himself, see himself forced to act on other principles, and to consult his reason before listening to his inclinations.⁹⁴

It is important to grasp Rousseau's position here. It is, as he states, the passage from the state of nature to the civil state *itself* that produces the change in man. The impediments to successfully exiting the state of nature therefore remain present until the moment of unification as 'the people' whereupon they suddenly disappear. This would be one possible account of the creation of laws that would regulate conduct within the new state. Nonetheless, Rousseau introduces an additional figure whose task is to ensure the newly constituted people create appropriate laws as well as bringing about the change in disposition that would make them capable of living under these laws. The 'remarkable change', which apparently occurred purely as a consequence of the exit from the state of nature, is subsequently shown to be supplemented by the activity of the lawgiver whose task it is one of 'changing human nature; of transforming each individual who by

⁹² Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 49.

⁹³ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 49.

⁹⁴ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 53.

himself is a perfect and solitary whole into part of a larger whole from which that individual would as it were receive his life and being'.⁹⁵

In the passage immediately preceding the chapter on the lawgiver, Rousseau outlines the problems associated with entering civil society:

The People subject to the laws ought to be their author; only those who are associating may regulate the conditions of the society; but how will they regulate them? Will it be by common agreement, by sudden inspiration? Has the body politic an organ to state its wills? Who will give it the foresight necessary to form its acts and to publish them in advance, or how will it declare them in time of need? How will a blind multitude, which often does not know what it wills because it rarely knows what is good for it, carry out an undertaking as great, as difficult as a system of legislation?⁹⁶

The issue, as discussed above in relation to Hobbesian natural man, concerns the way in which the agreement between individuals of the state of nature presupposes a disposition which is itself only generated through the contract. We should follow Inston in reading this as an obstacle to a linear reading of the founding moment: 'The foundation and what it founds refuse chronological schematization; they mutually presuppose one another'.⁹⁷ To argue that the 'blind multitude' are capable of recognising that their interests lie in forging a political community is to presuppose a multitude who already possess some degree of insight as to why community is preferable to natural independence. Likewise, even if we assume the multitude is able to recognise the possibility of certain advantages to community life, we are still unable to account for the commitment to the new political project, which is the necessary precursor of obedience to law. In other words, as in Hobbes, we are left in a position in which men may recognise the potential benefits of the political community but retain an atomised, individualistic perspective appropriate to the state of nature such that, when called upon by the community to act in a way contrary to their own

⁹⁵ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 69.

⁹⁶ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 68.

⁹⁷ Inston, *Rousseau and Radical Democracy*, p. 22.

interests, they invariably neglect their duty. The problem is outlined by Cohen as follows:

Thus, as parties to the social contract, individuals regard themselves as free agents. From this standpoint, they see an allegiance to the common good as simply one possible allegiance among others. Should they choose to work in service to the common good, they will see themselves as volunteers in that service. Therefore persons who regard themselves as contractors cannot have the kind of supreme attachment to the common good that is required on Rousseau's conception of the general will. Thus from the free contractor's point of view, the contract does not justify allegiance to the general will.⁹⁸

The individual-as-contractor is something quite distinct from the individual-as-citizen. A contractor's commitment to a political organisation is anchored in their private interests whereas the citizen's commitment to the *civitas* must exceed these interests. Again, it is not that a political commitment is simply the highest among a range of private interests; rather, as Cohen observes, it represents a 'supreme attachment'—not one interest among many but an attachment that restructures the schema of value according to which an individual's private interests are organised. The issue becomes more acute when we consider that it is not possible for an observer to decide whether an individual's obedience is due to a commitment to the *civitas* or simply a prudent course of action that is only temporarily aligned with the interests of the community. Since political commitment, if it exists, is only apparent from the inward perspective of the subject, the status of the political community (its reliability and potential durability) remains empirically undecidable until a situation arises which tests the subject's resolve.

There are, however, important distinctions to be drawn between man's pre-political disposition in Hobbes and Rousseau.⁹⁹ For Hobbes, the absence of a

⁹⁸ Joshua Cohen, *Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 92.

⁹⁹ The term pre-social here, as a descriptor of the Rousseauian state of nature, would not be accepted by scholars such as Andrew Levine who propose a distinction between the state of nature recounted in the *Second Discourse* and the state of nature we find in *The Social*

sovereign leads men to act on their passions and creates conflict, Rousseau points out that this argument involves a misattribution of social qualities to pre-social individuals: '[Hobbes] improperly included in Savage man's care for his preservation the need to satisfy a multitude of passions that are the product of Society'.¹⁰⁰ Vanity and diffidence are characteristics of a Hobbesian vision of pre-social man that lead to violence and chaos in the state of nature. Conceiving the state of nature as a violent place is important for Hobbes since this constitutes the main motivation for creating the covenant. Recall that according to Hobbes, natural law requires that men do that which is conducive to their survival.¹⁰¹ It is the state of nature conceived as a state of war, as a violent and hostile environment, which compels its inhabitants to make the covenant. In contrast, for Rousseau any violence that occurs in the state of nature is a consequence of natural man's 'self-love', which may prompt him to use force in his pursuit of some advantage. Rousseau's natural man cannot be offended and therefore will not seek vengeance because it, '[originates] in comparisons he is not capable of making'.¹⁰² Offence becomes possible once man has developed the cognitively advanced and socially conditioned ability to compare himself with others. This is an ability that would only emerge once man belonged to a community since

Contract. In his Andrew Levine, *The General Will: Rousseau, Marx, Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), that only the former is properly pre-social and that the contracting individuals described in *The Social Contract* would already engage in social activity and share certain conventions. While this is a possible reading (one that, as Levine admits, Rousseau himself may not have intended), it does not have any significant implications for our argument here since the key transition under consideration is that which generates duty (as distinct from interest) and thereby represents the beginning of man's *political* life. Narratives which deal with a political origin (i.e. the notion of non-familial authority) must present it as a radical, and necessarily sudden, transformation regardless of whether the contracting individuals are isolated or social.

¹⁰⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Second Discourse (Discourse on the Origin of Inequality)', in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. & trans. by Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 151.

¹⁰¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 91.

¹⁰² Rousseau, 'Second Discourse', p. 218.

only sociability will produce an understanding of his position in relation to other members of the community.

An additional distinction between Hobbes and Rousseau involves natural man's propensity towards acquisitive behaviour. For Hobbes, natural man is interested in accumulating goods not only in order to satisfy his immediate desires, but also in order to satisfy his anticipated future desires.¹⁰³ This intensifies the hostility described by Hobbes insofar as it creates scarcity and increases the likelihood of conflicts over desirable goods. Against this, Rousseau argues that the acquisitive behaviour we see in pre-political man cannot be read back into natural man; instead, it is rooted in man's concern for his relative advantage, a characteristic that can only develop through social living. In the state of nature, man's desires correspond to his needs and men are, to a greater or lesser extent, equal in their ability to satisfy their needs. It is *amour propre* which, emerging under conditions of inequality, inflates man's desires so that he now pursues his relative advantage in a manner akin to Hobbesian natural man. Once again, the essence of the Rousseauian challenge to Hobbes is that the latter has misperceived as natural a series of qualities and attributes which, while derived from broader natural characteristics (such as *amour de soi*), lead to behaviours which are dependent on context.¹⁰⁴ *Amour propre* is not a natural quality of man because it does not emerge regardless of context. Instead, it is better to say that man is potentiated towards *amour propre*, or, alternatively, that *amour propre* is the distorted form of *amour de soi*, which comes about through man's exit from the state of nature and his participation in social and

¹⁰³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 62.

¹⁰⁴ Rousseau, 'Second Discourse', p. 132.

political activity. This is conveyed through Rousseau's remarks concerning Emile:

This [when Emile perceives himself in relation to others around him] is the point where love of self turns into *amour propre* and where begin to arise all the passions which depend on this one. But to decide whether among these passions the dominant ones in his character will be humane and gentle or cruel and malignant, whether they will be passions of beneficence and commiseration or of envy and covetousness, we must know what position he will feel he has among men.¹⁰⁵

Amour propre is dependent on interactions with others—it is a formally neutral property which acquires a definite moral profile as an individual progresses through his unique pattern of social development.

Rousseau's alternative vision of pre-social man has important implications with regard to his motivations for forming a political community. The Hobbesian inhabitant of the state of nature is said to decide in favour of the covenant because he recognises that submission to a sovereign power will improve his chances of survival.¹⁰⁶ As argued above, Hobbes's account of the state of nature includes a mechanism which will eventually necessitate an exit—natural man is able to recognise the conditions which will be conducive to his survival (i.e. submission to a sovereign), but he is also *obliged* by natural law to decide in favour of these conditions and actually form the covenant once he has recognised that it is in his interest to do so.¹⁰⁷ In describing the covenant as the culmination of various processes, Hobbes advocates a strategy that Kierkegaard dismissively refers to as, 'quantifying oneself into a qualitative decision'.¹⁰⁸ In contrast, there is no mechanism in the Rousseauian account which could necessitate the passage from natural to social or political life; the exit either depends on the

¹⁰⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. by Allan Bloom (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1979), p. 235.

¹⁰⁶ Here I refer to the motivations in place for the second performer, not the first performer who, as has been argued, can have no rational motivations for performance.

¹⁰⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 91.

¹⁰⁸ Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, p. 193.

arbitrary gesture of a particular individual or on the activity of the legislator who is himself forbidden from forcibly bringing the exit about.¹⁰⁹ The first case, which involves the transition from man's independent, isolated existence to social relations, can be found in *The Second Discourse* in which Rousseau describes an individual who decides to enclose a piece of land, declaring – ‘*this is mine*’.¹¹⁰ Private property is a hallmark of the social insofar as it involves a notion of right (an individual may now have a right to use an area of land exclusively). The extent of the relationship that emerges with private property is not simply between people and things, but between the owner and the rest of mankind concerning the exclusive use or consumption of certain things. This is why property ownership is a social relation involving other people rather than a relationship between an individual and an object. Having said that, although private property indicates a social relation, we are not dealing with a political arrangement until there is some entity to guarantee that rights to land, livestock, and other goods are respected. The key point for our purposes is that the genesis of political life is a contingent event—it cannot be accounted for by the logic of the situation from which it emerges.¹¹¹ There is nothing in Rousseau's account that would prevent man from continuing to live in the state of nature indefinitely. As such, if the contract is made, it is not the result of a decision that is necessitated by private interest, but one in favour of the new form of freedom made possible by political life.¹¹² Indeed, the Hobbesian proto-citizen, whose task is mere survival as opposed to the realisation of a new form of freedom,

¹⁰⁹ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 71.

¹¹⁰ Rousseau, ‘Second Discourse’, p. 161.

¹¹¹ Although both transformations involve a contingent event, the political transformation described in *The Social Contract* is the key example under consideration here.

¹¹² This is referred to by Levine as the non-Hobbesian core of Rousseau's political thought: ‘True Hobbesians would deny, “man is born free”’, p. 57.

resembles a member of the patriarchal model of political community described by Rousseau in which, ‘the chief is the image of the father, the people are the image of the children, and all, being born equal and free, alienate their freedom only for the sake of their utility’.¹¹³ Although both Hobbes and Rousseau aim to generate a notion of duty that would be capable of sustaining political life, for Hobbes, the purpose is simply to promote conditions favourable for human survival. In contrast, a Rousseauian citizen is duty-bound to the *civitas* because it guarantees a more substantial freedom than their pre-political independence.¹¹⁴ Having said this, it is vital to note the difference between the Hobbesian covenant which is irrevocable and the Rousseauian contract which can itself be undone by way of a sovereign act. These distinctions between Rousseau and Hobbes will prove instructive for our discussion of political origins as involving an irreducibly contingent ‘decisive moment’.

¹¹³ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 42.

¹¹⁴ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 63.

The Temporality of Rousseau's Social Contract

The arguments raised against Hobbes's covenant initially seem to apply equally to the Rousseauian contract; there can be no effective legal system without first bridging the gap between formal agreement and actual obedience based on a genuine inward commitment. Yet while Hobbes attempts to suppress this gap through rhetorical sleight of hand, Rousseau openly admits the scale of the task and the fundamental transformation that is at stake:

Anyone who dares to institute a people must feel capable of, so to speak, changing human nature; of transforming each individual who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole into part of a larger whole from which that individual would as it were receive his life and his being.¹¹⁵

The lawgiver's task is to instigate and oversee the substantial, subterranean shift in each man's character, thereby rendering them receptive to the notion of political organisation and instilling an enduring (but not irrevocably binding) commitment to the body politic. Rousseau recognises that the contract itself exists at a purely formal level; it provides no steadfast guarantees as to whether the unity of the people will be lasting. It is only the performance of individuals in accordance with their promises that will eventually promote the effectiveness and durability of the contract. As in Hobbes, we are faced with a disconcerting openness between the formal agreement which generates 'the people', (the equivalent moment in Hobbes is the formal inauguration of the sovereign) and actual performance.¹¹⁶ In this moment of contingency both the success and failure of the contract are equally possible outcomes. The situation is open in the sense that neither obedience nor defection can be successfully predicted from the initial

¹¹⁵ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 69.

¹¹⁶ This reading of the role of the legislator as that of stabilising (without erasing) the uncertainty which exists between the formal act of constitution and its substantial articulation is supported by Kevin Inston whose interpretation will be discussed below. Kevin Inston, 'Representing the Unrepresentable: Rousseau's Legislator and the Impossible Object of the People', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 9.4, 393–413.

act of contract signing, of promising to obey. The success of the contract, if it has been successful, is at this stage only registered (as Kierkegaard might say) inwardly, as a change in subjective disposition.

As we have already noted, in stark contrast to Hobbes, Rousseau holds the contract itself to be revocable: ‘there is not, nor can there be, any kind of fundamental law that is obligatory for the body of the people, not even the social contract’.¹¹⁷ At any point, the citizens of the new state can decide to dissolve the contract and return to the state of nature.¹¹⁸ Of course, as Rousseau points out, this would not be a pure state of nature, but one that is contaminated by the memory of political life.¹¹⁹ When political life breaks down, ‘everything reverts to the sole Law of the stronger and consequently to a new State of Nature, different from that with which we began in that the first was the state of Nature in its purity, whereas this last is the fruit of an excess of corruption’.¹²⁰ The implication here is that citizens could agree amongst themselves that the contract between them can no longer stand and, by mutual consent, reclaim their natural freedom. Their experience of political life would nonetheless condition any subsequent attempts to create a new contract. Indeed, it could be argued that the state of nature resulting from a breakdown of political life would begin to resemble a Hobbesian

¹¹⁷ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 52.

¹¹⁸ Indeed, there is a sense in which the community return to an originary political state as soon as the sovereign is assembled. Sovereign power becomes active only when all the community are present and in session; at other times, the government has authority (derived from the sovereign) to see to the security and welfare of the community. Since the assembled sovereign has ultimate authority over the political community (even possessing the authority to dissolve the social contract) Rousseau’s social contract is less a once-and-for-all event and more an ongoing project that needs to be periodically renewed. Having said this, the original event has a different status from the subsequent acts of renewal since the former entails the politicization of natural/social individuals whereas in subsequent sovereign assemblies these individuals are already politicized and are simply resuming (rather than beginning) their political activity. Although the fact that sovereignty is existant only in the present complicates the issue of temporality in Rousseau’s account, this does not seem to present the same challenges to narrativisation as the originary act.

¹¹⁹ Rousseau, ‘Second Discourse’, p. 186.

¹²⁰ Rousseau, ‘Second Discourse’, p. 186.

state of nature. In such a situation we can consider man ‘corrupted’ in the sense that he has experienced social life and is moved by *amour propre*, and yet he has also experienced the failure of the political and may reason, on this basis, that human nature inevitably tends towards anarchy and violence.

We have seen above how Hobbes goes about presenting the exit from the state of nature in terms of necessity. Various scholars have sought to show how this is accomplished by building a pre-contractual notion of obligation into the state of nature, which prevents man from failing to act in such a way that preserves his life.¹²¹ Man is forbidden from failing to do, ‘that by which he thinks [his life] may be best preserved’.¹²² Therefore, if in the state of nature man is able to recognise the covenant as entailing a reduced threat to his life, he is obliged by the law of nature to accept its terms. Within the terms of Hobbes’s argument, this is a paradoxical position. If, as has been argued above, the obligation to obey the laws of nature necessitates the act of signing the covenant, we are no longer witnessing a radical origin, but a transition that follows a pre-existing unbroken trajectory from the state of nature to the *civitas*. In this case, the covenant itself becomes redundant since the laws of nature are already experienced as binding by men in the state of nature. The merit of Rousseau’s formulation is that it lacks a similar pre-contractual mechanism that would necessitate the transition from the state of nature to political community.

The short-circuit structure of the contract, which is for our purposes the most interesting feature of Rousseau’s account, is made explicit in the following quotation:

For a nascent people to be capable of appreciating sound maxims of politics and of following the fundamental rules of reason of State, the effect would have to become

¹²¹ Foremost among the exponents of this position are Taylor, VOL. II, ETHICS, pp. 22–40; Warrender, pp. 130–146.

¹²² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 91.

the cause, the social spirit which is to be the work of the institution would have to preside over the institution itself, and men would have to be prior to laws what they ought to become by means of them.¹²³

Rousseau recognises, and draws attention to, the paradox of political origins discussed above in relation to Hobbes. The making of the contract and the willingness to obey even in circumstances where obedience is contrary to one's private interest, or more precisely, to be motivated by duty as opposed to one's interests, both presuppose a subjective constitution typical of citizens as opposed to pre-political humans. Highlighting the paradox concerning political origins in Rousseau, Inston argues that the purpose of the legislator is to represent the possibility of the people's constitutive power during the process of their actual constitution: 'the multitude comes to understand itself as a "people" in the form of an idea or representation not as a thing in itself. The lawgiver aims to supply that representation, supplementing the people in writing the legislation of the state'.¹²⁴ What natural man lacks is a social identity that would reorient his will rendering it compatible with the common good and not merely his own private good. By offering a representation of the people as already constituted (one that prefigures the contract), the legislator is able to effect the change in individual dispositions providing social ballast and increasing the likelihood of the contract's durability. Inston is correct to view this in terms of an absence of ground, which in turn provides impetus for further political activity.¹²⁵ As has been argued above, the task of detecting the grounds of legitimate authority necessarily ends in circularity and paradox since it is precisely a spontaneous and therefore irrecoverable gesture that constitutes the founding moment.¹²⁶ Contra Hobbes,

¹²³ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 71.

¹²⁴ Inston, 'Representing the Unrepresentable', p. 400.

¹²⁵ Inston, *Rousseau and Radical Democracy*, p. 7.

¹²⁶ Inston, 'Representing the Unrepresentable', p. 395.

Rousseau presents us with a contingent origin that cannot be dissolved into a series of sequential stages. Such a reading indicates the Kierkegaardian structure of contract-making in Rousseau since it is Kierkegaard's moment which allows us to conceptualise a concentrated temporal paradox, a groundlessness which itself functions as a ground, albeit one that remains vulnerable to subsequent transformative moments.¹²⁷ Such a position includes those moments in which we experience, as Kangas puts it, 'the sudden failure of the structure of temporal representation'.¹²⁸ If it is unthinkable that a disparate multitude of individuals would spontaneously and simultaneously perceive themselves as belonging to a single, cohesive political body, the legislator is required as a mediatory narrative element whose inclusion gives body to the temporal paradox associated with origins without recasting the exit as a linear progression.

The guarantee offered by the contract is ultimately only effective so long as members of the new community perceive it as binding.¹²⁹ The implication for Inston is that every formally constituted political community presupposes a moment of 'temporal dislocation' providing impetus for the continued elaboration of the democratic project.¹³⁰ The key distinction between the account provided by Inston and the position taken here concerns the status of this openness. For Inston, this openness corresponds to the impossibility of any totalising notion of the people and the absence of any objective guarantee that could secure a single political configuration in perpetuity.¹³¹ Openness is then, on the one hand, an obstacle that has the potential to derail political projects, whilst also representing the positive condition of the continuation of the democratic model. Although I do

¹²⁷ Kangas, p. 20.

¹²⁸ Kangas, p. 186.

¹²⁹ Inston, 'Representing the Unrepresentable', p. 405.

¹³⁰ Inston, 'Representing the Unrepresentable', pp. 400–401.

¹³¹ Inston, 'Representing the Unrepresentable', p. 406.

not propose any major revisions to Inston's argument, I would nonetheless like to suggest added emphasis to the figure of the lawgiver as a corporalization of the temporal discontinuity arising in narratives of radical political transformation. It is a discontinuity, marked by a moment of paradox, that separates the pre-political multitude and the constitution of the political community. In Rousseau's account of the origin we find a requirement for the incorporation of a narrative element that will either obfuscate (as in Hobbes) or embody (as in Rousseau) the moment of temporal dislocation. In Hobbes, the possibility of an exit is introduced through the existence of pre-political forms of obligation as described in his account of the laws of nature. The covenant is necessitated by the existence of the laws of nature since humans are obliged to act in ways conducive to their survival. In Rousseau's account, the idea of pre-contractual obligation is explicitly ruled out.¹³² There are no laws of nature for Rousseau; the only locus of legitimate authority is the sovereign assembly. Self-love does not have the status of a law; it is simply a term that describes man's general tendency towards self-preservation. Indeed, as Gildin notes, natural law is seen by Rousseau to be a contradiction in terms since:

In order to be called a law, natural law must be addressed to a rational being capable of obeying and disobeying it (only reason can apprehend universal prescriptions), while in order to deserve to be called natural, natural law must speak with the voice of nature. Now since, according to Rousseau, the development of reason stifles the voice of nature, there is no place strictly speaking in his doctrine for natural law. As he himself delineates it, natural law is a square circle.¹³³

As we have seen above, there is no consensus as to whether natural law can be seen as obliging rather than describing behaviour in Hobbes's *Leviathan*, however, it is at least possible to set out a reading in which natural law does indeed

¹³² Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 44.

¹³³ Hilail Gildin, *Rousseau's Social Contract: The Design of the Argument* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 42.

compel certain behaviours. A Rousseauian pre-political human, in contrast, is not compelled to behave in accordance with any principle; instead, he simply exhibits a strong tendency to behave in certain ways. So, for example, just because a Rousseauian natural man tends to be concerned with his self-preservation, this does not demonstrate the existence of natural law.

In the absence of laws of nature, Rousseau's lawgiver serves to make the transition to political life possible, installing civic qualities, which will make natural individuals capable of life as citizens. The paradox is not missed by Gildin who sets out the problem as follows:

In order to acquire the force of law, the suggestions of the legislator must be enacted by the general will. Before it can enact any laws properly, however, the citizen body must already be possessed of the public-spiritedness and the basic political arrangements that are supposed to first result from obedience to the laws devised by the legislator. The social contract, it would appear, would have to exist already, in order to first begin to be. [...] [The legislator] must persuade the people to adopt his views. Under the assumption that governed Rousseau's first discussion of the formation of political society, and that he never explicitly repudiated, the legislator must do this at the very dawn of political life [...] Yet for the legislator to do this at the inception of political life does not appear possible.¹³⁴

The legislator's task is to change human nature, to foster the social spirit that will enable man to recognise his own good as aligned with that of the community. Such a task would require the legislator to emerge prior to the contract since his task is to recreate individuals and cultivate in them the civic spirit which is the contract's prerequisite. It is nonetheless equally clear that the legislator cannot pre-exist the contract since his characteristics and attributes are precisely those of a thoroughly socialised and educated citizen. For Gildin, this represents a weakness in Rousseau's argument, one that is compounded by additional ambiguities concerning the moment of the legislator's arrival:

Rousseau explicitly distinguishes between two kinds of founders. First come those founders who create everything out of nothing (the phrase is Rousseau's). They make a nation proud of its distinctiveness and courageous. They are differentiated from legislators who can only appear later and whose job it is to provide political codes. [...] The recognition that two legislators are needed rather than one and that the first

¹³⁴ Gildin, p. 71.

must not make the work of the second impossible is tantamount to an admission that a sound political order cannot be brought into being in a single moment.¹³⁵

Gildin notes Rousseau's description of the legislator as both the 'founder' who is therefore, by implication, already present at the moment of 'founding', as well as a figure who helps to write the laws and conventions of an already existing political association. While such a reading finds some support in Rousseau's text, this should not lead immediately to the conclusion that we are dealing with two legislators, but rather that the legislator's activity cannot be properly anchored in a single agent. In both Hobbesian and Rousseauian accounts, the transition from a natural disposition (prudent self-preservation) to a political disposition (duty) is achieved by including in the state of nature an element which can only logically emerge with or after the contract *but which must nonetheless be present before*. The legislator's role is thus to complete the circuit, to reveal to pre-political man what can be achieved through the contract and what will be required of him in order to achieve it. If standard, positivistic conceptions of historical temporality run forward in a causal-linear fashion, the legislator is a figure who acts as a narrative conduit for the retroactive power of the future upon the past. Inston is thus to be supported in his assessment of the legislator's momentary appearance which, 'deconstructs the binary oppositions of cause/effect, autonomy/heteronomy, homogeneity, represented/representative and fiction/reality'.¹³⁶ Such a deconstruction does not lead directly to a backwards-linear 'reverse causality'; instead, Inston invites us to consider, 'the contractual process [...] in terms of temporal dislocation', not so much the inversion of the causal process, but rather 'the impossibility of establishing antecedence'.¹³⁷ How

¹³⁵ Gildin, p. 74.

¹³⁶ Inston, 'Representing the Unrepresentable', p. 146.

¹³⁷ Inston, *Rousseau and Radical Democracy*, p. 149.

can this impossibility be grasped? Simon Critchley offers one option, suggesting that the legislator is a quasi-external figure who “belongs neither to the realm of politics nor nature, but who exists in a ‘no-place’”.¹³⁸ Although Critchley’s position is to be accepted, it is surely equally possible to argue that the legislator is present *both* before *and* after the constituting moment. We can supplement Critchley’s account by providing an additional nuance which will halt the oscillation between ‘*neither*’/‘*nor*’ and ‘*both*’/‘*and*’. As we have suggested, the impossibility of establishing antecedence is, for our purposes, to be understood as the superposition of alternatives one encounters when attempting to narrativise the sudden moment of origin or the transformative event. In contrast to Giddin, the position taken here is that the resistance to narrativisation we find in both Rousseauian and Hobbesian versions in fact brings us closer to a proper understanding of the specific status of political origins and the suddenness of their emergence. However, the original political event would be perceived in a different way from the perspective of an individual caught up in the process. For a contracting individual, the emergence of the legislator would indeed appear as a miraculous intrusion from some radically external ‘no-place’. This appearance cannot be read in terms of superposition but as a moment of hiatus. Superposition requires us to adopt a post-contract perspective, one based on the knowledge that the contract did in fact come into existence. Alternatively, for a contemporary (the individual we have referred to above as the ‘first performer’) this moment is one of hiatus, neither nature nor politics but rather the unintelligible interlude that separates them. The fact that this openness appears to collapse when we attempt to include it in a narrative of political origins reinforces the conclusion we have

¹³⁸ Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 61.

been working towards—a qualitative transformation is not merely an event of brief duration; it is one that cannot be thought chronologically since it includes, as its preconditions, elements which are only thinkable as its consequences.

An alternative view is proposed by Honig in her ‘Between Decision and Declaration’.¹³⁹ Honig argues that both the identity of the legislator and the content of the general will are undecidable, as is the status of the people as multitude or constituted collective: ‘The people, still and always also a multitude, never so fully formed that they are uninhabited by anarchic waywardness, must nonetheless discern and decide the difference between the legitimate lawgiver and the pretender’.¹⁴⁰ The lawgiver does not solve the problem of generating the general will, but rather, ‘shifts it to a new register’. While I am sympathetic to Honig’s account, I am not ready to endorse it unequivocally without certain caveats. The term undecidability, seems to suggest an ongoing uncertainty as to the identity of the legislator, the content of the general will, and the status of the people. Now, undecidability may simply imply the impossibility of a decision resulting in ongoing discussion and contestation. Alternatively, it might imply the provisional status of all decisions. Finally, it may indicate the impossibility of a once-and-for-all decision, one that would usher in an end-of-history stasis marked by the totalitarian closure of the political. Against these three connotations, the only notion of undecidability I could endorse would be one in which all decisions are taken to be, or appear as, final by those whom they apply to while nonetheless in fact remaining provisional. Even if, as a citizen of a Rousseauian political community, I accept the undecidability of the foundation

¹³⁹ Bonnie Honig, ‘Between Decision and Deliberation: Political Paradox in Democratic Theory’, *The American Political Science Review*, 101.1 (2007), 1–17.

¹⁴⁰ Honig, ‘Between Decision and Deliberation’, p. 6.

and the ongoing openness of the political situation, my obedience to the law attests to the fact that I do not treat the foundation as provisional. If my knowledge of the provisionality of the foundation and the laws it grounds were to determine my actions, I would be unlikely to feel a duty to obey; instead, I would only obey the law to the extent that its dictates could be made compatible with my interests. Likewise, as will become clear in the fourth chapter, there is nothing about a Badiouian event that could preclude the possibility of its own undoing by a subsequent event, however, this does not mean that the commitment generated in the subject of the event is diminished. For the subject, the event is both utterly indiscernible and absolutely true. It may eventually prove to have been provisional, but this provisionality is not apparent from the perspective of the subject (and for Badiou, the subject's perspective is the only one which counts).

Thinking the contract as a moment of superposition allows us to elucidate the idea of an evental suddenness. The Rousseauian description of the passage from the state of nature to 'the people' must include a moment at which the people are both constituted, since the making of the contract presupposes this constitution, and diffuse, since the role of the contract is to generate 'the people' as a single entity. Along with Inston, we should regard Rousseau's key innovation as his suggestion that the people *qua* constituted community can appear as a virtual point of reference by virtue of the lawgiver's ability to represent a previously unthinkable future outcome.¹⁴¹ This allows the people to acquire the capacity to authorise their own constitution. We find ourselves occupying the theoretical space set out by Kierkegaard as soon as the moment of origin appears

¹⁴¹ Inston, 'Representing the Unrepresentable', p. 400.

to mark a certain condensation or overlapping of ‘before’ and ‘after’.¹⁴² This overlapping is hinted at by Kierkegaard’s phrase, ‘the fullness of time’.¹⁴³ In the account of the fall of Adam provided by Kierkegaard in his *The Concept of Anxiety*, we find a similar point of overlap. The prohibition that God places on Adam presupposes that Adam already has the ability to judge for himself and thus addresses him as if he were a free subject.¹⁴⁴ This kind of origin correlates to that of Rousseau’s ‘people’ who must be present, albeit in a virtual sense, at the moment of their constitution in order for the contract to be legitimate. Alternatively, to take the example of Kierkegaard’s notion of conversion, a subject can accomplish the passage to faith only by making the ‘leap’, that is to say, by pre-emptively adopting the perspective of a religious subject prior to their actual conversion. Linear, sequential narratives fail precisely because they cannot accommodate the moment of co-existence of distinct alternatives nor the discontinuity implied by an original contract or ‘leap’.

The idea of a figure who serves as a corporalization of a radical, groundless change is also elaborated by Gibson in his *Intermittency: The Concept of Historical Reason in Recent French Philosophy*. Here, the figure is referred to as the ‘historical genius’ and represents, ‘the force that produces the work of art as an “unexpected, new, unprecedented form”, one for which we have no prior measure or place’.¹⁴⁵ Such a figure is directly identified with a ‘pure experience of liberty [...] not the freedom of the dogmatists or empiricists, freedom of choice or a reasoned freedom’.¹⁴⁶ At first glance, it is clearly possible to interpret this

¹⁴² This moment of superposition or overlap is also noted by Jacques Derrida in his “Declarations of Independence”, ‘Declarations of Independence’, *New Political Science*, 15 (1986), p. 10.

¹⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 22.

¹⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, VIII, p. 44.

¹⁴⁵ Gibson, p. 74.

¹⁴⁶ Gibson, p. 74.

‘historical genius’ as a Rousseauian legislator, one who possesses the God-like power to initiate, who ‘does not take its measure from a prior history but rather gives a measure to it’.¹⁴⁷ We have already described the legislator as an individual who emerges in the pre-political state (prior to the contract) without being determined or limited by this pre-contractual situation. Likewise, Gibson’s ‘historical genius’ is able to build, through imaginative force, the mirage of a future community which will prove the condition of that community’s realisation.¹⁴⁸ Nonetheless, is it not equally possible to venture an alternative interpretation, one that recognises in the ‘historical genius’ the characteristics associated with the Hobbesian first performer? It is the first performer who belongs to the state of nature but whose act can inaugurate a new time, or alternatively, interrupt the supposedly necessary relation between a present cause and a future effect. Gibson also provides us with a lucid account of the temporal character of the historical genius’s act which bears a strong resemblance to that of the first performer: ‘This time is no more linear, progressive or cumulative [...] but rather loops back on itself, is composed of ‘interlacings’ (*entrelacs*) and ‘arabesques’. [...] In the intersection of lines, a second event ‘duplicates’ or coincides with the first’.¹⁴⁹ For Gibson, the performance of a genuinely free act always entails a heterogeneous conception of time. A homogenous, linear-progressive notion of time can only accommodate historical events on the condition that they are connected in a causal relation. In contrast, Gibson’s ‘loops’, ‘interlacings’, and ‘arabesques’ serve to gloss the phenomena we have designated as superposition. It is a ‘looping’ or ‘interlacing’ in the sense that a future effect retroactively generates its cause. The

¹⁴⁷ Gibson, p. 74.

¹⁴⁸ Interestingly we are here unexpectedly close to Ferreira’s reading of Kierkegaard insofar as she holds the moment to be intimately tied to the human capacity of creative imagination. Ferreira, p. 19.

¹⁴⁹ Gibson, p. 89.

first performer is a conduit for precisely this kind of looping since it is through their groundless commitment to the new that the future can exert causal pressure on the present. By committing prematurely to a virtual outcome, an outcome that is *thinkable* but not *possible* from the performer's perspective, the first performer allows this future to produce concrete acts in the present that will widen the scope of possibility.

Gibson's notion of human action as intermittent and unpredictable, as opposed to linear-progressive, is pertinent to this enquiry in a further way. As noted briefly above, the occurrence of intermittent events, these free acts human subjects periodically accomplish, force us to revise our view of history as an internally coherent, homogenous totality. Instead, Gibson convincingly argues for a dualistic perspective in which the superficially homogenous tracts of empty historical time are periodically punctured by metahistorical interruptions. This is captured succinctly in Gibson's call for a, 'melancholic-ecstatic conception of history and an anti-schematics of historical reason'.¹⁵⁰ Uneventful tracts of time are designated as periods of inertia and make up the melancholic interim between ecstatic events.¹⁵¹ The use of the term inertia is particularly apt since it describes humanity's predicament in the state of nature, that is, the sense in which the state of nature appears to present an impasse. An escape from the state of nature cannot be achieved through rational deliberation; it requires a creative act, an apparently mad wager that the insurmountable persistence of a period of stasis does not preclude a metahistorical event.¹⁵² But while inertia is an appropriate term for the

¹⁵⁰ Gibson, p. 267.

¹⁵¹ Gibson, p. 217.

¹⁵² It is important to clarify that it would be inaccurate to characterize period directly preceding the Rousseauian contract as a pure 'state of nature'. At this point in Rousseau's account, humans have already undergone some degree of socialization. However, this does not make the passage any less abrupt in Rousseau since in this pre-political period there is still no notion of

state of nature, it is a no less appropriate term for the periods of political stagnation between intermittent bursts of revolutionary enthusiasm. As will be shown in subsequent chapters, the force required to break the inertia that characterises the state of nature is analogous to a revolutionary act, which insofar as it is necessarily premature, borrows from an imagined future in order to reorient the present.

In framing the metahistorical interruption as based on a subjective wager, Gibson encroaches on a theoretical terrain that is, for our purposes, thoroughly Kierkegaardian: ‘Politics must always take place on the basis of a wager, not of knowledge, or science’.¹⁵³ Returning to Kierkegaard’s position can prove instructive for our understanding of this kind of act. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard states:

Here is such a definition of truth: An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person. At the point where the road swings off (and where that is cannot be stated objectively, since it is precisely subjectivity), objective knowledge is suspended.¹⁵⁴

A subject’s resolution to act always emerges from a situation that is objectively undecidable, ‘*an objective uncertainty*’, which precisely because there is no readily available strategy for action, must involve a subjective decision. Through such a decision ‘the road swings off’, a departure occurs and a new historical trajectory is established, and yet the moment of decision cannot be located in hindsight, not merely when one attempts to recount the history of the decision, but it remains elusive even when one approaches it through a narrative reconstruction. Such a decision appears impossible from the perspective of the

sovereignty or authority, each of which can only come about after the decisive break effected by the contract.

¹⁵³ Gibson, p. 159.

¹⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, p. 207.

situation, however, it is this ability to take an unprecedented step, to achieve an apparently impossible transformation, with which Gibson and Kierkegaard are both fundamentally interested. The gesture Kierkegaard calls the ‘infinite decision’, the ‘decision of passion’, and elsewhere, the ‘leap of faith’, correlates perfectly to Gibson’s metahistorical event.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, there are identifiable reasons for this correlation. In the same way that Kierkegaard’s concept of the moment can be considered as a response to a Hegelian philosophy of historical reason’s gradual unfolding, Gibson’s collection of philosophical sources point towards the articulation of a concept of historical reason which does not dissolve the subject as one of its internal moments, but instead retains a concept of the subject as a non-sublatable source of impetus.

This chapter has sought to illuminate certain ambiguities pertaining to the moment of political origin in Rousseauian and Hobbesian social contract theory and to demonstrate the ways in which Kierkegaard’s concept of the instant/moment and the qualitative leap can yield insight when applied to the problem of political origins. Building upon our assessment of the transformative power of Kierkegaard’s concept of the instant in the previous chapter, our discussion above has enabled us to enhance our understanding of certain properties of narratives of political change. It is clear that individuals belonging to the state of nature cannot simply will themselves into a political community so long as we retain a standard notion of agency (as a reasoned choice between various possible options). Conceived in this way, agency would in fact be indistinguishable from determinism since humans would only have the power to choose their preferred option from the options available, a choice that would in

¹⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, p. 207.

fact be no choice at all since it would be determined in advance by factors belonging to the situation. Rather than the pseudo-choice between possible alternatives based on a pre-given situation, what if individuals also possess a capacity to ‘choose’ the factors they *experience as determining*?¹⁵⁶ What if individuals existing in the state of nature were able to somehow loosen themselves from their slavery to natural inclination (which is the ultimate impetus of action in the state of nature) and experience themselves as determined by a new imperative? Come’s account is instructive here:

It is of prime importance to establish unequivocally that what Kierkegaard (in *Sickness*) means by the self’s necessity (as well as the self’s possibility) is not a quality of the self’s extrinsic finitude and its involvement in the accidental and contingent, but is a quality that is operative in the inward domain of the self’s coherent gestalt of attitudes, predispositions, etc. [...] [Kierkegaard] makes the pregnant comment that this ‘negative form of the self exercises a *loosening* power as well as a *binding* power’.¹⁵⁷

Such a ‘loosening’ power should be understood as the subject’s capacity to loosen themselves from a given configuration of possibilities, enabling them to experience their situation as radically indeterminate, as requiring a groundless, and therefore properly free, decision. This ‘loosening’ is also the precondition for a Kierkegaardian understanding of resolution. When a subject decides to commit to an entirely new task, to shirk their private interests in favour of this task, at this moment their gesture involves a ‘positing of presuppositions’ so that instead of understanding their behaviour as determined by private interest, they experience the urgency of a nascent commitment to the *civitas*. This notion of freedom has a bearing on our discussion of Rousseau and Hobbes. It is a retroactive power since, in re-positing my presuppositions about what may or may not be possible, I

¹⁵⁶ Here, I introduce the key correspondence between Kierkegaard and Slavoj Žižek that involves subjectivity and the ‘positing of presuppositions’. The position I take on this correspondence, which will be developed at greater length in subsequent chapters, shares much in common with Burns, ‘A Fractured Dialectic: Kierkegaard and Political Ontology After Žižek’.

¹⁵⁷ Come, p. 212.

extract from an 'impossible' future a disposition that reconfigures my inward relation to the past and present so that this impossible future now becomes possible. Superposition thus appears as the narrative correlate of an irreducibly contingent subjective act of positing. It is the non-sublatable kernel of history, which cannot be integrated into a retrospective narrative, but persists as a minimal incoherence that undermines the completeness of each attempt at narrativisation. In subsequent chapters, I will link the problems associated with the narrativisation of radical transformations (such as the genesis of authority) to the more basic problem of the human experience of time. The status of the political subject and its implication in transformative moments will be the topic of the final two chapters.

Reflexive Determination in Kelsen and Schmitt

‘Wherever revelation does not awaken faith, it must awaken rebellion.’

- Rudolf Bultmann

Having established the points of correspondence between Kierkegaard’s transformative moment, the Hobbesian covenant, and the Rousseauian social contract, a pressing question still remains. This question concerns the extent to which our presentation of temporal complexity in narratives of political change necessarily entails a conception of the political contaminated by, or genealogically derived from, a theological conceptual apparatus. Given that Kierkegaard was first and foremost a religious thinker, it would seem to follow that our effort to construct the political implications of his concept of the moment adds impetus to the theological drift of political theory.¹ Put another way, does our enquiry into the temporality of political change inevitably draw upon on the religious well-spring that informed Kierkegaard’s understanding of temporality, or will we be in a position to decouple the political from the theological in favour of a materialist position? The importance of this task becomes more apparent when we consider

¹ For contemporary debates on the relationship between theology and the political; see Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. by Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Graham Hammill, *The Mosaic Constitution: Political Theology and Imagination from Machiavelli to Milton* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Claude Lefort, ‘The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?’, in *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. by David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988); Watkin.

that several of the theorists whose works are to be discussed in subsequent chapters either explicitly engage with theology as a resource for political thought (Slavoj Žižek), or define their philosophy as an extended effort to purge the political of its theological roots (Alain Badiou). Moreover, even though we have attempted to bracket the theological in Kierkegaard in order to sketch out the philosophical foundations of a political reading of his notion of the moment, the concept of the moment is nonetheless found embedded in a theological project. If it is possible to show that the concept of the moment can help elucidate transformative political events, it may be because these events also carry, as Roberto Esposito identifies, ‘a residue of transcendence that immanence cannot reabsorb’.² Not only is this residue detectable in Hobbes (who describes the sovereign as an ‘*Immortal God*’³) but the Rousseauian legislator is also described in terms that reference theology, as an individual who possesses God-like abilities and divine vision. A preliminary task for this chapter will therefore be to assess whether this invocation of theological tropes suggests an insoluble link between theology and political theory.

Our attempt to decouple the theological from the political is intended to enable a political philosophy whose features can be thought in terms of immanence. In the discussion that follows, we will seek both to divest political notions of their theological stock, but also to reassert materiality as the exclusive ground of the political. The impetus is twofold. In the first instance, I will show that there are practical and logical problems entailed by a politico-theological position. Schmitt’s sovereign, for example, cannot serve to ground the political since the sovereign decision is split from within, requiring recognition from a non-

² Esposito, p. 63.

³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 120.

sovereign actor. I will argue that if we remain sensitive to the temporality of the moment of decision, we will find ourselves obliged to conclude that the sovereign deed cannot be conceived in terms of a unilateral brute assertion of power, but must involve a moment of reflexive determination insofar as its very status as a decision relies on its recognition by a non-sovereign actor. As such, the additional motivation for political philosophy's de-spiritualization is that only a radically materialist conception of the political can rejuvenate the constituent power of the people as the highest, underived power. In short, a theologically inflected political philosophy serves to encourage an acceptance of uncontested concentrations of political power and serves to obfuscate the inalienable constituent power of the multitude. Radical materialism recognises the primacy of constituent power, even if the telos of this power is always to constitute, i.e. to produce sovereign concentrations. The vital caveat which will be explored in more detail below (and which is the more pressing concern of this thesis as a whole) is that this constituent power is itself unthinkable as a unified, self-identical force; instead, the multitude's political agency is always fractured, incomplete, delayed, or abbreviated. The form of the constituent power's actualization is therefore not decision, but rather a form of spontaneous recognition, or as I argue below, reflexive determination.

The Autonomy of the Political

The difficulty in handling the question of political theology can be framed in the following way. As has been shown in the previous chapter, in order to narrativise founding moments in politics, political theory must posit an exterior or remainder which cannot itself be properly included as a narrative element (i.e. the effort to include it subverts chronological ordering and results in a paradox).⁴ With respect to Hobbes, this exterior is condensed in the figure of the first performer who belongs to the state of nature but who can nonetheless take up an external position, behaving as if the new political grouping were already fully constituted in advance of its actual constitution.⁵ Alternatively, in Rousseau, the exterior appears in the figure of the legislator who oversees the process of founding but whose emergence cannot be fixed chronologically. The pertinent question here concerns the way we formulate this exterior and our understanding of its connection to theological thought. It could be that as soon as a figure takes on the function of an exterior or transmundane guarantee for authority, this figure is necessarily imbued with the traces of theological thinking insofar as theology provides guiding paradigm for all models of authority. This would then mean that since every claim to, or recognition of, authority relies on theological

⁴ Incidentally, theologico-political tensions can also be detected in Hannah Arendt's works on history, freedom, and revolution. Arendt is, on the one hand, seeking to show how the circularity of origins can be theorised without slipping into an explicitly theological register, whilst on the other hand we find Arendt often referring to the miraculous status of human freedom. Distancing her approach from Hobbes and Rousseau, Arendt argues that an act of foundation need not rely on, 'an Immortal Legislator or self-evident truth or any other transcendent, transmundane source', but that this search for an absolute ground overlooks the status of the act of beginning as absolute. Arendt, p. 204.

⁵ Of course, the first performer does not appear in Hobbes's own account of the founding moment of the political covenant, however, as soon as one imagines the genesis of a political community as taking the form of a covenant, a first performer is logically required. Hobbes himself admits that the first performer problem exists with respects to covenants in general so it is not unreasonable to conclude that the problem would also apply to the political covenant. *Leviathan*, p. 96.

modes of thinking, theology persists as an archetype which always-already determines the parameters for political thought. Schmitt's key claim in *Political Theology* is that the relation between theology and politics is based on genealogical linkage as opposed to metaphorical or analogical reference.⁶ Against this, an alternative position would need to show that conceiving of political concepts as always derived from theological ones rests on an all-too-hasty prioritisation of the ontic over the ontological. In other words, if political theory dispenses with the theological by conceptualising humans themselves as a quasi-transcendental source for founding acts, do we remain obliged to view these acts as bearing a theological structure?⁷ Moreover, if humans are to be viewed as capable of creating their own political foundations, would these foundations themselves not be open to challenge and contestation? Would every political configuration not ultimately be vulnerable to new attempts to start again, to create a new founding principle which can more directly realise notions of liberty, justice, and equality? Our position will be that there is no reason to suppose every political concept expresses an originally theological notion. The alternative strategy of presenting politics and theology as ontic expressions of an ontological impasse, could be a more plausible route. God would then simply be one figure who can occupy the place of an exterior, while exteriority is not itself necessarily

⁶ Hans Blumenberg deals with this issue in a critique which targets Schmitt's appropriation of theological metaphors in service of an argument concerning the real powers of a sovereign. In a similar vein, Graham Hammill argues that, 'Schmitt's crisis-driven rhetoric also literalizes [theological] metaphors in the very real person who oversees the executive branch of government [and thereby] justifies the expansion of executive authority'. See: Hammill, p. 10.

⁷ The idea of a quasi-transcendental source will be fleshed out below, however, by way of preliminary introduction, it is worth noting at this stage that my use of the term draws upon Sine Kramer's Derridean understanding of the 'constriction [...] of the empirical into the transcendental' with the implication that one can no longer posit an absolute boundary between the empirical and the transcendental, that they are henceforth to be viewed as 'mutually contaminated and contaminating'. See: Sine Kramer, 'Constitutive Exclusion and the Work of Political Unintelligibility' (College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences Theses and Dissertations, 2011), pp. 94–95, Paper 94 <<http://via.library.depaul.edu/etd/94/>> [accessed 16 July 2014].

theological but is rather to be held as an unavoidable structural feature of any founding gesture.

As indicated above, this chapter will work towards a radical materialist theory of the political subject which seeks to uproot the political from theological thought in service of a conception of political praxis arising immanently from human activity as opposed to a theological ‘beyond’.⁸ A comparable position is taken by Claude Lefort in his essay, ‘The Permanence of the Theological-Political’:

Every religion *states* in its own way that human society can only open on to itself by being held in an opening it did not create. Philosophy says the same thing, but religion said it first, albeit in terms that philosophy cannot accept [...] what philosophy discovers in religion is a mode of portraying or dramatizing the relations that human beings establish with something that goes beyond empirical time and the space within which they establish relations with each other.⁹

The use of theological concepts for political purposes does not inevitably entail the contamination of the political by the theological; on the contrary, as will be shown, insofar as both theological and political thought aims at conceiving human relations as an internally consistent totality, each must posit an exterior or surplus element which allows the totality of relations to be bounded. Rather than viewing political theory as somehow indebted to, or parasitic on theology, our task here will be to show how the structural or metaphorical parallels between concepts in theology and political theory are themselves traceable to a specific conception of subjectivity and temporality.

This chapter will develop a model of revolutionary change drawing on the works of Schmitt, Derrida, and Laclau with a mind to freeing political theory from its theological jesses. In the case of Schmitt, I will attempt to demonstrate how the decision on the exception cannot be produced *ex nihilo*, but must logically

⁸ The term ‘radical materialism’ will be discussed at greater length in subsequent chapters. For now, it is enough to describe a radical materialist position as one that is thoroughly atheistic whilst resisting the deterministic conclusions following from vulgar materialism.

⁹ Lefort, ‘The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?’, p. 223.

contain a moment of reflexive determination.¹⁰ Reflexive determination will then be shown to suggest a transmundane property of subjectivity and a non-linear conception of temporality. Rather than requiring a transcendent source for power and authority, human subjects are able to engage in kinds of activity which, despite being their own work, are nonetheless necessarily not recoverable as such. Temporal complexity emerges as a feature of narratives which seek to probe founding political moments. In the second section I will show how this particular quality of founding activity has been the focus of some of Derrida's more explicitly political writings such as his 'Declarations of Independence'.¹¹ Likewise, I will argue that Laclau offers a refined and comprehensive articulation of the secular political ontology that can be identified in the work of Schmitt as well as developing the notion of quasi-transcendental status of the constituting act. Our intention is not to surgically deconstruct, for example, the miracle, as a metaphorical gloss for the material activity of constitution building; on the contrary, the cross-contamination of religious and philosophical lexicons points to a structural limit, a category of event that metaphysics cannot assimilate but which should not, for this reason, simply be surrendered to religious discourse. Equally, we must also be careful not to retreat to a philosophical cul-de-sac, immersed in a religious vocabulary which serves to cut off further thought and to curtail in advance possibilities for emancipatory political praxis. Rather than simply pointing to the miraculous quality of transformative political action, the more pressing task is to ask why the concept of the miracle is an appropriate descriptor for a founding political deed. While the use of theological concepts

¹⁰ This is, of course, a notion adapted from Marx's famous *Reflexionsbestimmungen* by virtue of which a king is a king. See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 149.

¹¹ Derrida, 'Declarations of Independence', p. 10.

certainly suggests a resistance encountered by philosophical thought, we should not find ourselves forced to conclude that no further progress can be made in this direction. Even once it is conceded that there is a central, persistent aporia pertaining to moments of political transformation, this does not mean that we cannot thoroughly delineate its contours and unpack its implications for our conception of the human, political subject. Instead, I will show that conceiving founding political acts as comprising a quasi-transcendental gesture can allow us to successfully navigate the uncertain terrain of decisionistic arbitrariness and theologically derived transcendentalism. Religious thought is valuable for politics not because it provides useful or comforting explanations, but because it reveals the co-ordinates of philosophy's *terra incognita*.

The position we arrive at concerning the relationship between theological and political thinking will feed into a broader argument concerning narratives of founding events. The radical materialist gesture, insofar as it no longer allows for the possibility of a transcendental 'beyond' which could guarantee political foundations and authorise revolutionary transformations, results in a reformulation of the exterior such that, as Samuel Weber puts it, 'the otherness that is no longer allowed to remain transcendent therefore reappears this side of the horizon, represented as a "cataract", abyss, or fall'.¹² It is not the theological that persists, but rather, in reconceiving authority as emerging immanently from earthly human activity as opposed to guaranteed by a transcendental entity, the unknowable exterior now resurfaces in the world of human affairs, either as a disconcerting hiatus (the momentary absence of authority which intervenes in the passage from one political structure to another) or as a paradoxical narrative

¹² Samuel Weber, 'Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt', *Diacritics*, 22.3/4 (1992), 5–18 (p. 14).

surplus (a legislator who is present both before and after the moment of contractual agreement).

In *Political Theology* (1922), Carl Schmitt provides a dense and aphoristic argument concerning the theological origins of political concepts and the implications for our understanding of sovereignty. In an often-quoted passage, Schmitt makes the following claim:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology. Only by being aware of this analogy can we appreciate the manner in which the philosophical ideas of state developed in the last centuries.¹³

There are at least two ways of reading Schmitt's position here: either one can focus on the suggested transferral between theology and politics, or alternatively, one can read Schmitt's key claim as positing an analogical relationship between theological and political concepts. In the first instance we are dealing with genealogy. Theology provides an archetypal justificatory discourse for social distributions of power and authority which we have been forced to retain despite the transition to a post-theological era, albeit under the guise of modern theories of the state and sovereignty. This is the reading advanced by Karl Löwith for whom Schmitt's political theology aims to, 'show that all juridical concepts that are the expression of a sovereign decision, power, and dominance are secularized ones which do not simply make linguistic reference to theological notions but are also substantively developed from out of such notions'.¹⁴ From this perspective, it is not merely that political concepts resemble those of theology, but rather that,

¹³ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 36.

¹⁴ Karl Löwith, 'The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt', in *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, ed. by Richard Wolin (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 143.

following Schmitt's example, the notion of the omnipotent lawgiver has directly inherited a series of structural features from the omnipotent God of theology.¹⁵

There are several passages in *Political Theology* that seem to support a genealogical reading. For example, Schmitt states, 'A continuous thread runs through the metaphysical, political, and sociological conceptions that postulate the sovereign as a personal unit and primeval creator.'¹⁶ Other passages seem to place emphasis on the analogical relationship between theology and politics without necessarily conceding that this relationship is a product of a genealogical lineage.¹⁷ Schmitt does not provide steadfast indications in either direction. Instead, he suggests both that political concepts are secularized theological concepts and that they continue to relate to the latter by way of analogy.¹⁸ Although analogical and genealogical interpretations both have currency in contemporary debates, Hans Blumenberg has convincingly argued that Schmitt cannot sustain both positions simultaneously since, 'Analogies, after all, are precisely not transformations.'¹⁹ Moreover, it is worth noting that Schmitt himself retreated from his original position, arguing that his earlier remarks relate to a systematic structural affinity as opposed to genealogical derivation. In his *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology*, a text which can be viewed as a response to Blumenberg's challenge, Schmitt refers to the 'structural identity of theological and juridical concepts' and characterises his earlier work as 'the statements of a jurist on the obvious theoretical and practical

¹⁵ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 38.

¹⁶ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 37.

¹⁷ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pp. 36–37.

¹⁸ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pp. 36–37.

¹⁹ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. by Robert M. Wallace (London: MIT Press, 1985), p. 93.

legal structural resemblance between theological and juridical concepts.²⁰ This has led Marc de Wilde to conclude that ‘Schmitt no longer defends his original, genealogical claim that political concepts are secularized theological concepts but focuses on the structural claim instead.’²¹ However, as will be demonstrated below, even this analogical claim proves untenable when one looks closely at the moment of sovereign decision-making.

The distinction between these two approaches to Schmitt’s political theology has important implications. If political concepts are genealogically derived from theological ones, this invites a stronger claim about their theological status, one that could in turn lead to a problematic position whereby a purportedly secular political theory draws support from a theological structure it nonetheless disavows. This would leave us in the uncomfortable position outlined by Watkin whereby, ‘post-theological conceptions of politics implicitly require the persistence, in the theological notions they appropriate, of theological assumptions they explicitly reject’.²² If, however, we argue that the political is structurally reminiscent of the theological, this enables us to regard the political and the theological as two separate spheres and opens the possibility of a radical materialist position. Such a position would avoid, on the one hand, presupposing a God who would serve as the guarantor for the ethical character of a political community and the authority of its law-making institutions, while on the other hand also avoiding the determinism and ethical vacuity of a vulgar materialist position.²³ Of course, the two positions Schmitt refers to above are not mutually

²⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology*, trans. by Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (London: Polity Press, 2008), pp. 42, 148.

²¹ Marc de Wilde, ‘Meeting Opposites: The Political Theologies of Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt’, *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 44.4 (2011), 363–81 (p. 368).

²² Watkin, p. 170.

²³ Positivist materialism would be the clearest example of the form of materialism to be avoided. Throughout the argument that follows, I will seek to distance my position from any

exclusive insofar as genealogical connections may well positively imply structural similarities. Having said this, it is only by placing emphasis on structural affinity as opposed to genealogical connection that we are able to view the political as, at least potentially, autonomous from the theological. György Geréby is exemplary in this respect. Rather than asserting the reliance of the political on theological concepts and categories, Geréby points out how Schmitt's argument cannot rule out an interpretation that gives primacy to the political:

Schmitt has elaborated a "theology" of the secular world conceiving of politics as an immanentist theology in its own right. His argument, however, can cut two ways: from the idea that politics is a consequence of the immanentist theology of the secular, immanent political order, it follows that it might not be theology that changes into politics but politics that forms theology and makes it conform to its own shape.²⁴

Schmitt appears to advocate a reading of the political as subordinate to theology in the sense that politics is necessarily structured in accordance with a theological model. The very title of the text, *Political Theology*, implies a theology with a political character thereby relegating political theory to one possible mode of thinking that remains essentially theological. Geréby's point is that Schmitt does not provide any compelling reason to view the relationship between theology and politics in this way. In proposing that politics 'forms theology and makes it conform to its own shape,' Geréby notes that theological notions may well have originally emerged as part of an effort to grapple with political problems. Instead, Schmitt provides us with a series of structural associations between theological and political concepts in order to move to a claim about the way in which power and authority literally function.²⁵ A reader who holds this metaphorical

approach which takes material reality to be a homogenous, continuous substratum governed by a set of consistent physical laws. The task for a radical materialism, in contrast, would be to see how a political subject with a capacity for spontaneous action can emerge from a non-dualistic ontology of immanence.

²⁴ György Geréby, 'Political Theology versus Theological Politics: Erik Peterson versus Carl Schmitt', *New German Critique*, 35.3 (2008), 7–33 (p. 12).

²⁵ See: Blumenberg, pp. 100–101.

association to be rooted in genealogical connections will be more inclined to follow Schmitt's argument that sovereign power extends itself in a God-like way.

Hans Blumenberg also takes a position on this aspect of Schmitt's work, arguing that it is remarkable that Schmitt

finds any value at all in the secularization nexus since [...] it would have been more natural, in view of the intention of this "political theology," for it to establish the reverse relation of derivation by interpreting the apparent theological derivation of political concepts as a consequence of the absolute quality of political realities.²⁶

While it is essential to recognise the ambiguity Geréby notes in Schmitt's formulation of the theological-political, one can go further here. Instead of following the urge to allocate primacy to either the theological or the political, or recognising that primacy could never be definitively allocated, an alternative position would view both the theological and the political as responses to a metaphysical impasse of an origin or ground that cannot itself be grounded. It would be this impasse that Eric Santner refers to when he notes, 'an ultimate lack of foundation [...] that seems to push thinking in the direction of theology'.²⁷ My amendment to Santner's formulation would be that this lack of foundation ultimately pushes thinking beyond theology, and that politics, when thought through to its limit, encounters certain constitutive aporias.²⁸

Investigating Schmitt's use of theology is the necessary starting point for the argument I develop below. Citing genealogical links between theology and politics provides Schmitt with a stronger position from which to advance an analogical claim, and this claim, in turn, endows his sovereign with specific powers and attributes. The most striking of these powers is that of beginning via

²⁶ Blumenberg, p. 92.

²⁷ Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (London: Chicago University Press, 2011), p. 5.

²⁸ My position here finds support in Andrew Norris, 'Carl Schmitt's Political Metaphysics: On the Secularization of the "Outermost Sphere"', *Theory and Event*, 4.1 (2000), pp. 21–22.

a decision: 'Sovereign decision is an absolute beginning, and the beginning [...] is no other thing than sovereign decision'.²⁹ However, if the genealogical connection cannot be sustained, the analogical links Schmitt suggests may be little more than a rhetorical edifice serving only to obfuscate sovereignty's true operation. Below, we will see how political beginnings (or any transfer of political authority through extra-legal means) cannot be accomplished by a unilateral decider, but perforce imply the involvement of the demos. In order to present this as a plausible interpretation of Schmitt's *Political Theology*, it will be necessary to probe the metaphysical deadlock mentioned above via a discussion of the problematic status of juridico-political foundations.

²⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Über Die Drei Arten Des Rechtswissenschaftlichen Denkens* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlag, 1934), p. 28. Cited in Renato Cristi, *Carl Schmitt and Authoritarian Liberalism: Strong State, Free Economy* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 97.

Sovereignty and Exceptional Decisions

For Schmitt, the question of legal foundations is of utmost importance. His most significant works tend to consist of a sustained interrogation of a political concept with a view to determining its final, irreducible basis, or that to which the concept refers once all extraneous considerations have been stripped away. It is through such a procedure that the reader is led to a Schmittian definition of sovereignty: ‘Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.’³⁰ Note here how the formulation Schmitt provides in his *Political Theology* departs from the position he takes in his *Dictatorship*.³¹ In *Dictatorship* Schmitt distinguishes between commissarial and sovereign forms of dictatorship. The former is a circumscribed capacity to act in order to preserve the constitution and is inspired by the Roman practice of nominating an individual to resolve a specific task within a given time frame.³² The nominated individual will decide on the expedient course of action and will face no legal obstacles. The state of exception thus emerges from two decisions. First, there is a decision on whose duty it will be to resolve the crisis, and subsequently, there is a decision as to the actions that must be taken. Both these decisions are made by an appropriate, legally recognized entity. Finally, although the nominated dictator is free of legal impediments that might prevent him from completing his task, he is nonetheless obliged to reinstitute the regular legal order once this has been accomplished. Sovereign dictatorship, in contrast to

³⁰ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 5.

³¹ Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship: From the Origin of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to Proletarian Class Struggle*, trans. by Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014). For more on the distinctions between Schmitt’s *Dictatorship* and his *Political Theology*, see: John P. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt’s Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 133–141; Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 89–91.

³² Schmitt, *Dictatorship*, pp. 1–9.

commissarial dictatorship, appeals to a constitution which is to come, one that does 'not yet exist.'³³ This is not to be conceived as sheer power but as a power that is foundational and as such cannot be subsumed or negated by any actually existing constitution.³⁴

In *Political Theology*, the salient feature of sovereign power is to be viewed in terms of competence.³⁵ It is not a status to be designated and possessed independently of changing circumstances; on the contrary, Schmitt is concerned with a notion of sovereignty that is responsive to circumstances, and, in particular, the unique set of circumstances presenting an existential threat to the state. The preservation of the state is considered the highest priority since it is the security it provides that serves as a precondition for the survival of individual citizens.³⁶ If the state is faced with an existential threat that cannot be dealt with through available legal structures, there must be an individual or group who can recognize that such a threat exists and use extra-legal means to counter it. Or, to offer another formulation, if we agree with Schmitt that the legal system serves to preserve order within the state and that the state itself functions as the guarantor of this legal system insofar as the legal system would cease to exist without the state, we cannot avoid the conclusion that the state (or, more precisely, the sovereign entity that embodies the state) can unilaterally revoke its guarantee and suspend the law. The existence of the legal order relies on the state, not the other way around. David Dyzenhaus makes this point, arguing, 'once one sees the foundational role of decision, one will also see that, in the state of exception, while

³³ Schmitt, *Dictatorship*, p. 119.

³⁴ Schmitt, *Dictatorship*, p. 119.

³⁵ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 31.

³⁶ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 12.

law retreats the state stays.’³⁷ The decisionistic power of the sovereign is the practical consequence of the state’s existential primacy. This is why a sovereign call for a state of exception entails an absolute break from previous legal structures.

The sovereign decision is also a capacity that must exist in order to deal with an unprecedented threat. The key to sovereignty does not reside only in the fact that the state is under threat; it also arises from the unprecedented nature of this threat, in that there are no pre-existing legal means for dealing with it. It is an exception insofar as it ‘is not codified in the existing legal order.’³⁸ The deviation from Schmitt’s earlier position is thus to be found in the conflation between the individual who decides on the state of exception and the concrete actions that must be taken to resolve the crisis.³⁹ If a threat to the state is truly novel, the institutional separation of powers will no longer suffice. This feature of Schmitt’s account in *Political Theology* is also noted by Samuel Weber:

[S]overeignty is constituted as the power to decide upon or about the state of exception and thus in turn includes two moments: first, a decision *that* a state of exception exists, and second, the effective suspension of the state of law previously in force so that the state may meet and surmount the challenge of the exception.⁴⁰

Crucially, and in contrast to the account of commissarial dictatorship provided in *Dictatorship*, both decisions now emanate from the same source, occurring in a single, self-sufficient gesture. This is necessitated by Schmitt’s insistence that an exceptional case is impossible to anticipate by definition:

The precise details of an emergency cannot be anticipated, nor can one spell out what may take place in such a case, especially when it is truly a matter of an extreme

³⁷ David Dyzenhaus, *Legality and Legitimacy: Carl Schmitt, Hans Kelsen and Herman Heller in Weimar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 44.

³⁸ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 6.

³⁹ I follow Tracy B. Strong in holding the ambiguity in Schmitt’s formulation to be of interpretative significance. *Politics without Vision: Thinking without a Banister in the Twentieth Century* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 232.

⁴⁰ Samuel Weber, p. 10.

emergency and how it is to be eliminated. The preconditions as well as the content of a jurisdictional competence in such a case must be necessarily unlimited.⁴¹

Commissarial dictatorship remains within the horizon of constitutionalism insofar as it requires that all individuals and groups in the state behave in accordance with the parameters of the constitution. The nominated dictator may have a broad scope for action, but there are still legal limitations on his action. As Kalyvas argues, the dictator may occupy a 'normless vacuum,' but the parameters of that vacuum are pre-given from within constituted legal space.⁴² The legal system is thus to be seen as complete and self-contained, existing as a homogenous, positive order in which the 'frictionless functioning' of the legal idea occurs without any requirement for a truly extra-legal sovereign entity.⁴³

The distinction between the forms of dictatorship described in *Dictatorship* and the notion of sovereignty presented in *Political Theology* is pertinent to our discussion here since it is only in the latter that we are presented with a political entity endowed with God-like powers.⁴⁴ The sovereign of *Political Theology* seems to inherit characteristics of both commissarial and sovereign conceptions of dictatorship. The sovereign decision is aligned with commissarial dictatorship insofar as it comprises a response to a specific threat to the state. Nonetheless, it is also framed as an underived power, one that is not subject to legal limitations and, as such, can be aligned with the notion of sovereign dictatorship. *Political Theology* moves beyond both commissarial and sovereign forms of dictatorship since, rather than grounding the highest, underived power

⁴¹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pp. 6–7.

⁴² Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, p. 89.

⁴³ Here I paraphrase Schmitt's account of the application of Kantian formalism in Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 28.

⁴⁴ In fact, Schmitt does note a similarity between the *pouvoir constituant* and God, but the comparison is made in a brief remark that does not seek to present the *pouvoir constituant* as endowed with God-like omnipotence. Schmitt, *Dictatorship*, pp. 124–125.

in the *pouvoir constituant*, Schmitt draws theological parallels to support his argument that sovereignty asserts itself in a God-like way. With a sovereign dictatorship we are told that the dictator's power is not constitutionally established but is associated with the constitution insofar as it serves as its foundation. There is no theological analogy to be made with respect to either commissarial or sovereign forms of dictatorship. As Schmitt states:

It has been argued that dictatorship is a miracle on the grounds that its suspension of state laws is comparable to the suspension of natural laws in miracles. In reality dictatorship is not this miracle; it is a breaking up of the legal system that is implicit in such a newly established dominion.⁴⁵

The comparison between the forms of dictatorship that emerge in *Dictatorship* and the concept of sovereignty advocated in *Political Theology* leads us to ask how we are to account for the religious analogies that appear in the latter. Do these analogies provide greater insight into the way Schmitt argues sovereignty functions? Or is the theological analogy designed to add weight to an argument about how sovereignty *should* function? One possible answer would be that in his effort to theorize the highest, underived power, Schmitt encounters a problem described by Lefort as that of accounting for 'a difference that goes beyond differences.'⁴⁶

In positing the possibility of an exceptional moment, Schmitt is not simply describing a practical resource for sovereign power in a moment of crisis; rather, he is asserting the possibility of an exception as a legal-logical necessity. A legal system is always structured so as to appear as a closed totality with both a founding moment (even if this moment is a mythical, as opposed to empirical, event) and with a finite set of laws that apply within a limited territory. Conceiving a political entity as temporally and spatially bounded implies

⁴⁵ Schmitt, *Dictatorship*, pp. 120–121.

⁴⁶ Lefort, 'The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?', p. 223.

exteriority, both a temporal exterior (that is, the form of political organization that existed prior to the state's existence in the territory now occupied by the state) and a spatial exterior (the existence of groups outside the state's sphere of control that may threaten the latter either economically or militarily).⁴⁷ But insofar as a legal system has these temporal and spatial limits, and insofar as 'the norm requires a homogenous medium,' there remains a possibility that the state will encounter an empirical situation that cannot be accommodated by existing laws.⁴⁸ Exteriority therefore logically entails the possibility of an unprecedented situation, one that may require a suspension of law, while the sovereign is simply the agent who has the competence to suspend the law.⁴⁹ As such, Schmitt's use of theological analogies for political concepts can be viewed as part of a rhetorical strategy which, to quote Lefort, '[dramatizes] the relations that human beings establish with something that goes beyond empirical time and the space within which they establish relations with one another.'⁵⁰

A legal-positivist approach would be to create legislation that would define in advance the conditions for a situation's exceptional status and prescribe a set of actions to take whereas, for Schmitt, an exception is by definition that which cannot be accounted for in advance. Put another way, insofar as a legal system asserts itself as fully constituted, as a self-contained normative network, it necessarily posits the existence of an extra-legal space. The ability to defuse the crisis from within existing legal parameters constitutes a proof that an exceptional moment has not been encountered. In his *Dictatorship*, Schmitt

⁴⁷ Incidentally, these groups are easily recognizable as the Schmittian "enemy" of his well-known "friend/enemy" distinction developed in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. by George Schwab, Expanded edition (London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁴⁸ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 13.

⁴⁹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 33.

⁵⁰ Lefort, 'The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?', p. 223.

describes commissary dictatorship as a legal institution used to resolve a crisis within a given time-frame:

The dictator, who was appointed by the consul at the Senate's request, had the task of dissolving the dangerous situation by reason of which he had been nominated either by waging war or by squashing uproar from within. [...] The dictator was nominated for six months, but, whenever he had accomplished his mission, he stepped down before his official time of resignation — at least according to a commendable custom in early republican times.⁵¹

In contrast, the defining feature of *Political Theology* is the argument that the individual who acts and the scope for their action are both generated through a single decisive act, one that, as Schmitt argues, 'emanates from nothingness.'⁵² This is why in *Political Theology* Schmitt considers the miracle to be an appropriate analogy for the sovereign decision.⁵³ A miracle is conceivable when one views the natural world as a complete self-contained system existing in relation to an outside or beyond, inhabited by a transcendent deity. When natural processes are momentarily suspended, when a divine cause has led to a terrestrial effect, one can say that a miracle has occurred.

And yet this conception of the miracle, based on a strong opposition between the material and the spiritual, is not the only one available. Bonnie Honig has convincingly shown how the notion of the miracle that arises in the works of Franz Rosenzweig can assist a more democratic reading of Schmitt's theory of sovereignty: 'For Rosenzweig, miracle is not a ruptural divine decision; that is a remnant of earlier theologies and the by-product of their rationalization (in which miracle is that which must be expelled from a rational theology) [...] miracle is an ambiguous sign that thrusts upon humans the responsibility to receive it.'⁵⁴ Rosenzweig's notion of the miracle has import for political theory precisely

⁵¹ Schmitt, *Dictatorship*, pp. 1–2.

⁵² Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 32.

⁵³ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 36.

⁵⁴ Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*, p. 95.

because it describes a transformation that fundamentally involves humans. A traditional Augustinian formulation of the miracle holds God to be the performer of miracles, positioning humans as passively bearing witness to the divine Act. It relies on a strong dualism insofar as the boundary between the divine and the mundane is only occasionally breached. When breaches occur, they arise as an act of God and do not require any special participation or pre-existing disposition on the part of the human witnesses. In stark contrast, Rosenzweig's miracle points to 'popular receptivity and immanence'.⁵⁵ Miracle no longer emerges from an ethereal beyond, but it hinges on the earth-bound activity of those who will receive it as miracle. The daily practices which are the hallmark of devoutness: prayer, worship, and the study of sacred texts help prepare the individual for the miracle. The miracle is structured less as divine command and more as an invitation to be taken up or a sign to be interpreted and acted on. For Honig, then, we can certainly agree with Schmitt that the model of the decision is a miracle, with the all-important caveat that the metaphor of the miracle has the character of Rosenzweig's miraculous.⁵⁶ It is a miracle that is ambiguous as to its origins, requiring as much from the believer as from God.

Honig's rereading of Schmitt via Rosenzweig is undoubtedly a valuable and convincing contribution to the scholarship on Schmitt's decision. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which, insofar as we accept the Rosenzweigian miracle as the appropriate metaphor for the Schmittian decision, we have already accepted the core proposition of a materialist reading of Schmitt. If the sovereign is unable to simply command, if sovereign will does not automatically exteriorize its will in the decision, this implies that sovereignty is not concentrated in a

⁵⁵ Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*, p. 88.

⁵⁶ Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*, p. 107.

particular agent, but is in fact diffused throughout the body politic. Below, I will suggest an amendment to Honig's Rosenzweigian political theology which takes up the spirit of her line of enquiry and seeks to pursue it in a rigorously materialist direction.

Presupposing the *Grundnorm*

The issue of a legitimate ground for sovereign power can be also approached through the idea of an original foundation or Constitution. Hans Kelsen's *General Theory of Law and State* represents a significant effort in this direction. Kelsen aims at an account in which law is regarded as a complete system capable of absorbing its founding moment without excess or remainder. Each norm is derived from higher order norms and these higher order norms in turn refer back to a constitutional pact between members of the state. This ability to regulate its own creation, to include its foundation as one of its internal moments, is considered to be a 'peculiarity of law which is of utmost theoretical importance.'⁵⁷ Instead of positing a sovereign decision as the basis for the validity of law, Kelsen argues that any given system of law refers back to a basic norm:

If we ask why the constitution is valid, perhaps we come upon an older constitution. Ultimately we reach some constitution that is the first historically and that was laid down by an individual usurper or by some kind of assembly. [...] That the first constitution is a binding legal norm is presupposed, and the formulation of the presupposition is the basic norm of this legal order.⁵⁸

The legal order that derives from the basic norm consists of laws that 'remain valid as long as they have not been invalidated in the way which the legal order itself determines.'⁵⁹ This, argues Kelsen, 'is the principle of legitimacy.'⁶⁰ Elsewhere Kelsen states: 'The ultimate hypothesis of positivism is the norm authorizing the historically first legislator. The whole function of this basic norm is to confer law-creating power on the act of the first legislator and all the other acts based on this first act.'⁶¹ The quotations above provide a succinct indication

⁵⁷ Hans Kelsen, *General Theory of Law and State*, trans. by Anders Wedberg (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946), p. 39.

⁵⁸ Kelsen, p. 115.

⁵⁹ Kelsen, p. 117.

⁶⁰ Kelsen, p. 117.

⁶¹ Kelsen, p. 116.

of the disagreement between Schmitt and Kelsen. For Kelsen, a legal order can dissolve itself only from within, that is, by means that are already specified in law. In contrast, in *Political Theology* Schmitt argues that the decision comes from a trans-juridical outside and need not refer to any existing positive law.⁶² Schmitt points to the tautology implied by a positively given founding moment in Kelsen's theory of law:

Words such as *order*, *system* and *unity* are only circumscriptions of the same postulate, which must demonstrate how it can be fulfilled in its purity. It has to be shown how a system can arise on the foundation of a "constitution" (which is either a further tautological circumspection of the "unity" or a brutal socio-political reality).⁶³

The paradox both Schmitt and Kelsen grapple with can be stated as follows: in order for the foundation to be legitimate, it must be included in the system of law that it founds. However, if it is included in this way one can no longer view it as properly foundational. Kelsen seeks to sidestep this issue by arguing that, from the perspective of an existent legal order, the basic norm can simply be presupposed. The tautology noted by Schmitt consists in the way in which the legal order itself retroactively legitimates the gesture which founds it. One can apply Derrida's insight here: the authority of the signatories of the constitution is not coterminous with the act of signing itself but can only come about as an effect of the act of signing, 'in a sort of fabulous retroactivity.'⁶⁴ A genuine foundation has no antecedent principle to appeal to; instead, it receives legitimacy from the order it inaugurates, from the political community who presuppose its legitimacy.

The logic of retroactive legitimation in Kelsen's theory is brought to the fore in his remarks on the legitimacy of a revolutionary act. The relevant passage is worth quoting at length:

⁶² Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pp. 31–32.

⁶³ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 20.

⁶⁴ Derrida, 'Declarations of Independence', p. 10.

It is just the phenomenon of revolution which clearly shows the significance of the basic norm. Suppose that a group of individuals attempt to seize power by force, in order to remove the legitimate government in a hitherto monarchic State, and to introduce a republican form of government. If they succeed, if the old order ceases, and the new order begins to be efficacious, because the individuals whose behavior the new order regulates actually behave, by and large, in conformity with the new order, then this order is considered as a valid order. It is now according to this new order that the behavior of individuals is interpreted as legal or illegal. But this means that the new basic norm is presupposed. It is no longer the norm according to which the old monarchical constitution is valid, but a norm according to which the new republican constitution is valid, a norm endowing the revolutionary government with legal authority. If the revolutionaries fail, if the order they have tried to establish remains inefficacious, then, on the other hand, their undertaking is interpreted, not as a legal, a law-creating act, as the establishment of a constitution, but as an illegal act, as the crime of treason, and this according to the old monarchic constitution and its specific basic norm.⁶⁵

There is clearly something amiss here. For a theorist who is ostensibly concerned with demonstrating that a legal system can be conceived as a single, enclosed totality, Kelsen's account of revolutionary action seems to suggest a moment of ambiguity concerning the genesis of his basic norm. In committing to overthrow a 'hitherto monarchic State,' Kelsen's revolutionaries commit an apparently treasonous act. Nonetheless, as Kelsen admits, the status of this act as treasonous is not decided prior to acting, nor through the act itself; instead, the act receives its status from 'the individuals whose behaviour the new order regulates.'⁶⁶ The revolutionaries' status as founders of a new republic (as opposed to traitors or usurpers) and the validity of the new order which their activity inaugurates are decided by the individuals belonging to the state. But this decision does not take the form of a choice between two alternatives since the very possibility of such a choice would presuppose a meta-political position from which to judge each alternative (monarchy or republic) on its respective merits. In this scenario, the republican position would have effectively already been validated since the proper functioning of the *ancien régime* requires that it totalize the political field,

⁶⁵ Kelsen, p. 118.

⁶⁶ Kelsen, p. 118.

that there is no position from which one can judge its relative merits compared with republicanism.

Deciding the status of the revolutionary act, is it not possible to detect the same logic in Derrida's account of the 'successful' revolution? Derrida outlines his position in the following quotation:

A 'successful' revolution, the 'successful foundation of a state' [...] will produce *après coup* what it was destined in advance to produce, namely, proper interpretive models to read in return, to give sense, necessity and above all legitimacy to the violence that has produced, among others, the interpretive model in question, that is, the discourse of its self-legitimation.⁶⁷

Kelsen's condition for the legitimacy of a new, post-revolutionary regime is that it is able to successfully regulate the behaviour of its citizens. The unexpected common ground between Kelsen and Derrida concerns the *après coup* efficacy of the revolutionary act. In either case, the indeterminacy of the revolutionary act can only be settled after concrete steps have been taken and a new foundation has been posited. Crucially, this does not mean revolutions are illegitimate or unjust, but rather, since they refer to political foundations, revolutions involve a momentary suspension of the oppositions and categories which would enable judgements to be made. Revolution thus indicates a shift, as Eric Santner argues apropos revelation, at the level of syntax: 'Revelation is thus not so much the positing of an alternative and competing standard of value as an intervention into the very syntax by which values are determined and to which we are bound in our life with values'.⁶⁸ The revelation or revolution designates a position from which a subject could rework the very schema according to which their values are

⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundations of Authority"', in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 36.

⁶⁸ Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 97.

organised.⁶⁹ That is to say, during such a revolutionary/revelatory moment, one is thrown out of the inertia of normality so as to adopt a new position or commit oneself to a new task. This insight allows us to segue directly back into our discussion of Kelsen's revolutionary act which must also rely on a change of disposition on behalf of members of the state. If the revolutionary act is effective, it will result in a subjective change in the citizenry such that the latter will be receptive to government by the new republican founders, and if this change occurs, then the revolutionary act is not merely effective *but also legitimate*. It is vital to note that arriving at legitimacy in this way prevents us from viewing Kelsen's theory of law as delivering a positivist, internally consistent legal framework. On the contrary, as Kalyvas argues, the basic norm, while validating all inferior norms, 'is itself unauthorized, a 'hypothetical foundation', a mental presupposition that does not describe a real, existing ground'.⁷⁰ The validity of the basic norm relies only on its efficacy, that is, on the extent to which it can serve as a foundation for a legal system that its subjects actually perceive as legitimate and obey. Kalyvas outlines the crux of the problem that arises here:

Validity would ultimately refer to nothing more than the efficacy of certain actors to impose a new basic norm. [...] Kelsen reluctantly acknowledged that, when it comes to historical reality, the basic norm, though a logical presupposition, might well have emanated from the naked subjective will of an individual or a group of individuals who had the force to overthrow the previous basic norm and impose a new one. This elaboration suggests that the basic norm might be nothing more than the expression of an arbitrary, subjective act'.⁷¹

Kelsen ultimately fails to fully purify his theory of law since his account of the revolutionary act introduces a split notion of validity: norms are valid insofar as they are consistent with a basic norm and yet this basic norm is itself validated by

⁶⁹ Of course, this parallel between revolution and revelation must be understood in light of the arguments made above relating to the status of political theology. To recap briefly, we are not arguing that the revolutionary dynamic is parasitic on revelation, but rather that both revolutionary and revelatory moments indicate an ontological deadlock.

⁷⁰ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, p. 103.

⁷¹ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, p. 106.

its efficacy, that is, by its ability to compel obedience. As soon as one begins to conceive legitimacy as generated in this way, the concept itself is destabilized; legitimacy no longer expresses a universal standard, but is simply the temporary effect of particular human actions and their consequences. Kelsen's positivism thus cannot be sustained since it cannot submit a universal criterion for the validity of norms.

Framing Kelsen's theory of a revolutionary act in this way brings us unexpectedly close to a Schmittian position.⁷² As has been outlined already, Schmitt posits a unique entity with a trans-judicial capacity which allows the suspension of the legal order. It is the status of this act, the sovereign decision, that represents the vital kernel of Schmitt's political theory; however, it is also precisely the structure of this act that marks the point of convergence between Kelsen's liberal-constitutional theory of law and Schmitt's 'decisionist' alternative. In his *Political Theology* Schmitt refers to the sovereign decision as an issue of competence.⁷³ The state of exception is arrived at through a declaration by a competent political entity. Nonetheless, an ambiguity surfaces at this point concerning the locus of sovereignty during normal politics: is sovereignty always anchored in a determinate individual or group only to *become visible* through a declaration of exceptional circumstances, or alternatively, is the status of sovereignty *indeterminate in principle* prior to such a declaration?⁷⁴ George Schwab seems to take the former position in his introduction to *Political Theology*, arguing that the exceptional moment is one in which sovereign power

⁷² The odd convergence between these two intellectual opponents is noted by William E. Scheuerman, 'Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberal Constitutionalism', *The Review of Politics*, 58.2 (1996), 299–322 (p. 314).

⁷³ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 31.

⁷⁴ Dyzenhaus notes this ambiguity in *Legality and Legitimacy*, p. 43.

‘reveals itself.’⁷⁵ In a similar vein, Kalyvas holds that during normal periods the locus of power is ‘invisible.’⁷⁶ Neumann takes a stronger position in this direction, stating that, ‘the study of [...] emergency situations will yield valuable hints as to where political power actually resides in “normal” periods.’⁷⁷ The key reproach to be levelled at Schwab, Kalyvas, and Neumann is that their positions presuppose a metahistorical vantage point from which one could observe sovereignty throughout both periods of normal and exceptional politics. Sovereign power is hypostatized in a model of authority mistakes the symbolic for the concrete. If the sovereign is already in existence only to be *revealed* through the exception, we no longer have a sovereign who can be truly responsive to circumstances and the issue of competence is no longer central. But the more interesting feature of Schmitt’s formulation is that it shows how sovereignty can be thought of as constituted through (as opposed to being revealed by) the declaration of an exceptional set of circumstances. The point is well made by Michael Marder in his analysis of Schmitt’s ontology of the will:

[P]olitical will and the sovereign *qua* sovereign come about *as a result of* the decision on the exception; that is to say, they do not precede the moment of the decision but are decided into existence in this very moment. The production of the sovereign and of the will by the decision is a self-production, in that, in the absence of any transcendental supports, the sovereign is decided into existence *by him- or herself*, by the act of sovereignty, which, from the standpoint of the legal order, is null and groundless.⁷⁸

There is no invisible sovereign-in-waiting prior to the crisis; during normal periods political life functions well enough through institutions, legal structures, and the observance of precedents. It may be supposed that sovereignty exists in some particular political agent, but this supposition is ultimately baseless given

⁷⁵ George Schwab, “Introduction” in Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. xliv.

⁷⁶ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, p. 133.

⁷⁷ Franz L. Neumann, ‘Approaches to the Study of Political Power’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 65.2 (1950), 161–80 (p. 178).

⁷⁸ Michael Marder, *Groundless Existence: The Political Ontology of Carl Schmitt* (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 139.

that the locus of sovereignty can never be verified except by way of a decision. In this sense the Schmittian sovereign, much like the well-known emperor from Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, is naked at the decisive moment. Lacking any transcendental or objective guarantees, the sovereign decision originates from a position of profound uncertainty. Contra Schmitt, the sovereign is not unilaterally able to 'clothe himself,' instead, he relies on his subjects to presuppose his clothing for him, that is, to recognize him as the ultimate locus of authority. It is not that the people recognize a sovereign who was hidden or invisible prior to his declaration, but rather sovereign status is fixed to a particular political actor through the people's very act of recognition.⁷⁹ Kam Shapiro should thus be supported in her claim that, 'Every grouping not only carries protopolitical intensities but can also be a site of decision'.⁸⁰ Questions regarding the locus of sovereignty during periods of normal politics miss the way in which sovereignty, as a quality belonging to a particular agent, is itself *constituted* (or better still, as I will argue below, *reflexively determined*) through the decision on a state of exception.

There are two implications of this ambiguity which are pertinent to our discussion of a radical democratic moment in Schmittian political theory. The first has been already proposed by Kalyvas who argues that a basic norm, 'is valid not in the sense of a logical-transcendental presupposition but rather because it has emanated from those directly affected by it, that is, from the constituent

⁷⁹ The role of recognition in Schmitt's work has also been the topic of an article by Michael Marder. Although Marder's claims apropos Schmittian recognition involve the friend/enemy distinction as opposed to the people's recognition of a sovereign, I see our positions as broadly compatible. In particular, I am supportive of Marder's contention that 'misrecognition need not be understood as the divergence between reality and its representation; rather, it is the upshot of the non-transparency and obliqueness of the political field. See: Michael Marder, 'Carl Schmitt and the Risk of the Political', *Telos*, 132 (2005), 5–24.

⁸⁰ Kam Shapiro, 'Politics Is a Mushroom: Worldly Sources of Rule and Exception in Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin', *Diacritics*, 37.2/3 (2007), 121–34 (p. 129).

decision of the sovereign people'.⁸¹ For Kalyvas, the fact that Schmitt's theory constantly refers to an individual, personified, sovereign does not prevent us from reading sovereignty as, in a moment of profound crisis, reinvested among the subjects of the state. It is a reading which finds ample support in Schmitt's *Constitutional Theory*.⁸² A state of exception would thus be understood as a break with the previous order such that the legitimacy of its institutions is abrogated and sovereignty again resides with the people.⁸³ A further democratic reading of Schmittian theory can nonetheless be added as a supplement to Kalyvas's position. Once we view sovereignty as a competency emerging in a particular historical situation rather than as prescribed by a law, certain important implications follow. As we have seen in Kelsen's passage on revolutionary action, a competency definition of sovereignty in turn relies on a moment of recognition by those who would be obliged to obey.⁸⁴ Given that, for Schmitt, sovereignty is not immutably vested in any particular political entity but depends instead on the origin of a decision made in concrete circumstances, there is no reason to assume prior to a declaration of a state of exception that any individual or group could more competently decide on exceptional circumstances.⁸⁵ In fact, the competence of the individual or group to actually make a decision is determined in precisely the same way as in Kelsen: through the recognition of those to whom the decision

⁸¹ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, p. 115.

⁸² See, for example, Schmitt's claim that the people is 'the bearer of constitution-making power' in Carl Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, ed. & trans. by Jeffrey Seitzer (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 76.

⁸³ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, p. 115.

⁸⁴ The role of recognition in the genesis of authority is noted in Kojève, p. 34.

⁸⁵ Of course, in practice, it would be possible to convincingly argue that some individuals or groups would be more likely to successfully declare a state of exception than others. A king, a prime minister, a general commanding a battalion of trained and armed soldiers, or a revolutionary band of insurgents could all be plausible candidates. Nonetheless, the key point here is that it is impossible to know which of these groups would, in the event, successfully decide on a state of exception. It is for this reason that a competency definition of sovereignty contains an irreducible moment of undecidability.

applies. It is a consequence of Schmitt's position not lost on Wetters who cites the link between Schmitt and Weber on this point:

Schmitt's theory of legitimacy is clearly derived from Max Weber. [...] Weber's three forms of legitimation are, famously, *legal*, *traditional*, and *charismatic*. Weber defines all these forms in terms of the chances that orders will be followed obediently; the emphasis on 'chance' makes a difference. Schmitt, for example, does not speak of the chances that the sovereign will be able to effectuate a decision about the state of exception (even though this is in a sense what must be at stake).⁸⁶

Despite Wetters's tentative tone, this remark, which appears as a footnote, strikes at the heart of Schmitt's notion of sovereignty. An abrogation of the political order and the suspension of law by a sovereign must always involve the participation of the group of citizens who actually comprise the state. A declaration of an exceptional situation thus always takes the form of an appeal to a specific political grouping. Exceptional politics cannot be unilaterally imposed because the competence (or incompetence) of the sovereign is not itself purely a consequence of a sovereign decision. Instead, the sovereign declaration is made from a position of uncertainty with regard to the locus of sovereignty. That is to say, while the sovereign may be the one who decides on the state of exception, his decision must always take the form of a wager that his declaration will be recognised *as a sovereign decision*. Pushing this line of thought further, we can even argue that sovereignty is ascribed retroactively depending on the citizens who, when confronted with a declaration of exceptional circumstances, can treat the proto-sovereign individual either as an actual sovereign, or alternatively, as a lunatic or imposter whose declarations are meaningless. Far from an omnipotent, God-like lawgiver, the Schmittian sovereign is a mad gambler whose pretence to sovereignty is structurally identical to the claims made by Kelsen's revolutionary insurgents.

⁸⁶ Kirk Wetters, 'The Rule of the Norm and the Political Theology of "Real Life" in Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben', *Diacritics*, 36.1 (2006), 31–47 (p. 33).

A further illustration of this aspect of Schmitt's thought can be found in a passage of a speech made by Mussolini in 1922 quoted by Schmitt in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*: 'we have created a myth, this myth is a belief, a noble enthusiasm; it does not need to be a reality, it is a striving and a hope, belief and courage. Our myth is the nation, the great nation which we want to make a concrete reality for ourselves'.⁸⁷ As Victoria Kahn is right to point out, Mussolini's myth of the nation does not need to be true—its status as myth is openly admitted—for its efficacy depends on the extent to which it 'mobilises the masses'.⁸⁸ Throughout *Political Theology* Schmitt presents the decision as self-sufficient, as an independently determining gesture, but in order to arrive at a full account of the decision one must note the moment of *reflexive determination* whereby the decision receives validation from a given political community. The Schmittian decision, like Mussolini's myth of the nation, has the status of pure assertion. There is no guarantee that it will produce a substantial change since it does not address citizens on the basis of their capacity to reason, but on the level of belief and passion.

The distinction is also noted by Paul W. Kahn who contrasts successful and unsuccessful revolutions: 'A successful revolution establishes its own value by creating its own truth. An unsuccessful revolution loses the right even to claim the title of "revolution"'.⁸⁹ Kahn's remark, which ostensibly refers to the status of a political event as revolutionary, applies equally to the Schmittian exception. In Kelsen, the reflexive determination of legitimacy in a revolutionary situation is

⁸⁷ Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. by Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 76. Cited in Victoria Kahn, *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 29.

⁸⁸ Victoria Kahn, p. 29.

⁸⁹ Paul W. Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 47.

made explicit, whereas in Schmitt, it is the logical corollary of his particular formulation of the decision. Nonetheless, in either case, to follow each theory to its conclusion is to find oneself confronted with a hidden democratic kernel: the act/decision must be supplemented by a moment of democratic recognition and a certain ideological shift which detotalises the political field, revealing a naturalized legal system to rest on a contingent point of departure. Kalyvas is supportive of this admittedly counter-intuitive reading of Schmitt and Kelsen, arguing that it is not Schmitt whose theory of law suffers from a normative deficit, but the liberal-constitutionalist Kelsen: 'By developing the idea of the sovereign popular will as the only legitimate source of a modern democratic political order, Schmitt is better positioned for renewing the normative dimension of the democratic ideal'.⁹⁰ Although I follow Kalyvas in his identification of a democratic moment in Schmitt, it is perhaps less a point of distinction between Kelsen and Schmitt than a point of convergence. Kelsen is quite clear on the role of the popular sovereign will in determining the success and, importantly, the legitimacy of a revolutionary act. As he notes in the passage cited above, it is the citizens themselves who validate the new order by virtue of their behaving in conformity with its laws.⁹¹ It is for this reason that I depart from Kalyvas when he claims that: 'whereas for [Schmitt and Kelsen] this initial moment of the norm-giving act is beyond legality, for Schmitt it is not beyond legitimacy'.⁹² Kalyvas is implying that a norm-giving act is beyond legitimacy for Kelsen, however, Kelsen's statements on the legitimacy of revolutionary acts suggest an alternative reading: rather than arguing that a revolutionary seizure of power is always extra-

⁹⁰ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, p. 115.

⁹¹ Kelsen, p. 118.

⁹² Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, p. 106.

legal and illegitimate, Kelsen's point is that the revolutionary act is strictly indeterminate. Its legitimacy will only be decided from a future position, once its efficacy has been demonstrated.⁹³

At this point, a potential objection must be dealt with. In any political situation there are not only apparent concentrations of power but also concentrations of technologies enabling the use of force. What use is the notion of reflexive determination if the weaponry present in a given territory is distributed only among certain political actors? If there is an individual more capable than anyone else of mobilising force, is this person not effectively a sovereign figure regardless of whether they are recognised as such? Faced with such an objection, the crucial point to make is that the recourse to the use of force itself signals a situation's political openness. Insofar as a political grouping fails to obey spontaneously, insofar as violence is required to shore up sovereign domination, we are no longer dealing with normal politics but with the openness, uncertainty, and exceptionality of the political. Once we are at a stage where the state is openly carrying out acts of violence against its political opponents, the crucial moment has already past—the state is no longer recognised as the legitimate bearer of authority, but only as one actor in an open political struggle. To put this another way, violence is the hallmark of reflexive *indetermination*—a moment of non-recognition resulting in the sudden rupture of the political space. Of course, we should not discount the use of force and the presence of unequally distributed technologies, however, for our purposes the more interesting aspect is the anterior moment at which it is still unclear whether force will be used.

⁹³ Kelsen, p. 118.

The notion of a reflexively determined sovereign decision also has a bearing on how we should view Schmitt's idea of acclamation. Recall that in his *Constitutional Theory* Schmitt argues against voting in favour of the acclamation of the collectively assembled people at a public rally. His justification for this is that voting only expresses an individual's opinion as a private citizen whereas acclamation expresses the endorsement of the body politic itself with a single voice. Schmitt explains how acclamation functions in the following quotation: '[The people] can acclaim in that they express their consent or disapproval by a simple calling out, calling higher or lower, celebrating a leader or suggestion, honouring the king or some other person, or denying the acclamation by silence or complaining'.⁹⁴ Now, acclamation conceived in this way is entirely compatible with, but not identical to, the notion of a reflexively determined decision elaborated above. Acclamation is the objective correlate, or the outward signal, of an internal event—the event of the recognition of authority). Acclamation has a political impact insofar as it indicates to the sovereign that, at least at this particular moment, he has authority to rule. And yet the very fact that the sovereign is acclaimed in this way presupposes an antecedent event, one that is internal and perspectival as opposed to objective. The acclaim of the people relies on a more fundamental transformation which must have already taken place: the people's recognition of the sovereign is the silent forerunner, the real genesis of sovereignty, which gives rise to subsequent expressions of acclaim.

Viewing sovereign power as reflexively determined has important implications for the possibility of narrativising moments of radical political change. In the same way that the transition from an imagined 'state of nature' to

⁹⁴ Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, p. 272.

political life cannot be rendered as chronologically consistent, the reflexive determination of sovereign authority cannot be thought as a linear process. As we have seen, when we subject the sovereign decision to proper scrutiny, we find that this 'decision' is nothing but a declaration, a claim to possess power, rather than an assertion of an already existing power. The crucial point here is that in the event that the people (or some non-sovereign actor) does indeed recognize the claim, it is not simply that the sovereign gains power through this recognition, but rather that the declaration itself is suddenly transformed into a decision. But why is this retroaction required by the notion of reflexive determination? Precisely because if the sovereign were transparently to receive his sovereign status from a non-sovereign actor, this would put him in a relation subordination to this actor. His power would be derived from another such that, instead of being the highest authority, he would only be a delegate of another higher power. It is therefore vital that the mechanism that generates the sovereign *qua* constituted power, remains opaque. If the people themselves were to be fully conscious of their role in recognizing sovereign power as legitimate, this would make constituted power impossible.

We can arrive at the same conclusions by considering the other side of the Schmittian exception, that is, the state of normality that characterises the periods of political life between intermittent crises. If the sovereign is defined as the individual who decides upon a state of exception, are we not also obliged to recognise the obverse of this proposition, namely, that the citizens of the state, during un-exceptional politics, *decide* on a state of normality? That is to say, in order for normal politics to continue, it is enough that the citizens of the state presuppose a situation in which the application of law is not arbitrary but is consistent with certain pre-given principles. From this perspective, again, it is

clear that a normal situation is only actually suspended if individual citizens cease to presuppose normality. Schmitt himself seems to be aware of this difficulty and addresses the notion of a presupposed normal situation in the following passage: ‘The norm requires a homogeneous medium. This effective normal situation is not a mere “superficial presupposition” that a jurist can ignore; that situation belongs precisely to its immanent validity.’⁹⁵ The crux of the issue is whether a situation can be considered normal because of its immanent validity, or whether a normal situation is produced by the citizen’s presuppositions. For Kelsen, the validity of the basic norm is grounded in the fact that it is presupposed. If it ceases to be presupposed, the normal situation that is anchored in the validity of the basic norm dissolves. Alternatively, for Schmitt, the existence of a normal situation is a sovereign prerogative. A legal framework is only valid if a normal situation exists and the sovereign is the individual who decides ‘whether this normal situation actually exists.’⁹⁶ Nonetheless, if we accept Marder’s point that the sovereign comes into being only with the decision, and moreover, if it is possible to view the sovereign as reflexively determined in the sense I have argued for above, it follows that a would-be-sovereign cannot unilaterally suspend normal politics. The efficacy of his decision requires a corresponding reconfiguration of the presuppositions of the people who constitute the state. Failure in this regard does not mark the sovereign as incompetent; this would be a contradiction in terms since competence is itself the defining feature of sovereignty.⁹⁷ Instead, a ‘decision’ which fails to initiate a change in individual citizens’ presuppositions is a political ‘non-event’. This is the hidden dependency

⁹⁵ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 13.

⁹⁶ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 13.

⁹⁷ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 33.

which marks the relationship between sovereign and citizenry which Schmitt's rhetorical invocation of theology is designed to obfuscate.

These reflections provide greater clarity on the issue of Schmitt's political theology. As already mentioned, Hans Blumenberg has argued that in his suggestion of an indivisible link between theological concepts and the concepts of modern political theology, Schmitt performs an unsupported manoeuvre whereby the metaphorical use of theological concepts is invested with a literal substance.⁹⁸ Hammill takes up this thread, arguing that "Blumenberg's point is to show that Schmitt justifies a political argument through a metaphor that he treats as if it were real."⁹⁹ Based on the account provided above, it is now possible to go further. The metaphor of the miracle serves Schmitt precisely because he wants to present the sovereign decision as self-sufficient, as a gesture which does not require 'argumentative substantiation' since it has 'autonomous value'.¹⁰⁰ If the sovereign is conceived as a secularized God-figure with the sovereign decision as a structural analogy to the miracle, it becomes tempting to view the decisive production of a state of exception as occurring *ex nihilo*. A miracle, conceived in the traditional Augustinian sense, does not require anything from humans, it does not even require their presence; a miracle turns humans into passive observers whose role is only to bear witness while their witnessing does not determine the status of the miracle *qua* miracle. By presenting the decision in terms of a miracle, Schmitt obfuscates the moment of reflexive determination of sovereign status which constitutes the radical democratic kernel of his argument. This disavowed aspect of Schmitt's thought is not only found in his reflections on

⁹⁸ Blumenberg, p. 101.

⁹⁹ Hammill, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 31.

the popular constitution-making power in *Constitutional Theory* but also in his *Political Theology*. Concealed behind Schmitt's statements that the decision is analogous to a miracle is a more problematic assertion that the decision *must be* viewed as a miracle and this rhetorical injunction functions as a prohibition on thinking through Schmittian decisionism to its radical democratic conclusions.

It is vital to grasp the implications of this revised Schmittian decision for our broader discussion of temporal complexity and the narrativisation of moments of radical political change. The implication of reading the decision as a miracle is that our narrativisation of the transition from normal to exceptional politics ends up containing a moment of scission in which, by virtue of a sovereign decision, everything suddenly changes. The narrative implications of a reflexively determined decision are entirely different. Instead of a sudden rupture, we are confronted with the retroactive efficacy of the people's recognition of the sovereign. At the time of his announcement of a state of exception, the sovereign's status is undecidable; but once this announcement has been recognised as emanating from a sovereign, the past itself is overdetermined such that the undecidable declaration becomes a unilateral sovereign decision. It can always be argued that the real locus of power is the people themselves (or whichever non-sovereign actor recognises the declaration as legitimate) but this argument misses the point for the following reason: the mechanism of reflexive determination depends on the people's *misrecognition* of the extent of their own participation. If the people were to become aware that it was only by virtue of their recognition that sovereign power could be ascribed, this would undermine in advance any pretence to sovereignty from a particular political actor. Even if any claim to sovereignty ultimately hinges on the recognition of non-sovereign actors, as soon as one seeks to narrativise the passage from normal to exceptional

politics one is also required to view the sovereign's declaration/decision as the 'decisive moment' as opposed to the people's recognition. Viewing the latter as determining the former would entail the immediate undoing of constituted sovereignty itself.

We have already seen how the first, crucial deviation from a strictly Schmittian political theology has been made by Honig through her deployment of Rosenzweig's concept of the miracle. Rather than miracle as abrupt intervention, Rosenzweig views the miracle as requiring responsibility on the part of the believer. By substituting Rosenzweig's miracle for Schmitt's, Honig provides a valuable first step towards a radical democratic reading of the Schmittian sovereign decision. As Honig puts it:

If the Rosenzweigian miracle rather than the Schmittian one is the metaphor's ground (the decision is like the miracle, yes, but it is like Rosenzweig's miracle not Schmitt's), we see that 'decision' in terms of popular orientations to the decision, its uptake, its impact, the plural, iterative effects and chains of actions begun by it, and its success, or not, in staging an encounter between a people and sovereign or prophetic powers that (as with their prophecy at Meribah) could be the people's own powers. From this angle of vision, the decision testifies to an unsettling encounter with that which disrupts the binary of ordinary-extraordinary. Sovereignty looks more contestable than in Schmitt and Agamben, more democratic, more fraught, more fragile.¹⁰¹

Honig points to the status of sovereignty as contestable, fraught and fragile—both the sovereign claim and the popular responsibility for receiving the claim are implicated in the passage of the decision. In contrast, the argument I have set out above pushes further in this direction than Honig is willing to travel. Reflexive determination does not mean that sovereignty is contestable; it carries the stronger suggestion that sovereignty is directly constituted through a moment of popular recognition. So long as the metaphor of the miracle is retained, the implied paradigm of sovereign decision-making will be one that views sovereignty as prior to, and separated from, everyday political activity. Only a

¹⁰¹ Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*, p. 107.

strict, unflinching materialism allows us to account for both sovereignty's immanent genesis and its apparent transcendence.

Understanding sovereign power as legitimated through a moment of reflexive determination also allows us to address a problematic outlined by Lefort:

The theorist who analyses politics in terms of power relations cannot but ask himself how and why they stabilize in any given configuration in such a way that the dominant power does not have to exercise its authority openly [...] how and why they appear to be legitimate and in accordance with the nature of things. Apparently, then, this problem is how to account for the internalization of domination.¹⁰²

The gesture through which legitimacy is fixed to a given political entity is not fully conscious to the actors involved; instead, it is the shift in the political community's presuppositions concerning the centre of power. Not only does such a shift not require an open exercise of authority through a display of power, but such a display would already be a signal that various mechanisms of ideological capture had failed and that the citizenry do not spontaneously identify the (proto-)sovereign as legitimate.¹⁰³ Moreover, the 'internalization of domination' must be unconscious (or if not unconscious, then instantly forgotten, which would amount to the same thing). If it were not unconscious, political subjects would be able to recall the moment at which they voluntarily and consciously accepted power as anchored in a certain political entity with the implication that they would retain awareness of the sense in which their constitutive power (their priority vis-à-vis the sovereign) serves as the bedrock of political legitimacy.

In arguing for an appreciation of a radical democratic moment in Schmitt's political theology, I take an opposing view to Jeffrey W. Robbins who argues that

¹⁰² Lefort, 'The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?', p. 219.

¹⁰³ Slavoj Žižek makes this point *apropos* a Father's display of violence: 'Are the Father's terrifying outbursts of rage (*Wuten*) not so many signs of his basic impotence, signals that his cold and efficient authority has failed?' Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 85.

a progressive political theology must be one that has rid itself of the stain of Schmittian decisionism. Robbins outlines his position as follows: ‘it is my argument that Schmitt – and more specifically, his employment of political theology in opposition to democratic theory and practice – is the chief obstacle to political theology realizing its own radically democratic potential’.¹⁰⁴ While I recognise both the broad common ground between Robbins’s project and my own (given that we are both ultimately concerned with the elaboration of a radical democratic, emancipatory politics), there are important distinctions between our respective approaches which need to be addressed. In the first instance, the charge of decisionism has all-too-often been employed as a pejorative term suggesting a latent fascist tendency or an unhealthy fascination with political violence. Robbins adopts this position, labelling Schmitt’s work as irredeemably decisionist so as to pass more quickly to a counterposition which would avoid proto-fascist tendencies. The stigma associated with Schmitt’s ‘decisionism’ has functioned as an impediment to further theoretical enquiry such that, in Robbins’s volume (which defines itself as an investigation into Schmitt’s employment of political theology), there are precious few references to Schmitt’s key texts. Instead, Schmitt’s alignment of God and sovereign is accepted without question and Robbins is left to stage a confrontation between Schmitt’s omnipotent sovereign and Hardt and Negri’s multitude. The alternative approach I have outlined above may provide a remedy. Instead of denouncing the Schmittian variant of theologico-political thought as an aberration, the more productive approach is to explore how decisionism itself falls apart when subjected to proper scrutiny. We have seen above how Schmitt’s ‘decisive

¹⁰⁴ Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 15.

moment', the moment at which sovereignty actualises itself through a decision, must rely on a moment of *reflexive determination*. Schmitt's unilateral decider is a logical fallacy supported by a rhetorical edifice of theological tropes. This has been argued from the perspective of Kelsen's legal theory which posits non-sovereign actors (the demos, the masses) as capable of determining, through their behaviour, the sovereign status of a revolutionary party. The vital passage here is as follows: 'if the old order ceases, and the new order begins to be efficacious, because the individuals whose behaviour the new order regulates actually behave, by and large, in conformity with the new order, then this order is considered as a valid order'.¹⁰⁵ Likewise, for a Schmittian Sovereign the decision is an empty, meaningless gesture unless it is supplemented by a moment of recognition from non-sovereign actors. Having established the reflexively determined sovereign as a tenable interpretation of Schmittian thought, the task below will be to bolster this interpretation via a series of collisions between Schmitt's ontology (a non-positivist, self-grounding act of will) and corresponding Derridean and Laclauian remarks on the status of the foundation and the concept of the decision. Our particular interest will be in the quasi-transcendental status of the founding gesture that constitutes a new political community and its implications for the representability of the political Event. The thread that connects Schmitt to Derrida and Laclau is, on my reading, twofold. First, where Schmitt's proto-sovereign decision-maker always acts under initial conditions of uncertainty with respect to the outcome of his or her act, in Derrida and Laclau, uncertainty is at its most concentrated during the revolutionary passage. In both cases, political actors are required to decide under conditions of profound risk so as to bring

¹⁰⁵ Kelsen, p. 118.

about a political transformation which will retroactively alter the status of their deed. Second, in both cases the act/decision is not representable from within the political space it gives rise to.

The Democratic *a priori* and Quasi-Transcendental Foundations

Marder's *Groundless Existence* provides an account of Schmitt's notion of political 'will' from which his definition of sovereignty is derived: 'Schmitt's "will" is, merely, power in its actuality, an always already exteriorized expression of political existence, while power is an appellation for the effectivity of the will, which is not a withdrawn, noumenal cause but an active intervention in a given state of affairs'.¹⁰⁶ 'Will' is not something curtailed or compromised from within; it is the unified pre-given source from which power emanates. Moreover, on Marder's reading, 'will' is existentially present as the origin of a command.¹⁰⁷ Considering will in this way leads to the conclusions reached by Marder on the self-production or self-grounding of sovereignty based on an act of will. As has been mentioned above, Marder presents the hypothesis that, 'political will and the sovereign *qua* sovereign come about *as a result of* the decision on the exception'.¹⁰⁸ If sovereignty can be established through an act which is not vulnerable to external challenges, if the sole 'ground' for sovereignty is its own auto-positing ground, such a sovereign would be, in the moment it decides itself into existence, a self-determining or autonomous entity. Although the fully autonomous sovereign subject has already been challenged through the notion of reflexive determination, it is possible to raise a further objection based on Laclau's identification of a tension pertaining to the concept of autonomy itself. In his *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* Laclau describes autonomy as the site of an insoluble tension:

If an entity was *totally* autonomous, it would mean that it was totally self-determined. But in that case the concept of autonomy would be completely redundant (what, exactly, would it be autonomous from?) On the other hand, if

¹⁰⁶ Marder, *Groundless Existence*, p. 131.

¹⁰⁷ Marder, *Groundless Existence*, p. 131.

¹⁰⁸ Marder, *Groundless Existence*, p. 136.

autonomy was *totally* inexistent, the social entity in question would be completely determined. It would not, however, be something separate from that which determines it and the unsplitable ensemble of the determinant and the determined would obviously be self-determined. As can be seen, the notions of total determination and total autonomy are absolute equivalents. The concept of autonomy is only useful – or rather, meaningful – when neither of the two extremes (equivalents) is achieved.¹⁰⁹

If sovereignty were able to unilaterally actualise itself in a single, unimpeded gesture, we would be dealing with notion of sovereignty endowed with full autonomy. It is this logic that informs the Hobbesian image of the Leviathan—a single entity which cannot be separated from the individuals that comprise it. Strictly speaking, there is no representation in Hobbes; instead, the covenant produces ‘more than Consent, or Concord; [the Sovereign] is a reall Unitie of them all, in one and the same Person’.¹¹⁰ Here, Hobbes conforms to Laclau’s logic of pure autonomy. If the sovereign is to be absolutely autonomous, he will then be identical to the multitude of political subjects over which he governs. Absolute autonomy leads to ‘reall Unitie’ by way of logical necessity.

With respect to Schmitt, Laclau’s logic applies to the specific moment at which a state of exception is decided upon and at which, as I have argued above, a sovereign comes into existence. If, during periods of normal politics, law provides a check on the autonomy of all members of the political community, during the state of exception the sovereign occupies the position of law and his will acquires the force of law. A Schmittian sovereign thus occupies one pole of the aporia outlined by Laclau. Such a sovereign is able to directly will itself into being, but since this implies a moment of absolute autonomy we are also forced by the logic of Laclau’s formulation to view the entire socio-political ensemble as a single self-determining entity. To put this another way, if we assume that there

¹⁰⁹ Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 38.

¹¹⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 120.

is no countervailing pressure from the demos and that the auto-generation of sovereign authority occurs frictionlessly, then it becomes impossible to view the demos as a separate entity from the sovereign. Both sovereign and demos are united as a single acting entity. It is thus not merely the sovereign who is implicated in the decision, but the entire social body. It is precisely at the most radical limit of Laclau's heteronomy/autonomy nexus that the poles collapse into one another and we see the co-implication of the various political elements in the very gesture through which sovereignty is crystallised. What we discover in Laclau is additional ballast for a moment of reflexive determination which I have sought to advance as an essential, but previously ignored, aspect of the Schmittian sovereign's self-grounding act as we find it in *Political Theology*. The act by which sovereignty grounds itself cannot be thought as such unless we also include the political grouping over whom the sovereign will be effective. It is an aspect I consider to be a *democratic a priori* in the sense that it designates the necessary implication of the entire political community in any act seeking to reconfigure the boundaries of the normative space set out in the original contract or constitution. Attempts at reconfiguration are always minimally reliant on the willingness, or acquiescence, of the population. The appearance of sovereign power is not an essential quality of an individual, but emerges from the imbrication of the constituents of the body politic as per the famous image of the Hobbesian sovereign whose immensity is an effect of the accumulation of the individual citizens comprising him.¹¹¹

As has been shown above, the proper strategy with respect to Schmitt's 'decisionism' is not to denounce it unequivocally as symptomatic of his fascist

¹¹¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. xciii.

sympathies, but rather to show how one can arrive at a politically progressive position precisely by following the practical and logical implications of Schmitt's statements on the decision. Through such a strategy it becomes possible to read Schmitt against the grain, thereby identifying the unassimilable democratic kernel lodged at the centre of the Schmittian theoretical edifice. The most valuable feature of Schmitt's project for our purposes is the way he conceives an exit from a normal political situation. Since Schmitt's theory does not present any criteria as to where sovereignty *should* emanate from, and since we have no way of deciding in advance who might be a candidate for sovereignty, it follows that the decision to suspend normal politics can in principle emerge from anywhere.

We have noted above that the process of reflexive determination forces us to think through the retroactive efficacy of the recognition of sovereignty by a non-sovereign actor. This dynamic can be elucidated through reference to Derrida's account of the American Declaration of Independence. In his 'Declarations of Independence', Derrida makes the following observation:

The 'we' of the declaration speaks 'in the name of the people'. But this people does not yet exist. [...] If it gives birth to itself, as free and independent subject, as possible signer [of the Declaration], this can hold only in the act of the signature. The signature invents the signer. This signer can only authorize him- or herself to sign once he or she has come to the end, if one can say this, of his or her own signature, in a sort of fabulous retroactivity.¹¹²

The problem Derrida notes is that the conditions required for the event of signing to take place are only logically conceivable as an effect of the event. There is no pre-existing norm which could authorise the signers prior to the act of signing since it is only by virtue of their signature that they exist as a political entity. This forces us to view their signature as retroactively altering the status of the act of signing. It is not so much that the signers are unable to sign the contract, but

¹¹² Derrida, 'Declarations of Independence', p. 10.

rather that they cannot be authorised to do so. Just as we saw with the proto-sovereign declarer in Schmitt, Derrida's founder's act is illegitimate in the moment of its performance.

In both Schmitt and Derrida we find a founding event containing a moment which resists chronological exposition.¹¹³ As soon as one attempts to construct a complete chronological ordering one encounters a paradox. This is because, as Ricoeur argues in his *Time and Narrative*, every attempt to render past events as an intelligible narrative automatically supplies a logic of emplotment: '[The plot of a narrative] "grasps together" and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing the intelligible signification attached to narrative taken as a whole'.¹¹⁴ This 'grasping together' reduces the contingency of the events that are being narrated and subordinates the succession of events to certain logical connections. For example, if event A serves as the condition of event B, A must occur before B. Moreover, one cannot then say that A both serves as the condition for, and is caused by, event B since this collapses the sequence proper to narrative time. As soon as one disobeys this temporal logic of narrative development one ends up compromising the intelligibility of the narrative itself. For Ricoeur this indicates a transcultural mimetic link between time and narrative:

[B]etween the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity. To put it another way, *time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal experience*.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ This is akin to what E. E. Berns refers to as the 'constitutive lack of completeness [...] a fold, an empty place, a dislocation'. E. E. Berns, 'Decision, Hegemony and Law: Derrida and Laclau', *Philosophy Social Criticism*, 22.4 (1996), 71–80 (p. 76). While I agree with this characterisation, I am more concerned with the temporal aspects of this dislocation as a fold in chronology or narrative.

¹¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), I, p. x.

¹¹⁵ Ricoeur, I, p. 52.

An obstacle to successful narrativisation would be an event which was both required by the narrative and impossible to situate within it. Such an event would entail a failure in the successive ordering proper to narrative and, indeed, it is precisely such failed ordering that we find in Schmitt and Derrida which the latter terms the moment's 'mystique'.¹¹⁶ There is a sense that no amount of additional knowledge will allow for a proper ordering of the narrative elements, that there is an inherent resistance to narrativisation. Moreover, this resistance does not only occur when thinking through real examples of political discontinuity (the Declaration of Independence, the French Revolution, and so on) but can also be detected in speculative anthropological accounts (such as we saw with Rousseau and Hobbes in the previous chapter) aiming to account for the foundation of politics or society.

A similar logic applies to both Schmitt's sovereign decision and to Derrida's founding act. Since a revolution involves a re-foundation, a momentary reactivation of the state of openness which characterised the original instituting act, it must also, in some sense, authorise itself. As Derrida argues:

A 'successful' revolution, the 'successful foundation of a state' (in somewhat the same sense that one speaks of a 'felicitous performative speech act') will produce *après coup* what it was already destined in advance to produce, namely, proper interpretive models to read in return, to give sense, necessity and above all legitimacy to the violence that has produced, among others, the interpretive model in question, that is, the discourse of its self-legitimation.¹¹⁷

The phrase 'discourse of self-legitimation' is crucial here. It is clear enough that for a revolutionary movement to be successful, it must draw impetus from a discourse that legitimises its activity. But it is equally clear that such a discourse must also be produced by this very activity. This is a problem insofar as a

¹¹⁶ Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 35. Again, to be quite clear here, this 'failure' is one that is necessary for there to be an origin or foundation at all.

¹¹⁷ Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 36.

legitimizing discourse needs to be anchored in a ground or founding truth which goes beyond it. If a revolutionary gesture were transparently self-grounding there would be no way it could appear to be legitimate, not even to the revolutionary actors themselves, since the very logic of legitimation requires an immutable legitimating bedrock which is external to, and unaffected by, that upon which it confers legitimacy. A pure decisionism would involve a transparently self-grounding act. In contrast, if a revolutionary act can be considered self-grounding in a way that is opaque to the actors involved, this may allow us to conceptualise radical political transformations which do not encounter the problems of pure decisionism.

In contradistinction to a pure decisionism, I argue that Derrida formulates a notion of revolutionary action which involves a quasi-transcendental gesture where this ‘quasi’ serves to indicate, as Marchart argues, ‘that all transcendental conditions will always emerge out of particular *empirico-historical* conjunctures.’¹¹⁸ The quasi-transcendental operation thus consists in a misrecognition which casts one’s own historically conditioned claim as a trans-historical postulate. This is evident in the following passage in which Derrida refers to the moment of a new political order’s institution:

Here we ‘touch’ without touching this extraordinary paradox: the inaccessible transcendence of the law before which and prior to which ‘man’ stands fast only appears infinitely transcendent and thus theological to the extent that, so near to him, it depends only on him, on the performative act by which he institutes it: the law is transcendent, violent and non-violent, because it depends only on who is before it - and so prior to it, and who produces it, founds it, authorizes it in an absolute performative whose presence escapes him.¹¹⁹

Although there are points at which Derrida seems to cast law as transcending human activity, the proper task is to emphasise Derrida’s claim that law *appears*

¹¹⁸ Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, p. 25.

¹¹⁹ Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, p. 36.

as transcendent to man precisely because it is 'so near to him'. Insofar as the very notion of legitimacy demands a distance between the particular act and the ground that legitimates it, the revolutionary act must perform a double manoeuvre that both launches a re-articulation of the concepts of freedom, justice, and equality, as well as positing a transcendental ground which serves to legitimise this re-articulation. Crucially, this posited ground, in order to perform its legitimating function, must be perceived as immutable by the revolutionaries themselves *even while it originates from their own activity*. We are thus able to introduce a minimal, but all important, distance between pure decisionism and the decision associated with a quasi-transcendental gesture. In the case of pure decisionism, the content of the decision is transparent to the decider. There is no standard against which the decision could be held except the will of this individual since it transparently originates with their own act. In contrast, a quasi-transcendental decision includes both a particular content that is decided upon and a new standard against which this content will be measured. But even though this new standard issues directly from the revolutionaries' activity, the experience of the production of the new standard is not recoverable after the event as a freely willed act. Attempting to retrospectively plot the revolutionary transformation as a consistent narrative therefore *necessarily* results in failure; instead of recapturing the decisive moment between the build-up and the aftermath, the moment at which things 'really happened', we always encounter a moment of circularity (or unrepresentability) insofar as the eventual change requires its result to serve as its precondition. In contrast, if the identification of the moment of transformation were possible, this would be a sure sign that one were no longer within the political order established by the founding act.

Laclau finds an analogy to the moment of political origin in debates concerning the status of zero in relation to the order of number: ‘Everything turns around the role of the zero. The zero is, we are told, something radically heterogeneous with the order of number. The order of number, however, cannot constitute itself without reference to the zero. It is, in this sense, a supplement to the system which, nonetheless, is necessary for constituting it.’¹²⁰ Zero is required in order to ground the system of number. If it is possible to conceive of plurality, it must also be possible to conceive of a total subtraction, and yet after this subtraction we would be left with zero, a term which is not representable in terms of plurality but which is nonetheless logically required as soon as we begin to think number as a system. Without the term ‘zero’ we would have no expression for the absence of quantity and would be left in the absurd position of describing absence in terms of a tendency towards infinite scarcity. However, the price of this use of zero is the introduction of heterogeneity into the order of number: ‘With respect to the system, the zero is an undecidable tension between internality and externality - but an internality that does not exclude heterogeneity. The zero, in the second place, is ‘innommable’, unnameable; but at the same time it produces effects, it closes the system, even at the price of making it hopelessly heterogeneous.’¹²¹ Moreover, Laclau points out that ‘zero’, despite naming the absence of number, must be represented as number, always appearing in the guise of a ‘one’.

This feature of the analogy between the order of number and the founding act that constitutes a political order allows us to segue into a discussion concerning an issue we have touched upon in various places above: that of

¹²⁰ Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 84.

¹²¹ Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*, p. 84.

representability. Constituting the order of number depends on the inclusion of an element, the zero, which is heterogeneous with respect to the order of number and therefore not representable within that order. The representation of the absence of number is therefore both *necessary and impossible*, requiring a subjective gesture Laclau refers to as a ‘topological substitution.’¹²² The equivalent of the topological substitution in the political arena would be, for Laclau, the hegemonic operation which fills formally empty notions of freedom, justice, equality, and so on, with their particular content. Laclau notes that a certain repression accompanies the origin, leading to a moment of unrepresentability: ‘Insofar as an act of institution has been successful, a ‘forgetting of the origins’ tends to occur: the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade. In this way, the instituted tends to assume the form of mere objective presence’.¹²³ As this quotation indicates, Laclau’s point is that each founding moment includes a gesture of exclusion through which alternative historical trajectories are ruled out. Moreover, the revolutionaries must transcendentalize (that is, posit as transcendental instead of empirical) the ground which will then serve to legitimate their activity. It is this aspect of the subject’s revolutionary activity which leads Laclau to a definition of the subject as ‘the distance between the undecidable structure and the decision’.¹²⁴ The act is hegemonic in the sense that it excludes possible alternatives, but it is quasi-transcendental in the sense that it obscures its own site of origin. If the hegemonic operation could be transparently fixed to the willed activity of the revolutionary subjects themselves, their political

¹²² Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 68.

¹²³ Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 34.

¹²⁴ Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 30.

endeavours would be self-grounding in a decisionistic sense that would undermine any claim to legitimacy; only insofar as it is also quasi-transcendental are we able to preserve its radical status without slipping into a decisionistic position. To clarify this last point, both decisionistic and quasi-transcendental perspectives on the act recognise that it is self-grounding, however, while for decisionism the act grounds itself in a way that is transparent to the actor concerned, a quasi-transcendental act (or, indeed, a reflexively determined sovereign decision) involves a gesture which is necessarily opaque.

Reflexive determination does not mean that non-sovereign actors can actively choose whether the proto-sovereign decider is actually a sovereign; instead, recognition is pre-reflective, occurring as a spontaneous response to declarations emanating from the site where sovereign competence seems to reside. The formulation of a response (taking the form of an endorsement, or complicity, or resistance) by non-sovereign entities to a sovereign declaration indicates that we are already beyond the point at which determination occurs since the proto-sovereign declarer would now have been recognised as one to whom endorsement, complicity, or resistance may be due. One can see how Laclau's notion of constitutive distortion might be deployed here. Precisely insofar as the moment of reflexive determination is not an active decision, and insofar as it is not recoverable as a free act after the event, it can be viewed as an instance of constitutive distortion. Laclau provides the following exposition:

It is certainly inherent to all distortion that a 'primary' meaning is presented under a 'false' light. The operation this presentation involves - concealment, deformation, or whatever - is something that we can leave indeterminate for the time being. What is essential to distortion is, first, that a primary meaning is presented as something different from what it is, and, second, that the distortive operation - not only its results - has to be somehow visible. This last point is crucial: if the distortive operation does not leave any traces in its result, it will succeed in constituting a new meaning. But what we are dealing with is a constitutive distortion. That is, we are both positing an original meaning (as is required by distortion) and withdrawing it (for the distortion is constitutive). In that case, the only logical possibility of pulling together these two apparently antinomic dimensions is if the original meaning is

illusory and the distortive operation consists precisely in creating that illusion - that is, projecting into something that is essentially divided the illusion of a fullness and self-transparency that it lacks.¹²⁵

It will be clear by now that one of the overarching themes of this thesis involves the idea of distortion, in particular, distortions arising in our narrative or theoretical account of political origins. Laclau's notion of constitutive distortion can yield important insights in this regard. When looking at distortions arising from narratives of political origins, our spontaneous response might be, as Laclau suggests, to presuppose an original, undistorted narrative which would be rendered accessible through additional scrutiny. The problem that emerges, as we have seen, is that as soon as we try to recapture this undistorted content the result becomes ethically unacceptable to us. Faced with this impasse, one can either accept the ethical vacuity of political foundations (every attempt to constitute a political space is simply a decisionistic imposition in spite of any apparently ethical program), or one can positively re-assert the necessity of the distortion as essential to the founding moment in its ethical/normative dimension. As should be clear, I am advocating the latter position. Viewing narratives of founding moments as comprising a constitutive distortion means that there can be no recourse to platitudes on the objective meaning of the founding event. To take the example of the proto-sovereign declaration, the declaration itself has no objective meaning which could exceed or stabilise the political field as a whole; on the contrary, the declaration's overdetermination by the recognition of a non-sovereign entity must lead us to the conclusion that the declaration itself is essentially undecidable. Not only does it receive its meaning from an outside source, but this meaning can never be fully stabilized but will always be exposed to the possibility of overdetermination. If the closure of the

¹²⁵ Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*, p. 15.

political field is impossible, every operation that aims at closure will necessarily suffer from deformations, and it is precisely such deformations that arise in narrative efforts to grasp the passage between political orders.¹²⁶

The key conclusion of the arguments presented above is that one can arrive at an account of political change from a radical materialist perspective. Such a perspective avoids both theologically derived concepts since, as we have seen above, there is no necessary structural resemblance between political transformations and miracles, and a reductionist, vulgar materialism which would eradicate the possibility of radical change itself. The reading of Schmitt's *Political Theology* I have proposed above precludes the possibility of a (theologically informed) pure decisionism, arguing instead for a reflexively determined decision in which the demos are perforce implicated. Reading Schmitt in this way allows us to reintroduce the constituent power of the people so long as this power is not viewed as the property of a conscious, self-identical agent and so long as the moment of constituent power remains beyond the reach of narrative. Temporal complexity (the impossibility of chronological ordering) in both narrative and theoretical accounts of radical political change is the necessary correlate of political action viewed from a radical materialist position.

¹²⁶ Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*, p. 17.

Chapter Four

Alain Badiou's Divided Event

'The truth will set you free. But not until it's finished with you.'

- David Foster Wallace

The fundamental imperative for philosophy, as understood by Alain Badiou, is to rigorously and systematically think through the immanent emergence of newness from a historical situation.¹ Throughout his corpus, from his early collaborations with Sylvain Lazarus to his ground-breaking *Being and Event*, Badiou has sought to elaborate a philosophical system marrying an uncompromising materialism with a compelling advocacy of the real existence of truths. It is a project which sets Badiou against the tide of postmodern thought, a tradition Badiou regards as the most recent contribution to an anti-philosophical tendency that prioritizes an intuitive, as opposed to conceptual, access to 'what there is'. For anti-philosophy, one cannot make propositional statements about the 'stuff' of reality; anti-philosophical ontologies necessarily fails insofar as some vital dimension (such as Kierkegaard's subjective inwardness; Nietzsche's Life; Deleuze's animality) eludes its grasp. In contrast, Badiou understands ontology as fundamental to any philosophical project; one's ontological position (even if this position is simply one that avoids ontological propositions) will be a determining factor in all other

¹ Alain Badiou and Bruno Bosteels, 'Can Change Be Thought? A Dialogue with Alain Badiou' (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 252–253.

areas of one's philosophy. This is particularly true for Badiou whose arche-ontological statement is that mathematics is ontology and that set theory in particular discloses the laws of being *qua* being.² Occasionally Badiou even explicitly frames the opposition between philosophy and anti-philosophy as reducible to the question of whether mathematics can allow us to formulate ontological propositions. If we affirm that it can, this would also allow us to also conclude that 'being is not necessarily foreclosed to all proposition'.³ From this ontological foundation, Badiou embarks on a philosophical project that avoids relying on a theologically derived reassertion of the One whilst setting out a refined, non-reductive concept of the subject.

As an attempt to think newness from the perspective of an atheistic ontology, Badiou's work is clearly relevant to this enquiry given our interest the possibility of the emergence of newness and the occurrence of radical transformations. In Kierkegaard, the 'new thing' is a subjective insight which serves to ground a new commitment. Likewise, in Hobbes and Rousseau, we noted the impossibility of an incremental passage from an imagined 'state of nature' to political life; the new political human and the social contract emerge together in a way that resists chronological ordering. The previous chapter asked whether thinking through the notion of foundation, and especially political foundations, drives thought towards a paradigm that reproduces theological structures. Our reading of Carl Schmitt, Hans Kelsen, and Ernesto Laclau provided a way of viewing political events as both emerging immanently from human activity whilst nonetheless irrecoverable as such. Themes of temporality,

² Alain Badiou, *Number and Numbers* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 63; Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 4.

³ Alain Badiou, 'Silence, Solipsisme, Sainteté: L'antiphilosophie de Wittgenstein', *BARCA! Poésie, Politique, Psychanalyse*, 3 (1994), 13–53. Cited in Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 22.

transformation, and subjective activity/passivity have served as guiding coordinates for our discussion. As such, even if Badiou's use of set theory distinguishes him from the thinkers discussed in previous chapters, his importance as an interlocutor in philosophical debates concerning political change will emerge clearly in what follows.

The urgency of thinking through the possible emergence of newness is compounded by the current state of philosophy, which Badiou characterises in terms of 'malaise' and 'depletion'.⁴ Urging philosophy to 'break with historicism', Badiou argues that philosophy's current predicament involves an entanglement with sophistry such that the two become indistinguishable. 'Sophists', for Badiou, 'are those for whom the fundamental opposition is not between truth and error, or errancy, but between speech and silence, that is, between that which can be said and that which it is impossible to say'.⁵ The philosopher undertakes to think rigorously the possibility of truth whereas the sophist claims there is no truth, only conventions, rules, discourse, and so on.⁶ The definition of philosophy which Badiou takes to be a 'historical *invariant*' is thus that '*the central category of any possible philosophy is the category of truth*'.⁷ This does not mean philosophy gives rise to truths. There are four conditions or registers within which truths emerge (Politics, Love, Art, and Science) but philosophy is not among them; rather, philosophy is the effort to think the formal characteristics of operations that produce or seize truths from within these four conditions.⁸ 'Seizure', as we will see, is a vital but difficult notion here. This is because truths are not available to sense. They cannot be experienced, but rather, they are both the vanishing

⁴ Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 3.

⁵ Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 6.

⁶ Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 8.

⁷ Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 8.

⁸ Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 15.

point of reference for a subject's 'seizing' as well as that 'by which [the subject] is seized'.⁹ Whether we will be able to successfully reconcile these dichotomic aspects of truth's seizure remains to be seen.

Thinking newness philosophically will turn out not to be a neutral endeavour. The 'newness' Badiou describes, far from being conceived simply in terms of addition, is to be thought of as an *Idea* which instigates a new perspective. This is how we should understand the claim made in Badiou's *Second Manifesto for Philosophy* that 'The ultimate philosophical theme is that of the Idea'.¹⁰ Philosophy declares the interrelation, even the identity of life and the Idea for the living subject. We are thus dealing with a philosophy fundamentally concerned with the notion of commitment. Without too much distortion, one can translate this into Kierkegaardian terminology and argue that the key purpose of philosophy is to think through the passage from the aesthetic (a life pursuing small pleasures and fleeting moments of satisfaction) through the ethical, to the religious. While Badiou, as a materialist, would resist framing commitment in terms of religiosity, there is a clear parallel to be made between Badiou's committed subject who gives up his own concerns and interests for the sake of an absolute task, and the Kierkegaardian individual who is 'sensately and psychically qualified in immediacy [but who] has his [telos] in the universal [...] it is his ethical task continually to express himself in this, to annul his singularity in order to become the universal'.¹¹ For both thinkers, newness and commitment to the new are fundamental themes. The distinction is that, for Badiou, philosophy declares the indiscernibility of life and Idea, whereas Kierkegaard's anti-

⁹ Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 24.

¹⁰ Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p. 14.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, p. 99.

philosophical orientation (anti-philosophical, that is, according to Badiou's understanding of philosophy's task) is a response to the Danish Hegelian 'systematisers' for whom there is no space for real existing individuals and no requirement for the idea of an absolute commitment.

In keeping with the approach developed in previous chapters, this chapter will not attempt to provide a complete overview of Badiou's philosophy. Rather, it examines how Badiou's theory advances, inflects, and questions our enquiry into the complex temporalities involved in thinking through the moment of political change. The chapter is split into three sections. First, I provide a concise summary of Badiou's ontology focusing on its origins in set theory. This analysis serves as a springboard for a discussion of the most pertinent aspects of Badiou's philosophical enterprise for our enquiry.¹² The second section analyses these aspects, looking at the tandem concepts of the event and subject with a view to extracting the implied understanding of temporality entailed by an 'evental' philosophy of history. The question of the role of the subject is central here. Given that events give rise to subjects, it is important to consider the extent to which a subject is active or passive *vis-à-vis* the occurrence of an event. In the case of a passive subject who bears witness to the evental occurrence, we are left with a politically impotent theory likely to give rise to quietism as well as a notion of the event as emanating from an inaccessible beyond (a reversion to theological thinking by Badiou's own standards).¹³ In contrast, if we are dealing with an

¹² The key text used to access Badiouian theory below will be his *Being and Event*. I have chosen to focus on this text at the expense of his earlier *Theory of the Subject* and more recent *Logics of Worlds* since I believe it provides the clearest and most complete account of his position apropos the temporality of subjective action. Moreover, given the size and density of both *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*, I have determined that a full and thorough account of both texts would be beyond the scope of a single chapter. I believe this is a sound approach, particularly given that Badiou has never retreated from the positions he sets out in *Being and Event* even if, on occasion, he nuances them in response to his critics.

¹³ Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, pp. 165–166.

active subject who *produces* events, do we not return to an excessively voluntarist notion of the subject aligned with that of decisionism? I will argue that this dichotomy can only be avoided if we are willing to risk an interpretation of Badiou which asserts temporal heterogeneity. That is to say, both quietism and decisionism are artefacts of a linear temporal model of transformation. Once transformation is characterised in terms of circularity, we are able to formulate the event in such a way that outflanks charges of both decisionism and quietism. Finally, the third part of this chapter investigates some of the intersections between thinkers already discussed and Badiou. We have already seen how the pre-contractual ‘subject’ of Rousseau’s state of nature cannot be thought capable of instigating the foundation of a political community without the aid of the legislator. Does this enable us to conclude with Christopher Watkin that Rousseau’s ‘social contract is an event in Badiou’s sense’ insofar as it ‘is not guided or circumscribed by the facts of the situation within which it is proclaimed’?¹⁴ And if so, are we also to follow Hallward’s identification of the legislator as a Badiouian subject?¹⁵ Mobilising Badiou’s innovative approach to political change can yield important insights when applied to the paradoxes associated with change and newness that have emerged from my analysis of Kierkegaard, Hobbes, Rousseau, Schmitt, and Laclau. In the following reading of the concepts of the subject and the event, we will work towards a clearer understanding of Badiou’s contribution to a tradition of thought concerned with developing an uncompromisingly materialist account of the recrudescence of the New. My contention is that the Badiouian account of the emergence of newness relies on a temporal model that requires a moment of narrative failure in a

¹⁴ Watkin, p. 187.

¹⁵ Hallward, p. 111.

manner similar to that which appears in Kierkegaard, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Schmitt. The Badiouian Event is shown to be composed of two conceptually distinct moments (Adrian Johnston calls these ‘event¹’ and ‘event²’) while these moments themselves prove to be resistant to narrative ordering. Just as in Rousseau, an effect is required to serve as the precondition for its cause. If the architecture of Badiouian philosophy contains much that distinguishes him from the thinkers considered in previous chapters, the ultimate insight he arrives at reproduces a similar paradox concerning the narrativisation of radical political change.

Given that Badiou has devoted several volumes to his exposition of the ontological import of set theory, it will be difficult to deal with the topic comprehensively in the limited space we have here. Moreover, for the sake of clarity, I will introduce set theory via analogies and examples as opposed to reproducing the algebraic demonstrations provided by Badiou in *Being and Event* and *Number and Numbers*. While this strategy risks losing some of the rigor and subtlety of Badiou’s own investigations, it is justifiable given that our task is not to engage directly with the proposed metaontological value of set theory, but rather to explore the conceptual implications emerging from a set theoretic foundation.

Set Theoretic Ontology

In *Being and Event*, Badiou stresses the vital role of set theory for his philosophical project: ‘Set theory sheds light on the fecund frontier between the whole/parts relation and the one/multiple relation; because, at base, it suppresses both of them. The multiple—whose concept thinks without defining its signification—for a post-Cantorian is neither supported by the existence of the one nor unfolded as an organic totality’.¹⁶ Set theory thus allows thought to engage with being *qua* being without positing either an upper limit (everything, the Whole) or a lower limit (some indivisible elementary particle or fundamental substance). Badiou is then able to develop his idea of ‘actual infinity’—that is, a laicized, material/natural infinity more often designated ‘pure multiplicity’—as opposed to the infinite and transcendent God presiding over a material realm characterized by finitude.

To see how this works, consider Hallward’s remark that set theory’s fundamental proposition is that it is possible regard any collection of elements (objects, concepts, units of any description) as a single, discrete entity.¹⁷ Elements are defined *only* by virtue of their belonging to a particular set, and each element of a given set is a set in its own right. Now, consider a mundane set: the words on this page. We now deal with both a set (the words on this page) the elements (the words themselves) but also a series of subsets such as all the words on this page beginning with ‘t’, all the words with more than four letters, and so on. It is important to grasp the distinction between the elements that *belong* to the set which, in this case, are finite, and the subsets which are *included* in the set.

¹⁶ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 81.

¹⁷ Hallward, p. 83.

Belonging (of elements to sets) and inclusion (of subsets in sets) are entirely different modes of relation and their difference has important implications. That an element belongs to a set is the condition of the presentation of that element, which is to say that elements *only exist insofar* as they belong to a set. With respect to inclusion, it would be possible to come up with a lengthy list of subsets of a given set (such as the words on this page). We might then go further and posit a set of all these subsets. This would be the power-set. As Badiou puts it: ‘The power-set axiom posits that this second count, this metastructure, always exists if the first count, or presentative structure, exists’.¹⁸ Crucially for Badiou, this ‘power set’ would be larger than the original set. Not only would there be a vast variety of different imaginable sets (words beginning with ‘t’, words with more than four letters, words that begin a sentence, words inside an arbitrarily drawn circle on the page, and so on) but the elements contained in the original set would be contained many times over in the various the subsets. In the case of finite sets, the power set (the set of all the subsets) is measurable. As Hallward informs us, ‘given a finite set with n elements, the number of its subsets or parts is 2 to the power of n . [...] A set with nine members has 512 (i.e., 2^9) parts.’¹⁹ Moreover, there is a sense in which the power-set ‘completes’ the initial set. As a metastructure comprising all possible combinations of elements, it gathers together all the ‘sub-compositions of internal multiples’.²⁰

There is a distinction to be made between approaches to set theory which are based on an intensional selection process and an extensional selection process.²¹ For axiomatic set theory, we are dealing with extensionality. That

¹⁸ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 83.

¹⁹ Hallward, p. 89.

²⁰ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 83.

²¹ Hallward, pp. 85–86; Mary Tiles, *The Philosophy of Set Theory: An Introduction to Cantor’s Paradise* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

means that the only consideration in the determination of a set is the elements of the set. An intensional principle of selection would require some concept or pre-given criterion for the determination of an element's belonging to a set. This would mean recognising some necessity, some guiding constraint on what (or indeed who) can belong to a set. Extensionality, in contrast, recognises the contingency of belonging. An extensional conception of set would allow us to arbitrarily select a collection of words, letters, or sentences, and call this collection a set.²² This would be prohibited by an intensional principle of selection.

Let us briefly return and add emphasis to a point made above. The elements in the set are presented, which is to say, they exist insofar as they belong to a set. We can also take any subset and point to the existence of the elements of that set. Presentation is therefore defined by Badiou as 'multiple being as it is effectively deployed'.²³ Re-presentation is something quite different from presentation. It is the 'mode of counting, or of structuration, proper to the state of the situation'.²⁴ Elements of a set, simply by virtue of belonging to a set, are presented. Subsets (sometimes called 'parts') are only re-presented if they are *counted* by the state of the situation. As we have said, the number of subsets is excessive with respect to the number of elements. In fact, in historical situations, the number of subsets would be innumerable, meaning that it would be impossible to represent all subsets.

Why is this distinction between belonging and inclusion so important? If we accept the absolute distinction between the initial set and the power-set of all

²² This illuminating example is drawn from *Tiles*, p. 147.

²³ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 519.

²⁴ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 521.

the subsets within this set, and moreover, if we deduce with Badiou that ‘inclusion is in irremediable excess of belonging’, this will allow us to understand Badiou’s specific notion of ‘knowledge’ and the connected but thoroughly distinct notion of ‘truth’.²⁵ Knowledge refers to the set’s classified and re-presented subsets. Since the collection of a set’s subsets is vastly greater than the sum of its elements, knowledge is inevitably doomed to a partial re-presentation, a re-presentation that captures some, but not all, of the subsets. To refer back to our example of the set of the words on this page, knowledge would be the effort to classify each possible subset such that the entire power-set were exhaustively categorized. This would be achievable since there are a finite number of words on the page and therefore a finite number of combinations of words that could be grouped together. But in human situations the situation is far more complex. The elements in a given set may be infinite or may be hard to determine. So, for instance, if we were to ask for the power-set of all the *objects* on this page, we would be dealing with one in which the elements are far more difficult to delimit. Words, punctuation, letters, the curves and lines that constitute the letters, and so on, could all be considered elements (and, indeed, sets in their own right). The size of the set thus depends on what we mean by object, what will be counted-as-one. Once this is established, we have a consistent multiplicity of ‘many-ones’ and knowledge is the necessarily incomplete organization and classification of these ones into subsets.

The idea of the count as a gesture that produces a count-as-one (a presented element) allows us to explore another vital concept: that of the void. In *Being and Event*, Badiou makes the counter-intuitive claim that ‘void’ is the

²⁵ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 85.

proper name of being. This initially appears as an odd statement given that we have already characterised being in terms of sets, elements, subsets, and so on, all of which give the impression of a unicity which seems to jar with the term void. So how does Badiou account for this discrepancy? He begins by noting that the structure of a situation (the presented multiple) is split into ‘consistency (the composition of ones) and inconsistency (the inertia of the domain)’.²⁶ Now, because only that which is counted in a situation is presented in that situation, we can also deduce, following Badiou, that ‘nothing is presentable in a situation otherwise than under the effect of structure’.²⁷ Every element of a set is a count-for-one with respect to the set. It is also a set in its own right with respect to the elements that comprise it. In equating being with the void, Badiou is performing a logical operation along the following lines:

- 1) Every set is a set insofar as it is comprised of elements.
- 2) Every element is a count-for-one.
- 3) Prior to the count-for-one, the one is not.

Badiou is very careful not to positivise, as a kind of raw matter or primordial substance, this ‘prior to’ since this would be precisely the counting operation that would produce a ‘count-as-one’, thus bringing that which is supposed to be prior to a situation into a situation and cancelling its status as remainder. The difficulty is described as follows:

[I]f, in the immanence of a situation, its inconsistency does not come to light, nevertheless, its count-as-one being an operation itself indicates that the one is a result. Insofar as the one is a result, by necessity ‘something’ of the multiple does not absolutely coincide with the result. To be sure, there is no antecedence of the multiple which would give rise to presentation because the latter is always already-structured such that there is only oneness or consistent multiples. But this ‘there is’ leaves a remainder: the law in which it is deployed is discernible as operation. And although there is never anything other—in a situation—*than* the result (everything, in the situation, is counted), what thereby results marks out, before the operation, a must-be-counted. It is the latter which causes the structured presentation to waver towards the phantom of inconsistency.²⁸

²⁶ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 52.

²⁷ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 52.

²⁸ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 53.

It is precisely this phantom of inconsistency which stands for that remainder left out by the count. Of course, inconsistency could never be properly included in a situation. It is conceived instead as a phantom, having no positive existence prior to the count but nonetheless serving as ‘the base’ from which counting operations begin.²⁹

There is a further layer of structuration Badiou introduces in *Being and Event*. We have stated already that once we begin with an ontology informed by set theory, we can go on to describe being in terms of elements, sets, subsets, and so on. But we then saw how the oneness of these elements, sets, and subsets is only a result of a counting-for-one, that the consistent multiplicity of the presented is the emergence of oneness from a prior inconsistent multiplicity (or void) about which nothing can be said except that it is, or is composed of, nothing. Badiou contends that inconsistency threatens Oneness by virtue of the fact that the very claim that, “there is Oneness” transparently reveals the very operation from which the result results’.³⁰ Structuration is not enough; instead, the consistency of a given multiplicity requires ‘that all structure be *doubled* by a metastructure which secures [consistent multiplicity] against any fixation of the void’.³¹ The metastructure is therefore that which counts-as-one the subsets (also called sub-multiples) and thereby includes them in the situation. Since it was the excess of subsets over elements and the impossibility of their exhaustive inclusion that threatened consistent multiplicity with the decoherence of the void, the count effected by the metastructure ‘guarantees that the one holds for inclusion, just as the initial structure holds for belonging’.³²

²⁹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 54.

³⁰ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 93.

³¹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 94.

³² Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 97.

The metastructuration of a situation's subsets provides the coordinates of what can be known about the situation. A situation is rendered intelligible through a metastructural gesture which counts-for-one its subsets and delimiting the inconsistent multiple. Everything that is knowable or demonstrable about a situation is included in the count-for-one. In contrast, the inconsistent multiple, that which is left out of, or prior to, the count, cannot be approached in terms of knowledge. An encounter with inconsistent multiplicity is, for Badiou, an encounter with a truth. 'Truth' in *Being and Event* is a term closely connected with two others, the 'indiscernible' and the 'generic', both of which express the notion that a truth's emergence cannot be deduced from any part (the term 'part' here is to be understood as Badiou's gloss for the mathematical term 'subset') of a situation. In either case, truth as generic/indiscernible is that which 'makes a hole in knowledge'.³³

It is worth pausing here for a moment to introduce a topic that will be discussed in greater detail below. The direction of action here is from truth to knowledge. In the sentence, 'truth is that which makes a hole in knowledge', 'truth' is the subject acting upon 'knowledge' which is the object.³⁴ This is important because it represents an early occurrence of ambiguity that will be played out throughout Badiou's subsequent works and which has a direct bearing on some of the guiding questions of this thesis. Put simply, we are interested in whether Badiouian truths have an operational capacity of their own (as the previously quoted passage would seem to suggest) or whether a truth requires an actor, i.e. an individual or collective human subject. One of the primary objectives of this chapter is to appraise Badiou's position on this key question.

³³ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 327.

³⁴ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 327.

Before looking at Badiou's concepts of event and subject in more detail, it is worth asking whether Badiou's propositions about the philosophical implications of set theory are really sustainable. In recent years some scholars have sought to interrogate Badiou's notorious claim that mathematics is ontology. Among these interrogations is Nirenberg and Nirenberg's article from 2011, 'Badiou's Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology'.³⁵ The Nirenbergs' article is a useful point of reference for our purposes because it forms an attempt to scrutinise, and ultimately dismantle, Badiou's claims concerning set theory from the perspective of a 'working mathematician'. For the sake of brevity, we will limit ourselves to an analysis of the most serious challenge presented by the Nirenbergs as opposed to running through all the arguments presented in the article. This challenge is raised against Badiou's central claim that 'mathematics is ontology'³⁶ and is expressed by the Nirenbergs' as follows: 'the axioms of set theory themselves dictate strict limitations on the kinds of objects they can and cannot be applied to. Any rigorous attempt to base an ontology upon them will entail such a drastic loss of life and experience that the result can never amount to an ontology in any humanly meaningful sense'.³⁷ This is demonstrated via a thought experiment involving two bottles, one containing caustic soda and one containing muriatic acid. The Nirenbergs' rightly point out that if these two bottles are considered to be sets containing elements (the molecules comprising the two substances) it will be difficult to arrive at a state in which we have new set comprising the elements (contents) of each set (bottle).³⁸ Clearly, one cannot fault the Nirenbergs' knowledge of chemistry, however, the

³⁵ Ricardo L. Nirenberg and David Nirenberg, 'Badiou's Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology', *Critical Inquiry*, 37.4 (2011), 583–614.

³⁶ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 4.

³⁷ Nirenberg and Nirenberg, 'Badiou's Number', p. 586.

³⁸ Nirenberg and Nirenberg, 'Badiou's Number', p. 607.

demonstration does not present a problem for Badiou's position vis-à-vis mathematics as ontology. This is because the demonstration already takes an illegitimate step in drawing an equivalence (which Badiou does not draw) between an actually existing physical object and a mathematical concept. The Nirenbergs then mistakenly assume that a set containing both caustic soda and muriatic acid would have to be a new bottle (which would presumably entail mixing the two substances) when in fact, because set is a mathematical concept, we can simply take as a set the two separate bottles and their distinct, unmixed contents. As we said above, Badiou draws on a version of set theory that operates according to principles of extensionality. We can regard elements as belonging to a set without reference to any principle of inclusion. As such, the elements (in this case, the contents of each bottle) do not need to be mixed, moved, or interfered with in any way.

To avoid the inaccurate conclusions of the Nirenbergs, we should pay close attention to what Badiou actually says about mathematics and ontology. His thesis, as we have seen, is that mathematics is *ontology* as opposed to the actual stuff of reality, but perhaps more precisely one could say that Badiou's real task is to establish what he calls the 'meta-ontological' thesis that mathematics serves as a discourse of ontology.³⁹ Indeed, mathematics can serve as a discourse of ontology for the very reason that it is indifferent to its object. Within set theory it does not matter what is being counted; all that matters is an entity's status as either belonging to, or included in, a set. Badiou is thus able to study being without reference to empirically existing objects such that, contrary to the

³⁹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 8, 13.

Nirenbergs' reading, Badiou's ontology is strictly objectless—not even mathematical objects are recognised since mathematics 'presents nothing'.⁴⁰

There is a further issue concerning Badiou's proposition that mathematics is ontology that must be addressed before we move on to a discussion of the concepts that emerge from his philosophical system. As Hallward has noted, a vital aspect of Badiou's ontology is his unshakable commitment to an 'axiomatic orientation'.⁴¹ An axiom in mathematics is an unreasoned first principle from which one can deduce a series of logical consequences. Not only is set theory founded upon a series of axiomatic assertions, but Badiou's employment of set theory in his philosophical project stems from his own axiomatic first principle, 'that of the non-being of the one'.⁴² The criticism that one often sees made against Badiou concerns the status of this principle. The Nirenbergs, for example, state that their first goal, 'will be to demonstrate that Badiou's set theoretical models are at best a priori commitments rather than necessary truths of the set theory within which they are made.'⁴³ Likewise, François Laruelle has questioned whether the foundational thesis 'mathematics = ontology' can be anything more than an auto-founding materialist thesis.⁴⁴ Here, the act of auto-foundation is said to lead to decisionism and arbitrariness in its effort to flatten the (idealist) positing subject in to a materialist vision of reality.⁴⁵ The extent to which Badiou succeeds in his endeavour is not the central concern here since, if one accepts Badiou's meta-ontological axiom, it is because one also accepts axioms as valid foundations and this very acceptance would necessarily be formulated as an

⁴⁰ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 7.

⁴¹ Hallward, p. 312.

⁴² Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 31.

⁴³ Nirenberg and Nirenberg, 'Badiou's Number', p. 585.

⁴⁴ François Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou: On the Introduction of Maoism into Philosophy*, trans. by Robin Mackay (London: Bloomsbury Academic), p. 81.

⁴⁵ Laruelle, p. 82.

axiom. This is also why those critics that seek to unveil the auto-founding moment in Badiou's philosophy are knocking on an open door; Badiou explicitly frames his ontology as axiomatic: 'Obliged to think the pure multiple without recourse to the One, ontology is necessarily axiomatic'.⁴⁶ The philosophy he derives from set-theoretic foundations repeatedly returns to the idea of an auto-foundation or an unsupported decision. Nonetheless, the idea of auto-foundation provides a key thematic connection between Badiou's project and theories discussed in previous chapters. It is worth keeping this connection in mind as we begin to investigate some of the key concepts that emerge from Badiou's philosophy. In particular, our interest will be in the emergence of temporal complexity in attempts to narrativise an auto-founding moment.

⁴⁶ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 517.

The Event and the Intervention

Perhaps the arche-concept of Badiou's entire corpus is that of the 'event'. If, as has been mentioned above, Badiou is interested in the idea of the emergence of newness, the event is precisely the occurrence of the new within an ostensibly stable historical situation. An event, however, occurs at a particular point within a situation, and Badiou calls this point the 'evental site'. The evental site is designated as an 'abnormal multiple' and is 'a multiple such that none of its elements are presented in the situation'.⁴⁷ It now becomes clear why the distinction between 'belonging' and 'inclusion' outlined above is so significant. The evental site is *included* in the situation *qua* multiple, and yet none of the elements belonging to the evental site belong to the situation. For example, if we imagine the situation of the people in the United Kingdom we can think of many different ways of grouping those people (according to gender, ethnicity, education, whether they have a criminal record, whether they have a driver's license, and so on). Each of these groups is included in the situation and each of their elements (which are individual people) belong both to the part (e.g. people with criminal records) and the situation (people in the United Kingdom). The evental site in our example would be a group who are included as a part of the situation but whose individual constituents are not counted as elements of the situation. An example often favoured by Badiou and his adherents would be illegal immigrants. In the situation 'people in the United Kingdom' there is a group or part 'illegal immigrants' which is recognised as included in the situation, but each member of this group is left uncounted. They have no official status

⁴⁷ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 175.

within the situation. Thus, illegal immigrants in the United Kingdom are ‘a multiple such that none of its elements are presented in the situation’.⁴⁸

The evental site is considered to be on the ‘edge of the void’ since it is ‘the minimal effect of structure which can be conceived’ and insofar as, from the perspective of the situation, ‘one cannot think the under-side of their presented being’.⁴⁹ In every historical situation there is a certain limit to the structure imposed by the count. This limit is an evental site and can be identified and localized. Badiou further contends that the kind of limit one can regard as an evental site can only occur in historical situations; natural situations, in contrast, do not give rise to evental sites and are therefore incapable of producing events.⁵⁰ That is not to say that in historical situations evental sites give rise to events by way of necessity. There is nothing necessary about the occurrence of an event. In fact, in a discursive twist that will be important in the discussion that follows, Badiou claims, ‘a site is only “evental” insofar as it is retroactively qualified as such by the occurrence of an event’.⁵¹ This initial appearance of retroactive qualification is an early indication that we are not dealing with a linear temporal continuum within which events occur; but rather that the occurrence of an event has a decisive impact not only on the future of a situation (the course of history is momentarily derailed in order to continue on a new trajectory) but its impact also extends to a reconfiguration of the past.

To fully understand what is meant by the term event in Badiou’s philosophy, it is useful to turn to the classic and oft cited example from *Being and Event*, that of the French Revolution:

⁴⁸ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 175.

⁴⁹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 175.

⁵⁰ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 177.

⁵¹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 179.

One could certainly say that the event ‘the French Revolution’ forms a one out of everything which makes up its site; that is, France between 1789 and, let’s say, 1794. There you’ll find the electors of the General Estates, the peasants of the Great Fear, the sans-culottes of the towns, the members of the Convention, the Jacobin clubs, the soldiers of the draft [...] The historian ends up including in the event ‘the French Revolution’ everything delivered by the epoch as traces and facts. This approach, however—which is the inventory of all the elements of the site—may well lead to the one of the event being undone to the point of being no more than the forever infinite numbering of the gestures, things and words that co-existed with it. The halting point for this dissemination is *the mode in which the Revolution is a central term of the Revolution itself*; that is, the manner in which the conscience of the times—and the retroactive intervention of our own—filters the entire site through the one of its eventual qualification.⁵²

Now let us refer back to Badiou’s definition of the event: ‘the event is a one-multiple made up of, on the one hand, all the multiples which belong to its site, and on the other hand the event itself’.⁵³ The example of the French Revolution corresponds to Badiou’s definition insofar as the Revolution *qua* event includes a whole host of parts and groupings but also includes, as an empirical occurrence, an interpretive gesture which constituted these parts and groups as the one-multiple event: the French Revolution. Self-belonging thus proves to be an essential attribute of the event, or even, as Badiou argues in *Being and Event*, self-belonging is ‘constitutive’ of the event’s status *qua* event.⁵⁴

Badiou argues that an event is not recognised as existent by ontology since the latter ‘does not allow the existence, or the counting as one of sets in its axiomatic, of multiples which belong to themselves’.⁵⁵ The axiom of foundation posits that, ‘within an existing one-multiple, there always exists a multiple presented by it such that this multiple is on the edge of the void relative to the initial multiple’.⁵⁶ A one-multiple (or set) is therefore founded if it contains multiples (or subsets) whose elements are not included in the initial one-multiple. An example can help illustrate this point: if one were to take the one-

⁵² Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 180.

⁵³ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 179.

⁵⁴ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 506.

⁵⁵ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 190.

⁵⁶ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 185.

multiple of ‘all wooden things’ one would have an enormous collection of furniture, trees, twigs, and so forth, each of which could be disassembled or broken down into pieces which comprise them. But we can only continue disassembling for so long before we end up with single cells of wood which are in turn composed of non-wood substances (cellulose, hemicellulose, and lignin). These single wood cells would be the element that ‘founds’ the set. An investigation of the contents of the set would not ‘bottom out’ in an infinitely ongoing dissection of the substances composing tiny pieces of wood, instead, such an investigation would come up against a hard boundary—the wooden element which is composed of non-wooden elements. Now comes a manoeuvre which is crucial for Badiou’s notion of event: an investigation into an event, insofar as it is a one-multiple of itself and everything that belongs to itself, cannot ‘bottom out’ in the usual way described above. To illustrate, let’s assume that we are no longer investigating the contents of the set of wooden things, but *everything contained* in the set of wooden things. Clearly, we are still dealing with the set of wooden things, but now rather than only limiting ourselves to the *wooden* things in this set, we are faced with an infinity of elements and subsets, some of which are wood and some of which are the non-wood constituents of wood. From these deductions, Badiou draws the following conclusion: ‘The axiom of foundation delimits being by the prohibition of the event. It thus brings forth that-which-is-not-being-qua-being as a point of impossibility of the discourse on being-qua-being, and it exhibits its signifying emblem: the multiple such as it presents itself, in the brilliance, in which being is abolished, of the mark-of-one’.⁵⁷ This is a controversial point for those Badiou refers to as ‘working mathematicians’ since

⁵⁷ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 190.

Badiou seems to be simultaneously adopting a particular elaboration of set theory (ZFC) only then to attempt to derive concepts which require us to strategically disregard of one of its axioms—the axiom of foundation—since an event is precisely an unfounded multiple.⁵⁸ The various claims and counter-claims concerning this controversy need not detain us here.⁵⁹ Instead, suffice it to say that Badiou does not strictly adhere to ZFC set theory and but that it is an open question as to whether the discrepancies between Badiou’s version of set theory and ZFC set theory actually represent fatal weaknesses in Badiou’s philosophy.

Badiou’s definition of the event as a one-multiple of the multiples belonging to its site and itself leads to further consequences that need to be considered here. Since, as we noted above, the identification of multiples belonging to the event is endless due to the event’s violation of the axiom of foundation, there is no way to exhaustively account for the event’s occurrence by way of such a process of identification. An important characteristic of the event is therefore that it leads to two distinct hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that ‘the event belongs to the situation. That from the standpoint of the situation, being presented, it *is*’.⁶⁰ The second hypothesis is that ‘the event does *not* belong to the situation’.⁶¹ Crucially for Badiou, there is no meta-position from which one can actually demonstrate the event’s existence. The event may be ‘*localized* within presentation’ but it is never ‘presented as such’.⁶² And since the event is never

⁵⁸ Badiou defines the event as ‘un-founded multiple in an interview with Peter Hallward and Bruno Bosteels: Peter Hallward and others, ‘Beyond Formalisation: An Interview’, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 8.2 (2003), 111–36 (p. 130).

⁵⁹ Nirenberg and Nirenberg, ‘Badiou’s Number’; Alain Badiou, A. J. Bartlett, and Justin Clemens, ‘To Preface the Response to the “Criticisms” of Ricardo Nirenberg and David Nirenberg’, *Critical Inquiry*, 38.2 (2012), 362–64; A. J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens, ‘Neither Nor’, *Critical Inquiry*, 38.2 (2012), 362–80; Ricardo L. Nirenberg and David Nirenberg, ‘Reply to Badiou, Bartlett, and Clemens’, *Critical Inquiry*, 38.2 (2012), 381–87.

⁶⁰ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 181.

⁶¹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 182.

⁶² Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 178.

presented, no demonstration of its occurrence is possible; rather, the existence of the event depends on an interpretive intervention which simply posits the event's having occurred. The importance of this notion of 'intervention' cannot be understated. It is defined as, 'any procedure by which a multiple is recognized as an event' and is often used in conjunction with two other closely connected but distinct terms: wager and decision. As will be shown below, the act of intervention, whether conceived as a wager or as a decision, is crucial to Badiou's project and highly pertinent to our enquiry.⁶³

In 'Meditation Twenty' of *Being and Event*, Badiou provides some important clarifications concerning the relationship between an interpretive intervention and an event: 'Since it is of the very essence of the event to be a multiple whose belonging to the situation is undecidable, deciding that it belongs to the situation is a wager [...] No doubt, the consequences of the decision will become known, but it will not be possible to return back prior to the event in order to tie those consequences to some founded origin'.⁶⁴ Here Badiou points to the sense in which an event includes an 'auto-annulment of its own meaning'.⁶⁵ That is to say, although there is some real, in principle identifiable, occurrence that provokes an intervention, this in no way allows us to view this 'real occurrence' as exhausting the meaning of the event. No sooner has some occurrence provoked an intervention than the occurrence itself dissipates in 'the uniformity of multiple presentation'.⁶⁶ An intervention is therefore required for the event to have any status at all. It consists both in the recognition of a multiple's evental form and a

⁶³ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 202.

⁶⁴ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 201.

⁶⁵ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 202. Here we encounter a conceptual trope which seems to correspond to Laclau's notion of constitutive distortion. The depth and scope of this correspondence will be exposed in greater detail below.

⁶⁶ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 202.

decision that this multiple belongs to the situation. These two distinct acts comprising an intervention are considered to be ‘impossible to separate’.⁶⁷ Moreover, the latter component of this two-fold act includes a sub-component referred to as ‘nomination’. In order to decide that a previously unrepresented multiple belongs to the situation, one requires a new term to express this multiple. Nomination is thus to be seen as a resource for expressing something that was previously inexpressible within the situation: ‘The initial operation of an intervention is to *make a name out of an unrepresented element of the site to qualify the event whose site is the site*’.⁶⁸ A question arises here with respect to what the concept event actually designates. Is the event the real occurrence which sets things in motion and leads to interventions, nominations, and so forth? Or is ‘event’ the term we apply retrospectively to the whole process once we have reached the end? Badiou does not shirk from the radical conclusion that neither of these alternatives is to be endorsed as the designated content of the term ‘event’. On the contrary, Badiou states that, ‘an event is an *interval* rather than a term: it establishes itself, in the interventional retroaction, between the empty anonymity bordered on by the site, and the addition of a name’.⁶⁹ Note that the term interval can be understood both in a chronological sense, as a break in time, as well as the spatial distancing implied by a void demarcated by a boundary. This ambiguity is rooted in an undecidability concerning the anachronological unfolding of the event. As we have mentioned in passing above, the evental occurrence cannot be retrospectively viewed as having emerged at a specific time in a specific place. It has a ‘site’, but this site is defined by a set of criteria

⁶⁷ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 203.

⁶⁸ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 204.

⁶⁹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 206.

developed out of Badiou's set theoretic ontology; the site cannot be easily located either spatially or temporally and it may in fact even be a retroactive projection emerging after an event.⁷⁰

At this point in *Being and Event*, Badiou notes a paradox which brings him into contact with the philosophers and theorists whose works we have addressed in previous chapters. The paradox concerns the events emergence as involving a re-doubling or circularity:

It seems that the event, as interventional placement-in-circulation of its name, can only be authorized on the basis of that other event, equally void for structure, which is the intervention itself.// There is actually no other recourse against this circle than that of splitting the point at which it rejoins itself. It is certain that the event alone, aleatory figure of non-being, founds the possibility of intervention. It is just as certain that if no intervention puts it into circulation within the situation on the basis of an extraction of elements from the site, then, lacking any being, radically subtracted from the count-as-one, the event does not exist.⁷¹

Let us recap Badiou's argument here. First, an intervention is only possible once an event has taken place since without the event as a referent, the intervention has nothing to affirm. Nonetheless, it is also the case that the event's existence directly hinges on the intervention itself since, without an intervention, an event would be reabsorbed by the structure and thereby lose its status as an event. Now, a few pages prior to this quotation, Badiou had called the event an 'interval', whereas here the event is described in terms of a redoubled occurrence. That is to say, we are no longer identifying the event with a *gap* but with the motion of an intervention that circles this gap. Badiou's own oscillation between event *qua* gap and event as an occurrence retroactively qualified by an interpretive intervention can be understood as an attempt to include in his philosophy the possibility of a non-decisionistic decision. That is to say, the intervention must provide the condition for an event without producing the event by way of

⁷⁰ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 179.

⁷¹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 209.

necessity. This interpretation finds further support in statements that rule out the possibility of a 'hero' of the event.⁷² Badiou is well aware that the moment the event can simply be 'decided' into existence, all is lost. The figure of an omnipotent decider would cause Badiou's philosophy to collapse into a parody of Schmittian decisionism (that is, the very same decisionism shown to incur fatal practical and logical weaknesses), one that would not be able to distinguish in any theoretically rigorous way between the progressive politics of the event Badiou aims at, and a fascistic absolute voluntarism. The redoubled event, or the event as interval, seem to be two alternative strategies designed to outflank the decisionist charge. Determining whether this point does enough to move beyond pure voluntarism will depend on our appraisal of the issue of temporality in Badiou's thought as a whole—a task that will be embarked upon below.

⁷² Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 207, 211.

Indiscernability

Although the possibility of evental occurrences is vital to Badiou's work, it is in fact far more important to understand what events produce, what emerges from them, and the changes they effect in a situation. On this point, it is necessary to introduce a distinction between 'truth' and 'knowledge'. The former is instigated by an event, produced by fidelity to the event, and is indiscernible. The latter concerns situations and its operations include discernment and classification.⁷³ Badiou presents us with the following statement regarding the procedure of establishing a truth: "The general idea is to consider that *a truth groups together all the terms of the situation which are positively connected to the event*".⁷⁴ This grouping is not predetermined by the existing situation; if it were, the post-evental truth procedure would be reducible to knowledge and we would not have an event, but only a mere historical occurrence. The grouping together of the terms of the situation according to their connection with the event is performed by an 'operator of connection'.⁷⁵ The operator of connection is to be understood at this stage as a kind of witness to the event (one that Badiou will later reintroduce as the 'subject' of the event) whose task is to conduct a series of enquiries into the status of the situation from the perspective of the event. These enquiries determine the consequences of the event for the situation and the process of conducting these enquiries is what Badiou terms a 'generic truth procedure' where the term generic is roughly equivalent to the term 'indiscernible'. Ed Pluth offers a welcome clarification:

In a few words, this is what a faithful subjectivity always does - it is engaged in the construction of a new present: a construction whose process and end result Badiou also calls a truth. Such is what Badiou has in mind when he writes of the human

⁷³ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 513.

⁷⁴ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 335.

⁷⁵ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 335.

capacity to be seized by an eternal truth. A truth is in large part defined by the way in which its construction contests the reigning present not simply with a critique, but with the actual presence of an alternative within that present itself. This alternative scrambles the situation in question: it redraws relations among members or inhabitants of that situation.⁷⁶

The emergence of a truth via a truth procedure is thus not merely the addition of one more identifiable term to the situation; it is rather a far more radical change in the mode of organisation of the present. Pluth's outline of a truth as a construction of a new present seems to point us in the direction of political events—once a revolutionary event occurs, one cannot take up a neutral position or seek to simply continue life as normal. The revolution produces consequences that cannot be ignored but can only be either faithfully supported or reacted against. The same holds for one of Badiou's other situational spheres in which events can take place. Referring to a 'love-event', Badiou argues,

Love is thus a-truth (one-truth) of the situation. I call it 'individual' because it *interests no-one* apart from the individuals in question. Let's note, and this is crucial, that it is thus *for them* that the one-truth produced by their love is an indiscernible part of their existence; since the others do not share in the situation which I am speaking of. An-amorous-truth is un-known for those who love each other: all they do is produce it.

In the same way that we cannot demonstrate that a revolution has taken place (only that a series of occurrences, facts, and changing circumstances are 'revolutionary'), it is also impossible to demonstrate being-in-love; rather, one is aware of relating to another person in a new way and this awareness has a profound effect on one's values, needs, aspirations, and so on.

A truth's indiscernibility is not accidental but necessary. If it were possible to identify a truth, this would mean the state already had resources it could deploy to accommodate the truth and its consequences. Bruno Besana is right to identify Badiouian truths as excessive with respect to the situation they emerge from: 'a truth cannot appear as a normal part of the situation, but only as a dramatic

⁷⁶ Ed Pluth, *Alain Badiou* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 5.

rupture with the latter'.⁷⁷ If this were not the case, we would no longer be dealing with a novelty or an alternative present, but merely with a further elaboration and extension of the pre-existing situation. The indiscernibility of truths also leads us to the conclusion that from the perspective of the subject, 'there are no criteria for deciding whether or not the event is: a pure anomaly; an accident arising from another situation; or a strange product of the situation itself'.⁷⁸ The task of one who bears witness to an event is to affirm the truth of the event while acknowledging that there are no firm grounds from which such an affirmation could be sustained. Badiou's motto for this kind of affirmation is 'Love what you will never believe twice'—a rather opaque way of saying that the most important commitments are not experienced, at the moment of their genesis, as autonomous decisions. Moreover, such commitments are not undermined by changing circumstances; instead, the test of a real conviction is that one remains convinced even when the good reasons for being so no longer apply, or even when, as Pluth notes, we end up acting in ways that are risky or seem to go against our more directly tangible interests.⁷⁹

Understanding the truth as indiscernible has implications for how we view emancipatory politics. Such a politics can never emerge purely from an analysis of the situation since a normal political situation stabilises itself precisely through its conditioning and delimiting of the political spectrum. This means that from within normal politics, the most incremental, marginal progressive agenda could acquire the epithet 'radical' without in any way threatening the status quo. An Evental politics does not originate *in relation* to the State (the normal political

⁷⁷ Bruno Besana, 'The Subject', in *Alain Badiou: Key Concepts*, ed. by A. J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens (Durham: Acumen, 2010), p. 41.

⁷⁸ Oliver Feltham, *Alain Badiou: Live Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), p. 101.

⁷⁹ Pluth, p. 138.

situation) but emerges in conjunction with a fleeting occurrence at its outermost border. With respect to the participant engaging in this new radical political program, the beginning of the emancipatory project will not be felt as a considered and intentional response to a political demand; rather, it is felt as somehow always having been. As Badiou puts it in his *Conditions*: '[Emancipatory politics] can therefore only ever presuppose its own existence. The question of existence here cannot be formulated except from the vantage point of a pre-existence [...] Emancipatory politics is not observed; it is *encountered*'.⁸⁰ This is an important aspect of Badiou's thought for our purposes. It expresses something that we will deal with more thoroughly below, namely, the dynamic associated with a subjective change that is sudden and spontaneous as well as being utterly transformative. From Badiou's point of view, one is either fully immersed in normal politics, or one is separated from it; there is no stable passage from one to the other. This means that from the subject who experiences themselves as committed to an emancipatory project, the moment of insight that generated the commitment cannot be easily located; it is simply presupposed as having already occurred.

We have seen above that truth cannot be stated in terms of knowledge.⁸¹ This is not such a controversial point; Heidegger in particular is credited by Badiou with having convincingly shown that truth is inaccessible in the form of a judgement or proposition.⁸² The far more radical step is to propose a tenable form for truth, as Badiou does in his claim, 'We must conceive of a truth both as the

⁸⁰ Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 164.

⁸¹ Badiou has framed his proximity to Rousseau in the following terms: 'Politics starts with the same gesture by which Rousseau clears the ground of inequality: leaving aside all the facts. For an event to occur, it is important to leave aside the facts' Alain Badiou, *Peut-on Penser La Politique?* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), p. 78.

⁸² Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, p. 43.

construction of a fidelity to an event, and as the generic potency of a transformation of a domain of knowledge'.⁸³ To attempt to render this truth in propositional terms is always a dead-end resulting from a confusion of truth and knowledge. But it does not follow from the argument that truth and knowledge are distinct that there is no relation between truth and knowledge; in fact, truth has a transformative effect on knowledge since, if its consequences are followed through, it necessarily leads to profound changes in the state of the situation. For example, in politics, after the event of the French Revolution, fundamental political concepts such as 'the people' or 'the king' began to mean something thoroughly different. Likewise, after an amorous event, the affected couple view their past and future, their values and aspirations as totally transformed. The truth has an anticipatory dimension which involves the affirmation and projection of its intended result. For the French Revolution, this would be the full realisation of liberty, equality, and fraternity; for the loving couple, it would be expressed by the phrase 'I will always love you' which serves to anticipate the hypothesis of the 'truth of integral love'.⁸⁴

An important addition to the constellation of concepts (Event, Subject, Truth) is that of the Idea. In his *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, Badiou outlines his notion of the Idea as follows: 'I name "Idea" that upon which an individual's representation of the world, including her- or himself, is based once s/he is bound to the faithful subject type through incorporation within the process of a truth [...] the idea is the mediation between the individual and the Subject of a truth'.⁸⁵ Idea signals the individual's participation in, or

⁸³ Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, p. 43.

⁸⁴ Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, p. 49.

⁸⁵ Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 105.

experimentation with, universality. It is knowledge that their project, which is the unfolding of a truth, has universal validity while being entirely anchored in material particularity.⁸⁶ This leads Badiou to describe Ideation in terms of a commitment, discipline, or resolve that cannot be easily ignored but can be betrayed or abandoned. Ideation is the reorganization of an individual's life in accordance with the truth they have experienced. The imperative of an Evental politics is to act in accordance with an Idea whereas the everyday activity of politics in our post-political age 'de-bars the Idea' and encourages us to 'act in the absence of Idea'.⁸⁷

We have already seen how Badiou admits that his theory of the event gives rise to a circular model of emergence. With respect to the occurrence of an event, one finds a circular movement between the event proper and the intervention that names it since while the former serves as a precondition for the latter, the intervention is also *required* in order to qualify the event *qua* event. Without an intervention, the event cannot exist.⁸⁸ The situation becomes more complex when Badiou begins to invoke various tropes which directly invite us to view the process as unfolding in time. Consider the following passage:

The ultimate effect of an evental caesura, and of an intervention from which the introduction into circulation of a supernumerary name proceeds, would thus be that the truth of a situation, with this caesura as its principle, *forces the situation to accommodate it*: to extend itself to the point at which this truth—primitively no more than a part, a representation—attains belonging, thereby becoming a presentation. The trajectory of the faithful generic procedure and its passage to infinity transform the ontological status of a truth: they do so by changing the situation 'by force' [...] A truth would force the situation to dispose itself such that this truth—at the outset anonymously counted as one by the state alone, pure indistinct excess over the presented multiplicities—be finally recognized as a term, and as internal.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Here I rely on Peter Hallward who describes a truth as a 'pure conviction [that] comes to acquire a universal validity': Hallward and others, p. 111.

⁸⁷ Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 149.

⁸⁸ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 209.

⁸⁹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 342.

We are told that the event is accompanied by a caesura—a break in time—and that its initial occurrence subsequently ‘*forces the situation to accommodate it*’. The faithful generic procedure moves along a certain trajectory, ‘changing the situation “by force”’. But some important and potentially troubling questions emerge here. The most pressing of these is the question of who or what is motivating the ‘trajectory of the faithful generic procedure’? If we agree with Badiou that the occurrence of the event is utterly contingent, that it violates the principle of sufficient reason, it is nonetheless legitimate to ask what determines whether this event will change the situation. As Oliver Feltham notes, there is a tension between, on the one hand, Badiou’s principled aversion to any idea of a unified agent of change, and on the other, the sense that there is something at work in the unfolding of a truth procedure. If we reject the first option, we end up with a kind of automated truth procedure that simply runs by itself without any need for human commitment or faithfulness (both of which are terms Badiou often uses to describe the relation between an event and a subject). But if we accept that there is some agent behind the generic truth procedure, additional difficulties emerge. Not only does the idea of a subject *qua* agent go against Badiou’s explicit statements on his understanding of the subject, it would also be vulnerable to the Nietzschean argument that there is no doer behind the deed and that any experiential basis for asserting a subject *qua* agent is a mere epiphenomenal residue of a deeper, single substrate (i.e. will to power).⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Oliver Feltham investigates the extent to which this Nietzschean critique can be applied to Badiou, concluding that while Badiou avoids the voluntarist challenge, he only does so by positing ‘the as yet unknown existence of something like a higher or deeper will’. Feltham, p. 115. Also, for Nietzsche’s critique of agency, see: Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 26.

The tension between voluntarism and automatism in Badiou's work resurfaces in the secondary literature. Advocating a strong voluntarist interpretation, one that Badiou either warns against or categorically refutes on several occasions, Calcagno argues, 'Interventions are subjective decisions that give us events'⁹¹ and that moreover, 'A subject becomes fuller as a subject (*subjectivation*) by intervening in certain situations'.⁹² While Calcagno does not provide us with the line of reasoning that led him to this position, it may be worth reconstructing the textual evidence that could account for it. Recall that for Badiou, although the event precedes the subject, without a subjective intervention the event itself has no being. This does mean that, in a sense, the being of the event as well as any subsequent transformation in a situation depend on its being taken up by a subject. One could therefore reason, as Calcagno seems to, that the intervention produces the event since without an intervention, we have no event. So where is the problem here? As we saw above, the subject cannot pre-exist the event because the event serves as the pre-condition for a subject to emerge through fidelity to a generic truth procedure.⁹³ Any reading that asserts the existence of a subject prior to the event would certainly lead to a decisionist position for which events are directly willed into being. The distinction to be made here is between the event itself which Badiou describes as 'a nothing – just a sort of illumination'⁹⁴ one that is 'not the result of a decision'⁹⁵ and the naming of the

⁹¹ Antonio Calcagno, *Badiou and Derrida: Politics, Events and Their Time* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 73.

⁹² Calcagno, p. 71.

⁹³ See, for example, the following quotation: 'whatever convokes someone into the composition of a subject is something extra, as something that happens in situations as something that they and the usual way of behaving in them cannot account for. Let us say that a subject [...] needs something to have happened'. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 41.

⁹⁴ Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, p. 140.

⁹⁵ Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, p. 129.

event which, in *Being and Event* at least, is described as a matter of deciding.⁹⁶ Calcagno's error is to miss this distinction and conflate the decision to name the event with the event itself resulting in an inaccurate and excessively decisionist reading of Badiou.

⁹⁶ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 204.

The Subject and its Nomination

In some of his most recent comments on the thorny issue of the evental occurrence and its entanglement with a subjective intervention, Badiou indicates that the paradox of the event should be seen as a secondary concern in relation to its consequences. In an interview with Bruno Bosteels, for example, Badiou complains of often being read ‘askew’ in such a way that focuses on the event over the situation: ‘I don’t think that we can grasp completely what a trajectory of truth is in a situation without the hypothesis of the absolute, or radical, arrival of an event, not the transcendence or the entrenchment of the event itself’.⁹⁷ Now, to be clear, it may well be the case that an emphasis on the event over the situation has a tendency to produce misreadings, nor it is it necessarily problematic to say that some crucial dimension of the event is suspended from view—indeed, this is precisely what Badiou calls the event’s indiscernibility—and yet, if we accept that something emerges from a situation which is irreducible to that situation, there is undoubtedly a requirement to provide an adequate conceptual elaboration of this emergence. One can accept a zero-level indiscernibility as a characteristic of the event only after one has pushed one’s analysis to the end so as to provide a convincing account of why the indiscernibility is irreducible.

Feltham offers a counter interpretation of the Badiouian subject which serves to clarify matters:

Thus in a political truth procedure a subject is not so much an agent as a series of meetings, tracts, protests and occupations of parliament [...]. As a set of multiples connected to an event and encountered during the random sequence of enquiries, the subject falls outside the purview of ontology. Thus in Badiou’s terms, ontology cannot think the *being* of the subject, but it can think its *operation*, which is forcing. There is no separation, however, between the subject’s being as a set of multiples and forcing: a particular instance of forcing is what produces or unfolds that set of multiples. There is no room, therefore, for a part of the being of the subject that might be the source of forcing: in other words, there is no separate agent of change within

⁹⁷ Badiou and Bosteels, p. 306.

the subject for Badiou. The subject is nothing but change as forcing [...]. The subject is not so much an agent behind the work of change, but the work of change itself.⁹⁸

This is a significant improvement on Calcagno's reading, not least because it finds support in many of Badiou's own statements on the concept of the subject. By viewing the subject as 'nothing but the change as forcing', Feltham seems to tarry both the decisionist challenge and the Nietzschean critique of (subjectively anchored) free will mentioned above. Rather than viewing the subject as an agent in the process by which an event transforms a situation, 'subject' is simply the name given to the process of transformation itself. Nonetheless, there remains a shortcoming here, one that Feltham is aware of. In the account of the event offered in *Being and Event*, Badiou often refers to certain decisions which take place at the beginning of the process. That is to say, in the immediate aftermath of an event, decisions are being made which will determine the trajectory of the generic truth procedure initiated by the event. This is apparent in Badiou's *Infinite Thought* where he writes: 'a truth begins with an *axiom of truth*. It begins with a groundless decision – the decision to *say* that the event has taken place'.⁹⁹ Groundlessness would therefore seem to apply both to the emergence of the event and the subjective intervention which begins the process of forcing the consequences of the event through an act of nomination. The former has been described as absolutely contingent, occurring *ex nihilo* from within a situation but without any precursors in that situation. The latter is also a 'groundless decision', one that hinges on the occurrence of an event but does not presuppose a subject since 'subject' for Badiou is precisely what comes about as a result of an event and an intervention/nomination: 'Les décisions (nominations, axiomes...) ne supposent aucun sujet, puisqu'il n'y a de sujet que dans l'effet de telles

⁹⁸ Feltham, pp. 111–112.

⁹⁹ Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, p. 46.

décisions'.¹⁰⁰ This leads Hallward to observe, 'Badiou effectively reduces this process to an inaccessible moment of decision'.¹⁰¹ Likewise, Feltham comments in a similar vein that the 'connection between the [nomination/intervention and the event] remains completely opaque'.¹⁰² The question that reasserts itself is whether or not this inaccessibility or opaqueness represents a weakness in Badiou's thought or a necessary characteristic of radical political change.

Ed Pluth goes further than Feltham in identifying Badiou's ambivalence between the *constituted* subject conceived as a procedure or process of following through eventual consequences and the *constituting* subject as the entity deciding upon and motivating this process. The difficulty arises because there is ample evidence for both positions in Badiou's work. Even in the definition provided in *Being and Event* Badiou includes terms which seem to pull in different directions—subject is said to be a 'finite series of enquiries' as well as that which 'realizes an indiscernible, forces a decision'.¹⁰³ Viewing the subject as a finite series of enquiries has the advantage of de-coupling 'subject' from the commonplace intuitive understanding of subject *qua* conscious, reflective, human individual. But if Badiou advocates a concept of the subject as a series of enquiries, it becomes difficult to see how such a subject could be capable of a decision. Recall that Badiou also regards the subject as 'that which decides an undecidable from the standpoint of an indiscernible'.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, in his *Ethics* Badiou states that the process of a truth stems 'From the decision to relate henceforth to the situation *from the perspective of its eventual supplement*'.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Alain Badiou, 'L'être, L'événement, La Militance', *Futur Antérieur*, 8 (1991), 13–23 (p. 19).

¹⁰¹ Hallward, p. 285.

¹⁰² Feltham, p. 104.

¹⁰³ Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 522–523.

¹⁰⁴ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 407.

¹⁰⁵ Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p. 41.

Statements such as these lead Pluth to ask ‘Would it not have been more consistent for Badiou to say that an *inhabitant* decides? How can Badiou’s subject – for example, as a series of artworks! – decide on anything?’¹⁰⁶ We might opt for a generous interpretation here and suggest that Badiou is also hinting at a radically different notion of decision-making, albeit one that is not fleshed out in sufficient detail throughout his work. Alternatively, a less generous reading might claim that Badiou is engaging in a minimum amount of rhetorical obfuscation in order to avoid, on the one hand, a classical notion of the subject as unified, conscious agent, and, on the other hand, subject conceived as a dispersed multiple impelled by an initial evental happening but ultimately characterised by passivity insofar as it is incapable of deciding or ‘doing’ anything. Against both these positions, the remainder of this chapter will seek to present inaccessibility and opaqueness as constitutive of the evental decision itself.¹⁰⁷ Subject must be an entity capable of deciding, striving, or indeed of failing or falling into error. And yet as soon as we attempt to think the role of the subject in a radically transformative political process, the unity of the subject *qua* agent breaks down. Such a position draws support from Adrian Johnston’s interpretation of the Badiouian subject which succeeds insofar as it is sensitive to the *temporality* of radical change.

¹⁰⁶ Pluth, p. 127.

¹⁰⁷ It is important to be quite careful here not to confuse the necessary opaqueness of the decision on intervention with the kind of generalized opaqueness Derrida attributes to the event. Against Derrida, the event is not *a priori* lost to ‘non-knowledge’, rather a very narrowly defined intra-evental occurrence remains opaque without precluding a thorough delineation of the parameters of this opaqueness. For Derrida’s comments on the unknowability of the event, see Jacques Derrida, ‘A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event’, in *The Late Derrida*, ed. by W. J. T. Mitchell and Arnold I. Davidson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 90–92.

Noting the redoubled occurrence of ungrounded events in Badiou (the event itself and decision/intervention that qualifies it as event), Johnston argues for a two-fold conception of the Badiouian event, or to put this another way, Badiou's event involves two components, both of which are contingent with respect to the situation: 'First there is event₁. Then, there is event₂. Event₂ is the decision to acknowledge event₁ as an event strictly speaking'.¹⁰⁸ The distinction is an important one insofar as it takes into account the fact that there is nothing about the occurrence of event₁ that necessitates event₂ and yet, at the same time, event₁ depends on event₂ for its very existence.¹⁰⁹ Johnston's reading does not save Badiou from the charge of decisionism by itself since, regardless of the status of event₁, the decision to intervene must be ungrounded. It follows that even if we accept that the new subject is posterior vis-à-vis the event, we are still obliged to import some unspecified transcendental agency capable of intervening. Badiou points to Lyotard as an early proponent of this line of questioning: 'Lyotard asked me from the beginning: isn't the naming of the event itself already fundamentally a form of subjectivation. And isn't there then a second subjectivation that is under the condition of the name fixed by the first subjectivation? Isn't the subject, as is often the case in philosophy, presupposed by its very constitution?'.¹¹⁰ This proto-

¹⁰⁸ Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, p. 73. In making a conceptual distinction between event₁ and event₂, Johnston could be seen to be imposing a linear chronology on the passage of change marked by the event. Avoiding this reading means appreciating the reciprocal relation between event₁ and event₂: first, no event₂ without event₁ (an intervention needs to recognise some trace, some inconsistency in the situation in order for an event to occur), and yet equally, no event₁ without event₂ (the trace recognised by the intervention is nothing, not even a missed opportunity, without an intervention). The temptation of a linear reading can therefore be undercut by recognising the temporal entwining of event₁ and event₂.

¹⁰⁹ Common misreadings of Badiou tend to posit the event₂ as retroactively necessitating event₁, whereas the occurrence of event₁ always remains undecidable in Badiou's work. Event₂ does not make event₁ *necessary*, but it does make it *possible*. For an example of such a misreading, see: Oliver Harrison, 'Revolutionary Subjectivity in Post-Marxist Thought: The Case of Laclau and Badiou', *Global Discourse*, 2.2 (2013), 1–13 (p. 7).

¹¹⁰ Hallward and others, p. 132.

subjective force would need to be able to perform the act of intervention/nomination that sets the process of transformation in motion, but would also need to be thought as somehow constrained or divided in order to avoid decisionism. Feltham offers his own solutions to Lyotard's charge of decisionism, but he is less willing than Johnston to view the event as an ensemble composed of two discrete elements and this leads him to venture solutions to the issue of the pre-subjective intervener through a reiteration of Badiou's post-evental conception of the subject. Even when Feltham edges towards a notion of the subject as the locus of a decision on, or an impetus for, a series of situational changes, he refrains from commenting explicitly on the decisive interim between event₁ and event₂ (a distinction which is not fully fleshed out in Feltham's argument) and instead notes the necessity of positing 'the as yet unknown existence of something like a higher or deeper will'.¹¹¹

Before presenting a possible solution to the alleged decisionist tendency running through Badiou's *Being and Event*, it is worth looking at a final attempt to resolve the question found in Bruno Bosteels' *Badiou and Politics*. Bosteels's reading of the event contains two countervailing tendencies. On the one hand, Bosteels argues that 'an event [...] can only be decided retroactively by way of a subjective intervention', however, he also claims that the event is 'an irruption that [...] cannot be dissociated from the intervention of a subject'.¹¹² While Bosteels is correct to note retroactivity as a key feature of our account of any decision a subject takes, there is nonetheless a contradiction here. Bosteels is telling us that an event is decided by a subjective intervention but that this

¹¹¹ Feltham, p. 116.

¹¹² Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 161–162; Bosteels, p. 161.

intervention cannot be dissociated from the event. But clearly, if we are to conceive an intervention as the deciding factor in producing an event, there is already some minimal dissociation going on at a conceptual level. That is to say that, conceptually, if I am to think of one event producing another, I am already obliged to conceive them as in some way as separate parts. One way to resolve this contradiction would be to introduce a further distinction between practical dissociation and conceptual dissociation. We can then see how practically it may not be possible to separate the evental occurrence (Johnston's event₁) from the intervention (event₂), whereas conceptually such separation is not only possible but necessary. Indeed, since Bosteels tends to observe the conceptual separation of occurrence and intervention throughout *Badiou and Politics*, one can read his theory of the Badiouian event as comprising distinct components in the same manner as Johnston. The association or disassociation of event and intervention is of vital importance since the only way to avoid decisionist and quietist attacks on the Badiouian event is to prise apart intervention and event without abandoning the role of intervention wholesale.

If the event is understood as actualized by a decision, or as the realisation of some pre-existing determinate potential by way of a decision, we would be again confronted with a decisionist paradigm of the event.¹¹³ This is, of course, something Bosteels is keen to avoid, as is clear in the following quotation:

the impasse of the structure becomes visible only as a result of the retroactive effect of a subject's intervention. This intervention, though, should not be seen as a purely self-authorizing act or a sovereign decision, which would mark the possibility of an absolute beginning as a kind of primordial or grand event [...] [the event] is not an absolute ex nihilo creation but a production that starts out from the edges of the concrete void that is proper to this situation and to this situation alone. [...] This does not mean that the event already lies hidden as a sleeping potential within the

¹¹³ My challenge against Bosteels is not that his defence of Badiou fails because Badiou is, in fact, a decisionist, but rather that a stronger defence against the decisionist charge can be made on the basis of the arguments I made in the previous chapter apropos Schmitt's alleged decisionism and by remaining sensitive to the temporality of the event.

situation at hand, ready to be actualized, for only an intervention loyal to the event retroactively defines the site of this event as such in the first place.¹¹⁴

Let us briefly clarify Bosteels argument here. First, we have the argument that the structural impasse becomes visible as a result of a subjective intervention. This intervention cannot, however, be viewed as performed by an agent since Badiou does not offer us a theory of 'agency', but of the subject. Finally, it is an intervention that defines the site of the event in the first place. 'Intervention', on Bosteels's reading, turns out to be a slippery term, appearing everywhere it needs to in order to ensure the passage of the event. Intervention both renders the impasse in structure visible as well as defining the evental site. Moreover, given that this intervention is often framed as an act of deciding, there seem to be compelling reasons to view the role of intervention in the production of events as obeying a decisionistic logic within Bosteels account. To set out the issue in simple terms, Bosteels fails to untangle the central problematic of the relation between event as occurrence and event as intervention. Laying too much emphasis on the event as occurrence leads to quietism as would-be subjects patiently await the event; whereas focusing on the role of the subjective intervention in generating the event opens Badiou up to charges of decisionism (as well as requiring a concept of the pre-evental intervener that his theory lacks). Bosteels is no doubt correct to note that the intervention, 'takes the form of a looping or bootstrapping mechanism by which a subject comes to open up a minimal gap within its own conditions of existence', and yet without a thorough interrogation of the source of impetus behind this intervention or the implications of this 'bootstrapping mechanism', we cannot arrive at a reading of Badiou that escapes both quietism and voluntarism.

¹¹⁴ Bosteels, p. 242.

There is a way in which Johnston's event₁/event₂ dyad can be deployed in order to provide a way of thinking the Badiouian event that avoids decisionism and quietism, however, in order to show this we need to first briefly return to some of the arguments made in the previous chapter apropos Schmitt's alleged absolute 'decisionism' of the omnipotent sovereign.¹¹⁵ Schmitt's *Political Theology* is often cited as the most irredeemably decisionist of his political writings.¹¹⁶ In that text, Schmitt advocates a notion of sovereignty that is ascribed to the agent capable of making a decision upon the suspension of law in an exceptional moment. That is to say, in times of profound crisis, it is legitimate for the sovereign to decide to suspend law and act in any way they see fit in order to bring an end to the crisis or threat. I argued in the previous chapter that recent scholarship on Schmitt's ontology require us to rethink this alleged 'decisionism'. In particular, I argued in support of Michael Marder that the sovereign does not pre-exist the decision but is in fact *generated as a result of the decision*. Moreover, since Schmitt's idea of sovereignty is conceived in terms of competence (the sovereign is simply the entity competent to decide, not an agent with a pre-defined executive remit), in principle, the sovereign can emerge from anywhere within the political field. Sovereignty is indeed determined via a decision in some sense, but in the moment of deciding the proto-sovereign individual has no objective guarantees that his or her declaration will result in an actual confirmation of their status as sovereign. Sovereignty is therefore *reflexively determined* insofar as there is a requirement for at least one non-sovereign entity to recognise the claim to sovereignty as valid. I therefore depart from Marder

¹¹⁵ I am here making an assumption that I feel to be fairly uncontroversial, namely, that when commentators accuse Badiou of decisionism, they have in mind the kind of decisionism Schmitt seeks to advance in his *Political Theology*. I have shown in the previous chapter how this kind of decisionism can be unraveled by challenging the presupposed omnipotence of the sovereign.

¹¹⁶ See, for example: Cristi, pp. 108–116.

when he claims that ‘Schmitt’s “will” is, merely, power in its actuality, an always already exteriorized expression of political existence’.¹¹⁷ Instead, the exteriorization of will comes about through recognition on the part of a non-sovereign subject.¹¹⁸ Lack of recognition does not *undo* an individual’s status as sovereign, rather, the more radical conclusion is that sovereignty is brought about retroactively as a result of an intervention it has no control over. Moreover, this intervention cannot be thought of as a decision in the traditional sense of the term; rather, it is a spontaneous response which is not experienced as an act of deciding but as the activity that precedes any decision-making and sets the parameters for the kind of decision that can be made. One decides between options; one cannot decide which options to *recognise* as such.¹¹⁹

The notion of ‘recognition’ set out in the previous chapter with respect to Schmitt’s state of exception serves us well in our analysis of a non-decisionistic reading of Badiou. A basic tenet of a decisionist position is the existence of a deciding agent who pre-exists the moment of decision and whose decision is not constrained or conditioned by any extraneous factors. In addition, there are no normative criteria by which one can evaluate the decision; the only criterion that can be applied is whether or not this decision corresponds fully with the will of the decision-maker. We saw with Schmitt how the sovereign decision is not fully decisionist insofar as the decision takes the form of a declaration which becomes a decision once it has been recognised by at least one non-sovereign actor. The

¹¹⁷ Marder, *Groundless Existence*, p. 131.

¹¹⁸ For an illuminating account of the role of recognition in relation to the genesis of authority, see: Kojève, p. 34.

¹¹⁹ It is worth mentioning that the notion of recognition I use here can be viewed as resembling the Kierkegaardian notion of a qualitative transition. Jamie M. Ferreira’s reading is exemplary here. Ferreira argues, ‘It is crucial to realise at the outset that a qualitative transition does not necessarily have to be brought about by a direct decision’, and again, ‘[Kierkegaard] distinguishes between ‘freedom of choice’ and ‘true freedom’ [...] the latter is compatible with there being, in some meaningful sense, ‘no choice’’. Ferreira, pp. 34, 37.

proto-sovereign, by virtue of the declaration, attempts to force the recognition of his sovereign status, but this status is only achieved once recognition takes place. The declaration thus takes the form of a wager that sovereign status *will have been* confirmed by virtue of the transformation effected by the declaration. Without recognition from non-sovereign actors, it is not simply that sovereign status dissolves, but rather that *it is never in fact ascribed*. When analysing Badiou's 'event', one detects strong similarities. It is quite wrong to imagine that event₁ occurs independently of event₂ and that, regardless of the consequences, there can be an event₁ even if it is not followed by an event₂ to decide that it has indeed occurred; on the contrary, the lack of event₂ *retroactively erases event₁*. Event₁ corresponds to the proto-sovereign declaration in Schmitt while event₂ corresponds to the moment of recognition on the part of non-sovereign actors. We can defend Badiou against charges of decisionism by noting that at no stage do we have a single, unified subject deciding in an unconstrained, unilateral way. Event₂, which might conceivably be the decisionist moment in Badiou, is far closer to the idea of 'recognition' I have outlined above than it is to a decision insofar as 'subject' as the agent which pursues the consequences of an event only comes into being in the event's aftermath, not in the vanishing interim between event₁ and event₂. Even when Badiou uses the term decision, it is clear that the kind of decision he is aiming at is closer to a perspectival shift than a decision proper and, as such, might more accurately be termed 'recognition'.¹²⁰ To put this in other words, the radical conclusion one must draw from Badiou's philosophy

¹²⁰ Take, for example, the following quotation: 'From which 'decision', then, stems the process of a truth? From the decision to relate henceforth to the situation *from the perspective of its eventual supplement*.' Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p. 41. And again, in *Metapolitics*, we find a more direct identification between 'recognition' and 'decision': '[an event's] recognition *as event* is simply at one with the political decision'. Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. by Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), p. 23.

of the event is that event₂ retroactively serves as the possibility condition of event₁, such that event₁ *will not have been* without event₂. The content of the moment of recognition (event₂) corresponds to the logic of the future anterior. It is, on one level, a recognition that an event has occurred, as well as a decision that, from this occurrence, certain consequences must follow. As such, the previously troubling alignment between Badiou and Schmitt turns out to be less dangerous and more conceptually productive than many of Badiou's commentators have realised.¹²¹ One does not need to rescue Badiou from decisionism; instead, by submitting the Schmittian variant of decisionism to thorough and careful analysis, it becomes clear that the very idea of an omnipotent decider cannot be sustained.

While there are clearly good reasons to pursue a comparison between Schmitt and Badiou, it is important to point out the limits of such an approach. First and foremost, even though both the 'event' and the 'decision on the exception' contain a moment of circularity which impels the movement to a new situation, they are nonetheless acts which accomplish different kinds of change. Put another way, they are transformations which work in different directions. For Badiou, the key change is from a closed situation, fully articulated in terms of knowledge, to a situation including a newly formed subject advancing the revolutionary consequences of a truth. In contrast, Schmitt's state of exception, inaugurated by a (reflexively determined) sovereign decision is more likely to be a counter-revolutionary measure, a measure aiming at closure instead of

¹²¹ Incidentally this is not the only potentially productive comparison between Badiou and Schmitt. In *Theory of Contradiction*, Badiou clarifies his notion of class struggle in a way that is unmistakably reminiscent of Schmitt's existential antagonism between friend and enemy: 'A class does not preexist before the class struggle. To exist means to be oppressed. The existence of a term is entirely given in its contradictory correlation with the other term of the scission'. Alain Badiou, *Théorie de La Contradiction* (Paris: François Maspero, 1975), p. 70. Cited in: Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 153.

openness.¹²² Schmitt's sovereign is supposed to resolve a 'case of extreme peril' and aims more at the re-institution of order than explosive revolutionary openness.¹²³ Moreover, when one scrutinises a Schmittian sovereign decision according to Johnston's event₁/event₂ dyad, one notices additional differences. Whereas in Badiou event₁ is a 'pure occurrence', one that vacillates between existence and inexistence until it is nominated by way of a subjective intervention, the correlate of event₁ in Schmitt (the proto-sovereign declaration) is not merely an occurrence but an *act*, albeit an act which may or may not emanate from a sovereign. We can thus see how the comparison between Schmitt and Badiou illuminates the formal distinction between events that end a period of political instability and those which aim at order and closure. While neither can be regarded as decisionist in the strict sense of the term (given that neither is rooted in and fully determined by a single act of a unified pre-existing subject), the distinction between event₁ as *act* (Schmitt) and event₁ as *occurrence* (Badiou) may also allow us to establish the formal distinction between progressive/revolutionary and conservative/reactionary events.

The question that follows from this comparison between Schmitt and Badiou is one that also concerns Johnston—namely, what is it about the occurrence of event₁ that precipitates an intervention (event₂)? The solution in Schmitt is no doubt the proto-sovereign's ability to conjure up a certain affective response in his or her subjects. The regalia that accompany royalty function as a display of power producing an affective response which, in turn, predisposes the

¹²² Although there are reasons to suspect Badiou would be wary of the comparison I make here, we can nonetheless detect a certain ambivalence in his idea of the relationship between sovereignty and the event. For example, Badiou certainly regards the event as a kind of exception, albeit a kind of exception that undermines power as opposed to bolstering it. See: Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, ed. by Peter Engelmann, trans. by Peter Thomas and Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p. 12.

¹²³ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 6.

people to treat the monarch as a sovereign. Of course, there is nothing about the signs and emblems of royalty which actually *determine* subjects' recognition of sovereign status; rather, the King's regalia function to increase the likelihood of spontaneous obedience by virtue of a common understanding that they are a visual correlate of power. Likewise, the interim between event₁ and event₂, could be understood as the space of a pre-reflective act of recognition (given that, as we have seen, it cannot be the site of a decision¹²⁴) triggering the spontaneous condensation of a proto-subjective force into a unified deciding entity. That is to say that although there is no decision between event₁ and event₂, there is an act of recognition which effects a reorganisation of a proto-subjective force into a subject in the strictly Badiouian sense. After the event (which we are here regarding as comprising both event₁ and event₂) there is a subject capable of deciding, however, this decision-making power of the post-evental subject can only determine the subject's *fidelity to the event*, not the occurrence of the event itself—having recognised the event, the subject is in a position to decide whether to follow its consequences or to behave as if nothing has really changed.

How exactly is this 'proto-subject' that arises between event₁ and event₂ to be understood? Johnston provides a neat summary of the problem:

What is being called for here is a metapsychological investigation into the affective, libidinal, and identificatory features of the pre-evental human psyche with an eye to discerning what, within these features partly tied to what could be designated as a sort of 'constitution' or 'nature,' harbours the possibility for a readiness or responsiveness to the transformative effects of evental interpellations.¹²⁵

Johnston is entirely correct to point to the question of the 'pre-evental human psyche' as a vital avenue for enquiry. Investigating the question of the pre-evental

¹²⁴ Even Johnston should be reproached for his use of the term 'decision' to characterise event₂; event₁ must be recognised as opposed to 'decided upon' if we are to arrive at a non-decisionist reading of Badiou. Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, p. 73.

¹²⁵ Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, p. 79.

subject will be a guiding thread in the final chapter of this thesis. At this stage, however, it is worth noting the way in which Laclau's trio of related concepts—misrecognition, structural dislocation, and constitutive distortion pertain to the idea of a pre-subjective state or proto-subject which is absent in Badiou's thought. My argument here is that a comparison between Badiou and Laclau's respective notions of the subject may shed some light on the pre-evental breach in Badiou. It is a comparison motivated by the shared concern in each thinker to develop a theoretical account of the emergence of possibility, not in the Aristotelian sense of the actualisation of latent potentials, but rather, possibility at a further remove, as Badiou puts it (adopting a Kierkegaardian formulation), the 'creation of new possibilities [...] at the level of the possibility of possibilities'.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 243.

Laclau, Badiou, and the Intra-/Post-Evental Subject

Given that we have already looked at the Badiouian concept of the subject in some detail, let us begin our comparison between Badiou and Laclau with a definition of the subject according to Laclau:

Subject equals the pure form of the structure's dislocation, of its ineradicable distance from itself. An examination of the subject's forms of presence in the structure must therefore be an exploration of contingency's discursive forms of presence in the field of objectivity - or more precisely, the ways in which objectivity is subverted by contingency. Or in a third formulation, which amounts to the same, it must analyse the emergence of the subject as a result of the collapse of objectivity.¹²⁷

There are several important points to draw from this quotation. Firstly, we have the subject defined as 'the pure form of the structure's dislocation'. By structure we are simply to understand that which is given for a certain regime of signification, i.e. that which can be represented. However, for Laclau, structuration has a limit such that it can never be fully represented, and this 'ineradicable distance' is the subversion of structure (objectivity, the representable) by contingency. Finally, the 'third formulation' posits subject as 'a result of the collapse of objectivity'. Superficially, this might appear quite close to a Badiouian definition. After all, Badiou's subject can, in some sense be regarded as arising from the abrupt collapse of a situation. In addition, both Laclau and Badiou point to the existence of a degree of negativity or non-closure which allows for some kind of change to occur. In Badiou this change is, of course, the event that accompanies the emergence of a subject faithful to a truth. For Laclau, in contrast, there is no sharp boundary between transformative events and the structure. The subject understood as the dislocation of structure correlates to the ever present undecidability that characterises a given political system, that is, the

¹²⁷ Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 61.

impossibility of structure's totalization which is in turn a result of the 'contingent nature of all objectivity'.¹²⁸

Another point of comparison between Laclau and Badiou can be made in relation to the concept of the decision. Both Laclau and Badiou are clearly thinkers whose concept of the subject is somehow related to the concept of the decision. We have seen with Badiou that this decision cannot simply be the point of origin for an event since this would automatically result in decisionism. There is a notion of intervention in Badiou which may well be structurally reminiscent of a decision, and yet, as I have argued, the intervention is best conceived in terms of recognition as opposed to decision since decision implies a pre-given agent whereas recognition, as spontaneous, pre-reflective, and un-willed, does not require a pre-formed agent in the same way. Now, turning to Laclau, it is quite clear that 'decision' plays a more prominent role in relation to the subject. Having convincingly argued for the constitutive nature of antagonism resulting in the undecidability of structure, Laclau argues,

If the undecidability lies in the structure as such, then any decision developing *one* of its possibilities will be contingent, that is external to the structure, in the sense that it is not determined by that particular structure, even though it may be made possible by it. But secondly, the agent of that contingent decision must be considered, not as an entity *separate* from the structure, but constituted in relation to it.¹²⁹

Laclau goes on to characterize the relation between subject and structure as one of 'partial autonomy':

It is also clear that if, on the one hand, the subject is not external to the structure, on the other it becomes partially autonomous from it to the extent that it constitutes the *locus* of a decision not determined by it. But this means: a) that the subject is nothing but this distance between the undecidable structure and the decision; b) that ontologically speaking, the decision has the character of a ground which is as primary as the structure on which it is based, since it is not determined by the latter, and c) that if the decision is one between structural undecidables, taking a decision can only mean repressing possible alternatives that are not carried out.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 31.

¹²⁹ Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 30.

¹³⁰ Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 30.

‘Decision’, for Laclau, is simply an inaugural structuring gesture. To say that decision has the character of a ground is the same as saying that there can be no definitive ground for the political, that every political structuration emerges from a partially autonomous decision, and that it is only by way of a process of sedimentation that one contingent decision begins to appear as if its durability were due to an underlying necessity. Moreover, for Laclau, the result of a decision is always the ‘eclipse of the subject’.¹³¹ Regardless of the relative success of the repression of possible alternatives, the overall effect of a decision having taken place is the closure of the distance between structure and decision, which as we have seen is identical to the subject. Of course, this does not mean that undecidability is only a transient state of affairs; rather, Laclau points to the ‘work of “myth”’ as that of suturing the dislocated space.¹³² ‘Subject’ is, in this sense, that which mediates the mythical representation of dislocated elements and the new dominant structural objectivity.

The key distinction to be made, therefore, between Badiouian and Laclauian notions of the subject concerns its temporal extension. For Laclau, subject persists in the distance between the undecidability of structure and a decision. But what is the signal of the undecidability of structure if not an event? And likewise, although we have sought to reconceive event₂ in terms of recognition as opposed to decision, is it not equally apparent that Laclau’s ‘decision’ which marks the ‘eclipse of the subject’ performs a similar structural function to Badiou’s ‘intervention’ which registers the evental occurrence as an event?¹³³ The complementarity between Laclau and Badiou allows us to see how

¹³¹ Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 61.

¹³² Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 61.

¹³³ Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 61.

‘subject’ is itself the puncturing of a normal situation which nonetheless, for each thinker, emerges at a different stage in the process. Badiou’s subject is thoroughly post-evental. Regardless of whether we conceive subject as the sum of the consequences of an event, or as the agent who unfolds these consequences, there can be no subject prior to the event. The proto-subjective force that both Feltham and Johnston identify (notwithstanding their different terminologies) is what we might view as a kind of blind spot in *Being and Event*, a non-ontologizable remainder whose appearance seems coincident with its disappearance. In contrast, the Laclauian subject correlates precisely with this remainder. Here, subject is the unrepresentable, and strictly achronological, interim between (to reapply Johnston’s dyad) event₁ and event₂. If event₁ corresponds to the ‘collapse of objectivity’ (i.e. the revealing of a situation’s contingent foundation), subject corresponds to the dislocated space itself as well as the contingent decision that grounds a new order. Subject for Laclau is co-extensive with the unrepresentable distance between two distinct objective orders as well as the operator that brings the new order into being, whereas for Badiou, subject is primarily the long process of drawing out consequences and maintaining fidelity.

Reading Badiou and Laclau in tandem allows us to return to some of the guiding questions of the thesis. One such question concerns the problems encountered when describing a revolutionary transformation in terms of a chronological narrative. We saw in previous chapters how thinkers of the social contract tradition either attempted to reduce the impact of narrative discontinuity through means of rhetorical obfuscation (Hobbes) or by condensing the contingent moment onto an external figure (Rousseau). These attempts are based on an underlying imperative to render the past intelligible, and, as we know from Ricoeur, the effort to understand the past always requires us to supply a

logic of emplotment such that each action has a set of motivations, is carried out with certain intentions, and has consequences. Moreover, as Jonathan Culler notes, 'the analyst must assume there is a real or proper temporal order, that the events in fact occurred either simultaneously or successively'.¹³⁴ The very act of narrativisation posits a series of actions and events which are to be treated as an external referent to be captured by narrative. But since we are dealing with actions undergone by human subjects, there is an additional level of interpretive activity which can only be incompletely captured by narrative and which may also be suspended from the conscious reflection of individual actors themselves. The central point made in the previous chapter is that this unconscious dimension may well be a necessary feature of human political affairs. If the collection of political actors on the brink of recognising a proto-sovereign were to experience their own participation in the constitutive act, this would change the status of their act from recognition to decision and the proto-sovereign would be viewed merely as a hysterical madman or unsuccessful pretender. Moreover, if the people were somehow aware of their power to recognise the sovereign into existence, this would also imply their consciousness of their own status as the highest, underived power. The people's awareness of their constituent power (to unconsciously recognise a sovereign claim as legitimate) automatically suspends the efficacy of any sovereign claim and instead reforms the people as *constituted* (as opposed to constituent) power. Turning to Badiou, it appears that the event must also be non-narrativizable for similar reasons. The event cannot be the work of a conscious subject (since this would lead to decisionism) but nor can it be a mere product of circumstances. This means that from the perspective of an attempt to

¹³⁴ Culler, p. 171.

narrativise the event in terms of a broader account of a passage from old to new, there is always a missing link, a point at which a relatively mundane situation suddenly escalates so as to produce effects which cannot be accounted for through reference to their causes. For Schmitt, Laclau, Rousseau, and Badiou, we see an effort to think (perhaps reluctantly in the case of Schmitt) a moment that is necessarily opaque, that gives rise to radical changes precisely because it is opaque.

Ricoeur's reflections in *Time and Narrative* offer some support to the position set out above. Although humans experience their own temporal existence in terms of an always-present moment of 'now', the counterpart to this experience is an originary point from which time can be measured, a point that establishes a calendrical succession within which the 'now' of the present can be situated. But the price paid is that the originary moment itself can never be fully included in narrative except as either a disconcerting hiatus or breach. The moment that establishes a new era is unintelligible because it cannot be included in the narrative totality of the historical period it inaugurates.¹³⁵ This allows us to understand more fully the issue of subjective engagement in Badiou. As we have seen above, much like Kierkegaard's 'gaze of worldly sagacity', the disengaged spectator is unable to fully appreciate the eventual occurrence. To such a spectator, the event simply appears to be a chaotic intrusion—nothing ends or begins, there are perhaps minor disturbances, but they can be fully understood in terms of the elements of the situation. Clearly, for this spectator, the event's vital dimension remains invisible. But if we accept Badiou's reasoning, we should also add that it

¹³⁵ For more on this point, see: William C. Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative: An Introduction to Temps et Récit* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), pp. 75–76.

is equally invisible from the perspective of the engaged subject given that insofar as the event inaugurates a new era, the originary moment of foundation cannot be narrativised as an element within that era conceived as a totality. It is because the event is unintelligible that it cannot be demonstrated but must simply be posited.

What has Badiou contributed to our investigation into the political significance of narrative time and discontinuity? In the first instance, Badiou's set theoretic ontology is a decisive move beyond politico-theological thought. That is to say, we no longer need to deploy a thinly veiled theological paradigm to describe political activity. The extent to which one finds Badiou's position convincing will depend on whether one accepts the axiomatic assertions which ground his ontology. Nonetheless, part of the achievement of Badiou's philosophy resides in its boldness as well as its unrelenting drive towards internal consistency. There is a sense in which, once the initial assertions of *Being and Event* are accepted, the rest of the argument unfurls in an unassailable, unbroken strand of reasoning. And yet the other (deeply unphilosophical) strength of Badiou's work is that it seems to resonate intuitively with how humans actually experience their engagement during certain kinds of endeavor, how they can suddenly be taken up by a project, devoting their energies to it with a passionate resolve that exceeds understanding. Indeed, one can argue that this is the ultimate task for materialism today—to think through the possibility of the kind of subjective commitment that is capable of unlimited expenditure, of remaining committed long after the original reasons for committing have ceased to be compelling. Apropos this kind of commitment, it is worth recalling the passage in Montesquieu's *On the Spirit of the Laws* in which we are told of the effect of an oath on a virtuous people. Montesquieu writes:

Such was the influence of an oath among those people that nothing bound them more strongly to the laws. They often did more for the observance of an oath than they would ever have performed for the thirst of glory or for the love of their country.// When Quintus Cincinnatus, the consul, wanted to raise an army in the city against the Æqui and the Volsci, the tribunes opposed him. “Well,” said he, “let all those who have taken an oath to the consul of the preceding year march under my banner.” In vain did the tribunes cry out that this oath was no longer binding, and that when they took it Quintus was but a private person: the people were more religious than those who pretended to direct them; they would not listen to the distinctions or equivocations of the tribunes.¹³⁶

The unconditional investment here is not in the particular oath but on the *idea of what it means to take an oath*. This is important because a particular oath is something one directly decides to make, but what makes an oath binding is not the decision to take the oath, but rather the pre-existing disposition towards oaths which leads the subject to treat them as binding. It is precisely the emergence of such a disposition that Badiou is seeking to understand in *Being and Event*. The task of this chapter has been to scrutinize a particular aspect of Badiou’s project, or more precisely, to ask what exactly prevents us from inscribing the change Badiou calls ‘event’ in a continuum of historical actions and events. As has been argued, the impediment to the event’s chronological inscription inheres in the retroaction that characterizes the relationship between subject and event, that in a sense, one requires something very much like a subject to name the event which brings subject proper into being. It is a paradox that bears a close structural affinity to Schmitt’s ‘sovereign decision’ (notwithstanding the sense in which they work in opposite directions, as I draw attention to above) as well as being reminiscent of the subject of the social contract who appears in both Hobbes and Rousseau, and is precisely a subject who must *precede their own genesis*. Moreover, in each case, we see an attempt to theorise a radical change in subjective disposition which correlates to a transformation in the external

¹³⁶ Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. & trans. by Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 122.

political order, and yet crucially, this is a change that is only effective insofar as it remains inaccessible to narrative—as soon as one can account for the shift in terms of a stable, continuous narrative, the quality of the transformation itself changes.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ By way of illustration, recall the earlier example apropos Schmitt's sovereign. As soon as the constitutive power of subjects (in terms of their capacity to 'recognise', and thereby generate, sovereign status) is included in their own understanding of the genesis of sovereignty, one can no longer regard the sovereignty as inhering in the King; instead, the King becomes a mere delegate of the people who are themselves the site of real power.

Chapter Five

Transcendental Materialism in Žižek and Johnston

‘There is no real direction here, neither lines of power nor cooperation. Decisions are never really made – at best they manage to emerge, from a chaos of peevish, whims, hallucinations and all around assholery.’

- Thomas Pynchon

Each of the preceding chapters can be viewed as variations on a single argument, namely, that in our effort to account for political foundations, we encounter a resistance to narrativisation that is worthy of philosophical investigation. Put another way, the founding act which gives rise to a political community, or the act that mediates the transition between one constituted order and the next, cannot itself be successfully included in a stable narrative of the passage from old to new. At the decisive moment, chronological exposition slips into circularity and insoluble aporias are encountered as narrative passes through the distorted space of revolutionary action. As has been argued, this should be understood as an a priori unintelligibility, one that emerges both in empirical analysis as well as speculative anthropologies.¹

The narrative distortion associated with a constitutive act appears in one of two ways.² Either it is represented as a gap or break in time, described by Arendt as the ‘legendary hiatus between old and new’, or it reveals itself as a moment of circularity or retroaction whereby, in order to complete the passage

¹ Here I am referring to the ‘speculative anthropologies’ of Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau discussed previously in the second chapter.

² Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*, p. 15.

from the old political order to the new, we must import certain features from the future into the past. A key example of this latter form of distortion can be found in the figure of Rousseau's legislator who must appear exactly where (or rather, when) he is needed but where it is nonetheless impossible for him to be. We have seen how the notion of a quasi-transcendental gesture might allow us to conceive of an act that, so to speak, covers its tracks, impeding the resulting political subject's subsequent narrativisation. Such a gesture is no doubt performed by some agent, and yet crucially, the political subject's involvement *qua* agent is not recoverable *après coup*; instead, the act's quasi-transcendental status signals that it is a moment of founding which emanates from concrete political action, but which nonetheless loses its efficacy if it is not perceived as transcending mundane earthly human activity.

The current chapter will seek to investigate the aforementioned issues in greater depth through the works of Slavoj Žižek and, to a lesser extent, Adrian Johnston, each of whom have drawn upon a diverse array of sources (most notably German Idealism and Lacanian psychoanalysis) in order to pioneer a transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity.³ Of course, it will not be possible to provide a comprehensive account of either Žižek or Johnston's work here; instead, the task of this final chapter will be to scrutinize the features of a transcendental materialist position on subjectivity and action. While both Žižek and Johnston have tended to view transcendental materialism as a theory of subjectivity *strictu sensu*, our task will be to focus on its implications for our

³ There are numerous other contemporary thinkers who are also contributing to a tradition of philosophical reflection on the possibility of the immanent genesis of transcendence. Worthy of mention here are Catherine Malabou, whose interpretation of Hegelian philosophy in light of recent neuroscientific discoveries points in a similar direction to Johnston's work, and Michael O'Neill Burns whose recent monograph *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectic* presents a transcendental materialist account of Kierkegaard's philosophy.

understanding of history, temporality, and political change. To that end, I will seek to perform a transcendental materialist reading of Hobbes and Rousseau, showing first how Hobbes's account falls short insofar as it fails to provide scope for contingent, undetermined human action and, subsequently, how these shortcomings are resolved in Rousseau whose notion of human nature ultimately proves compatible with a Žižekian/Johnstonian ontology.

Distilling Žižek and Johnston's respective contribution to political theory will allow us to bolster and extend the readings of thinkers under discussion in previous chapters. The aporetic impermeability of transformative moments is held by Johnston and Žižek to be firmly located at an ontological, as opposed to merely epistemological, level. If we were dealing with a resistance to analysis with an epistemological character, this would mean that a totalising account of political transformations would be possible in principle, and would be achievable given enough data and a sufficiently refined methodology. There are compelling reasons to side with Žižek and Johnston in rejecting this approach. As we saw in Chapter 2, the aporia associated with origins appears in speculative as well as empirical accounts—a clear sign that we are facing a deadlock that cannot be reduced to a question of methodology or empirical detail. Rather, as Ricoeur has argued, we should conclude that an event comprising a decisive break with the past will not be fully intelligible, but will leave a remainder, the remainder being 'the event itself'.⁴ Human events are intelligible according to a logical grammar of time which requires us to view them as either simultaneous or successive with respect to each other. Taken together, these events must be posited as a totality from which the originary event is necessarily excluded; to include the originary event

⁴ Ricoeur, I, p. 222.

within the continuum of rectilinear time it establishes would require us to think of this event in terms of a set of prior conditions. We would then be then be unable to think this event as originary since, as Laclau succinctly puts it, 'something is originary insofar as it does not need to go outside itself in order to constitute what it is'.⁵ It is from such a position that a transcendental materialist conception of the subject can inform our understanding of political origins and moments of historical transformation.

⁵ Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*, p. 15.

The (Im)material Subject

According to Johnston, the key tenet of a transcendental materialist position is a twofold assertion that maintains both an uncompromising materialism (i.e. there is no other spiritual/immaterial substance which imbues human bodies with the magical property of subjectivity) while also showing how inert matter can give rise to a more-than-corporeal subjective dimension. Johnston frames this endeavour in the following way: ‘the choice between either a disembodied subject or an embodied self is a false dilemma. Cogito-like subjectivity ontogenetically emerges out of an originally corporeal condition as its anterior ground, although, once generated, this sort of subjectivity thereafter remains irreducible to its material sources’.⁶ This is not to be read as a simple reversion to straightforward transcendentalism. There is no higher plane transcending materiality; there is nothing but substance.⁷ And yet, equally, this is a ‘dual aspect monism’, one that does not entail reductivism or force us into view subjectivity as a mere epiphenomenal impression. The task for contemporary philosophy is to assert a form of transcendentalism that emerges immanently from a homogeneous material plane. Conceiving the genesis of subjectivity in this way, as we have noted, makes it possible to evade the theoretical cul-de-sac of a vulgar materialist reductivism with its assertion of pure, uncontaminated materiality, but it also allows for a compelling critique of the Deleuzian/Guattarian notion of sheer multiplicity, unpredictably spilling rhizomatically in every direction. Johnston follows Badiou here in revealing how beneath the celebration of the Deleuzian

⁶ Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, pp. xxiiiv–xxiv.

⁷ In fact, the situation is more complicated than this. There is a discrepancy between Johnston’s materialism of a thick, inert substance which gives rise to more-than-corporeal subjectivity, and Žižek’s most recent arguments for a ‘dematerialized’ materialism. This divergence between Johnston and Žižek will be dealt with in more detail below.

‘mad dance’, there lies an underlying sameness.⁸ Multiplicity, when thought to its limit, ends up slipping into its opposite—a single plane of immanence from which nothing new can emerge.⁹ And finally, the cogito as a self-identical kernel, the locus of conscious thought and directed action (in the manner of orthodox readings of the German Idealist tradition) is held to be insufficient insofar as it entails a notion of the subject as simply posited in advance without adequately delving into the *positing activity* which gives rise to it.

Even while Žižek has appropriated the term transcendental materialism to describe his own philosophical position, there is nonetheless an important distinction between Johnston and Žižek with regard to the consistency of this materialism. In Žižek’s most recent work we find a materialism that is not the inert density of substance Johnston holds capable of producing the more-than-material subject, but rather a materialism of the immaterial. Žižek’s materialism is described as the ‘immanent materiality of the ideal order itself’ and as a ‘*materialism without matter*, without the metaphysical notion of matter as a fully constituted substance—in dialectical materialism, matter “disappears” in a set of purely formal relations’.¹⁰ Having said this, it is unclear from Žižek’s arguments whether he intends to stake out a truly distinct position from Johnston or whether the distinctions are purely rhetorical. For our purposes, it is worth retaining focus on the broad commonalities between Žižek and Johnston’s respective intellectual projects. Both theorists are interested in thinking through materialism’s central problematic, that of ‘the rise of an eternal Idea out of the activity of people caught

⁸ Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamour of Being*, trans. by Louise Burchill (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 11; Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, p. xiii.

⁹ Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, p. xiii.

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014), pp. 56, 73.

in a finite historical situation'.¹¹ In addition, both assert the priority of a cut or rupture (drawing on the Lacanian notion of the Real) as opposed to any ideal/material plane.

Transcendental materialism draws on the Lacanian notion of the split subject to elaborate an ontology characterized by the non-closure of substance. The subject is not an additional element one adds to material reality; instead, the subject is the site of a constitutive split between a vanishing point of negative self-relating and a series of partial identifications. This is neatly expressed in Žižek's concise statement that 'Man is a lack which, in order to fill itself in, recognizes itself as something'.¹² Indeed, this is the vital point of contact Žižek identifies between Lacan and Kant, described by Johnston as a split between 'phenomenal and noumenal dimensions of subjectivity': 'The subject *an sich* that makes experience possible cannot itself fall, as a discrete experiential, representational element, within the frame of the field it opens up and sustains'.¹³ To be quite clear on this point, the subject is not *in-itself* this 'noumenal' vanishing point. Considering this dimension of subjectivity as 'noumenal' as Johnston seems to here is already to concede too much to an orthodox idealism.¹⁴ Subject is, on the contrary, the very oscillation between a pure self-relating negativity, and various modes of identification giving rise to a transcendental illusion, the illusion of a hard kernel of self-sameness. It is an illusion that correlates to the psychoanalytic notion, proposed by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, of the

¹¹ Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, p. 73.

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), p. 44.

¹³ Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, p. 30.

¹⁴ Elsewhere Johnston is more careful, affixing a qualifying 'quasi' to the noumenal dimension of subjectivity. As with quasi-transcendentalism, explored at length in previous chapters, the term 'quasi-noumenal' expresses the fact that while full noumenality cannot be sustained, the illusion of noumenality is an inevitable, constitutive aspect of subjectivity.

‘fundamental fantasy’—that of the ‘origin of the subject himself’.¹⁵ The insight here is that the ‘core’ of the subject is not pre-given, but is in fact, as hinted at above, a consequence of another more basic activity of ‘positing’. It is this positing activity which fabricates a firm ground (albeit illusory) from which the subject can seize itself as a self-sufficient agent and begin to act in the world. For Žižek’s Lacan, the idea of the ‘subject of the signifier’ expresses the ‘contentless’ status of the subject, the sense in which the subject has no stable objective correlate:

there is, of course, no substantial signified content which guarantees the unity of the I: at this level, the subject is multiple, dispersed, and so forth – its unity is guaranteed only by the self-referential symbolic act, that is, ‘I’ is a purely performative entity [...] when I designate ‘myself’ as ‘I’ – this very act of signifying adds something to the ‘real flesh-and-blood entity’ (inclusive of the content of its mental states, desires, attitudes) thus designated, and the subject is that X which is added to the designated content by means of the act of its self-referential designation.¹⁶

Clearly, the designation ‘I’ does not point to any particular locatable content, but the very illusion of a consistent content referred to as ‘I’ has its own autonomy, exerting downward causality (actively manipulating the world through directed action and entailing other ‘real world’ adjustments) such that material being and non-material subject engage in a reciprocal process of modification. The problem one encounters here is that any formal description of what the subject ‘is’ or what it ‘does’ can entail theoretical regressions into a self-sufficient subject-*qua*-agent, the very ‘doer behind the deed’ Nietzsche sought to debunk in his *Genealogy of Morality*.¹⁷ Even describing the subject as ‘non-material’ seems to lead to a quasi-spiritualized subject, thus enabling precisely the dualist misreading both Žižek and Johnston are at pains to avoid. Against this, the subject should be viewed as a torsion between a self-relating negativity and various partial fixations. This

¹⁵ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, ‘Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality’, in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. by Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (New York, NY: Methuen, 1986), pp. 5–34 (p. 19).

¹⁶ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, pp. 244–245.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, p. 26.

means that it is impossible to distil some subjective essence by removing all material obstacles and influences, but equally, one cannot bracket off the subject so as to perceive external reality as an uninterrupted, objective totality (the subject would inevitably be smuggled back in the form of this fantasised, desubstantialised gaze).

The manoeuvre performed by Žižek and Johnston is one that sidesteps dualism (either as a Kantian phenomena/noumena or a spirit/substance division) and vulgar materialism (homogeneous, continuous, material being plus epiphenomenal ‘illusory’ subject) so as to assert a fractured ontology, i.e. a materialism that is not consistent but is riven by splits, gaps, and discontinuities. Within Kantian philosophy, subject cannot be situated on the side of phenomena or noumena; instead, according to Žižek, the possibility of the subject’s thinking activity itself relies on a minimal, ineradicable opacity: ‘The act of “I think” is trans-phenomenal, it is not an object of inner experience or intuition; yet for all that, it is not a noumenal Thing, but rather the void of its lack’.¹⁸ There is a significant radicalisation of Kant underway here. From an orthodox Kantian perspective, the subject is inaccessible insofar as it is located within the noumenal field. In the same way that objects in-themselves are inaccessible to subjective apperception, the Kantian subject is that which is ‘recognized only through the thoughts that are its predicates, and about which, in abstraction, we can never have even the least concept’.¹⁹ The error here is that of conceiving the gulf between the knowing, perceiving subject and subject *qua* Thing capable of autonomous, spontaneous action as if it were of an epistemological character.

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 13.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. & trans. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 414.

Therein resides the kernel of Žižek's radically heterodox Kantian insight: 'if I were to have an access to my noumenal Self, *I would thereby lose the very feature which makes me an I of pure apperception*; I would cease to be the spontaneous transcendental agent that constitutes reality'.²⁰ Subject cannot thus be understood as an additional noumenal Thing. We move from an epistemological limitation to ontological deadlock as soon as we accept that access to the noumenal subject would entail the self-erasure of subject as such.

This is, for Žižek, the only ontological position which can sustain human freedom: 'either subjectivity is an illusion or reality is *in itself* (not only epistemologically) not-All'.²¹ Subject is to be identified with the rupture in the field of 'objective' reality, not as an additional element to be uncovered, but as *discontinuity*, i.e. as the non-element that both subverts efforts towards totalization and gives rise to the misperception of materiality as a reified otherness. We can supplement Žižek with Laclau here: the genesis of 'subject' arises by way of a constitutive distortion through which the pure void of self-relating negativity misperceives itself, investing itself with a consistency that then gives rise to the recognizable 'classic' subject *qua* self-sufficient agent of thought and action. The distortive operation is not the second-order misperception of an original content; rather, this 'original content' is precisely the illusion generated by the distortive operation which '[projects] into something that is essentially divided the illusion of a fullness and self-transparency that it lacks'.²²

²⁰ Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 16.

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 103.

²² Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*, p. 15.

Ent-Scheidung

Does our conceiving the subject as the result of a constitutive distortion then prevent us from viewing the subject as capable of autonomous action? Or, put another way, is the idea of an autonomous subject also the result of a misperception of a more fundamental heteronomy resulting from our immersion in a fully determined ‘chain of being’? Žižek addresses this issue in his *Indivisible Remainder*, an examination of Schellingian philosophy that defends the possibility of a free act through an account of the moment of beginning as the result of an irrecuperable, primordial deed:

The deed, once accomplished, sinks immediately into the unfathomable depth, thereby acquiring its lasting character. It is the same with the will which, once posited at the beginning and led into the outside, immediately has to sink into the unconscious. [...] The decision that is in any way the true beginning should not appear before consciousness, it should not be recalled to mind, since this, precisely, would amount to its recall. He who, apropos of a decision, reserves for himself the right to drag it again to light, will never accomplish the beginning.²³

The insight Žižek wishes to extract from Schellingian philosophy is the idea of a beginning that occurs with a free act which, once accomplished, is definitively and necessarily lost to conscious reflection.²⁴ For Schelling, we are dealing with an arche-original deed—the act that gives rise to consciousness of one’s subjective relation to the world. There is no doer behind this deed, only a chaotic vortex, characterised by Žižek alternately as the ‘rotary motion of drives’ and as an

²³ F. W. J. Schelling, *Die Weltalter. Fragmente. In Den Urfassungen von 1811 Und 1813*, ed. by Manfred Schröter (Munich: Biederstein, 1946), pp. 183–4; Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 21.

²⁴ It is worth noting that Žižek’s reading of Schelling has been reproached from different quarters for its overzealous and inappropriate application of a Lacanian conceptual framework to Schelling’s work, and for its pretensions to ‘critical materialism’ which in fact amount to an ‘incomplete idealism’. These debates, while deserving of scholarly attention, are considered peripheral to the objectives of this chapter. See: Peter Dews, ‘The Eclipse of Coincidence: Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, and Žižek’s Misreading of Schelling’, in *Traversing the Fantasy*, ed. by Geoff M. Boucher, Jason Glynos, and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 197–215; Iain Hamilton Grant, ‘The Insufficiency of Ground: On Žižek’s Schellingianism’, in *The Truth of Žižek*, ed. by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum, 2007), pp. 82–98.

‘orgasm of forces’.²⁵ Taking this vortex as the starting point, Schelling describes a moment of contraction, followed by a decisive cut, with the latter serving to institute an unstable balance. So, why must this decisive cut remain unconscious? Precisely because the cut *is itself the primordial act of repression which generates the stability of the new order*.²⁶ If this act of repression were available to conscious recollection, this would mean that the repression itself had been unsuccessful and chaos would immediately resurface. As Žižek puts it, it is not the ‘eternal past’ that is unconscious, but rather the ‘act of *Ent-Scheidung* by means of which drives were ejected into the eternal past’.²⁷

To what extent are we permitted to view this act as ‘free’? Žižek repeatedly emphasises the contingency of the act, claiming that this act is not the outcome of any pre-existing dynamic. Even though his account tends to read like a pneumatic modelling of the original vortex, giving rise to conscious subjectivity through a gradual build-up of pressure ending in a sudden release, this model cannot be accepted insofar as it supposes the ‘release’ as the predetermined eventual result of the ‘vortex’. This is the criticism hit upon by Iain Hamilton Grant in his contribution to *The Truth of Žižek*. Among his concluding remarks, Hamilton Grant triumphantly asserts:

‘*At last we have it: the self-grounding of freedom common to all the Idealist philosophies, Schelling’s included, says Žižek, provides the necessary ‘subject’s prehistory’; to what else could it lead? How capable is Being (*Seinkönnen*) of anything other than subjectivity, and moreover, of a subjectivity narrowly conceived within the rubric of a freely acting self-consciousness, whatever its constitutive lacunae?*’.²⁸

Hamilton Grant then goes on to admonish Žižek for arguing that the ground of human freedom is the inexistence of nature whereas a truly Schellingian

²⁵ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters*, pp. 24, 28.

²⁶ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters*, p. 33.

²⁷ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters*, p. 33.

²⁸ Hamilton Grant, p. 95.

argument would, in contrast, claim that freedom is thoroughly rooted in nature.²⁹ The problem with this argument is that it misconstrues Žižek's notion of nature. Of course, nature 'exists', however, there is a crucial distinction to be made between nature in so far as it exists *for us*, and nature *in itself* as an object of philosophical speculation. This is why we are not permitted to equate the 'vortex of drives' to nature. To do so only imports a vision of nature as it exists *for us* into the eternal past—an illegitimate manoeuvre, although no doubt a tempting one since it would enable us to view human subjectivity as emerging by way of necessity (in the manner indicated by Hamilton Grant when he asks what else Being could be for other than subjectivity) as opposed to simply as an utterly contingent event, an aberration that could just as easily not have happened at all.

Schelling's *Weltalter* seeks to provide an account of the original genesis of subject out of substance. In turn, Žižek claims that the expulsion of the eternal past via an act of primordial repression can be mapped onto the two great epochs of human history: 'the *pagan epoch of rotary motion* [...] and the *Christian epoch of linear teleological progress*'.³⁰ Paganism is thus the primordial, eternal past, separated from divine Logos by the Christian event. Without wishing to discount this 'application' of Schellingian philosophy to human history, there is a far more telling parallel to be found between Schelling's philosophy of beginnings and the Hobbesian narrative of political origins. On this reading, the 'rotary motion of drives' forms the rough equivalent of the proto-political collection of disparate, isolated individuals existing precariously in the Hobbesian state of nature, while the political community instituted by the covenant corresponds to Schelling's fragile order generated by a founding act of repression. The idea of an act which,

²⁹ Hamilton Grant, p. 96.

³⁰ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters*, p. 42.

in the very instant of its occurrence is immediately and irrevocably buried in an eternal past, dovetails with our earlier remarks on the idea of a quasi-transcendental founding political gesture. In both cases, there is a moment of ‘necessary forgetting’ whereby, in order to accomplish a passage from old to new, the act that motivates the transformation must be hidden from retrospection. We can detect a similar kind of forgetfulness in Hamilton Grant’s reproach against Žižek in which the former asks, ‘How capable is Being (*Seinkönnen*) of anything other than subjectivity?’³¹ Hamilton Grant succumbs to the perspectival distortion which views the present as the only possible future for the past. The implicit claim is that Being is teleologically oriented to the production of subjectivity whereas in fact Being is more than capable of indefinite static inertia. There is a similar manoeuvre in Hobbes’s account of the passage from the state of nature to political life. A teleological trajectory is introduced into the state of nature such that political life becomes the only possible outcome. The contingency of the founding political deed is effaced and we are left with an apparently smooth progression from anarchy to order. In Hobbes, the effect of this effacement is the opacity of the narrative episode in which the moment of contractual agreement actually takes place. We find in Hobbes’s account the absolute contraction of all the deliberation and persuasion that one might expect to accompany the genesis of political life expelled from the narrative, while its absence is signalled with the tellingly abrupt phrase ‘This done’.³² No sooner are we approaching the moment of political genesis than we have already passed over it directly into sovereignty, law, and government. ‘This done’ marks the point of groundlessness, the decision that generates political life *ex nihilo*, producing

³¹ Hamilton Grant, p. 95.

³² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 120.

order out of the constant, self-perpetuating cycle of manipulation and exploitation found in the state of nature. Moreover, just as for Schelling the originary act is the very operation that expels the foundation into an eternal past, so too does the Hobbesian ‘This done’ allow us to see how the passage from disorder to order contains a Laclauian constitutive distortion, i.e. a distortive gesture which does not distort an original meaning, but rather has as its primary effect the production of the illusion of an underlying, undistorted content.³³

³³ Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations*, p. 15.

A Transcendental Materialist Reappraisal of the Social Contract

The Žižekian subject thus appears to be the locus of a distortive operation which, on the one hand, plays a constitutive role in forming ‘objective reality’, whilst on the other hand, is unable to perceive reality as a consistent Whole. As soon as one attempts a totalising narrative, one faces both a surplus of meaning (a plethora of different versions or perspectives that are incommensurate with one another and cannot be synthesised into a higher Whole), or a narrative ridden with gaps and breaches. Žižek offers a notion of the subject which allows us to account for the unavoidable narrative distortions noted in the various thinkers considered throughout the previous chapters of this thesis. From Kierkegaard’s account of the circularity that characterises the genesis myth through Hobbes and Rousseau’s respective repressions and displacements, the reflexive determination of the Schmittian sovereign, and Badiou’s evental subject—in each case we are obliged to view the vital act that accomplishes the passage between old and new as freely undertaken while being prevented from viewing it as a simple choice between pre-given alternatives. The following quotation from Žižek’s *The Ticklish Subject* proposes a reading of Hegel and Kant that may serve to clarify matters:

On a philosophical level, this delicate distinction allows us to grasp Hegel’s break with Kantian idealism. Hegel, of course, learned the lesson of Kant’s transcendental idealism (there is no reality prior to a subject’s ‘positing’ activity); however, he refused to elevate the subject into a neutral-universal agent who directly constitutes reality. To put it in Kantian terms: while he admitted that there is no reality without the subject, Hegel insisted that *subjectivity is inherently ‘pathological’* (biased, limited to a distorting, unbalanced perspective on the Whole). Hegel’s achievement was thus *to combine*, in an unprecedented way, *the ontologically constitutive character of the subject’s activity with the subject’s irreducible pathological bias*: when these two features are thought together, conceived as co-dependent, we obtain the notion of a *pathological bias constitutive of ‘reality’ itself*.³⁴

³⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso Books, 2008), p. 87.

The primordial past of the state of nature can only appear to us in distorted form because the founding social contract not only accomplishes the constitution of a political entity, but also marks our own constitution as subjects within the newly created political space. It is this dynamic which then introduces the '*pathological bias*'. Any narrative recapitulation of the past is always posited/constituted from our perspective, with the implication that every attempt to perceive the past 'as it really was' automatically imports characteristics of our own period into the past. The past 'as it was' is definitively lost'; all we have left is the past as it exists 'for us', that is to say, in so far as it is thinkable from our current historical situation.

To push this interpretation in a more explicitly psychoanalytic direction, it is also clear that the idea of an original social contract is a perfect example of what Žižek, following Freud, calls a fantasmatic 'primal scene'. This 'primal scene' need not refer to a verifiable event, nor it is even necessary for us to 'believe' in it; instead, the primal scene is simply the subject's attempt to gain narrative purchase on its own origins. Thomas Brockelman makes this point in his study on Žižek and Heidegger, pointing out that the role of fantasy is to '[project] the social *qua* totality by imagining it as totalized from [a] position of transcendence'.³⁵ It is the act of totalization that, by effacing the trauma of the origin, gives rise to a system of meaning. The irrecoverability of the origin (as we have already seen, one does not have any pure access to the origin without some degree of repression/distortion) sets the subject's fantasmatic effort in motion, and yet, as Žižek argues in *The Plague of Fantasies*: 'the price one pays for the narrative resolution [of the problem of origins] is the *petitio principia* of the temporal loop—the narrative silently presupposes as already given what it

³⁵ Thomas Brockelman, *Žižek and Heidegger: The Question Concerning Techno-Capitalism* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 56.

purports to reproduce'.³⁶ Without this narrative closure, the universe of meaning collapses. The examples Žižek mobilises include both the myth of 'primordial accumulation'—the idea that the inequalities produced by capitalism emerged gradually as a result of the varying degrees of effort and talent of different workers—and, perhaps the arche-example, the genesis story of the Old Testament in which man's fallen state is attributed to an original transgression. All the key features of a fantasised primal scene are also present in the Hobbesian account of the social contract. Even though the state of nature can hardly be described as Edenic, its real function is to assert the inevitability of the emergence of a sovereign in whom power and authority are concentrated and, importantly, that the sovereign's power is derived from a moment of consensus between all members of the nascent political community. Our own epoch is rendered meaningful insofar as we are able to read the passage from human pre-history to political life as a necessary progression rather than a strange, contingent aberration. Put another way, applying Žižek's Hegelian insight to the Hobbesian contract reveals how the very horizon of meaning is sustained only through the continued exclusion of some underlying contingent event.

Against the Hobbesian account, Žižek's claim (no doubt informed by an idiosyncratic reading of Hegel) is that the passage from one 'particular life-context' to another is not achieved through a flexible recognition of new means to secure one's interests, but through a stubborn, excessive attachment:

when, irrespective of circumstances, I stubbornly attach myself to some accidental particular feature to which I am bound by no inner necessity, this 'pathological' attachment enables me to disengage myself from immersion in my particular life-context. That is what Hegel calls the 'infinite right of subjectivity': to risk everything, my entire substantial content, for the sake of some trifling, idiosyncratic feature that matters more to me than anything else.³⁷

³⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 11.

³⁷ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 104.

This is one way of conceiving the actual mechanism that produces the founding political act. In the Hobbesian state of nature we are told that every covenant is doomed to fail since Hobbes's materialism holds that each individual will always follow their own perceived advantage. It will always be in one's interests to trick or manipulate other parties in order to secure advantage, just as it will always be an extremely risky strategy to be the 'first performer' of any contract made. Under such conditions, for a contract to succeed, one requires a moment of irrational, stubborn resolve to fulfil a certain task *even when the likely outcome will be disadvantageous*. As will now be clear, this is the crucial missing link in the Hobbesian narrative. The first performer's gesture is both necessary and impossible within the terms of Hobbes's account.

For Hobbes, the ultimate load-bearing human attribute motivating the passage from the state of nature to political life is reason. The Hobbesian individual is assumed to be oriented to the rational pursuit of self-interest in all contexts and scenarios. As a consequence, fear can be a powerful motivator both prior to the contract, since fear of a 'painful and violent death' provides a powerful incentive to leave the state of nature, and afterwards, insofar as the subject's fear of the sovereign ensures a measure of order that would have been impossible in the state of nature. Rousseau, in contrast to Hobbes, does not view the contract as arrived at by way of necessity; rather, it is viewed as a hypothetical solution to the problems described in the second *Discourse*. It is a position which follows from Rousseau's emphasis on freedom, and not reason, as the fundamental human quality: 'The principle of all action is the will of a free being. We cannot go beyond this. It is not the word freedom which is meaningless but the word

necessity'.³⁸ We are human insofar as we have a will, not because we have the capacity to reason. Indeed, reason's primary function in Rousseau is to strengthen and extend our freedom as opposed to the function of reason in Hobbes which is to secure a durable political order. The content of the notion of freedom in question is described by Asher Horowitz as follows: 'Freedom consists in the biological endowment of a creature with relatively open instincts and therefore possessed of a rudimentary negativity, a rudimentary capacity to oppose himself to things, other 'persons,' to his own drives, to his own past, and to the objectified image of himself he constructs from his interactions with others.'³⁹ Man's negative freedom does not lead us into a new teleology in which humans are simply propelled forward by another essential property (freedom as opposed to reason); in fact, there is nothing in Rousseau's account which necessitates man's use of his faculty of negativity. The implication is that every historical development man undergoes as a result of his free will must be viewed as utterly contingent. History can no longer be conceived as progressing steadily towards specific outcomes as Hobbes would have it. Rousseau's account is one that views history as an open ended process in which material transformations occur in tandem with changes in the disposition of historically acting subjects.

Rousseau's conception of human nature proves compatible with a transcendental materialist understanding of the subject. Horowitz and Inston have both noted the profound mutability of the human subject in Rousseau's account as well as the indeterminacy of the social and political institutions humans create. For Horowitz, man's 'perfectability' is a function of an essential

³⁸ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 291.

³⁹ Asher Horowitz, *Rousseau, Nature, and History* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. 72.

negativity that enables human agents to interrupt their determination by historical conditions. As mentioned above, it is this negative power that, on Horowitz's reading, provides the '*sine qua non*' of both human evolution and the later historical and cultural development with which the former insensibility merges'.⁴⁰ Likewise, Inston's reading of Rousseauian man's perfectibility takes it to be, 'a consequence of our essential indeterminacy'.⁴¹ The harmony between a Rousseauian conception of human nature and the transcendental materialism of Žižek and Johnston therefore resides in the shared notion of a subject capable of disengaging itself from its determination by a particular life-context. This 'disengagement' (which may also take the form of an excessive moment of *over-engagement*) is accomplished through a free gesture Žižek refers to as an 'act'.⁴² As we will see, the concept of the act has important implications for our enquiry into the possibility of radical transformations and the disjointed temporality such transformations imply.

⁴⁰ Horowitz, p. 72.

⁴¹ Inston, *Rousseau and Radical Democracy*, p. 50.

⁴² Throughout Žižek's works, the term 'act' is often conflated with the term 'event', with acts sometimes being described as 'events' and vice versa. Moreover, the term 'event' in Žižek's corpus is not identical to Badiou's concept of the event even if the former is heavily influenced by the latter. Throughout the discussion below, I will attempt to follow Žižek's usage as closely as possible. As a rough principle, it can be noted at this stage that 'act' generally has a more Lacanian inflection, while 'event' is more often used to refer to moments of political transformation. Where I discuss passages in which the two terms seem to be used interchangeably, I will use 'act/event'.

The Act and its Vissitudes

Žižek uses the term ‘act’ (occasionally capitalized as ‘Act’) to describe a subjective performance that accomplishes a radical change precisely because it does not bind itself to a particular predefined strategic intervention within a given horizon of meaning. While it should be clear at this stage that something like a Žižekian act is required in order to exit the state of nature, Žižek’s own reflections on the act tend to operate in the opposite direction—i.e. the act is not the gesture which inaugurates the sovereign and establishes political life; rather, it is the kind of activity required to overthrow a political order, to dissolve a given configuration of power relations. As we will see, both acts share the same structure because they rely on a zero-level characteristic of political legitimacy, that of the constituent power of the political subject. This constituent power, elaborated by thinkers such as John Locke, Emmanuel Sieyès, and Carl Schmitt is both the subjective capacity that gives rise to a political order as well as the people’s inalienable power to abrogate any constituted order.⁴³ If an act can be said to perform this function, we are obliged to conceive it as undetermined by the order it overturns. While there is no doubt that ‘acts’ occur in particular historical situations, they are not reducible to the situation’s conditions, but rather emerge by introducing a measure of distance with respect to those conditions. This has led Žižek and others to adopt a quasi-religious register when describing the act: ‘absolute/unconditional acts do occur, but not in the (idealist) guise of a self-transparent gesture performed by a subject with a pure Will who fully intends them – they occur, on the contrary, as a totally unpredictable *tuche*, a miraculous

⁴³ In this identification of a tradition of thought dealing with the constituent power, I am supported by Andreas Kalyvas, ‘Popular Sovereignty, Democracy, and the Constituent Power’, *Constellations*, 12.2 (2005).

event which shatters our lives'.⁴⁴ The miraculous quality imputed to the act/event here should not mislead us—the act does not emanate from a divine beyond; it is rather to be viewed as a moment of 'pure happening', a position adopted by a subject without an explanatory rationale, not a consequence of 'inner' willed activity, not experienced as a choice, but equally, an event that exceeds situational determination.

In his more recent works, Žižek has offered further discussion on the concept of the act:

But what about the retroactivity of a gesture which (re)constitutes this past itself? This, perhaps, is the most succinct definition of what an authentic act is: in our ordinary activity, we effectively just follow the (virtual fantasmatic) coordinates of our identity, while an act proper involves the paradox of an actual move which (retroactively) changes the very virtual "transcendental" coordinates of its agent's being—or, in Freudian terms, which not only changes the actuality of our world but also "moves its underground." We have thus a kind of reflexive "folding back of the condition on to the given it was the condition for": while the pure past is the transcendental condition for our acts, our acts not only create new actual reality, they also retroactively change this very condition.⁴⁵

The above quotation is telling insofar as it brings into focus the centrality of the retroactive mode of operation for our understanding of the subject's act. We have already seen how an effort to scrutinize a moment of radical transformation ends up producing a narrative which falls short of the usual standards of intelligibility given that its narrative episodes cannot be ordered in a rectilinear manner. In a similar way, Žižek posits the retroactive reconfiguration of a situation's coordinates of possibility as an inherent characteristic of the act. Human freedom is not the freedom to act in one's own interest, or to make a selection from a set of alternatives. While I may not be able to act freely in a classical sense (my actions are always-already determined by pre-given natural-mechanical limitations and ideological constraints), insofar as I remain a subject I retain a

⁴⁴ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 463.

⁴⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 178.

minimal capacity to choose which determinations are salient. My freedom thus consists in my ability to reject the schema of value that grounds a given field of choices, or as Žižek puts it, to accomplish ‘the more radical gesture of subverting the very structuring principle of this field’.⁴⁶ A subject is capable of spontaneously becoming something other, of identifying with a new set of determinations and experiencing them as overriding imperatives. To take a commonplace example often invoked by Žižek, when one falls in love, the beloved suddenly becomes an ultimate source of value such that previously unimaginable sacrifices are now possible on their behalf.⁴⁷ Likewise, a political act proper would be a total commitment which one does not experience as freely undertaken, but rather as a spontaneously arising inner compulsion to act in accordance with a new principle.

Can such an understanding of human freedom be convincing? In order to arrive at an affirmative answer, some significant challenges will first need to be addressed. Foremost among these challenges is the tendency for Žižek’s account of the act to betray what Oliver Marchart regards as a ‘romantic longing for purity’.⁴⁸ Marchart identifies the key shortcoming of the Žižekian act as its ‘all-or-nothing’ character. Either one has a radical change that recreates the entire global order such that it is no longer recognisable, or one simply has ‘acting’, a term designating mere business-as-usual in politics, the ebb and flow of electoral cycles and low-key, ineffectual bouts of activism. In a similar way, Johnston criticises the clamour and carnage of the ‘spectacular act’.⁴⁹ Both Marchart and

⁴⁶ Slavoj Žižek, ‘Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes Please!’, in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 121.

⁴⁷ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, p. 30.

⁴⁸ Oliver Marchart, ‘Acting and the Act: On Slavoj Žižek’s Political Ontology’, in *The Truth of Žižek*, ed. by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 108.

⁴⁹ Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, p. 158.

Johnston see practical and theoretical dangers in conceiving the act as a thunderous awe-inspiring break with the past. Practically speaking, if we accept that a total rupture is actually the minimal condition for change (since anything less will simply be the continuation of the old in the guise of the new), we may set the bar so high that change itself begins to appear to be an impossible task. This is referred to by Marchart as ‘cutting the link between politics and the political’ and the ‘hypostatization of the act’ and is certainly a feature of some of Žižek’s more forthright expositions of the concept of the act.⁵⁰ If the political is indeed severed from politics, this would seem to deprive us of any means of achieving the kind of effective engagement that might lead to systemic change. Even fairly radical forms of activism can be easily dismissed as implicitly sanctioned expressions of dissent which may even give rise to more pernicious forms of complicity.⁵¹ Alternatively, on a theoretical level, Žižek’s position generates certain difficulties insofar as it seems to engender an irresistible slippage into theological rhetoric. Even if this is a danger Žižek is aware of, it seems to be one he actively courts by constantly imbuing the act with the aura of revelation—no doubt an odd strategy for someone claiming to espouse radical philosophical materialism. Far from enabling political engagement, conceiving act *qua* miracle encourages us to view political change as an intervention from another domain, something that cannot be worked towards but should rather be patiently waited

⁵⁰ Marchart, ‘Acting and the Act: On Slavoj Žižek’s Political Ontology’, p. 104.

⁵¹ A classic example, offered by Žižek, would be the anti-war marches in the United Kingdom prior to the 2003 war in Iraq. These marches were well attended and certainly indicated a popular objection to the invasion of Iraq. The point to note, however, is the sense in which both sides win: the protesters are able to absolve themselves of their feelings of complicity and Western guilt, while the UK Government are able to make the self-congratulatory argument that such protests are only possible in a liberal democracy and that by toppling Saddam Hussein, Iraqis themselves will be able to enjoy the same democratic freedoms. See: Slavoj Žižek, *World Renowned Philosopher Slavoj Žižek on the Iraq War, the Bush Presidency, the War on Terror and More*, 2012

<http://www.democracynow.org/2008/5/12/world_renowned_philosopher_slavoj_zizek_on> [accessed 12 January 2016].

for. Moreover, this theological register would then also seem inconsistent with some of Žižek's favoured examples of the act. Most notably, in describing Lenin's revolutionary decision to seize state power, Žižek characterizes Lenin's stance as one of, throwing oneself into the paradox of the situation, seizing the opportunity and *intervening*, even if the situation was "premature", with a wager that *this very "premature" intervention would radically change the "objective" relationship*.⁵² If the act is analogous to a miracle, this would imply it comes from a realm distinct from human action. The most basic way of characterising a miracle would be as a divine intervention in worldly processes. Viewing an act as 'unworldly' in the same way as a miracle would mean that no 'premature' intervention can possibly generate it. Žižek's account thus seems to be divided between claims that acts can be brought about through a kind of reckless Leninist wager, and an opposing position that acts are quasi-divine, occurring independently of human activity. The core of my immanent critique of Žižek on this point is simply that we do not need to resort to theological terminology in order to conceptualise the act. Reading the act as a miracle sets us back on a path that Badiou, Johnston, and Žižek, as proponents of a thoroughgoing materialism, should all be determined to avert. I am therefore sympathetic to Marchart's exasperation with Žižek's tendency to deviate sporadically from his own positions, and even to attack scholars seeking to defend positions he previously adhered to.⁵³ With this in mind, I argue that an effective reading of Žižek must also be a selective one. There is no single, coherent position on the concept of act, nor indeed on many other Žižekian offerings. One must rather sift through the

⁵² Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 114.

⁵³ In the example Marchart mentions, Žižek attacks Stavrakakis even though the latter is defending a position Žižek himself took only a couple of years prior. See: Marchart, 'Acting and the Act: On Slavoj Žižek's Political Ontology', p. 115.

debris of Žižek's various revisions and interlinked theoretical projects in order to pick out certain promising elements.⁵⁴ In the discussion of the act that follows, I will attempt to flesh out the concept's political import as well as the model of temporality it implies. The act, as will be shown, requires us to think in terms of the retroactive efficacy of an effect upon its cause. To put this another way, the Žižekian act complicates the narrative emplotment of cause and effect insofar as it requires us to consider the possibility of an effect that reconfigures the situation such that it generates the very causal dynamic that gives rise to it.

⁵⁴ If this can be construed as intellectually dishonest, I share Marchart's defence that it is a necessary countermeasure taken up so as to grapple with the shifting terrain of the Žižekian corpus. This may mean adopting a position that Žižek himself no longer endorses, but this is less of a problem for a thesis seeking to discern structural resemblances recurring throughout a series of different thinkers than it would be for a thesis seeking to present an internally consistent position on a particular theorist.

Vanishing Mediators and Posited Presuppositions

In an early text entitled *For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a political factor*, Žižek does in fact provide a thoroughly materialist account of the possibility of radical political change. Here, the term ‘vanishing mediator’ is deployed in order to characterise the intermediate element required to think a transformation between two distinct historical periods. The concept itself is drawn from Fredric Jameson’s classic interpretation of Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in which the former argues that, for Weber, Protestantism represents an important mediatory stage in the transition to a capitalist economy. Rather than emerging organically from feudal practices, the rise of capitalism required a thorough-going transformation on the level of individual behaviours, aspirations, and beliefs. Protestantism achieved this by encouraging individuals to accumulate additional wealth as well as promoting the virtue of an ascetic, puritan life. Once the ‘ascetic-acquisitive’ attitude has been socially normalized, the substantial life-world of feudalism has effectively been left behind such that all that is required is a formal shift which registers the transformation as having already been accomplished. Put another way, first one simply has society organised according to feudal relationships; then, the mediating phase of the Protestant ethic which gives rise to new dispositions and practices, within the parameters of the old feudal form; then, finally, these dispositions and practices become autonomous from the Protestant ethic which gave rise to them, such that they are now asserted in their own right. Žižek urges us to read this process according to Hegel’s ‘negation of the negation’:

the first “negation” consists in the slow, underground, invisible change of substantial content which, paradoxically, takes place *in the name of its own form*; then, once the form has lost its substantial right, it falls to pieces by itself – the very form of negation

is negated, or, to use the classic Hegelian couple, the change which took place “in itself” becomes “for itself”.⁵⁵

Protestantism accomplished a universalization of the Christian attitude: the protestant ethic means that even economic activity is also conceived as a ‘domain of the disclosure of God’s Grace’.⁵⁶ But precisely this universalization served to prepare the ground for capitalist individualism whereby, instead of the ascetic-acquisitive stance serving to indicate one’s moral stature or devoutness, acquisition begins to take place for its own sake. The Hegelian point Žižek wishes to emphasise here is that there is a minimal but all-important difference between medieval corporatism conceived *in-itself* and its invisible, subterranean erosion by the universalisation of the Christian attitude effected by Protestantism.

The analysis of Protestantism as a vanishing mediator does not exhaust the concept’s import for our enquiry. Having established the possibility of reading a historical phase as a necessary mediator between two otherwise unbridgeable epochs, Žižek goes on to argue that this is not the only reading possible. In fact, one can also propose a distinct reading in which the vanishing mediator designates a transformation that takes no time, but rather, in the same way as the Badiouian event, as a moment of openness which becomes indiscernible in hindsight.⁵⁷ Rather than conceiving a vanishing mediator as an entity or tradition whose emergence and disappearance are both necessary to produce a certain historical outcome, now the vanishing mediator is seen as having no positive status at all; it is rather the pure form of difference between two distinct historical periods that surfaces as narrative discontinuity, albeit with the vital caveat that this ‘difference’ is the space of a subjective act. This understanding of the

⁵⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 186.

⁵⁶ Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 182.

⁵⁷ Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 188.

vanishing mediator is vital to our enquiry. Žižek introduces the topic in the following remark:

This “impossible” moment of openness constitutes the moment of *subjectivity*: “subject” is a name for that unfathomable X called upon, suddenly made accountable, thrown into a position of responsibility, into the urgency of decision in such a moment of undecidability. This is the way one has to read Hegel’s proposition that the True is to be grasped “not only as *Substance* but also as *Subject*”: not only as an objective process governed by some hidden rational Necessity (even if this necessity assumes the Hegelian shape of the “cunning of Reason”) but also as a process punctuated, scanned by moments of openness/undecidability when the subject’s irreducibly contingent *act* establishes a new Necessity.⁵⁸

Historical time is not a homogeneous succession of segments through which evolutionary trends occur, but nor is it characterised by subjective freedom in the volitional sense of being able to commit to and implement new projects as and when they are required. Instead, we should view History as characterised by broad stretches of normalcy which are occasionally and unpredictably punctured by moments of openness.

Andrew Gibson has already proposed an ‘intermittent’ conception of history based on the works of Alain Badiou, François Proust, Christian Jambet, Guy Lardreau, and Jacques Rancière.⁵⁹ Rather than an evolutionary model of historical time, Gibson advocates an alternative he describes as a ‘melancholic/ecstatic conception of history and an anti-schematics of historical reason’.⁶⁰ Historical time is no longer a homogeneous linear continuum, but is prone to moments of acceleration and contraction, ephemeral bursts of revolutionary enthusiasm which rapidly slip back into melancholic lethargy. The compatibility between this ‘intermittent’ history and the vision of historical change presented by Žižek is quite clear. Not only do both thinkers problematize the idea of homogeneous successive time, but they also recognise that only a

⁵⁸ Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 189.

⁵⁹ Gibson.

⁶⁰ Gibson, p. 267.

rejuvenated Hegelian philosophy of history will be equal to the task of thinking History in terms of contingency and necessity, of frisson and inertia. Gibson refers to a Hegelian dialectic that, ‘secretes a flaw, the real’ and argues that, ‘it is precisely this flaw that one needs to think *within* historical reason’.⁶¹ Where Gibson and Žižek diverge turns out to be not on the importance of thinking through this flaw in the Hegelian edifice (a flaw that Žižek consistently argues is a core aspect of the Hegelian project), but rather on the perspectival rifts between observers, participants, and the backward gaze of the historian. No doubt the distinctions between Gibson and Žižek are a matter of nuance, but they are worth exploring in order to assist a more thorough exposition of the features of the latter’s account of historical time in *For they know not what they do*.

In a vital passage, Gibson sums up his understanding of historical intermittency:

Intermittency, then, would appear to define itself as a relationship between a seeming impasse and an alterity which interrupts it. This alterity is not already given, everywhere accessible, available at once, cannot be described before it appears, but happens, here and there, from time to time. Its arrival is unpredictable. There may be a means of establishing connections between its occurrences, but they cannot be forecast, and no logic of hindsight can account for their taking place.⁶²

All the core elements of Gibson’s position are presented here: unpredictability, the interruption of the event, and the impossibility of providing a proper account retrospectively. What is missing is the additional, characteristically Žižekian twist: it is not so much that we cannot account for the event’s having taken place, but rather that our accounts inevitably miss *the site of our own inscription in the revolutionary passage*. So, to take the well-worn example of the Russian Revolution, one can easily provide a detailed history in which all the trends and factors are present and weighed against each other so as to decide upon the salient

⁶¹ Gibson, p. 122.

⁶² Gibson, p. 207.

processes and outcomes.⁶³ But what remains absent in such an account is the subjective perspective of the revolutionary actors embedded in the situation, seeking to bring about the very outcomes which will later be viewed as having been necessarily produced by objective processes. Nor is it enough to simply write this perspective into one's account—the subject's position cannot be absorbed *après coup*; it is definitively lost to hindsight. The only way to capture the subject's situatedness is to stress the incommensurability between history as an objective series of events, and history as the contingent decisions and actions of committed individuals. As Žižek argues, 'A proper Hegelian dialectical move [...] disperses the fetish of "objective historical process" and allows us to see its genesis: the way the very historical Necessity sprang up as a positivization, as a "coagulation" of a radically contingent *decision* of the subjects in an open, undecidable situation'.⁶⁴ To distinguish between Gibson's intermittent historical time and Žižek's Hegelianism requires us to think the difference between ecstatic time, which places emphasis on the exuberance and emotional release of a revolutionary moment, and the narrative effect of the perspectival shift between subjective engagement and the historian's sober detachment. There is not necessarily a choice to be made between these different positions; in fact, we should note that they are entirely compatible with one another. My main point here is twofold: firstly, one should recognise that the two positions are not *equivalent*, that there is an additional feature in Žižek's account, namely, the revolutionary subject's inscription *qua* vanishing mediator. It is not enough to stress a heterogeneous temporality; one must also say exactly what it is about

⁶³ Žižek makes this point with reference to the Russian Revolution in Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 189.

⁶⁴ Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 189.

certain historical moments that impedes the application of a more orthodox, rectilinear temporal model. Again, the distinction here is between an intermittent history characterized by explosive eruptions of passion whereby an affective surplus gives rise to moments of temporal concentration, and one characterized by irresolvable perspectival distortions based on one's position vis-à-vis the evental change. Secondly, comparing Gibson and Žižek throws into relief the distinction between a transcendental materialist theory of revolutionary change and the latent theological tendency detectable in Gibson's notion of intermittency. Ultimately, Gibson remains too close to a revolution that arrives in the manner of a miracle and must therefore be patiently waited for rather than actively brought about.

It will be clear at this point that the concept of the act being developed here is quite distinct from the concept that appears in many of Žižek's later works even though both versions of the act are intended to accomplish the same scale of transformation. Throughout the majority of Žižek's works, the paradigmatic case of an 'act' is Antigone's stubborn revolt against Creon.⁶⁵ In asserting her brother's burial rights, Antigone 'risks her entire social existence, defying the socio-economic power of the City'.⁶⁶ Why does this refusal serve as a paradigmatic case of an act for Žižek? The key trait of an act is its non-determination by the big Other.⁶⁷ This does not simply mean resistance; as Žižek is well aware, it is entirely possible to engage in forms of resistance that are thoroughly situated within the horizon of possibility determined by the big Other. An act, in contrast, must

⁶⁵ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 313; Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, pp. 304–305; Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, p. 512.

⁶⁶ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 313.

⁶⁷ The big Other is a Lacanian concept used by Žižek to indicate the sense in which power is perceived as emanating from an external source while in fact being nothing more than the cumulative effect of the presuppositions of those who regard themselves as subjects of this power.

accomplish the impossible, not only subverting the big Other, but masochistically striking at one's own disavowed complicity in the reproduction of the social order. The logic of recognition we noted in the third chapter applies here too: in order to accomplish a truly radical gesture worthy of the designation 'act', the subject must not simply resist the big Other (embodied by the state) but must undergo an inner change (occasionally described as 'subjective destitution') that frees them from the spontaneous, pre-reflective recognition of the state as *that which is to be resisted*. There are thus forms of resistance which serve to bolster power and forms which undermine it with greater or lesser degrees of success. Antigone's refusal would be a radical example of the latter. In a relatively sympathetic critique of this understanding of the act, Russell Grigg has pointed to a possible shortcoming of the act conceived as an example of absolute freedom:

the act of absolute freedom, as Žižek understands it, derives its essential features (its freedom, its gratuitousness, its criminality, its unaccountability and unpredictability) from the fact that it lies outside all symbolic determinations. It strikes me that not only does Antigone not conform to this requirement but also that it makes an act indistinguishable from mere whimsicality. There is no objective criterion and there can clearly be no appeal to any subjective features to distinguish an act of absolute freedom from a gratuitous act.⁶⁸

Grigg's analysis here is fundamentally sound. Certainly, there is no 'objective criterion' that can be applied to test whether we are witnessing a genuine act or 'mere whimsicality'. As to the act's 'subjective features', here things become more difficult. Firstly, it is unclear exactly what Grigg's term 'subjective features' is supposed to refer to. It could designate the features of the situation from the subjective perspective of the one who is undergoing it. Or it could mean the situation's objective features which indicate a subjective investment such as passion, revolutionary fervour, and so on. Secondly, and more importantly, is it

⁶⁸ Russell Grigg, 'Absolute Freedom and Major Structural Change', in *Traversing the Fantasy*, ed. by Geoff M. Boucher, Jason Glynos, and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 193.

not precisely the impossibility of verifying an act from both subjective and objective perspectives that is the most basic property of the act itself? Žižek may be guilty of decoupling the act *qua* radical refusal from the act as an ontological perturbation giving rise to perspectival distortions. My contention is that it is possible to remedy this disjointed theory of the act by reasserting the insights Žižek develops in his *For they know not what they do*. This will also provide answers to some of Žižek's vocal critics by tempering the more problematic features of the act without depriving it of its radicality.

The reading of the act as a vanishing mediator answers the challenge of the act's unverifiability from both subjective and objective perspectives. The following quotation from Žižek provides a useful starting point:

The incompleteness of the linear causal chain is, consequently, a positive condition for the 'subject effect to take place: if we were able to explain without remainder the advent of the subject from the positivity of some natural (or spiritual) process – to reconstruct the complete causal chain that led to its emergence – 'subject' itself would be cancelled. The gap, the incompatibility between cause and effect, is therefore irreducible, since it is *constitutive of the very effect*: the moment we establish the complete chain of causes, we lose their effect.⁶⁹

While Žižek is here referring to the *genesis* of the subject (i.e. the way in which a human organism comes to be seen as a subject with its own inscrutable thoughts and intentions) the point also holds for a subjective act. As soon as one reduces historical transformation to mere causality, subject itself is lost. One can create an historical account, in accordance with the principle of sufficient reason, from which nothing appears to be missing, but these accounts ultimately prove unsatisfactory. The truth of the situation is not the objective account minus the subjective act, nor is it the purity of the subject's absolute deed, it is rather *the discontinuity between the two*—the fact that every objectivising narrative is contaminated by a subjective act just as every subjective act is automatically

⁶⁹ Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 198.

overdetermined by the new synchronous network of meaning it inaugurates. This discontinuity effectively is what we regard as ‘subject’:

One cannot reduce one perspective to another by claiming, for example, that the ‘true’ picture is that of necessity discovered by the ‘backward view’, that freedom is just an illusion of the immediate agents who overlook how their activity is a mere wheel within a large causal mechanism; or, conversely, by embracing a kind of Sartreian existentialist perspective and affirming the subject’s spontaneous *praxis*. If we proceed in this way, we retain the ontological unity of the universe, whether in the form of substantial necessity pulling the strings behind the subject’s back or in the form of the subject’s autonomous activity ‘objectivizing’ itself in the substantial unity – what gets lost in both cases is the *subject* in the Lacanian sense which is not an autonomous power ‘positing’ the substance but precisely a name for the *gap* within substance, for the discontinuity which prevents us from conceiving the substance as a self-contained totality.⁷⁰

By associating the act with subject *qua* gap or ‘missing link’ we can begin to understand how to answer Grigg’s challenge apropos the potential whimsicality of the gesture supposed to constitute an act. The proper response is to accept that there is no incontrovertible, once-and-for-all distinction to be made between whimsicality and the seriousness of an authentic act; insofar as we are caught in the process of history in its unfolding, the meta-historical vantage point from which distinctions could be made is unavailable to us. Likewise, the agents of revolutionary change themselves are not in a position to make categorical claims about the significance of their own deeds; the meaning of their deeds remains open to rearticulation and it is this openness that comprises the situations undecidability. Johnston is thus correct to assert that, ‘acting essentially involves taking the risk of a gesture with no meta-level guarantee of being appropriate, correct, just, right, successful’.⁷¹ So from this position it becomes clear that *acts can fail* as long as we accept the additional twist that a ‘failed act’ also fails to *qualify as an act*. Incidentally Žižek’s own answer, contained in the same volume as Grigg’s essay, falls short here. Žižek states in direct response to Grigg: ‘what

⁷⁰ Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 221.

⁷¹ Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, p. 149.

makes a certain move an act proper are not its inherent qualities but its structural place within a given symbolic network [...]. This is what distinguishes an act from mere whimsicality'.⁷² It is abundantly clear from Žižek's other works (not least *For they know not what they do*) that one cannot determine an act's status in the moment of its occurrence, that it is only afterwards that one can begin to assess just how much has (or has not) changed. The undecidability between whimsicality and act cannot be overcome through reference to the act's 'structural place within a given symbolic network' since act is precisely the vanishing mediator between two distinct symbolic fields. To allow the absorption of the act into one or other symbolic field would be precisely to undo its radical status.

In fact, Žižek provides an example of what we might describe as a proto-act (i.e. a historical occurrence that might have been an act, but which the passage of history has proven to be mere whimsicality) in his all-to-brief account of the proponents of a new revitalised socialism that emerged in the final years of 'actually existing socialism'. The highlighted historical agent here is the *Neues Forum* in the GDR: 'groups of passionate intellectuals who "took socialism seriously" and were prepared to stake everything in order to destroy the compromised system and replace it with the utopian "third way" beyond capitalism and "actually existing" socialism'.⁷³ From our perspective, this utopian belief that the end of actually existing socialism could give rise to a political formation that would be a genuine alternative to both capitalism and socialism is easy to dismiss as hopelessly utopian—clearly the *Neues Forum* served as a vanishing mediator, albeit one that unleashed forces which would both lead to

⁷² Slavoj Žižek, 'Concesso Non Dato', in *Traversing the Fantasy*, ed. by Geoff M. Boucher, Jason Glynos, and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 252.

⁷³ Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 187.

the introduction of neoliberal economic policies throughout Eastern Europe as well as to the corruption of the very aspirations the movement stood for. The term ‘vanishing mediator’ is therefore an ambiguous one. It does not refer automatically to a successful act but can also appear as a moment of utopian longing soon to be overrun by historical events.⁷⁴

The act *qua* vanishing mediator is characterized by a further ambiguity. We have seen how it can be read both as a free act with dramatic consequences, one that restructures the field of possibilities from which it emerged, but also how it can be a hopeless utopian outburst with no enduring significance. Moreover, we have seen how, from the perspective of an engaged subject, the situation is thoroughly undecidable, offering no criteria for an informed assessment as to its meaning. There is, however, an additional problem apropos Grigg’s (and indeed, in various passages, Žižek’s) idea of the act as a moment of absolute freedom. As Žižek himself points out, if we are to really move away with the impoverished notion of freedom as a choice between alternatives, are we not also moving towards a notion of freedom *experienced as necessity*? From such a perspective we begin to see how, at the moments where things are genuinely open, when substantial reforms or even revolutionary overthrow may be possible, the agents involved do not experience themselves as acting ‘freely’ but rather as constantly responding to the urgency of a rapidly unfolding situation, to the shift and flux of circumstances that threaten to undermine their political work. It may in fact be the case that the ‘absolute freedom’ of the act is itself experienced as an unrelenting imperative which forces the subject to persist in their project even

⁷⁴ Incidentally, and event like the French Revolution could also be seen to bear the structure of the vanishing mediator in the sense that, in striving for the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, it ultimately gave rise to the modern liberal bourgeois nation-state.

when faced with certain catastrophe. The ultimate meaning of the missing link for Žižek is thus that it, ‘is never missing “now” – “now”, in the present time, the chain is always completed; it is only afterwards, when we endeavour to reconstruct the chain, that we discover how “something is missing”’.⁷⁵ The ‘moment of openness’, the point at which a situation’s horizon of possibilities was no longer definitively circumscribed, is not available directly as a conscious experience; instead, it appears retrospectively—when the revolutionary actors look back upon their work, they perceive the transition brought about in the name of a utopian project but nonetheless leading to a new, stable symbolic order. Here, freedom is not so much the ability to ‘act’, to interrupt a given order with a gesture that escapes reduction to situational considerations, but rather the freedom to decide anew on the way in which one’s act will be inscribed in the situation: ‘at its most elementary, [freedom] is not a free act which, out of nowhere, starts a new causal link, but a retroactive act of endorsing which link/sequence of necessities will determine me’.⁷⁶ Freedom thus operates at a second remove: we experience ourselves as determined by circumstances when in fact the degree of purchase specific circumstances have upon us is the result of our own choice, albeit a choice made unconsciously. The same applies when one considers the paradox of love which is precisely a choice or decision that is never made in the present moment—one can only state with hindsight that one’s attachment to another person has changed in a fundamental way.⁷⁷

We are now ready to attempt a tentative periodization of Žižek’s reflections on the act. In the early works (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, *For they know not*

⁷⁵ Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 222.

⁷⁶ Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, p. 314.

⁷⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 187.

what they do) the act is conceived primarily as a perspectival distortion—we are never directly present as a free agent at the moment of decision. The most crucial decisions appear as something that simply happened to us, something we were forced to respond to. Subsequently, there is divergence in perspectives between those whose subjective engagement allows them to perceive retrospectively how there really was a moment of openness, a space for a radical new project, and those whose detachment sutures the narrative space, positivising the subject's act as reducible to a linear causal chain. Žižek's middle period reasserts the act as a radical transformation, but this time with a stronger theological inflection—the act/event is a miracle, an other-worldly intervention in human affairs.⁷⁸ In Žižek's most recent works, the theological tone is markedly reduced (probably under the influence of Johnston who has taken a more consistently materialist position on the act/event) and in *Less than nothing* the term miracle tends to appear in inverted commas as if to indicate that we are dealing with a rhetorical device rather than a concept to be taken seriously as a metaphor for the act/event. Moreover, Žižek explicitly warns against the danger of conflating the miracle with the event as this would imply an intervention from a 'transcendental Beyond' as opposed to the material, worldly activity of human subjects.⁷⁹ Žižek's extensive corpus then seems to move in an extended arc around the concept of the act/event in an effort to avoid both vulgar materialist and proto-religious deviations.

One of the reasons it is difficult to extract a single coherent concept of the act from Žižek's work is that it is often, but not always, used as if it were interchangeable with the term event. Žižek even goes as far as to declare that

⁷⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (Routledge, 2001), p. 84; Slavoj Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, ed. by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 118; Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic*, ed. by Creston Davis (London: MIT Press, 2009), p. 42.

⁷⁹ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, p. 811.

Badiou is ‘*the* theorist of the Act’—a statement which is only possible if one reads ‘Act’ as ‘event’.⁸⁰ Clearly, there is some scope here for comparison between the Badiouian event and the Žižekian ‘act/event’. In the discussion that follows, we will look at the question of the pre-evental, that is to say, on the conditions that must pre-exist the event for an event to happen at all. Badiou’s anti-humanism consists in his dismissive position with regard to the status of the pre-evental human: prior to an event, there is only a ‘human animal’, part of the natural fauna with no enduring significance.⁸¹ It is only an event which elevates the individual above animality, stimulating in him the passion and resolve of an engaged subject. But if this is the case, if there is no real distinction between the pre-evental human and an animal, how are we to account for the fact that only humans can become subjects? What is it about *human* nature that makes it predisposed to subjectivation?⁸² Or more generally, as Žižek puts it, ‘How must the domain of Being be structured so that an Event is possible within it?’⁸³ This challenge ties in neatly with a further accusation Žižek levels at Badiou, that when all is said and done, Badiou cannot escape a dualistic account of the relationship between being and event. Badiou ends up relying on the old Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena, with the event conceived as a noumenal rupture in the phenomenal order of being. This disavowed Kantianism then facilitates an all-too-hasty slippage into a theological register whereby the event is a momentary penetration of the worldly (being) by the divine (event).

⁸⁰ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, p. 427.

⁸¹ Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p. 58.

⁸² Peter Hallward poses this question as follows: ‘Can we account for the exceptional assumption of a subjective “immortality” without relating this immortality to the merely individual morality that it transcends?’. Hallward, p. 411.

⁸³ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, p. 822.

Žižek's answer to these questions conveys the fundamental distinction between his own version of the act/event and Badiou's event:

The only solution here is to admit that the couple Being/Event is not exhaustive, that there must be a third level. Insofar as an Event is a distortion or twist of Being, is it not possible to think this distortion *independently of* (or as prior to) the Event, so that the "Event" ultimately names a minimal "fetishization" of the immanent distortion of the texture of Being into its virtual object-cause? And is not the Freudo-Lacanian name for this distortion the *drive*, the death drive?⁸⁴

Rather than a rigid demarcation between nature and culture, between 'human animal' and subject, within Žižek's schema we have a third element—'death drive' which is a name for the reciprocal subversion of nature and culture. 'Death drive' accounts for the fact that humans are not simply able to myopically achieve their goals in the same way as animals. Rather than simply pursuing instinct or inclination, humans are prone to bouts of absolute stubbornness whereby a single object becomes the target of an overwhelming investment. This is also brought out in Žižek's discussion of the 'undead' as a human state—in addition to the standard binary alive/dead, a third possibility can be inserted to describe a form of activity that detaches itself from the rhythm of natural life, a persistent repetition which has become autonomous from its organic substrate. 'Death drive' for Žižek is not the classically Freudian notion of a will to self-destruction; it is rather the insistence of sheer life that continues after biological death. From a transcendental materialist perspective, 'death drive' describes the human animal as denaturalized (a being of language, of culture) and yet not yet subjectivized. As Johnston puts it, '*Todestrieb* [...] is a psychoanalytic term referring to certain "immortal", "metaphysical" facets of psychical being'.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, p. 823.

⁸⁵ Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, p. 157.

Death Drive, or, the Entangled Freedom of a Proto-Subject

How can the notion of death drive help resolve some of the problems we have highlighted in various accounts of political transformation? Recall that in Badiou's *Being and Event* there is a logical gap between event₁ (the event as sheer occurrence) and event₂ (the requirement for an intervention/nomination). The problem we noted was that in order to pass from event₁ to event₂, we need to be able to imagine a latent receptivity to the occurrence of event₁ which is absent from, if not foreclosed by, Badiou's ontological position.⁸⁶ 'Death drive' may be theoretically productive as it allows us to conceptualise the kind of receptivity which would otherwise be absent from Badiou's philosophical system. Rather than conceiving the pre-evental human as a mere 'human animal', Žižek's notion of death drive enables us to conceive of a form of attachment, proceeding without reference to strategic objectives, which inaugurates a change in the situation but which does not present itself to the scrutiny of hindsight. Moreover, death drive would be a way to describe the non-voluntarist, but nonetheless subjective, propulsion that enables a passage between distinct symbolic fields. A case could be made for viewing Badiou's notion of fidelity as the structural analogue of death drive, and yet although both death drive and fidelity name the subject's relation to the event/act, it is crucial to see how they differ. Firstly, fidelity is definitively post-evental. One can only maintain a relation of fidelity vis-à-vis the event once the event₁/event₂ dyad is closed. Fidelity presupposes nomination and therefore hinges on the recognition of the event's having already taken place.⁸⁷ In contrast,

⁸⁶ This problem with Badiou's concept of the subject is also noted in Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectic*, p. 174.

⁸⁷ It is possible to conceive of kind of proleptic fidelity that becomes operative in anticipation of an event, however, on my reading, this would simply indicate that the decisive shift had already taken place. The event does not have to be anchored to a historical occurrence (in fact, the event's indiscernibility means it is never truly anchored in this way), it can also be a radical

death drive is considered to be a pre-reflective inherent ‘unruliness’ correlating to a human’s non-assimilation (or incomplete assimilation) into a given symbolic order.⁸⁸ Secondly, death drive is distinct from fidelity insofar as it expresses the irreducibility of the subject *qua* self-relating negativity to any positive set of historical conditions. The human subject is not the exclusive product of its social/political/cultural milieu, but neither is it reducible to a series of physiological impulses. Death drive expresses the dissonance between environmental and physiological determinants. It is not chosen upon, but is a characteristic produced by the cross-contamination of nature and culture. Fidelity, on the other hand, is in some sense the result of a post-evental *choice*—one can choose to ignore the occurrence of the event or to not pursue its consequences, and yet this would still imply a recognition that an event has taken place, even if that event should be rejected. The form of choice here does not imply voluntarism since the choice is made against the background of an event’s having occurred—the occurrence of the event itself is not subject to a choice; it is only apprehended or recognised. In any case, the basic point to be grasped here is that, in Badiou’s *Being and Event*, the individual is not theorised in a way that would allow us to view an event and subsequent evental fidelity as possibilities.

A Žižekian formulation of death drive allows us to add conceptual ballast to our reflections on the role of the vanishing mediator in a political transformation.

Drive is literally a countermovement to desire; it does not strive toward impossible fullness and, being forced to renounce it, get stuck on a partial object as its remainder. Drive is quite literally *the very ‘drive’ to BREAK the All of continuity in which we are embedded*, to introduce a radical imbalance into it, and the difference

change in disposition on the part of an individual. Moreover, the closure of the event¹/event² dyad does not imply a final, irrevocable closure but only a closure *for a subject* lasting for as long as that subject is still caught up in carrying out the consequences of the event.

⁸⁸ Slavoj Žižek and Markus Gabriel, *Mythology, Madness and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 96–97.

between drive and desire is precisely that, in desire, this cut, this fixation onto a partial object, is, as it were, 'transcendentalized', transposed into a stand-in for the void of the Thing.⁸⁹

As Johnston notes, the death drive is the missing element in Badiou's undialecticized pair: Being and Event.⁹⁰ If an act/event is successful, it is only because the negative gesture of cutting oneself loose from one's politico-historical conditions has been accomplished. Crucially, for the revolutionary passage to occur, the negative gesture must be lost to retrospection in the same manner as the Schellingian act of *Ent-Scheidung*. Johnston is therefore correct to assert the Žižekian 'vanishing act' as a valuable theoretical innovation vis-à-vis the (Badiouian) 'spectacular act'.⁹¹ Žižek's strength over Badiou (at least the Badiou of *Being and Event*) is that he identifies the unrepresentable excess corresponding to an act/event's interstitial moment and roots this back into a concept of the subject neither fully determined by nature, nor fully domesticated by culture. With Badiou, the danger is not that we remain within the coordinates of a theological paradigm of radical change, but rather that the secularization of this paradigm has been *too successful*. That is to say, the event *qua* secularized miracle allows an all-too-direct transposition of the attributes of the miracle onto the event such that humans lose any involvement in the occurrence of an event. Even if a nomination is required for the evental occurrence to count as an Event, human actors are still in no position to bring about the referent of this nomination. The resulting predicament is one in which the dominant pre-evental attitude would be quietism. We would be confronted with the vision of historical change outlined by Gibson in which long stretches of melancholic lethargy are

⁸⁹ Slavoj Žižek, 'An Answer to Two Questions', in *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change*, by Adrian Johnston (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), p. 230.

⁹⁰ Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, p. 157.

⁹¹ Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, p. 158.

infrequently punctured by impassioned explosions of revolutionary energy. For both Gibson and Badiou there is little sense in even posing the question ‘What is to be done?’ during pre-evental/melancholic periods—one can only play a waiting game, hoping for a miraculous *ex nihilo* occurrence that will provide us with an event worthy of our passion and our fidelity. At the very least, the Žižekian alternative recognises an elementary feature of the human psyche which gears us towards a radical revolutionary act. Death drive does not necessitate a revolutionary event, but it does provide the possibility for an evental occurrence without slipping into a voluntarist position. The price to be paid is that this act can never be represented or rendered intelligible from the perspective of the newly inaugurated political order. Insofar as the act/event is bound up with such a notion of drive, we are not dealing with an event that can be included as a narrative element, but rather with the formal perturbation afflicting narrative as such.

The Uncanny Subject

There are features of Žižek's act/event which prove pertinent to our broader argument when read alongside the Schmittian sovereign's decision. As has already been claimed above, the sovereign decision is not an act of omnipotence. It is not enough to argue, as Michael Marder does, that the sovereign decision is the 'always already exteriorised' will of the sovereign.⁹² Rather, the sovereign relies on the recognition of a political community. I have proposed the term 'reflexive determination' adequately captures the sense in which the sovereign decision must always take the form of a declaration and is only determined as a decision retroactively by the response of a non-sovereign actor or group of actors. The sovereign is not the omnipotent wellspring of political authority; rather, sovereign *constituted power* is always secondary to popular *constituent power*, with the latter standing as the only underived power.⁹³ The connection between Žižek and Schmitt concerns the act in its Leninist formulation (or at least Žižek's reading of Lenin), as a wager that a premature gesture will be enough to force the situation such that one retroactively secures the possibility conditions with respect to the gesture itself:

The Leninist stance was to take a leap, throwing oneself into the paradox of the situation, seizing the opportunity and *intervening*, even if the situation was 'premature', with a wager that *this very 'premature' intervention would radically change the 'objective' relationship of forces itself, within which the initial situation appeared 'premature'*—that it would undermine the very standard to which reference told us that the situation was 'premature'.⁹⁴

⁹² Marder, *Groundless Existence*, p. 131.

⁹³ Andreas Kalyvas has forcefully argued for a thorough reassessment of the relationship between constituted and constituent power: 'In positive terms, popular sovereignty *qua* constituent power discloses a different imaginary of sovereign power, not only historically prior but also analytically and ontologically distinct from the regal model: democratic, egalitarian, federative, constitutional, emancipatory, and revolutionary.' Andreas Kalyvas, 'Rethinking "Modern" Democracy: Political Modernity and Constituent Power' (presented at the Momentos de Ruptura: Acontecimiento y Negatividad en el Pensamiento Moderno, Santiago, Chile, 2014), p. 12.

⁹⁴ Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion*, p. 114.

There is a near perfect symmetry here between the Leninist ‘premature’ act and the sovereign declaration. In both cases, the initial gesture takes the form of the wager. Just as the Leninist revolutionary does not know whether her deed will genuinely disrupt the socio-political order or prove to be naïve ‘acting out’, the Schmittian proto-sovereign has no guarantees that his declaration of the situation’s exceptional status will be recognised as valid by the political community he addresses. One can just as easily see how the would-be revolutionary gesture might turn out to be nothing more than a hysterical outburst, and likewise, how the sovereign declaration might simply be ignored or dismissed as the delirious ravings of a usurper. Crucially, in both cases, the status of the revolutionary/sovereign is determined retroactively by way of its recognition by non-sovereign/non-revolutionary actors. Once this recognition takes place, the proto-sovereign declaration is re-inscribed as sovereign decision, just as the revolutionary wager is transformed into a decisive act. Nonetheless, the two procedures are *symmetrical* and not *identical* insofar as they work in different directions: the sovereign decision concentrates power whereas the revolutionary act disperses it. For the Schmittian sovereign, a successful decision anchors power in an individual: we are dealing with *constituted power*. The situation unfolds in the same way as the genesis of political life as described within the social contract tradition. In both cases, the contingency of origins, the fact that numerous alternative historical trajectories are eliminated in a single gesture, must disappear from view in order to accomplish the instauration of a new historical epoch. For both Hobbes and Schmitt it is the *constituent power* of the people that is eclipsed by the constituted power of the sovereign. In contrast, the revolutionary gesture, if it is truly successful, must undo constituted power and hold open the moment of *constituent power*.

Framing the Schmittian sovereign decision in this way allows us to arrive at a further insight concerning the proximity of a momentary ‘recognition’ that transforms a situation to Althusser’s renowned theory of interpellation. Althusser argues that our constitution *qua* subject comes about through a subject’s recognition of himself as the addressee of a policeman’s call: “Hey, you there!”. In responding to the call, the individual becomes interpellated as a subject: ‘By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was “really” addressed to him, and that “it was *really him* who was hailed” (and not someone else)’.⁹⁵ In his own analysis of this feature of Althusser’s thought, Žižek argues that the real insight to be retained is the ‘timeless’ character of the interpellatory address. The recognition of the policeman’s call by a particular individual retroactively alters the status of the call itself such that it was *always* meant for him. What Žižek adds to this account concerns the status of the subject prior to interpellation. If the subject is produced by the interpellatory encounter, do we not also require some pre-subjective entity, an ‘uncanny subject that precedes the gesture of subjectivization’.⁹⁶ As with Althusser, so with Schmitt, we are obliged to think through the status of the non-sovereign entity whose recognition both interpellates him as a subject of the sovereign and achieves the transubstantiation of a proto-sovereign to sovereign. Again, there is a similar requirement for a ‘pre-evental’ subject in Badiou’s philosophy of the event. Just as one cannot think through the Schmittian sovereign without accepting the ‘vanishing mediator’ of the proto-sovereign individual (the individual who calls for a state of exception

⁹⁵ Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards and Investigation)’, in *On Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 48.

⁹⁶ Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, p. 64.

without any guarantee that his competence to decide will be recognised), we cannot accept Badiou's Event without also allowing for a vanishing form of individuality which serves to render the human animal receptive to the evental occurrence. Contra Badiou, we are not simply dealing with a spontaneous, unaccountable occurrence that gains the designation 'Event' through its nomination by a subject; rather, we must extend the scope of our conception of subjectivity in order to include the latent sensitivity to proto-evental occurrences. This is brought out in both Žižek and Johnston's works, but also in Frank Ruda's call for a theorisation of the 'hypothetical subject' or 'anticipated subject'.⁹⁷ In the final section of this chapter, we will address this dimension of Žižek's work with reference to Kierkegaard's notion of anxiety and the moment.

In a statement that echoes Kierkegaard's reflections on the appearance of 'the moment', Žižek describes one characteristic of our contemporary political malaise:

Progressive liberals today often complain that they would like to join a "revolution" (a more radical emancipatory political movement), but no matter how desperately they search for it, they just "don't see it" (they don't see anywhere in the social space a political agent with a will and strength to seriously engage in such activity). While there is a moment of truth in it, one should nonetheless also add that the very attitude of these liberals is in itself part of a problem: if one just waits to "see" a revolutionary movement, it will, of course, never arise, and one will never see it.⁹⁸

It is impossible to miss the parallel between the liberal attitude bemoaned by Žižek and the derided 'gaze of worldly sagacity' which Kierkegaard argues is incapable of seeing the moment: '[worldly sagacity] stares and stares at events and circumstances, calculates and calculates, thinking that it should be able to distil the moment out of the circumstance'.⁹⁹ Žižek and Johnston's

⁹⁷ Frank Ruda, *For Badiou: Idealism without Idealism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015); Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, pp. 78–79.

⁹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, 'Badiou: Notes from an Ongoing Debate', *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, Žižek and Badiou, 1.2 (2007), p. 7 <<http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/26/85>>.

⁹⁹ Kierkegaard, XXIII, p. 338.

transcendental materialist approach draws attention to the opacity that characterises originary and transformative moments, further positing that this signals an ontological deadlock as opposed to an epistemological impediment to be overcome. Receptivity to the moment in Kierkegaard, and to the event in Žižek, requires the subject to accept the irreducible contingency that characterises historical transformations. In other words, for both Kierkegaard and Žižek, humans find themselves thrown into a world without eschaton or telos—there is no higher power to imbue our mundane activity with meaning or to guarantee the ethical character of our action, but nor are we fully embedded in a natural, material Whole governed by immutable causal laws. Both thinkers point to a fundamental openness as providing the condition for both subjective and historical transformation.

The common ground between Žižek and Kierkegaard can be brought out through a careful reading of the following quotation:

The system of existence [*Tilværelsens System*] cannot be given. Is there, then, not such a system? That is not at all the case. Neither is this implied in what has been said. Existence itself is a system—for God, but it cannot be a system for any existing [*existerende*] spirit. System and conclusiveness correspond to each other, but existence is the very opposite. Abstractly viewed, system and existence cannot be thought conjointly, because in order to think existence, systematic thought must think it as annulled and consequently not as existing. Existence is the spacing that holds apart; the systematic is the conclusiveness that combines.¹⁰⁰

At first glance, this passage suggests a commonplace philosophical account of the epistemological limitations encountered by finite beings. God, on the other hand, would have access to the Whole, the system in its conclusiveness, without breaks, discontinuities, or remainders. And yet to read Kierkegaard's notion of God as a divine personality capable of viewing the system of existence in its completeness would force a return to a formula of faith and conversion that Kierkegaard is at

¹⁰⁰ Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, p. 197.

pains to refute. If the Whole can be thought by God, all human existence would be subsumed and freedom would be illusory. There would be no urgency behind the decision and the moment itself would be reduced to a quantitative addition rather than a qualitative change. The solution here (which is, again, simply a positive assertion of the intractability of the problem) is to note the paradoxes arising from Kierkegaard's formulation. If 'system and existence cannot be thought conjointly' then God is that for which the unthinkable, the unconjoinable, are reconciled. But this 'reconciliation' is not the annulment of existence in favour of systematization; rather, it is the fragile unity of reciprocally subverting principles. 'God' is thus a name for human freedom thought in its paradoxical relation to (and not in its absorption by) the system. Kierkegaard warns against the idea that one can 'serve God' since this would seem to rest on the impression that God 'has a cause, has intentions.'¹⁰¹ For this reason, any attempt to conclude the system, to approach the objective and subjective as dimensions of a single system, can never succeed. As we saw with Žižek's notion of the historical subject, for Kierkegaard, 'existence' (by which we mean the existing subject) is not an additional element one can add to one's elaboration of the system; rather, subjectivity is our name for the system's non-closure, for the impossibility of final conclusiveness. Kierkegaard's assertion that 'existence is the spacing that holds apart' is thus to be taken literally: insofar as our objectivising narrative of an existential event is either inconclusive or encounters unresolvable paradoxes, we are forced to accept that discontinuity is not a secondary effect of an event, but is constitutive of the event itself.

¹⁰¹ Kierkegaard, II, p. 153.

The interpretations offered in the most recent works on Kierkegaard depart from the standard view that it is simply human finitude that prevents access to the ‘system’ *qua* Whole. Given that the division between existence and system is irremediable, and since to think existence systematically is to think it as annulled (and thereby descend into paradox), the only solution is to inscribe paradox into existence itself. This is brought out more clearly in Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness unto Death* where God is characterised in terms of possibility: ‘since everything is possible for God, then God is this—that everything is possible’.¹⁰² In the same text, Kierkegaard urges us not to view God as an ‘externality’.¹⁰³ Having said this, Kierkegaard’s writings contain ineluctable ambiguities apropos the nature of God. Despite characterizing God as ‘possibility’, Kierkegaard frequently refers to God in such a way that seems to anthropomorphize Him. Take the following passage: ‘Providence is indeed everywhere present and thus in one sense is the closest of all. But in another sense he is infinitely far away. That is—he refuses to intervene forcibly, he omnipotently constrains his own omnipotence because it has pleased him to want to see what will become of this whole existence.’¹⁰⁴ Not only is God presented as an agent with intentions capable of being pleased or displeased, but human existence is framed as a kind of entertainment. The passage speaks in favour of precisely the kind of reading we are attempting to dismantle—God as divine personality, passively bearing witness to his creation from on high. The contradiction between Kierkegaard’s notion of God *qua* possibility and God conceived as divine personality cannot be resolved easily. In light of this, the most promising strategy is to interpret Kierkegaard’s

¹⁰² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition For Upbuilding And Awakening*, ed. & trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 40.

¹⁰³ Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, p. 80.

¹⁰⁴ Kierkegaard, II, p. 153.

notion of God such that it can be rendered consistent with his wider project. If Kierkegaard retains a dualist, spiritualizing conception of the relation between God and the individual human, his arguments regarding possibility and human freedom would be undermined. Ultimately, only a transcendental materialist reading of Kierkegaard can open space for the form of human freedom he is concerned with articulating. I therefore propose, alongside Burns, Shakespeare, and Mooney, that Kierkegaard's conception of God does not require a division between brute materiality and an ephemeral spiritual plane, but rather indicates fracture immanent to the material. This leads Žižek to state that only a 'thin, imperceptible line separates Kierkegaard from dialectical materialism proper'.¹⁰⁵ And yet is it not possible that even this tentative demarcation is a step too far? Even though, as noted above, Kierkegaard's various characterisations of the nature of God present considerable interpretive difficulties, his conceptualisations of temporality, possibility, and action would seem to anticipate Žižek and Johnston's transcendental materialism. Žižek again:

Kierkegaard's theology presents the extreme point of idealism: he admits the radical openness and contingency of the entire field of reality, which is why the closed Whole can appear only as a radical Beyond, in the guise of a totally transcendent God [...] Here we encounter the key formula: Kierkegaard's God is strictly correlative to the ontological openness of reality, to our relating to reality as unfinished, 'in becoming.' 'God' is the name for the Absolute Other against which we can measure the thorough contingency of reality—as such, it cannot be conceived as any kind of Substance, as the Supreme Thing (that would make him part of Reality, its true Ground).¹⁰⁶

Contra Žižek, the proper task here is to see how the materialist gesture has already been accomplished. Kierkegaard's God does not *correlate to* the ontological openness of reality; God is *identical with* this openness. Absolute transcendence, pushed to its limit, re-emerges as a fracture on this side of the ontological horizon, as a persistent contingency that undermines systematisation. If Kierkegaard's

¹⁰⁵ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁶ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 79.

endlessly repeated critique of Hegel focuses on the way in which the latter obliterates contingency from his philosophical system, Žižek's revisionist approach to Hegel is an answer to this critique: The irony is that [...] for Kierkegaard, Hegel is *the* systematic philosopher of the *fait accompli*, while, as we have just seen, the point of Hegelian dialectical analysis is not to reduce the chaotic flow of events into a deeper necessity, but to unearth the contingency of the rise of necessity itself—this is what it means to grasp things “in their becoming”.¹⁰⁷

What kind of human action does this Kierkegaardian materialism enable? As we saw in the first chapter, rather than freedom of choice we are faced with freedom *experienced as necessity* (and yet not in-itself necessitated). The ability to choose invites the possibility of postponement, of adopting a sceptical attitude, or of balancing out arguments for and against. Moreover, it implies a self-contained subject, detached from the choice and therefore capable of taking up a passive relation to it. On the contrary, Kierkegaard's notion of freedom is characterised as follows: ‘freedom really is only when, in the same moment [that] [...] it is (freedom-of-choice), it hastens with infinite speed to bind itself unconditionally in the choice of submission [i.e. to the one thing necessary], the choice whose truth is that there can be no question of any choice’.¹⁰⁸ It is a conceptualisation of freedom that is thoroughly compatible with the Badiouian/Žižekian event that presents itself to the subject as an overriding imperative. Rather than a selection between equal alternatives, the act of freedom is the recognition that a certain course of action must be unequivocally endorsed and pursued. This is also why the instant can be understood, as Elrod puts it, as

¹⁰⁷ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, p. 575.

¹⁰⁸ Kierkegaard, II, p. 68.

‘the negation of time’.¹⁰⁹ The subject does not experience the *beginning* of this impulsion, but simply realises that he/she is *already* caught up in it. Time is both condensed into a vanishing instant (since there is no instant of decision, only the realisation that the decision has already been made) and shattered by an eternal truth. Narrative distortion (the impossibility of a full sequential recapitulation) is thus the consequence of an epiphanic realisation that cannot be situated within the temporal continuum of passing moments. On the other hand, if one makes a concerted effort to begin, the beginning is never accomplished: ‘The dialectic of beginning is quite commonplace; yet one side is forgotten—that the beginning must be a breaking off, and therefore it presupposes a whole line of thought in order to make a beginning; for if something else is not presupposed, the act whereby I abstract from everything is presupposed. But this I cannot do, I cannot get around to making a beginning since I am using all my powers in order to abstract from everything.’¹¹⁰

A further commonality presents itself between Kierkegaard and Žižek’s respective positions on fate. In each thinker, fate is taken not as some pre-ordained, immutable trajectory, but as reified product of *our own deed*.¹¹¹ Or as Kierkegaard puts it, ‘a man’s choice becomes his fate. At first glance this does not seem even well-phrased, for if he himself chooses it, then there can be no talk about its becoming his fate, then it is his choice; but perhaps what he chose turns out to have much more in it than he thought and involves completely different consequences—thus it becomes his fate.’¹¹² We experience our fate as determined

¹⁰⁹ John Elrod, *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Works* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 239.

¹¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers, A-E*, I, p. 355.

¹¹¹ Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 190.

¹¹² Kierkegaard, II, p. 70.

insofar as we have repressed the positing activity that gave rise to our experience of a particular set of determinations as binding upon us.

One finds strong support for this reading of Kierkegaard as soon as one returns to the key passages on the decision. In an unmistakably Badiouian style *avant à la lettre*, Kierkegaard writes:

In the moment of the decision of passion, where the road swings off from objective knowledge, it looks as if the infinite decision were thereby finished. But at the same moment, the existing person is in the temporal realm, and the subjective 'how' is transformed into a striving that is motivated and repeatedly refreshed by the decisive passion of the infinite, but is nevertheless a striving.¹¹³

In arguing that the decision of passion is enabled in its very rejection of objective knowledge, Kierkegaard anticipates the familiar Badiouian insight that one cannot derive novelty purely through reference to an objective situation. An event, like the decision of passion, requires a kind of exposure to a situation's internal discontinuity or contradiction, its disavowed element. The equivalent concept in Kierkegaard is 'objective uncertainty', a term indicating the impossibility of historical closure and systematization, which must be 'held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness'.¹¹⁴ The decision of passion can then be understood as a realisation that there are no objective guarantees, that the historical is not the purposeful unfolding of a grand design or system, but is continually riven with the frisson of the contingent event which no *verstehen* can sublimate or absorb.

To recap briefly, we have seen how 'choice' and 'decision' in Kierkegaard are problematized in a manner that resonates with Žižek and Johnston's position. A valuable form of freedom is shown to be that which is experienced as the recognition of an urgent imperative. Nonetheless, there is still scope for 'will' in

¹¹³ Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, p. 207.

¹¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, p. 207.

the traditional sense of agentic, volitional action within Žižek, Johnston, and Kierkegaard's account. Remaining resolute in the face of objective uncertainty requires 'a striving' and this striving can no doubt be conceived as the result of a subject's willed activity. What must be rejected is the notion that this same willing activity could generate the 'decision of passion' that gives rise to the process of striving; on the contrary, the decision of passion is entirely spontaneous. Arnold

B. Come's account is instructive on this issue:

there is no way to infer with certainty what action will be taken by the agent, or indeed to demonstrate that there is a hidden 'straight', unbroken line of causal necessitation from presuppositions to action [...] Rather, in the enactment of that *kind* of possibility which is achieved through the human individual as an agent, there occurs a pause, and a break or breach opens up before the agent.¹¹⁵

Come is correct to focus on the trope of the breach which is recurrent in Kierkegaard and which expresses again our point concerning the lack of objective guarantees. When one experiences an historical moment as a breach that exceeds calculation or reasonable deduction, one is forced to confront history *in its truth*. However, the salient aspect of Kierkegaard's thought is not the appearance of the breach to the subject in the moment of her immediate experience, but the appearance of the breach to retrospection. As will be clear by now, a guiding proposition of this thesis is precisely that historical openness is not limited to the perspective of an engaged subject, but that a radical transformation is in-itself irremediably distorted. From Kierkegaard's account of the Fall in his *Concept of Anxiety*, through Hobbes and Rousseau's respective speculations concerning the origins of sovereignty and Schmitt's concept of the decision, one repeatedly finds a common structural motif whereby an 'impossible' transformation appears as a moment of narrative discontinuity. Kierkegaard's importance then resides in his early attempt to think through, and to accept philosophically, the *necessity of*

¹¹⁵ Come, pp. 254–255.

contingency. That is to say, Kierkegaard holds that the subversion of a chronologically ordered retelling of a subjective transformation by a formal distortion is necessary insofar as this distortion is the counterpart to the subject's hiatusal experience of the 'passionate decision'.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis we have been engaged in a theoretical investigation of the temporal character of events I have tended to describe as ‘radical political transformations’. I have sought to avoid the term revolution since this would only be a particular variant of the more general category of event I am interested in. The elusive origins of political life can perhaps be thought under category of ‘radical political transformation’, but it would be inaccurate to describe these events as revolutions (even if revolutions may be thought of as, in some sense, originary). To regard an event as a revolution seems to indicate a shift from one political order to another whereas the founding political event would spring out of the primordial anarchy of humankind’s prehistory. If there is a commonality between the revolutionary event and the original political deed, it resides in the way in which the former must pass through the anarchic negativity that characterises the latter. For this reason, revolutions can be seen as a momentary collective remembrance of the original, underived power to authorise. As Rousseau maintained, this remains an inalienable power since the very notion of a political subject no longer makes sense without it.¹ And yet although it is inalienable, it must nonetheless be forgotten or repressed in order for the passage from constitutive power to constituted authority to be accomplished. Below, and by way of conclusion, it is worth reasserting a connection that we have been

¹ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 57.

investigating from the beginning, namely, the connection between the term ‘radical political transformation’ and the idea of authority. I will then provide a final outline of the kind of subject implied by our reflections on time, narrative, and the political.

Authority, which could itself be regarded as the arche-political concept, is on the one hand, the property which is being transferred in any political transformation—for Hobbes and Rousseau, we are out of the state of nature only once we know who has the authority to decide, once we know whose decisions are to be obeyed, who is sovereign and who is subject—but equally, as soon as we speak of political transformations, we are speaking of a shift that is also *internal* to the political subject. Weber has highlighted this feature of authority in his uncharacteristically convoluted definition of the concept found in *Economy and Society*: ‘*Herrschaft* [Authority] will thus mean the situation in which the manifested will (command) of the *ruler* or rulers is meant to influence the conduct of one or more others (*the ruled*) and actually does influence it in such a way that their conduct to a socially relevant degree occurs *as if* the ruled had made the content of the command the maxim of their conduct for its very own sake.’² The ‘as if’ here is ‘unavoidable’ since it captures the ‘command is accepted as a valid norm’.³ Weber is right to note that the objective fact of obedience is not enough; the concept of authority must include reference to the subject’s internal relation to the figure of authority and the command. In a similar vein, while authority may appear to be bestowed, in actuality it is always effective insofar as its existence is presupposed by an individual or collective subject. This means that

² Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (London: University of California Press, 1978), p. 946.

³ Max Weber, p. 947.

the passage from one regime to another takes place both as a spectacle that is witnessed as well as a sudden internal shift in the subjects' convictions as to who possesses authority to decide. Nonetheless, the catch here is that the transfer of authority can only be fully recapitulated *as spectacle*, i.e. in its objective dimension. The difference, to put it in Schmittian terms, is between the acclamation of an individual whose qualities and properties predispose him to sovereign authority, and acclamation as the objective correlate of the constitutive force of the collective. In the case of the former, we find a vision of sovereign power that is always 'pre-constituted', grounded in the inherent attributes of the individual who possesses it. Alternatively, in the case of the latter, the clamour and tumult of the publicly assembled crowd expresses the multitude's constitutive power, the anarchic levelling of the political field which subsequently condenses around a figure in collective acclamation. Acclamation, on this reading, is the spectacular frisson that signals a political event. As has been shown throughout the chapters of this thesis, the subjective dimension of the transformation *qua* spectacle is not only unconscious (or more precisely, constitutively distorted), but cannot be brought to consciousness without either encountering crippling logical paradoxes or, otherwise, dissolving the concentration of authority in the new sovereign agent by exposing its genesis as grounded in the multitude's constitutive power.

In his unrivalled investigation of the concept of authority, Kojève offers us the following definition:

All forms of (human) Authority have this in common: they make possible the exercise of an action that does not provoke a reaction, because those who could have reacted abstain from doing so consciously and voluntarily. Conversely, wherever men submit to an action (that they would not have effected by themselves) by consciously and

voluntarily renouncing their faculty to react against it, it is possible to observe the intervention of an Authority.⁴

Such a definition can encompass every form of authority addressed throughout the chapters of this thesis. Clearly, the social contract would have to be regarded as an act that, if successful, causes individuals to ‘abstain from’ certain activities and ‘renounce their faculty to react against’ certain actions. Likewise, the actions of a revolutionary group compel behaviour in a similar way. In any of these cases, we are dealing with a particular individual or group whose authority resides in their ability to implement or maintain a political situation such as the exit from the state of nature, the continued security of the individuals comprising the state, or carry out a program for revolutionary change. Kojève goes on to note a distinction between the ‘*birth* (genesis) of an Authority’ and the ‘*external* signs of its “recognition”’.⁵ What is left unsaid in Kojève, but is nonetheless strongly implied in his account, is that the status of authority as a quality of a concrete political agent necessarily hinges on the subject’s apprehension of that authority. Authority exists as soon as it is recognised, but as we have seen this event (of recognition) is not a willed act. It should instead be understood as a spontaneous shift in disposition; the outward manifestation of this shift (acclamation, actual obedience, or signs of respect) is the only real indicator that there is indeed a new authority. These two events are conceptually distinct and remain so even if we concede that the first event (recognition prior to its manifestation) may occur unconsciously in individual political actors. For example, if having been ordered to perform some act by an individual I find myself obeying spontaneously, without reflecting on the commanding individual’s authority, I would still nonetheless not experience my obedience as coterminous with the genesis of that authority (for

⁴ Kojève, p. 13.

⁵ Kojève, p. 34.

then the individual's authority would be dependent on my act, and he would in fact have no authority except by virtue of my obedience). Instead, I would project the genesis of authority backwards in time so as to enable me to perceive my obedient act as the mere acknowledgement of an authority already in existence. Once I have reached the end of the process, both my constitutive power and the positing/projecting activity which treats authority as already effective are concealed from retrospection. Kojève comes close to this insight in the following remark, 'Authority (and its "recognition") arises (spontaneously) in the "candidate" (who *will* be elected) *before* his election, which is nothing but a (first) *manifestation* of this already existing (that is to say, "recognised") Authority'.⁶ The key point to note here is Kojève's use of the future anterior—to paraphrase: authority *will have been* present already once we have the manifestation of authority which is the external form of its recognition. We can only be sure that authority exists once we have witnessed the manifestation, and yet, having witnessed the manifestation, we must also conclude that authority was somehow present before, albeit from an original moment which cannot be definitively located. Retrospectively, the chain of events that led to the concentration of authority contains a break marking the site of the subject's constituting act.

The central conclusion of this thesis is not simply that radical political acts (those that involve a new genesis of authority) involve a moment of narrative opacity, but also that the genesis of authority *necessarily operates in this way*. Objectively speaking, we are therefore not permitted to draw a firm distinction between the genesis of authority by way of a sovereign decision and the actions of a revolutionary vanguard—in both cases, the genesis of authority lies in the

⁶ Kojève, p. 34.

constitutive power of a multitude. Likewise, in both cases there is great risk, the debilitating uncertainty as to the outcome of one's act, the agony of decision in the absence of any *Grundnorm* to which an appeal can be made. It is therefore a mistake to view the revolutionary act as inviting catastrophe by virtue of some inherent flaw; if the attempt to install a new political order fails in the case of revolutionary acts but seems more likely to succeed when imposed through a sovereign decision, it is due to factors that are incidental (the charisma or perceived strength of the would-be leader, the pre-existing disposition of the population, and the loyalties of the men holding the weapons) and not the essential mechanism through which authority is generated which, in both cases, is utterly contingent and necessarily includes a moment of opacity or distortion.

From a transcendental materialist position, it becomes possible to see how the non-closure of the fabric of historical narrative correlates to perspectival difference, or, to the reflexive determination of sovereign power through its recognition by a subject. Transcendental materialism, as formulated by Adrian Johnston, provides a conceptualisation of subjectivity that is compatible with the arguments made above concerning authority, narrative, and temporality. Johnston outlines his view of the subject as follows:

Mind (including, for present purposes, the dimensions of the subject) cannot be demoted to the status of pure epiphenomenon, as asserted by reductive mechanistic materialists. Why not? Even if dematerialized subjectivity, engendered by, among other things, the intervention of the signifiers of the symbolic orders, is 'illusory,' it is an illusion that nonetheless really steers cognition and comportment. [...] Expressing this line of thought in a vaguely Hegelian style, the 'true' reality of material being (as substance) passes into the 'false' illusions of more-than-material non-being (as subject). But, through a movement of reciprocal dialectical modification, these illusions then pass back into their respective reality, becoming integral parts of it; and, at this stage, they no longer can be called illusions in the quotidian sense of the word (i.e., false, fictional [epi]phenomena). [...] this movement of reciprocal dialectical modification is interminable to the extent that it forever fails to close the gap opened up within the material Real.⁷

⁷ Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*, pp. 128–129.

The point to emphasise here is that it is precisely the ‘gap’, noted by Johnston, which has been the concern of the various thinkers discussed throughout this thesis. First, we have a situation in its sheer, material facticity. This might be the Hobbesian state of nature, the crisis ridden state whose existential threat requires a Schmittian sovereign, or the pre-subjective ‘human-animal’ who may be taken up in fidelity to a Badiouian event. Then, by way of an illusion (the illusion of a particular actor’s authority, for example), this empirical situation is changed in important ways: real material redistributions take place. The illusion now gains a life of its own, appearing more fundamental, more solid, more lasting, than fleeting distributions of material resources, territory, weapons, and so on. So, if we can reconstruct the entire process, why follow Johnston’s insistence on a ‘gap’? For the reason that, in order to ‘steer cognition and comportment’, illusions must be irreducible to their material conditions. As Johnston puts it, ‘Cogito-like subjectivity ontogenetically emerges out of an originally corporeal condition as its anterior ground, although, once generated, this sort of subjectivity thereafter remains irreducible to its material sources’.⁸ The very possibility of authority (or indeed, political commitment, love, or religious conversion) attests to the efficacy of an illusion that cannot be dissolved back into a material substratum or explained through reference to causal mechanisms. The autonomy of the ‘illusion’ vis-à-vis its material conditions forces us to accept its reality; it turns out that it is in fact the possibility of full and exhaustive material determination (*à la* Hobbesian ‘matter in motion’) which is illusory while ‘illusions’ (authority, commitment, obligation, conversion, love, and so on) have themselves become real. The ontogenetic emergence of subjectivity from an original corporeal

⁸ Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, pp. xxiii–xxiv.

condition provides the model for subsequent transformations, radical investments, and subjective commitments.

When Johnston insists on a ‘gap’, he refers to a failure that appears to emerge from methodological shortcomings but which is in fact essential rather than superficial or provisional. The implication is, as Žižek would put it, that the gap has an ontological, as opposed to merely epistemological, character—“*the Whole is never truly Whole*”.⁹ This means that when Kojève tells us that authority always emerges spontaneously, we must add that this spontaneous emergence cannot be represented as occupying a discrete moment in time.¹⁰ It is precisely the incommensurability between the pre- and post-evental, and the absence of any meta-historical vantage point from which these perspectives could be reconciled, which leads to irremediable narrative distortions. Narrative opacity is an essential feature of speculative, theoretical, and empirical accounts of political transformation.

The notion of reflexive determination, explored in the third chapter, serves to describe the downward causation exerted on historical materiality (i.e. the distribution of resources and weapons, territorial borders and fortifications, bodies and barricades) by insubstantial, unobservable processes. In recognising a sovereign, a political community succumb to a necessary illusion; they come to view the power of the sovereign as the primary, ‘underived’ power and repress the truth of their own constitutive power. Once this illusion gains traction it not only has a real, material impact on the lives of political subjects, but it becomes naturalized, reified, and apparently real. The supposedly superficial play of appearances that seems to arise from hard, material facticity turns out to be

⁹ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, p. 523.

¹⁰ Kojève, p. 33.

implicated in a process of reciprocal determination. As Marx noted long ago, a king is only a king insofar as he is treated as a king by his subjects.¹¹ A king's status does not depend solely on the material resources at his disposal, but on the way in which his power is encoded and apprehended by his subjects. From this, we might understand that the king can easily be displaced; all his subjects need to do is refuse to acknowledge his sovereignty. Alternatively, we might point out that the king engenders recognition by his subjects through his material resources (his regalia, his castles, and the spectacle of his marching troops) and that the subjective recognition of his power is a second-order, epiphenomenal correlate of his control over a concentration of these resources. The problem with each interpretation is that it insists on a firm boundary between the ideal and the material, elevating one side so as to read its opposite as illusory or derivative. In the first case, the agentic subject is allotted primacy over the material; in the second case, the dispositions, actions, and goals of the subject are relegated beneath matter or viewed as superficial articulations of deeper material processes, which amounts to the same. Lefort's vital contribution here is to explicitly acknowledge the symbolic dimension of power. The apparent 'transcendence of power', to adopt Lefort's phrase, is no doubt illusory, and yet viewed through a Johnstonian lens, it is precisely a 'real' illusion, that is to say, an illusion which produces real material effects.¹² One cannot simply strip away the layers of illusion so as to arrive at a self-identical kernel of sovereign power; power is operative at the level of ideality while nonetheless generated immanently from a material 'Real' substratum.

¹¹ Marx, p. 149, n. 22.

¹² Lefort, 'The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?', p. 92.

There are practical consequences of the argument I have made throughout this thesis. If illusion and distortion are essential to radical political change, and if there are ambiguities that characterise our attempts at collective action, this would seem to leave politically minded citizens in a troubling situation. Faced with new states of emergency, sudden concentrations of power in unaccountable political entities, and suspensions of legal norms, what strategies can be offered to today's engaged political subjects? In the first instance, to assert that illusion and aporia are essential features of political action both in the moment of its accomplishment and in its retrospective narrativisation does not necessarily undermine the democratic ideal of free consent and participation *tout court*. The notion of reflexive determination I outlined in the third chapter of this thesis implies a corresponding understanding of what I have designated as the democratic *a priori*. Briefly put, there can be no unilateral assertion of sovereignty; rather, every declaration by which a political actor would claim sovereignty requires recognition by a non-sovereign actor, and eventually, by every individual who would be subject to the system of law the sovereign claims to execute.¹³ This does not mean that a proto-sovereign who fails to be recognised by the individuals he or she supposes to be his subjects has no further recourse; they might have technologies at their disposal which allow them to compel obedience. But obedience is only the objective correlate of recognition and, insofar as force is used, we are no longer in a properly political situation; the relation between proto-sovereign and would-be subjects has become a state of war. Following this, the task for engaged and interested political subjects is to cultivate

¹³ The term 'non-sovereign actor' is directed primarily at Schmitt and Hobbes and certainly cannot be applied in the case of Rousseau. For Rousseau, we have a kind of institutionalisation of the constitutive power in which each member forms a part of the sovereign. There would therefore be no non-sovereign actor whose recognition would be politically relevant.

a sceptical and perspicacious attitude towards the exercise of power, to contest unwarranted concentrations of power, to constantly reflect upon the locus of the authority their obedience presupposes. Even if a political community can never permanently inoculate itself against the possibility of tyrannous rule, it is nonetheless possible to build up a collective resistance to it.

Our current era of political, economic, and ecological upheavals, provides new challenges for political theory and philosophy. If the notorious ‘End of History’ thesis rang true at the close of the twentieth century, it has since been thoroughly interrogated and dismantled. It was in 2011, against the backdrop of the gradual dismantling of Fukuyama’s thesis, and at a time when revolutionary chants echoed in city squares throughout the Arab world, that the idea for this thesis was conceived. The bifurcating trajectories of countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria contain a message for our generation—they speak of the ultimate contingency of political fortunes, the anarchic origins of order, and the constitutive power of the people. Ultimately, the revolutionary events of our generation awaken us to the non-closure of the political. Humans are uniquely and universally predisposed towards radical transformation at an individual and collective level. The task I have taken up in this thesis has been to identify and elucidate this potentiality even if it means tracing the boundaries of an aporia. To argue, as I have, that political life is enabled (as opposed to derailed) by distortion and illusion should not be taken to indicate a pessimism or cynicism about new political possibilities; on the contrary, the theoretical articulation of the nature and quality of these distortions/illusions is an endeavour that can serve to energise political communities. If the message of the revolutionary act is easily forgotten (or, strictly speaking, necessarily repressed), we should heed the Freudian discovery—there can be no repression without a symptom. From the

perspective of our own epoch in which the concretion of contemporary power relations has reached its apogee, and in which the era of globalised liberal-democratic capitalism seems immutable, one can nonetheless detect a 'return of the repressed', a latent utopian optimism that sets its crosshairs on the new.

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