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## Infinitization of the Subject

Traditionally, emancipatory politics is a question of knowing which parts of society are capable of counting for something, and which ones are not. From such a perspective, the founding act of politics consists in uncovering what Rancière termed the “conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it”<sup>1</sup>. Formulating the question of emancipatory politics in terms of *existence* means acknowledging that there is a constitutive disjunction between politics and the system of domination, a system that is usually characterised as a system of placement, identification, counting, or quite simply the State. Indeed, the division between two irreconcilable logics: the egalitarian or generic, on the one hand, and distributive or constructivist, on the other, is, according to some of the most radical political thinkers today, considered to be definitional of politics as such. Hence, if politics itself is viewed as a disruptive excess of equality over to the distributive logic of the State, this signals that a new perspective is opened for the theorization of politics: one that locates the proper place for emancipatory politics, that is, for “political subjects who are not social groups but rather forms of inscriptions of the count of the uncounted,”<sup>2</sup> within the very terrain in which the statist counting operates.

In a certain sense, the polarity between the State and the politics of emancipation is only tenable if the State is reduced to what Lacan singled out under the name of the master’s discourse conceived as a power of positing, the power of the signifier to call something into being. As a matter of fact, for Lacan, “[E]very dimension of being is produced in the wake of the master’s discourse – the discourse of he who, proffering the signifier, expects therefrom one of its link effects [...] which is related to the fact that the signifier commands. The signifier is, first and foremost, imperative.”<sup>3</sup> In the field of politics, the master’s discourse, given

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<sup>1</sup> J. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University Press of Minnesota, 1999), pp. 26–27.

<sup>2</sup> J. Rancière, “Onzes theses sur la politique”, in *Filozofski vestnik*, n° 2/1997, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York and

that it aims at saying what is, could essentially be viewed as a symbolic constitution of the social order according to a certain logic of predication: by establishing the relation between the elements that constitute a given situation and their attributes, the master's discourse effects the "partition of the sensible", to borrow Rancière's well-known expression, by determining what counts and what is of no account, what is visible and what is not, in the final analysis, what exists and what does not. In light of this, the master's discourse is obviously "creative". Having the performative power of the signifier to structure the social field by assigning to the members of a given society a place and a function, the master's discourse can be seen as the power of conferring existence, a paradoxical power, as it requires the subject's complicity in order to be fully effective. While it is true that before his/her place is mapped out by the master's discourse, the subject does not yet exist; he/she is, strictly speaking, a potentiality, he/she can as yet have no being, yet it is only after taking up a place and function assigned to him/her by the master discourse that the subject comes into existence: the subject can become what he or she "is" from the viewpoint of the State, that is, only by taking upon himself/herself the function imposed upon him/her by the State. Indeed, only by being identified, by assuming his/her role or function, can the subject exist at all. The symbolic birth of the subject or, rather, the quandary of his/her existence is formulated by Lacan, as is well known, in terms of a fundamental alienation: "either I am nothing but this mark" (this role, function, or mandate, attributed to me by the social Other), "or I am not this mark", which means that "I am not at all". The subject can thus "be" a mark, or not be.<sup>4</sup> What is thus "created" is an empty subject, lacking being and signifier: from the moment the subject consents to his/her symbolic existence, i.e., takes up the symbolic identification assigned to him/her, he/she becomes name-less, caught in an infinite quest, in the metonymy of his/her identifications, for the missing signifier, the one which could at last name him/her in his/her being.

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Bearing in mind the ontological dimension inherent in the discourse of the master, as its principal task is to decide what exists, the crucial question for every emancipatory politics worthy of the name is of course: how can that come into being which, within the framework of the master's discourse, ultimately, does

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London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> J. Lacan, unpublished seminar *L'acte psychanalytique (1967–1968)*, the lesson of 10<sup>th</sup> January 1968.

not exist? At first sight, it may appear that, faced with deciding between (real) being and (symbolic) existence or identification, there can be no choice for the subject. Due to the fact that before the identification with his/her symbolic “mandate”, the subject does not exist at all, the choice of being over identification would prove catastrophic, in truth, an impossible choice, since it would exclude the subject from society and relegate his/her existence to the obscurity of a life outside the discursive space where all that counts is exactly the place that one occupies within this space. In social terms, it then appears that the subject cannot avoid choosing identity, as it is through identification that one can obtain a sense of existence – but at the price of complete identification with the role laid out for one by the Other.

From the standpoint of emancipatory politics, however, there is a possible way out. The starting point of emancipatory politics is nothing but the irreducible gap between the subject’s being and his/her symbolic existence or, more precisely, its departure point is not the alienated subject of the master’s discourse, the subject taken up by the master’s order, but rather the subject as the failure of the master’s discourse to completely absorb or take up his/her being in the imposed system of places and functions. It thus sets out from the excess of the subject’s being over the statist counting – the remainder, the waste-product – of the operation of predication by which the State structures the social reality. In a sense, the emancipatory politics is only possible because there is something that is limping in the regime of mastery: the subject, insofar as he/she can never coincide with the role laid out for him/her by the discourse of the master. Hence, when it is the forced choice instituted by the law of the situation, whether one terms it the master’s discourse, as Lacan does, or the transcendental regime of the world, as Badiou does, which must be brought into question in order to reveal the utterly contingent character of its necessity, then the only possibility for the subject to face the forced choice is, ultimately, to choose what cannot be chosen: being. In order to find a new existence, a form of life beyond or outside the existence that has been prescribed by the logic of the situation, the subject must, paradoxically, first choose not-to-be.

Taking Joan of Arc as a model, Badiou provides a compelling account of the subject’s choice of non-being as the obligatory step in his/her coming into (a new) existence. What constitutes Joan of Arc as a proper event in the sense Badiou conceives of this term is namely a series of “successive choices not to be what

the situation prescribes her to be”<sup>5</sup>. Hence, what characterises Joan of Arc as an emancipatory subject, according to Badiou, is exactly a kind of subtraction from the possibilities or roles that her time had prescribed to her contemporaries, an invention of a posture that allowed her to maintain herself at a distance from the situation of the times. The subject must be willing to accept his/her non-being, that is to say, his/her subjective destitution, in order to begin to create a new being *ex-nihilo*, as it were. In essence, what marks out the initial position of the emancipatory subject, a sort of “common denominator” of various figures of the political subject, is their refusal of the imposed identification, even and especially if such refusal brings their very symbolic existence into question. This choice of Joan of Arc “not to be” or, more generally, this ability of the subject to escape the power of identifications imposed on him or her by the Other, i.e. this newly acquired margin of the subject’s freedom, is what Lacan calls “the infinitization of the value of the subject”<sup>6</sup>. Lacan namely presents the subject as a fraction which takes on an infinite value insofar as the zero in the denominator, a kind of stand-in for a traumatic encounter with the real, abolishes the value of all terms placed in the numerator. It is noteworthy that, for Lacan, the infinitization of the subject signifies the function of freedom. This is not to be understood in the sense that the zero is open to all interpretations that have been attached to that signifier in the course of the subject’s desperate successive attempts to render the irruption of the real meaningful, but rather in the sense that all of them are cancelled out. And that is just what the choice of being involves: a solution where “the subject designates his being only by barring everything it signifies”<sup>7</sup>.

In view of the infinitization of the subject, to choose being is to choose the choice, the possibility to choose. The choice of being, at this point, it is less a matter of the choice of a concrete “form of life”. It is not about choosing this or that. At stake in this second choice is rather, to quote Badiou, “the choice to choose, the choice between choosing and not choosing”,<sup>8</sup> where the potentiality of this

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<sup>5</sup> A. Badiou, “L’insoumission de Jeanne”, in *Esprit*, n°. 238, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> J. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin books, 1977), p. 252.

<sup>7</sup> J. Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus”, in *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), p. 581.

<sup>8</sup> A. Badiou, *The Clamour of Being*, transl. by Louise Burchill (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 11.2.

“choice to choose” can be, of course, re-established only retroactively: in actuality, i.e., the here and now of this second choice. So, in some sense, emancipatory politics can be said to be concerned with the question of existence and being simply because it sets out from the assumption that the forced choice can be revoked by reconfiguring the coordinates of the initial choice. Why, indeed, one might ask, would emancipatory politics have as its pre-condition one’s putting at stake of one’s position of the subject, indeed, one’s very (symbolic) existence, if no choice were involved in the forced choice? Yet it is only from the standpoint of the second choice, the choice of being, that the subject discovers that he/she was free and therefore responsible, forced to bear the consequences of his/her choice, when he/she opts for what the social Other imposes upon him/her as the “only possible choice”, namely his/her alienation in a given structure of representation and domination. In confronting the forced choice qua choice, the subject annuls it, more specifically, he/she annuls the imposed aspect of the necessity implied in the forced choice. The choice of being, we could then argue, is exactly the gesture that effects a kind of return to the point of departure which preceded the attribution of existence, since it allows the subject to regain his/her power of choice in order to confront once more, as it were, the original choice: being/existence, thus allowing him/her to ratify or to reject his/her initial, although forced choice. Emancipatory politics, on this account, is nothing but a process of re-subjection allowing the subject, enslaved by the master’s discourse, to repeat the act of choosing in order to verify his/her first choice. Insofar as emancipatory politics makes it possible for the subject to restore his/her capacity to choose, Lacan seems quite confirmed in his claim that “one is always responsible for one’s position as a subject”,<sup>9</sup> on the proviso that one understands this responsibility in terms of the subject’s radical conversion or re-birth: in order for the subject to accede to this point beyond the imposed identifications and/or symbolic existence,

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it is as desire’s object a, as what he was to the Other in his erection as a living being, as wanted or unwanted when he came into the world, that he is called to be reborn in order to know if he wants what he desires.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> J. Lacan, “Science and Truth,” in *Écrits*, p. 729.

<sup>10</sup> J. Lacan, “Remarks on Daniel Lagache’s Presentation: ‘Psychoanalysis and Personality Structure’”, in *Écrits*, pp. 571–572.

Separation from the Other becomes possible whenever a dysfunction of the seemingly faultless functioning of the master's discourse becomes visible. In order for the master's discourse to vacillate, there must be, a gap, an incommensurability between being and existence. It is this breach that allows the subject to challenge the master's regime rather than consent to blindly follow it as law. To the extent that the choice of being involves the refusal of all identification, i.e. the possibility for the subject to disengage himself/herself from the social Other, it also shows how the subject, precisely by being nothing but an empty place within the Other, can nevertheless render the Other incomplete, and disrupt the smooth working of its order. Likewise, emancipatory politics aims at the lack in the Other, its impossibility to completely absorb the being of the subject, to transpose it into the signifier. Lacan indicates at several points, notably in his text "l'Étourdit"<sup>11</sup>, that it is the hole that structures. Lack is in fact necessary to the subject for him/her to sustain himself in the master's regime which constitutes his social reality.

### To Have or to Be

To arrive at an understanding of how the choice of being can be re-enacted in the field of politics, we must keep in mind that existence can only be situated on the basis of a discourse which constitutes an institutional framework determining the type of social existence. Consequently, if emancipatory politics aims at reconfiguring the existing state of affairs, it is the impossible choice of being over the symbolic existence or identification that imposes itself upon the subject. No better idea of the effects that the choice of being might produce in the field of politics can be given than by expanding on a point which has been made by Giorgio Agamben a propos the Chinese May '89. In his book *The Coming Community*, Agamben evokes the Tiananmen demonstrations to illustrate emancipatory politics such as is possible at the present time: a politics of whatever singularities. The latter being Agamben's name for a new, unheard-of figure of the emancipatory subject situated beyond both all identity and every condition of belonging to any community whatsoever. In this remarkably lucid analysis one also finds elements for understanding when the mere fact of speaking can count as an act:

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<sup>11</sup> J. Lacan, "L'Étourdit", in *Autres écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), p. 483.

What was most striking about the demonstrations of the Chinese May was the relative absence of determinate contents in their demands (democracy and freedom are notions too generic and broadly defined to constitute the real object of conflict, and the only concrete demand, the rehabilitation of Hu Yao-Bang, was immediately granted). This makes the violence of the State's reaction seem even more inexplicable. [...] In the final instance, the State can recognize any claim for identity – even that of a State identity within the State (the recent history of relations between the State and terrorism is an eloquent confirmation of this fact). What the State cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable conditions of belonging. [...] The State, as Alain Badiou has shown, is not founded on a social bond, of which it would be the expression, but rather on the dissolution, the unbinding that it prohibits. For the State, therefore, what is important is never the singularity as such, but only its inclusion in some identity, whatever identity (but the possibility of the whatever itself being taken up without an identity is a threat that the State cannot come to terms with.<sup>12</sup>

Highlighting the resistance of whatever singularities to any form of representation, Agamben marks a subtle, yet significant change in emphasis. Indeed, what is subversive about whatever singularities, this powerful example of the invention of a new political subject, are neither their “ways of doing” nor their “ways of saying”, what is subversive is rather their “way of being”: in peacefully demonstrating the “impotent omnivalence of whatever being”<sup>13</sup>, whatever singularities bring all possible belongings radically into question. Thus, if we are to follow Agamben, by situating themselves beyond belonging to any community whatsoever, by presenting in the here and now what could best be called, in Badiou's jargon, “political unbinding”, thereby defying any system of classification or counting, ultimately, any predicative inscription in the symbolic, whatever singularities incarnate the principal enemy of the State. In this regard, the mere “staging”, putting on stage of the social unbinding, presents a threat to the proper function of discourse, that of establishing a social link. What is actually involved in the concept of whatever singularity is a peculiar figure of “unbinding” that announces, in the words of Lacan, “another dimension of discourse and opening up the possibility of completely subverting the function of discourse as such”<sup>14</sup>. Precisely as an ele-

<sup>12</sup> G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 85–86.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> J. Lacan, *Encore*, p. 30.

ment which is unsituatable within the social space, as construed by the State, a whatever singularity appears as a place-holder for the anonymity of the generic: manifesting their belonging to themselves, whatever singularities affirm genericity, in Badiou's words, under the guise of "the disparate 'we' of togetherness"<sup>15</sup>. That is to say, in refusing to "give up on the demand that there be a 'we'",<sup>16</sup> as Badiou puts it, a collective emancipatory subject which, in accordance with Lacan's thesis that a group is the real, that is, impossible, manifests its own inherent disparity, without dissolving itself.

What is striking about Agamben's example of the way in which a new political subject is formed is the divisive power of its demands, it is the manner in which whatever singularities succeed in uncovering the lack in the Other, thus provoking the Other's passage to the act, a proof that the statist Other is facing its impotence. This clearly indicates that, for the emancipatory subject, the Other's lack is central because its demand concerns its existence as subject, an existence obtained through the Other. What is initially so striking about the Tiananmen students' protest is the fact that nothing that was actually said there, no content of the students' demands, could have had such a subversive force to provoke the violent response of the state power. Indeed, the intolerable threat that the state power recognized in the students' demonstrations is not to be sought in some specific, concrete content of their demands, but resides ultimately in the fact that their demands were perceived by the State as claims which are by definition unfulfillable. In effect, from the standpoint of the Chinese State, the students demanded the impossible. What they demanded, in fact, was not what the State could give, but, literally, what it could not give: the exposure of its impotence, its lacking the means to satisfy their demands. What was unbearable for the Chinese State to the point that the mere fact of uttering these demands made it respond with force, is the insistence of the demand beyond all its specific contents, an insatiable More! that no amount of giving and concessions on the part of the State could appease. From Agamben's account of the Tiananmen demonstrations it is namely clear that the protestors' demands could not be assuaged as they served to constantly re-inscribe the initial lack of the Other, its lack of means to satisfy them.

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<sup>15</sup> A. Badiou, *The Century*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 97.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



The mere fact that the demand could persist, insist beyond all particular contents, requires that we make a rigorous distinction between two structurally different demands: a want-to-have and a want-to-be. The elementary form of demand is situated at the level of the having. In the want-to-have, the Other is always-already there. Every demand, inasmuch as it is formulated in terms of the lack of having, is directed at the Other that is supposed to have what we are lacking. By making the subject dependent on the Other, since in order to obtain what one is lacking it is necessary to presuppose an Other that lacks nothing, a demand for “having”, is therefore constitutively alienating. A want-to-be, a demand for “being”, by contrast, is a demand which, properly speaking, makes no claims addressed to the Other as the one who “has”. Rather, it is articulated to the Other’s lack. In demanding “being”, the subject may well appear to be demanding a complement of being that is supposed to be located somewhere in the Other. However, the mere possibility of expressing such a demand indicates that one cannot find one’s place in the Other, such as it is, revealing in this way that, in demanding being one demands nothing from the Other that the latter might supply on demand, nothing that could therefore fall under the heading of “the having”. The crucial point here is that, whereas the demand of having allows the Other to gain a tighter grip on the subject, the demand for being, by contrast, involves the subject’s separation from the Other. It is for that reason that a demand for being is intrinsically subversive, revolutionary.

The case of the Tiananmen demonstrations seems to be a particularly appropriate example that can account for the splitting of the demand since a disjunction is introduced at the moment at which a demand which appears to be a demand for some specific having (democracy, freedom...) suddenly turns into a demand of a quite different type, a peculiar demand since it is somewhat indifferent to its fulfillment, thereby indicating that its proper objective is the subject’s being.

In some radical sense, all demands of the subject are demands for being since the subject’s initial demand is motivated by the fact that the Other lacks the signifier to capture the whole of his/her being. Being nothing but the interval, the gap between two signifiers, the subject always seems to be lacking in some respect. Which is why, in order to make good the lack of his/her being, the subject desperately seeks a complement of its being that is presumably located somewhere in the Other. Hence, there is no contradiction in the fact that there can be no demand without aiming at the lack of being that supports it, and the fact that the

subject's demand for being always appears in the guise of a demand for something, in short, a demand for having. It then appears that a demand for being is, as such, a paradoxical demand. It is paradoxical, first of all, because it can never be expressed as such. A demand for being is namely always "dressed up" in a demand for having, disguised, so to speak, as a wanting-to-have. As a result of this obligatory passage of the demand for being through the demand for having, something of the demand for being gets "lost in translation" and it is this ineliminable remainder of the unsatisfied demand that operates as a stand-in for the demand for being. In a certain sense, it can only assert itself as a wanting-to-have, i.e. as a demand for something, whatever that might be, a having which is a stand-in for the unsayable want-to-be. In other words, one of the particular demands for having, which represents, within the space of the Other, an anomaly in the order of demands, as it aims at an object that is, from the perspective of the Other, unattainable, stands in for the constitutively inexpressible demand for being. A demand for being is, in the strictest sense, an impossible demand for having, that is to say, a demand which, under the existing positive social order, has to remain unfulfilled. Yet it is precisely because some demand for having remains un-inscribable in the existing discursive universe, that it can make manifest the subject's lack of being and, consequently, lead the latter to claim its being.<sup>17</sup>

Hence, to take up the example of the demands made by the Chinese protestors, there does not seem to be anything specific about their demands for democracy and freedom, for instance, that immediately situates such demands under one heading or the other. Yet precisely this "relative absence of determinate contents in their demands", as has been rightly emphasized by Agamben, reveals one of the essential features of the demand for being. Actually, it is because "democracy" and "freedom" do not have intrinsic contents of their own, i.e., it is precisely as "empty signifiers" that they can figure as a paradoxical incarnation of the subject's lack of being, indicating in this way that the proper object of such a demand for being is a demand for something which has no being, just like the famous Lacanian object *a* that can be characterized solely negatively: "That is not

<sup>17</sup> This insistence of the demand for being, however, is not to be confused with the desire's eternal "This is not it!" that signals the structural impossibility of satisfaction. Rather, to the extent that any "having" can, in principle, operate like a stand-in for the proper object of a demand for being, on the condition that it opens the way to repetition, to the eternal return of the same. Hence, by not giving up on this object, whatever this may be, a demand for being betrays the insistence that characterizes the drive.

it!”, a paradoxical lack of having that can only emerge through the subject’s disappointment once he/she obtains the demanded object. One can therefore argue that a demand for being is, to quote Lacan, “but the request for the object *a*”,<sup>18</sup> the latter giving body to the void presupposed by the demand as such. If, by slightly revising Lacan’s formulation, we could state that “the discordance between want-to-have and want-to-be is our subject”,<sup>19</sup> this is because the demand for being is, ultimately, nothing but a division of the One into Two, a scission of the demand for having itself, or, in the word of Badiou, a minimal, yet absolute difference between a having and the void to which it gives body.

The demand for being is a paradoxical demand for yet another reason. On one hand, a demand for “being”, as any other demand, is addressed to the Other. Only here, the very fact that it is a demand for *being*, signifies that there is no room for the subject in this Other, to which the subject addresses its request. This is because a demand for being can only be addressed to the Other by an in-existent agency of sorts, those who are denied a place in a given social order, that part of society that is in excess of the classification, unaccounted for by the master’s discourse. In this respect, a demand for being is not a demand for something in particular, the satisfaction of which would depend on the Other’s “good will”, for it is quite clear that the satisfaction of the demand for being made by the in-existent part of society, one which is uncounted and unaccounted for in the given structure of assigned places, would have the effect of making the Other disappear, a disappearance by which the whole of its order is annihilated, too. This fact alone justifies us in situating the demands of the Chinese demonstrators under the heading of the demand for being rather than that of the demand for having. There where Western observers could recognize in the demand for the freedom of speech, for democracy, merely a demand for having, the Chinese State correctly placed freedom and democracy in the register of the empty signifiers as the metonymy of the protesters’ lack-of-being, a being incompatible with the established order of things, thereby correctly deciphering behind the apparent demand for having (democracy and freedom), a No! directed at the existing regime of mastery. The Chinese State, by responding with violence, thus returned to the demonstrators their own message in an inverted, which is to say, in its true form: behind what appears to be a demand for having, it correctly recognized that noth-

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<sup>18</sup> J. Lacan, *Encore*, p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

ing that it can give them would satisfy them, thereby indicating that such a demand, by not being reducible to a “having”, as such, proves to be incompatible with the existing order of power. “We understand that in demanding only more democracy and freedom,” the Other is presumed to reply to the demonstrating students, “you are in fact demanding that the actual socio-political order should exist no more”.

It is, therefore, only to the extent that being itself is at stake in the demand for being that the mere fact of proffering such a demand can bring about a radical modification of the connection between the subject and the Other. A demand is, as such, always destined to the Other. To put it bluntly: all demands are articulated, fundamentally, to the Other. All demand calls for a reply from the Other. What this immediately implies is that for a demand to be recognized by the politico-social Other in the first place, it has to be reduced, downgraded to a “lack of having”. This may be why in an era of the proliferation of demands, all these demands, inasmuch as they are made in the name of belonging to some already existing group, in the name of some communal identity, such as it is represented in the Other's order, can, in principle, be acknowledged by the latter. From our earlier developments, however, it is clear that the subject obtains some sense of its being by being identified with what the Other lacks. A wanting-to-be may well seem to be addressed to the Other that is supposed to be whole, but the very fact that such a demand is possible at all bears witness to the lack in the socio-political Other. In fact, it is through such a demand for being that the lack in the Other, its incompleteness, comes to light. Ultimately, insofar as such a demand presupposes some kind of exclusion, the only “message” of the demand for being that is directed at the Other by those who occupy the position of internal exclusion within the established order, is: “You are not whole!”. In this sense, we might consider that whenever the demand for being succeeds in forcing the socio-political Other to acknowledge it, this necessarily involves a complete re-configuration of the existing socio-political framework, thus engendering a new Other, ultimately, it involves the creation of a new order. It is then this particularity of the demand, its fundamental dependence on the Other, that a demand for being subverts by revealing that demand made by “whatever” or generic singularities, precisely those singularities that lay no claim to identity and refuse any criteria of belonging to whatever community, cannot be recognized by the Other as a legitimate claim. The operator of the social linking, the State, and generic singularities are mutually exclusive since, to ratify a demand made by

generic singularities would namely entail the unbinding of all social bonds, an unbinding that undermines the State whose *raison d'être* is exactly to assure the social bond by distributing singularities according to the established system of places in the social order.

A demand for being is therefore a paradoxical demand since it can only be issued from some unthinkable place, literally, a non-place, to be precise, since it is made by an instance which, being a waste-product of the constitution of the social order, of the Other's counting, cannot, by definition, have a place within the Other's order. A demand for being can only be expressed from the position of an instance which, by being but an unsituable excess, does not have its proper place in the field of the Other and is therefore condemned to endlessly err in the space of the Other. This place from which a demand for being is issued is, strictly speaking, an invisible, or better put, perhaps, a nonexistent place, a place that is not yet given in the Other. And conversely, the very fact that a demand for being is made signifies that the Other, which declared that there is no loss, that everything that counts has been counted and can be accounted for, is not whole, that it is incomplete, since, in its order, there is no possible room for the inexistent, i.e., those who demand to be recognized in their being. This is why whenever the inexistent, that is, such an instance that has no proper place in the discursive space of the Other, declares its being-there, it renders the Other necessarily incomplete.

This would amount to asserting that in order to make itself be there, i.e. to be included in the Other's order, the subject first has to make a place in which to inscribe its being. One might even add here that there is no demand for being that does not in some sense create the space in which it is to be inscribed. One can therefore argue that the emancipatory subject speaks out or makes its demand for being from the point at which the Other falls silent. However, no demand can be made if one does not exist. It is for that reason that a demand for being always manifests itself through a proclamation of existence: "*nos sumus, nos existimus*"<sup>20</sup>, a proclamation which signifies that something which, for the Other, does not exist at all, which was therefore mute, starts to speak out. The subject comes into being here by proclaiming "we are, we exist," thereby ratifying the being that is only anticipated in such a proclamation. The subject speaks out as

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<sup>20</sup> This formulation is borrowed from J. Rancière's *Disagreement*, p. 36.

if it already existed. In truth, the declaration “we are, we exist” can be issued at the moment in which the subject who claims to exist, does not yet exist, because, in the socio-political configuration established by the Other, there is no possible place for it to be situated in. To find one's place in a given symbolic order, if this place is not already provided by the Other itself and assigned by it to the subject, therefore requires that the subject bores its way into the Other, makes a hole into the Other and situates itself in that hole. Hence, the subject can speak out only by making holes in a given order of power, or better still, by adding something which, with regard to this order, is regarded as superfluous, in excess, a disturbing surplus that should not be there in the first place, indeed, that which, from the moment that the Other acknowledged its existence, would cause the disappearance of the Other itself.

### **The Curse of Metonymy**

This is why the subject of the demand for being has affinities with the position of the hysterical subject, namely that subject who, at the level of being, can only exist if the Other is lacking. Indeed, just like the hysteric, the subject of the demand for being occupies the place of the barred subject – the subject which experiences its lack of identity as a lack of being, a lack of its being in the Other: it is not because it cannot situate itself there. Consequently, the hysteric will concentrate her efforts towards exposing the lack in the Other, or, if necessary, by boring a hole in the Other in order to make a room for herself. Lacking being, and unable therefore to recognize herself in the role attributed to her by the Other, the hysteric is condemned to a ceaseless search for an appropriate signifier to represent her. But precisely for that reason it is also the subject who, by definition, rejects the closure, the act of saturation, this being, in Lacan's vocabulary, a master's “point de capiton”, the act of the “hegemon” par excellence, which, far from denying the impossibility of the constitutively non-totalizable social field to totalize itself, succeeds rendering a given situation “legible” by drawing a line of demarcation between that which exists and that which does not. This also explains why such a subject wants to count, actually, continues to count, after the Other has declared to have counted all there is to count. Stated differently, if she wants to add, after the Other's the last word, at least one more word, it is because she does not allow the master to have the last word. In responding to the master's gesture of closure by adding at least one more signifier, the hysterical subject opens up a dimension beyond the closure, thereby revealing how is it possible to

make a move from a logic of necessity, this being eminently the logic of totalization, the logic of the “all”, to a logic of contingency, which is but another name for the logic of the “not-all”, and which can only be acceded through the hysteric’s operation of de-totalization. The hysterical gesture concerns us, not just because it challenges the master, but also because it shows us how it is possible to pass from closed intervals to what Lacan designates as “open sets, in other words, sets that exclude their own limits”<sup>21</sup>. Which is why the Other, whose counting is based on the sequence of natural numbers, can never catch up with the hysteric or with the emancipatory subject, for that matter, since they situate themselves at the level of real numbers, those numbers namely which, because there is always a real number between any two given real numbers, converge towards a negative limit that will never be reached or, to be more precise, which can be reached only at infinity.

It is precisely this move from the logic of the all to the logic of the not-all that the hysterical subject and the emancipatory subject, as it has been theorized by J. Rancière and G. Agamben, have in common. Just as the coming into existence of the hysterical subject, the political subjectivation rests on a peculiar articulation of counting and unbinding. The subject, from such a perspective, exists only through and for the ceaselessly repeated operation of uncovering a miscount in the Other's count. In either case, in response to the Other’s counting, the subject proposes an entirely different operation of counting, one that proceeds “one by one”. But the problem with such a solution where the political subjectivation is premised on hysterical refusal lies in this very rejection of the closure. And indeed, *prima facie*, the closure is what we might think of as the master's gesture par excellence, since it is a gesture by which it is decided, as Rancière remarks, “whether the subjects who count in the interlocution ‘are’ or ‘are not’”<sup>22</sup>. Therefore if the elementary gesture of emancipatory politics consists in de-totalizing all totalization, it becomes apparent that emancipatory politics, as Rancière sees it, precisely because it depends upon the master's closure, is only possible in a world in which the Other exists.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> J. Lacan, *Encore*, p. 9. This ability to continue with counting once everything has already been counted is essential for the hysterical subject. “When the hysteric proves that, once the page is turned, she continues to write on the other side and even on the next page, we are at a loss. For the hysteric is a logician.” J. Lacan, *Le séminaire. Livre XVIII. D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p. 157.

<sup>22</sup> J. Rancière, *Disagreement*, p. 50.

<sup>23</sup> We can understand A. Badiou's critique of Rancière along these lines. See in particular his

In the view argued for by Badiou, however, the operation by means of which the emancipatory subject exposes a dysfunction of the Other's count, revealing in this way the lack in the Other, is not the final word on the question, since there is another perspective, another angle under which emancipatory politics can be situated in the present conjecture. Hence, contrary to what Rancière holds when he situates emancipatory politics in a universe in which it is the Other that carries out the closure, we should follow the path taken by Badiou and Lacan and set out from a situation in which the closure is no longer achievable, moreover, a situation in which the non-existence of the Other, its inconsistency, is flagrantly obvious to everybody. To sum up, we could say that the subversion of the master's closure is certainly not sufficient to account for an emancipatory politics that would be more attuned to the deadlocks of globalized capitalism. The reason for this is the mutation of the master's discourse, that namely which, by being articulated to the lack in the Other, to the barred Other, and which Lacan, as is well known, designated as the discourse of the capitalist, instead of providing a new master signifier, capable of rendering a given situation "legible", by an operation which involves the forcing, the crossing of the bar that separates two incommensurable orders: the symbolic order and the order of the real, literally "lives for" the preservation of this bar, thus assuring, through an infinite quest for the constitutively lacking compliment, an eternization of the existing state of affairs: an interminable status quo. The capitalist discourse, having as its structural principle the "generalized metonymization", from the outset excludes the possibility of closure. This is also why, with the generalization of metonymy in the late capitalist conjecture, the problem of a break with the existing state of affairs acquires an urgency. The real burning question today is thus: How, indeed, can we identify "the wherewithal for prescribing new possibilities,"<sup>24</sup> as Badiou explicitly puts it, within the non-totalizable space of discursivity created by the new dominant discourse, a discourse in which everything is included, in which the exclusion itself is excluded, and in which therefore everything seems to be possible?

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*Metapolitics*, trans. by Jason Barker (London and New York: Verso, 2005, pp. 109–110). It is not by chance that key examples used by Rancière to illustrate the working of emancipatory politics, the Athenian demos and the proletariat, are precisely two models of the political subject from an epoch in which the operation of conclusion was still possible, i.e. an epoch in which the Other still existed.

<sup>24</sup> A. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 72.



Our point is namely that the possibility of an emancipatory politics changes fundamentally as the master's discourse yields to the "generalized metonymization". Or to be more precise, the total hegemony of a discourse that is structurally metonymic, the capitalist discourse, has decisive consequences for the transformative power of politics, ultimately, for its capacity to change the transcendental regime of the present world. What characterizes the globalized capitalist discourse is precisely that there be nothing left that serves as a barrier. Indeed, in a discourse that knows no limitation and in which, as a consequence, "everything is possible", it is the impossible that appears to be impossible. We are living in a regime of mastery which no longer proceeds by prohibition and repression and which, thus, renders transgression and, as a corollary, the idea of a revolutionary change questionable. For something has radically changed with the globalization of the capitalist discourse. Globalization, in this respect, does not mean simply that nothing is left in its place as no anchoring seems to be capable of controlling the unending movement of displacements and substitutions. Indeed, in the current space of discursivity, the notion of place itself is strangely out of place. What is more, with the category of place thus rendered inoperative, it is one of the key categories of emancipatory politics, the notion of lack, necessary to the subject for it to sustain itself in the symbolic Other, which as a result becomes obsolete.

There are two structural consequences of this. The first is that, contrary to the classic discourse of the master, in the capitalist discourse the subject appears to be disidentified. By situating in the place of the agent, the barred subject that is essentially guideless, caught in an infinite quest for the missing signifier, the one which could at last name him, anchor him in the field of the symbolic and put an end to his erring, the capitalist discourse exploits the lack it installs in the subject as a way of reproducing itself. The cunning of the capitalist discourse then consists in exploiting the structure of the desiring subject: by manipulating his desire, i.e. by reducing it to demand, the capitalist discourse creates the illusion that, thanks to scientific development and the market, it is able to provide the subject with the complement of being that he is lacking by transforming the subject's lack of being into the lack of having. In this view, "having" is considered to be a cure for the lack of being of the subject of the capitalist discourse. The second structural consequence is that the subject of the capitalist discourse, which is the embodiment of the lack of being, is completed by products thrown on the market. This is why Lacan named the subject of the capitalist discourse "*the proletarian*". Indeed, it is a subject which is inseparable from that which con-

stitutes the complement of his being: his surplus-enjoyment, the object *a*. As the dominant structure of social relations, the capitalist discourse provides the conditions of an obscure subjectivation which depends on the conversion of the surplus-value, that is to say, any product thrown on the market, into the cause of the subject's desire. We would suggest that it is precisely this indistinction between the surplus-value and the surplus-enjoyment which makes it possible for the capitalist production of "whatever objects" to capture, indeed, to enslave the subject's desire, to sustain its eternal "this is not it!". It could be claimed that capitalism, insofar as it promotes the "solipsism of enjoyment", promotes at the same time a particular communal figure, that which J.-C. Milner termed a "paradoxical class", a collective in which its members are joined or held together by that which disjoins them,<sup>25</sup> namely, their idiosyncratic mode of enjoyment. What is thus placed in question is precisely the social bond. Or to be more precise, the social bond that exists today is one presented under the form of dispersed individuals that is but another name for the dissolution of all links or unbinding of all bonds.<sup>26</sup> Both of these features of the capitalist discourse could, then, be brought together in a single syntagm of the generalized proletarianization. In the words of Lacan, "there is but one social symptom: every individual is in effect a proletarian, that is to say that no discourse is at the disposal of the individual by means of which a social bond could be established".<sup>27</sup> Ironically, proletarianization remains the symptom of contemporary society. Only, this proletarianization is of a particular kind, one that, by being articulated with the intrinsically metonymic nature of the capitalist discourse, has lost all its subversive effectiveness, all its revolutionary potential.<sup>28</sup> Summarizing in this way Lacan's thesis on the contemporary proletarianization, is to shed some

<sup>25</sup> J.-C. Milner, *Les noms indistincts* (Paris : Seuil, 1983), pp. 116–123.

<sup>26</sup> Capitalism, in a sense, could be seen as an aberration among social bonds, since it realizes what in all the other bonds seems to be impossible: its compatibility with enjoyment. The capitalist discourse is a social bond which does not demand that the subject sacrifice his or her enjoyment. On the contrary, the capitalist social bond is a bond that adapts itself to the "trifle", the private enjoyment of everybody. So, from this perspective, it could be argued that, not only does enjoyment not threaten the capitalist social bond, but, on the contrary, capitalism presents itself as a discourse in which the "democracy of enjoyment" reigns. It is in the sense of this solipsistic "democracy of *jouissance*" whose sole principle is *primum vivere*, to live for enjoyment, that we propose to read "democratic materialism", a syntagm that Badiou introduces in order to identify the dominant ideology of our time. See his *Logics of Worlds*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 1–9.

<sup>27</sup> J. Lacan, "La troisième", in *Lettres de l'Ecole freudienne de Paris*, n° 16, 1975, p. 187.

<sup>28</sup> Despite the fact that the value of the symptom in politics and psychoanalysis differs, never-

light on the impasses of the present generalized “metonymization”, in particular the fact that no social link can be established on the basis of metonymy.

Arguably, it is this generalized metonymization operated by the capitalist discourse, which provides us with a plausible key to identifying the difficulties of contemporary emancipatory politics in finding a way out of the present impasse. For the inexistence of the Other, and the resultant limitless expansion of metonymic displacements, contrary to what might be expected or hoped for, is not in and of itself a liberating factor for the subject, it is not experienced by the subject as liberation from the capture which the Other effects upon him/her. Quite the contrary: in the absence of the master signifier which would render a given situation “readable”, the subject remains a *prisoner, not of the Other that exists, but of the inexistent Other*, better put perhaps, of the inexistence of the Other. Examined closely, however, far from disappearing, the Other is re-introduced in a discursive space in which metonymy dominates. It is by structural necessity that metonymy resuscitates the belief in the Other as an agency which, while remaining invisible, situated at an inaccessible point locatable only at infinity, is supposed to govern this seemingly erratic, properly lawless movement. It is this deadlock that the subject faces in a universe of the inexistent Other, that Lacan highlights in raising the following question: “ $S_1$  represents the subject for another signifier, but if there is no Other to furnish another signifier, what, then, becomes of  $S_1$ ?”<sup>29</sup> Better yet: “for whom” or,

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theless they are not without convergence in some respect. The seemingly ostentatious connection Lacan is making here between politics and psychoanalysis may find confirmation in the following passage: “there is no difference, once the process has started, between the subject engaged in the path of subversion in order to produce the incurable where the act attains its true end, and that of the symptom which takes on its revolutionary effect only by not being conducted by the so-called Marxist baton”. J. Lacan, “Comptes-rendus d’enseignement”, in *Ornicar?*, n° 29, 1984, p. 24. From the start, Lacan conceived of the symptom as that which disrupts the smooth working of the social order, betraying the subject’s resistance to total alienation in that order. By taking the lead that the above quote offers us, we will contend that the affinities laid out by Lacan between his notion of symptom and Marx’s proletariat as a symptom of the bourgeois society can only appear on the basis of Lacan’s claim that “the symptom is a metaphor”. J. Lacan, “The Instance of the Letter”, *Écrits*, p. 439. The point here is that the symptom can generate its subversive effects precisely to the extent that it operates like a metaphor, that is to say, as a quilting point which, by reconfiguring relations between elements of a given situation in a different way, momentarily reveals the possibility of a new, an entirely unprecedented type of the socio-discursive arrangement.

<sup>29</sup> J. Lacan, “III-L’impossible à saisir,” *Le séminaire. Livre XXIV, L’insu que sait de l’une-bévue s’aile à mourre, Ornicar?*, n° 17/18, 1979, p. 18.

rather, “for what”, then, is the subject represented? And vice versa, the the putting of the master signifier,  $S_1$  – that signifier namely whose principle function is to ensure the “legibility” of the given discursive space – in parenthesis and hence making a given situation “illegible”, requires that the subject, by assuming the impossibility of a closure, nevertheless finds a way of “telling the situation”, i.e., of making it “legible”.

The problem for contemporary emancipatory politics is not that the closure of the incomplete, not-all discursive space is actually impossible, but that it cannot be represented in the symbolic, i.e. effected through the quilting point. To put it another way, insofar as the counting effected by the master and the counting accomplished by the hysteric can never coincide in the real, as they can meet only in infinity, at the (non-)place of the limit, what is at issue here is an operation of counting that brings together the infinite and the finite, an operation, that is, which, by revealing the action of the structuring rule of the established regime as that of the infinitization, thus opening a perspective of infinity, could also give cause to hope for its modification. In this context, Badiou's critique of Rancière has a very precise theoretical value: it reminds us that the theory of the double counting does not suffice to account for a politics of emancipation capable of producing something new in a given situation, indeed, of bringing about a new situation in the actually existing situation, as this situation already presents itself as a situation of infinite possibilities. Emancipatory politics in the epoch of the nonexistent Other is therefore confronted with the task of reversing the structural impossibility of the closure of the capitalist discourse into a condition of possibility of invention, ultimately, the invention of a new socio-political structure, while assuming the impossibility of the closure. For such an invention cannot be satisfied with the anchoring point, the metaphoric totalization, as it always brings us back inexorably towards the infinitization of metonymy. What is needed in addition, indeed, as the beyond of the theory of counting that is modeled on the hysterical revolt, is a theory of a break or rupture capable of producing effects that forever change the discursive configuration within the limitless universe. By making a move to Lacan's notion of the cut, one finds a possible theoretical framework through which one can situate a possible way out for the contemporary politics of emancipation by opposing the infinitization of an interminable discourse, such as the capitalist's, and an operation of a “transfinitization”, to use Cantor's term, effected through the cut respectively termed act (Lacan) and event (Badiou).

The hypothesis here is that the cut comes to the place of the metaphoric suture or, rather, the cut intervenes there where metaphor as an act of closure is no longer operational, i.e. in an infinite universe in which it is impossible to create, by way of a predicate, a totality. The difference between metaphor and the cut could then be summarized as a difference between a space of discursivity seen as a structure striving towards completion, towards closure, and a space of discursivity considered, on the contrary, as being not-all, i.e. the incompleteness that can never be completed. Not-all, in this view, is not a discursive structure which would be decompleted, it is rather presented as a series without any limit, moreover, a lawless series. In a sense, both, metaphor and the cut attempt to reconfigure the existing discursive universe on the bases of radical groundlessness. Yet unlike metaphor, which comes to punctuate the metonymic slippage, thereby allowing for the closure of the series, its totalization, the cut intervenes precisely in order to prevent the closure. Bringing a not-all sequence back to the hole, the cut thus makes the point of the real, the radical lawlessness, emerge.

Generally speaking, the exposition of the point of the real as the immanent impossibility of a given social configuration, is a constitutive prerequisite to initiate change. It then follows that for change to be possible at all, the point of the impossible of a given social order must be identified. A truly transformative act would thus consist in marking the point of the impossible-real of the existing socio-political situation, more precisely, marking a point at which the impossible turns into the possible. Inasmuch as change can only occur as a disruption of the hegemonic regime of discursivity, contingency must be established at the point at which the impossible, that which can not be, emerges: something that is considered as impossible suddenly comes into existence. With this in mind, the politics of emancipation could be seen as aiming at making contingency a necessity in order to approach the impossible: to invent a new form of collectivity, while acknowledging the impossibility of grounding it in the real. However, in the existing conjecture, which is itself structured as a lawless sequence, this point of the real, marking some radical heterogeneity to that which exists, is not articulated to any kind of impossibility, whether presented as defense or interdiction, rather, it is obscured by a seemingly limitless expansion of the realm of the possible. In an era of the frenetic production of the new for the sake of the new, in an era in which everything is new but the new signifier which would render the situation “legible”, its structure discernible, the only manner, in Badiou’s vocabulary, to “say the situation”, which would allow one to orientate oneself in

existence, is through a veritable cutting gesture. There where the inconsistent Other cannot provide the subject with a compass, it is up to the subject itself to discover a stopping point, which would put an end to the erring of the generalized metonymization of the master's discourse of our time, to measure its measurelessness, as Badiou would say it, a measurelessness which is itself due to the errant, non-measurable surplus of the Other's power, "the subjective errancy of the power of the State",<sup>30</sup> and would therefore anchor the subject's being.

But for this, it is necessary that the cut, to quote Lacan, "be revealed as the knife which introduces difference into [the world]"<sup>31</sup>. From such a perspective it could then be said that the cut can be validated in view of its consequences. One does not demonstrate the cut, insofar as, for Lacan and for Badiou alike, it is verified, just as in science, through its effects on the real. That is to say, a true cut is only true by way of its consequences, or, which amounts to the same, "[I]t is only true inasmuch as it is truly followed"<sup>32</sup>. The cut, in this account, no less than the master's catachresis, has the same creative power of a groundless positing. The essential difference between the cut and the master's "*point de capiton*" being, however, that whereas the master's gesture of closure is only effective if it succeeds in concealing the groundlessness of this positing, the cut, by contrast, is overtly situated in a zone beyond all guarantee, beyond the Other as guarantee. This is why the mode of temporality involved in the master's gesture of closure is that of retroactivity: using Lacan's own terms, it is a question of reordering "past contingencies by conferring on them the sense of necessities to come";<sup>33</sup> whereas a true cut, to the point that its validation depends upon its consequences, is inscribed in the future anterior: it will have been. This is the principal lesson to be drawn from Lacan's seminar "L'acte psychanalytique": how can a cut occur such that it would provoke a logic of consequences to be followed, a logic that, moreover, derails the transcendental regime of a given discursive universe.

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The implication here is that, if the Other is no longer capable of the suture, this leaves the emancipatory subject the task of coming up with a solution, not, however, at the level of the signifier, as it will inevitably fuel the process of metonymization, but at the level of that which is heterogeneous, disparate with the

<sup>30</sup> See in particular Badiou's essay "Politics as Truth Procedure", in *Metapolitics*, pp. 144–145.

<sup>31</sup> J. Lacan, "La psychanalyse dans ses rapports avec la réalité" in *Autres écrits*, p. 357.

<sup>32</sup> J. Lacan, *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> J. Lacan, "Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis", p. 213.

signifier, namely the act. Indeed, it is not enough to expose the inexistence of the Other and the resultant inconsistency of the social field, it is also necessary to understand that in relation to the deadlocks of the general metonymization only the act can be situated as a solution – because it does not involve the relation to the Other.

### Actheism<sup>34</sup>

Intrinsically sui-referential, as it cannot find an ontological support, the act, as such, is correlative of the inexistence of the Other. But how does the act constitute a resolution to the deadlock of the in-existent Other? Ultimately, what exactly is it that the act affects, modifies, creates? This is where Lacan provides us with an answer as to the question of whether violence, in the epoch of the inconsistent Other, is the only way out of the powerlessness of the subject. What concerns Lacan in this respect is to define a transmutation, a proper conversion of the subject, a conversion that renders it capable of the act. At the centre of this is the following question: how is the subject of the signifier, that is, the subject as an effect of the signifier, implicated in the structure of the act? In the seminar *L'acte psychanalytique*, Lacan provides a way of thinking about the act that is slightly different from that furnished in his preceding seminars. The far-reaching novelty of this new approach can help us explain the emergence of the emancipatory subject in an era of otherlessness and, as a corollary, account for two distinct conceptions of the emancipatory politics. For what is at stake in the act is the saying of that which, in a given situation, cannot be said, namely its point of the impossible. Lacan's solution to the impasses of the in-existent Other is to propose a new definition of the act: a paradoxical short circuit of saying and doing, of speech and action. The act is accomplished through a saying whose subject, as a result, emerges different, other than he was before: "The act (*tout court*) takes place by means of a saying, thereby changing its subject."<sup>35</sup> Hence, what is at stake in the act for Lacan is the status of a "saying" insofar as it is presumed to produce a set of decisive consequences, starting with the subject. It is

<sup>34</sup> This neologism, which we borrow from C. Soler, by condensing "act" and "atheism" in one word, points to that dimension of the act which could best be designated as the "atheistic transcendence", an immanent transcendence beyond all figure of the Other. See C. Soler, "Les fins propres de l'acte analytique", in *Actes de l'Ecole de la Cause freudienne*, n° 12, E.C.F. Paris 1987, p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> J. Lacan, "Comptes-rendus d'enseignements", in *Ornicar?*, n° 29, 1984, p. 18.

here that the crucial aspect of the act comes to light: it is an act which appears without a subject. Instead of saying that the subject carries out an act, it is the subject which is considered as resulting from an act.

However, for an act of saying to be taken as a true act, it is required that it leaves an indelible trace in the universe of discourse within which it occurred. This clearly indicates that the act is not something that is beyond language, something that is more real than language, since, for Lacan, “the signifying dimension is constitutive of any act”<sup>36</sup>. And indeed, to paraphrase Lacan himself, the act does not go without saying. We should not take this to mean that whenever there is a saying there is also an act. To avoid the absurd conclusion that every act of saying alters the subject, it is decisive to differentiate between two heterogeneous ways of “doing things with words”. Here we have to distinguish between the act in a Lacanian sense and the act such as has been elaborated by speech act theory in order to accurately locate the true agent in an act. According to J.L. Austin, for an enunciation, for instance, “I promise”, “I declare a general mobilization”, to count as the accomplishment of an act, “there must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances”.<sup>37</sup> A true act in Lacan’s sense, by contrast, is an act for which no such “conventional procedure” is supplied in advance. What is more, it is only “*nachträglich* [retroactively] that an act takes on its value”<sup>38</sup>. In this regard, a Lacanian speech act is the reverse of an Austinian speech act: while an Austinian speech act, where the speaker performs an act by proffering a formula designed for that purpose, aims at the absorption of certain ways of doing realized through a mere act of saying into the signifier, the reduction to the signifier of that which is fundamentally heterogeneous and therefore incommensurable with it, namely doing, a Lacanian speech act pushes the signifier itself beyond the limits of the symbolic. Or to be even more precise, whereas the Austinian speech act, where the act amounts simply to “doing things with words” in conformity with a pre-given convention, a genuine act in Lacan’s sense involves a passing through a barrier of the signifier. One could say that such a speech act makes use of the signifier to bring into existence something that is of the order of the real.

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<sup>36</sup> J. Lacan, *Lacte psychanalytique* (1967–1968), 16 May 1968.

<sup>37</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> J. Lacan, *Lacte psychanalytique*, 16 May 1968.



It is not by chance that Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon illuminates, for Lacan, the essence of a true act. Indeed, if the signifying dimension is constitutive of the act as such, this is precisely because for Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon to take on the value of an act, it must go beyond a limit, to cross a boundary that only exists in the symbolic. That is to say, it is not enough for Caesar to cross the Rubicon with his army, thereby violating the Roman law according to which the army, upon returning to Rome, must be disbanded before crossing the Rubicon, he must in addition proclaim: "*alea iacta est!*". It is in the symbolic itself that this transgression must be marked. At the same time, the act is correlated to a real upon which it has effects: the inscription of some radical discontinuity in the symbolic, which thereby inaugurates a reconfiguration of the existing discursive universe. In emphasizing the dimension of discontinuity brought about through an act, it should be noted, however, that the Lacanian notion of act is not primarily concerned with the transgression. Rather, the crossing of a purportedly inviolable barrier is to be understood less as the hysteric's act of defiance directed against the Other's prohibition, than as an attempt at locating the point of the impossible of the existent social order: marking and dissolving at the same time the point of the impossible-real in the situation, the act succeeds to initiate a set of until then unheard of possibilities, to chart an uncharted zone, beyond borders, to be explored. There is, then, an act on the condition that the crossing of the symbolic barrier is conceived as a clearing gesture signaling a new beginning which, however, cannot be attained without crossing some point of impossibility. It is in this sense that we could speak of the act as constituting a true beginning insofar as it gives rise to a new desire<sup>39</sup> – to be sustained by way of its consequences. And we can start to see more clearly now that it is only through such a forcing of the barrier of the symbolic that an act can constitute an interruption, a break, a discontinuity that forever separates a "before" and an "after".

But what becomes of the subject after the act? Undoubtedly, Caesar before crossing the Rubicon and Caesar after crossing the Rubicon are not the same Caesar. By crossing the Rubicon, by inscribing in the symbolic his gesture of transgression, "*alea iacta est!*", Caesar, who launched this new signifier and thereby introduced a new order in the world, becomes himself nothing more than a waste product of "his" proper act. The moment of the act, strictly speaking, is the moment at which the subject appears to be "suspended" between the "old" subject

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 January 1968.

that he was before the act, and a new being that is a being without essence, as he will only become who he really is through the deployment of the act's consequences. He will become what he is, i.e., nothing other than a series of consequences that follow from "his" act. Stated otherwise, the act does not include, at the moment of its realization, the presence of the subject. It is only after the act and through its consequences that the subject will find its presence, but a renewed presence, says Lacan. We are confronted here with two fundamentally different subjects: the first one, the one that will be ultimately sacrificed, is the alienated subject of the signifier, and another subject, the one that emerges disidentified, without a mark and therefore in search of a new mark, a new signifier. It is this fundamental mutation of the subject that could be referred to as "the suicide of the subject", to use the term J.-A. Miller prefers in order to emphasize that the (old) subject, i.e., the subject as an effect of the signifier, has to "die" in order to make it possible, by virtue of the act, for a new, wholly different subject to emerge<sup>40</sup>: the subject of an infinitization of the consequences of "his/her" act.

The act of crossing a boundary that is traced in the symbolic has the effect of shattering the existing symbolic order. So what characterizes the act is not merely the fact that it alters the subject, it is not just the death of the old subject and the birth of a new one, but the act, also and essentially, involves a modification of that agency at which or against which it is, ultimately, always directed: the Other. Generally speaking, it is by taking into account this "address" to the Other that it was possible for Lacan to oppose acting out and *passage à l'acte*, passage to the act, two types of acts particularly difficult to distinguish as they both appear to involve an unexpected, violent headlong movement. Lacan defines acting out as the subject's playing out on a stage, literally making a scene for the Other, and a passage to the act as an attempt to detach itself from the Other. In the event of acting out, the subject addresses the Other through his/her act, thereby contributing to making this Other consist. Through the passage to the act, in contrast, the subject in effect escapes from the power of the Other, but at the price of a drastic separation: by evacuating himself or herself from the stage. Signaling in this way the subject's definitive separation from the Other, the passage to the act entails at the same time the subject's disappearance.

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<sup>40</sup> J.-A. Miller, "Jacques Lacan: remarques sur son concept de passage à l'acte", in *Actualités psychiatriques*, n° 1, 1988, p. 52.

However, the passage to the act is not Lacan's final word on the question. There is another angle in terms of which it is possible to draw a far clearer distinction between a true act, on one hand, and both, the acting out and the passage to the act, on the other. This is not the final word, since it is against a background of this second demarcation that he seeks to elaborate more rigorously the act in relation to the Other. What a genuine act, for Lacan, has in common with the passage to act consists in the fact that both can only be accomplished in the void of the Other; at the very moment of its realization, the act appears to be without a support in the Other. This is why, for Lacan, one can never know what an act will bring about. More importantly, there will always be the risk that the act will flip over into a mere *mise-en-scène*, a playing out for the Other, in a word, into an acting out.<sup>41</sup> It then appears that a true act, because it does not belong to the order of calculation or reasoning, as such, is paradoxically left at the mercy of the Other. This reintroduction of the Other in the act, however, requires an additional distinction, this time a distinction between the act in the proper sense of the word and the passage to the act. What would a proper act be, then, in light of this distinction?

It is noteworthy that this demarcation from the passage to the act was introduced by Lacan in passing, as it were, yet at a crucial turning-point in his teaching, when he proposed a singular procedure, termed the pass, destined to verify, that is, to ratify the purportedly irreversible change in the subject's status at the end of analysis.<sup>42</sup> The point at issue here is that because Lacan's proposition, "Proposition of 9 October 1967"<sup>43</sup>, met with resistance by "the old guard" of Lacanianism, this failure of "his" act leads Lacan to a radical reformulation of the act in its relation to its outcome. At the centre of his re-elaboration of the notion of act at that time is namely the question of the kind of authentication that the act might receive. In fact, the second definition of the act proposed by Lacan is, strangely enough, best argued through the experience of failure. Commenting on the failure of his "Proposition", Lacan gives us another very important clue to understanding the act. It is therefore from the perspective of this uncertain fate of his speech act known as the "Proposition" that Lacan is able to shed some light on the act as such. Namely, that if all he received from the Other as a response to his "Proposi-

<sup>41</sup> J. Lacan, "Comptes-rendus d'enseignements", in *Ornicar ?*, n° 29, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> Namely, the pass as a modification presumably indicating the subject's passing from the position of the analysand to that of the analyst is the one which marks the destitution of the subject of the signifier and its passage into the mode of the object, the passage from subject to object.

<sup>43</sup> J. Lacan, *Autres écrits* (Paris : Seuil, 2001), p. 243–259.

tion” was a flat rejection, the Other’s No!, is not just an aspect of the act, it is rather the fundamental feature of what we mean by the act. One can go further and state that, due to the Other’s refusal to ratify his “Proposition”, Lacan is obliged to raise the question of whether his “Proposition” is an act at all. What, then, according to Lacan himself, is his “Proposition” lacking, such that it might not deserve the qualification of an act? Whereas the passage to the act may well remain indifferent to what follows since the consequences of the act are precisely what the subject who precipitates himself into the act does not want to know anything about, this cannot be said of the “Proposition”. Indeed, the fact that the “Proposition” has met with resistance, rejection even, from the Other, is seen by Lacan as an indicator that the status of the act is retroactively annihilated. Hence, the only answer to the question: “Is it an act?”, for Lacan, is: “It depends on its consequences”.<sup>44</sup> This centrality of consequences is arguably at the heart of Lacan’s revisited theory of the act. In fact, it is by focusing on the consequences that the precarious, ungrounded nature of the act is truly brought to light. If Lacan can claim that “it is in the consequences of what is said that the act of saying is judged,”<sup>45</sup> this is because “what one does with what is said remains open”<sup>46</sup>. What this immediately implies is that the essential feature of the act at stake for Lacan here introduces a peculiar logic of consequences to account for the effect the act has in the situation in which it has been accomplished.

This brings us to what we take to be one of the most important shifts in Lacan’s theorizing of the act. One cannot but experience some difficulty in reconciling this emphasis on the consequences of the act, with Lacan’s initial insistence that, for a genuine act, there is no “after”, no “tomorrow”. Is not, which is now thrown into question, in essence, what Lacan regarded as the exact nature of (the passage to) the act, i.e., this dimension of finality, of irrevocability, without appeal to any “tomorrow”, this refusal to take into consideration the outcome, the continuation of the act, ultimately, the effacement of that which would have issued from it, the utter indifference with respect to the “after”? These two apparently contradictory aspects of the act are none the less bound together. To make the status of the act dependent upon what follows, to take into account, so to speak, as an integral part of the act, this uncertainty, i.e. the impossibility of predicting its consequences, in short, the dependence of the act on the Other

<sup>44</sup> J. Lacan, “Discours de l’EPF”, in *Autres écrits*, p. 262.

<sup>45</sup> J. Lacan, *Encore*, p. 16.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

that is supposed to ratify it, announces an unheard of heresy with respect to the Lacanian canonical definition of the act that has been modeled on the passage to the act. As is well-known, the latter constitutes, for Lacan, a paradigm of every (successful) act as it is through such a passage to the act that the subject can divorce himself from the Other, definitely tear away, wrench himself from of its power. This also explains why suicide is regarded by Lacan as “the only act that can succeed without misfiring”<sup>47</sup>. But if we take the consequences of the act to properly constitute the structure of the act, does this not indicate a major shift, a displacement, perhaps even a throwing into question of Lacan's classical definition of the act? Is it not rather a break with the Other inherent in the very essence of the act? Is it not a moment of the subject's definitive separation from the Other?

If Lacan is concerned with the failure of his “Proposition” to the point of doubting its status as an act, this is because at the moment of its accomplishment, we cannot know whether we are dealing here with an impotent posturing, ineffective gesticulation, or with a true act capable of producing certain dislocatory effects in the existing situation. Actually, by inscribing the consequences in the very status of the act, Lacan merely indicates that the outcome of the act is uncertain, as indeed, the status of the act depends, ultimately, on the Other, i.e. the effect it has on its law. The Other, thus, unexpectedly re-appears as that instance which is supposed, retroactively, of course, after the event, to ratify the act. Which is but another way of saying that the only authentication of the act as a transformative power follows from its consequences. At the moment at which the question is raised of knowing whether we are dealing here with a futile gesticulation, an empty posture, or with something that is capable of producing certain dislocatory effects in the existing situation, the question of the address to the Other is re-posed with all urgency. The true in an act in Lacan's sense, is then to be measured by its consequences; ultimately it has to be judged by the effects it has on the Other. What distinguishes the act, then, is not simply the subject's separation from the Other, but also, or even more so, the reconfiguration that the act causes in the Other's world, the reconfiguration that may go so far as to the emergence of a new figure of the Other. It is only in this sense that a true act constitutes an interruption, a cut, a discontinuation, in relation to the existing

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<sup>47</sup> J. Lacan, *Television*, trans. by Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), p. 43.

state of affairs, and the founding gesture, the foundation of a new order, a new situation, indeed, the creation of a new discursive universe.

The impression now is that the emphasis has shifted: the act is less a matter of a break, a discontinuity, than one of inaugurating a new series, initiating a “new counting”. How are we to understand this paradoxical structure of the act? Discontinuity, a breaking up of the (signifying) chain is undoubtedly essential to the notion of the act. The act, in this respect, designates the fact that an interruption occurred in a situation, yet an interruption which nonetheless points to an “after”, to some “tomorrow”, whilst signifying a new beginning. How is this possible? Being utterly contingent, i.e. underived, emerging, as it were, *ex nihilo*, the act, at the moment of its accomplishment, *assures nothing*. In effect, the act cannot guarantee that anything at all will follow. What specifies an act as the beginning of a new epoch, however, is precisely the uncertainty of the future to which it is exposed because of its consequences. Or more broadly stated: to the extent that the act breaks the link between the before and the after, to put the act in its place is to put it in a chain, in sequence. Through its consequences, the act is inscribed in a chain, in a metonymic series, to be precise, without being entirely able to master it, to control it. Only if the act succeeds in transforming the series in which it is inscribed, into a new sequence, can it be decided after the fact, that is to say, retroactively, whether we are truly presented here with an act or not. On the one hand, in all genuine act, there is a dimension of “auto”: it is by “authorizing” oneself that one can accomplish an act, which is to say that one has to take upon oneself the fact that one finds no support, no guarantee in the Other, the symbolic order. The act, in this regard, is a *causa sui*, a cause of itself, which, of course, is not to be confused with the subject. For the cause that is at work in the act, cannot be attributed to the subject, rather, it must be located in the object, and more specifically, in the cause of desire as that which is withheld from the subject's knowledge. Which is why Lacan evokes a paradoxical structure of the act, since, in the act “the object is active, while the subject is subverted”.<sup>48</sup>

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On the other hand, though, the act is equally inscribed in the dimension of the retroactivity, in so far as it is precisely to the point that it is on the basis of its consequences that it can be decided whether the act was accomplished or not. To state with Lacan that the destiny, even the validity of the act, is dependent on its con-

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<sup>48</sup> J. Lacan, “La méprise du sujet supposé savoir”, in *Autres écrits*, p. 332.

sequences, is to state that the “status of the act is retroactive”.<sup>49</sup> But what does this dependence of “his/her” act on the consequences that proceed from it, ultimately, on the Other's reception of the act, entail for the subject? What, then, is the role of the subject if the act is essentially transindividual? To this question no other response can be given except one in terms of the infinitization of the subject: in a universe in which the Other does not exist, the subject accedes to certitude solely by virtue of an act, on the condition, however, that he or she assumes the groundlessness of the act itself.<sup>50</sup> In this respect, we can claim that every act worthy of the name is accomplished in the perspective of the last judgement, since to “accomplish an act [...] means to be responsible for the act and its consequences”<sup>51</sup>. A new subject emerges as the effect of the act. This subject, however, is not to be identified simply with the agency which assumes, takes upon itself the responsibility for the always unforeseeable outcome of the act. It would be more appropriate to say that the subject is the insistence of the (in principle at least) interminable series of the consequences brought about through the act.

There is perhaps no better illustration of this paradoxical aspect of the act than the famous dialogue (whether it actually happened or not) between Lenin and Trotsky, on the brink of the October Revolution: “What if we fail?” asks Lenin anxiously. “What if we succeed?”, no less anxiously replies Trotsky. Despite the fact that this divergence in questions quite obviously indicates two distinct conceptions of revolution and politics in general, the subject here has to answer for his/its own course of action. Signaling a moment of anxiety preceding every act – for there is no answer in the Other to tell him or her what she or he should do – both of these questions indicate that, regardless to the outcome of the impending revolutionary act, the subject has already situated what is about to be carried out in the perspective of the “last judgement”, thereby demonstrating his willingness to assume the unforeseeable consequences that proceed from this act, consequences that, ultimately, remain at the mercy of the Other. But what “Other” is the act aiming at in a universe in which the Other, precisely, does not exist? That is the quandary proper to the act by which the question of the act becomes a quandary for both psychoanalysis and politics. There seems to be no other way out of this impasse but to assert that the act itself creates a new Other to which it is addressed.

<sup>49</sup> Here we draw on J.-A. Miller's elaboration of the act in his seminar “Politique lacanienne”, 27. 5. 1998.

<sup>50</sup> J. Lacan, “La méprise du sujet supposé savoir”, p. 338.

<sup>51</sup> J.-A. Miller, “Politique lacanienne”, 27. 5. 1998.

One might just as well say that the Other at which the act is directed is in essence an effect of the act. It is the act itself that creates that agency that is supposed to be validating it. Being the material support of the act, the subject necessarily fails to notice that the act itself creates the Other, that space namely in which the inventions it brought about will have been inscribed. At once anticipatory and retroactive, the act always presents itself in its paradoxical aspect: it is both ungrounded (at the moment of its occurrence) and foundational (from the viewpoint of its consequences), foundational inasmuch as it calls into existence both the subject as that instance that will assume the consequences that follow from the act, and the Other that will retroactively ratify it as an act. The Other, which is, strictly speaking, *the after-effect of the act itself*.

It is here that the implications of Lacan's novel account of the act become valid for emancipatory politics. One of the paradoxes of the kind of field that politics constitutes, is that it is a field in which this structure of the act remains unsurpassed. Indeed, according to some of its most radical contemporary theorists, emancipatory politics is impossible without the claim that people, taken indistinctly, are capable of thinking<sup>52</sup>. More specifically, what singularizes this unshakeable belief in the capacity of people to think essentially consists in the wager that there is a cause that mobilizes people, in short, a belief that their desire is guided by a cause that, while operating unbeknown to people, i.e. going beyond what they know, nevertheless makes it possible for them, to paraphrase Lacan, to be "*sure in their action*". While finding no support in the Other, the emancipatory subject is guided surely by some cause unbeknown to it, so much so that it is never in the position to ask: "What is to be done?" Indeed, from the moment one starts to ask what to do?, it is already too late. The desire that was animated by this cause is already fading, thus announcing the return of anxiety, that affect namely that reins in contemporary "democratic materialism".

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<sup>52</sup> A. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 142.