

Subjective Singularities

Sylvain Lazarus

Abstract: This is a chapter is a portion of Lazarus' book *Chronologies du Présent*. This book is comprised of six lectures, delivered in 2018, before the movement of *Gilets jaunes*. Its principal question runs as follows: what possibilities are there for a politics from the point or perspective of people? This is the question which the present chapter will address and try to explain.

Keywords: politics, State, people, space

General question: how to render "politique du point du peuple"? From the point of view of? The space of people? The point at which we find people v. the point/place occupied by the State?

Preface. The Present Question and the Point

Warm thanks are due to Eric Hazan for finding a home for this publication in his publishing house. The opportunity of publishing with *La Fabrique* allowed us to work our way patiently through what was initially a series of six conference talks given in Paris between February and October of 2018 and ultimately come up with the present manuscript. Those conference talks, conceived as a sort of chronicle of the present moment, took place before the *Gilets jaunes* uprisings which, later that year, would come to confirm, accentuate, and indeed exacerbate many of the hypotheses that we evoked in these conferences by inscribing them further still in the real. One of the stranger, more unsettling aspects of our present moment consists in the fact that such wide-spread, massive mobilizations fail to open up alternative horizons, other ways of conceiving relations of power, and resolves nothing in terms of the parliamentary system nor the rhythms of its electoral politics.

This book is about our present political condition. Its principal question runs as follows: what possibilities are there for a politics from the point or perspective of people? What the reader will find in the following pages is a re-evaluation of the contemporary as a felt, lived and experience which anchors itself in its difference from that which has taken place. What carries the present chronicles forward is the rupture taking place between the *taking-place* and the *having-taken-place* of the event.

Going back to the Algerian War of Independence and the Vietnam War, Sylvain Lazarus has devoted his thought to what he calls politics "from the point of people" (*du point des gens*). Though over the years he has engaged in revolutionary forms of politics, participating in the founding of two militant organizations, with respect to the present moment Lazarus has often remarked to me that he is merely "one amongst others". To be one amongst others, called to the struggle by the state of world we find ourselves in, and to not try to claim an exceptional

status in that struggle on the basis of what one has been or done in the past, these are, for Lazarus, the touchstones of an anti-demagogic *ethos*, a form of truth-telling (*dire-vrai*) that is not without relation to what the late Foucault conceptualized as the “courage of the truth” (*courage de la vérité – parrhesia*). Only here the question of *who* is speaking is displaced in favor of knowing the site or *point from which* speech takes place, is rooted, elaborated and debated. The site in question is the site at which Sylvain Lazarus’ core claim, his central statement, emerges. Namely: that *people*—on their own terms and according to often creative logics of the possible—*think* (*les gens pensent*). He therefore leans on their words in his work, for it is in their words that their thought is borne out; to his mind, what they say bears within it a world of propositions for what may be possible in the present.

[...]

Claire Nioche

The Two Classisms

1

In my book, *Anthropology of the Name*, I argued that time does not exist.¹ What exists in the method of anthropological inquiry are sequences, each inscribed in its own system of dates. Sequences, rather than *time*, are meaningful because they allow us to inquire into thought, into the spaces of politics as a kind of *thought* that often shows up in such spaces as an “inner experience” of the political.

The question of sequences, however, immediately raises that of its own dating; and the dating of a sequence leads us to its *political quality | qualification*. I’ve often come back to the different dates that historians from the first half of the twentieth century proposed for understanding the French Revolution, for instance: some see it as taking place between 1789 and 1794 (Albert Mathiez), others (such as Georges Lefebvre) from 1789 to 1799, and others still (Alphonse Aulard) from 1789 to 1804.² In their dating of the event, each historian puts forward a different view (*qualification*) of what they understand by the name, “French Revolution”; or rather, to use a turn of phrase that I introduced and which has encountered more than a few imitations since, by the way that they understand the dates of the event, they put forward an answer to the following question: *Of what is the French Revolution the name?* What, in these different datings, does the “revolution” name? Obviously, if I date it from 1792 to 1794 (that is, to the events of Thermidor and execution of

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1 Lazarus 1996.

2 Aulard 1901; Mathiez 1939; Lefebvre 1951 & 1957

the leading members of the Jacobins), that which the Revolution is the name of cannot name the same thing as a set of dates that would prolong the revolution up to Bonaparte (1799) or indeed the latter's coronation as Emperor (1804).

Sequences are the lapses of time in which a mode is at work. That is to say, it is the lapse of time in which a specific invention of a politics takes place. Or, better yet, in which what emerges is the absolutely singular and unprecedented presence of something which has never before been and which will never again occur, take place. This is what I have called *a historic mode of inner politics|experiencing politics from within (un mode historique de la politique en intériorité)*, a term which allows us to conceptualize and describe a mode in terms of sequencing (revolutionary mode, Bolshevik mode, etc.) and to trace out their boundaries and limits.

Let me add a word of explanation/clarification: politics, here, is pinned to the axiomatic principle that "people think". This is what makes of a given politics a subjectivity, an interiority. It appears in the form of a mode. The form of this inner (experience) of politics is not a constant: it is sequential, rare, fragile. In order to identify it, we need to expose and disclose that which was thought and invented in the course of the sequence. A mode of politics can only ever be identified if we seek out the specific thought of the political which was at work in it. Such an inventive thought, furthermore, is the thought of a mode's agents, its actors, and it is rooted in, committed to, the *sites of the name*. As such, the name is unsayable (*innommable*); its description is carried out by investigating the name's sites: to return to the French Revolution, such sites would include the Constitutional Convention, for instance, the Sans-Culottes clubs, and the Army of Year II. When such sites cease to be, the mode has ended, closed itself off.

Why privilege sequencing over temporality, over "time", though? In my view, "time" is an invention handed over to us from Grand Narratives: Creation, Genesis, beginnings and ends of time; the time of unending repetitions of the calendar; of the crossing of the Red Sea, birth and death of Christ or of the Prophet and so on. Time is also a constitutive conceptual apparatus in the philosophy of History, and in Hegel especially. Time opens out onto totality, and thus onto unity. The dialectic needs time, culminating ultimately in the thought of historical materialism.

Today, however, a different problem occupies me. There is no inner experience of politics in the present, no widely-shared political site or space exists "from the point of people", and, thus, no sequence, open and open-ended in its political singularity. It is this present in which politics is sought after which I want to confront in these chronicles of the present.

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In 1902, Lenin writes in the opening moments of *State and Revolution* that [control of] the State is the central question of politics, directly aligning his view with that of Marx's conclusive assessment of the experience of the Paris Commune and its defeat in 1871: the bourgeois State must be destroyed.

If for Marxists the State is the product of the irreconcilable nature of class contradiction and of the domination of one class over another, then destroying the State was the condition for wresting power away from the bourgeoisie. The disappearance of private property and capital was thus subordinated to the destruction of the bourgeois State. Whence the centrality of antagonism, of struggle, unfolding into the institution of a new form of power: the dictatorship of the proletariat, henceforth the only possible alternative to the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. And as a reminder, the concept of 'dictatorship' for Marxists was nothing more than the expression of the nature of State power itself—a power which is not shared between classes and which is transferred from one class to another even less. Once in power, for Marx and Engels, and later Lenin, the proletariat would put an end to the existences of classes as such by eliminating private property and the reign of exchange value, thus paving the way for the withering away of the State. The experience of Communism in the twentieth century would, however, belie this theory: once in power, the so-called party of “the classes” became the dominant operator in/of the State, organizing the latter's perpetuation rather than its historical disappearance.

Pierre Clastres, an ethnologist specializing in the Guayaki Tribe in Paraguay, argues, however, that it is in fact the State which creates classes and not the other way around.³ He positions and articulates class and State in a relationship which is symmetrically opposed to Lenin's view. Whereas Lenin affirmed that it is classes which—through and in the form of their contradictions—create the State (“The State,” he claims, “results from the fact that class contradictions are irresolvable”), in Clastres' inversion it is the State as such that creates classes.

From the standpoint of Marxism, the State always carried within it a causal claim as to its origins: they are rooted in the contradictions of classes. The perspective of a classless society would be mediated by the proletarian revolution, the temporary dictatorship of the proletariat and, finally, the withering away of the State form. At the root of class conflict and the contradictions of class was private ownership of the means of production. Thus, what we have is a theoretical apparatus (*un dispositif*) of causes in which identifying the point of origin, what *causes* the emergence of the bourgeois State also allows for a theoretical inversion which the necessary steps and waypoints of its disappearance could be elaborated.

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3 See Clastres 1974.

I think it is now necessary for us to give up on this causal model or view of the bourgeois State from which we can always only too logically deduce and identify the path towards its inevitable destruction and, from there, the eventual withering away of the proletarian State in turn.

This would lead to a decisive change in our approach to the problem of the State. The question is no longer that of its disappearance. Today, in light of what I propose to think of as *conclusive experiences*, the categories of Communism and of the proletarian Revolution have lost the luster of credibility. The experience of so-called socialist States (the URSS, China, Cuba, and so on) is conclusive; so, too, is the disappearance from the contemporary scene of a working class organized as an *active political agent/body*. All this leaves us with the question of how, today, we might conceive of a politics from the point of people.

If we are to analyze the present moment, the present, we need to break with revolutionary historicity. We need to break with the idea of time and History, which is a real and major rupture. I see this breakage as a rupture with(in) the intelligibility of sense.

3.

I propose that we call “classism” the consequences of the following hypothesis: in modern society, there exist classes which are in conflict with one another (workers/bourgeoisie, workers/capitalists, etc.). Let us call “marxist classism” the following theorization: the proletariat, or the modern revolutionary class, is able to overthrow the bourgeoisie, to bring about a dictatorship of the proletariat and, along with the disappearance of private property, inaugurate a classless society, a communist society. There exists, of course, a bourgeois classism that allows space for a theory of class war, but its ends and aims are entirely other. As Keynes, that theorist of 20th-century bourgeois classism, once put it: “class war will find me on the side of the educated bourgeoisie”.⁴

These two versions of classism are already perfectly spelled out in Marx’s famous letter to Wedermeyer of 5 March 1852, nearly four years after the publication of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

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V Subjective Singularities

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Subjective singularities raise difficult questions, and so it would be futile of us to hope to encounter easy answers to the questions that they put before us. When a question is complex, our response to it can only try to

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4 Keyes 1933.

find a way to follow it in its complexity. What is at stake here is the status today of the assertion with which my *Anthropology of the Name* opened:

The field of the anthropology of the name is constituted by the questioned posed to thought by the following statement: *people think*. The goal [...] of this book is to shed light on the subjective from within the subject(ive) itself, or, as I put it, “in [its] interiority” [*en int eriorit e*], and not from the standpoint of objective or positivistic referents. Politics renewed—a new approach to politics—will take the form, here, of an example of how to think or approach subjectivity as a process.

My fundamental claim about politics is that it is of the order of thought. At stake in this claim is the irreducibility of politics to any other space than its own and, thus, the necessity of thinking politics in its singularity.⁵

If people think, and if politics is of the order of thought, it follows that people—after all, this does happen on occasion—can think politics, their politics, the politics that they speak out on, *politics in [their/its] interiority*. Such was my view of the situation twenty years ago.

What are we to make now, though, of what people think—what is the status of this thought today, when there no longer seems, to my mind, to be an available politics from the point [of view] of people?

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At the time, I indicated that, for me, “the goal” of anthropology was to “grasp and account for subjective singularities”. I was careful to specify that *Anthropology of the Name* should not be placed nor read under the sole heading of the political. “Politics,” as I stated, is only *one name* for what was at stake: “for anthropology, politics is merely one name amongst others, anthropology includes the political but cannot be reduced to it.” It was, therefore, a book about subjective singularities.

Why would the statement, “people think”, be an anthropological rather than a political thesis? Or is it *also* but not *exclusively* a political claim? In describing anthropology, was I not invoking a *scientific discipline*, that is to say, a point of exteriority, and thus troubling somewhat my contention that politics needed to be thought as *politics*, from the point of politics? Why would the statement, “politics needs to be thought as politics”, be anthropological rather than political? I would seem to be claiming that they are both—that they are both anthropological *and* political theses—when I propose that we think the subjective as subjective, on the basis of the subjective.

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5 Lazarus 1996, p.11.

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What, then, are “subjective singularities”? By way of response, I would first try to indicate what they do: subjective singularities allow for the *thought of thought's processes* (*la pensée des processus de pensée*), processes which are singular and sequential, which neither repeat themselves nor are repeatable.

This way of approaching the question is incompatible with methods for which any given phenomenon—if we want to investigate it, know it, formalize it—necessarily fits between a before and an after, and needs to be compared to other phenomena in terms of its similarities or differences. Such, of course, is the method of classical historiography and sociology: they operate in terms of causes, effects, and comparison.

In his *In Praise of History: or, the Work of the Historian*, Marc Bloch argued that taken in its uniqueness or singularity, no lived phenomenon can be accounted for in terms of critical analysis or interpretation. “A unique experience,” as he put it, “is always incapable of discerning the factors or conditions elements which constitute it (*ses propres facteurs*), and is thus incapable of accounting for or interpreting itself.”⁶

It should be obvious that my own way of thinking is very different from Bloch's, especially given his linkage of *interpretation* to *factors*, and of *factors* to *causes*. In this view, a singular or unique experience is never enough on its own; one needs to be able to compare it to something. And that's the point: in terms of causality for Bloch, a singular experience cannot on its own account for its causes nor provide an interpretation of itself. An approach based on subjective singularities sets out to do exactly the opposite: a unique assemblage of experience (*un dispositif unique*) can also be identified as a singular form of thought provided we take the subjective as the basis for our interrogation of the subjective, provided we think the subjective on its own terms.

With this way of thinking anthropology as the anthropology of singular subjectivities, of the thought of the processes of singular forms of thought, I am of course at a radical remove from approaches or methods based on causalities, determinism and comparison.

But do singular subjectivities allow for the putting into place of a method of knowledge production adequate to the formula, “people think”? Based on my own experience, as well as all my work, I know for a fact that the proposition “people think” tends to encounter resistance and to produce complications. So too does the idea that politics can be understood as a singular form of intelligence (*une intellectualité propre*), one that can be thought on its own terms. “There are people” is, in and of itself, already a claim which is difficult to acknowledge, especially if, as I suggest, what is at stake in this postulate is what I call a *clear uncertainty*, a *certain indistinction* (*un indistinct certain*). In other words: *there are* [*il*

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6 Bloch 1993, p.95.

y a] people, but what matters in the words—what matters in the question of the nomination or name, its qualification, its specification—*is not there* [*n'est pas là*] for as much. For a thought of people to be there, for there to be a thought of people, presupposes a form of work, an engagement/commitment, a process.

Yet instead of “people think” it is often and too readily said that capital and commodities decide everything, including what we think. What's more, we find ourselves traversing an age of groups and labels: the rich and the poor, Catholics, Muslims and Jews, second-generation citizens and the elites... We've gone from class struggle to the rush to classifications, it would seem.

For all of us, the State exists—there is the State as space of order(ing)s and commands. Next, there exist divisions between those who claim that this is simply the way of the world and the only thing to be done about it is give in and comply with it, and those who think that this is indeed the way of the world *but that there are nevertheless alternatives to it*. Within the space of parliamentary politics, one such possible alternative would be reforms, or the opposition between the political Left and Right.... For still others, the alternative resides in adopting a posture of opposition to capitalism.

My own position is quite different. I would argue that, if something is to come about, it will do so from where people are. Where, when, or how, today, are questions none of us can answer, yet we must not simply wait for something to happen but actively work to bring it about as a possibility. If something is to be done, that is where it will come from, even if we do not know nor can predict what that may be. This is why I claim that the “people” in “from where people are” (*du côté des gens*) is the name for a *certain indistinction*.

For the category “people” introduces a break with that map of objectivism composed of entities and labels, of analytics and descriptions of situations. Using *people* as a category represents a move into the domain of decisions.

We need a *decision* if we are to renew or reinvent the question: what do people say and do? (*Que dit-on et que fait-on?*) Why? Because, if we are to emerge from the certain indistinction and thus open up a space for the possible, we are going to need *instruction*, we need a *formula*. For example: how ought we talk, today, about migrants or refugees? Some have suggested we talk about “the newly arrived”, but in point of fact our problem is that we lack the words for the situation. We're in the realm, here, of a certain indistinction for which we have yet to find the right instructions, the right formula. And the right formula is inextricably linked with what's at stake in the above-mentioned question: what do people say and do?

Accepting the “there are” and the existence of the certain

indistinction means affirming, with respect to migrants and refugees, that a formula is being sought out. This does not, of course, do away with the fact that the State's categorizations still also exist. If we take words like "migrant" or "refugee", which belong to the domain of administrative language, we cannot avoid immediately conjuring up practices and problems of repression, concentrated detainment or the possible registering by the State of such subjects as political refugees. The State categorizes according to its own logics and norms.

Maintaining that *there are people* and that this designates a *certain indistinction* and that *people think* is one possibility. But maintaining these hypotheses is a political choice, not merely with regards to where we want to end up, but also by the rigorous way in which they clarify where we do *not* want to end up. Each of those statements can be related to the other in the following formulation: at a distance from the State.

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On the question of the subjective, I have argued the following:

Politics is of the order of the subjective.

The subjective without dialectical relation to the objective, and formulated on its own terms, is what I call *thought*.

That particular thought, *qua* thought, places in suspension the core polysemia of the word from which it derives. To think [*Penser*] is fundamentally to assign a content to thought on the basis of a word, to affix it to a specific usage which suspends the slips of polysemia. I recall a passage from Lenin's *What is to be Done?*, in which he writes: "There is politics and there is politics". There is a bourgeois politics, and there is a social-democratic (proletarian, revolutionary) politics. About the great wave of strikes of the 1890s, he notes (if I recall right) that: workers occupied the factories and they clashed with Cossacks, but this was not, strictly speaking, an instance of class war because what was still lacking was "the conscience awareness of the antagonism they represented with respect to the whole of the existing social and political order."

Where Leninism was concerned, suspending the polysemia of the word "politics" was the gesture which introduced the formula, the order (*la prescription*), of antagonism.

We need to reexamine today the operation by which such polysemia are placed in suspension. I want therefore to propose two additional postulates with respect to—two extensions of the thought in—my *Anthropology of the Name*. On the one hand, the suspension of a word's polysemia *does not in any way cancel out the fact that the word is polysemic*. Using it, then, in such or such valence, or according to a specific order, is a choice, a decision made in a context in which

polysemia is and remains nevertheless at work. On the other, the suspension of polysemia renders the chosen signification *exclusive* with respect to the other possible senses of a word. Not in the sense that they are antagonistic. Rather, they are mutually exclusive in the way that, in my own word, an exclusive/exclusionary choice separates “the point of people” and the “point of the State”.

Whence the following: *in the act of suspending a word's polysemic possibilities, a thought circumscribes its site/situation with respect to other sites, and we can call these disjunctive and incompatible spaces 'exclusive'.*

The operation of intellectuality of this thought is a relation of the real, which in the terms I propose means that it is *rational*. The operation is not of a causal or determinant type, working backwards from effects to causes and explaining the how and wherefore of a given situation. The intellectual operator (*opérateur d'intellectualité*) of this particular thought is the act of deciding on a *possibility*, deciding that something *is possible: confronting the political real(ity) of a situation is also to formulate a possible alternative to it*. I want to insist on this last point, if only because we are so intellectually marked by a tradition which holds that thinking is only ever formalizing or systematizing a set of relations between causes and effects, so much so that it is difficult to accept that they might be any other form of thinking with respect to a given situation; one which might not be preoccupied with determining what factors have created the situation, what is its origin, and more concerned with the following proposition, which we are perhaps not very mentally attentive to or ready to accept: in this situation, what is possible?

When a boat is sinking and the lifeboats are put out, one of the trickiest but most important things is to get the passengers not to jump directly into the boats, but just off to the side of them. That's what the possible, *in situ*, is like. Intellectually speaking, it's not all that important, at the moment such a situation arises, to know who messed up the boat's motor, thus explaining why the ship went off course and so on. The possible here is strictly circumscribed by the situation and its circumstances, what they do or do not allow for and according to which rules or guidelines. What's at stake here is a rational thought whose category is that of the possible.

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The possible and organized politics: during the period in which the Organisation politique⁷ group was operational, the main point

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7 A militant, post-party political organization that Lazarus helped to co-found in the 1980s. [Translator's note]

of reference for the subjective was what we called the thought of *politics from within/ in interiority*. In 2007, we decided to put an end to Organisation politique, however. Our question now, then, is to find out if there can be an thought of politics *without organization*. Or, rather, is there today a thought from the (stand)point of people which does not unfold under the auspices and constraints of an organization in the sense that I once argued that the only politics is organized politics.?

The State is the paradigm *in its space* of one form of articulation of a subjective to a form of organization. In that particular space, subjectivity and organization are inseparable: there are articulated to and often confused for one another; depending on circumstance, one term (subjective, organization) tends to prevail over the other. We see the same thing in Leninism as well. There, too, subjectivity and organization are inextricably intertwined. The subjective, there, is that of the working class and of the people and is indexed to their revolutionary potential. Yet there too, depending on circumstance, one of the two terms wins out over the other.

It was this paradigm linking the category of the subjective to forms of organization that led me to think about the October Revolution. I wondered if we could say that, in the October Revolution, the organization (i.e., the RSDWP, the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party) was put in the service of the subjective being borne by the mass of workers and the people? Does this obtain, even if as early as 1920 it is the subject which finds itself exclusively in the service of the party-State apparatus and not in that of the masses? Of course, that second sequence of the October Revolution corresponds to what I have called the period of bureaucratization (*étatisation*) of the *working class*, a period in which the subjective side of the revolution is entirely subordinate to the State apparatus.

In *What is to be Done* (1902), the subjective is regulated by the fundamental antagonism, the contradiction, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat as well as by the creation of a party led by professional revolutionaries. Yet the party was an *open* one—open, for example, in February of 1917, to the Soviets; it was open to the inventions of the masses while remaining inflexible on points of doctrine. The party managed to conjoin spontaneity and deliberateness. After coming to power, it was the State which would impose its points of reference for the subjective in the now well-known guise of the Workers' State, the Homeland of Socialism.

I wonder if, seen in this light, Leninism couldn't be understood as a kind of forced bending of Communism's conscience to the constraints and imperatives of a communist politics: class, struggle, and then a proletarian State. In other words, an assemblage of conditions, but conditions which are limited by doctrine.

Bending of the conscience to the imperatives of the State is a formulation that could apply to two ways in which the working classes were incorporated by the State: first, there is the Soviet form of the party-State in the 1920s; then the later, parliamentary form of incorporation of the working class, of which the PCF and the CGTU⁸ would be the main vectors in France during the same period.

The space of the State is simultaneously organized and subjectivated. An important part of this State subjectivity has to do with the fact that the questions of order and commandment that power embodies form, within the space of the State, the unavoidable, necessary space of politics—of the *thought* and *subjectivity* of politics. There are two forms of the subjective *within the State* that evolve alongside it. Let us consider two examples. The first is the manner in which the word “worker” and the figure of the worker disappeared from the space of the State as well as from the spaces which counted for and were accounted for by the State. This erasure of the word “worker” intensified in the 1980s, under Mitterand, especially during the strikes of automobile workers at Citroën and Renault factories. At the time, these strikes were described as “Shi’ite” strikes being led by “immigrants who were completely ignorant of French social-cultural realities”. From there, it could no longer be, from the State’s point of view, a question of working-class strikes, but of religious ones being carried out by immigrants and foreigners. What took place in this slippage was the literal erasure of the word “worker” and its replacement with the word “immigrant”, now no longer understood as a positive cultural presence but as a “problem”. This confessionalization of workers of immigrant origin in the sector of heavy industry effectively allowed for their disappearance as subject of/with rights. We thus went from an objective figure endowed with rights to an ominously threatening identity. This process of confessionalization of the figure of the worker in the language of the State (passing from *worker* to working class *immigrant*, to *immigrant tout court*) applied, furthermore, not only to workers but to middle-school and high school students too. To girls who wore the veil, or to the youth in the *banlieues* who were often also ‘confessionalized’ according to the same stigmatizing terms deployed by the State. That heinous bureaucratic bromide, *youth descended from immigrants*—used to describe young French citizens whose working-class parents or grandparents came from abroad to work in France and settled down with their families there—does the same work in this regard. Plainly put, “descended from immigrants” means: ‘their parents were foreigners’. Which implies: their parents were working-class *Muslims*. Thus the expression—*youth descended from immigrants*—is part and parcel of a broader field of operations that consists in no longer evoking the word “worker,” in no longer counting it as a figure of national identity.

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8The CGTU (or, *Confédération Générale des travailleurs unifiés*) was an offshoot of the French CGT and had deep ties to the French Communist Party (PCF) as well as to the Communist International.

In much the same way, once the State managed to appropriate the expression “I am Charlie,”⁹ it too became a kind of example of the processes by which the State produces subjects, by which it solicits adherence to its security and governmental projects and forms. What we saw there was a way in which the question of the separation of church and state was irreducibly linked to a terrible, criminal attack as well as to the State’s responsibility for identifying and apprehending those responsible. As far as the present situation in France is concerned, I would argue that the State today is a form of what I call the *separated State* (*l’Etat séparé*) and that this has furthermore been the form of the State for at least the past decade or so. For sorry proof of this fact, we need look no further than the way in which the rights of immigrants—and especially their right to regularization—has (d)evolved in France from the 1990s up to the present conjuncture. In the 1990s, every year that had been spent laboring without papers, or with counterfeit papers, documented by the pay slips accumulated while performing a real job, counted towards, and formed the basis of, a worker’s regularization dossier. Today, such documents would simply disqualify the regularization dossier and indeed expose the worker to legal jeopardy. Year by year, a series of laws transformed the process into a decision made increasingly at the discretion of a local prefect, workplace seniority as source of rights no longer counting. We mobilized a fight in favor of the proposition that “work means rights” / “working gives us rights” (*le travail ouvre à des droits*). In the Group of Undocumented Workers’ Collectives (*Rassemblement des collectifs des ouvriers sans papiers des foyers*), we proclaimed that: *work has a legal-judicial status. Every worker is a figure of work.* We organized a number of demonstrations between 1995 and 2007, in the course of which we chanted: “Workers matter,” “Working matters!,” “Papers for the Undocumented!,” and “We’re here, we’re from here!”. Taken together, each and every legislative measure or regulation passed since the beginning of the new millennium can be seen as a direct negation of every one of the principles that we spoke out for in the streets.

While we no longer find ourselves in a class vs. class type of paradigm, I continue to insist that bourgeois classism, that is, statist classism, forms the fundamental referent for binary oppositions such as rich/poor, center/periphery, elites/banlieues, and so on. It’s not that such oppositions don’t exist (the rich certainly exist, as do the poor, as do inequalities...); the problem is rather that this sort of pseudo-classism is at base a bogus, misleading displacement of class contradictions whereas our situation is very different from those of the past. In its Marxist formulation, the history of humanity is the history of class struggle. Today, however, a shift has taken place such that we might say

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9 A slogan widely circulating in the aftermath of the massacre by ISIS-affiliated terrorists of much of the editorial team of the French satirical daily, *Charlie Hebdo* in January of 2015. [Translator’s note]

that *the history of humanity is the history of inequalities*. That there are *de facto* historic processes borne out by inequalities is not in doubt, but this is not done at all within the previous or prior space of class struggle. From a Marxist point of view, class struggle was initially synonymous with the political power or potential of the proletariat, with the fact that the proletariat's political potential or power would be the base of support for a revolution, for a classless society, and for the withering away of the State. Class struggle wasn't simply a matter of *differences* or oppositions, it didn't merely indicate the existence of the rich and the power, the downtrodden and the powerful, the oppressed and the oppressor.

Classism based on an analysis of class formed groups positioned in a relation of class struggle (some contended that, with the support of the proletariat, the end of the State and class, the classed State, was in our sights; others maintained, like Keynes for instance, they were “on the side of Capital, and the bourgeoisie would always find [them] by its side”). That there are oppositions does not suffice to indicated the *nature* of certain tensions, processes, or the different, possible trajectories of things. We live in an age in which we are constantly informed and reminded of the extraordinarily uneasy, dramatic nature of certain situations—that of refugees, for instance. Which perspectives, which possibilities, might open up before us is, however, at once unknown and complex. There are the poor, and there are the rich: there is an undeniable tension there, but what produces that tension is today an open question.

6

Much in the same way that the terms “class struggle” and “revolution” have lost a certain consistency alongside the elapsing of revolution, the words “war” and “peace” have found themselves hollowed out. This is equally true where people are concerned as it is for the State.

For Clausewitz, the aim of war was to have the victor impose their conditions for peace upon the vanquished.

The internationalist thesis held that the figure of the global proletariat carried within it, along with socialism, the prospect of universal peace. If the proletariat were to come to power in each country across the globe, peace would reign. For years, the French Communist Party would even go so far as to subordinate struggles for national independence in colonized spaces to the imperatives of bringing about socialism in France, which would then emancipate every population that French imperialism had dominated, oppressed, and exploited. An essential moment of the collapse of the proletarian International, along with the Sacred Union of 1914, occurred with the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact between the Nazis and the Soviet Union in August of 1939. In Brecht's Diary, we find the following, stunning page about what this utter disaster portended for the proletariat as well as for progressive forces across the world. He writes:

The German-Soviet pact naturally alarmed every proletariat. the communists rushed to affirm that the pact represented a perfectly respectable contribution on behalf of the union to maintaining peace. it's true that shortly afterwards—a few hours later—war broke out [...] and the union presented itself before the global proletariat bearing all the stimata of having aided and abetted the spread of fascism, that most vicious and most anti-worker part of capitalism itself. the union saved itself by leaving, as the price for its salvation, the proletariat directionless, hopeless, and helpless: i don't think there's anything else to say.¹⁰

What are the valences of words like “war” and “peace” today in the spaces of power? What do they mean for people? How do we break free from the slippages to which they are currently subjected? We must examine and ask ourselves about the fundamental gap that separates the lexicon of State subjectivity (that is, imposed *de facto* by the State) and the language of subjectivity which is that of people.

The State remains an important challenge: what are its current forms, its inner contradictions, the tensions between the national and the international, between the logic of markets and the general good...? These are of course analytic questions, but we also need to think (about) the State from the standpoint of peoples' experiences of it. In his study of politics in Rome and Athens, Moses Finley cites the following remark by Harold Kaski: “The citizen can only access the state through the intermediary of the government [...]. He derives his conclusions about the nature of the State from the nature of governmental action; there is no other way for him to know [what the State is].”¹¹ A State, seen from the point of view of what Finley calls a citizen, is whatever a government does.

With respect to our analysis of the State today, I have maintained that, on the workers' side of the equation, the struggle with capital no longer had much conceptual consistency. Workers as *political agents* carrying out a praxeological struggle (*pratiquant un antagonisme*) with capital—this framing of things belongs to a bygone era. And yet, it is the case that there exists an antagonism on the part of the State vis-à-vis that which is heterogeneous or opposed to it. Seen thus, it is the State as such which puts into practice and develops antagonism, struggle.

There where there is multitude, there is a need for order, commandment, and violence, and thus for the State. Class struggle no longer has the political consistency that it once did. What remains is solely state struggle, antagonisms created and disseminated by the State. What predominates in current debates about the nature of the

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10 Brecht 1976, p. 47. Brecht's punctuation.

11 Finley 1985, p.30. Laski 1935, pp.57-58.

State is mostly the nature of the relations between the economy and the State.

I disagree with the idea that the bourgeoisie and capital are subordinated to the State. We have a tendency to link capital to private property, to the law of value, to money—with the understanding of course that the State is involved in all this. But could we not imagine the opposite scenario? That is to say, that property and money are *creations* of the State? That it is the State, in fact, which creates the economy as well as its different forms?

I want to oppose to the thesis “The State bends to the laws of capital” the following proposition: the State doesn’t stem from the economy, even if it is the State which creates the dynamics involved in the creation and circulation of money and the market. The order of the State co-directs that of the economy.

And so I come back to the point of departure: subjective singularities.

The problem today is that it is not possible to take what I call *people* (*les gens*) as a subject nor politics in terms of organization. That way of thinking the political is entirely and exclusively parliamentary: it sees subjects as electors, and every parliamentary party as the essential and inevitable venue for forms of organization. In the current conjuncture, I don’t think that there is really much to be gained from non-Statist forms of organization. Organization nowadays only takes place in spaces of the state.

Today, the expiration of the category of revolution and of the proletarian antagonism require a complete reinvention of what we understand by the category of the subjective. “Subjective singularities”, in the mode of politics from within/politics in interiority, was thus also an agent of historicity. It is not for nothing that when I elaborated the concept that I also talked about a *historic* mode of politics: there was a subjective singularity and I was able to identify what it entailed, to indicate when it began and when it ended. So let us raise or open the question: do subjective singularities exist other than in historic modes of politics? Will we be able to seek out other modalities for the subjective, locate it in other modes or forms? Will we be able to tell what a new form of subjective singularities might be capable of doing, that they may open up other possibilities and processes? Once the historic mode of politics no longer claims a monopoly on the subjective singularity from the point of people, it will simply be one of the latter’s forms. An organized form. In *Anthropology of the Name*, the work of novation was assigned to historic modes of politics, to their sites, qualities, and qualification. But what would “people think” mean, then, in our present conjuncture, today, in a period in which there are no politics in interiority? Is it possible for us to imagine a (category of the) *subjective without organization*?

Conclusion. The Subjective without Organization

In every political decision there is always an existential dimension, there are always important questions of meaning. The main question is that of ascertaining *what grounds the decision*. The decision is individual. But in the space of a political organization, the initial decision consists in the act of coming together and adhering to the line. Yet if the subjective, today, is organizationless (*sans organization*), where are we with respect to the decision? If organization was of the order of a “we”, what would be the status of the subjective without a “we”? We would thus pass into the register or domain of an “I”, a heterogeneous, multiple “I”. In any event, the “we” of a politics in interiority was never an unconditional given, but a “we” which emerged *on/in certain conditions*. To return to my framing of the question, “people think” was in this sense a conditional *we* (*un nous sous conditions*). In the Group of Undocumented Workers’ Collectives and in the Organisation Politique, the overarching principle that guided and structured each of our meetings was the following: *each of us speaks in their own name and politics are shared in common*. What we had in common was a politics from the point of people. This is what grounded at once the subjective and organizational “we” of those groups. In that dry spell which for me stretched from the shutting down of the Organisation Politique in 2007 to the present day, I formed, along with a handful of friends from the OP—people who were still militantly engaged in politics, only now in a different form—a small group called *Les Quelques-uns* (The Some). *Each of us speaks and acts in their own name*, likewise for our interventions: some began working with workers’ shelters, others with homeless foreign minors without families in France, others with Romani families, others in working-class and impoverished neighborhoods and cities in and around Paris... *Each in their own name* is no banality. We gathered for small meetings, and rather than putting into practice an organized “we”, there was a plurality of individual subjectivities.

So if there is no longer a politics in interiority, and no longer any “we” other than in the fantasy of a collective subject, where are we with respect to what people think, with respect to the thought of people? Thought is conditional upon being able to formulate/formalize what constitutes it, in its opinion, as thought. To return to the “I”, the condition allowing for an “I” to think something is, I claim, alterity. What grounds alterity is the “I”’s accepting that the other, the “s/he”, is also an other “I”. I will therefore name *political thought* the existence of a third space or person (*un tiers lieu*) proposed or put forward by the “I” as a form of compatibility linking the “he” or the “she” to this “I”. “S/he” is an other “I”, and my own “I” in turn has the status of a third—of a “he”—for this “s/he”. This other, this “he” and this “she”, acts as a powerful interpellation of the “I”. Take, for example, the case of the word “migrant” and the language of the third person, of the “they” or the “them”, which always introduces and surrounds the migrant: they, the clandestine; they,

the undocumented; they, the potential terrorist, the refugee, the person escaping hunger, the unemployed, the survivor of the disaster while crossing the Mediterranean, the person at the mercy of others, they the vitally vulnerable and threatened. And responses to this “s/he” or these “they” run the gamut from “send them all back” to “this is someone that I absolutely will help”. Which proves, if need be, that the “s/he”, here, *is at the mercy of an “I”* who makes such statements. They depend upon it.

Did the organized “we” account for alterity? In its own space, certainly. And yet, there is a real and fundamental difference which separates the organization which provides for categories and a common idiom for thinking alterity and having to account for the latter oneself.

Can we transfer, then, the thought of a “we” of a politics in interiority to an “I” conditioned upon alterity? If we admit the hypothesis of an “I” and of a “s/he,” in other words, is it possible for us to locate an operative category of *the subjective on its own terms*, absent any form of organization? Can the multiplicity of “I”s and of alterities open up an other thought of politics? Subjectivities could then be apprehended as the space in which work takes place between the “I”s and the others. Can making others other “I”s produce a political thought? There’s something complicated about our situation, not least because recent mass movements and mobilizations seemed not to enjoy any apparent power other than that of intensifying repressive responses to them on the part of the state.¹² This raises the question of the relation between subjectivities and mobilization, and of the nature itself of a State which refuses to listen to what is being said in the streets. At present, no one takes seriously any more the idea that there may be alternatives, or that the State might take into account the propositions being formulated and put forward by people. So what must be done in such a situation? This is the question itself of the *at a distance* from the State.

There are servile positions available, positions of acquiescence and adherence to the State. What are the subjectivities associated with this acquiescence? Adherence to order, even if the order is a criminal one? To the State as guarantor of national wealth? Is such acquiescence motivated by personal interest masquerading as a defense of law and order? What we should propose, instead, is the creation of a space at a lateral remove from the State, *at a distance from the State*. As I’ve said previously, there is the State and it is what it is. And yet I can be *at a distance* from it, and find forms of creativity there, forms of inventiveness and inspiration from the point of people. At stake here is a the space of a possible positivity with respect to an institution that is at once fearsome and formidable. An absence of alternatives to the State today

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12 Consider for instance the Yellow Vests movement, the protests in 2017-18 against reforms of the age of retirement, or forms of support, solidarity and action during the first wave of Covid confinements in 2020.

is not a weakness any more than it is a blindspot. It is simply one way of accounting for, describing, an experience: both of the grand but opposing views of the state, that of communist socialism and that of social-democratic parliamentarianism, have run out of steam.

To conclude, I want to return to my time spent in the company of the *Gilets jaunes* in 2018-19, an apprenticeship which left a profound mark on me and which I continue to carry fervently with me today. *Being one amongst others* is something they taught me in particular, along with the attentive patience needed to listen to the other and, more important still, to hear what is said by each person, to hear what they think, what they hope, what they are prepared to do.

In November of 2019, Mortiz Herrmann and Jan Philipp Weise invited me to give a talk in Frankfurt to mark the occasion of the German translation of my *Anthropology of the Name*. I titled this talk, “Can We Put a Yellow Vest on *The Anthropology of the Name?*”. Here’s what I said at the time:

The Yellow Vests contend that the government, which considers itself constitutionally legitimate, is immoral both in terms of the decisions it has made and in its carrying out of them. Its discourse is one of mendacity and corruption. *They’re trying to pull the wool over our eyes*, as the Yellow Vests put it. This immorality, furthermore, is embodied in the police and legal violence to which they have been subjected in the course of their protests.

For those of them that I met, the immorality of the use of power in question delegitimizes it. To the constitutional, judicial, but immoral, legitimacy of power, the Yellow Vests oppose the moral legitimacy of their mobilization. What’s at stake is a *conflict of legitimacies*, and to my mind the violence used by the powers-that-be can largely be explained by the way in which its moral legitimacy has been called into question. The question of morality, here, is neither religious nor philosophical. By morality, what is in play are values and principles. Fundamentally taking into account the real, lived experience of people, and respecting it—this is the essential principle for them. So, too, is telling the truth about what’s happening for them. As a refrain from one of their songs went: *Here we are, even if Macron wants us far, we’re here for the/in honor of workers and for a better world.*¹³

Though the absence of homogeneous, centralized structures and organization of this movement had been the object of some reservations, if not critiques, of the Yellow Vests, for my part I

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13 In the original French, the “we” in question in this song is the indefinite, third person collective pronoun, “On”: *On est là même si Macron ne le veut pas, on est là pour l’honneur des travailleurs et pour un monde meilleur.* [Translator’s note].

find this very quality to be essential to the movement. What's being presented to the government is not an organization, but a principle: our lives are worthy of respect and they must be respected. Peoples' lives matter, they count. Absence of structures is one sign of the Yellow Vests' newness: what one finds there is a form of distance from, and rejection of, the state-like dimension of every organization and which is symbolically concentrated in forces of centralization and the figure of leaders. But to open a dialogue with an organization the State needs to be able to identify leaders, it needs recognizable spokespeople, legitimate interlocutors. But what the Yellow Vests suspect, or what they have intuited, is that every organization is organized like a state (*toute organisation est étatique*). Theirs is not an anarchist proposition. They propose neither councils nor communalism. The only theory they put forward about power is that of its corruption and of the immorality of power's personnel.

The experience I had with the Yellow Vests is a point of reference for me (*est référentielle pour moi*). It will become a chronicle of the present someday, when whatever comes from the side of people/where people are will manage to pick up and take further what the Yellow Vests made possible. I waited until 2008 to write my chronicle of May 68, having experimented with the creation of two different militant organizations, both of which were initially conceived as ways of learning May 68's lesson: namely, as we argued at the time, that what was lacking in 68 was an *organization* with an all-encompassing view and a coherent political doctrine. When the present moment has come to its end I will be able to write not so much a chronicle of the Yellow Vest movement, but a chronicle of what they managed to open up, what they managed to bear witness to, for a time which has not yet arrived. For someone from my generation, there's still hope.

Translated by Robert St. Clair

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