

Title	Twenty Theses on Politics and Subjectivity
Author(s)	Bosteels, Bruno
Citation	ZINBUN (2016), 46: 21-39
Issue Date	2016-03
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.14989/209952">https://doi.org/10.14989/209952</a>
Right	© Copyright March 2016, Institute for Research in Humanities Kyoto University.
Type	Departmental Bulletin Paper
Textversion	publisher

Contemporary Philosophy and Politics/*Philosophie contemporaine et Politique*

Symposium: "Provided that this lasts..."/*Colloque « Pourvu que ça dure... »*

## Twenty Theses on Politics and Subjectivity

Bruno BOSTEELS

ABSTRACT: In French theory and beyond, the shift between structuralism and poststructuralism marks a pivotal turning point in the broader process of problematizing the question of political subjectivity. Two dominant trends can be distinguished in this context: one still connected to Marxism and the dialectic, for which politics is inseparable from a process of subjectivization; and the other very much aimed against the Hegelo-Marxist dialectic in the name of difference, for which the subject remains irreparably metaphysical. If in the latter tendency, associated with the legacy of Heidegger's thinking, the most we obtain is an intimation of an ontology of "being-with" as the basis for an inoperative "community," then in the former tendency, associated with the legacy of Althusser's canonical works, the argument in favor of the political subject is frequently formulated in terms of a plea in favor of maintaining the category of "the people." The problem with this new consensus, however, is that the resulting theory of the subject, articulated onto the gap or incompleteness of the structure, has once again become ontologized as a new law. More so than a reshuffling of the familiar deck of philosophical cards, the current impasse in the theory of politics and subjectivity requires a two-fold historicization. Not only should we expand on the notion of "historical modes of politics," but, in addition, we should also historicize the different "theories of the subject," in the plural, from which the new post-Hegelian consensus has been able to emerge uncontested by consolidating itself as if it were the only theory of the subject that ever existed.

KEYWORDS: subjectivization, deconstruction, poststructuralism, metaphysics, community, ontology, the people

---

Bruno BOSTEELS is Professor of Romance Studies in Cornell University.  
E-mail: bb228@cornell.edu

## 1

Political theory today faces a double challenge. On the one hand, even the most radical political theories hopelessly seem to lag behind the variety, intensity, and mobility of recent political practices. From riots and occupations on the fringes of so-called civil society to scattered attempts to reenergize a parliamentary left via the electoral route toward integral or even just partial state control, there is certainly no shortage of events that beg to be analyzed in terms of their possible contributions to the worldwide theorization of the present moment, for instance, in terms of the role of organization, the function of the state, the place of history, the critique of political economy, and so on. Many theorists, however, seem to have great difficulty overcoming the deeply ingrained impulse merely to retrofit a selection of events grabbed from the headlines—some more reformist and unapologetically or reluctantly state-oriented, others more anarchist-libertarian and quietly or rabidly anti-statist—into so many instantiations or illustrations of their own independently conceived theories. On the other hand, posing a second challenge to contemporary political theory, the shortcomings of some of these recent political experiments are often equated with, if not actually attributed to, the shortcomings of contemporary theories or philosophies. Perhaps this is just one more example of theoretical arrogance parading in the guise of self-critical modesty. No longer able to keep up with the speed of current events, let alone anticipate and guide them from above, many theorists nowadays prefer to wallow in the sorry predicament in which at least current practices show up the weaknesses and blind spots of our prevailing theories. There is no real threat to intellectual authority when this or that philosopher is reproached for not having the conceptual tools and wherewithal to understand the promise of this or that riot. For such a reproach after all still conveniently confirms—by way of negation or by default—the need for all radical practice to be oriented by the correct theory. Theorists still win even when they lose out in the face of ongoing practices.

## 2

This situation is further compounded by the fact that the relation between theory and practice, far from offering a ready-made answer, is very much part and parcel of the current impasse of all orthodoxy. There exists a broad consensus today that political practices can no longer be viewed—if they ever could—as the application or derivation of prior theories or programs. Even the view of revolutionary politics as entailing the much longed-for fusion of theory and practice—a fusion for which the technical term of praxis was coined or borrowed from Greek philosophy—has come under attack as stemming from a much longer tradition of Western metaphysical thought, of which the idea of a dialectical synthesis would be the crowning moment rather than a radical critique. Marxism, especially, in its debts to the

## TWENTY THESES ON POLITICS AND SUBJECTIVITY

Hegelian dialectic (debts that possibly extend well beyond the moment of the “epistemological break” between the work of the so-called young and the mature Marx), would not come unscathed out of these attacks, with the result being that theory and practice are left dangling, forever disjointed in their blind or dogmatic autonomy, except for brief and intermittent, mostly short-lived messianic flashes of redemption in what can then only be called an emptied-out or deactivated praxis: a praxis that has been rendered inoperative, or a praxis without practice. Finally, even the notion of theory as being immanent to the movement rather than imported from the outside, which is a notion quite common among a large number of today’s activists—whether they self-describe as anarcho-communists, autonomists, or accelerationists—is perhaps only the latest avatar of the millenarian dream of a coincidence between theory and practice realized in the actual unfolding of events themselves. But this dream can hardly withstand the critique or deconstruction of Western metaphysics, a critique or deconstruction for which the legacy of metaphysics shows two faces or tendencies: on the one hand, the tendency to view theory (as first philosophy or ontology) as prior and transcendent to practice (as ethics or politics); and, on the other hand, the tendency to search for the fusion (synthesis or coincidence) of theory and practice in the (dialectical or pantheist) immanence of praxis.

### 3

The problem of how to name the subjects and events of today’s politics should be placed against the backdrop of this larger impasse. The difficulty of nomination is merely an index of the absence of self-evident dialectical links, first, between theory and practice; second, between politics and history; and, third, between history and ontology. To be exact, with the critique of dialectics as part of the critique or deconstruction of metaphysics, the relation between politics and history falls apart no less than the relation between theory and practice. This means that politics is seen as no longer being grounded in or deduced from—if it ever was—historical factors in the broadest sense, including elements of the social and the economical. If “people,” “nation,” “civil society,” “proletariat,” “plebes” or even “multitude” no longer seem to fit today’s actors as the glove that these names once seemed to offer, this is in large part because the origin of a genuine political event is henceforth associated with an inevitable gap between an actor and its naturally or objectively assigned role in society, a discrepancy between a subject and its place in the economic structure, or an internal scission that separates any political subject from itself. Unfortunately, though, such an understanding of the gap, discrepancy or scission at the source of any genuine political event (today or always? that is precisely part of the question that becomes obliterated in the process), in its most radical version, becomes re-ontologized in the sense that the separation or intransitivity between politics and history, just like the distance between theory and practice, is referred

back to the supposedly more fundamental gap between the ontic (now including every realm of politics, history, society, and so on) and the ontological (philosophy as the thinking of being as such). The brief attempt to translate the so-called ontological difference into the difference between “politics” and “the political” is only one version of this ontologization. But this makes it impossible to interrogate the *historical* reasons for why certain names or modes of political subjectivization might have worked at certain times, for example the class politics of party and unions, whereas nowadays these names or modes supposedly would have become inoperative. In fact, more often than not, the conclusion insinuates itself that all hitherto existing forms of politics—even, if not especially, all Marxist-inspired revolutionary politics—have remained blind to the inevitable gap, discrepancy or dehiscence that always already unhinges any political subject from its objective function in history or society. At its most extreme, this anti-historicist and anti-essentialist insight, which derives its credentials from a radical rethinking of historicity or historicality in the wake of Heidegger’s destruction of metaphysics, supposes the abandonment of the category of the subject altogether—whether political or otherwise.

## 4

Paradoxically, the radical deconstruction of the category of the subject as the very culmination of Western metaphysics (a culmination that is at the same time the beginning of the end of metaphysics embodied in the Nietzschean will to power, which Heidegger interprets as the sovereign will to will) affects most but not all names of political subjectivity. “People,” “nation,” “state,” or “proletariat” certainly succumb to the critique of metaphysical subjectivity, and so do even the “soviets” of so-called council communism, which once upon a time, during the process of de-Stalinization after 1956 and again with renewed energy after 1968, if not also today with the revival of various autonomist or anarcho-communist tendencies, were expected to offer a self-managed alternative to totalitarian bureaucracy. However, the same critique does not seem to apply to the notion of “community.” For a brief while, starting in the 1980s, a radical deconstructive rethinking of community was undertaken to show that a community worthy of this name is, or ought to be, without the underlying unity of an essential identity and that what is, or ought to be, shared in a community amounts to nothing—except, precisely, the absence of a common essence. Is, or ought to be? Much depends on this ambivalence. And while the ontologizing tendency typical of deconstruction as a whole clearly favors the preemptory use of affirmations in the present indicative, it is equally clear that the various arguments about the inoperative, finite or singular-plural nature of the community all depend on the implicit normativity of an imperative ought-to-be, without which the worst forms of really existing communitarianism—whether national-socialist or even communist—could not be kept at bay. In other words, whenever we read assertions

## TWENTY THESES ON POLITICS AND SUBJECTIVITY

from the hand of Jean-Luc Nancy or Giorgio Agamben about what *the* community (in French or Italian, the use of the definite article, while seemingly neutral, can always be read as emphatic in this way, whereas the English translations are frequently able to do without the article altogether) “is,” namely, without substance, essence or stable underlying identity, we must understand that this is so in principle but not always in actual fact, since such is obviously not the way in which Nazism or Stalinism—the main ideological forms being targeted in these philosophical reflections—put to work their idea of the community.

### 5

To the ontological register thus is assigned the formidable task of having to translate a historical critique of the present in philosophical terms, while at the same time interrupting the possibility of establishing a genuine two-way link between history and ontology. To be more precise, really existing history, which in this context can be summed up in the standard twin versions of totalitarianism named by the proper names of Hitler and Stalin, always falls short of the ontological dignity of the concept of “the” community, which can be shorn of all that cumbersome ballast so as to be affirmed as what it *is*, when in actual fact this is how things *ought to be*. But this leaves the reader with the impression that no existing community ever manages to be what the philosophers so boldly and confidently stipulate, not even under the juridical protection of regimes of representative democracy that alone would be capable of staving off the threats of totalitarianism. At most, in this reimagining of the community, there will be flashes of anticipation to tease out what otherwise is merely affirmed in the present indicative: scattered experiments selectively but also predictably pulled from the headlines—an art work here or a street riot there—in which perhaps we catch a glimpse of our fundamental condition as mortal human beings exposed to a pure “being-with,” or to a pure “being-in-common,” without substance and without essence. Finally, because of the way in which the disastrous experiences of the twentieth century thus receive a diagnostic written in a radically ontological key, based on the recognition that such experiences violently disavow the kernel of finitude at the heart of “the” community, this aspect of the deconstruction of politics by the same token also seems to render impossible, if not wholly undesirable, the actual putting into work of any future sense of the collective subject, least of all one based on such notions as work, labor or operativity, which are now considered hopelessly metaphysical. And yet, this does not keep some of these very same thinkers of the community from invoking the notion of a certain communism. “This is why,” Nancy writes at the start of *The Inoperative Community*, ambiguously referring to a well-known dictum from Jean-Paul Sartre (according to whom it was Marxism that constituted the unsurpassable horizon of our time), “even as we posit that communism is no longer our unsurpassable horizon, we must

also posit, just as forcefully, that a communist exigency or demand communicates with the gesture by means of which we must go farther than all possible horizons.”<sup>1</sup>

## 6

As it turned out, this seemingly scholastic dispute over the metaphysical nature of the Marxist dialectic was to have enormous impact on the political and theoretical history of the Left. To be exact, as a result of this dispute an already incredibly varied socialist and communist Left would be drawn into a overly philosophical arena where it would soon lose its main features as a political project altogether. In what could well be the greatest conjuring trick of the twentieth century at the level of political thought, the reassessment of the history of the socialist and communist Left (from Marx and Bakunin by way of Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky all the way to Stalin, Mao, Castro and Ho-Chi-Minh—though with precious few of these last figures being mentioned by name, let alone studied with the same textual zeal as, say, Husserl or Heidegger), is now recast and presented as being part and parcel of the millenarian struggle against the metaphysical oblivion of being. Conversely, avid readers of Heidegger’s lectures and seminars on the history of metaphysics, even the recently published “black notebooks,” can thenceforth present themselves as the urgently needed harbingers of a post-metaphysical Left. Thus, giving rise to a self-described “left Heideggerianism” and pleading for a “radical democracy,” if not for a “democracy-to-come,” the philosophies of difference allow newer generations of thinkers to reassess the failings and shortcomings of all past political movements, state formations, and popular uprisings in light of the critique or deconstruction of metaphysics. *All?* Well, yes: insofar as what is at stake is the very ground on which political questions are raised in the first place, no concrete fact or example of politics can ever hope to evade the all-embracing sweep of the critique of metaphysics, of sovereignty, or of hegemony. For the critique in question, moreover, these last three terms are roughly equivalent and can be used almost interchangeably; whoever says post-metaphysical thus implies post-sovereign and post-hegemonic at the same time. From Plato to NATO, as the popular rhyme goes, is hardly a caricature to describe the full range of options over which this critique casts its worldwide net of deconstructive suspicion. More surprising is the fact that such suspicions are applied with even greater fervor to the Left than to the Right. Thus, by presenting themselves as the guardians of a never-ending vigilance with regard to the metaphysical temptations built into every effort at self-emancipation, whether by an individual or by the people, by the proletariat or by the multitude, proponents of the deconstruction of metaphysics can always position themselves as standing to the left of the official Left.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 8–9 (trans. modified).

## TWENTY THESES ON POLITICS AND SUBJECTIVITY

Last but certainly not least, also giving rise to various so-called new materialisms, the philosophers of difference and their contemporary heirs can always claim to be more radically materialist than all the old materialisms having come before them. And, foremost among the latter, we should always assume the shadowy presence of a certain (dialectical and historical) materialism—now considered irreparably idealist and metaphysical—attributed to Marx.

### 7

The complete debunking of the very notion of political subjectivity is not the only outcome of the current theoretical impasse. Even if we limit ourselves to so-called French theory, aside from the Heideggerian tradition in the deconstruction of metaphysics found among disciples of Jacques Derrida, we can find a number of thinkers—among them Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière and Étienne Balibar—who all maintain the notion of subjectivization as essential to politics and who paradoxically are associated with the teachings of Louis Althusser. This is paradoxical because for Althusser, no less than for Heidegger, the category of the subject is inherently suspect: not as much metaphysical so much as ideological, the subject is never on the side of truth, whether scientific, political, or otherwise. Contrary to this rejection of the subject found in Althusser's canonical texts, the difficult task faced by his students in the midst of the crisis of Marxism—a crisis often referred to as the moment of the emergence of post-Marxism—consists in having to articulate a theory of the subject that nevertheless would be compatible with the deconstruction of metaphysics. This means that deconstruction cannot go all the way down or, rather, that deconstruction is impossible without at least some notion of the intervening subject. Between the two intellectual traditions marked by the names of Heidegger and Althusser and their disciples, there exists both and at the same time an essential compatibility (which we can sum up as the need for the deconstruction of the One) as well as an essential incompatibility (which we can sum up in terms of the abandonment or maintenance of a minimal theory of the subject).

### 8

One area where this debate plays itself out is in relation to the above-mentioned relation between politics and history. For thinkers such as Badiou or Rancière, politics, which is always the work of a subject, can no longer be referred to the objective data of history, sociology or political economy. This “no longer” can be interpreted in two ways: either what once was historically feasible has now run its course and is no longer available as a practical option, or else it is only a misguided theoretical tradition that saw the class struggles from the past as deriving directly from the socio-economic realities of their time. In other words, either Marx has in fact become obsolete, even though his vision of the class struggle was



once historically correct, or else he was always right in theory, even though his insights in the contingent character of the class struggle were subsequently buried under a deterministic essentialism in the tradition of orthodox Marxism.

## 9

The shared premise behind all post-Marxism thus consists in taking into account the gap between politics and history, understood in a sense that is broad enough to encompass the relations between politics and society or between politics and economics. Badiou's trajectory is exemplary in this sense, insofar as over the course of two or three decades, he has increasingly come to disjoin the analytical from the political role of Marxism. As a diagnostic, Marx's critique of political economy may well be more valid today than ever, but this does not help the militant actors in the political uprisings of our time to devise the appropriate tactics and strategies for intervention. Something has entered into a profound crisis in the articulation between these two aspects or logics of Marxism, which I have called the analytical and the political and which other interpreters of Marx such as Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval call the logic of capital and the logic of the class struggle, supposedly marked by an incommensurability overcome only by the imaginary glue of communism: "Communism is what serves as 'glue' to hold together two lines of thought that have very different histories: the 'objective' logic of capitalism and the 'practical' logic of the civil war between classes would converge into a superior social and economic form of organization. In other terms, only an imaginary projection of the future would soldier together the disparate nature of these two perspectives."<sup>2</sup> As for Badiou, even he is less and less convinced that we can understand politics, like the development of religion, "through history, in and with history," as the early Marx said in *The Holy Family*, in a phrase often repeated by the late Daniel Bensaïd. This is because for the author of *Being and Event* politics is entirely on the order of the event, which cannot be understood unless we put to the side all mere facts and opinions about facts. Thus, Badiou increasingly will come to see political interventions—just like art, mathematics and love as the other three domains in which events can take place—as self-referential and authorized only by themselves. This is especially clear in the period from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, roughly from *Being and Event* to *Metapolitics*, when the anti-historicist and anti-dialectical impetus of Badiou's work effectively is at its peak. But many commentators are suspicious of the anti-historicist tendency in later works as well and perceive a similar stance in the proposed return to the Idea of communism in *The Communist Hypothesis* and *The Rebirth of History*. The potential drawbacks rightly or wrongly associated with this position should be obvious enough: a seemingly ethereal aloofness, a privileging of the philosopher-

---

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Marx, prénom Karl* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), 11.

## TWENTY THESES ON POLITICS AND SUBJECTIVITY

intellectual to the detriment of the masses in revolt, and in general a separation of praxis and Idea under the openly accepted philosophical guardianship of Plato rather than Marx. Conversely, the potential risks involved in the opposite position should be no less evident: an anti-intellectual disdain for theory in favor of the pedagogy of the deed, a tendency to explain away the emergence of autonomous political tactics on the basis of the historical cycles and crises of the capitalist world system, and in general a reduction of the political or interventionist Marx of *The Communist Manifesto* or *The Civil War in France* in favor of the more analytical or systemic Marx of *Capital*, with or without the supplement of the more subjectively based *Grundrisse*. In any case, the perceived shift in the trajectory of Badiou's evaluation of Marxism as a militant discourse is less radical than appears at first sight. Even as he will differently come to interpret the sense or meaning of the term "history," Badiou in fact has always defended the thesis that politics—while necessarily *anchored* or *rooted* in history—cannot be *inferred* or *deduced* from history alone. This is why all events of politics are necessarily forced events. In *Theory of the Subject*, for example, Badiou attempts to devise a dialectical articulation between history and politics, mapped onto the dialectic of productive masses and partisan class. "Class, apprehended according to the dialectical division of its dialecticity, means partisan political action anchored in the productive historicity of the masses," he claims. "The whole point is to know how all this works together, because it is this working-together that is class. This entails nothing less than to make the rectifiable singularity of politics rise up in the real movement of history."<sup>3</sup> It is true that Badiou subsequently comes to abandon this view of the transitivity or, at the very least, the dialectical working-together of history and politics, or of masses and classes, organized through partisan action. Thus, in *Can Politics Be Thought?*, intransitivity becomes the new key in determining the essence of politics, which marks the point of the real even for Marx's own discourse, which only the Marxist critique of political economy subsequently ended up fixating into a fiction. Yet this does not mean that Badiou from that moment onward will abandon Marx's dialectic and forgo the category of history altogether. As recently as in *The Rebirth of History*, in fact, he revisits much of the same grammar for the articulation in question, but now the history in which all politics is said to be "anchored" or "rooted" no longer refers to objective factors but instead becomes wholly internal to the subjective process of sustaining a political event as such. For the post-Marxist or post-Maoist in Badiou, the point is no longer to politicize history but to historicize politics. If there is a rebirth or reawakening of history, it is no longer based in the objective history of the class struggle but in the becoming-historical of certain

---

<sup>3</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. and intro. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), 27. For a more detailed analysis of Badiou's changing relationship to Marxism, see my "The Fate of the Generic: Marx with Badiou," in *(Mis)readings of Marx in Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, ed. Jessica Whyte and Jernej Habjan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 211–226.

spontaneous revolts and uprisings and in the making-political of those historical riots. In other words, all there is to the dialectic, if this is still what we want to call the theory of the event, is an immanent periodization of spontaneous riot, historical movement, and political organization. And so the new version of the old question asked in *Theory of the Subject* in terms of masses, classes, and party, becomes the following in *The Rebirth of History*: “How are we to inscribe politically, as active materiality under the sign of the Idea, a reawakening of History?” particularly if such inscriptions are no longer socially predetermined but instead both rare and contingent: “Let us simply note that if every political truth is rooted in a massive popular event, it nevertheless cannot be said that it is reducible to it.”<sup>4</sup>

## 10

Within French theory and even beyond national boundaries, the shift between structuralism and poststructuralism marks a pivotal turning point in the broader process of problematizing the question of political subjectivity. As stated earlier, we can distinguish two dominant trends in this context: one still connected to Marxism and the dialectic, for which politics is inseparable from a process of subjectivization; and the other very much aimed against the Hegelo-Marxist dialectic in the name of difference, for which the subject remains irreparably metaphysical. If in the latter tendency, associated with the legacy of Heidegger’s thinking, the most we obtain is an intimation of an ontology of “being-with” as the basis for an inoperative “community,” then in the former tendency, associated with the legacy of Althusser’s canonical works, the argument in favor of the political subject is frequently formulated in terms of a plea in favor of maintaining the category of “the people.” In their contributions to the collective volume *What Is a People?*, for example, Badiou and Rancière thus argue that “the people” in the singular, at least when it is severed from any particularist inscription that would be signaled by an adjective accompanying the noun, can continue to serve as the name for the political subject today: “The word ‘people’ has a positive sense only with regard to the possible nonexistence of the state. Either the forbidden state whose creation is desired. Or the official state whose disappearance is desired. The ‘people’ is a word that takes all its value either, in transitory forms, from the wars of national liberation or, in definitive forms, from communist politics.”<sup>5</sup> But in the same vein we could also locate the theoretical orientation of another ex-Althusserian, the late Ernesto Laclau, who similarly

---

<sup>4</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2012), 67 and 89. For Badiou’s changing views of history and politics, see also Chapters 3 and 7 in my *Badiou and Politics*.

<sup>5</sup> Alain Badiou, “Vingt-quatre notes sur les usages du mot ‘people,’” in *Qu’est-ce qu’un peuple?* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2013), 21.

## TWENTY THESES ON POLITICS AND SUBJECTIVITY

argues that the logic of populism describes the essence of all political processes. These arguments then raise the question of what happens when “peoples” appear in the plural and not in the singular, as in the expression “we, the people” that Judith Butler projects onto recent events worldwide, as if the expression did not belong to a narrowly defined constitutional tradition based in the United States. On the contrary, the pluralization of this possible name for the political subject today entails some reference or other to the racial, ethnic, and civilizational diversity of “indigenous peoples,” “first nations,” or *pueblos originarios*. “The universe of meaning in which the notion of people is deployed and takes on specific meanings is generally constructed upon the articulation, never identical, of three other notions: the nation, the citizenship/sovereignty, and the classes that we call subordinate,” as Sadri Khiari postulates in his contribution to *What Is A People?* He adds: “To complete this description, we can mention the case in which the people, even while giving itself the same foundations as the nation, self-identifies as ‘less’ than the nation, generally in that, even while being attached to certain autonomous powers, particularly on the cultural plane, it does not aspire to (or renounce) granting itself a state that would be its own (we can mention in this regard the many ‘minority peoples’ in the European states).”<sup>6</sup> This plural reference is rarely, if ever, taken into account in what remains a fairly Eurocentric discussion regarding the names of the political subject today. But if we want to understand processes such as the classical tension between proletarians and peasants in Mao’s Cultural Revolution, the agrarian reforms of the Mexican or Cuban Revolutions, or the new plurinational constitution in Bolivia, we cannot continue to remain blind to the question of the “motley” or *abigarrado* nature of political subjects today.

### 11

In any case, a new consensus has emerged in dialogue with the Althusserian school, in which not only Rancière or Balibar but also Badiou or Laclau can be inscribed, as well as a series of younger thinkers whom one would not immediately or exclusively associate with Althusser such as Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, or Sandro Mezzadra. The shared premise behind this consensus holds that subject and structure can be articulated through the essential incompleteness of the latter—an incompleteness that would not be visible, however, without an intervention of the former. This is why, in the words of Balibar, all good structuralism is already poststructuralism: “But my hypothesis is precisely that there is, in fact, no such thing as poststructuralism, or rather that poststructuralism (which acquired this

---

<sup>6</sup> Sadri Khiari, “Le peuple et le tiers-peuple” in *Qu’est-ce qu’un peuple?* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2013), 117–118. See also my introduction, “This People Which Is Not One,” to the forthcoming English translation of *What Is A People?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

name in the course of its international ‘exportation,’ ‘reception,’ or ‘translation’) is always still structuralism, and structuralism in its strongest sense is already poststructuralism.”<sup>7</sup> The crucial point not to be missed in this context is not only that every structure is always already dislocated from within, marked by a necessary gap or discrepancy that keeps it from constituting a self-contained totality, which is after all the lesson to be learned from the canonical Althusser himself, who on this topic is in perfect agreement with Heideggerians such as Derrida, but also, and above all, that this gap or discrepancy does not appear unless there is an intervening subject at work on this very site, the site of an event where the historicity of the situation is symptomatically concentrated. Such is the major theoretical innovation introduced in common by a number of thinkers working in the aftermath of Althusser’s Marxism, Derridean deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Italian autonomy. To use the excellent summary offered by Laclau in his preface to one of Žižek’s first major books, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: “There is a subject because the substance—objectivity—does not succeed in constituting itself completely.”<sup>8</sup>

## 12

The problem with this new consensus is that the resulting theory of the subject, articulated onto the gap or incompleteness of the structure, has once again become ontologized as a new law. Just as Althusser, in his canonical writings from *For Marx*, turned the law of uneven development into a “primitive law,” applicable to any structure whatsoever, regardless of historical circumstances such as the clash of civilizations or the peripheral nature of certain countries such as Russia, so too in countless formulations flowing from the pen of Žižek, Butler, or Mezzadra, we now are told that the subject always exceeds its own determination by the power structures that nonetheless bring it into existence in the first place. “Agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled,” Butler postulates as though this were an irrevocable law of subjectivity as such. “If the subject is neither fully determined by power nor fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both), the subject exceeds the logic of noncontradiction, is an excrescence of logic, as it were.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in the name of this necessary excess, which opens up the structure to its own radical contingency while

---

<sup>7</sup> Étienne Balibar, “Structuralism: A Destitution of the Subject?” trans. James Swenson, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14:1 (2003): 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ernesto Laclau, “Preface,” in Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), xv.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 15 and 17. See also Chapter 2, “Producción de subjetividad,” in Sandro Mezzadra, *La cocina de Marx: El sujeto y su producción*, trad. Diego Picotto (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2014), 23–33.

## TWENTY THESES ON POLITICS AND SUBJECTIVITY

at the same time inscribing the subject in the space of this opening, contemporary theory also frequently follows in the footsteps of Althusser himself who in his posthumous writings went in search of an eclectic form of “aleatory materialism,” supposedly capable of bypassing the alleged determinism of his own earlier materialist dialectic in whose name he had first begun to articulate some of the same principles in his canonical writings.

### 13

If, in the words of Yoshihiko Ichida, there exists something like a dominant political anthropology, or a new fundamental ontology today, then it is this consensus, which gives a new twist to Hegel’s dictum that spirit must be thought “not only as substance but also as subject.”<sup>10</sup> Žižek, of course, is the philosopher who has gone the farthest in proudly affirming the Hegelian credentials behind this new consensus, which in his eyes breaks definitively with the textbook versions of deconstruction that claim to have overcome the totalizing drive of the dialectic toward the Absolute. But even when the presence of Hegel is less mind-numbingly obvious than in the case of Žižek, we can find similar assumptions about the articulation of substance and subject among a great many other authors in contemporary theory. In this sense, our current situation in terms of theory is overwhelmingly controlled by the persistent paradigm of German idealism.

### 14

Any attempt to break with the paradigm of the theory of the subject inherited—after the necessary deconstruction of its metaphysical underpinnings in terms of the principle of totality—from German idealism, for this very reason, sees itself confronted with the same alternative voiced in the title of another one of Althusser’s disciples, that is, the title of Pierre Macherey’s book *Hegel or Spinoza*. In fact, continuing in the footsteps of the posthumous Althusser, many authors find unsuspected allies for this effort in other pre-Hegelian or even pre-Kantian thinkers, aside from Spinoza: thinkers such as Machiavelli, if not much earlier, ancient materialists such as Lucretius. Finally, like the radical outcome of the Heideggerian path of thinking, such efforts also frequently end up sacrificing the theory of the subject altogether, but now they do so in the name of an ontological affirmation of radical immanence, contingency, and the objective—rather than subjective—freedom of the aleatory.

---

<sup>10</sup> Yoshihiko Ichida, “Héros (post-)structuraliste, politique de politique,” in this same issue.

## 15

More so than a reshuffling of the familiar deck of philosophical cards, the current impasse in the theory of politics and subjectivity requires a two-fold historicization. Not only should we expand on the notion (originally proposed by one of Badiou's friends and fellow militants, Sylvain Lazarus) of "historical modes of politics," including among others the Jacobin, Bolshevik, Stalinist and democratic-parliamentary modes, which would at least begin to account for the fact that certain modes of doing politics, such as the class-based politics of communist parties and unions all over the world, may have been appropriate in the past, even if they have become obsolete or saturated today. But, in addition, we should also historicize the different "theories of the subject," in the plural, from which the new post-Hegelian consensus has been able to emerge uncontested by consolidating itself as if it were the only theory of the subject that ever existed (as when Badiou himself writes, precisely in *Theory of the Subject*: "The truth is that there is only one theory of the subject"<sup>11</sup>).

## 16

In terms of the first historicization, we might want to consider the fact that long before the multiple events of Tahrir Square, the *indignados* of Puerta del Sol in Spain, or Occupy Wall Street in the USA, the current sequence of riots and uprisings may have taken off in 2006 in Mexico with the so-called Oaxaca Commune, which in turn inspired activists in California to baptize themselves the Oakland Commune rather than Occupy Oakland. This name, however, should not too quickly be interpreted only as a reference to the heroic example of the 1871 Paris Commune, so frequently invoked by the likes of Badiou and others. As even Marx knew all too well, even though he momentarily seems to forget this in his analysis of the Paris Commune in *The Civil War in France*, there exists a longstanding tradition of *comunero* revolts in the Hispanic world that goes far back at least to the sixteenth century, with the rebellion of *comuneros* of Castile, through various eighteenth-century indigenous uprisings in the Andes and New Granada, all the way to what the Trotskyist historian Adolfo Gilly describes as the Commune of Morelos of 1914–1915, in a year-long experiment in radical land reform and military self-government among the original Zapatistas just south of Mexico City. The commune thus intermittently appears as a historical mode of political action and organization that seems particularly apt in moments of quasi-anarchist autonomy from the centralized state, with the fusion of peasants and proletarians in particular being a key mobilizing element in the context of Latin America. But this also brings back the question of the community in a way that can no longer be reduced to the ontological register and

---

<sup>11</sup> Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 115.

## TWENTY THESES ON POLITICS AND SUBJECTIVITY

instead calls for an investigation into the historical fate of so-called primitive or originary communities in the buildup of various political forms of the commune.

### 17

Similar questions must come to frame the second task of historicization, in terms of various theories of the subject aside from the dominant version inherited from German idealism. If today, for example, the new consensus has established the version in which the subject appears split by the incompleteness of the structure, then we must still come to an understanding of how this version became, as it were, ontologized as the only theory of the subject, valid for all times. For all the emphasis on the contingency of the event, this evental theory nevertheless remains through and through ahistorical and transcendental. There is then always only one theory of how any subject whatsoever intervenes in fidelity to the event but there are no events—such as the advent of Christianity or the globalization of capitalism with the conquest of the Americas—that would come to mark different types or figures of the subject. By contrast, if we want to take them into account, such types or figures call for a theory of the subject that would no longer be structural or transcendental but rather historical or genealogical along the lines of the recent work of Alain de Libéra, in his multivolume *Archaeology of the Subject* or that of the recently deceased Argentine philosopher León Rozitchner, on the historical links between capitalism and Christian subjectivity.

### 18

Marx's thought can still be helpful in this context. Even in the *Grundrisse*, whose the subject-oriented approach inspired Antonio Negri's lessons given for Althusser's seminar in France and subsequently published as *Marx Beyond Marx*, we do well to focus not just on the 1857 *Einleitung* or on the so-called "fragment on the machine" from which all Italian autonomists and post-autonomists took their inspiration, but also on the central section on "Economic Forms that Precede Capitalism," which was edited in English as a separate booklet by Eric Hobsbawm and, particularly in peripheral or postcolonial contexts such as in Latin America, went through numerous reprintings as one of the fundamental texts in the Marxist corpus. What this section highlights is the need to raise anew the question of the historical emergence of capitalism out of the fortuitous encounter of factors that are themselves not capitalist but that subsequently come to be recoded and circularly reinscribed into the impossible loop of capital, as though they had been the result of capital itself. It is in large part due to such an impossible looping mechanism that the so-called primitive, agrarian or peasant communes or communities that preceded the movement of originary accumulation appear as being forever lost, so that the various uprisings and revolts, which for this reason often



adopt the name of the commune, claim to operate in the name of their utopian return. Such a utopian dream is not just the result of a retrospective illusion, to be dispelled through the adoption of an ontological community that is always already constitutively lost; it is also an inevitable aspect of any political initiative that seems to mobilize a collective subject there where previously only atomistic individualities seemed to be available on the marketplace of civil-bourgeois society.

## 19

There nonetheless exists a strange analogy between the circular loop of capital, as described in these central sections of the *Grundrisse*, and the very structure of revolutionary praxis, which is defined in the third of Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" as the "coincidence" or, literally, the "falling together" of the changing of one's circumstances and self-change, that is to say, the simultaneous transformation of the structure and of the subject: "Das Zusammenfallen des Änderns der Umstände und der menschlichen Tätigkeit kann nur als umwälzende Praxis gefasst und rationell verstanden werden" ("The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary praxis*"<sup>12</sup>). Even or especially when this thesis is translated in terms of the dominant post-Hegelian consensus, the fact remains that the notion according to which a subject, though determined by circumstances that are not of its own making, can simultaneously transform both itself and its own circumstances, offers an uncanny replica of the loop whereby capital seems to posit the effective presuppositions of its own emergence as though they were the products of its own doing. A sustained engagement with Marx's theories of the subject, which obviously cannot be undertaken here, should thus be able to contribute in a fundamental way to what must be described as a second-order historicization, that is, the historicization of the becoming-transcendental or ahistorical of the political anthropology inherited from German idealism. Such an undertaking might be able to shed new light on the fact that even the most radical calls for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism seem to continue to rely on a very peculiar theory of the subject, which only in the modern era has been able to present itself as universally and eternally valid. This is not to say that we suffer only from the philosophical influence of German idealism but rather that the rise of German idealism itself is part of a broader historical process in which our understanding of subjectivity seems to have been modeled upon the self-change or activity of capitalism.

---

<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," *Collected Works* (London: International Publishers, 1975), vol. 5, 4.

A thorough materialist historicization of the becoming-ahistorical of the dominant–evental but still transcendental–theory of the subject today cannot afford to obliterate the historical markers that might separate a Christian from a pre-Christian understanding of the self, or a capitalist from a pre-capitalist understanding of human speech and thought. This does not mean, however, that we should opt instead for a position of historical relativism according to which every culture from every epoch would have a theory of the subject of its own. If we still wish to argue that the subject has always existed, we might want to add that it did not always exist in the same subjective form. The subject is not an invention of the philosophers, be they Descartes or Hegel, perhaps preceded along this path by Saint Augustine. If the subject is quintessentially modern, to the point where any theory of the subject can be said to involve an implicit theory of modernity, then we must come to an understanding of how such a modern subject was able to project itself on the basis of pre-modern circumstances that it did not create but rather found before it as so many effective or historical presuppositions. In other words, the break between the subject and that which is not the subject (the materials on which the subject operates, whatever they are called: nature, desire, will power, life or simply certain quanta of force and drive) must be interrogated in tandem with the break between the modern and the pre-modern, or between capitalist and pre-capitalist economic but also subjective (psychic, libidinal, cognitive, and affective) formations. Only then will it be possible to escape the conundrum in which any call for the transformation of the world, no matter how rabidly and violently anticapitalist in tone, continues to replicate the impossible loop whereby capital, like an eternal Münchhausen pulling himself up from his own hair, sustains the illusion that it is capable of producing everything, even the historical presuppositions of its own emergence. Put differently, only then will we be able to stop thinking and acting like capitalist subjects.

Mexico City-Kyoto, January 2015

### **Bibliography**

- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Badiou, Alain. *Being and Event*. Trans. Oliver Feltham. London: Continuum, 2006.
- . *Metapolitics*. Trans. Jason Barker. London: Verso, 2005.
- . *Theory of the Subject*. Trans. Bruno Bosteels. London: Continuum, 2009.
- . *The Communist Hypothesis*. Trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran. London: Verso, 2010.

- . *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2012.
- . “Vingt-quatre notes sur les usages du mot ‘peuple.’” *Qu’est-ce qu’un peuple?* Paris: La Fabrique, 2013. 9–21.
- Badiou, Alain, et al. *Qu’est-ce qu’un peuple?* Paris: La Fabrique, 2013.
- Balibar, Étienne. “Structuralism: A Destitution of the Subject?” Trans. James Swenson. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14:1 (2003): 1–21.
- Bensaïd, Daniel. “‘Dans et par l’histoire’: Retours sur la Question juive.” In Karl Marx, *Sur la Question juive*. Ed. Daniel Bensaïd. Paris: La Fabrique, 2006. 74–135.
- Bosteels, Bruno. *Badiou and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- . “Introduction: This People Which Is Not One.” *What Is A People?* New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
- . “The Fate of the Generic: Marx with Badiou.” *(Mis)readings of Marx in Contemporary Continental Philosophy*. Ed. Jessica Whyte and Jernej Habjan. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 211–226.
- Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- . “‘Nous, le peuple’: réflexions sur la liberté de réunion.” *Qu’est-ce qu’un peuple?* Paris: La Fabrique, 2013. 53–76.
- Dardot, Pierre, and Laval, Christian. *Marx, prénom Karl*. Paris: Gallimard, 2012.
- De Libéra, Alain. *Archéologie du sujet. I. Naissance du sujet*. Paris: Vrin, 2007. *II. La Quête de l’identité*. Paris: Vrin, 2008. *III.1. L’acte de penser. La Double Révolution*. Paris: Vrin, 2014.
- Gilly, Adolfo. *The Mexican Revolution*. Trans. Patrice Camiller. New York: The New Press, 2006.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Nietzsche*. Trans. David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: Harper, 1991.
- Khiari, Sadri. “Le peuple et le tiers-peuple.” *Qu’est-ce qu’un peuple?* Paris: La Fabrique, 2013. 115–136.
- Laclau, Ernesto. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso, 2007.
- . “Preface.” In Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989. ix–xv.
- Lazarus, Sylvain. *L’intelligence de la politique*. Ed. Natacha Michel. Marseille: Editions Al Dante, 2013.
- Macherey, Pierre. *Hegel or Spinoza*. Trans. Susan M. Ruddick. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- Marx, Karl. “Theses on Feuerbach,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*. Vol. 5. London: International Publishers, 1975. 3–5.
- Mezzadra, Sandro. *La cocina de Marx: el sujeto y su producción*. Trans. Diego Picotto. Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2014.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Ed. and trans. Peter Connor. Minneapolis:

TWENTY THESES ON POLITICS AND SUBJECTIVITY

- University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Negri, Antonio. *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*. Trans. Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan and Mauricio Viano. New York: Autonomedia/Pluto, 1991.
- Rancière, Jacques. "The Populism That Is Not To Be Found." *Qu'est-ce qu'un peuple?* Paris: La Fabrique, 2013. 137–143.
- Rozitchner, León. *La Cosa y la Cruz: Cristianismo y capitalismo (en torno a las Confesiones de san Agustín)*. Buenos Aires: Losada, 1996.
- . *Cuestiones cristianas*. Buenos Aires: Biblioteca Nacional, 2013.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.