

The Idea of Revolution: yesterday, today and tomorrow

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FOR A LONG PERIOD NOW—broadly coextensive with what philosophers, sociologists, and some historians of ideas at least call “modernity” (*die Neuzeit*)—it would seem that questions related to the articulation of the *concept of history* (or, perhaps better, in a more reflexive manner, *historicity*, meaning a specific manifestation in time of processes, events, continuous and discontinuous changes, deliberate and involuntary actions) and the *concept of politics* (or, in a more speculative manner, the *concept of the political*, including a specific distribution of civil conflict and representation, and an “ontology” of the subjects of political action, such as peoples, nations, classes, leaders and masses, etc.), were revolving around the assessment and the interpretation of the *idea of revolution*. This is not to say that, in history or in politics, there are only revolutionary moments and movements to be found, whether successful or failed, achieving their “goals” or being “interrupted”, being encouraged or resisted, at the expense of every other form of change, or action, or institution. But this means that the idea of revolution (with permanent debates about its genealogy, meaning, and conditions of application) acquired a unique function of *polarization* and *intensification* with respect to the aporias and potentialities of this articulation, when it had become clear at the same time (something that, probably, is typically “modern”) that politics and history cannot become isolated, represented *apart* from one another, while at the same time never becoming entirely *reducible* to one another, since there must be something in history (or historical causality) that escapes politics, but also something in politics that interrupts history in order to “make” it. And this unique function of the idea of revolution apparently could be related to at least three characters of modernity: its specific understanding of the idea of progress, its eurocentrism, its problematization of history and politics in terms of recurring antinomies. Allow me to elaborate briefly on these three aspects.

1) As historians of ideas are well aware, the name “revolution” pre-dates modernity, inasmuch as it refers traditionally to a “cyclic” process, making it possible to compare astronomic movements with periodic changes in the form of political regimes (I leave aside considerations of more or less adequate equivalence between different languages in this respect). The “old” semantic value seems to be still dominant in a celebrated passage from Rousseau’s *Émile* (published in 1762) where it is announced that “we are approaching the state of crisis and the century of revolutions”, which retrospectively sounds prophetic. But the “new” value was suggested by the French Revolution almost instantly after its beginning (witness a remarkable essay by Condorcet in 1793 “Sur le sens du mot révolutionnaire”), which had worldwide repercussions, and even more strikingly with the historical “analogy” leading to coining the expression “industrial revolution” in the first half of the 19th century. According to Immanuel Wallerstein, these twin events produced a new conception of history that “normalized” the idea of social progress, with the result that the three typical “ideologies” of modernity (I would prefer to say the *second modernity*, after the “revolutionary” break) would define themselves according to the three formal possibilities offered by a configuration of “normal” progress: either to *organize* it (liberalism), or to *resist* it or *slow it down* (conservatism), or to *accelerate and radicalize* its development (socialism). This presentation seems to grant a privilege to the “centrist” liberal position which, by definition, is reformist and not revolutionary. This is Wallerstein’s own position, but from a different angle I believe that it can be displaced, showing that what is determinant is in fact the attitude with respect to “revolution”—which should be no surprise given the starting point of the semantic mutation. As we will see, the three modern ideologies seek either to make revolution “permanent”, in a sense that has to be clarified, or to displace it (particularly through a prevalence or substitution of the industrial revolution to the political revolution), or to reverse it into a “counter-revolution”, again in a sense to be discussed. Revolutions, thus, become the standard after which the effectivity and modality of progress is appreciated.

2) To this scheme of historicity a specific Eurocentric turn is added, which encompasses a great cycle. In the colonial era, culminating in the “sharing of the world” among Western (or quasi-Western) and particularly European powers, or in Schmittian terms a “law and distribution of the earth” (*Nomos der Erde*) where the “center” rules over the “periphery”, revolutions are supposed to be *political processes* that are

typical for the center because they involve a participation of “citizens” who exist only in the nation-states, and raise the issue of the democratization of the State (particularly the devolution to the *demos* of the “legislative power” which, according to Marx in his 1843 *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, “makes all the great revolutions in history”). In the dominated colonial peripheries, there are no “revolutions” but only “resistances”, “guerillas”, “uprisings” and “rebellions”. However, this dissymmetry is reversed through the process of decolonization (which, in fact, had begun with the second modernity itself, if one counts—as one should—the American insurgencies, North and South, as early cases of decolonization, however ambiguous they are, since they are not made by the indigenous peoples). At the end of the period, anti-imperialist wars of liberation of various length appear as the typical model of revolutionary processes, so that Europe is deprived of its “monopoly”, or even it becomes the object of revolutionary politics, not its subject. Nevertheless, this leaves the possibility to consider that a full “Europeanization” of the world has been achieved (including the universalization of its political categories), ending with a kind of “negation of the negation”.

3) Finally I want to indicate in general (before returning to some specific aspects of this discursive configuration) that the privilege of the idea of revolution is also illustrated through a *metaphysical* structure of debates which pushes all the tensions inherent in the Modern attempt at identifying history and politics (or politicizing history in general and historicizing politics, against the “ethical” and “naturalist” views of *politeia* or *civitas* that had prevailed since ancient times) towards the figure of *antinomy*, or the unity of opposites. It is apparent in many categorial oppositions, which in fact permanently underscore the hermeneutic debates about the crucial issue of *agency* (or, in Hegelian-Marxist terminology, *praxis*) in the field of human affairs, for which the idea of revolution is the operator of intensification. This is true for debates about the “autonomy” and the “heteronomy” of the political, because revolutions are by definition moments of emancipation, where the freedom of agents (citizens, insurgents, revolutionaries) forms at the same time the driving force and the ultimate goal of politics, but simultaneously (sometimes by means of a comparison with geological transformations) revolutions appear as a moment in which the *laws of history* (its deep tendencies, whether spiritual, moral, or material, social, technological) are implemented, with the revolutionary “subjects” only acting as their (more or less conscious) instruments. Again, it is true for debates about

the respective functions (and values) of *institutions* and *violence* (or civil war, insurrections, force, lawless interruption of the continuity of the legal order), because revolutions are typically linked to the *new foundation* of the State or the social regime, which is carried on through a “state of exception” which Benjamin called a moment of “divine violence”. But the exception needs to be *teleologically* oriented towards normality or stability, just as the moment of “crisis” is seen as an intermediary between successive “organic” states of society. And finally it is true for debates about individuality and mass politics, because a revolution in the original sense (much influenced again by Rousseau’s doctrine of the *general will*) is at the same time a moment when individual subjectivities are activated (subjects become *active citizens*) and a moment when a “fusion” is taking place, identifying masses of individuals with collective interests and ideals, gathering on the same “squares” and speaking the same language. In all three cases we recognize antinomies of politics as a human agency, for which there never seems to be a definitive solution, but we also observe that “revolutionary *praxis*” serves as a dialectical overcoming of the antinomy, or as unification of the opposites, which precisely changes the course of history. This is usually called “dialectics”, or it explains the privileged relationship between the revolutionary phenomenon and the concept of dialectics in modern times, whether we observe that, in its new definition (as “negation of the negation”), the concept of dialectics (in Hegel) is a reflection on the meaning of the contemporary “revolutionary process” (and also an attempt at rationalizing its chaos and normalizing its excess), or we observe that it is used (as in Marx) in order to anticipate a new revolutionary moment which would “overcome” the first one (the “bourgeois” revolution), or push it beyond its own limitations.

Progress (in its different modalities), *eurocentrism* (and its reversal), *dialectics of praxis* as overcoming of the metaphysical antinomies of politics and history, such are the first conceptual (philosophical) “correlates” for an idea of revolution that could receive almost infinite variations in its application, but remains essentially stable since it was formed in the moment of expansion of the Modern State and the emergence of the new industrial society. *Or such they used to be...* Because (not only in Europe, whose “limits” in any case are impossible to fix in an indisputable manner) we are now living in a “century” where the opposite of Rousseau’s prophecy seems to be the case: not the imminent return of revolutions, but the exhaustion of the idea or the accumulation of fac-

tors which make the failure of revolutions their only possible outcome, therefore deprive them of their historical meaning and their political effectivity. Revolutions are left with a kind of melancholic function in the realm of collective affects and representations. To be sure, this is not insignificant. It serves as a paradoxical force of resistance against powerful discourses, to which I will return, which insist on the twin ideas of the “end of history” and the “end of politics”. And it serves as a permanent incentive to look for *other “revolutionary” models* than the modern ones, frequently located in the *premodern past*, European or not. There are eschatological models for the advent of the Messiah (which can be a “human”, collective Messiah, going along with liberation theologies, of secularized versions of the religious ideals of poverty instead of property, the use of commonalities instead of private appropriation). And there are political models of direct democracy as opposed to the institutionalized hierarchy of rulers and ruled, in other terms “political power”, which can be retrieved from Ancient Greek city-states, or projected upon them by imagination.

A sophisticated version of this contemporary experience has been proposed by Reinhart Koselleck in his well-known book *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (“Futures Past: On the semantic of historical times”, 1979), which contains a seminal essay on the “historical criteria of the modern concept of revolution”. It was written in 1968—therefore implicitly addressing the enigma of contemporary “new social movements” and uprisings, but centered on the problematic identification of “revolution” and “civil war”. In fact, the reading of the whole book shows that it is *precisely* the change in the semantics of the idea of revolution that appears to Koselleck to mark the transition between two different historical “times” or eras, or the fact that certain “frames of expectation” (*Erwartungshorizont*) which defined hopes and fears, and possibilities of action for our forerunners, are no longer meaningful for us—or not in the same way. “We” used to expect the revolution as a likely outcome of our crises (when the “latent civil war” described by Marx becomes actual), we were hoping for it or fearing it, but this is no longer the case. In a sense—which shows that we are moving in a circle—there is here an implicit idea that a new “cultural” or “symbolic” change has put an end to the validity of the idea of revolution, or made it an *ancien régime* of imagination, a trace or a specter, when generations in Europe and elsewhere had used it to imagine their present (or the potentialities within their present). However, things are not as simple as we could first

imagine if we read Koselleck in a *positivist* manner: as it were, *yesterday* there was a real basis for the revolutionary expectations, *today* there is no longer one, this “future” has past. Time is over... But this is actually quite far from his methodology. For, as I just indicated, the *becoming past* of the representation of the future also clearly opens possibilities of *using the past*, or various moments and elements of the past, in order to imagine the future in a renewed manner. It is a question about time as much as it is a question about politics. At stake is dropping the evolutionist representation of history itself and asking *which past* could *return* in the future, or even better—according to the typical “anticipation” of political imagination—which past *will have returned* to “produce” or “generate” a *new future beyond the “future [that is now] past”*. This could be another way of thinking, imagining, “doing” the revolution, infusing the same name with a different meaning linked to different experiences, or perhaps adding new names in order to rethink some of the same contents, which have not lost their political relevance.

Such dilemma, clearly, is overdetermined by the fact that an insistent “counter-revolutionary” discourse today also refers to the return of “revolutionary illusions” as a mortal threat for the society, the economy, the “democratic institutions”, etc., against which a *preventive ideological war* should be waged. For all these reasons, what we need is a careful critical examination of the *genealogy* of the idea of “revolution” and its typical uses in modernity (especially the “bourgeois” use and the “proletarian” use), showing how this idea was “constructed” and how it can be “deconstructed” for a different use. In the second part of this presentation, I want to sketch such a genealogy, insisting on three aspects: the *dramaturgy* of revolution (what we might also call the “narrative” or “scenario” that defines it as a *political form*), the “bourgeois” character of the idea of revolution (or the question whether *every* idea of revolution, including the “socialist” or “proletarian” revolutions, is in some fundamental sense a “bourgeois” category), finally the problematic articulation of the revolutionary subject with different modalities of “collectivization” of political action. This, I must say, is very much a work in progress, for which I would need months, and perhaps years. Therefore, I propose it as sketch, not as theory.

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A political scenario of revolutionary moments in history essentially combines three types of phenomena: *a change in the distribution of power* within society, which transfers it from those who “normally” monop-

olize it (the aristocracy or oligarchy defined by wealth, status, or both) to those who “normally” are excluded or marginalized (the mass, the poor, the ordinary citizens); a *transition from one state or social regime to another*, which concerns the *whole* of society (or its basic institutions), therefore separates “long” periods of time or what the philosophy of history calls *epochs* (*Zeitalter*); a *moment of exception* with respect to the legal and institutional “governmentality” (to borrow from Foucault’s terminology), where the rules of decision-making and the forms of representation are suspended, either in the direction of more democracy or dictatorial authority *or both*, in a typical (and highly problematic) unity of opposites. Like the latter, all three aspects are in fact—as I suggested before—essentially antinomic or structured as unities of opposites (for instance in terms of the reversibility or irreversibility of revolutionary changes, or the inclusive or exclusive dimension of the redistribution of power, the primacy of democracy or dictatorship. However, these antinomies do not emerge at random, according to a pure conceptual oscillation of the idea of revolution between its own internal polarities. They are essentially *produced* and *organized* as historical determinations within a certain “dramaturgy” whose origins are to be found in a “stylization” of the course of events in the French Revolution between 1789 and 1799 (or 1815, or 1830...). Let us say that this dramaturgy combines a *temporal scheme* of historicity with an “agonistic” *scheme of struggle*, which explains why the question of revolution and the question of war are permanently intertwined, as illustrated by the assumption in Koselleck that “revolution” initially means “civil war”: but we can observe as well a permanent effort to elaborate a “civil” and “civic” concept of struggle or political battle that is not identical with “war”, or even provides an alternative to war in crucial historical circumstances. “Civil war” is a conceptual shifter here.

On the temporal side of the dramaturgy, we have in the first place the idea that a revolution achieves an *historical transition* from one “regime” to another. This can cover, in Hegelian language, “epochs in the evolution of spirit”, or, in Marxian language, the destruction of a certain “social formation” and emergence of a new one, based on a different “mode of production”. In any case, these regimes must be organic totalities, encompassing all the most determining social relations or systems of institutions. Whether such a transformation is irreversible or not is the key issue: since the idea of revolution forms an “intense” modality of the idea of progress, it must incorporate the representation of a line of

development where there is a necessity for the new to replace the old, at least in the long run. But this is perfectly compatible with the idea that there are “regressions” or “restorations” taking place (even for a long time, if not indefinitely) in the course of events. Which leads us directly to the other side of the dramaturgy: the “strategic” element of conflict or struggle, without which it is unthinkable that a revolution reaches its goals. This explains why the model of “civil war” (even a *broad* model of civil war) is bound to remain central: because a revolution arises from a confrontation between “parties” with antagonistic interests, what 19th century essayists (including Marx) called the “Party of Order”, including all those who defend a vested interest and a form of domination, and what they called the “Party of Movement”, including all those who want to “emancipate” themselves from a system of domination and alienation. However, a confrontation between antagonistic forces, which are caught in a certain “relation of forces”, can be imagined in different manners. They are not necessarily characterized as “classes” with antithetic economic interests, but what is necessary is a correspondence between the temporal discontinuity, separating the “old regime” and the “new regime” as radically heterogeneous epochs, and the social discontinuity, the “essential conflict” or contradiction between those at the top and those at the bottom of the social order. It is this correspondence that produces the effect of retroactive or anticipated necessity: the revolutionary moment *will have been* necessary to “resolve” the social contradiction, through an immanent development of the conflict itself. Marxism as we know pushed this idea to the extreme, giving rise to the eschatological vision of a “last revolution” (the anticapitalist or proletarian revolution) which *forever* abolishes the class conflicts, because it is carried on by a “party” with genuine universalistic intentions, a “class” with no specific interests to impose (at least in terms of appropriation).

At this point however the combination of temporal break with the past, virtually irreversible, and agonistic social struggle, becomes complicated through an additional factor: ideally it could be dispensed with, but in practice it is never absent, therefore it needs to become a component of the idea. This additional factor is *counter-revolution*, the fact that *there is no revolution without a counter-revolution*, a struggle in the second degree between “revolution” itself and “opponents” who seek to obstacle or derail its course. “Counter-revolution” immediately is nothing other than an *organized* resistance or opposition to the regime change, but this leads to a more complex dialectical situation: to con-

front counter-revolutionary forces (ideologies, organizations, groups) there is a need to assemble specific instruments, strategies and tactics, and to develop a specific struggle whose objective is not to create institutions, but to neutralize the counter-revolutionaries (with or without “terror”). We can call this moment *ultra-revolution*, and with its emergence the revolution becomes a drama with a very aleatory result, not just a “transition” or a “change”. There are always many different ways to act within such an overdetermined conflict, which historic examples (in particular the French and Russian revolutions) abundantly illustrate. An ideological polarity becomes recreated within the revolutionary process itself (or a system of “deviations” with respect to an ideal rectitude). On the “reformist” side, which can also become labelled “liberal”, it is ultra-revolution more than counter-revolution that appears as the main threat for the victory of revolution, because it alienates the majority of the people or precipitates the transformation of conflict into civil war (when the civil war was not initiated by counter-revolutionary forces themselves). A major objective becomes suppressing it or making it unnecessary through the *limitation* of the revolutionary objectives, so that they become “acceptable” and “reasonable”. On the “radical” side, conversely, it is reformism that may appear as a disguised version of counter-revolution itself, which leads to identifying “enemies” within the revolutionary party itself, who need to be neutralized or eliminated. A revolution which remains half-way of its objectives is not a revolution, or it is a “revolution without revolution”, as Robespierre famously said. From there derives one of the most important formulations of revolutionary radicalism, which is *permanent revolution* (“déclarer la révolution en permanence”, a slogan that Marx borrowed from Proudhon and others). However, this is an extremely ambivalent idea, since the demarcation between strategic realism and political compromise, against which the “declaration” of permanent revolution is directed, is never drawn in advance or objectively identified: hence it leads easily (if not inevitably) to the well-known effect of self-destruction, with the Revolution taking the figure of Chronos devouring his own children... Moreover, Europe’s history in the 20th century in particular has demonstrated that there is a “circulation” of political forms and instruments between the two extremes, with counter-revolution adopting “ultra-revolutionary” strategies and trying to mobilize the same “masses” (as in the case of fascism), and the revolution itself reversing into counter-revolution from the inside (as in the case of Stalinism). The question that is latent

in these episodes, which are too frequent to be considered marginal, is whether the *excesses and inversions* of the revolutionary process with respect to its own goals (its “impolitical” side so to speak, borrowing the category now made famous by the work of Roberto Esposito) must be left aside in order to recreate a “pure” concept of the revolution (if not a myth), or ought to be *incorporated* into the phenomenology of the revolution as a problem intrinsic to its specific way of articulating history and politics. I favor this second position, which gives a greater intelligibility and more accurately addresses the reasons why, on the threshold of the 21st century, the idea of revolution remains suspended in a kind of spectral uncertainty, between a promise and a threat.

In my description—admittedly very simplified—of the revolutionary “dramaturgy”, you will have noticed that I took inspiration from different cases, particularly from the French and the Russian revolutions, which seem to bear a strange analogy across history (this is even more the case now that, after the closure of what Rita Di Leo called the “profane experience” of the Russian revolution and its aftermath, it has “produced” a specific form of capitalism which is fully integrated in the globalized economy and politics). The more I reflect on this, the more I believe that the question of the “identity and difference” of the *bourgeois* and *socialist* (or *proletarian*) revolutions is crucial for the critical genealogy at which I am aiming. In fact it is a “classical” question, already addressed by Marx himself, haunting the self-consciousness of the Russian revolutionaries and guiding their critics, and certainly underlying the construction of Koselleck’s semantic inquiry, which declares the revolution to be a “future past” in the double sense: *neither* the “bourgeois” (especially French) *nor* the “proletarian” (especially Russian) could be perceived now as “present futures” (i.e. *possibilities*), and perhaps this is the *same* impossibility (which would define our “now” as a closure of the era of Modernity). I want to address this issue partially (since it is a very complex question), but also radically, by asking the question: *is “Revolution” essentially a “bourgeois” idea*, even if it becomes reversed or transposed into other forms (socialist, anti-imperialist or anti-colonial)? In that case, the “difficulty” that we now have with the idea of revolution, leading to what I successively called a melancholy, or a vacillation between hope and fear, historicization and actualization, or a permanent quest for “alternative” possibilities of acting politically in order to “make history”, would be, ultimately, a difficulty with the bourgeois model itself (emblematically illustrated by the French revolution), and

with the seeming impossibility to “evade” it without annihilating the idea of revolution itself. No future because no real past except *this past*. Of course it includes the impolitical side: the Terror, the Bonapartist outcome, etc. But above all it includes the “emancipatory” project of *constituting a State* which, as Hegel would say, is the “common thing” (or “work”) of *its own citizens*, pushing the concept of citizenship beyond simple membership in a constituency, to the idea of constituent power exercised in common.

I must be brief on this difficult question. On the one hand, it has to be acknowledged that the typical dramaturgy that I was sketching a moment ago essentially illustrates a “*bourgeois drama*”. It is modelled on the French and especially Parisian chain of events which came to be reproduced (or even consciously imitated) in later revolutionary processes. This is true even for such notions as “dictatorship of the proletariat” (Lenin and Trotsky as well as their “reformist” adversaries were aware of this, and it has been theorized in the recent past by such intelligent anti-communist historians as François Furet). The difficult question is the comparison with the American revolution, which is the object of Arendt’s theorization of an opposition between the “revolutions of equality” and the “revolutions of liberty” (*On Revolution*). But perhaps the distance becomes smaller if one considers *long revolutionary events*, i.e. processes which include their own after-effects (particularly, in the American case, the “civil war”, which has clear “egalitarian” dimensions). On the other hand, we must take seriously the fact that socialist or “anticapitalist” revolutions in the 19th and 20th century systematically tried to *detach themselves from the “bourgeois” model*, by injecting a “social” content that revolutionary politics did not include by itself, *contradicting* its notion of “rights of man and the citizen”, thus distancing themselves from civic-bourgeois universalism. Radical socialist thinkers (such as Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*, and their successors) are not seeking to *build a State*, even a democratic State, because they link the existence of the State exclusively to the structure of a class society. Even if the actual history of socialist revolutions (and the regimes arising from them) does anything but eliminate the State (and in practice also recreate class distinctions), this remains an important difference *in the idea*. We observe here that the privileged instrument used by the Marxist tradition to address the issue of the analogy and discontinuity between the “two revolutions”, was again the notion of *permanent revolution*, this time developed in a different direction. What it asserted was essentially that the “bour-

geois revolutions” themselves included something like a “double bottom”, with democratic and purely “political” mottoes covering (and expressing, or suppressing) “social” demands that concerned *real equality* (or, ultimately, a classless society) instead of purely formal, juridical equality compatible with the preservation of exploitation. Hence there would be a *second conflict or struggle located within the first*, which could mean that, when the revolution unmasks and dismantles a certain form of domination (monarchic, aristocratic), it also lays bare another one, which in a sense is more fundamental: the domination of private property and capitalist accumulation. As a consequence, the revolutionary exigency that I recalled a moment ago, to keep the revolutionary process going on in order not to be reversed into a restoration of the “old” order, becomes an exigency to push the revolution beyond the “bourgeois limits” themselves, or to begin a second revolution from within the “womb” of the first. The agent or subject of this second revolution would not be simply “the people” (or the majority of the people as opposed to an oligarchy of “unnecessary” oppressors, as Abbé Sieyès famously explained in his pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?* (1789), it would be a kind of “people within the people” or “people of the people”, for which the 19th century adopted the old Roman name “the proletariat” (and Marx explained that, through the industrial revolution and the development of capitalism, this radically exploited class itself would become the majority, if not the “99%” of the society). The idea of permanent revolution now becomes the idea that, through the logic of its own radicalization and confrontation with the counter-revolution, *one revolution becomes another one*. Another important dialectical scheme of transformation—which was frequently activated in the internal debates of anti-imperialist struggles in the 20th century, where the “bourgeois” form of popular sovereignty was reformulated as “national independence” and the class-interest of the proletariat was amalgamated with the objective of “development”. We may wonder if, in this dialectics of internal transformation (whether achieved or blocked) it is not, however, the bourgeois model itself that is confirmed, inasmuch precisely as it contained the idea of a state of exception that is bound to transgress its own limits. This idea may also have a deconstructive effect on the model itself, because certainly it reinforces the hypothesis that *the bourgeois revolution is the only revolution possible* (or thinkable, in our intellectual tradition), but conversely a “purely” *bourgeois revolution* (remaining “bourgeois” until the end) *is historically impossible*: it must either fail or become the starting point for another

revolutionary process (which may be a way to “fail better”, in the famous formula by Samuel Beckett). The bourgeois revolution is a very paradoxical type, because it is intrinsically unstable, it must “change character” in order to be carried on.

There is a different side to this paradox in the Marxist philosophical tradition, which has to do with the discussion of the *ideological forms* in which “men make their own history” (*The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*), or “become conscious of the historical conflict and fight it out” (*Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*). Again there is essential instability here, because the Marxian formulas present us with a dilemma: they explain, on one side, that “revolutionaries”—individually and above all collectively, inasmuch as they rally and organize for a common goal, creating a “collective subjectivity”—are bound to imagine their own actions in the “costume” provided by past moments of emancipation that have become more or less mythical (such as the Roman “republican” phraseology); therefore revolutionaries are never the “contemporaries” of their own actions, of the history they “make”, they never consciously inhabit the “now” of history (*die Jetzt-Zeit*). Like Benjamin’s “angel of history” illustrated by the picture he received from Paul Klee, they look towards the past when they proceed to break into the future. Althusser at one point provided a radically “pessimistic” interpretation of this ideological dependency from the narratives of the past, which he connected with the fact that—in his view—there is no such thing as a political practice *without ideology*. But he also wanted to investigate the possibility for “organized” social forces *to critically distanciate* themselves from their own ideology: another dimension of emancipation that he probably connected to the same Marxist idea of transgressing the limits of the “bourgeois” revolution, or the bourgeois “imaginary” of the revolution. However, if we want to uncover the posterity of the other thesis also present in Marx—namely the idea that, *within ideology*, an anticipation of the classless society is possible for the radically exploited producers, with the help of a theoretical critique of capitalism—we must turn toward a very different tradition in Marxism: that of *utopian Marxism*, in the early Lukacs, Mannheim, and especially Ernst Bloch, for whom the collective imaginary involves not only a repetition of the past, but also an anticipation of the possible, or a transgression of the historical limits preventing us from thinking the “novelty” (*novum*), which by definition is unknown. Perhaps a dialectical solution would involve a different distribution of the elements of

continuity and discontinuity between “bourgeois” and “socialist” revolutions that focuses not so much on the “constitutional” content than the “insurrectional” form itself. Revolutions are *new beginnings* in the history of societies, they suspend the validity of an existing political order, in the broad sense that includes every distribution and modality of power, therefore, even before the establishment of a new regime, the dramaturgy of revolution must begin with a subversive emergence of revolutionary forms of participation in the “public sphere”—which in the language of 18th century and 19th century “civic-bourgeois” universalism was called “insurgency” or “active citizenship”. It is this emergence that forms the “tradition” between Rousseau and Marx and that, on the contrary, was perceived as a threat for the order of institutions by such liberal thinkers as Kant, Hegel and Tocqueville, not to mention the conservative and counter-revolutionary ideologists. Returning to the “bourgeois” origins of the modern idea of revolution can also mean a questioning about the flexibility of the forms of insurgency depending on the type of domination, the vested interests in power and oligarchic institutions that they confront, as well as an experimentation in active citizenship (“acts of citizenship”, in the terminology of Engin Isin) that renovates the democratic imaginary. It is a transformation of the past into a future that had not been imaginable, rather than a burial of the exhausted future within the past.

To speak of a moment of insurgency that creates or recreates active citizenship inevitably leads to a discussion of the forms of “collective subjectivation” (Rancière) that—to put it in Machiavellian terms—“raise agency from the private to the public standing” (*The Prince*, chapter 6). In a sense this is the most important moment in a critical genealogy of the uses and meanings of revolution “after” the declared “end” of the revolutionary era, because the difficulty is not so much with identifying revolutionary situations (especially if they are reduced to situations of acute social “crises”), it is above all with identifying *in the present* collective agents who can become active in such situations and “resolve” the contradiction. Not only are revolutions characterized after the name of their agents (bourgeois, national, indigenous, proletarian...), but the phenomenology of revolutions in history is primarily a description of the *becoming subject* of the groups or the “forces” that are virtually revolutionary, or can be said to have a revolutionary interest in “changing the world”. This is exactly the case in Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, where the “class struggle” is presented as the principle of the transition from a “latent” to

a “manifest” conflict, making proletarians the communist subjects who “can only lose their chains”. When I referred a moment ago to the fact that a transformation of the bourgeois revolution into a proletarian revolution involved a reconsideration of the proletariat (or the working class) as the “people of the people”, I was precisely alluding to a modality of interpretation of the process of “collective subjectivation” that is practiced by Marx, combining sociological and eschatological categories. If the notion of a “revolutionary subject” is not a mere tautology, in spite of its axiomatic use by many contemporary discourses on the radical left (together with “revolutionary forces” or “revolutionary objectives”), this is mainly because neither the articulation of the individual and the collective agency, nor the transition from virtuality to actuality, from “latent” forms to “manifest” figures of the insurgent capacity of the citizens, can be anticipated or taken for granted. Once again, they *will have existed* when the revolutionary process takes shape in history, but they are not predictable in spite of continuous attempts at *organizing them in advance to “prepare” the revolution* (of which the Leninist “party-form” is but the most visible example in modern history).

It derives from such considerations that the “revolutionary subject” is not only a flexible figure, it is something like a *transitional figure*, which is affected in its “being” by the modalities and after-effects of its own historical interventions (the spectacle of its emergence on the public sphere, the internalization of its confrontation with the counter-revolution, the splitting between reformism and radicalism, etc.)—a “becoming” or a process of subjectivation rather than a given “subjectivity”. And it is not only a transitional figure, it is a conflictual figure, that finds itself permanently exposed to the competition between different modes of subjectivation (or formations of the collective) which are ultimately incompatible (although they can be momentarily hierarchized and mediated). In these concluding remarks, I want to focus on one typical formulation of such dilemma, which is typically observed in the Marxist tradition, but has a far broader range of application. This is the distinction of the “class” and the “mass”, more precisely the antithesis of a crystallization of revolutionary subjectivities in the form of a “class consciousness”, a “class collective” or a “class party” (without which one could argue that there is no “class” in the *actual*, political sense of the term), and a fusion (which can be seen also as “dissolution” of separated individualities) in the coming out of a single “mass”. This is not only an analytical dilemma, it also has ethical implications, because the col-

lective subjectivations that are incorporated in a class identity are primarily conceived in terms of an emergence of *consciousness* at the level of collectivity (or a *conscious* participation in a succession of actions which, taken together, form a strategy to dismantle the established order of domination and create new institutions in which the interests of the “have-nots” are expressed), whereas the dissolution of separated subjects and their merging into a single mass that overwhelms the protections of the “specialized” governmental agencies (whose special task, as shown by Foucault, is to “individualize” the subjects in order to “discipline” them) is bound to rely to a large extent on *unconscious* motives and psychic mechanisms. This is also what explains why, at least in the Western tradition of categorizing the political, the “class point of view”, even without being crystallized in a movement or a party, has a privileged relationship to a *progressive* (or *progressivist*) representation of politics, whereas the problematic of the mass and the intervention of “masses” who are awoken by critical situations (such as economic crises or wars) has a much more ambivalent distribution. It is favored by *counter-revolutionary* discourses, who either project it negatively on revolutionary movements (even by anticipation), in a typical “fear of the masses”, or emulate the revolutionary mobilization of the mass against oligarchic power and structural violence, in order to destabilize the relationship of forces (as in the fascist tradition). However, the semantic of opposition between class and mass (both departing from the organic figure of the people) is far from being reducible to such polarities, because the notion of a “mass movement” (which, in the 20th century, became the permanent horizon of politics as a transgression of the limits of “representation of the people” in a statist form) is itself ambivalent and plastic. It is a typical reactionary and counterrevolutionary discourse to explain that the “revolt of the masses” (Ortega y Gasset 1929: *La rebellion de las masas*) is a potential destruction of civilization, but it is a *critical revolutionary* point of view to explain that mass movements are the cradle in which collective subjectivation takes shape, still undetermined in their results and final destination, but with a potential of overwhelming the state and a permanent problem of confronting internal and external violence. This explains the fact that the communist tradition has eventually concentrated its revolutionary potential in the objective of inventing the forms of a “mass democracy” on a “class basis”, beyond representation and technocratic expertise, an objective which seems to be ever deceived and never exhausted. The problem with a political strategy based

on mass movements comes from the fact that they are short lived and easily dismantled or internally disaggregated. Returning us to the very roots of what creates a *balance of forces* to match established state power in history, they also exhibit in the most visible form the antinomy of the temporal modalities of revolution: disruptive event, and long term transformative process. Forming the most effective aspect of revolutionary subjectivation, they are also the most enigmatic ontologically and politically. If the class, and above all the party, is very much a “counter-state” (or tends to become such), the mass appears rather as an “anti-state” of which the state itself can make a perverse use. The two forms of collective subjectivation called “class” and “mass” are both opposed to the ideal of “organic” collectivization that the national bourgeois state inherited from its own way of “terminating” or institutionalizing the revolution (the consensus of the general will or “We the People”, most of the time finding its official voice in the discourses of the State itself), but they oppose it from different angles. “Revolution” permanently looks for their reconciliation in the conjuncture.

With this last remark, we have come in a sense full circle in trying to classify the various dimensions that pertain to the current “crisis” of the idea of revolution, in the form of a conflicting pattern of archaism and actuality. This is because, of all the vicissitudes of the revolutionary dramaturgy that keep haunting our political present, the one that is perhaps most relevant is *counter-revolution*, albeit in the paradoxical form of a *preventive decomposition of the mass* as political agent, or a massive and systematic suppression of mass movements performed by neo-liberalism in the multiple forms of consumerism and precariousness, which specifically neutralize the political as collective subjectivation—or *tries to neutralize it*, as if the ruling elites were obsessed by what they believe to have eliminated. I would say that this is the *revolutionary germ* or “remainder” that is actively “missing”—in the Deleuzian sense of the “missing people”—, thus virtually present in the very instability of our historical conjuncture, in search of its own formation and its own dramaturgy. This seems to indicate that the vast question that is *opened*, but certainly *not closed*, by the multivalent hermeneutic proposition that “revolution” as an idea has become a “future past”, inseparably concerns and connects the issues of a history of time, a politics of the political, and calls for an identification of what the “people of the people” for us could mean.

