The Making of Political Identities

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It was in Buchel in September 1910. The visit of the devil lay still far away in the future. Adrian Leverkühn took his friend Serenus Zeitblom for a walk. The conversation turned around the relationship between the archaic and the revolutionary in music. At some point Zeitblom started the following exchange:

'It would be tragic,' I said, 'if unfruitfulness should be ever the result of freedom. But there is always the hope of the release of the productive powers, for the sake of which freedom is achieved.' 'True,' he responded. 'And she does for a while achieve what she promised. But freedom is of course another word for subjectivity, and some fine day she does not hold out any longer, some time or other she despairs of the possibility of being creative out of herself and seeks shelter and security in the objective. Freedom always inclines to dialectical reversals. She realizes herself very soon in constraint, fulfils itself in the subordination to law, rule, coercion, system -- but to fulfil herself therein does not mean that she therefore ceases to be freedom.'

'In your opinion,' I laughed: 'So far as she knows. But actually, she is no longer freedom as little as dictatorship born out of revolution is still freedom.'

'Are you sure of it?' he asked. 'But anyhow that is talking politics. In art, at least, the subjective and the objective intertwine to the point of being indistinguishable, one proceeds from the other and takes the character of the other, the subjective precipitates as objective and by genius is again awakened to spontaneity, "dynamized", as we say; it speaks all at once the language of the subjective. The musical conventions today destroyed were not always so objective, so objectively imposed. They were crystallizations of living experiences and, as such, long performed an office of vital importance: the task of organization. Organization is everything. Without it, there is nothing, least of all, art. And it was aesthetic subjectivity that took on the task, it undertook to organize the work out of itself, in freedom.'

'You are thinking of Beethoven.'
This sequence contains all the points relevant for our argument: (i) the identification of freedom with the subject; (ii) the idea of freedom as not only unable to provide its own forms of self-determination ('she despairs of the possibility of being creative'), but as searching for such determination in something external to itself – a 'something' which will operate as both 'shelter' and source of 'security'; (iii) the principle of organization as the realization of freedom. If freedom can only be realized through its alienation to an external content, thereby providing the determination that freedom lacks, and if such a content is the principle of organization, the latter can neither be something merely objective nor, for that matter, merely subjective. Why? Because the principle of organization is the point of crystallization of a tension, of an undecidable alternative between subject and object; it expresses itself through the objective and can only manage to do so by its dialectical reversal. Not surprisingly, the exploration of this tension will lead us to the very centre of the problematic of the subject – which, as we will see, is precisely the subject as the subject of the lack. The starting point of the analysis, then, will be to consider these three oppositions: freedom/identity; subjectivity/objectivity; organization and its lack.

First relation: freedom/identity

As we have seen in the foregoing quote, Thomas Mann poses the question of the subject in terms of creativity. Creativity requires as its sine qua non – no, more than that, as a definition of itself – that the subject is the origin of 'her' expressive forms, and that these forms do not emerge from any source other than subjectivity as such. Subjectivity and creativity in this case require each other; the realization of subjectivity is freedom conceived as self-determination. To pose the question in Kantian terms one would say: it is only the autonomy of the will that creates the possibility of a self-determined subject. And yet, if we take this as given, the content of that autonomous will starts immediately to blur the strict frontier between autonomy and heteronomy. Let us accept for a moment the central maxim of a rigorous ethical formalism: 'behave in such a way that your actions can become a universal norm of conduct'. Let us also accept, for the sake of argument, that this is a rational criterion. A question, however, remains unanswered: what is the source of the principle of rationality as a basis for action? It is clear that such a principle does not logically follow from the notion of a free subjectivity, and that the link between the two requires an act of identification of the latter to the former. But if the condition of pure subjectivity is self-determination, and if no determinate content follows a priori from the form of subjectivity as such, two necessary conclusions emerge: (i) that the condition of freedom – and, as a result, of subjectivity – is indeterminacy; and (ii) that all determinate content (even the most formal, in the Kantian sense) is objective rather than subjective and, as a result, must be heteronomous from the point of view of a pure subjectivity.
Second relation: the contraposition between the subjective and the objective

Mann presents this relation in terms of 'dialectical reversals'. It is clear why: if subjectivity, as such, is indeterminacy, there is no possibility that we can derive from it any determinate content. Determination can only be the result of the 'alienation' of subjectivity, of its becoming the opposite of itself. There is a subtle movement of significations on which the very meaning of the relation between the subjective and the objective depends. Let us assume for a moment that we are in the field of 'determinate negation' in the Hegelian sense: in that case indeterminacy would be superseded by a specific content, by a concrete determination. Thus we would conclude that indeterminacy is indeterminacy-for-the-determination; determination would be hegemonic and indeterminacy would be only one of its internal moments. So, let us modify the assumption: let us suppose that by 'dialectical reversal' we do not understand an indeterminacy that just anticipates its overcoming by specific forms of determination, but, rather, a passage from the indeterminate to the determination as such—a certain indifference or distance of the indeterminate vis-à-vis the forms of determination that supersede it. In that case the relation between the indeterminate and the determinate, between the subjective and the objective, will be dramatically different: there will never be real supersession, nor peace, between the two. The subjective will only acquire a content by alienating itself in an objectivity which is its opposite (though this, as we will later see, is what is involved with the notion of identification, as different from mere identity). But the objective cannot be reduced to its specific content either, as it only functions as a surface for identification. Indeed, given that the latter is not a necessary identification— for, to assume otherwise would lead right back to the hypothesis of a determinate negation—this concrete content will represent the opposite of subjective indeterminacy. That is, it will represent the principle of determinability as such. In saying this, it becomes clear that what is at stake in Thomas Mann's 'dialectical reversals' is not a determinate freedom which realizes itself in a determinate content, but determinability as the condition of the realization of freedom. 'She [freedom] realizes herself in the subordination to law, rule, coercion, system,' Mann reminds us, 'but to fulfil herself therein does not mean she therefore ceases to be freedom.'

Third relation: organization and its lack

It remains to be explained why the freedom that fulfils itself in coercion is still freedom. This point is crucial for our argument, and its elaboration leads us to our third relation. Leverkühn's response to the question concerning a freedom that realizes itself in coercion turns on the principle of 'organization', which is, as he puts it, 'an office of vital importance' without which 'there is nothing, least of all art'. Two intertwined dimensions can clearly be read from
this response, the first being that the centrality of the principle of organization is derived from the staunch assertion: without organization 'there is nothing'. For even though Leverkühn is speaking about art — in spite of his tantalizing hint about politics — Hobbes would not have presented differently his opposition between Leviathan and the state of nature. The decisive point is that this 'nothing', set in opposition to 'organization', is not the nothing of a logical impossibility that would simply collapse into the nonexistent: it is a real nothing, an empty place that 'organization' would come to fill. What makes that 'nothing’ possible? The answer is: the subject, as freedom and indeterminacy. This leads us to the second dimension. We have seen that dialectical reversals imply a freedom only able to realize itself through its identification with something that is its opposite — that is, with an objectivity that can only fulfill its identificatory role as far as it accomplishes the alienation of the subject. But in that case, why is it that freedom does not simply annul itself through this act of alienation? Why is it 'still freedom'? A preliminary answer, upon which we will elaborate later, could be formulated in the following terms: an active identification is not a purely submissive act on the part of the subject, who would passively incorporate all the determinations of the object. The act of identification, on the contrary, destabilizes the identity of the object. Let us suppose, for example, that in the context of extreme social disorganization the identities of the social agents are subverted, and that this anomic situation leads to the identification of those agents with a certain political discourse — which thus plays the role of the principle of organization in Leverkühn’s sense. The contents of that discourse will appear necessarily split as a result of the identificatory act. For, on the one hand, these contents will be a set of proposals for social organization; but, on the other, as they will appear as the symmetrically opposed alternative to the possibility of ‘nothingness’, they would incarnate the very possibility of a social organization — that is, the principle of social organization as such. If we draw the point out to its full conclusion, what we have here, then, is that the lack (that is, indeterminacy) of the subject will constitute the object of identification as split object.

The ultimate incompatibility of the two poles of the ‘dialectical reversal’ is thus maintained and reproduced throughout all its stages. The structure of the identificatory act preserves, without superseding, the constitutive nothingness of the subject; and the representation of the latter takes place through the subversion of the surface of identification. Moreover, the alienating character of the act of identification is also maintained, in so far as there is no supersession of the subject/object duality. Two basic consequences follow:

(1) If the objective ‘fills’ my originary lack, this filling can only take place in so far as what is objective is external to me. Through the act of filling my
lack, the objective does not lose its externality; it is not assimilated to an identity that was already mine. On the contrary, its alien character is precisely what allows it to function as a filler. Its 'magic' filling can operate because the subject is originary lack of being. But if the subject is originary and ineradicable lack, any identification will have to represent, as well, the lack itself. This can only be done by reproducing the external character of that with which the subject identifies itself, that is, its incommensurability vis-à-vis itself. It is because of this that the acceptance of the Law — that is, the principle of organization as opposed to 'nothingness' — is the acceptance of the Law because it is Law, not because it is rational. If the acceptance of the Law had resulted from its rationality, in that case, the Law would be a prolongation of the subject as a positive identity and could not fulfil its filling role. But if the Law can fulfil this role, it necessarily follows that this role has to be its own justification, and that the latter cannot be granted by any a priori tribunal of reason.

(2) The filling function requires an empty place, and the latter is, to some extent, indifferent to the content of the filling, though this filling function has to be incarnated in some concrete contents, whatever those contents might be. This is the originary split constitutive of all representation, to which we referred before. Now, this means that between the filling function and the concrete content that actualizes it, there is a constitutive incommensurability. This incommensurability would only be eliminated if a concrete content qua concrete could exhaust and become identical with the filling function. But in that case, we would be back to the reabsorption of the indeterminate within the determinate, and the radical character of the opposition between 'organization' and 'nothingness' would have been lost. So let us return to our previous example. Suppose somebody is confronted with a deep anomic situation — what would be required would be the introduction of an order, the concrete contents of which would become quite secondary. Thomas Mann perceived this clearly. In his Lotte in Weimar, one of the characters describes the successive occupation of the city by the French and the Prussians at the end of the Napoleonic period:

We peered through the curtains at the tumult in the streets, we heard the crashing gunfire and the braying of horns. The fighting soon passed from the streets to the park and presently beyond the city limits. The enemy, alas, won his accustomed victory. And actually, against our wills, it seemed to us like a triumph of order over rebellion — a childish and foolish rebellion, as the event had proved. 'Order and quiet are good — no matter what one owes them.' We had to provide for the billeting of the French troops, and the town was straightaway burdened to the utmost limit of its capacity. Not only heavy but long was the burden laid upon it. Still, there was peace; the streets were open till sundown, and the citizen might go about his business under the oppressive protection of the victors.
However, when the forces of the anti-Napoleonic coalition approached the city, a clear change in the public attitude took place:

The nearer they drew, the less were they called barbarians, the more the sympathies and hopes of society veered towards them and away from the French. That of course was partly because we began to see in them the victors one might hope to placate – even from a distance. But even more, it was because we human beings are by nature submissive. We need to live in harmony with outward events and situations. We need to come to terms with power – and now fate itself seemed to be giving the signal for the change. In the space of a few days the barbarians, the rebels against civilization, turned into liberators. Their successful advance brought to a bursting point the general enthusiasm for folk and fatherland.\footnote{3}

It would be a mistake to think that what is involved in this rapid change of position is sheer opportunism. As Mann himself says, that would be neither the only, nor the main, reason. For if the objective of national independence was to prevail, it had to show something more than a spontaneous attractiveness or moral superiority. It had to show its ability to become a realistic alternative for the organization and management of the community (in Gramscian terms, it had to show it was an alternative that could become hegemonic). The dislocation created by the war had autonomized the general need for a continuity of the communitarian order from the alternative political projects that attempted to guarantee such a continuity. The possibility of identification with a certain political order depended not only on its political virtues or attractiveness abstractly considered, but on its ability to guarantee the continuity of the community. But this continuity, precisely because it did not coincide with any of the political forms that would make it possible at particular moments in time – precisely because it would have no content of its own – would be nothing other than the name of an absent plenitude that could not be exhausted by any of the concrete forms that would attempt to realize it.

Now, if this incommensurability is constitutive – because the gap between indetermination and determination is utterly unbridgeable; and if no concrete content is, in its concreteness, destined \textit{a priori} to fulfil the filling function, this also means, then, that all concrete content will be constitutively \textit{inadequate} to carry out that function, and the place of the subject will be perpetuated on the basis of the reproduction of this inadequacy. This means that there is not a unique act of identification whose effects would fulfil unchallenged its filling function. As any identification takes place through contents which are essentially inadequate to this fulfilment, the identification will be constitutively incomplete and will have to be always re-created through new identification acts. This logic of the 'subversion of the rationality of the determinate’ is
what we have called *overdetermination* – and it is crucial for understanding the formation of political identities.

Before we delve into the intricacies of overdetermination, let us first turn to the various dimensions of this constitutive split of all social identities – which, as we have noted, is at the very basis of the emergence of the duality subject/identification. We will discuss these dimensions by exploring four theoretical avenues: (i) the approaches to power and legitimacy in Political Philosophy; (ii) the critique of violence by Walter Benjamin; (iii) the distinction between ‘presencing’ and ‘presence’ in Heidegger; and (iv) the logic of the signifier in Lacan.

### Power and Legitimacy

What are the presuppositions of a theory of power as variously developed in modern political thought? The first is that power is located at some point *within* society, from where its effects would in some way spread over and around the social structure as a whole; indeed, that there is a structure at all is, to a large extent, the result of power. Power is, in a sense, the *source* of the social, though one could equally say in another (and related) sense, that it is the very condition of intelligibility of the social (given that the possibility of representing the latter as a coherent entity depends on a set of orderly effects emanating from power). There is no difference, from this point of view, between holistic and pluralistic conceptions of power. For, whether the social effect comes from a ‘power elite’ or is, instead, conceived as the pure and simple result of competitive interactions between a plurality of groups, that effect will always be there, as an actual consequence of power – or of power struggle – and, at the same time, the source of its justification.

However, as soon as we attempt to explore the logic of this imbrication between power and ‘society effect’, we find a contradictory movement in which power can engage itself but cannot really supersede. What would be a fully achieved ‘society effect’? Clearly, it would have to be one in which the relationship between the effect and its cause would be entirely undisturbed, in which the fullness of the effect would entirely be derived from the fullness of the cause. Power would then be the absolute origin of whatever order there is in society. The more absolute is the origin, the more complete is power. There is, however, a problem: to what extent can an absolute origin be conceptualized in terms of power? If, for example, A has absolute power in society, then its effects over B, C and D will fully constitute the identity of the latter. (This total identification is a requisite of total power, otherwise, B, C and D would suffer from the effects of power and that would mean that from some point – even if that point meant simply their solitary consciousness – they would be able to resist A’s power. Ergo, A’s power could not reach that point and the
power could not be absolute.) But from this, it would follow that a situation of absolute power must be one where the concept of power entirely loses its meaning. A cause qua cause can only exist in its effects; a cause is nothing but the sequence of its effects, the latter being part of the cause’s identity. If an individual or group had absolute power in society, this would mean – as we have seen – that the other groups would have no other identity than the effects deriving from that power and, as a result, they would also be part of the identity of the dominant group. A feudal lord, for instance, is feudal lord only in so far as there are serfs; and in the hypothetical case that the identity of the serfs is exhausted in their relationship with the lord, it is evident that both lord and serfs would be internal positions or differentiations within a unique identity, and that no relation of power could exist between the two. Whatever decision the lord takes as a result of his status, it will express not only his identity but also that of the serf.

That is, the ‘society effect’ can only take place in so far as power is eliminated. But this also shows clearly that certain conditions must be met in order that a relation of power exists: there has to be a conflict of wills in which one of them would prevail. And yet, as we know, the very possibility of a conflict requires the partial efficacy of the conflicting forces (for, in order to resist a dominant power there has to be a point in society where the dominated forces can organize and initiate their resistance). This means that the very condition of existence of power is that it is not absolute. It is only if Power is impossible that actual powers can exist in the social terrain. But if there is a plurality of powers, then the ‘society effect’ is also impossible. For, as we have seen, the society effect is the constitution and representation of the social totality as a coherent object resulting from the combination of orderly effects that unfold from a unique centre of power. To put this point differently: if the very condition of actual powers is conflict, and conflict presupposes the irreducibility of the social to a unique source of effects, there would have to be a limit to the representability of the social – since representability presupposes compatibility – and, as a consequence, no society effect.

Is not this logical conclusion, however, a bit excessive? Can we purely and simply just do away with the ‘society effect’? Let us consider the matter carefully. What would such a ‘doing away’ logically imply? Clearly, that the forces in conflict would be unable to hegemonize the social totality, and they would thus be limited to their own particularities. But that limitation would not necessarily close them in on themselves, for if a force is threatened by another force external to it, neither of the two forces could be fully constituted. As a result, they could not close themselves within their own being. Only by going beyond themselves – only by realizing their own being in terms of a ‘society effect’ that transcends their own particularities – could those particularities become fully constituted. This transcendence, as we have seen, would involve the elimination of power. But the important point is precisely

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that, as power makes that transcendence impossible, the society effect does not simply disappear: it remains present as that which is absent, as the empty place which prevents the full being of each of the opposing forces being achieved. The reality of power constructs the irreality of society as a structural lack accompanying and distorting all social identities.

This becomes clearer if we consider another dimension closely associated with the conceptualization of power; namely, the one connected to the relationship between power and legitimacy. What is the theoretical possibility of such a distinction? If by power we just understand the ability of producing a society effect, the distinction would be impossible. For to distinguish between legitimacy and power involves the possibility that an actual system of power is illegitimate. But if the totality of 'social effects' can be referred to power as its sole source, there would be no place in society from which to put that power into question. Let us not forget that the initial theory of power was a theological one: it dealt with the omnipotence of God as creator of the world. It is clear that if God were the only source of all created things, there would be no way in which his power, or even a part of the actions in which that power would be expressed, could be illegitimate. Power and legitimacy would be one and the same. In fact, it would not even enter as a question whether God's power would be legitimate, because God Himself would represent absolute goodness. To assert otherwise would be to erect a tribunal to judge God's actions that would have to be independent of Him. God's power is legitimate because it is His power. If the question of legitimacy were not to be reduced, even in those early theological discussions, to that of power per se, it is because of the problem of the existence of evil in the world and the resulting possibility that man acts in a way that is illegitimate in God's eyes. (This poses, of course, the well-known theological problem of how, if God is both omnipotent and the expression of absolute goodness, He allows for the existence of evil in the world.) But the important point for our discussion is that this disjunction between power and legitimacy raised the question that was to become central in the modern theorization of politics: what are the sources of legitimacy once there are 'social effects' that conflict with each other and that cannot be referred back to a single generating force?

While God operated as a source of legitimacy external to the world, the gap between power and legitimacy could conceptually be contained – more or less – within manageable limits. But when, in modern times, the search began for a source of legitimacy from which to judge the world, and yet one that was, however, internal to the world, the aporias implicit in the very terms of the question became fully visible. For if legitimacy qua legitimacy were not endowed with power, it would have had to create its own power; but in that case it would itself be mere power – mere contingency – and could only ground its claims in the power that it could obtain. As in the theological case, we find the concept of legitimacy indistinguishable from power, with the
difference that there was now a power that could always be reversed. Machiavelli happily accepted these conclusions—in as much as they grounded legitimacy both in power and in what concerns the contingent character of that power. But even theories that attempted to legitimate absolute power—as did Hobbes’s—accepted a purely secular perspective and a unidirectional relation of causality; power was the root of legitimacy, albeit with the reservations that we will consider momentarily.

The problem, however, is this: to what extent could we say that a legitimacy purely derivative from power remains legitimate? Is not a factually based legitimacy a contradictory concept, one that entirely does away with the distinction between fact and value? At this point we are struck by the structural parallelism between the duality ‘power/society effect’ and the duality ‘power/legitimacy’. Our conclusion concerning the first was that a fully fledged ‘society effect’ was impossible as far as there is power; but that, on the other hand, power logically requires the fullness of society as that which is absent, as the place of a structural lack. In the present case we have concluded that power makes impossible a fully fledged legitimacy. Should we conclude as well, then, that power requires its other—legitimacy—as absent filler of its impossible fullness? A brief consideration of Hobbes will help clarify matters.

The logical conclusions Hobbes drew, which follow directly from a secularized conception of power, entail a rigour never reached before him and few times after. In asking the question, ‘Is there any hope of having an ordered society quite apart from power relations?’, Hobbes’s answer, as is well known, was emphatically negative. Civil society, left to itself, can only reproduce the chaos of the state of nature. But having said that, would it be possible to institute an absolute power that could generate a ‘society effect’? Hobbes thought that it was possible; and he invoked the social covenant as a way to achieve it. But there are two consequences that necessarily follow from this way of addressing the problem. The first is that, as in all absolute power, including the case of God in medieval theology, the distinction between power and legitimacy cannot emerge. It is not the case that there is only a relation of causality between power and legitimacy; it is, rather, that power and legitimacy are one and the same. To call a power illegitimate would presuppose another social order whose content would be the basis to judge the existing power. But if outside power there were only the chaos of the state of nature, then that basis would simply not exist. The only way in which a power could, thereby, become illegitimate would be if it were incapable of guaranteeing the life and security of the subjects—that is, if it ceased to be the basis of a viable Commonwealth. This would mean that power would have to be, at the very least, partially justified by an instance external to itself; if it were incapable of providing that guarantee of life and security, it would cease to be legitimate. Clearly, then, this would mean that the conditions of its legitimacy must be external to itself. The split between power and the condition of its legitimacy would have a dual
effect. On the one hand, if power were to be justified by an instance different from itself, the latter could not be a derivative of power. This is the basis for postulating a distinction between a public and private sphere, a seminal split introduced by Hobbes which now marks his work as one of the starting points of modern liberalism. On the other hand – and this is our second consequence – because that guarantee of power was to be both the necessary and sufficient condition of its legitimacy, then, as far as that condition were to be met, power would become legitimate independently of its forms and contents. Why? Because given that the ‘other’ of power was simply the disorganization of society, whatever political order exists would be legitimate not as a result of the value of its own contents, but due to its ability to incarnate the abstract principle of social order as such.

Hobbes’s theory consists in a well-knit argument wherein (i) power and legitimacy cannot – in the case of a successful political order – be differentiated from each other; though, (ii) a potential split exists between the general function of the guaranteeing of a social order and the concrete political arrangements capable of fulfilling such a function. If this split is only potential, it is because – if a political order is to be successful – it is impossible to distinguish a concrete form from its general function. The concrete form would still incarnate the general function, but the incarnation would be so perfect that the split would not show itself. To put the matter in a slightly different way: legitimacy and power would collapse into each other only under the condition that the split between the general function and the concrete social arrangement remains concealed. For what would happen if this split shows itself? Purely and simply, the concrete social arrangement would appear as merely concrete, and this could only happen when that arrangement loses its ability to incarnate the general function; that is, when it shows itself as mere, unjustified power. The crisis of a system of power, therefore, consists in the disarticulation of its internal dimensions, each of which runs wild and develops its own internal logic, once the latter is not limited in its effects by their precise location within the model of the Hobbesian Commonwealth.

It is worthwhile unknotting this model and following the wild logic of its liberated dimensions, for this exercise will lead us directly to the question of the subject. In order to do so, we do not need to move an inch from the grammar of Hobbes’s theory. What is shown in the crisis of a system of power is that the general function is no longer attached to the concrete social organization that has ensured it thus far. But what happens in that case? Is it that an old organization is automatically substituted by a new one, so that the whole crisis and its resolution take place entirely in the terrain of the concrete? Certainly not, because the first manifestation of a crisis is the emergence of a threat that always haunts the social order: the return to the state of nature. It is this threat that presents the social order as something which is present through its absence, as structural lack. And as this absent social order acquires
its meaning only as the alternative to radical disorganization, it can only be order in general, order as such, dispossessed of any concrete attribute. Now, we have seen that it is precisely this crisis that re-creates the potential split between power and legitimacy. Power loses its legitimacy when it is unable to ensure the social order; in that case it shows itself as mere power. But if the perception of legitimacy as separated from power coincides with the perception of the general function as different from the social arrangements guaranteeing it, the principle of legitimacy can equally only be an abstract and general principle, which has to be differentiated from the concrete historical forms incarnating it. A discourse on legitimacy, therefore, is only possible when illegitimate outcomes are possible as well. It is only in the context of a failure in the achievement of fully fledged identities that calling something ‘illegitimate’ makes sense. We can now see why there is a parallelism between the duality power/‘society effect’ and the duality power/legitimacy: in both cases the second term of the alternative points to an absolute fullness whose total realization would make the first term meaningless.

At this point, we can return to Mann’s ‘dialectical reversals’ and ask what Hobbes would have made of them. Hobbes’s ruler presents himself in terms that amount to a total and final elimination of such reversals. There is no longer a freedom that realizes itself in subjection, but, rather, an absolute coincidence between the subjective and the objective in the case of the ruler, and the absolute lack of objectivity in the case of the individual wills of the state of nature. It would appear that the will of the ruler represents the triumph of the subjective principle, given that the source of objectivity is pure will, and neither an objective order escaping human decisions nor a transcendent being. In actual fact, what happens is the opposite. For a will which is automatically — as a result of the covenant — the source of social objectivity, becomes indistinguishable from the latter. The ruler has abolished the split between his individuality and the universality of the community, and in this sense, far from representing the introduction of a subjective principle, he is just the point in which the distinction between subject and object, between individuality and universality, collapses. This first modern resolution of the tension between power and ‘society effect’ takes place on the basis of asserting the latter through the emptying of the former of its particularity — or rather, through the making of this particularity the very form of universality.

Yet, we have only to modify slightly some of Hobbes’s assumptions to be able, without going beyond the rules of Hobbesian grammar, to develop a set of different possibilities. For what actually happens if the two sides of Hobbes’s picture contaminate each other; that is, if we have a situation in which the ruler is less than omnipotent, and the state of nature less than totally unstructured? This is the point at which the various dimensions of the Hobbesian model start running wild. The perfect balance which had concealed the split between the individuality and the universality of the ruler,
between power and legitimacy, between concrete social arrangement and universal function, no longer obtain. The individual will of the ruler does not become automatically the universal law of the community, and so the gap between the two becomes unbridgeable. Power, not being absolute, cannot ensure the conditions of its own legitimacy; and, as no concrete social arrangement is entirely capable of guaranteeing social order, the general need for the latter is emancipated from any necessary link with the former. Why, however, does such a situation not inexorably drift towards the state of nature? Because we have interrupted Hobbes's algorithms with a possibility not contemplated by him, but one which can theoretically be constructed in terms of his own system of categories. The ruler is still the only source of social order, and the individual wills are still fully structured by the latter. But as the ruler is no longer capable of entirely fulfilling his or her function, the individual wills will be partially unstructured. Precisely because order in society can only be constructed along Hobbesian lines, the partial failure of the ruler creates a fissure in the structure. But as the individual wills are only partially destructured by that fissure, they will be forced to engage in a succession of partial covenants. Only a total collapse of order would return society to the state of nature. Short of that extreme situation, there are only dialectical reversals between objectivity and freedom. This means that whatever social objectivity exists, it will not reach the closing point of a 'society effect' but instead will be, constitutively, power. And as individual wills cannot be reduced to objective differences or identities within a fully fledged social order, they will only be subjects, places of a constitutive lack whose only identity can be reached by acts of identification (dialectical reversals, submission to the externality of the Law as the sole source of social objectivity).

**Walter Benjamin and the Politics of Pure Mediacy**

A similar conclusion can be reached if we move to our second theoretical discussion: namely, Benjamin's analysis of violence. Benjamin starts by asserting that a critique of violence belongs to the moral sphere, and counterposes two apparently opposite approaches: natural law, for which just ends justify violent means; and positive law, for which legal means justify ends. In spite of this opposition, however, both share the dogma of the possibility of reaching — although in opposite ways — a point of non-conflict between means and ends. As Benjamin puts it:

>[B]oth schools meet in their common basic dogma; just ends can be obtained by justified means, justified means used for just ends. Natural law attempts, by the justness of the ends to 'justify' the means, positive law to 'guarantee' the justness of the ends through the justification of the means. This antinomy would prove
It is this latter hypothesis that Benjamin’s whole critique of violence tries to explore. Putting aside the realm of ends, Benjamin poses the question of the ‘justification of certain means that constitute violence’, and takes as his starting point the distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence. The latter presents an ambiguity, noticed by Benjamin, which is crucial for our argument: to what does unsanctioned violence pose a threat? To legal ends in their concreteness? Certainly not—or at least, not only. Instead, what is put into question is the principle of legality as such:

[One might perhaps consider the surprising possibility that the law’s interest in a monopoly of violence vis-à-vis individuals is not explained by the intention of preserving legal ends but, rather, by that of preserving the law itself; that violence, when not in the hands of the law threatens it not by the ends that it may pursue but by its mere existence outside the law. The same may be more drastically suggested if one reflects how often the figure of the ‘great’ criminal, however repellant his ends may have been, has aroused the secret admiration of the public. This cannot result from his deed, but only from the violence to which it bears witness. In this case, therefore, the violence of which present-day law is seeking in all areas of activity to deprive the individual appears really threatening, and arouses even in defeat the sympathy of the masses against law.]

Now, here we are on the same terrain as in Hobbes: as something ‘outside’, the law is a real alternative threatening concrete legal ends. The latter are constitutively split because—beyond their concreteness—they incarnate the principle of ‘lawfulness’ or ‘legality’ as such. But this means that between means and ends an insurmountable caesura has been introduced. If the ends, in their concreteness, were the only thing that counted, the means would be transparent and the entirety subordinated to the ends. If, on the contrary, the legality of the means is what is at stake, the ends would become indeterminate, but within the concrete limits established by the means. But if legal means are subverted in their concreteness because they incarnate the principle of lawfulness as such, a more radical possibility emerges: a politics of pure mediacy which, by its passage through concrete, and transient, means and ends, attempts to enact or to subvert legality as such. The whole distinction by Benjamin between law-making and law-preserving attempts to show the constitutive character of this possibility, its inherence in any legal system.

Benjamin illustrates his argument about pure mediacy with two examples: language, and the distinction in Sorel between political and proletarian strike. Let us concentrate on the latter. A political strike is entirely dominated by particularistic aims. It tries to abolish concrete forms of state power, not state power as such. The proletarian strike, on the other hand, does not attempt to
substitute one form of power from another or one form of legal organization from a different one, and so on; but, whatever are its concrete aims, it tries to put into question the very principle of legality and state organization.

In contrast to this political general strike (which incidentally seems to have been summed up by the abortive German revolution), the proletarian general strike sets itself the sole task of destroying state power. It 'nullifies all the ideological consequences of every possible social policy; its partisans see even the most popular reforms as bourgeois'. . . While the first form of interruption of work is violent since it causes only an external modification of labour conditions, the second, as pure means, is non-violent. For it takes place not in readiness to resume work following external concessions and this or that modification to working conditions, but in determination to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the state, an upheaval that this kind of strike not so much causes as consummates. For this reason, the first of these undertakings is law-making, but the second anarchistic.

This, however, immediately raises a problem: to what extent is the proletarian strike an actually possible historical event? And if it is actual, under what conditions? For a politics of pure violence, of pure mediacy, is, strictly speaking, directed against nothing; however, if it is going to succeed, it requires some content. Benjamin, in the above quotation, seems to point to such a content: the determination to resume 'only a wholly transformed work'. Let us remember that what was at stake in both law imposition and law violation was not only the content of a particular law but the principle of lawfulness as such. So, if the proletarian strike is directed against the latter, its consummation can only be a post-legal history, a history that breaks with the dialectics imposition/violation. Benjamin’s text seems to point in this direction when he speaks of the emergence and reversal of the various legal systems as dominated by the dialectical law of their succession, and when he thinks of the overthrow of legal state power by the proletarian strike as an actual event which is the beginning of a new history. This looks like a rather traditional Marxist view, according to which the content of a post-legal history can only be a reconciled society that supersedes the opposition subject/object. For, as we have seen, we have in such a case a pure 'society effect' which abolishes power while, at the same time, abolishing also the possibility of a subject.

Things, however, are not so clear cut, even for Sorel. It is rather doubtful that Sorel conceived the revolutionary strike as an actual, possible, historical occurrence. On the contrary, its efficacy as a myth was independent of the actual possibility of its arrival; it lay, instead, in the possibility that it opened for reconstructing a revolutionary will not integrated into decadent bourgeois society. Sorel’s support of the aims of the proletariat resulted not so much from his approval of those aims, but from the revolutionary will which was
constructed in their persecution. That is the way in which Sorel conceived a politics of pure mediacy: whatever the concrete aims of the proletarian struggles, the workers, in struggling, would construct a subjectivity capable of arresting the corruption and decline of European civilization. All emphasis is put on the exercise of the means, not in the achievement of the ends. So, in that case, the general strike is not so much an actual event, as a historical horizon that gives sense and direction to the particular struggles and prevents their closure within their own concreteness. The counterposition political strike/proletarian strike is not so much the opposition of two types of event, as two dimensions which, in different proportions, are combined in any particular struggle (they are the metaphorical embodiment of the constitutive split of all social identity).

The difference between Sorel and Benjamin can be reduced to the following point: while for Benjamin the elimination of legal and State violence is an event which closes a historical cycle and opens a new one, for Sorel it is a dimension constitutive of all political experience - it is for this reason that a politics of pure mediacy can be formulated more in Sorelian than in Benjaminian terms. This becomes even clearer if we turn to Werner Hamacher's analysis of Benjamin's text. In his attempt to radicalize the pure mediacy of the Critique of Violence, Hamacher is led to blurring the separation between political and proletarian strikes:

For cognitive purposes, any strike must take place in the border region between political and anarchist general strikes, between negotiation or, rather, extortion and acts of positing new law on the one hand, and the pure violence of deposition on the other. For cognitive purposes, there can be no more a pure anarchism than there can be absolute affirmatives. Affirmatives can have unforeseen effects, precisely insofar as they 'strike' the cognition directed toward them with powerlessness. The more the event of afformation becomes possible and thus unpredictable in its effects for constative or thetic consciousness, the less the question of its actuality becomes cognitively decidable. Pure violence 'shows' itself precisely in the fact that it never appears as such. 'For only mythical violence, not divine [violence], will be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be in incomparable effects... The strike is not a matter of theory; it can be the object neither of prognosis nor of programmes; it belongs to the order of events that break through the continuum of history, as they do the incommensurability of cognition. Whoever speaks of the strike cannot be sure that he is not affected by it, that he is not already participating in it.'

Hamacher links pure violence, as an act not of posing but of depositing, to what he calls affirmatives, which are the condition of any performative act. They are not acts separated from the performatives per se, but are, in a special way, internal to the latter:

Affirmative, or pure, violence is a 'condition' for any instrumental, performative violence, and, at the same time, a condition which suspends their fulfilment in
principle. But while affirmations do not belong to the class of acts - that is, to the class of positing or founding operations - they are, nevertheless, never simply outside the sphere of acts or without relation to that sphere. The fact that affirmations allow something to happen without making it happen has a dual significance: first, that they let this thing enter into the realm of posittings, from which they themselves are excluded; and, second, that they are not what shows up in the realm of posittings, so that the field of phenomenality, as the field of positive manifestation, can only indicate the effects of the affirmative as ellipses, pauses, interruptions, displacements, etc., but can never contain or include them.  

That is, pure violence, pure deposing, cannot be performative and can never acquire, accordingly, the character of an independent event. But this leaves us with a constitutive split that can never be overcome: we will combat violence, as such, through its incarnation in a concrete system of violence, but the moment of pure deposing of violence never arrives. The destruction of a system of power can only mean the construction of a different power. There is going to be an ineradicable asymmetry in all social identity: the forces attempting to depose violence are going to be hopelessly inadequate to carry out the task that they assume. The pure deposing circulates among bodies which have an unbridgeable distance from it. Paraphrasing Lacan, we could speak of 'a subject supposed to liberate'. And we would find ourselves again with the place of the subject as the place of a constitutive lack. If the pure deposing - a violence as pure mediacy (a non-violent violence because it is not directed against any particular object) - were possible as an independent act, that would mean, then, the death of the subject because the duality subject/object would have been entirely eliminated. But if the relation posing/deposing is one of mutual contamination, then pure deposing can only inhabit the historical acts of the posing/deposing as that which is absent, as something required by the structure of the act, but, at the same time, as something that is made impossible by that very structure. The relation political strike/proletarian strike will be constitutively undecidable. This space of undecidability, of un-representability, is the locus of the subject. There are subjects (in the plural) because the Subject (or the Object, which amounts to the same) is impossible.

**Presencing and Presence**

Let us move now to the distinction between ‘presence’ and ‘presencing’ in Heidegger – the so-called ontological distinction. Let us approach it with reference to the plurality of senses of the notion of ‘origin’ – arché, principium, Ursprung – in Heidegger, as discussed, in particular, by Reiner Schürmann. The Aristotelian notion of arché combines for the first time two different meanings: inception and domination. It is the fusion between the two, with the
increasing subordination of the first to the second, that is going to constitute the central discourse of Western metaphysics. Moreover, it is the concealment involved in this subordination that the Heideggerian intervention will try to deconstruct in an attempt to launch a new beginning. But that fusion of meanings is only possible with the advent of a causalist type of explanation. Indeed, a causalist explanation is the first step in the subordination of inception to domination:

The alliance between the notions of inception and domination is possible only once the metaphysics of the causes is constituted. Once it is understood that phenomena as a whole are knowable from the viewpoint of causality, then it can be said that a true cause is only that which begins its action ‘and never ceases to begin it’, that is, a cause that also commands. In this way Heidegger links the fate of the concept of arché to the constitution of the metaphysics of causes.¹²

Now this causalist explanation – which is the first step in the subordination of inception to domination – is linked to the paradigmatic character, which the fabrication of tools or works of art is going to assume in the explanation of any kind of change or movement. As far as the distinction between things that have the origin of their movement in themselves and those moved by another is concerned, the latter are the model that is going to be metaphorically extended to the understanding of the former. If the efficient cause takes precedence, the final cause, the telos of the process of change, has to be active from the beginning: it is only as a result of this teleological orientation of action that ‘becoming’ acquires a being which it lacks. Becoming is intelligible only as far as it is dominated by its telos. And this domination-oriented conception of origin is generalized to all human action.

The teleocratic frame of reference applies to action to the extent that action is still seen as becoming: magistrates ‘move’ the city because they are themselves ‘moved’ by the idea that is its end. This is why architecture is the paradigmatic art: the anticipation of end through which Aristotle comprehends the origin is observed most clearly in construction. . . . How, then, does arché dominate? In anticipating telos.¹³

The turn towards a total concealment of the distinction between presencing and presence – between inception and domination – is not complete in Aristotle because, as Heidegger says, he speaks Greek and cannot be entirely blind to the original sense of physis as presencing, as coming forth. But all the essential preconditions for the turn are already there:

[W]e glimpse how the reversal of history sets in which will place first a divine, then a human constructor, in the position of origin. What anticipates onto-theological and
onto-anthropological doctrines, in which the origin figures as the predicate of one entity, is the novel concept — if not the word — arché in Aristotle.\textsuperscript{14}

A first hardening of the subordination of inception to domination takes place with the transition from the Greek arché to the Latin principium: the latter is not a neutral translation by Cicero from one language to the other, but one that reinforces the dimension of ruling (principium, princeps). This move reaches its climax first, when, in the Middle Ages, the Principium becomes divine and is conceived as the supreme cause of everything; and second, when this supreme principle is transferred to the logical order and it is thus identified with the universal representation for a subject.

The concept of ordo dependentiae in Scotus privileges in the principium the dimension of hierarchy over that of source. With this, the temporal dimension that was still present in Aristotle as a result of the insufficiency of being shown by becoming, is replaced by pure presence in an entirely dominated order. God, rather than a Creator, assumes the figure of Pantocrator. The process comes to a close with Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason, by which reason rules even over God. With this transition from an ontological to a logical principle, the latter becomes a law of the mind, and assumes a function of universal representation grounded in human subjectivity. Thus it becomes a subjective rule for ‘enframing’ things.

According to Heidegger, this hardening of the dimension of domination that sanctions the concealment of Being as inception, finds its highest point in contemporary technology.

The deconstruction of Western metaphysics is conceived by Heidegger as the attempt to undo this hardening and to restore the lost dimension of inception. It is this restoration which makes visible the ontological difference between Being and beings as a temporal difference. This leads to a different type of origin, what Heidegger calls Ursprung (literally, ‘primal leap’). Now, the important point for our argument is that the possibility of access to this more radical origin — which shows itself as temporal difference and thus splits the unity of the principle, depends on a passage through nothingness. As Schürrmann cogently asserts:

\textit{Phain} has no history, no destiny. But this is not to say that it is atemporal. If it were, how could acting ever be \textit{kata phusin}, following the coming about of presence? The temporality of this coming-about may be understood through the corresponding notion of nothingness. The ‘original’, i.e., an epochal beginning, is a rise out of ontic nothingness, out of all those (possible) entities that remain absent for an age. The ‘originary’ is a rise out of ontological nothingness, out of the pull towards absence that permeates presencing to its very heart. The presencing-absencing is originary time: both approaching (Angang) and departing (Abgang); genesis and \textit{pthora}, rising and declining; being and not being. The mutual
emergence of phenomena, in which non-being temporalizes being is the 'originary' origin, Urspriung.15

The structure of the argument is clear enough: nothingness is the very condition of access to Being. For, if something were mere, unchallenged actuality, no ontological difference would be possible: the ontic and the ontological would exactly overlap and we would simply have pure presence. In that case, Being would only be accessible as that which is the most universal of all predicates, as that which is beyond all differentia specifica. And that would mean it would not be accessible at all, for reasons Heidegger discusses at the beginning of Sein und Zeit. But if nothingness were there as an actual possibility, any being which presents itself would also be, to its very roots, mere possibility, and would show, beyond its ontic specificity, Being as such. Possibility, as opposite to pure presence, temporalizes Being and splits, from its very ground, all identity. Presencing (Urprung) and what is present, the ontological and the ontic, are irremediably split, but this has a double consequence: the first is that the ontic can never be closed in itself; the second, that the ontological can only show itself through the ontic. The same movement creating the split, condemns its two sides (as in all splits) to mutual dependence. Being cannot inhabit a 'beyond' all actual beings, because in that case, it would only be one more being. Being shows itself in the entities as that which they are lacking and as that which derives from their ontological status as mere possibility. Being and nothingness, presence and absence, are the mutually required terms of a ground constitutively split by difference.

This allows us to link Heidegger's argument with our previous discussions – though moving in a direction which Heidegger did not take and of which, most likely, he would not have approved. As we have seen, the split between political and proletarian strike is, for Sorel, ineradicable, because any concrete struggle will put into question both an actual system of violence and the principle of violence as such. But now, if pure violence, violence as such, cannot be something which has an actual existence of its own, the 'beyond violence' cannot be an actual event either. The impossible, the 'beyond violence', would certainly eliminate the split: in a fully reconciled society we would have total and undisturbed presence, absolute domination by a pure principium. But if violence is constitutive, it becomes the nothingness which shows the character of mere possibility of itself and of that which it opposes. It is this effect of unconcealment that splits the opposing forces between their 'ontic' contents and the character of mere possibility – that is, inception, pure Being – of those contents. In the same way, we have seen Hobbes's state of nature as a 'nothingness' which splits the identity of the order imposed by the ruler: on the one hand, the ruler imposes a particular order; on the other, and as the alternative to this particular order is chaos (nothingness), it has also to incarnate order as such, whose indifference to the particularity of its contents likens
Heidegger’s ontological difference clears the way to think the various structural dimensions of this constitutive split of all identity.

But now, is it not precisely this subject that we have found in our various explorations – the subject of the lack of being – which is made possible by this difference? This is not the subject of onto-theology or onto-anthropology (a *cogito*, an *ousia* conceived as mere presence), but exactly the opposite: a subject whose lack of being is the precondition for its access to Being.

Subject of the Lack and Logic of the Signifier

It is time now to move from these various theoretico-discursive surfaces, which have shown us the emergence of the subject as lack, to a fuller theorization of the latter. We will do this through a consideration of Lacanian theory and its approach to the question of the relation between subject (lack) and identity (objectivity), mediated through the mechanism of identification. We will argue that the act of identification is precisely what performs the function of filling as a ‘dialectical reversal’: a movement involving a function of determination triggered by the failure in the constitution of an objective unity.

Following Freud, Lacan argues that the ego is an ensemble of successive imaginary identifications (historical and contingent). The world of the ego is enjoyed as a reflection, where relationships amongst egos are dual and fixed (fascination, hostility, love). The ego has the function of misrecognizing the impossibility of fullness: the illusion of closure is the illusion of the ego. Throughout its life the ego will be transformed by means of a series of identifications which will involve two main mechanisms: projection and introjection of the features of an ‘object’ of identification. This points precisely to the double incidence of the imaginary and the symbolic, where the ‘mediator’ or hinge is the ego ideal. The structure – that is to say, the Other – is also the field of the ego’s projections, whereas the mechanism of introjection is crucial for the articulation of the symbolic. The structure does not return our image, otherwise the ego would only be that which I can see myself being in the structure. But I am also that Other who sees what I see: the one who, when I look at it, looks also at itself through me and in me. It sees itself in the place that I occupy in it.

All imaginary identifications constituting the ego can only be assumed if ratified by the Other as symbolic referent. Here we have an ego, then, that while misrecognizing the Law, nevertheless must submit to it. The symbolic identification involves the interplay of signifiers and the structure of intersubjective relations that is dominated by the Law: proper names, syntactic rules of language – and the assumption of the place of the Other as the third term which sanctions truth and guarantees stability. What we thus have is an operation of alienation and internalization: a subject is alienated in
an identity-as-objectivity which is part of an objective system of differences, that is, the Law, which is internalized in the same movement.

However, there is another element in any act of identification: the failure in the constitution of any identity. Every signifier fails to represent the subject and leaves a residue: something fails to be reflected in the mirror-world of reflections. There is an essential asymmetry, between projection and introjection, for although the image is brought in, it remains outside; the inside ‘starts’ outside. In other words, not everything is reflected in the image-mirror, and what remains on the other side is the impossible, the primarily repressed. This asymmetry points to the faults that instal uncertainty and trigger identifications. The moment of failure marks the emergence of the subject of lack through the fissures of the discursive chain. This moment has destructuring effects: the subversion of objectivity (identity) becomes ineradicable. The construction of any unity instal also something of the order of the impossible in that reality: a void which has ‘unwelcome effects’ – distortions and excesses that point at its precarious and contingent constitution.

This inevitability of failure of any identity, and the anxiety involved with the emergence of that moment with respect to uncertainty, can be shown to be at work in the logic of Borges’s poem ‘The Golem’. Borges confronts us with the anxiety of the rabbi of Prague in the face of his creation: the Golem. After complicated permutations of letters, the rabbi has achieved the act of Creation by pronouncing ‘the Name which is the Key’. But his creation can never become more than just a clumsy and crude simulacrum of a man, one who could never learn to speak (‘perhaps there was a faulty text?’). Looking at the Golem the rabbi wondered with terror:

How (he asked) could it be done
That I engendered this distressing son?
To an infinite series why was it for me
To add another integer?\(^{19}\)

The anxiety of the rabbi is no more than a mere distortion or even the imperfect repetition of divine anxiety itself:

Who can tell us the feelings in His breast
As God gazed on His rabbi there in Prague\(^{20}\)

In each inscription something is lost: there is a discordance, a failure which triggers anxiety – the failure of the rabbi vis-à-vis the Golem, and the failure of God vis-à-vis the rabbi – an anxiety which points at the place of emergence of the subject.

It is the ineradicable character of this failure that instal the very possibility of the lack in the structure – a lack which is, as we have seen, the very condition
of power relations. Failure will trigger new acts of identification – new ‘partial covenants’, as referenced in our discussion on Hobbes – which attempt (vainly) to master those destructuring effects. It is in these interruptions that the subject of lack will emerge and disrupt that imaginary-symbolic universe. This constitutive duality between the lack (as the domain – or non-place – of the subject) and the structure or Law (as an objective system of differences as identities) is the terrain where identification takes place as a ‘dialectical reversal’ between the two.  

The dynamic relation between lack and structure is shown by several logics of Lacanian theory: (a) the logic of suture; (b) the logic of repression; and (c) the logic of the subject. The logic of suture focuses on the point of maximum tension (‘point of suture’) in the relation between lack (subject) and structure (object), as the place of least resistance. It involves the articulation of the signifier which, in circulating beneath the discursive chain, acts as a ‘stand-in’ for the lack, and thus later appears as an element of the structure (for example, Death, Sexuality). But this operation is misrecognized and, as it is represented through a stand-in, the lack cancels itself out. This is why there is a permanent and alternating movement whereby the lack is rejected and invoked, articulated and annulled, included and excluded. In this way the lack triggers the metonymic chain in an endless process of differentiation. This is the process that determines the appearance of the successor in the series of natural numbers (n + 1), the classic example that J.A. Miller draws upon from the work of Frege. Here the lack is articulated as a unity in so far as the zero names the lack, and is counted as a unity, that is, as 1, while the zero circulates as an element beneath the series of numbers which fixes and produces the 1. The zero thus comprises three logical moments: (i) the zero as lack: the non-concept, the Real, the blank; (ii) the zero as a number: as a stand-in concept of the impossible which evokes and annuls the lack; (iii) the zero number as 1: that is, as a unity and as identity.

We could say, similarly, that there are signifiers occupying this point of suture in a particular political field. Let us take the case of the policy of disappearances put into effect by many Latin American dictatorships. The signifier ‘desaparecidos’ occupies a central place in the political field, where various discursive threads are knotted. On the one hand, the authorities tend to deny the existence of any desaparecidos: all government arrests have been executed according to the legal framework. Thus, the desaparecidos as a category are excluded from the world of objects. On the other hand, the authorities recognize their existence but deny responsibility for their disappearance, saying that they are abroad, or have been killed by ‘subversive’ organizations, and so on. Then again, there are times when the government officials may assume responsibility but try to minimize it along the lines that these disappearances are inevitable ‘consequences’ of war, excesses, abuses, and so forth. As a result of these two operations, these desaparecidos inhabit a
space where they are neither dead nor alive; they can reappear, they can also be killed. Their death and their life is suspended, deferred. And by means of this operation fear is installed into that context: the desaparecidos point to the existence of another space, a space of suspension, which is both part of, and excluded from, the realm of ‘society’, and, in this way, it becomes necessary to define its limits.  

A similar logic is at work in repression, where the primarily repressed (irreducible to discourse) insists on being represented in the discursive chain via a stand-in. By means of primary repression ‘something’ (that real impossible Thing that escapes the signifier) is excluded and is relatively fixed on to something else: the Vorstellung Representanz. But what is excluded exerts a certain force of attraction and insists on emerging in the signifying chain. It is the function of secondary repression to prevent such eruption. However, that which is excluded manages to emerge, even if through a remote derivative: this is the moment of dislocation.  

A function analogous to that of the ‘point of suture’ is assigned here to the Vorstellung Representanz, which Lacan also calls ‘binary signifier’,  

that is, the condition of possibility of representation and of subversion. This is the paradoxical signifier which marks the limit to any totality because something will always be lost . . . until it erupts.  

It is in this fundamental division where the dialectic of the split subject is established: in so far as ‘when the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he [sic] is manifested elsewhere as “fading”, as disappearance’.  

The articulation of the ‘point of suture’ and of the Vorstellung Representanz follow the same logic as the subject vis-à-vis the structure or the Law-as-Other. On the one hand, the subject is excluded from the field of the Other: the subject ‘is’ lack – that is, pure indeterminacy which cannot be reduced to the structure or constituted discursively. On the other hand, the subject is counted also as a unity in the field of the Other, by means of the signifier of identity, resulting from the process of identification. This is the fictional ‘self’ and the subject of the énoncé.  

Finally, this dual articulation and the exteriority/interiority of the relation between the subject and the Other establishes both the unconscious (‘the core of our being’) and the subject as an excess of the énonciation – as a cut in the chain, as the permanent possibility of one more signifier operating from within the chain, as a stand-in for the subject of lack. Through this stand-in the subject of lack is inscribed in the text, but only as a residue, via, for example, the loss of a signifier (parapraxis) and certain ‘particles’ (like the ‘not’ in denegation), and so on. The subject, then, appears and disappears in the interstices of the structure, by way of, at least, a ‘pair of signifiers’, one of which is eclipsed by the ascendancy and return of the other. This triggers the movement of the chain: a signifier represents the subject for another signifier. The movement is founded in a process of permanent differentiation in so far as the signifier fails and constantly defers in representing the subject. This is also why the subject of lack is an ‘active or productive’ impossibility rather than
‘just’ an impossibility. For while it constantly re-marks the moment of impossibility of constituting a full identity – a re-marking that becomes, also, the moment of power and of the emergence of the subject in the structure itself – it also triggers action, that is, the act of identification and the struggle to re-suture the political field. In this sense it is important to bear in mind that the logic of the subject not only involves three terms – the subject of lack, identity and the stand-in; it also involves a move towards Being, a ‘want to be’. ‘Man is the subject of the lack because he [sic] emerged from a certain relation to discourse, and he [sic] can only fill that lack by means of . . . action. . . . But such action is not a solution.\textsuperscript{29}

The failure of any identification or filling triggers the movement leading to ‘dialectical reversals’; reversals which, as we have seen, are inherent in any act of identification. When Lacoue-Labarthe asks, ‘Why, after all, should the problem of identification not be, in general, the essential problem of politics?\textsuperscript{30} we could add that the problem of politics is not identification, but identification and its failure.

Politics and the Subject

Let us draw from the previous developments some conclusions relevant for political analysis. Identification presupposes the constitutive split of all social identity, between the \textit{content} which provides the surface of identification and the \textit{function} of identification as such – the latter being independent of any content and linked to the former only in a contingent way. The recognition of this split involves a whole historical mutation. As we have seen, the concealment of this split is deeply rooted in the tradition of Western metaphysics and in the political philosophy deriving from it. In the movement from \textit{arché} to \textit{principium} the dimension of domination prevails over that of inception and, as a result, the distinction between presencing and what is present tends to be cancelled out. The notion of a political order, as a result, was not open to any differentiation between ‘political ordering’ and the actual order which was implemented.

This is what gives to Hobbes’s discourse its crucial role in the constitution of the political discourse of modernity. On the one hand, God is no longer there to determine the content of a good communitarian order; on the other, the state of nature poses a threat not to this or that particular social order but to social order as such, and this makes visible, perhaps for the first time, the function of ‘political ordering’ as different from the various concrete political orders which could historically fulfil it. For even if God were no longer there as a Pantocrator, as \textit{principium} of the cosmic order as a whole, the need for His presence cannot be eradicated – the unicity of the \textit{principium} remains as a requirement for society not to dissolve into the chaos of the state of nature.
This explains the need for a ruler whose omnipotence should reproduce, in a secularized version, as many as possible of the divine attributes. But a secularized God is different from God sensu stricto in one crucial respect: while in God the ruling function and the contents which actualize the latter cannot properly be differentiated, secular rulers have to justify themselves by proving themselves capable of properly fulfilling the ruling function. There is, in this way, an initial split between the empty place of a function which is not necessarily linked to any particular content, and the plurality of the contents which can actualize it.

Modern political theory has been, to a large extent, the development and deepening of this initial split. Democracy, in the modern sense, is going to be the institution of a space whose social function has had to emancipate itself from any concrete content, precisely because, as we have seen, any content is able occupy that space. It is a mistake to oppose a conception of democracy as having a particular content, to that which is merely procedural. What is at stake is more than mere procedures: it is the institution of signifiers of a social lack resulting from the absence of God as fullness of Being. The Hobbesian ruler, as we have seen, cannot avoid having to justify his rule, and this justification requires, as a necessary prerequisite, that those who are ruled can judge the extent to which the ruling function is fulfilled by the ruling order – something not possible in the case of God. The fissure through which this judgement can operate is minimal in the case of Hobbes (those ruled cannot be the source of the social order, and their protagonism is only required when the ordering function of the ruler is not fulfilled), but it is already there and its widening will open the way to the discourses of modern democracy. While previous forms of social organization led to the concealment of this difference by presenting concrete forms of political organization as the only possible ones that fulfil the function of political organization as such, modern democracy makes that difference fully visible.

But it would be a mistake to think that the ordering function is linked to the idea of an order which has to be maintained and is, in that sense, essentially stabilizing and conservative. Revolutionary violence, as described by Sorel and Benjamin, plays exactly the same role. The subversion of an existing order is the search for a fullness that the latter is preventing. And, as we have seen, there is no alternative order that can achieve that fullness. The politics of pure mediation – of a violence which is addressed to no particular targets, although particular targets are always the occasions which trigger it off – would be impossible without the split between the fullness that pure violence is searching for and the constitutively inadequate objectives of the actual struggles that attempt to incarnate it. The objectives of revolutionary violence – in the same way as the function of social ordering – are deprived of any content and are, in this sense, the empty places of an absent fullness.

Now, two important corollaries follow from this. The first is that a series of
signifiers of the lack, of the absent fullness, have to be constantly produced if politics — as different from sedimented social forms — is going to be possible. Politics presupposes the — peaceful or violent — competition between social forces and the essential instability of the relation between ruling order and ruling function. Terms such as 'the unity of the people', the 'welfare of the country', and so forth, as something that antagonistic political forces claim to ensure through totally different political means, have to be necessarily empty in order to constitute the aims of a political competition. They are alternative terms to refer to the plenitude of a fully fledged communitarian order as something which is absent and which has to be achieved. The second corollary is this: that in a politically managed society, whatever identity the political agents have can only result from precarious and transient forms of identification. It is easy to see why. If the relation between the ordering function and the actual order is going to be always an unstable one, this is only possible in so far as the identity of the political agents will change by means of successive acts of identification; acts that will sustain, modify, resist or reject that concrete order — an identification that will always ultimately fail to achieve a fully fledged identity.

If we maintained — which we do not — that the fullness of society is something that can finally be achieved (be it the communist society, the harmonic organic society, or whatever), we would imply that, in this order, the agents will finally achieve their true identity. There is no need and no place for identification in this perspective, and there is no longer a place for political ordering, due to the radical elimination of all splitting and decentring. This elimination would be equivalent to the 'death of the subject', given that it presupposes the abolition of the distinction between subject and object. Neither do we want to suggest, however, that the subject can be reduced to an effect of a non-subjective process that constitutes the identities of the political agents. The latter would be more in line with those types of analyses concerned simply with the study of relative subject positions in social networks, disciplinary techniques, hierarchies, and so on; that is, the relative subject positions that empower, denigrate, subordinate, exclude. This is only part of the story since it does not contemplate the interruptions and dislocations through which the subject will emerge and will disrupt the imaginary-symbolic universe.

If, on the contrary, the split between ordering and order is constitutive, the subject, as the subject of lack and identification, cannot be superseded by any fully fledged identity, whether of an objectivist or a transcendental character. In that sense, the death of the subject and the unstable character of all identity are conditions of that management of the incompleteness of society that we call politics.
THE MAKING OF POLITICAL IDENTITIES

Notes

3. Ibid., p. 138.
4. We have profited in this section from the work of Törben Dyrberg, Power and the Subject: A Presuppositionless Conception of Power (Ph.D. thesis, University of Essex, 1989).
6. Ibid., p. 281.
7. Ibid., p. 291.
10. Ibid., p. 1139 n. 12.
12. Ibid., p. 99.
13. Ibid., pp. 103–4.
15. Ibid., pp. 141–2.
16. For Freud identification, the endless processes of identification involve the transformation of the ego; or, as he writes, ‘the character of the Ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and . . . it contains the history of those object-choices . . . accepted or resisted . . . ’ (Sigmund Freud, ‘The Ego and the Id’, The Standard Edition [SE] of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, and with Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson [London: Hogarth Press, 1923] Volume XIX, p. 29). We should remember that for Freud the ego is produced rather than always being there: ‘a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed . . . so there must be something added to auto-erotism – a new psychical action – in order to bring about narcissism’ (Freud, ‘On Narcissism: an Introduction’, SE, 1914, Volume XIV, p. 77).
17. Ideal formations are created by projective processes; i.e. they are thrown ‘outside’ to be recuperated by means of identification. In this process, therefore, a certain outside is created as projection of the inside. The ego ideal functions as a source of introjection, whereas the Ideal ego functions as a source of projection. The latter is a function of the imaginary.
21. That is, there is a decentred and incomplete structure (a relatively stable terrain of meaning) that in- and ex-cludes moments of subversion. The structure is organized around the gaps that disorganize it. There is production of meaning because something is lost and something else occupies its place, and this is what makes possible differential relations between signifiers and the production of a signified. The lack enables productivity and multiplicity of meaning, the play of signification, overdetermination, and it also triggers determination. But the lack will always escape this demand for presence and it will be eternally postponed.
22. Of course, this logic on its own cannot define the limits of the social. Other logics are in operation and are articulated to this one in several ways. For instance, the logic of equivalences defines the antagonistic other, many times in very vague terms, and in this way contributes to the instilling of fear among the population since anyone can cross the limit: nobody is certain where the limit lies.
23. We could think of, for instance, the classical Freudian example of parapraxis: his forgetting of the name of the painter of the Orvieto fresco, ‘Signorelli’. His forgetting caused Freud an ‘inner torment’ and only after a few days could he come up with two names: ‘Botticelli and Boltraffio’. When he finally remembered the name ‘Signorelli’, he attempted to explain the parapraxis by examining the overdetermined character of the forgotten signifier. Freud’s analysis weaves a
chain of signifiers: Bosnia, Herzegovina, Traffoi. These are the 'metonymic ruins' of other rejected signifiers of impossibility: death, the 'Herr' of sexuality. Freud concluded that, by means of condensation and displacement, this signifier became a substitute for something else, 'some-Thing' that crossed the bar of signification and which Freud would link to Death and Sexuality. This lost something was rejected from the chain but remained within it via the distortion of that chain ("The Psycho-pathology of Everyday Life", SE, 1901, Volume III, p. 332).


25. Ibid., p. 218.

26. This does not mean that the distance between the self and the Other disappears. Quite the contrary; the Other is external to the unity of the ego (of the narcissistic contract) in so far as the Other exists in the tri-dimensional spaciality of the ego, where there is an inside and an outside.

27. Discontinuity is the form in which the unconscious appears. For Lacan, what strikes us from the phenomena of the unconscious is 'the sense of impediment to be found in all of them. Impediment, failure, split. . . . What occurs, what is produced, in this gap, is presented as the discovery [of psychoanalysis].' The Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 25. These moments of rupture of meaning 'mark and re-mark the text' and leave traces (ibid.). The formations of the unconscious, in this context, are the traces that appear and disappear: they are produced in the (symbolic) order but point at something which is outside its signifying dialectic.

28. This is not a split subject that is secondary to a primary unity. The subject emerges as a split subject and therefore is non-subject before this moment.
